A simple twist of fate. When impending famine threatens one of the northern houses, Ned Stark’s honor and duty compels him to wade right in the middle of it. Taking Jon with him, the two journey to Pentos, where their paths cross with a young Daenerys Targaryen. Sparks fly and destiny is fulfilled, an entire story of Ice and Fire rewritten. JonxDany starting in Season 1.
Journey to Pentos

A/N: Hi everyone. First time writing for Game of Thrones, so don't be too hard on me, lol. I had this idea for a while and finally decided to write it.

Be sure to comment and let me know what you think :D

CHAPTER ONE

Slicing through the still air, a decent warmth yet joined by a cooling breeze even during summer, the arrow impacted directly into the center of the target. Only, it wasn’t that of the young nobleman practicing. Little Arya took a bow, clutching her own bow - leading Bran to chase after her while the older boys laughed. Life may not have been perfect for the Stark clan, but it came close sometimes.

“Alright lads,” cautioned Ser Rodrick. “Clean up dis mess before you head inside!” Both Robb Stark and Jon Snow complied, knowing the drill.

Grabbing a trio of arrows, Jon couldn’t help but glance up to catch a glimpse of his father. The lone bastard in the brood of Starks, even the slightly pampered life of an acknowledged son couldn’t make up for the missing affection provided to his half-siblings. Lord Eddard Stark loved all his children, and Jon cherished any bit of fatherly pride he gave him. Eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“Brother, why are father and Lady Stark arguing?” Catelyn Stark made sure he knew of her distaste for him.

Robb looked up himself, frowning. “This does not look good. They rarely argue like this.” The Realm was at peace, so it was rare that disputes led to such contention between the Lord and Lady of Winterfell. Even the death of Catelyn’s father hadn’t done so, her brother Edmure taking the control of the Riverlands rather easily. “I guess we’ll find out when we find out.”

“I guess we will, brother,” Jon replied, averting his eyes upon Lady Stark’s death glare sent at him.

Tearing her gaze from Jon Snow - her husband’s bastard, the living reminder of the shame the normally honorable Warden of the North brought down upon her - Catelyn turned back to her husband. “And why in the name of the Old Gods must you do this?” She tried to keep her voice down, feeling it wise not to draw attention to their quarrel.

Worry lines deepened on the brooding vestige of Lord Ned Stark. “I don’t have a choice Catelyn. It is my responsibility to see this through.”

“But to disappear from the North to journey across the sea? Not a day after we found out Jon Arryn passed away? You cannot leave Winterfell now.”

“We have been at peace for over a decade, Cat.”

“Times are uncertain now. Ned. All I ask is that you stay. Lord Karstark can see to this. It is his deal that he must follow through on, his people at stake after all.”

Ned frowned, slightly stunned that Catelyn would minimize his duty. “Lord Karstark would do this, but the merchants in Pentos would only treat with the Warden of the North for something of this magnitude.”

“But it is not your responsibility.” Lady Stark had inherited the Tully stubbornness after all.
“I am Warden of the North, therefore it is my responsibility.” He remembered the raven from Karhold, telling him of the outbreak of blight. Karstark and his men had eradicated it, but with the result of destroying the current years crop - they had to get more or else there would be starvation in their lands or a depletion of stores for winter. “There is nowhere else for Karhold to get grain this late in the harvest season.”

Catelyn grasped his arm. “If this were the Vale, or even the Westernlands I’d understand, but Pentos? You can’t travel all the way to Essos simply to oversee a shipment of grain. Send one of your trusted men, or even Ser Rodrick!” she pleaded.

“I gave Lord Karstark my word, and a Stark’s word is his bond.” He felt hurt seeing the steely look in his beloved’s eyes. “Myself and my son will sail for Pentos before the end of the week.” Ned might as well drop the other bombshell on his wife.

“You’re taking Robb to Pentos too? I see no reason why both you and your heir should leave.” If something happened to both of them then Bran would have to assume the Lordship, and he was far too young.

Ned looked down at his two sons, laughing as they put away the archery equipment. How he loved them both, even if only one was his trueborn. “No. Robb will stay here and manage affairs in my name. It is time he get true experience in being a Lord.” The second born that he was had won his experience during the furious conflict of Robert’s Rebellion. “I will take Jon.”

As he expected, Catelyn visibly recoiled as if a fire had engulfed the space between them. “Your bastard?! Why would you soil yourself with him?” she hissed.

“The circumstances of his birth are immaterial. He is my… blood of my blood.” Ned hated further dishonoring himself, but he simply had to do so. For everyone he knew and loved. “I need someone strong and trustworthy to assist me on this voyage and Jon is the best choice.”

“How could you insult me this way, Ned?” Her piercing gaze returned to Jon Snow, putting away the last of the arrows. He looked up and met Catelyn’s eyes once more, feeling the radiating contempt. “First you bring him to Winterfell, humiliating your faithful wife with proof of your adultery. And now you grant him the full privilege of being your son when we all know full well that he is no such thing.”

‘Aye, he is not,’ Ned thought, sighing inwardly. He hated fighting with Catelyn, but Jon was a constant source of disagreement - to put it mildly. “Look Cat, I understand Jon isn’t your favorite person.” She huffed and crossed her arms, averting her gaze. “But long ago I made a promise that I would take care of him no matter what. He is my blood and I love him as… just as much as I do Robb, Sansa, and all the others.” It warmed his heart that his eldest and three youngest accepted Jon with open hearts, though he wished Sansa wouldn’t be as cold. “He has no birthright. No prospects for anything other than the skills he can bring to bear for this House.”

“Your bastard,” she spat, “Can join your brother at the Wall. We all know that he wants to. There is no more perfect place for him that the Night’s Watch.” To tell the truth she had been looking forward to the day when he would be shipped off there, never to be seen again by her or anyone.

Ned’s heart broke, thinking of Jon at the Wall. “He could, aye, but what if it isn’t his destiny. Seeing new places and learning new skills would be good for him, give him a new outlook on life.” Wanting more for his son than a dreary life at the Wall, an exile to the end of the world nor befitting what a great man Jon was, Ned knew he was grasping at straws but willing to try. “It is decided, Cat. I am taking Jon to Pentos, that is final.” Catching the pained look on his beloved’s face, Ned hated to hurt her but knew it needed to be done.
The cool sea breeze whipped Jon’s matted hair behind him, counteracting the unhindered rays of the summer sun. He rested his hands on the caravel’s railing, watching the vast expanse of dark blue water as far as the eye could see - no land having been in sight since leaving White Harbor and the open arms of House Manderly. He smirked, having rather enjoyed being part of the festivities for a change.

Looking back at the hustle and bustle of the Manderly crew - the aging Lord Wyman more than happy to provide his fastest ship for the great Ned Stark - Jon knew there would be much to enjoy about this journey. Sure he missed his siblings, even Sansa though he doubted she returned such feelings, but being away from the presence of Lady Stark and the other longtime stalwarts of House Stark was more than welcome. Here, out on the open sea he was not Jon Snow, the Bastard of Winterfell. He was the son of Lord Eddard Stark, Warden of the North and Wolf of the Trident. His idol, along with his Uncle Benjen.

“Such an amazing sight, isn’t it?” Jon was interrupted out of his thoughts by the presence of his father, joining him on his right. “Living inland, we don’t get this sort of view.”

“Aye.” Despite knowing his father loved him, Jon still felt sort of cowed in his presence. Seemingly sensing the thoughts, Ned reached out and clasped the lad’s shoulders, giving them a fatherly shake. Jon couldn’t help but grin. “Being away from the North for the first time, seeing everything, it puts things into perspective doesn’t it?”

“That it does son, that it does.” Jon’s heart skipped a beat at being called ‘son.’ With the life he had, a bastard took whatever affection sent his way with open arms. “Jon…” he turned and looked at his father, studying him. The normally proud Eddard Stark seemed… conflicted. Pensive even. As if he was fighting within himself.

Protocol dictated that a bastard call his father by his title - yet, it was just him and his father, no one else to contradict or scold him over it. “Yes, father?”

Opening his mouth, nothing came out. Luckily for his dignity, a yipping ball of white fur bailed Ned Stark out. The Warden of the North glanced down to find Jon’s new dire wolf - the runt of the litter - begging for attention. “I see your new child is calling you,” he said in a rare moment of jest.

Jon laughed and hefted up the pup. “What’s wrong Ghost? Let’s see if the ship’s kitchen has something for you.” The pup wagged his tail excitedly as his master led him away.

As soon as Jon was out of sight Ned let out a breath that he didn’t realize that he’d been holding. ‘Was I just about to tell him…’ He shook his head. Now was not the time, never the time. Ned Stark knew it in his bones that trouble was on its way, and the status quo was the safest for all.

The ship turned south, making course for Pentos.

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Blinking her eyes, the silver-haired young girl didn’t think she heard him correctly. “I’m sorry, brother. I don’t think I understood what you were saying.” If it was what she thought it to be, then the barely-eaten lamb and vegetable milieu in the style of Western Essos didn’t look as appetizing.

Viserys laughed, a piercing, cruel laugh - as if he enjoyed his sister’s confusion and dejection. “Well of course you didn’t understand me, sweet sister. A weak and frail woman wouldn’t understand the schemings of her male betters.” He speared a cube of meat in his fork, scarfing it down his skinny
gullet. Unlike what the stories said of the toned, muscular Crown Prince Rhaegar, his younger brother was as skinny as a reed. However, he had enough haughtiness to spare. “I shall go slower for you, though. For the first time in our wretched life you shall be of use to me, sister.”

Hands in her lap, Daenerys Targaryen avoided looking at her older brother. If she looked ungrateful then he would undoubtedly ‘Awaken the Dragon.’ That she grasped that he only had done so to those weaker than him - mostly women - was something he failed to see. “There is nothing in the world I wouldn’t do to be of use to you, dear brother.”

She felt his clammy hand cup her cheek, forcing her to look up. “That is good, because our near term plans have changed. It is not I that you will marry in the near term.”

This did surprise Dany - as her mother had once called her in the few hours they had known each other. As with their parents, and grandparents before them, Targaryens had largely upheld the custom of Aegon the Conqueror to marry siblings. Keep the bloodline pure, even though the Targaryen blood joined that of the Baratheons and Lannisters in its strength. Though she would have done it for her family, inside Dany was relieved that it was not to happen. Then a thought hit her. “Who… who am I to marry?”


Daenerys had to bite her lip to keep from screaming.

“I am not happy with this arrangement Illyrio,” Ned Stark ground out, his lips pursed in a dark glower. His northern clothes baked in the heat of the Essos sun, sensing that Jon would join him in relief to head inside. For now, his annoyance at the merchant distracted him from the discomfort. “You were supposed to have the grain ready yesterday morning. I don’t see enough to fit even one silo.”

Hands clasped together underneath the flowing red/yellow shift, Illyrio Mopatis snorted. “It is not I that controls the weather, Lord Stark. Nor do I have any control over the slaves that grow the wheat. Pentos has trouble feeding itself for now.” Given the thick neck and flabby belly underneath the scraggily, braided beard and flowing garments, Jon observed, the Master of the Pentos Merchants Guild had no trouble procuring enough food for his table.

His father was having none of it. Ned was normally even tempered - even when executing the deserter from the Night’s Watch, Jon hadn’t seen him bat an eyelash. Now though… “We had an agreement,” Ned seethed. “I will not let Karkold starve on my watch.” A smirk found its way onto Jon’s face watching his father grip the hilt of his sword. A move seen by all.

Gulping, Illyrio backtracked with a beaming smile on his face. “But of course, Lord Stark. Forgive me. We have been working at a vigorous pace to fill Lord Karstark’s order, but it will take more time than we expected.”

Letting go of the sword, Ned let out a deep breath, calming himself. “And how much more time will we need?”

“A month, give or take a week… the harvest at Karkold, limited it may be, can last for that long if my estimates are correct,” the merchant hastily added.

Sharing a look with Jon, who merely shrugged, Ned knew this was the best he could do. Illyrio was right, Karkold’s harvest would hold. It wasn’t what he desired, but… “Alright. But given the order of this magnitude, I will oversee that you fulfil the amounts that you promised. Both myself and my
son, Jon.”

Having been preoccupied observing the strange sights of Essos, Jon immediately turned back to his father. ‘Not Jon Snow, or my bastard… but Jon.” Essentially, Eddard Stark had claimed him as his son without clarification. Suppressing outward emotion, inside Jon was beaming.

“Of course,” Illyrio conceded, bowing slightly to the Warden of the North and personal friend of the King of Westros. “As a sign of my apologies for the delay, allow me to offer you and your son the use of two of my spare bedrooms. My house is at your service, and there is more than enough room to house both you and my other guests.”

Both northerners raised a single brow. “Other guests?” Ned inquired. The merchant guilds - and the bankers guild in Braavos - were the most powerful organizations in the free cities. Illyrio, who commanded his guild, wouldn’t open his home to just anyone.

The smile on the oily merchant’s face was disconcerting to Jon. This was not a man to trust. “Right this way, Lord Stark.” He guided Ned into the atrium of the mansion, Jon following close behind. “Allow me to introduce you to my other honored guests…” He stopped, smile widening. “Ah, there she is now.” Color drained from Ned’s face at the first glimpse of silver hair.

Sitting by herself at the fountain, Daenerys still hadn’t processed what her brother told her. ‘The Dothraki.’ All in the known world knew of them, the barbarians on horseback. Terrors and land pirates that built nothing - only sowing destruction in their wake. She was so consumed with her thoughts that she didn’t spot the two northerners until they were nearly upon her. Clearly Westerosi, one sported the hardened, weathered looks of an experienced fighter while the other - was far younger and far more handsome. Dany blushed, looking away.

She was beautiful. In all his life, Jon had never seen such an exquisite woman. But why was his father so ashen upon seeing her?

Illyrio would soon dispel any doubt. “Lord Stark, allow me to introduce Princess Daenerys of House Targaryen.”
The Dragon and the Bastard

Chapter Notes

I’m glad everyone is enjoying the story. Be sure to drop a comment with what you think :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 2

“I will not stand for this!” Daenerys heard some kind of wooden trinket or case crash against the wall. To say that her brother took Lord Stark’s arrival badly was an understatement. “To allow one of the Usurper’s dogs into the same home as me, his rightful king!” Yet another enraged yell left his throat, this time not joined by something shattering.

“Calm down, your Grace,” Illyrio cautioned, staying back and letting the prince let out his anger. “His arrival here is but a coincidence, due to business dealings I have with one of his vassal lords…”

Viserys chuckled darkly. “Do you think I can give two shits about your business, Illyrio? No, the effrontery of him to even grace his presence around me while still bending the knee for Robert the Usurper is what angers me. And to bring a bastard into my presence…”

Dany’s ears perked up at the even passing mention of the handsome young man accompanying Lord Stark. ‘He is a bastard?’ Though such distinctions were less imposing in Essos than her native land, it still surprised her that such a high nobleman would essentially treat a bastard in the same vein as a trueborn child. Such spoke volumes about Eddard Stark, or this Jon Sta… Snow - as was the traditional northern bastard name - or perhaps both.

For some reason the young girl felt a need to defend him from her brother’s insults. “Viserys, it is not this young man’s fault he was born a bas… eeek.” A strangled breath left Dany’s lips as she was pressed into a wall, stone digging into her back while her brother’s hand was wrapped around her neck. “Did I say you could talk, sweet sister?” He hissed. “Do not wake the dragon!” With that, Viserys let go, causing her to crumple on the floor.

Sensing a need to calm the situation - Daenerys was no good to anyone severely injured - Illyrio jumped in. “Do not worry, your Grace. Lord Stark may be on the side of King Robert…”

“Robert the Usurper! I am the King, do you understand!”

The merchant gritted his teeth. “Yes forgive me. But while Lord Stark has his loyalty to the Usurper the people of the North still drink secret toasts to your name. He would be a fool to be anything but respectful of you.” That Ned Stark always conducted himself with honor and respect regardless of oaths and loyalty could be left out, as was the North’s hatred of the Targaryen name.

It seemed to mollify the angry prince, who merely huffed. “If that is the case then I will tolerate his presence, but if he sullies my good name with that half-blood bastard then things will be different.” Viserys stormed off, Illyrio behind him.

Curling up against the wall, one hand soothing her sore neck, Dany fought the tears that were
threatening to fall. “I am the blood of the dragon,” she whispered to herself. “A dragon does not cry.” It wasn’t the first time Viserys abused her, nor would it be the last. Truth be told, this was mild compared to some of the enraged tantrums he had taken out on her. ‘It is not kindness,’ she quickly thought. ‘A bruise would lessen my worth to the Dothraki… and lower his standing in front of the Starks.’ To not even allow herself to imagine her brother had any kind or loving feelings for her hurt Dany worse than any blow, but a lifetime on the run from assassins and poverty quickly killed any idea of harboring denial.

“I am the blood of the dragon.”

It was at that moment a voice reached her ear, a voice from outside. One that she had only heard once in the atrium just this morning. Standing on shaky feet, she made her way to the open window to see the handsome young man playing with a white pup. The Bastard of Winterfell.

Jon Snow.

‘He looks much better, smiling,’ Dany couldn’t help but think. However, something drew his gaze to where she stood, and for a second their eyes locked before she ducked back away from the window - a bright red blush adorned her pale cheeks.

Sighing, Jon looked away from the now empty window to where his dire wolf sat, tail wagging. “Well Ghost. Think a girl like that would ever think me more than a bastard?” Ghost cocked his head to one side, tongue swiping over his nose. “That’s what I figured.”

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Of all the far-fetched contingencies Ned Stark had imagined were waiting for him in Pentos, seeing the two remaining children of the Mad King wasn’t one of them. Robert was not going to like this if he found out. The King of the Seven Kingdoms trusted Ned with his life, but was irrational when it came to the Targaryens. ‘I will have to stop by King’s Landing on the way home, break the news personally of this visit.’ If Robert knew the whole story then he was bound to understand. Ned knew that it was only he that could have gotten away with it, though.

Eyes catching a glimpse of the princess… ‘She looks just like her mother, more beautiful even.’ He still remembered Rhealla, silver hair lustrous with the Targaryen graceful beauty on that fateful day. The Grand Tourney that started everything. It was as if Ned saw a ghost, but he would have to shove that aside. He was the mighty Warden of the North. No man worth his salt would insult a host’s gracious invitation to a feast in his honor.

Convincing Jon to let go of his emotions was a whole other story. “Father, do you know what they did to our family?” the 16-year old hissed. The classic stubbornness of youth, along with a bullheaded nature clearly from his mother - it made Ned want to smile in fond recollection, but he bit it back. Now wasn’t the time. “I will not treat with the Mad King’s son.”

“Aye, our family suffered at the Mad King’s hands,” Ned conceded. The fact that Jon omitted the Princess was not lost on him. “But that was the Mad King’s doing. Viserys was but a child, and Daenerys was merely a bump in her mother’s belly.” Jon opened his mouth to protest when Ned placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Believe me son, I hate the Mad King for what he did. But what did I teach you and Robb about judging a man’s character?”

Jon’s face softened. “An honorable man always looks at what a person is, not what his family has done.” It was the Stark way. Ned’s way. He taught his children well. “I see your point father. I will give the Prince and... Princess my respect.”
Ned smiled at his son. “Good. I’m proud of you, Jon.” He eyed him over, truly taking in what a strapping young man Jon had become. The boy deserved more - it was his failure that he hadn’t gotten it. “I couldn’t ask for a better son.”

Unused to such praise, Jon merely smiled at his father. The smile turned into a nervous frown. “Father.” He struggled with the boldness to ask what he had always died to know. “Tell me about my mother, please.”

‘Of course he would ask.’ Ned would have been shocked had Jon not. But he couldn’t tell him, not now.

‘He deserves to know something,’ a voice in his head cajoled.

‘It is too risky, especially in these times.’ The Warden of the North settled on a compromise. “That is for another time, Jon. But I promise you, your mother loved you very much. More than anything in the world.” It was the truth. She did love Jon. Watching tears start to form in Jon’s eyes, Ned smacked him affectionately on the shoulders. “Now come on lad. A Stark is never late.”

‘Back to seeing ghosts,’ he couldn’t help but think.

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It certainly felt different being in the center of the attention. Given Lady Stark’s disposition towards him, Jon usually spent any major feast or dinner out of the main hall. He’d eat in the kitchens, Robb or Arya keeping him company when he was lucky, and spend the festivities letting out the anger and bitterness through training. Now though, here he was, sitting right next to his father at the head table as merchant after merchant passed by to address the Warden of the North and the other honored guests.

Jon knew he occupied the most junior position, the far left edge, on the table but he didn’t care. It felt great to eat next to his beloved father, who at the moment had a fake, reserved smile plastered on his face as a drunk merchant with terrible teeth began asking about the battle of the Trident. Hearing a loud snort further down the table, Jon quickly understood why his father refused. Sitting to Illyrio’s right was Viserys Targaryen, staring daggers and both him and Ned. Spotting him, the prince’s face turned revolted and shifted to talk to Illyrio - as if a bastard wasn’t worth his time. It didn’t bother Jon, he was used to it from Lady Stark, Ser Rodrik, and to a lesser extent Sansa.

To Viserys’ right a small figure of silver-blond hair leaned forward. Princess Daenerys. Remembering the incident with the balcony, and what his father had told him right before the feast, Jon sent what he figured was his warmest smile. Something he only reserved for Arya and his other siblings. To his credit, Daenerys responded with a smile of her own. Jon decided at that moment that she looked best when she smiled, though why it mattered to him did cross his mind.

“Lord Stark!” boomed another rather boisterous - and clearly drunk - merchant with a beard twice the length of Illyrio’s. “What an honor it is to see the Wolf of the Trident himself!” Hoisting his mug in the air, a green look washed over him as his eyes bugged out and he ran for a small antechamber in the corner of the hall. A smirk crossed Ned’s face and Jon snickered, faint retching sounds audible over the cacophony.

“Is this what it’s always like in the east?” Jon asked his father in a whisper.

“No,” Ned remarked. “Only the separate room. It’s so partygoers can… void their stomachs to keep celebrating.” That statement made both burst into chuckles. “I knew plenty of feasts where a room like that would have helped King Robert.” Chuckles turned into pure laughter.
“Tell us about Dorne!” another shouted.

“The man who defeated the Morning Swordsman single handedly,” announced another. At this, Jon’s interest was peaked. He and Robb loved hearing about their father battling Ser Arthur Dayne at the Tower of Joy, but had never heard it from his father personally.

A loud smack was heard through the cavernous hall. “Of course,” sneered Viserys, his speech slurred slightly from the fine Dornish wine. “The great Eddard Stark, renowned the world over for stabbing his King in the back.”

The whole hall grew quiet, even the drunkest among them knowing what was said. Ned’s face turned the stone, not a single emotion visible. Jon on the other hand grew flush with anger. “You do not know what in seven hells you are talking about, my Prince,” he sneered.

“Oh but I do, bastard.” The Prince had a smug look on his face, coupled with a rather serpent-like grin. “When my ancestor Aegon the Conqueror defeated the northern forces, Torren Stark swore fealty to him in perpetuity. For your undoubtedly feeble half-blood brain, that means that the Starks are forever sworn to the Targaryens. Your father is a vile traitor.”

Jon, even in his anger, could tell Daenerys was mortified at what was going on - similarly, she hadn’t had a drop to drink. “Brother, please. This is not…”

A sharp crack echoed out, Dany’s hand rushing up to clutch her face where Viserys had struck her. “Quiet slut!” Dany’s quiet pain made it clear this wasn’t a rare occurrence.

In any case, Jon felt fire course through him. Lord Stark had raised honorable men, and no man worth his salt ever laid a hand on a woman - Robb had pounded Theon Greyjoy to a pulp two years before just for trying. This time, Jon was more diplomatic. Slightly. “If you raise a hand against your sister again, I will cut it off,” he hissed, standing with his hand on the hilt of his sword. Daenerys stared at him with wide eyes, while her brother laughed. Jon could sense a small flash of fear though.

“Jon, that is enough. Sit down,” he heard his father say evenly. Ned Stark’s face was still stone, but his eyes blazed. Sitting, Jon knew it wasn’t directed at him. “My family, Prince Viserys, were loyal subjects of House Targaryen. However, when my brother and father pleaded with King Aerys about my sister, and he responded by burning one alive and strangling the other to death.”

The room was silent. Daenerys sat there with pure horror written on her face, the little color her pale skin had draining away. The Prince by contrast grew enraged. “LIES! Every word!”

“My oath to him died on that day, and I can tell just by looking at you that you share his honor.” He stood. “More accurately the lack of it.” Ned turned to his son. “Jon, we’re leaving. I’ve lost my appetite.”

Glad to go, Jon followed his father out of the hall. He turned for one last look at the Princess, who was close to tears at his father’s story. Perhaps he had only misjudged one of the siblings.

The knocking on the door disturbed Ned from his work. Quick reflexes prevented the ink bottle from spilling on the grain manifests cluttering the intricate wooden desk. “One moment.” He hoped it wasn’t Illyrio or one of his servants, not needing the headache.

Opening the door a creak, he was surprised to see a rather subdued Daenerys Targaryen. Not the person he would have imagined being at his door so late after dinner, but then again nothing about this visit to Pentos was ordinary. “I’m sorry to bother you my Lord, but may I have a few minutes of
Though hard and somber most occasions, Ned Stark allowed her a soft smile. This girl was not like her brother, nor her father - more like her mother and brother, which was an eminently good thing in his opinion. “You are not bothering me, Princess.” He let her in, keeping the door slightly ajar. “One should rest his eyes often while writing. Please, sit down.” He motioned to the bed while sitting in his chair. While she complied, the young Targaryen remained silent. Her cheek was red with a large handprint, something that made his blood boil. “My Lady, please forgive me for my rudeness earlier.”

Biting her lip, after a few terse seconds Dany mustered the courage to speak. “No, you weren’t rude. My brother was…” She never criticized her brother, knowing what Viserys would do to her if he heard it. However, allies of the Usurper they might be, the Starks were honorable men and they didn’t deserve what happened. “He was wrong. You two are fellow guests of our host and deserve our respect.”

Ned smiled. Daenerys Targaryen had a good heart, unlike her father. While he felt she’d be a formidable ruler if given a chance - just a gut feeling, though a Stark gut was usually quite accurate - the humility and kindness precluded the Targaryen madness her father and brother had. “Thank you, my Lady.”

Smiling softly at his noble air, Dany stood. “Do you know where your son is? I’d like to let him know as well.”

“I’m not sure, I think he’s outside.”

Nodding, Dany was about to leave when one last question popped into her head. One that nearly made her shake. “Lord Stark?” She watched Ned look at her with sincere eyes. “Was it true? About my father?”

Honorable to the core, Ned couldn’t lie to her. “Yes.”

Feeling physically sick, Dany fought the tears threatening to fall from her eyes with all the fortitude of a dragon. “I’m sorry, for everything.” With that she was gone.

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She found him exactly where Lord Stark had said - leaning on the railing, gazing out at the sea. Aside from the half-moon high above them the only light was a flickering lantern on the far wall, casting a low illumination. Daenerys could tell that the young man was immersed in thought. Handsome features imagining something far away from current reality.

The revelation about her father had floored the princess, adding to the whirlwind her life had taken in a mere twelve hours. ‘Sold to the Dothraki and being the daughter of a monster.’ Viserys had berated her not to “Believe the lies,” but at this point Dany felt that Ned Stark was far more trustworthy. Her brother would have thought her a fool for her need to talk to the Lord’s bastard as well, but she slowly approached him. Dany didn’t know why, but felt compelled to do so.

Reaching out to brush his shoulder, out of nowhere he jumped and batted her hand away. Dany’s eyes widened, fear spreading on her face.

Jon had been staring at the sea, not being able to get a silver-haired girl out of his mind. It wasn’t the first time he had seen a pretty girl, far from it, but his self-loathing and fear of putting another Snow in the world normally won out. So why was it this woman that couldn’t leave his thoughts? ‘Must be
the fact that she is a Targaryen.’ It wasn’t every day that one comes across the legendary Dragon House. Growing up to stories of how evil and mad the family was, finding one so… innocent only made it more surreal.

It was therefore that he instinctively prepared to fight whomever disturbed him - only to find his stomach pain when seeing those waves of silver before him. “Princess.” He drew away, angry at himself for causing her much fear. “Forgive me.”

Blinking, Dany was taken aback by his piercing grey eyes. But that lasted but a second. “It is alright, my Lord. I should be more careful sneaking up to a warrior next time.” She couldn’t help but smile sheepishly.

“Aye, but you shouldn’t call me that.” He turned back to the sea. “I’m not a Lord, I am but a bastard of a Lord.” Catelyn’s words still cut him deeply from halfway around the world. He was nothing compared to the lowliest son of the lowliest lord, let alone a pure-blood Targaryen.

Dany bit her lip once more, not knowing what to say. This Jon Snow was an enigma, not much escaping the brooding, aloof exterior, but she could tell his status was a source of insecurity. She could relate, given her relationship with her brother. Looking out at the sea, she decided to ignore it. “I’m sorry for what my brother said. Even a bastard deserves respect.”

“Perhaps, but you clearly do.” His eyes were drawn to her cheek, the welt making him snarl. “I meant what I said about cutting off his hand.” He looked her in the eyes for a moment, conveying his sincerity before shifting away. “Your brother is what I thought all Targaryens would be like,” Jon snorted. “No offense, Princess.” He sighed. “Your family and my… my father’s family haven’t had the best of histories.”

“No, they have not.” Gazing back at Jon Snow, Dany took in his features. The hardened yet boyish skin, the slightly long, wavy hair, determined jaw. He was handsome, no doubt - downright beautiful. He was still lost in thought. “What are you thinking about Jon Snow? Home? The North?”

She was simply too kind, too innocent. It disarmed him. “Aye, Winterfell. It isn’t much to the eye compared to somewhere like here, but I love it nonetheless.” His lips curled into a wistful smile, Dany’s heart fluttering at how much it brightened his face. “Spending time with my brothers and sisters, and my father. There’s nothing I love more.”

Dany could just imagine it, and felt happy that the enigmatic Jon Snow had some levity in his life. He was lucky to have siblings that loved him, unlike her. It had been easy to talk to Ned Stark, the weathered lord kind and and welcoming - almost like the father figure she never had. Jon Snow on the other hand? Daenerys simply… it felt right, as if he could relate to her. ‘Perhaps he does.’ “Must you have left a pretty girl behind?” Dany asked, curious. A small teasing impulse took her over for a moment. “Perhaps more than one?” A ghost of a grin crossed her face.

Only to disappear at his frown. “None.”

“Why not? I would be sure plenty would be interested.” ‘In someone as beautiful as you,’ she didn’t add.

What drove Jon to trust her with his secrets was a mystery to him, but it felt right to do so. “I don’t want to create another bastard named Snow, and no woman would want to marry a bastard.”

An overwhelming sadness crossed over Dany, feeling for this boy more than anyone else she had ever encountered - including herself. Wordlessly, she raised a delicate palm and placed it on Jon’s back, stroking softly. Comfortingly.
Not moving to push the hand off, Jon felt some of his pain flow away.

Gazing down at the two from his second floor window, Ned Stark sighed. On some level he knew this would happen the moment he spotted the silver-haired princess, though by the old gods and the new this was the last thing he wanted happening now. ‘Oh Lyanna,’ he thought, wishing he could talk to his long dead sister. ‘What should I do?’

He heard nothing but the rustle of the equatorial wind.

Chapter End Notes

Before y'all ask, Ned despises the Mad King for what he did to the Starks. However, after Lyanna told him the truth I doubt he would continue hating all the Targaryens. He would have wanted his sister to be happy, and without all the pain he would have consented to her marrying Rhaegar without a doubt (making Dany his sister-in-law, lol). Given that his father and brother wouldn't have gone to the Mad King had there not been such a fuss over the "kidnapping" because Robert couldn't get over himself and think that just maybe, Lyanna didn't love him, I think Ned would hold a love/hate feeling towards him.
Head leaning on his propped up forearm, Robb nursed the persistent migraine that hadn’t left him since Ned and Jon had left. ‘Dear Gods, how can father make this look so simple.’ Even with Ser Rodrick, Maester Luwin, and his mother advising him the whole task of being the interim Warden of the North in his father’s stead was overwhelming at times. Catelyn had informed him that he was settling into his role, but the heir to Winterfell hoped that the grain shipment for Lord Karstark would end soon.

Just as he figured that the business of the day was concluded a servant flew into the room. “my Lord, we just received a raven from the capitol.” He seemed to have run all the way from the aviary, panting hard.

“I’ll take it.” Grabbing the strip of paper from the servant’s hand, the young Stark’s eyes widened. ‘I have to get this to mother.’ Throwing his bearskin cloak over his shoulders, Robb whistled for Grey Wind to follow and stalked out of the receiving hall.

Catelyn was at the balcony, where he expected her to be. “Bran! I told you not to climb on the battlements!” she yelled across the ground. “Stop encouraging him, Arya.”

“But he’s doing so well, mother,” his younger sister responded.

“You should be sewing with Sansa.” The groan audible from even the balcony gave Robb a belly chuckle. The day Arya would willingly sew was the day dire wolves would take to the sky.

But the message from King’s Landing wormed back to prominence again. “Mother. King Robert is coming north.”

That got her attention. “What?” Robb handed her the note, causing her to scowl. “Damn you Ned.” She crumpled it up. “The King is only coming because of him. This is not good news.”

“We’ll need to prepare the castle for his arrival, stockpile food and such for the feasts.” If what his father had said about King Robert was true, then the kitchens couldn’t have enough supplies stored.

“Agreed.” Catelyn began to look for Maester Luwin. “And pray to all the Gods that your father comes back from Pentos soon.”

Muscles straining, Jon brought the sword against the practice dummy dragged into the courtyard at Illyrio’s orders. The oily merchant may have been as trustworthy as a snake to both honest Northerners in his care, but did make a legitimate effort to make them feel welcome and comfortable. Honing his fluidity and ease of swordsmanship on the thick wood, Jon knew it wasn’t the same as having a sparring partner. His father was, however, overseeing a delivery of inland grain to the port so the dummy would have to do.

It had been one week since he and his father arrived - one week since the fateful feast. Since that night overlooking the Narrow Sea. Dodging an imaginary swing, Jon reflected on the time he had spent with Ned, the longest continuous length of time he had with his father in his entire life. He wouldn’t have traded it for anything in the world no matter the backbreaking and stressful work at
the docks managing the grain. When Ned Stark wanted something done right he did it himself, and expected Jon to join in.

Much to Jon’s pleasure, he hadn’t seen hide nor hare of Viserys Targaryen since that night, earning belly laughs from his fellow northerners in dubbing him “The Mad Prince.” He could envision the Prince in the Mad King’s shoes, burning his family alive. Jon’s hacks at the dummy grew far more frenzied, anger lashing out.

“I don’t think it would harm you.”

Stopping mid hack, Jon drew back his sword and turned to meet the soft voice. No longer did all Targaryens elicit his loathing. Faced with the silver-waves and lovely, kind face of Daenerys Targaryen, here was one that challenged his preconceptions. “my Lady,” he remarked, bowing. “I did not hear you come by.”

Dany couldn’t help the small upward curve of her lips. “Seems like that is a running problem with you.” Ghost, waiting on the sidelines, was immediately up and at Dany’s side. Double the size Jon found him, he wagged his tail in excitement. Beaming, the princess gently kneeled to pet him. The snow white direwolf rolled on his back, enjoying the attention. Jon smiled - Ghost had taken an immediate liking to Daenerys. It surprised but did not disappoint him.

Over the week since he had arrived with Lord Stark she often sought out his company, mostly during the evenings. Dany hadn’t been able to get Jon Snow out of her mind following their chat by the sea, and in the stress and chaos preceding the date she would be presented to the Dothraki the distraction he gave was most welcome. “A northern warrior that can’t watch his back… Not a good thing.”

Nodding modestly, Jon wiped the sheen of sweat on his brow. “Perhaps it is because of your gentle feet, my Lady,” he deadpanned. “Small enough to sneak up on a person.”

She snorted, not helping the unregal, girlish giggle that left her lips - Viserys would not have been pleased at her behavior but in present company she didn’t care. There was something about Jon Snow that disarmed her, drawing out a part of her that had been suppressed long before. ‘He is a bastard, while I am my brother’s valuable asset. Ones that have had their humanity marked as less than others.’ The handsome northerner was largely the same as her, and Dany figured that was what drew them together. “Are you always this witty?”

The brooding look returned. “I wouldn’t know.” Even with Robb and Arya he rarely talked more than was needed, always mindful of Lady Stark or Ser Rodrick. Jon knew that only Ned’s presence - and Arya’s stubbornness - allowed him to spend time with his siblings at all. Seeing Dany’s face fall at his mood, it tugged on Jon’s heartstrings. Despite always being beautiful, this beautiful vixen deserved nothing but happiness. Of this he was certain. “Want to know something about my sister Arya?” he asked, trying to change the subject.

Her eyes immediately perked up, sparkling. “Yes.” Jon had mentioned his siblings in passing over their past conversations, and while he loved them all it was Arya that he clearly loved the most.

“She’s the wildest of all of us,” he recalled fondly. “Stubborn to a fault, which my father says she gets from my Aunt Lyanna.”

‘The one my brother dishonored,’ Dany thought. Instead of voicing it, she let him continue, loving the sound of his voice.

The day before his father informed him of their impending trip came to mind, Jon grinning. “She’s a natural at archery and swordsmanship for her age, and it drives Bran up the wall. Arya likes showing
off that she’s better than him, and he finds it humiliating that a girl can beat him.” The grin had evolved into full blown laughter at this point. Dany loved his laugh. Coming from how dour he usually was, the carefree sound made her smile. “And your father and Lady Stark allow her to do so? Viserys wouldn’t dare let me learn the combat arts.”

A dark fire crossed Jon’s grey eyes for a moment at the mention of the Mad Prince, but he extinguished it by focusing on Arya. “Lady Stark would rather she be a lady in training like Sansa, but they let her be most of the time. I think my father feels it’s like being with his long-dead sister once again.” Though his fond memories, what Daenerys said about her brother came back to mind. “I could teach you a few things.”

Eyes widening, Dany wondered if she heard him correctly. “What?”

For some reason he found her confusion amusing. It was… cute. “I always encouraged Arya to learn these things. Though she could only benefit to be a bit more feminine, I was planning to make her a sword of her own when we get back to Winterfell.” He placed a hand over hers. “Learning a few basic skills wouldn’t hurt, especially for someone soon to join the Dothraki.” From the stories he heard, their women were tough.

Mouth opening and closing several times without a sound, Dany was about to finally answer when a snide call made her heart sink.

“Sweet sister,” Viserys sneered sarcastically, striding up to the both of them in full Targaryen regalia. “I thought I told you to wait for me in my rooms to discuss your future with the barbarian chief.” He laughed. “Imagine, when future generations speak of my reign, they’ll realize the beginning to be this. How boring, wouldn’t you say.” Not waiting for her to finish, his grin turned into a scowl upon seeing Jon. “What are you doing here bastard? Are you harassing my sister?”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. ‘It is not I that is harassing her now,’ he thought, based on her demeanor. He willed himself calm, however. “Merely practicing my swordsmanship.”

The statement seemed to amuse Viserys to no end. He cackled, hand on his gut. At Jon’s raised eyebrow, he sneered. “Oh the northmen, the worst swordsmen in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Ser Arthur Dayne would say differently,” the Bastard of Winterfell deadpanned.

Viserys snorted. “Even if your father beat the Sword of the Morning, the common blood inside you beat out all of his.” A gleam entered his murky violet eyes. “Tell you what, bastard. If you think you are so skilled, then fight me.” He drew his own blade, the steel glinting in the sun.

Staying silent, Jon turned away. He wasn’t going to take the bait.

“Viserys, please…” Dany pleaded, tugging on his shoulder, pale with fear.

The Prince’s head swiveled to Dany, blazing with anger. “Hands off me, slut! Do not wake the dragon.”

Both were soon preoccupied again as Jon drew his sword, leveling it at Viserys. He could take insults directed at his person, but he would be damned if Daenerys was abused on his watch. Her fear, her cowering in front of this pathetic worm ignited a fire deep inside him - one that never once bubbled to the surface in his life. “If you wish a match, then so be it.”

Gleaming in a smug triumph in comparison to Dany’s horror, Viserys pulled away from her and the two began circling, swords drawn and sizing each other up. “Scared, bastard?”
“No.” Ignoring him, Jon spent his time shooting Daenerys a calming look, as if saying ‘I’ll be fine.’ Her horror changed into a more concerned fear, but he was glad she was no longer about to scream or pass out. The Prince’s taunting did not bother him, used to far worse from Lady Stark. “The opposite actually. I could use a sparring partner.” Jon’s lips curled upward in a ghost of a smirk. “Even if it is the Mad Prince.”

At hearing the name Jon had coined for him, a vein throbbed on Viserys’ reddening head. “You will pay for that.” And with that, he lunged forward with a poor excuse for a battle cry - likely meant to be frightening but coming off as cringeworthy. Steel glinted as it moved to slice at Jon…

Only for Jon to easily sidestep it. He had expected the attack, and was ready. Gripping the hilt tightly with one hand, metal clanged as two frenzied parries were batted away with minimal effort. “Is that the best you can do, our Grace?” Jon teased, enjoying Viserys’ rage. Ser Rodrick may have shared Lady Stark’s opinion of him, but he was as thorough with teaching him as he did Robb - in this case the importance of psychological warfare.

As expected, it only angered the Prince even more. “Enough games!” Raising his sword high above him, the steel slightly discolored from rust - obviously he hadn’t taken care of his blade as a true swordsman would - he brought it down with all his might.

Dany felt her entire body tremble. She wanted to move, to cry, to do something but her feet and legs failed her, voice barely a rasping whisper. Viserys had sparred in her presence before, usually against training servants that he always beat. The powerful downward slice made her mouth gasp in a silent scream - so worried that her northern companion was a goner - when the blades clashed once again. The vice gripping her heart eased watching Jon fluidly bat and parry her brother’s attacks, his movements graceful and skilled.

Only for the suppressed scream to leap from her throat. Not catching an uneven stone paving, Jon’s agile footwork to avoid stumbling cost him time to react to a slash by Viserys - the Prince’s blade tasted blood, slicing through Jon’s tunic and leaving a shallow gash on his side. His dark smirk of triumph contrasted with the near tears in Dany’s. She couldn’t stand to see him hurt. In such a small time, he had become one of the only people she could trust. Her friend. Her confidant.

“Give up, bastard?”

Blacking out the pain, Jon gripped his sword in both hands. “I could do this all day.” He feinted to the right, sparing a moment’s satisfaction at the Prince taking the bait. Two swipes and a lunge of his sword later, and the rusted blade clattered on the stone. A kick to the gut sent Viserys to the ground, scraping his arm and bruising his elbow.

Instinct and familiarity, much as she would have rather seen to Jon first- as Ghost did, running to his master’s side - brought Dany to her brother’s side. “Do you need help, brother?” she asked, grabbing his hand.

A primal screech left Viserys’ throat. “Don’t you touch me!” Pride taking a huge beating, the princess knew that he was using every facet of his self-control not to lash out physically at her - apparently Jon’s threat of slicing off his arm had worked to an extent. He wouldn’t dare attack her in the northman’s presence. He stormed off towards Illyrio’s house, cursing up a storm.

“Jon!” Dany raced over to him, free to now that her brother was gone. All she could see was the red mark on his chest, oozing a small trickle of blood. Her hands were on it. “Oh Gods.”

Wincing from the sting, the gentle touch of the Targaryen princess ghosting on his skin nevertheless felt wonderful. A calming warmth radiated from the pale digits, soothing much of the pain. “It’s fine,
Dany. It’s just a scratch.”

Inspecting it carefully, once she was confident that it wasn’t serious Daenerys’ mind finally realized what he had said. “Dany?”

Jon looked away sheepishly. “Sorry. It just slipped out.”

“No.” She couldn’t help the blush spreading on her cheeks. “It’s fine. I... like it.” Dany really did. The nickname felt so sweet, so right coming from him. His statement from earlier came to mind. “Perhaps I shall take you up on your earlier offer.” She tugged on his arm. “Let’s get you inside and get it cleaned. Are you sure you’re fine?”

“Positive.” Jon smiled, letting her know that it was nothing. “Robb did far worse to me during our spars, though in fairness those were fair matches. Now I know what Ser Rodrick must have felt when he was teaching us to spar.”

Dany couldn’t control the laugh that tumbled from her. Leave it to Jon Snow to make her laugh after such a day.

A flick of the quill pen finished off his signature, Ned Stark indenting a small dot to punctuate the message. As condensed and small as possible to fit onto the large piece of raven parchment, the Lord of Winterfell quickly read it over. There was so much to convey in so little space. But his brother needed to read it, being the only person he could completely and totally trust.

Dearest brother,

The gods have nearly created our nightmare. I am in Essos with Jon, for what is not important, but while there I have ran into the Targaryen orphans. The boy is worse than his father, while the girl…

She and Jon have grown close in our time here, and I fear the worst. I will likely return within a few weeks, and will send another raven to you when I arrive in White Harbor. Please be ready to ride to Winterfell, for we need to speak.

Ned

He was supremely confident that Benjen would come. The Lead Ranger of the Night’s Watch loved Jon, probably more than anyone in the family aside from Arya - and had kept the secret for longer than even Ned. Never indecisive or lost, on this he needed his brother. There was literally no one else that he could turn to.

For the aviary where Illyrio kept his ravens - always fully stocked due to the plethora of dealings undertaken by the head of the Merchant Guild of Pentos - Ned caught the sound of merry laughter from the gardens. Resting on a stone bench underneath an acacia tree were the subjects of his dilemma, engrossed in amiable conversation. Jon’s direwolf Ghost was resting in Daenerys’ lap, licking her face as she laughed - it was as if all the pain and apprehension was gone from her face, leaving nothing but a radiant beauty in its wake.

And Jon… the reserved brooding present even during light moments was fully gone. His smile was completely genuine. Ned had only seen it once before, for a moment after Arya was born and Jon was able to hold her. While the smart thing would have been to keep Jon and the Dragon Princess apart, his heart warmed at seeing his son so happy and content. ‘If only you were here to see this, Lyanna.’ Given all that happened, remembering her was bittersweet. It was at these times that he hated both Robert and the Mad King for bringing it about.
Everything was simply so unexpected, the chances of running into the last Targaryens with Jon at his side so remote that he had never considered it possible. ‘And yet you are here.’ The bell could not be undone, so he would have to bear the brunt of it. Delivering the message to the raven-keeper and watching him ready the black bird, Ned formulated what he would need to do. Getting Jon out as soon as the grain was ready remained atop his list, for he couldn’t let the boy grow too close to Princess Daenerys. ‘You may be too late,’ a voice inside his head told him, but he ignored it.

Besides him and Jon, there were only two that needed to know about this - and only one of them the whole truth. Ned could trust Benjen, while Robert had to at least be told of him running into Viserys and Daenerys. Exiting the aviary, Ned knew the King would not be happy, but it was better hearing it from him rather than one of the Lannisters. With Jon Arryn dead the allies he had at court were slim to none, and even if the whole of Westeros separated him from King’s Landing he had to cover his bases.

“Excuse me, is this the home where Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen are residing?”

That voice. Never in his future years would Eddard Stark ever forget that voice. One belonging to someone that brought the greatest scandal ever to befall the North after the coronation of Robert Baratheon. Turning the corner of the grounds, there he was. Older and far more weathered, be it from stress or labor, but there he was.

A man Ned had sentenced to death.

Jorah Mormont, the disgraced heir to Bear Island.

Chapter End Notes

Can't not bring in Ser Jorah.
To describe Ser Jorah Mormont’s exile as hard would be engaging in a massive understatement. Once the heir to Bear Island, one of the oldest and most noble Northern houses, the dashing warrior had his life ripped away from him over one mistake - a mistake that cost him everything. Unable to go home, to even exist in his native land. The knowledge that those he once called friends and comrades now hated him, his family branding him a disgrace. His poor father, condemned to live out the rest of his years at Castle Black with Jorah’s shame. All to please a woman that never loved him.

Drowning his sorrows at a tavern in Pentos, reduced to a common sellsword, the rumors had floated in regarding the upcoming marriage between the Khal of the Dothraki and Princess Daenerys Targaryen. This had piqued his interest. He held no love for the Targaryens, none whatsoever. What they had done to Rickard and Brandon Stark bought them Jorah’s everlasting hatred. However, an opportunity arose. They would need a Westerosi face to trust among the Dothraki horde, and King Robert would pay handsomely for information… perhaps even a pardon?

Such was what brought him to the home of Illyrio Mopatis, to call on Prince Viserys to offer his services. He knew the Dothraki, and they would be well served by him.

“Ser Jorah Mormont,” the merchant announced, feet gliding across the glazed floor tiles to greet his guest. “I did not expect the Andal himself to arrive at my home.”

Jorah smiled wanly, not bothering to correct Illyrio - being from the north, he was a First Man, not an Andal. But the name stuck among the sellswords of Essos, and he was fine with it. “I come to offer my services to the Prince and Princess.”

The oily merchant’s eyes gave away nothing. “I will pass this along to them, Ser Jorah. Prince Viserys would likely be thrilled to have such a great warrior giving him counsel.”

“Aye, they would be lucky to have his counsel.”

As soon as he heard that statement, Jorah’s blood turned to ice, blood leaving his tanned, weathered skin. Turning, he was completely and utterly shocked to find his former Warden striding toward them. “Lord Stark,” he said evenly, fighting hard not to croak. There were few that intimidated Jorah Mormont, but Eddard Stark was one of them. If he had his way then Jorah would have died at his hand.

“Ser Jorah Mormont, in the flesh.” Ned was angry at seeing this disgrace once again, but suppressed it. He had every right to be here, for it wasn’t Westeros, and it would have been dishonorable to pass the man’s sentence outside the North. “I know that Prince Viserys wouldn’t value my word, but I can vouch that Ser Jorah is an able warrior and advisor.”

Blinking, Jorah only just managed not to gape. Illyrio clapped Lord Stark on the back. “Well put.” He turned back to Jorah. “I will inform the Prince of your arrival, though it is not the right time for you to formally offer your services. Perhaps at a later time, Ser Jorah.”

“Whatever you feel is proper.” The Bear Islander bowed. “Lord Illyrio, Lord Stark. May the grace of the old Gods be with you.” He turned and walked to his horse, pondering what just occurred.

Stroking the stubble on his chin, the gears were turning inside Ned’s head. ‘Jorah is too much a proud northerner to wish to serve a Targaryen. What does he desire?’ Whatever it was, he was going to find out.
Darting to the right, Daenerys nimbly shifted along the grounds when a thump on her shoulder left her pursing her lips. A Valyrian curse tumbled from her lips. Yet again she was bested.

“Dead, for the tenth time,” came the husky, slightly amused northern accent of her instructor. “Good think you have warriors like me to protect you, Princess.”

Daenerys glowered at Jon, violet eyes stormy with annoyance. “You do not fight fair, Jon Snow.” Tucking the heavy, wooden practice weapon under her arm, she rubbed the blossoming bruises on her shoulders and sides. Had it not been Jon, her kind and devilishly handsome northern companion, she probably would have lost patience with this after the third thumping. She glanced over at Ghost, the growing puppy sprawled comfortably in the shade of an acacia tree. ‘Lucky wolf.’

Jon grinned, the silver-haired princess disarming his guarded nature as Robb or Arya did. “Battle is not fair, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. There are no rules, except to win of course.” For the last two weeks the two of them had been practicing, Jon running through all of the drills and exercises taught to him. It hadn’t been the easiest going, but Dany was coming along well enough to graduate to basic sparring.

At the glimpse of a blue-black welt marring Dany’s porcelain skin, Jon’s face fell. Perhaps he was being too hard on her. He would never forgive himself if he hurt her. “Would you like to stop, Dany?”

The nickname never ceased to make her stomach flutter. Raised to be a proud woman of the last noble house of Old Valyria, Daenerys nevertheless loved the sound of ‘Dany’ in the husky northern dialect of her companion. “No, I’m fine. I want to master this, it’s just frustrating.” She huffed, kicking at a few pebbles on the courtyard floor.

“Maybe we should change direction then.” Jon reached into his mind, remembering the lessons with Ser Rodrick. There were fundamental principles to good swordsmanship that all warriors were obligated to master, but otherwise the skills were malleable. The styles of Braavos were different than the styles of Dorne which were then different from the styles of the North. What worked for Jon and Robb’s strong muscles and large swords wouldn’t work for the dainty and slender Daenerys.

What she needed was a different technique, not to master for now but to allow her to defend herself. “Hand me your sword.” Dany complied, watching with puzzled eyes at what Jon was doing. Opening the chest holding all the wooden practice blades, he set it down and grabbed a curved Dornish scimitar, the wood slender and light. “This should help. We’ll try some exercises to take advantage of your speed and agility.” He couldn’t help eyeing her figure for a moment. Clad in a slightly tight female tunic and trousers that Arya favored - his little sister hated dresses - Danys full slender curves were on full display. It was a magnificent sight, one where he willed himself to discount most of the time. He’d never get any work done otherwise. “As a woman your body is nicely built for it.”

Dany blushed slightly. ‘Is he really complimenting my body?’ She realized that she would enjoy it if he did, as well as his grey eyes on her. Taking the faux scimitar in her hand, she was immediately appreciative of how much lighter it was. How much easier it was to maneuver it with her hand. “So I should try to mimic the agility exercises?”

He readied his stance. “Yes, but please try to be unexpected, Dany. You are the blood of the Dragon. You have it in you.” With that, Jon began with a light jab at her abdomen.

‘Blood of the Dragon.’ Managing to dart out of the way, just, Daenerys let her scimitar slash at Jon.
While missing, she felt pretty good - the lighter blade was easier for her to handle, requiring less strength and more agility. This time, she managed to last over thirty seconds before a cross from Jon caused her to stumble and lose her footing.

A small hand reached out and grabbed Jon’s shirt to try and stay upright, but the motion ended up propelling both to the ground. Jon on top of Dany. Both were breathing heavily from the exertion. “Looks like.” Jon sucked in a breath. “We found your particular style.”

“Yes.” Dany breathed. “We did.” He chuckled, and so did she. Their faces barely apart. Eyes gazing into the other. Dany’s shifted down to his lips, and she swore his did to hers.

The moment was ruined at Ghost letting out a bark, both hurriedly separating and standing as a servant girl approached. Flustered, Dany couldn’t help the small smirk on her face at Jon’s bright red blush, the northerner rubbing the back of his neck. It was oddly adorable. “Yes?” She asked the servant.

“My Lady, your brother the Prince would like your presence in the baths.”

A pit formed in her gut. ‘Oh Gods. That’s today.’ Biting her lip, Dany looked back at Jon. “I have to go. Today is when I’m presented to the Dothraki Khal.”

Sensing her fear, Jon soothingly placed a hand on her arm. It felt electric to the touch. “Would you like me to attend?” He knew that Viserys would likely try something, and if the stories he heard about the Dothraki were true then an additional sword wouldn’t hurt.

Dany could feel her heart melt. No one had ever been as kind to her as Jon. “I would like that very much, Jon Snow.”

“Seven hells, sister, what are you doing in those ghastly rags?” Whatever levity and confidence that Jon Snow made bubble to the surface disappeared upon sight of her brother. Dany couldn’t control it, Viserys being a far larger presence in her life. “You look like some flea bottom wench.” A disgusted grimace on his lips, he slapped at the garment, as if not wanting to sully his fingers with it. “No, no, this won’t due at all.

The bath was already steaming, various servant girls filling it further with searing water. They scurried out to avoid Viserys - he was a noted groper when he was drunk, and had his fun with the female domestic staff. ‘He would have done so with me had I not been so valuable to him as a maiden,” Daenerys thought sadly.

Viserys returned with a flowing grey-white dress, cutting a rather dashing figure in his cotton tunic and leather, high-laced boots. He paled in comparison to a certain raven-haired northerner in Dany’s eyes, though. “Here, look at this fabric.” She reached up, gently feeling the gossamer fabric between her fingers. It was thin and airy in the traditional style of Essos noblewomen. Much better in the heat of the equatorial sun than what Jon and Lord Stark wore. “Much better for you than those mannish rags. A gift from Illyrio. Isn’t he a gracious host?”

Dany looked away, thankful for the thicker layers hiding her from Viserys’ wandering eyes. “He’s never given us anything while we’ve stayed here.”

“Oh Daenerys,” her brother chuckled. “He knows that I will repay his friends once the throne is mine. They drink secret toasts to my health in the Seven Kingdoms, you know.”

‘How little you know, brother,’ she thought, looking at how Jon thought of him. If the northman was
any indication, they thought nothing of Viserys. “What do you want me to do?”

“You shall take a bath and get ready for the Dothraki king to arrive.” He hummed in approval, eyeing her over - unlike Jon’s looks, she only shuddered unnoticeably. “One thing the northern bastard did right, he improved your posture. But forget everything else. A proper bride is submissive before her husband.” A look she knew very well flashed in his eyes, causing her to want to flinch. “You will be perfect today, sister. Don’t think of waking the Dragon.”

Shaking her head, Dany endured how he stripped her of the tunic and trousers, running a hand along her naked body. “A woman’s body. Perfect.” Walking out, he glanced back at her. “Soon, I shall be on the Iron Throne. Our family will be back where it belongs. Where I belong, with you by my side, my sweet.”

Turning towards the bath, Daenerys reflected on the family legacy. How she was likely birthed solely to provide her dead brother Rhaegar with a daughter-in-law. How she was still only a broodmare for Viserys, to keep the bloodlines pure. Dany hated feeling alone, hated thinking that she could be the last Targaryen - in this way she loved Viserys, but seeing how Jon talked about his siblings and how he loved them all so dearly, Viserys was not her true brother. He did not love her, only wanted her as his pawn.

And she was too weak to be anything but.

“You are the blood of the dragon.” Jon’s words still echoed in her.

‘I am the blood of the dragon.’ Slowly, she lowered herself into the bath, ignoring the pleas of the servants. It felt hot, scorching even. But she could handle it.

‘Blood of the dragon.’

“What do you know about the Dothraki, father?” It felt good to be able to call Ned father. Used to the strict rules at home, Jon was only free to not use “Lord Stark” when alone or among his siblings.

Ned pondered the question, the two of them walking to the balcony overlooking the front courtyard. “Not much. Only by reputation. They live on horseback, raiding and looting to keep wealth. That makes them powerful warriors.” He remembered a little tidbit he learned from a sellsword at the docks. “A Dothraki warrior only cuts the long braid of hair if he loses a fight. Their current leader, Khal Drogo, has never once cut his hair.”

“And he’s the one Daenerys is marrying?” Jon couldn’t help the gloomy look that crossed over his face.

It did not go unnoticed by the Warden of the North. “Yes. I believe so.” He looked to the sky, once again wishing she had not left this world. Ned had been doing that quite a lot since landing at Pentos.

Gazing down from the balcony, he spotted Dany waiting next to her brother and Illyrio. Jon’s breath hitched. She looked like perfection embodied in the light, flowing dress - he couldn’t deny it. As if noticing his arrival, Dany glanced backward and the numb expression quickly morphed into a wide smile. Jon smiled back, hoping that he could calm her by just being there. The Princess was his friend, someone that he had grown quickly to care for.

Almost as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, Dany turned back as the drum of hoofbeats grew closer and closer. Mask back on, she steeled herself. ‘This is it.’ She did not want this to happen, wanted to scream to the heavens for her brother to end it, but at least with Jon Snow close
by she didn’t have to go through the ordeal alone.

Soon, the Khal had arrived, surrounded by his equally fearsome bloodriders. “Khal Drogo of the Great Grass Sea,” Illyrio called out in a grand tone, opening his hands wide. “Please, let me present to you Viserys of House Targaryen, third in his name, rightful King of the Andals, Rhoynar, and First Men, Protector of the Realm.” He then motioned to her. “And Daenerys, Princess of House Targaryen. Your prospective betrothed.”

Closing her eyes, Dany heard the steady clop-clop of hooves on stone. They got closer and closer, her future… husband approaching.

‘Blood of the dragon.’

She opened them, looking up into his face. Drogo was handsome, in a way. No one could call him beautiful, but he had a muscular build that screamed strength. Nothing that could compare to the perfect beauty. To Jon.

‘Blood of the Dragon.’

The horse circled her, Drogo inspecting Dany as if she were at a Meereen slave auction - which in effect she was.

‘Blood of the Dragon.’

Before she could even make sense of it, the Khal rode off, his bloodriders following. “Hey!” Viserys cried, running down the carpet. “He didn’t say anything! Did he even like her?”

“Calm down your Grace,” Illyrio replied, clasping a hand over Viserys’ back. “If he had any objection, we’d know. The Khal liked his prize.” He grinned, the smile spreading to Viserys as they walked back inside.

Hearing them had been too much for Dany. Trying to stay strong was brutal, and she had heard her brother view her as akin to a slave before, but this time something inside her broke. She rushed out, heading for the garden. Heading for someplace she could be safe.

Sad grey eyes watched her the whole time.

Quiet, nothing but the rustle of the wind and the low hum of the great free city of Pentos long away. It seemed surreal for Jon, and for a moment he feared that he may have been alone. That something could have happened. That there was no sign of…

It was then that he heard it. A soft sobbing, one that brought relief to his system and ice to his heart simultaneously. There, nestled in a grove of trees, was Daenerys. She laid herself out on the lone stone bench, head laying on her crossed arms and body shaking from tears. Jon’s heart ached for her. She was such a strong, noble woman with blood that rivaled any high-born noble in the Seven Kingdoms. He knew she carried herself with such quiet dignity despite being used as a pawn by her brother, but if anyone understood being overwhelmed it was him.

Stepping forward, Jon gently placed his hand on a bare upper back. The pale skin felt so soft, but her whole figure tensed up immediately. “It’s me, Dany.” The tension disappeared.

Fearing that someone had intruded on her shameful ignoble moment, Daenerys was so relieved to hear Jon’s voice. In a short time he had become the only person she trusted so fully. A kindred spirit
that knew her pain. There was a deeper connection, one she hadn’t yet found out nor could even comprehend, but was supremely glad was here in this trying time. “Jon.” She rose, wiping her eyes and steeling herself. “Please forgive me.”

He sat next to her, making her shiver at the closeness. “There’s nothing to forgive, Dany.” A callused hand placed itself over hers. “I couldn’t imagine what it would be like for you. Only someone with the strength of a dragon could endure it so well.” She watched him purse her lips, as if wrestling with some bad memory. One that ached at his soul.

Staring into his grey eyes, heart beating rapidly, Dany softly rested her hand on his cheek. It was prickly with the unshaven black stubble, but it just made him all the more manly to her. Rugged. Strong. He closed them for a moment, opening to reveal a storm of emotion. So comforting. So beautiful.

Without warning she closed the distance between them, her lips coming into contact with his. The sudden move caught Jon by surprise, but it lasted a mere moment before his icy posture melted by Daenerys’ fire. He relaxed into her, arms pulling the silver-haired princess to him as he instinctively returned the kiss. Dany felt as if she was flying, surrounded by his strong arms and clutching his waist tightly. She never wanted this to end. Wanted more, so much more.

Brain fogged, all Jon could think about was Daenerys. For the first time in his life he had someone to relate to, someone who could share his pain. The kindest heart and most loving soul. He groaned as Dany’s tongue swiped slowly over his lips. Seeking entrance. Unable to resist, he granted it.

Warmth bellowed into flaming dragonfire as her tongue met his. Dany knew this had to be unique. She had never been kissed before. No ordinary kiss could be like this. Two hands snaked up his chest as their tongues battled. ‘Gods, this man is so beautiful.’

The princess’ touch threw Jon back into reality. It felt so amazing, but he couldn’t do this. Wrenching himself away, Jon sucked in a wheezing breath. Dany stared at him with confused eyes, looking so beautiful in the low light. Jon wanted her. He felt ashamed. “What have I done?”

His words were like an icepick to Daenerys’ heart. “Jon.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, only to be shrugged off. “Please. What’s wrong?” Tears welled in her eyes.

“I can’t do this.” He tore his eyes away, noticing her suppressing a sob. Nothing hurt him more than watching her in pain because of him - but it was his fault. “You deserve someone perfect. You deserve more than a bastard.” And with that he walked away, two pairs of eyes wet with tears.
Falling

Chapter Notes

Be sure to check out the newest update of the longer fic on FF .net :D

“I have acquired you a slave, Daenerys.”

Perched at her vanity table, elegant wood a dark mahogany from Volantis, Dany continued brushing her silver locks as if her brother had not mentioned his random statement. “Oh? I thought the Free Cities abolished slavery?”

A chuckle left Viserys’ lips. “There are always ways, sweet sister.” He stepped behind her, placing a hand on her bare shoulder. It was revolting to the touch, clammy and cold, but Dany couldn’t care to express an emotion - lest the tears bubble up. “She is a special slave, purchased to be your personal handmaiden alongside what horse trash your husband will provide.”

In all honesty, Daenerys had barely heard a word her brother said. All her mind was focused on was either what had happened only a few days before - or trying to forget what happened. Just remembering the words from her likely former friend’s mouth made her heart feel like it had been run in with a sword. Dany couldn’t take it. Even for the blood of the dragon, it was too much.

Still, the way Viserys had called this new handmaiden a “Special Slave,” caused a pit to form in her gut. “Oh?” She tried to seem aloof and disinterested. “How would she be special.” Dany set down her brush and glanced at her brother through the mirror.

She watched as the snake-like grin spread on his face, stretching from ear to ear. It clearly amused him to think about. “She is a former whore that served the Dothraki. Doreah will teach you everything you need to know about pleasing a man, Khal Drogo to be exact.” The look in his eyes was pure glee, as if he enjoyed the images dancing in his head. Her thin garment left little to the imagination.

For Daenerys, her eyes merely widened in horror. There it was, the certainty of her future brought back like an onrushing bull elephant - it had been drowned out by Jon in the last few days, but was crystal clear now. She was to be married to the Dothraki Khal. Sold like a common slave - by her brother nonetheless. The last family she had left. Of the sweet boy that taught her about the history of their people, both in Valyria and Westeros, nothing remained. The Targaryen madness had set in, leaving him cold and obsessed with power.

Her discomfort and grief wasn’t even noticed by him. “You must listen to your future King, Daenerys, for he possesses all the intelligence that is lacking in a mere woman.” He ran his hand along her cheek. “I know how to play a man like Drogo. I give him a Queen, and he gives me an army.”

“I don’t want to be his Queen,” she blurted quietly, almost a whisper. It just slipped out. Part of the confidence her time with the northmen taught her rushed to the surface, only to die down upon being reminded of where she was and who she spoke to. Under his peering gaze, she retreated into her usual meekness. “I want…” Jon. She wanted Jon. “I want to go home.”
“I do too.” Viserys had a puzzled smirk on his face, as if he was surprised she said such a stupid thing - but too dense to read between the lines. “I want us both to go home, but we can only do so at the head of an army. Khal Drogo’s army.” His hand returned to her cheek, stroking it. It made Dany nauseous. Once resigned to having to marry him to keep the bloodline strong, compared to one kiss from Jon she found she could not do it. Her brother’s lack of concern for her only solidified her inner disgust.

“I would let his whole tribe fuck you, them and their horses, for that army, sweet sister.” Feeling his lips kiss her on the forehead, soon Dany found herself alone in the room. Totally and completely alone as she was most of her life.

Wrapping her arms protectively around her chest, Dany fought back the tears that threatened to form. Once again denied even the littlest comfort from another, she missed the moments she had with Jon. A connection existed between them, one that didn’t make sense to her - but it was there, Daenerys knew it and was certain the raven-haired wolf knew as well. ‘My wolf.’ Sobs wracking her lithe frame, she needed his comfort, his words of wisdom and kindness, but they weren’t available. After their kiss, the happiest moment in her life, he had fled thanks to his insecurities. She cried for what hurt him so.

“You are not a bastard to me.” No one around her, the words were lost to the silence.

It should have been for the best. Every voice inside Eddard Stark’s head was shouting loudly that they had all averted the catastrophe hanging over their heads the minute the Bastard of Winterfell laid eyes on the silver-haired Targaryen princess. That didn’t stop the proud Warden of the North from feeling like shit. A heavy sigh, a guilty sigh escaped his lips as he watched his flesh and blood train in the courtyard - hacks and parrys were as skilled as ever, but there was an enraged intensity to them. An unnecessary brutality attempting to free demons trapped within the young lad.

Hanging his head, Lord Stark turned and ambled through the lush garden overlooking the Narrow Sea. For him the riddle had an easy answer. It was the fourth morning where Jon trained alone, without the companionship of Daenerys Targaryen. Ned had his theories as to why this occurred, not knowing for sure but surmising.

‘It is his destiny, brother,’ the nagging voice would keep saying whenever he thought about it. Ned didn’t want to believe it - for his entire stay in Pentos he willed to both the old gods and the new that Jon and Daenerys wouldn’t share that connection. But, it was all for naught. Perhaps it was destiny? A song of Ice and Fire, as it had been for…

He stopped, eyes catching a flash of silver in the grove of trees ahead. There was only one of two people in the entire known world it could be, and the gods wouldn’t be cruel enough to Ned for it to be anyone else but her. And they weren’t. If Ned had any doubt as to the reciprocity of Jon’s feelings, the look of faraway heartbreak in Princess Daenerys’ violet eyes shattered it. ‘A song of Ice and Fire.’ Destiny? He made his way into the grove.

‘It is their destiny, Ned.’

“Princess.” The Lord of Winterfell gave her a small bow.

Staring out at the sea, almost like how she had first found Jon on his first night in Pentos - while barely three weeks before, it seemed like ages since he arrived into her life - Dany nearly jumped out of her skin at the dour northern accent. “Lord Stark,” she breathed after catching her bearings. With
the poise of her highborn birth, she rose and curtsied for the Warden of the North. “I did not see you
arrive.”

“Tis’ alright,” Ned chuckled softly, motioning for both of them to sit on the stone bench. “A wolf
instinctively knows how to quietly approach something.” It heartened him to see the girl’s lip quiver
upward at his lame attempt at humor.

‘Don’t let this go on, Ned.’

“Jon, he’s never had the easiest time of it.” He could tell she had shifted her gaze, looking intently at
him, but he remained fixed on the sparkling waves of the Narrow Sea. It had to be done, or else he’d
lose his nerve - words never once thought to apply to Eddard Stark. It wasn’t comfortable for him,
but his honor mandated it. For his family. “Most bastards in the north, they are but loyal pawns for
the family. Useful, but never truly loved.”

“But not Jon.” Ned smiled. The girl caught on quickly.

“No, not Jon. I always treated him as my own, strived to make sure he knew he was part of the
family. My other children… apart from Sansa they all did as well. Her… I know she loves him, but
she wishes to emulate Catelyn. Lady Stark.”

Dany closed her eyes, welling back the anger she felt for the Lady of Winterfell. It wasn’t hard to
know why. “Jon told me about her, of how he respects her.” That got Ned to meet her eyes, if for
only a moment. “But I can tell, the animosity she has for him from his words. She never truly forgave
you for straying, and takes that out on him, yes?”

Guilt bubbled within the Warden of the North. “Aye.” If only she had known the truth… but the
truth could never be told. ‘Could it? To her?’ If to Benjen, could Ned trust her with this? Such was a
question for another time. “With his siblings, Jon can open up from his shell. However, I have never
seen him as close to anyone as he has been to you. Like…” Like his mother. “Himself.”

Eyes watering, Dany’s lip quivered. It went both ways. With Jon she, almost instantaneously, had
that elusive home. Where she could simply be… Dany, without the stress and worry of her house
and her blood, if only for a little while.

Glancing back at her, Ned felt the facade of anger simmering away. Of course he hated the Mad
King, but the weight of history that he wore as armor to fulfill his promise, it melted in the face of
this innocent girl. She was blameless for her father’s madness. Blameless for the mistakes of her
eldest brother. ‘For Jon she is…’ That may be much too far, but there was no denying to himself that
the two’s destinies were intertwined somehow. Even if miniscule.

Daenerys broke his thoughts, standing. “You are an honorable man Lord Stark, and have raised an
honorable son.” She possessed the regal poise of a queen, but her violet eyes burned with
determination and… love? “Thank you for this talk.” A small smile crossed her features. “I will take
it to heart.”

Watching her graceful form leave, feet rushing along the stone path in a brisk walk, Ned let a
massive breath he had been keeping in exhale. “Seven hells, what did I just do?” This had gone far
beyond what he had hoped to contain. His promise long before continued to pop in his head, her
words seared in his mind...

“You have to protect him. Promise me Ned. Promise…”

That memory never ceased to bring the great Eddard Stark to tears, glad only the wind rustling
through the olive and acacia trees bore witness to it. The greatest loss of his life, the loss of one of
those most near and dear to him - it still gripped his heart like a vice. There was no greater honor than
keeping the promise made that day, regardless of the consequences. Jon was safe. No matter what,
he was safe.

‘And now Daenerys is in his life.’ The loving, carefree female voice was strong and clear in his mind
- as if she were next to him. ‘You knew this day would come, Ned. She is now as much a part of
him as he himself is.’ He closed his eyes. He now had both their lives in his hands.

‘You know what you must do.’

“Promise me Ned.”

Every muscle aching, Jon collapsed onto the bed. Illyrio kept his house stocked with plenty of fresh
water - all available at a call for a servant - and for this Jon was grateful. Even with the sea breeze the
heat was overpowering, and cool water felt welcome on his skin. Hair damp from both sweat and
where he splashed water on it to cool, changed into a clean tunic he allowed himself the moment of
recovery following his mid-afternoon training session.

He was exerting himself past mere exhaustion. Unlike someone like Theon Greyjoy, Jon wasn’t
dense enough to deny the undeniable. Pushing himself to the breaking point every day turned his
muscles into limp rags by dinner, and if he kept it up only trouble would result. But Jon needed the
solace training provided. Needed the escape venting his anger through his sword gave him. Needed
to get the image of her devastation out of his mind.

Needed to get her out of his mind.

“You deserve more than a bastard.” Words still as true as they were when first spoken. Jon’s heart
ached from having to turn her away, from breaking what had been his only real connection to a
person not his family. ‘She was just my friend, nothing more.’ He had to believe that, to believe the
kiss meant nothing. It haunted his dreams, how much he wanted her, but he knew it was for the best.

Hearing a loud thump on his door, Jon blinked the tiredness from his eyes and rose, wincing at the
soreness. Expecting his father, his mouth dropped at the sight of the very person that haunted his
thoughts so. “Daenerys…”

“Out of my way.” Without so much as a greeting, the silver-blond goddess pushed her way past
him and into the room. Her lips were pursed in a determined scowl, jaw set in determination. She
looked angry. She looked breathtaking. Oh how he wished to take her in his arms and kiss her over
and over again.

Jon willed that desire to the recesses of his mind. “You shouldn’t be here. Not alone in my
chambers.”

The princess literally growled. Blood of the dragon. “Don’t you dare tell me where I can and cannot
be, Jon Snow.” Whereas once it was like a vice on her heart, now his sadness and insecurity spewed
forth an anger deep inside her. Dany would not let him do this - not let him think this way about
himself. She would make him see the truth if it killed her. “Why have you been avoiding me, Jon?”

He fought to be emotionless, cold. “You know why. This is not proper.”

Though unladylike, the noise Daenerys made clearly expressed her opinion on his statement. “Stop
lying. I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen.” The regal thunder in which she spoke
shocked her. She never spoke in this manner to anyone, the back of Viserys’ hand making acquaintance with her cheek for far less. “You will tell me the truth!” He remained silent, looking away - Dany would not stand for this. “Tell me,” she said in a softer yet steeled tone, stepping closer until she was looking up into his face.

The violet eyes drew Jon in like a magnet. They were filled with steel, anger, and… pain. If he looked deep enough, he could see the pain he caused her. It tore him in two. “I’m sorry, Dany. But it was for the best.”

Daenerys scoffed. “You can’t possibly think that.”

“I am a bastard, Dany.”

“Do not speak of yourself so lowly.”

“It is the truth,” he exhaled with a heavy heart, only to see his hand encased by hers.

The other cupped his cheek, causing a wave of silence to descend over the room. It was as if time stood still, only the two of them remaining in the world. Moving forward, Daenerys melded her lips on hers in a sweet kiss. It was electric, warming her wonderfully while still hurting her heart that this was the most that they could do. She wanted this man more than anything, but could never have him.

But Dany still could make sure he never thought badly of himself again - if that was all that came out of this, she’d be content. “You listen to me, Jon Snow, you are not defined by your birth. You have a noble heart, just like your father.”

Though it warmed his heart to hear the woman that had enchanted him since his arrival praise him so, her statements still seemed to ring hollow. “And what does it all give me? No matter how good I become I will always be a bastard.”

“You will always be the man that means so much to me.”

He blinked. “Dany…”

“No. You’ve done so much for me, simply by being here. I know it’s been short, and I know that…” she bit back the crushing, painful truth. “I will never regret meeting you, Jon. I…” She couldn’t say it, it would only hurt both of them even though she knew he likely felt the same. Please don’t ruin the last bit of time we have together. Let us just have this.”

Opening his mouth to respond, Jon thought against it. She was right, they did have so little time together. ‘I can’t do this to her, let her suffer more.’ Part of him felt that he did deserve this, was a good person, if only that the amazing creature that was Daenerys Targaryen thought so. Smiling, he kissed her again, this time just as passionately as their first.

Feeling her heart burst, Dany melted into the kiss. The two of them fell sideways into the bed, soon ending up nestled together. Jon on his back, Dany cuddled up against him. Both wishing they could go farther, but knowing they couldn’t.

“I’m sorry, Dany. I really…”

“Shhhh.” Dany enjoyed his embrace. The feeling, that of pure calm and contentment that had been so lacking in the last few days, was back - even moreso. She didn’t want to think about the future, about a time where she was going to have to let this man go. They couldn’t go forward, even if they wanted to. No husband would take such a prize as her if she wasn’t a maiden. Daenerys had her duty, and Jon had his honor. Best not to think about it. “You should really wear more proper clothes
A snort left Jon’s face. It was just such a random topic, but he appreciated it. He didn’t wish to think about leaving Dany as much as she apparently did. “I like my clothes, Daenerys Stormborn. They suit me, and I can tolerate the heat and sweat.”

“That’s not what I have seen,” Dany giggled, patting the young man’s chest - such a firm chest, not as muscled as Drogo but well suited to his frame. “And I couldn’t say that I wouldn’t enjoy seeing you bare chested.” It felt downright naughty, but Daenerys knew that Jon Snow was the only one who could get her to this undignified, flirty state. Just a feeling.

“Oh course you would.” He chuckled. Taking the initiative, he guided her chin up and kissed her again on the lips. Dany moaned, spurring him to deepen it. The feeling was indescribable.

Once he pulled away, the silver-haired princess remained in a haze for several moments before blinking it away. “I refuse to believe there is no girl in Winterfell waiting for you. A kiss like that must have been honed by practice.” Not having been kissed before, she still knew through instinct who was a good kisser - and Jon Snow definitely was.

Jon shook his head, playing with a strand of silver hair. “You were my first kiss, my Lady.” A rose blush colored his cheeks, feeling a bit embarrassed.

Melting, Dany looked at him with longing. ‘Gods, could this man get any more attractive to me.’ She leaned up and pecked his lips again. “I’m glad, Jon Snow.”

Leaning down, he kissed the crown of her head. “You should head back to your rooms, Dany. Prince Viserys would not take it well if he discovered you here.”

Even at night, Pentos was a bustling place. There always seemed to be people in the streets. Essosian smallfolk and drunk sellswords were out and about for business or pleasure, their cackles and shouts echoing through the cavernous alleyways. Thus no one seemed to notice the cloaked figure darting through the shadows. Passing guards or smallfolk ignored him as he strode purposefully, determined in his goal.

‘There!’ The flophouse was run by a gnarly former infantryman of the Golden Company, purchasing it with a share of gold from a bonus paid to them by the city of Qarth after completing a contract. It was dilapidated and filthy, but was still packed with those down on their luck and passing through
the city. ‘Oh how the mighty have fallen.’ The figure ducked into the stairwell leading up to the rooms, sneaking past a sleeping security guard. The person he sought deserved to be in this hell, though that could change depending on tonight.

While nowhere near as cunning as the Master of Whisperers, the figure had managed to use some ‘little birds’ of his own to find the exact address - among other, far more juicy tidbits of information. Confident, he gently rapped on the rotting wooden door. Sounds of steps and groans came from inside.

“What?” an irate Jorah Mormont ground out before being pushed roughly into his room. Previously fast asleep and groggy, he was wide awake now. Anyone would have been with a sharp blade pressed against their throat. “Please, I don’t have much money.”

The figure drew back his cloak to reveal Eddard Stark, hard steel in his grey eyes. “It is not money I am after, Mormont,” he said evenly.

Jorah sighed. He had expected this might happen ever since running into the Warden of the North at Illyrio’s mansion. The disgraced noble had made his peace. “Go ahead, my Lord,” he said respectfully. “Carry out my sentence. I submit to your justice.”

“I am not going to kill you for that, Mormont,” Ned rasped, keeping his voice low but the blade firm. “However, I know the real reason why you’re offering your services to the Targaryens.” He smirked darkly. “You intend to sell information to Robert Baratheon for a royal pardon.”

Eyes widening, Jorah wracked his brain for what could have tipped Stark off. He found nothing. “What is your business if I did?” he croaked, sweat pouring from his brow. “You hate the Targaryens as much as he does.”

“Aye, I hate the Mad King with all my heart and soul, but the Mad King is dead.” Deciding it was time, he lessened the hold he kept on Jorah’s neck. “The girl is innocent, Mormont. No harm can come to her.”

“That can’t be the true reason.” A voice in his head told him it was a bad idea to press his tormentor, but he was curious and Ned weakening the sword’s hold made him bold. This went beyond honor.

Ned closed his eyes, and when they opened Jorah was shocked to find pure emotion. Grief. “Long ago, I promised one I loved with all my heart that I would protect someone.” An image flashed before his eyes, of a laughing Jon, happy and at ease for the first time in his life. He was with Daenerys, sparring with her - there was no doubt in his mind that she was the cause of his happiness. Denial was counterproductive. Jon had found his dragon, as Lyanna found hers. He was too late and too trusting to protect her, but he could and would protect Jon. In totality. “And I am fulfilling that promise, though it has now expanded in scope.” He took a deep breath. “I am offering you a chance to redeem yourself.”

This Jorah did not expect. Here was a chance, not just to go back home but a chance to atone for his shame, to make his family and father proud again. No royal pardon could do so, but a pardon from the Warden of the North could. “What must I do?” The decision was easy.

“First, let me say this. I always liked you, Jorah. You were honorable and good, which is why it pained everyone in the north when you did what you did.” His eyes met Jorah’s, sheathing the sword back into its scabbard. “Do you regret it?”

“Every day.” There was nothing that Jorah wanted more than to take it all back.
“Good.” Ned rested a hand on a battered table, leaning on it. “I need you to protect the girl, Jorah.”

Jorah blinked. “Which girl?” He had a feeling but had to be sure.

“Princess Daenerys.” He met the disgraced Mormont’s eyes once more. “Make sure no harm comes to her, and you will have your pardon.” It was sealed with a clasp of the hands.
Elbowing his way through the crowd of dirty, swearing smallfolk, Jon kept one hand on his moneypurse and the other on his sword. Pickpockets and criminals abounded in the Pentos marketplace, especially on market day itself. ‘Plenty of ignorant, rich fools not paying attention to their riches.’ No son of Eddard Stark would ever be so foolish.

Though he stood out from the drab yellows and browns by the dark grey leather of the north, no one paid him any heed. Everyone seemed to be going about their own business. Such suited him fine. Jon had business here too, unrelated to that of his father - the massive grain ships in the harbor filled to the brim for Karhold loomed large in the background. It was personal in nature. He was looking for the perfect… wedding gift for Dany.

Bile rose in his throat and his heart clenched at the thought. ‘Dany…’ It had been nearly impossible for Jon to abide by their pact - had it only been two weeks since they had done so? Every moment with her, every bit of levity and happiness only stoked the desire for more in his heart. Oh how he wished that it was he that she prepared to wed. He that was being gifted such a beauty, the most breathtaking, amazing girl in the known world.

‘Any man would fall in love with her in an instant… but I cannot afford to.’ Jon wished he could be allowed to love Daenerys Targaryen, but she belonged to someone else. Was a highborn Valyrian while he was simply a northern bastard. No matter how good he could ever be, simply being that made him unworthy of her. ‘Even if she does feel the same way.’

No, all honor and practical consideration proved to him that she would never be his. After his father informed him that they would be leaving once the wedding concluded - Jon still remembering Illyrio extending the invitation, “Have you ever been to a Dothraki wedding?” - he owed it to his own honor to find Dany the perfect gift. Something to always remember him by.

Something unique, as she was to him.

Trying to keep focused on the objective, her violet orbs flashed in his mind. The ones that haunted his dreams even now, before he had to let her go. Though no Weirwood tree stood south of the Vale, Jon remembered how he beseeched every old god that could hear his prayer. “Please, let us be together. I will give you anything, even my life, to be with her.” A moment of weakness, one he was not proud of, but even now he felt that she was worth it.

Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. ‘Dany.’

Steeling himself, he kept walking.

“Be patient Khaleesi,” Doreah smiled wanly, trying to put her at ease. “This will be over soon.”

Nodding, Daenerys nevertheless felt all her blood rush to her cheeks, flushing them with color. For a girl cloistered all her life - not from the existence of sex but certainly the nature of the act itself - one couldn’t help but be just a tiny bit mortified. ‘That all the lessons put images of one handsome northman into my head doesn’t help matters.’ That her first night of sex lessons only two days before her wedding happened right after a whole midday and afternoon with the handsome, kind Jon Snow didn’t help such matters.

A chuckle left the lips of her new handmaiden - the slave purchased by her brother. “Pay attention.”
A gentle hand coaxed the embarrassed Dany to look at her. “It’s the eyes, Khaleesi. Always keep your eyes on your beloved.” Grinning sultrily, Doreah rolled her hips around Dany’s, miming the sex act for her new lady. “Love comes in at the eyes.”

“Does it?” Remembering a pair of grey orbs, boring into her soul, Dany began to appreciate the words. ‘Perhaps she is right.’

“Oh yes. Irogenia or Lys was said to have finished a man by simply looking them in the eye.”

Dany raised an eyebrow. “Finish a man?” Watching Doreah smirk, realization dawned on her face - along with yet another blush. “Oh.” Thinking of Jon doing just that made her blush even more crimson. “I don’t think… Drogo would like me being on top.”

“Dothraki take slaves like a hound takes a bitch, Khaleesi. A man desires something that they never had, and it is the wife’s job to please him so greatly with those skills that he never strays.” She mimes riding her, showing her the proper way to ride a man when Doreah suddenly stops. “Wait, you almost said another name, not your intended’s.” Her eyes flashed interest. “Hmm, so there is someone else that you lust for? And yet your skill is that of a prudish Westerosi spinster.” She giggled at Dany’s half-glare. “If you made love before, then you wouldn’t be this inexperienced Khaleesi - so I’d take it that he is one that takes what he wants as well?”

“What… no…” By now, Dany felt she’d be beet red - as if covered in dust from the Red Waste. “I’ve never done… that.”

“No? Such a shame for your preferred lover. You are a rare beauty, Daenerys of House Targaryen.” Carefully stepping off her, Doreah readjusted her skirt “It is too bad Khaleesi, that you have not had a lover before. That would make this far easier, both in teaching you and for when you marry the Khal.”

“What do you mean?” Now Dany was puzzled. Much as she would have enjoyed laying with a particular man, both her honor and need to preserve her maidenhead prevented it - for the good of House Targaryen, to provide Viserys with his army. “I cannot lay with a man. My husband must be my first.”

Pouring a cup of Dornish red wine from the corner table, Doreah let out a merry stream of laughter. “Who told you that? If it was your brother, then he is quite misinformed. The rightful King, but ignorant of the persons he wishes to fight for him.”

Dany blinked. “The Khal wouldn’t value his bride’s maidenhead? I don’t want to jeopardize my brother’s army.”

“Don’t worry, Khaleesi. The Dothraki depend on large numbers to conduct their raids. They care not about chastity - though I wouldn’t advise you to cheat on your Khal, simply because you are the Khaleesi. Fertility is what is important to them.” Gingerly, she sat on the bed next to Daenerys. “As long as you can give the Khal plenty of strong sons and beautiful daughters, he will not care how many past lovers you had.” Doreah winked at her, choosing that moment to step outside. ‘The Princess has a lot to think about,’ she couldn’t help but think, a wry smirk on her lips.

Simply lying there, staring blankly at the ceiling, Dany’s mind was racing a mile a minute. ‘Is it true, what she said?’ If it was, then… Scrambling out of bed, she quickly snatched up the thick book resting on a shelf in the far corner of the room. One that she borrowed from Illyrio’s library, titled Understanding the Dothraki Horde. Eager to learn, Dany had read about halfway through but now leafed through to the final section - where the information was bound to be…
Wide eyed, Dany felt her knees buckle. Collapsing onto bed, the words were burned in her mind. ‘It is true. Jon and I could…’

She quickly composed herself. ‘I am blood of the dragon.’ If any person was capable of decisive action, it was Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. Standing, she made her way out of the room. She knew what she wanted and would obtain it no matter what.

Unable to sleep, Jon rolled over onto his back for the fifth time in thirty minutes. He wished he could drift into slumber, but his mind raced with images of the goddess sleeping somewhere else in the mansion. In a few days, she’d marry the Dothraki Khal and he and his father would set sail for Westeros, never to set eyes on Daenerys Targaryen ever again. Oh how he wished he could just toss her over his shoulder and take her back to Winterfell, but that wasn’t possible. “A bastard doesn’t get to have the beautiful woman,” Jon mused. They never married highborn ladies, never got to have love in the end. Most died alone, which was why the Night’s Watch was so appealing.

Hearing a soft knock on the door, Jon was glad for there to be something to distract from his insomnia. Given this had happened before, he half expected it to be Dany… What he never would have prepared for was what was to come. “Jon,” she announced, silver hair flowing behind her as she breezed in. “I need to speak with you.”

“Can’t sleep either, Dany?” he asked, chuckling. It was then apparent to him that she wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

Without warning, she pulled Jon into her arms and kissed him - deeply. “Make love to me, Jon.” His eyes widened, the grey eyes that she loved so very much. “Please.”

For several moments, nothing came out of him. “Da… Daenerys. I… we can’t.” Images of the Dothraki impaling him through the back came to mind. “You should go.”

“No.” She gripped his arm, holding tight. “The Dothraki don’t care. All they want is for their women to bear them children.” Pain filled her soul - Daenerys didn’t want to bear the Khal’s children, only someone else’s. ‘My wolf’s.’ She didn’t say that out loud. “They are not like those in Westeros.”

If this was true, Jon would be stupid not to take her up on that offer. There was nothing he would rather do more, but hesitate he did. “Dany, you deserve more than a bastard.”

“Please Jon. I don’t want my first time to be like this. I want it with someone I know that cares about me. With someone I…” Daenerys closed her eyes, tears poking out from underneath the creamy lids. “With someone that I love.” There, it was said. She loved Jon Snow - loved him more than anything. In less than a month he had stolen her heart… no, she had given him her heart willingly. How could she have not?

Mouth agape, knees trembling, Jon had to brace himself against the wall. ‘She loves me. Loves me.’ The radiant Daenerys Stormborn, Dragon Princess, loved a northern bastard. He had run from female affections all his life, convincing himself - not altogether without evidence - that no woman would ever want the Bastard of Winterfell.

“I can’t sire yet another bastard named Snow.” But with Dany… a warmth spread to his body. Jon saw the fear and sadness from her face melt away, her eyes staring at him intently. A smile tugged on his lips. Who was he to deny the truth? Stronger men couldn’t have resisted her, and at this moment Jon couldn’t. “I… I love you too.”
Whatever emotions Daenerys wore before melted in the brilliant grin that stretched nearly from ear to ear. The future didn’t matter - all that did was that Jon was here, and he returned her feelings. He loved her, and she loved him. Crossing the small distance between them, Dany crashed their mouths together. Her lips opened, his tongue plunging between hers as he wrapped his strong arms around her waist and pulled her as close as possible. She complied, wanting to be flush against him, feel his hard body on hers.

The small yip that left the enchanting Daenerys Stormborn’s throat as they collapsed on the bed made Jon smile against her lips, his strength ensuring they never had to break their hungry kiss. They had kissed before, sometimes passionately, but never like this. Never gone this far. ‘I couldn’t have kept my hands off her if I knew.’ No woman could compare to Dany. Hands roaming over the lithe curves and supple breasts barely concealed by her flimsy nightgown, every moan coaxed from Dany at a new spot discovered was sent right to Jon’s member, now as hard as Valyrian steel.

Nimble fingers enclosed around the fabric of his tunic, nearly ripping it to get it off. Seeing Jon’s bare torso exposed to her, Dany latched her lips to his neck, loving how strong and warm it felt to her tongue. Loving the grunts that he made because of her. “Dany,” she heard him whisper, making her heart hitch with love. Leaning up slightly, Daenerys closed her eyes and lowered the straps of her nightgown. She had a good opinion of her body - at least from what Viserys and Doreah had told her of it - but in front of Jon she was shy and nervous. ‘I want to please him.’ Opening them after several seconds passed, a shiver of pleasure warmed her core at the pure lust in his dark grey eyes.

“You’re beautiful,” Jon managed to ground out, staring at the milky globes that Daenerys had exposed for him. Seeing her shy blush, he grabbed her hands in his, kissing them. “You are, Dany.” She seemed to melt at that, thrusting out her chest.

If she was to live her life as her brother’s pawn, Dany would have this pleasure first. Enjoy the man she truly loved before it was too late. “Make love to me, Jon.”

Jon was eager to comply. “As you wish, my Lady.”

Gasping, Dany fought to keep her eyes open as her wolf latched to one breast. Her hands grasped his head, holding him there. “Please, don’t stop.” Licking, nipping, and sucking, Jon’s hot mouth brought her so much pleasure - more than she had ever thought possible. His stubble tickled her skin. The grip on his wavy hair tightened. “Gods, you are wonderful!” How he did it, made her close to shattering with barely any touches, was dizzying and amazing at the same time.

Breast red and slick from his attention, Jon released it and attacked the other, earning yet another round of those delicious moans and whimpers that he now adored. Straining against his now tight trousers, he quickly began to shove it down his legs. The nipple left his mouth with a pop. Soon her thin shift joined the trousers on the floor, both of them completely bare. Unlike back home, Jon didn’t need a crackling fire to keep comfortable in this state.

Unsure and dejected at Jon abandoning her breasts, Dany opened her eyes only to have them immediately widen. There he was, nude. She had seen nude men before, but never in this light. Never one so… perfect. Rippling muscles, taut stomach, length thick and long as it poked into her stomach. Daenerys gulped, reaching down to touch it. A hiss escaped Jon’s lips when she closed her fingers around it. She found she liked that noise very much. “Enjoying this, Jon Snow?” Dany said with a small smile.

“Aye.” He was so hard it was painful. “I could explode at any minute, Dany.”

The thought was sobering, bringing out the gravity of what they were about to do. ‘I don’t care.’ Daenerys wanted this boy to be her first. To always have this memory of when she was truly happy.
“I love you, Jon.”

“Love you too,” he replied, replacing her hand and guiding his length to her entrance - it was how Theon always described how to do the act, though this moment was nothing like his tawdry stories. Loving, not debased. With the perfect woman beneath him. The woman he loved. “There’s no going back from this.”

“I know. Please don’t make me wait.” On instinct, she locked her legs around his waist, leaving Jon no recourse but to slide inside her.

The feeling was like no other. Hot and wet walls sheathed him, soaking his length and drawing him further inside. All the stories Robb and Theon told him made sense to Jon now, though he doubted anything they experienced could compare to Dany. The heat was intense, dragonfire, though perfect to him. “Dany.” His Dany, at least for now. Reveling in the feelings, a soft whimper of pain drew his eyes to hers. “Should I stop?” he asked with concern, seeing her discomfort.

Dany shook her head almost violently, cupping his cheek. “No, do not stop. I’ll be fine.” She kissed him and all his tension melted. Slowly, he began to rock inside her. Daenerys let out a scream inside his mouth. The kiss never broke, the princess using it to ground herself in reality. It felt like nothing she could have ever experienced. A delicious fullness, satisfying an empty, carnal longing deep within her body and soul. “Jon. Jon. Jon,” she purred into his mouth, tightening her legs to spur him on. Something was building inside her, something that would soon burst with the force of a thousand dragons.

Increasing the force and speed of his thrusts, Jon gritted his teeth as he watched Dany’s eyes roll in the back of her head. Whatever pain was evidently gone, replaced with pleasure. If she felt even a fraction of the pleasure he was feeling… Walls contracting like a vice around him, Jon felt it happen. The breaking point before his release. “Dany!”

The sensation of his seed coating her walls did it for her. The dam broke. “Jon!” Daenerys shattered around him, stars and flame in her vision as the rippling climax coursed through her entire body. She felt him collapse on her, his welcome weight pressing down on her body as the final shockwaves left her system - leaving nothing but spellbinding bliss.

Feeling his heart beating out of his chest, Jon rolled off Daenerys’ body and onto his back. A smile crossed his face as the lithe form of his lover immediately turned as well and snuggled against him. Silver hair spilled out on his chest, soft lips placing a kiss right on his heart. “Mmmmm, I love your heartbeat.”

“I’m glad,” he replied, stroking her shoulder. “Why is it that it always goes like this?”

Dany looked up at him. A slender hand reached up to play with one of his raven curls. “What do you mean, Jon Snow?” The soft glow of the moon highlighted her violet eyes, making her even more regal than before.

Leaning forward, abdominal muscles strained for a slight moment as he pecked her lips. “Our relationship, all the important moments began with you approaching me, mostly while I’m in my room.”

Blinking, Dany’s jaw dropped for a moment before a delightful giggling left her lips. “You may be right.” She rested her head on his chest and nuzzled it lovingly. “Whatever happened, it worked.”

“Aye, it did.” Jon wrapped his arms tightly around Dany, loving the pleasant warmth radiating off her porcelain skin. ‘The benefits of sleeping with a dragon,’ he thought happily, closing his eyes with
“What are these benefits you speak of?” His eyes opened and found the object of his joy lying atop him. She sported a quizzical look on her face, as if daring him to answer the question.

Surprised, Jon, gulped. “Did I say that out loud?”

Much as she tried to remain dour, Dany couldn’t help the smirk on her face. ‘It would be impossible to be dignified when alone with this man.’ He made her want to act like a love-struck maiden - which in this case, she was. “Yes you did, Jon Snow, so you have to answer your Princess.”

Grey eyes found themselves rolled. “Your warmth. I could very well use you on cold, winter nights in the north.”

“So I’m just a mobile brazier to you?”

“More or less,” Jon teased, causing her to smack him on the chest.

“Shut up.” It felt nice, being able to be herself. Daenerys loved this man, feeling privileged to see him crawl out of his brooding shell. Jon Snow was far more than the Bastard of Winterfell, the amazing, honorable man that so enraptured her kept hidden due to the anger of the outside world. Her blood boiled. ‘If only I could march to Winterfell and make sure they all knew how wonderful this man is…’ If only she could march. ‘I can’t.’ She couldn’t. In two days would likely never see this man again. Thoughts spewing forth from where their passion had forced them into, out of sight, tears welled in Dany’s eyes - spilling onto her lover’s chest.

Jon felt the superheated droplets on his skin. “Hey, what’s wrong, sweetling?”

A contented warmth spread through Daenerys at the pet name, heart swelling with love. ‘We may have only known each other for mere weeks, but this is real.’ She snuggled closer to him. “I love this. The first time I’ve felt at peace in years.”

Smiling, Jon ran his hands through her shimmering locks. “If only my siblings were in the same house as us, then it would be complete for me.”

“Even Sansa?” Dany remembered Jon telling her how she was always cold to him.

“Aye. I still love her, Dany. She’s my blood.”

Dany placed a kiss on his chest. “You’re a good brother, Jon. Loving and loyal to a fault.” A resigned breath left her lips. “Viserys was once like that, kind and sweet. When we lived in Braavos, in a house with a red door, he would often tell me stories at night about our house. The history of old Valyria.”

“That doesn’t sound like him now,” Jon couldn’t help but observe.

“King Robert’s agents killed our protector, and we were forced to flee with nothing but the clothes on our backs to save ourselves. Everyone used to call him the Beggar King. It… changed him.” She shimmied up the bed, resting her head in the crook of his neck. “Now, he’s cold and power-mad - like your father said about mine.” Fresh tears trickled from her eyes. “And I am not his sister, but a pawn in his quest for the throne. I don’t want to be a pawn.”

Close to tears himself, Jon held her tighter, kissing her cheek. “All my life, I wished to be my father’s trueborn son as Robb is. Growing up, I knew that was impossible, and dreamed of joining the Night’s Watch, where I’d be accepted.” As his uncle said, there were many bastards there, and all
were brothers in the black. “Now, I would rather just be with you.”

The sobs escaped, Dany unable to control herself anymore. “I want the same, my sweet wolf.” She kissed him, deeply. “I want to run away with you, beyond the Red Wastes to places unknown, where we can be together. But, but, but…” It hurt to continue, so she instead kissed him again.

A hand rested on his heart, pressing not a soft warmth but the pure heat of dragonfire into him. Unlike how one would expect, it felt welcome to Jon… more calming than anything before. “Dany…”

“I love you Jon Snow,” she ground out, sobbing. Daenerys pressed her lips against his hungrily. Passionately. Desperately. “No matter where you are, be it in Winterfell, the Wall, or the frozen wastes far to the north, know that I love you.”

His squeezed her tightly, rolling her around and pressing his skin flush against hers. He would not cry, fighting the tears threatening to fall. But when Jon spoke, the emotion hoarse in his voice was unmistakable. “Daenerys.” All her kisses were returned, their tongues clashing. “I love you too. No matter where we are, I always will.” Fresh tears escaping her, Dany simply melted into their ardor.

Nothing mattered to the two lovers in that moment, just each other. Enjoying every newfound act of sexual intimacy. Celebrating a love that almost never happened, and honoring one that likely could never continue. Two lost souls that found each other.

Fire and Ice.
A Dothraki wedding was certainly a sight to behold. While Jon had figured that the parties and feasts thrown in the great hall of Winterfell were rowdy, ale and meat passed around as dozens of boisterous northerners celebrated, they were downright meek compared to the kind of celebration thrown by the plains horde. Whole animals were roasted on spits, warriors mounted women in the plain view of everyone else, and dozens of fights broke out. He - and his father both - were disgusted as one rider disemboweled another at the foot of the Khal's platform over a female dancer decked out in garish blue paint. Overhearing Illyrio, apparently a Dothraki wedding without at least three deaths was a tame affair.

Glancing up at the dais, Jon felt his heart clench for the woman he loved. Standing next to the Khal was Daenerys, apprehension and misery written all over her face. He wanted to go to her. Wanted to grab her and stow her away on the ship to White Harbor - but one look at his father and reality proved to Jon that this was impossible.

Jon was surprised to see a Westerosi face next approach Dany. His father leaned forward, eyes boring deeply on the man in a determined stare. “Your Grace,” he bowed. “Ser Jorah Mormont of Bear Island.” The northerner’s eyes widened. “Histories of Westeros, your Grace, a humble offering.”

“Your offering is much appreciated, Ser Jorah,” Dany responded, smiling kindly on the weathered knight.

“Father, this is the man you condemned to death,” Jon hissed, only to be silenced with a hard look. He knew that look, his father had planned something.

Jorah bowed deeper, bending the knee. “Your grace, as someone that has knowledge of the Dothraki and their ways, I humbly pledge my services to you in any capacity that you see fit.” He rose and walked to the side, taking a seat near the edge of the main party - sharing a quick look with Ned, who nodded.

Lord Stark soon rose, approaching the newly married couple to offer his congratulations and a small gift. As protocol dictated, the bastard son of the lord was relegated to after the Lord himself - had this been at Winterfell, Jon knew that even four year old Rickon would outrank him in matters such as these. Sharing a glance with Ned, who sent him a calming nod and smile, Jon held his gift horizontally upon outstretched arms. He caught the inquisitive look from the rather intimidating Khal Drogo. Out of the corner of his eye, Viserys scoffed at his presence.

“Presenting, Jon Snow, the bastard son of Lord Ned Stark,” Illyrio announced, adding the phrase in Dothraki for the other guests.

Locking eyes with Dany, Jon could see the slight hitch of her breath and flush on her cheeks. Most would likely think it was the sun. Jon smirked. He knew better.

The two lovers moved in tandem, one meeting the thrusts of the other. Tongues danced, hands roamed, and skin pressed against skin as neither even dared to allow any form of separation. Their mouths had joined at the beginning and never once broke. Only for a quick gulp of needed air would they part, lips crashing back into nirvana right after. They needed this. Needed it more than to quench their thirst or abate their hunger. Needed the closeness.

“Oh, Jon,” Dany moaned into her lover’s mouth as he shifted angle, hitting into a spot that made her
see dragonfire. In the last few days since they abandoned modesty and lost themselves in each other, her wolf had grown from a cautious virgin into quite the skilled man. “Ah! Please.” She bit his lower lip, not complaining.

Grunting, the northerner’s hair spilled over his eyes as he continued to thrust inside his dragon. “So tight, Dany.” Her walls tightened around him like a vice, sucking him deeper. It felt angelic, the greatest pleasure of his life. “Fuck yes, so amazing.”

“Yes. Fuck me hard, Jon!” Detaching her kiss swollen lips from his, Daenery surged forward and latched onto his neck, sucking hard. “Remember this, Jon Snow,” she hissed. “Remember our love. Remember me.” She would remember him - till her dying day Daenerys Targaryen would remember her wolf.

Jon kissed her. “I will. Always, my love,” he groaned as both of them tumbled into bliss...

Dany closed her eyes, core heating at the sensuous memory. ‘Was it only early this morning?’ Noticing he was getting close, she wished she could take him now - that he was her groom instead. But that wasn’t going to happen, the look in his eyes told her he knew as well. His face morphing into an impassive one of respect, he bent the knee. “My lady, I present to you a humble gift to honor your marriage.”

A biting laugh rang out. “What could a bastard offer a Princess,” mocked Viserys. Dany glanced at him apologetically, while Jon ignored the insult. His attention was focused on the silver-haired goddess, wishing that it was he marrying her than the stony-faced Khal.

Drogo grumbled something in the guttural Dothraki language. “He says for you to present the present, for you are taking too much time.” The main guests all found humor in that, Jon noticing his father’s distinctive chuckle. Even Dany smiled at it.

He accepted it with a sheepish smile. “My apologies, honored Khal, Khaleesi.” The way he said it made Dany shudder internally, knowing it was his bedroom voice. Without delay, the small cloth covering the gift was removed and she let out a gasp at the gleaming metal.

“A sword?” Viserys scoffed, as if both amused and insulted. Dany stared in wonder. Holding it, Jon sliced it slowly and fluidly through the air, showing off its capabilities. The steel was smooth, pressed thin and flat in a gleaming curve just under one arm length long. The curve was shallow, unlike the Dornish scimitar or Dothraki sickle, connected to a simple cylindrical hilt of fine sharkskin.

Jon presented it to her, kneeling once again. “It is a katana, Khaleesi, favored by the peoples beyond the Red Waste.” He reached out, guiding Dany’s hand along the smooth blade - sparks shot out from where they touched, Jon noticing her struggling to remain composed. Their eyes locked, love relayed through to the other. “Valyrian steel, imported to the Eastlands from Old Valyria itself.” The merchant that he purchased it from had no idea, only knowing it had come from the east by way of Qarth - the only city that had trade ties with the Eastlands.

Fluid, easy for her to handle, Daenerys was on the verge of tears. Her wolf knew how much their sessions meant to her, and purchased a weapon he personally selected that was perfect for her to handle. She wanted to kiss those wonderful lips of his, Jon staring at her in a similar manner. The sexual tension between them could have been cut with a knife.

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Luckily, a humorous bark from her husband saved them both. All around the Dothraki howled in laughter, pumping their weapons in the air. At a questioning look from Viserys, Illyrio translated, laughing himself. “The Khal has stated that such a weak sword is perfect for the weak female touch.” Jon pursed his lips - Dany was far from week, joining Arya and Lady Stark as some of the strongest
women he’d ever known. No part of him sought conflict with Drogo, however, so he merely bowed and headed back to his seat next to Ned.

Both he and Daenerys missed how proximate they had been to each other.

“And now for the final gift,” said Illyrio with a sweeping gesture. Two burly servants ambled forward. In their hands was carried a large chest, which let out a resounding clunk upon being set on the dusty ground. “For the bride, blood of the dragon, I have found the perfect token of my well wishes and honor.”

Straining to see what it was, Jon saw Dany’s eyes widen after Illyrio swung the chest open. “Gods,” his father whispered next to him, slight shock written on his face.

“Father?”

“I thought there were none left,” came the cryptic reply. What Illyrio said next would shed light for Jon, but it seemed as if Eddard Stark wasn’t telling all he knew.

“Dragon eggs, Khaleesi. From the mountains beyond Assai. Though the centuries have ossified them into stone, their beauty shines to anyone that beholds them.” He watched with a grin as Dany stood, running her hands over the scales. “Keep this as a reminder of your heritage, as a daughter of Old Valyria.”

Tips of the scales pricking at her fingers, Dany’s eyes glazed over. She sensed a… heat coming from the eggs. Faint, but there. Thanking Illyrio for the gift, her gaze shifted to Jon. No words had to be said.

I love you.

I love you too.

Our hearts will always be connected.

One day, I hope we can be together.

I will pray for that, my love.

“That’s it Joffrey, swing left,” came the guttural growl of King Robert of House Baratheon. His meaty paws clutched a chicken drumstick, enjoying his considerable lunch outside on the sunny Riverlands day. “Catch him off balance!”

The golden-haired prince slashed with the wooden trainer, chafing at his mother’s insistence on the generally harmless weapon over his brand-new sword gifted to him by his uncle Renly on his last name day. His personal guard and instructor, Ser Sandor “The Hound” Clegane, was skilled enough to dumb down his swordsmanship for the boy - but there was no getting past Queen Cersei and her overprotective devotion. It drove King Robert to distraction, and irritated Joffrey in this instance.

“Careful!” the aforementioned queen, locks as golden as her beloved son, shouted as the Hound skillfully parried the sloppy blow his ward sent at him. “Careful with my sweetling.”

A belch resounded from the King’s stomach. “Seven Hells, woman. The boy needs to man up! Do as you were taught, lad. I’ll make a Baratheon out of you yet.” His house was populated with powerful warriors, both him and his two brothers some of the most skilled in the Seven Kingdoms.
“Slice his arm off! Defend your house and your honor!”

After yet another parry was dispatched, Joffrey snarled and charged at the Hound. Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, the burn-scarred knight sidestepped his Prince, watching him trip over his feet and stumble to the ground. Elbow outstretched, it slammed against a stone resting in the grass.

Pain shot through Joffrey’s arm, a sharp stab that had him curled into a ball and clutching the wounded arm. “Ahhhh!” Heads turned across the entire encampment, their Prince’s cries not an uncommon sound for them.

Cersei was out of her seat almost immediately, skirts fluttering as she rushed toward her fallen boy. “Joffrey! My sweetling.” Kneeling, she cared not that the dirt soiled the expensive silk. “Call a maester! The Prince is injured!”

Belly jostling, the King lurched from his bench and made his way to the two of them. “Let me ‘ave a looks see.” Once trim and powerful, the man that defeated the great Rhaegar Targaryen with his mighty warhammer, the now King waddled across the ground with the grace of a southern penguin - or rather the lack of it. It was a sorry sight. Roughly yanking his son and heir off the ground, blue eyes narrowed as they inspected Joffrey’s injury. “Gods! What in the name of the Warrior is this?” Robert’s mouth contorted in disgust and embarrassment. “You call this an injury?”

Smacking the affected elbow, Joffrey cried in pain from the sting. His father wasn’t known for his consideration or empathy. “Father, please. It hurts!”

“‘Father, please. It hurts,’” the King mocked in a falsetto. “Stop whining like a woman. Get back to your tent, compose yourself like a man, and get back here and do it again! No food until you do!” Shaking his head in annoyance, his glare rested on his Queen and wife - though the last time they shared a bed escaped his memory. “And don’t even think about disobeying my command, lionspawn. That boy takes too much after you for his own good!” Grumbling, he plopped down and resumed his lunch, too apathetic to notice the death glare Cersei sent his way.

Expensive crocodile skin boots squelching through the mud, Joffrey fought back tears as he hurried to his tent. The Hound followed right behind, ever the loyal guard. “Your grace, I didn’t intend to let you…”

“Stuff it, Hound, if you know what’s good for you!” snarled the Prince, flinging the curtains back to the yellow-black tent. Rolling his eyes once more, Sandor muttered exactly what he thought of his ward before heading to grab some stew.

Breathing hard, Joffrey stared at what possessions he had. The sharp blade rested on the table, hilt encrusted with gold and steel polished enough to gleam. “Fucking Northerners! Fucking Hound!” Unsheathing the sword in a blind rage, Joffrey swung it down at the table, slicing it in two. “Fucking father!” Angered screams echoed through the tent, the blonde-haired boy venting his frustration out on the furniture.

“I’ll show them!” A mirror found itself shattering, Joffrey disgusted with the weak boy staring back at him. “I will be the strongest, most powerful King in history!” His enemies would rot, his father choking on his words. “He will see! They will all see!”

A gentle wind wafted across Dany’s face, blowing her hair behind her in a lustrous sheen. It was said that such coloring made Targaryen women the most beautiful in all the world. Jon certainly thought so, given how he looked at her - those grey eyes near black with desire. A contented smile
passed over her face for but a moment, thinking of the handsome face of her wolf.

The heavy breathing behind her dispelled those thoughts to the back of her mind. Khal Drogo - her husband - on the other hand was an enigma. In matters of battle and strength his opinions were worn on his muscular sleeve, chuckling and rolling his eyes at the various antics of his blood riders. Silently cheering on the fight that saw one of them die. In matters of love, of affection, his brown eyes gave away nothing. His lips remained flat in an expressionless scowl. Daenerys knew not how he felt for her. Whether her beauty bewitched or even excited him, or whether he would rather avail himself to the swarthy Dothraki women that likely warmed his bed before. She gulped, choosing not to think about it.

Gazing at the rocky shore, Dany found no others but herself and Drogo. A good distance away rested both their horses, her husband’s powerful Volantian stallion’s brown coat contrasting with the snow white of her Dornish mare. Ser Jorah’s words came to mind: “The Dothraki believe everything of importance must be done under the open sky.” And her she was. A married woman ready to consummate her marriage outside.

A rough hand brushed against her shoulder, toying with the strap of her gown. Unlike Jon’s touch, she had to force herself not to shudder. Unlike with her brother’s, Dany succeeded. “Do you know the common tongue?” she asked, hoping for an affirmative. Her Dothraki was very limited.

“No,” came the grunted reply.

‘A dragon does not cry.’ “Is no the only word that you know?”

Drogo untied a bow holding the back of her dress together, moving to two gold bangles in the front. “No.”

Eyes drifting to the vast expanse of ocean, Dany gazed intently for the speck of wood and sail - the speck that her love was on. ‘Jon.’ She missed him, missed his touch and his voice. ‘My wolf, my love.’

But he was gone. Likely she would never see him again.

‘A dragon does not cry.’ Yet tears trickled down her cheeks all the same.

With a flick of his meaty hand, Drogo let the wedding gown slide down her body. Self-conscious - wishing only Jon could have the privilege of seeing her breasts, of lavishing them with the attention that made her melt from pleasure - Dany nevertheless didn’t cover up. She let her new husband cup one of the mounds roughly. It was her duty now, and by the gods she was not going to let herself be hurt.

Sensing Drogo kneel behind her, Dany turned around roughly. “No.” A flash of anger crossed his eyes before she rested a soothing palm on his chest. “Please. I would like to look upon you as we make love.” Dothraki halting and heavily accented, Daenerys saw that he understood her all the same. For the longest time, she waited in silence as Drogo pondered her request. Every second that passed she waited for him to shove her onto her hands and knees and fuck her brutally - nowhere near the hard yet loving passion Jon used.

Doreah’s words proved true, however. Nodding almost imperceptibly, Drogo acceded to his bride, likely the first time he had ever let a girl take the lead. ‘Men want what they never had.’ Mounting him, giving the Khal her best look of lust and passion, as she lowered herself onto him Dany nevertheless only thought of Jon.
“Jon.” The young man glanced back at his father, who viewed him with kind eyes. “Are you coming below? It will be a long voyage, and you’ll need your rest for the ride back to Winterfell.”

Smiling wanly at his father, Jon shook his head. “I’ll be there in a moment, father. Allow me a little more time in the fresh air.” The cooling mist took that time to hit his skin, banishing the heat that clung to him thanks to the scorching equatorial sun.

Ned nodded, turning to head down the stairs of the sternpalace. A sense of foreboding, of destiny coursed through him, body shuddering slightly. ‘He pines for her. Misses her. Loves her.’ Nothing of this magnitude escaped him. It felt as if the last seventeen years of his life had led to this moment, put into place as part one of a song that was yet to be completed.

“Lyanna,” he whispered to the sparkling ocean, to the orange-pink skies above. “I pray that I have done right by you today.” For his role, at least for the portion left behind, was complete. It was up to the gods now.

Staring at the shrinking landmass to his south, the red-orange orb of the sun setting on the right, Jon thought of his beloved. The woman he loved with all his heart. Alone, fulfilling a destiny that did not include him. Never to see him again, or he her. It took all his strength, all the honor of a Wolf of Winterfell, to not break down and allow the pain to fully crush his heart.

“Daenerys… Dany…” Closing his eyes, a single tear fell into the waves below.
Grasshopper whizzing past his head, Jon heard the merry chirping of birds all around him. It hadn’t been winter for years, but for him it always was a bit of a shock to see the north so vibrant and full of life. After listening to the tales and perceptions of many others from across the world, his home had the reputation of being rather bleak and lifeless. ‘I wish Dany could have seen it.’ Jon blinked back the urge to cry. No matter where his thought process shifted to, it always came back to the silver-haired princess. His love. His first. ‘The wife of another.’ He wouldn’t cry, not again.

Another insect irritated his mount, causing her to neigh. “Easy girl,’ Jon whispered, stroking the horse’s head gently. A soft crunching drew his attention to Ghost, who was happily chewing on a grasshopper in his jaw. “Enjoy that snack boy. Nothing more till we get to Winterfell.”

“Shouldn’t be more than an hour away, I would think,” his father stated, pointing to the sky. “Sun’s directly above us, gonna be there right after lunch.”

Jon nodded. “Hope so. All this riding is giving me aches.”

“You’ll get used to it, but not by much.” The two of them shared chuckles, enjoying the quiet time together. ‘He seems lighter, more confident underneath his sadness.’ Ned would have been an idiot not to know why - they weren’t being quite the masters at sneaking into each other’s rooms. They had been lucky that only he noticed. ‘Just like Lyanna,’ he thought to himself. ‘Can’t resist the allure of a dragon.’

A commotion ahead of them drew their attention. Hoofbeats filled the air. “Father, something’s ahead on the King’s Road.” Jon stilled his mount, Ghost starting to bark.

“I see that, son. Ride behind me.” Urging the horse into a light gallop, Ned quickly approached the massive host. Eyes widened at the distinctive Stag and Lion sigels.

‘Robert.’

It was always surreal for Ned Stark when he entered the Winterfell crypts. Nothing but a flickering light from the few torches to banish away the darkness, the dancing shadows that were cast on the sarcophagi of Starks long dead left him disconcerted most of the time - especially at the three youngest stone tombs. Added in not even two decades before. His brother and father, the latter’s body too burned to be recognizable, and his beloved sister. The one King Robert Baratheon stood in front of, body stone still in grief still crippling. Lyanna.

“There’s not a day that goes by where I don’t miss her, Ned,” the King ground out. A meaty hand rested on the dusty stone, almost reverently. As if a pilgrim touched an ancient relic.

Ned bit back the urge to draw his sword and sever the hand. ‘You don’t deserve to even speak about her.’ Much as Robert was a friend to him, he was the cause of all of this - just as much as the Mad King. “She was an amazing woman,” he finally said, voice heavy with sincere emotion. Ned did grieve for her, and wore it as a cloak against the bile. “Everyone loved her.” Lyanna was the She Wolf of Winterfell, able to charm anyone into loving her. ‘But she only loved one, a dragon.’

Tears welled in Robert’s eyes. “The sad thing is, I barely even remember her face.” He laughed heartedly, likely to keep from crying. “What could have been, Ned,” the King announced, grasping the Warden of the North’s shoulder. ‘The two of us, bound in blood as well as friendship. A stronger
alliance emerging out of the ashes of the dragonspawn.” Grief morphed quickly into anger. “I’ll kill every single one of them. Every last Targaryen in this world, in her name. She deserves that justice.”

‘Even her child? The one she and her true husband loved?’ The King’s anger was still not tempered by time, burning white hot against the house that stole his beloved from him. Hiding Jon in plain sight only increased in importance, given what had happened in Essos. It were times like this that truly tested the famed honor of Lord Eddard Stark. Much as he loved Robert, he hated him just as much.

‘Tell him, Ned.’ Ned sighed, knowing there was going to be no better time. Robert was alone with him, and it was far less likely that he’d go into a homicidal rage when in Lyanna’s presence. “Robert,” Ned said, clasping both of the man’s shoulders. “You do know that I would never betray you.”

The king snorted, eyes narrowing in confusion. “Well of course, Ned. What in Seven Hells are you talking about?”

Best out with it. “Do you know who are the remaining Targaryens are?”

Rage crossed back on Robert’s face. “Yeah, the last two of the Mad King’s hellspawn. A son and daughter.” His head tilted back as he roared in laughter. “Last I heard, they were living as beggars in Essos. Fitting life, before I have them killed.”

Much as it pained Ned to allow Daenerys to essentially be sold to the Dothraki, she was safer with the Khal than anywhere near Robert Baratheon. “Robert, I… when I arrived in Pentos to secure the grain shipment, the merchant with whom I resided hat them as his guests.”

Eyes widening, Robert, squeezed his upper arm. “Did you do it, Ned? Did you kill them, avenging your father and my bride?” He seemed almost gleeful at the possibility.

Grief, hate, and complete obliviousness had consumed the once great leader and warrior. ‘All the drinking and whoring haven’t helped.’ What could have been a solid marriage with Cersei Lannister was tanked by Robert himself, killing what respect Ned had for the King. He steeled himself for what was to come. “I had no authority to carry out any sentence in Pentos, and I couldn’t dishonor myself in such a way.”

Silence reigned for the moment before a guttural snarl left Robert’s throat. “TRAITOR! You dare leave the swine alive?!” Robert grabbed him by his cloak. “After all that has happened, you let the Targaryens escape to scheme against me, call me a usurper, and prepare to destroy the peace I have brought to the realm!” Steam almost left his ears, chubby face red as a tomato. “I should have you drawn and quartered for this!”

Ned allowed his anger to rise. Batting aside Robert’s grasp - none of the great warrior remaining in the fat king - he roughly gripped the King’s head and forced him to look at Rickard Stark’s tomb. “Look at it. Look at it, Robert. That is my father, corpse having to be entombed in a closed coffin because there was barely anything left from when the Mad King burned him alive. If you think I’d side with the Targaryens then you don’t deserve my friendship or loyalty!” Not a total lie - Ned hated the Mad King more than anyone in the known world.

Never confronted in this way by anyone other than Ned and Stannis, Robert’s rage evaporated - the shock of Ned’s response had blasted through it.

Taking advantage, the Warden of the North pressed on. “I didn’t have a choice in my contact with them. To insult my host by trying to kill the exiled Prince would have jeopardized the grain shipment
for Karhold, an action that I was not about to let happen.”

A snort left the King’s nostrils. “Lord Eddard Stark’s famous honor.” It seemed the ghost of a grin couldn’t help but grace his lips. “Only one person could break it, and I have yet to meet her.” His eyes softened, Ned’s rationalizations seeming to work - he wondered if it was the presence of Lyanna, tempering his anger and boorishness. ‘She did always do that, much as she hated him.’

“Prince Viserys, he couldn’t be less of a threat to you if he tried. Don’t worry about him, Robert.” In this Ned was completely sincere, able to use his true feelings and divulge his real observations. “The boy is a stupid version of his father. Arrogant and entitled, without an ounce of sense.” A grin appeared on his face, a rare laugh leaving his lips. “He once told everyone that the people of Westeros raised secret toasts to his health.”

Robert’s belly jostled as he chortled, laughing bombastically. “That little twerp. I will personally enjoy using my warhammer on him when the time comes.” That Robert was likely too fat to go into battle anytime soon wasn’t voiced by Ned. The King shifted his gaze back to Ned, wiping spittle off his beard. “And what of the girl?”

“The Targaryen princess was married off to the Dothraki Khal, she’s just a child, Robert. Not a threat to you or anyone.” At this point, it was true. “No self respecting horse tribesman would fight for her brother. He couldn’t general a bun fight in a brothel.”

“Bun fight in a brothel, I like that.” His scowl returned. “I want them both dead, Ned, regardless of how incompetent one of them is. They stole Lyanna from me, and I vowed to her that I’d kill every last one of them!”

‘And I vowed the exact opposite directly to her,’ Ned thought, wishing he could slam his fists into the King. Knowing that to be a mistake, he triggered his final strategy. “I know you would, Robert. That is why I have a person I trust attached to them.”

“Who?” Robert’s eyes widened in curiosity.

“Jorah Mormont.”

“The Lord of Bear Island? The one you sentenced to death?”

“No one would expect him to be my agent. I offered him a pardon to track her movements for me.” As before, not a complete lie.”

A wide smile stretched on the King’s face. “Fucking good move! There’s the great Eddard Stark, and he ‘as a cunning side after all!” Robert smacked Ned on the back, anger forgotten. “Sorry bout that, Ned. I should’ve known you’d always be loyal. Being on that damn horse and having to deal with those goddamn gold-shitting Lannisters all the time messes up your head. By Gods, my own son can’t even swing a sword properly. Getting him betrothed to a hearty Stark girl will get that right out of him.” He gestured towards the exit. “Let’s forget about Targaryens for a while. Time to drink and be merry just like the old days!”

Letting out a soft breath, Ned nodded. The conversation having gone far better than he expected, the Warden of the North knew that a hearty feast would get his mind off everything - at least till his brother came.

To say that the Stark family had been shocked to see Ned and Jon arrive with the royal procession was an understatement. Not a moment after the King and his father disappeared into the Crypts did
Arya and Bran throw themselves at Jon, hugging him tightly. Little Rickon joined in, while Robb clasped his shoulder. The welcome warmed Jon’s heart, having missed his siblings greatly - a quick look at Sansa expected her usual cold vestige. To Jon’s surprise, she hugged him too. Though not as warm, perhaps she did have a soft spot in her heart for him. The way the young Prince Joffrey eyed her over disconcerted him, though.

Locked out of the feast as usual, the bastard of Winterfell too humiliating to be displayed to the King - such was normal among noble families, the disgustingly ignoble Walder Frey the exception. Under the twinkling stars of the night sky, Jon grabbed his training sword to practice. The habit had become even more habitual for him since leaving Dany, to get his mind off of the woman he still loved with all his heart. ‘Dany.’ Whom he would never see again, he but a lowly bastard pining for the future Queen of the Seven Kingdoms.

“The gods flip a coin for every Targaryen, one side for madness the other for greatness.”

Remembering his father’s words as he practiced fluid movements, Jon knew deep in his soul that she would be great. That she would be Queen. Needing to make alliances, secure victories through marriage - he would never shape up, never be more than the bastard son of a northern Lord. The most he could aspire to was the Night’s Watch...

“The southern sun agrees with you, Jon,” Robb chuckled, punching his brother’s shoulder playfully. “Adds a nice tan to your skin.”

“That’s what happens on the open ocean,” Theon Greyjoy said, combing his hair. “It’s why the Iron Islands breed strong, virulent warriors. The majesty of the waves.”

Jon rolled his eyes. A month away hadn’t changed Theon worth a damn. “Is that right? Then why are you here? Or Stannis Baratheon alive?” Theon’s smirk quickly changed into a scowl, deeper after Robb joined in the laughter. Enjoying putting the arrogant shit down, Jon winced as the barber gripped his chin in a vice of bony fingers. “I still don’t see the point of this.”

“All of us endured this, Jon,” Robb responded. “Mother wants us pretty for the King and Queen, and I’m not going to let you weasel your way out of it like you did everything else while you were gone.” There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“Worked well for me, I got so much ass in Wintertown with this haircut.” Strutting around the room, Theon’s smugness was overbearing. “Wish you could have seen it, bastard.” He winked and left the room.

Jon rolled his eyes, left alone with Robb after the barber left. “Well, Theon’s just as much of an ass as he always was.” The memory of the Iron Islander almost killing the pups came to mind.

“Aye, he is.” Robb furrowed his brows. “You didn’t brood and shy away when he bragged about his exaggerated prowess.” ‘Damn,’ Jon thought, but his brother was already on the scent. “Did you meet a girl in Essos?” The raven-haired lad’s silence said it all. Robb laughed merrily. “Well good for you,” he said, slapping him on the back. “Who was it? The Targaryen princess?” Tone indicating it was a joke, the smile fell a bit at Jon’s continued silence. “Was it?”

“It’s a long story…”

He didn’t know why he confided in Robb about Dany, but knew he could trust his half-brother. The two were thick as thieves, always getting into adventures and trouble together over their shared childhood and adolescence. The heir to Winterfell had no problems with it, and gave his word to keep it a secret from everyone, but the whole experience just brought memories of Dany back to his mind.
Hacking again at the target, the steady clopping of hoofbeats drew Jon’s attention. “Is he dead yet?”

The attention widened into a smile at the sight of the distinctive black cloak draped over the rider. Dismounting, the rider shot Jon a smile in return, striding up to him. “I was looking for my nephew, not a master swordsman in the making,” he said merrily.

“Uncle Benjen,” Jon replied, firmly encircling the man’s shoulders with his arms in a manly embrace. His uncle was one of the few outside his siblings that showered affection on him, and they were always close - and the fact he was the Head Ranger of the Night’s Watch didn’t hurt Benjen’s image. A bastard stuck in the middle of a sullen reception from the rest of Winterfell, the egalitarian nature of the Brotherhood appealed to Jon.

Now, all that he wished for was to be with Dany. To hold her in his arms and be her protector as she reclaimed her destiny, her birthright. But it was not to be. “Not inside?”

“Lady Stark…” resentment bubbled up, where only self-loathing would have been before. “Thought it would insult the Royal Family to seat a bastard in their midst.”

Benjen blinked. “Well… there’s always room for a bastard at the wall.”

“And I would take no wife, and father no children…” Silver-hair flashed in front of his eyes.

“It’s not like I have any other choice, uncle.”

Once Jon was out of sight, Benjen’s smile dropped into a pensive frown as he sought out Ned. As luck would hold, there he was, standing off to the side near the entrance to the great hall, seemingly getting some air. “Brother,” he called out in a harsh whisper. After a quick greeting, the still unsmiling Ned led him to a secluded alcove. “Is it true? Did he meet the Targaryen princess?” Ned’s letter didn’t leave much doubt to Benjen, but it had to be asked.

Ned’s nod told him everything. “Seems he can’t resist falling for a dragon any more than she could.”

Unable to resist chuckling, Benjen clutched the bridge of his nose. “While I’m happy for him, this does raise a massive problem for us. Did you tell anyone else about the truth?”

“I enlisted Jorah Mormont to protect Princess Daenerys in Essos.” Ned winced at what she was likely enduring in the hands of her brother and the Dothraki. “It killed me to leave her there and not bring her to safety among her… family, but there was simply no other choice.”

“Agreed.” Benjen knew Ned barely handled having to endure the stigma from his great lie. This was likely even worse in his eyes. “Even if Robert wouldn’t go into a homicidal rage and have her gutted, who’s to say Tywin Lannister wouldn’t sick the Mountain on her to protect Joffrey’s claim.”

He ran a hand through his long hair. “And what about Jon?”

The Lord of Winterfell visibly sagged. “Does he still wish to join the Night’s Watch?” It had been Jon’s dream for years, the boy quite excited about it.

Benjen sighed and placed a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “He used to want to, but just now his entire tone about it was that he seeks to use it to escape whatever demons ail him. It’s not smart since the vows are for life. From the tone of your letter you intend on having him seek his birthright.”

“From what has transpired in Essos, I believe it inevitable.” Both brothers hushed up as a couple of drunk Lannister guards sauntered by, talking about the whores in wintertown. “He can’t know now, but we have to get everything that he needs up to Castle Black. In the care of your Maester.” Ned
then spent the next few minutes discussing how exactly his plans would work.

“You’ve really thought of everything, haven’t you Ned?” Benjen chuckled dryly. “I just have one addition. You need to tell Catelyn.”

It was unavoidable. “Aye.”

“Explain to me why we are heading into the crypts, Ned?” Pulling a light cloak tighter around herself to ward out the draft, Catelyn stuck close to her torch-wielding husband. She never went down here - while there was no real reason for her to, the pitch blackness didn’t endear it to her. And to have Ned drag her from her hostess duties by literally sneaking out of the great hall while King Robert pawed at a serving girl and Queen Cersei consulted with her brother was only making it worse. Catching the determined set of his jaw, she merely folded her arms.

Ned glanced down at her, a sheen on his face illuminated by the flickering flames. “Trust me, Cat,” he said in an oddly loving tone for the normally dour Warden of the North. “Would I lie to you?”

“You did, once,” replied Catelyn, who immediately regretted it. The once loving look hardened once more. Ned turned away, and the Lady of Winterfell closed her eyes to block out the pain and tears. ‘I love Ned, I truly due,’ she told herself, but that moment sixteen years before truly hurt her to this day. The man she loved… betrayed her - it had been a stain on their relationship ever since, never truly being able to replicate the ardor that had characterized their early marriage bed.

Turning a corner, deeper into the labyrinth, Ned turned to her once again. “I never meant it to hurt you. Not once, Cat.” A pained frown crossed his lips. “I do love you, wife.”

This surprised Catelyn. They never discussed the elephant in the room, even if it brought so much pain to the household - not since that very day… the day Ned Stark returned to Winterfell.

“Seventeen years ago you rode south with Robert Baratheon, leaving me pregnant with our son.” Even the stoic, proud Catelyn Stark of House Tully couldn’t stop the tear that cascaded down her cheek. “One year later, you returned with a baby in your arms - a baby you had with a southern harlot. I never expected the honorable Ned Stark to betray me this way.” Her voice caught. “Never expected the husband that I loved and thought loved me to betray me.”

A less gravelly, more jovial voice punctuated the din. “I know Ned loves you, Cat, and would never have found another to grace his bed. Not the Ned I knew.” Blinking, Catelyn was finally made aware of a second torch hanging on one of the columns, directly in front of Lyanna Stark’s grave - standing there with a crowbar in each hand, was Benjen. Nodding at Ned, he tossed him one of the metal bars. “What took ya so long?”

“Robert’s easy to sneak by,” Ned shrugged, walking beside his brother. “Cersei… not so much. Had to wait till she was talking with her brother.”

Benjen laughed. “Lions my ass, I always said the Lannister house sigil should be a viper.” Hefting the crowbar, he slid one of the ends inside a small crevice in the sarcophagus and began to push. “If you don’t mind, brother?”

Watching the two of them try to wrench open a… panel in the sarcophagus baffled Catelyn to the core. A reason for them to hack at Lyanna Stark’s grave - no reason came to mind. “Why are you two acting like fools?” she demanded, suddenly annoyed. “I did not consent to be snuck out of the most important feast I’ve ever put together just to peak at the bones of your long-dead…”
Cutting her off, the small stone panel dislodged, teetering over. It slammed into the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust. Catelyn smothered her mouth and nose with her cloak. “Damn it, Ned.” But neither Stark listened to her, Benjen on his stomach and reaching into what seemed like an alcove underneath the tomb - something that was not usually present, if the funerals of Ned’s father and brother were any indication.

Ned stood hunched over, holding the torch for Benjen’s sake. He kept his eyes focused on her, however. “Forgive me Cat. I never wanted to lie to you, but I had no choice.”

“What are you…?” Catelyn trailed off when she saw exactly what Benjen pulled out of the alcove. The nearly ossified round lumps. “What in the Gods?” Her jaw was dropped, completely shocked out of for the first time in her life.

Both brothers had the nerve to keep their eyes on the floor. “Cat, there’s a story that you need to know…”

Running a gentle hand along her limp son’s hair, Catelyn knew she looked like the worst of hells. Face pale, skin unwashed, eyes sunken… the tolls of staying by Bran’s bedside had affected her greatly - yet she stayed. Refused offers to leave. Refused other nurses. Refused all but the very modest of meals in her dedication to her son. The only other with similar dedication was resting on the bed, Summer’s snout perched on Bran’s still form.

Everyone had been by to give their support or see Bran, Ned and Robb struggling to keep the tears from flowing while Sansa, Rickon, and even Arya failed at that venture. All gave their love and kindness to their brother’s fight to stay alive… except one. ‘Jon.’

With plenty of time to reflect, Bran having not woken since Hodor brought him back to Winterfell after his fall, Catelyn’s mind kept revolving back to Jon Snow. Her husband’s bastard. ‘Not his bastard.’ Memories of that day sixteen years ago kept repeating whenever she closed her eyes. How Ned came back from the South, a pink baby bundled in a blanket in his arms. How he carried him reverently, as much in love with him as he was with little Robb. Catelyn hated that child, hated Jon with every fiber of her being. Hated the reminder of how her beloved Ned was seduced by some southerner, and the love he had for the child stoked jealousy that he loved her as well.

‘But it was all a lie.’ The truth felt surreal. In all her life, she was in the company of the rightful…

A knock on the door startled her. Catelyn looked up, only to spot the object of her thoughts. “May I enter, my Lady?” Jon Snow asked, his face supplicant and tone respectful. Unable to come up with an answer, Catelyn just nodded.

Watching him stride towards Bran’s bedside, Catelyn looked him over as if she had never seen him before. With his coal-black hair, grey eyes, and sturdy features Jon definitely took from his Stark side. And the way he loved his family, speaking words of affection and brotherly love for the still sleeping Bran… the lady saw much of Ned in him. ‘Lyanna.’ But there was an almost regal air… a martial prowess and innate confidence that was just starting to prop up. ‘His other side.’ The one that stunned her and disconcerted her the most. It hadn’t been there before, before the Targaryen princess. Jon had been sullen, withdrawn, unsure of himself. Was that because of her? Regret pulsed in the back of her mind.

The contemplation was once again broken when Jon kissed Bran’s brow, moving to head out. “Jon,” she called, his name not tinged with bile for once. The lad stopped, glancing at her puzzled. He sensed it too. “Thank you, for coming. Bran would welcome it.”
Modestly, Jon merely nodded his head. “It is no trouble. He is my brother.” His response only made her pain worse, and his leaving left her alone with her thoughts.

Catelyn looked to the ceiling, as if her eyes centered on heaven itself. “You can count on me, Lyanna.” For the first time in sixteen years, Catelyn Tully Stark let go of her anger.
Hand of the King

Stepping back, Jorah quickly wielded his broadsword into a blocking position. Steel clashed on steel, his arms straining to move the heavy weapon to block the swift slashes from his opponent…

The slight prick on his neck ended the sparring as quickly as it began. A smirk formed on his face. “Yield.” Pride flashed on his face. “First time you’ve beaten me.”

Daenerys, Khaleesi of the Dothraki and Princess Targaryen, beamed exhaustively. “It won’t be the only time, Ser Jorah.”

Bent over, catching his breath, Jorah glanced over at his secret ward. The girl was panting hard as well, silver hair sticking to her brow. In the several weeks since Ned Stark bound him to her by the iron northern vow, the former lord had seen Daenerys grow from a shy young girl into a vibrant, confident lady. One he was growing to view as a daughter of his. The Khal was enrapured by his exotic wife - at least to an extent - all but the most arrogant of his khalasar seamlessly following their Khaleesi’s orders. She fit into that role faster than Jorah had expected. Some in the Khal’s inner circle would grumble, but only Viserys truly challenged Daenerys on her authority. A good thumping by her guards and Jorah himself while Dany watched without emotion quickly taught him a message to not challenge her publically. And now, she was steadily becoming a master swordsman - or woman rather. He wiped a sheen of sweat off his forehead. “You’re getting better by the day, Khaleesi.”

Her breaths were still labored. “I still can’t beat a warrior in a fight.”

“You’re getting there. Just need to perfect your agility. Fighting a massive knight, the proper maneuvers can get around him and hit him in vulnerable places with ease.” He eyed the Yi Ti sword - Jorah had never seen anything like it. The gently curved blade, steel the same color as her hair, it suited her and her fighting style. “Most great swords have names. Have you thought of one for yours?”

Pursing her lips, Dany seemed lost in thought. “Old Valyria had a class of elite warriors, that used cunning and agility to defeat stronger enemies - like me.” She glanced at the sword fondly, running a finger along the smooth steel. “I’m inclined to call my sword by the name of those warriors. Saracen.”

“Saracen. I think that is a fitting name.”

Smiling at him, Daenerys had just sheathed her sword when a hand drifted to cup her belly - midriff exposed in the Dothraki style. Her face was pale. “Khaleesi?” Jorah asked, concerned. It was expected that she would tire from their sessions. The determined young woman made it a standing order that Jorah not go easy on her, but this was different.

Opening her mouth to respond, Dany’s eyes widened. Instead, she rushed over to a clump of tall grass and spewed the contents of her stomach into the dull green flora. Hunched over, she noticed Jorah’s hand resting comfortingly on her back - in a paternal manner. An overwhelming feeling of embarrassment clouded over Dany. “That… please forgive me for that, Ser Jorah.”

“No need for apologies,” Jorah said with a soft chuckle. “It happens to the best of us.”

“I…” The world faded to black as Dany’s eyes rolled into her head. The last thing she felt were two strong arms keeping her from falling.
With a heave, Alliser Thorne shoved another boy - Grenn, if his aged mind remembered correctly - forward. “What are you waiting for! Get on with it!” The previous lad barely even tried to spar with the young Tarly boy, the one who Aemon always found in the Castle Black library. Not a warrior he was, but based on how each of the other trainees that Thorne threw at him looked at Jon Snow, he had a benefactor. “Attack him!”

Grenn seemed to whisper something to Samwell, who barely struck his chest with the wooden sparring sword. The lad went down immediately. ‘Yield! Yield!’ Wrinkled lips curved into a smile.

Face contorted in anger, Thorne shoved Samwell aside and advanced on Jon Snow. “You think that was funny?” Earning Aemon’s respect, Jon said nothing and stood his ground with a smirk. ‘Just like his father.’

“Enough, Alliser,” the old Maester called out. “I’m sure you have more pressing duties as Deputy Commander.”

Scowling at his nominal superior, Thorne dressed down the other recruits and stormed off. Sparing one last look at Jon Snow, Aemon didn’t notice the younger man step beside him. “There’s a lot that resembles him in the lad, isn’t there?”

Sighing, Aemon Targaryen sheared away from the railing and headed back indoors. He tightened the loose robe on his wrinkled frame. “Yes, and much that resembles her, from what I have heard of the She-Wolf.” The old Maester may have been near blindness, but he swore he could have seen the slight tears that clouded Benjen Stark’s eyes. “The lad’s birthright is wasted here at the wall.”

Closing the door, the two were safe from prying eyes and listening ears. With the Lannister at Castle Black for at least another week, one had to be extra cautious. “It is he who is the rightful heir.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Benjen shot back. “That she wouldn’t want her only child condemned to the chains of our vows. I don’t even think the boy wants them anymore himself, simply that he doesn’t have a choice.”

Reminded of that fact, Aemon’s tired eyes glazed over. “The princess…” he trailed off wistfully. “Love is the death of duty, Benjen. We saw that with my great nephew, but, there is derived a strength from it that cannot be measured by human minds.” A gnarled hand reached for a pitcher of wine.

Benjen took the offered cup that Aemon poured for him. “At this point, the safest place for him is here. And the safest place for her is on the Great Grass Sea.” He chuckled darkly. “My brother says a storm is coming, and either of them will be tempting targets for the vipers and opportunistic swine. Wildlings and barbarians pale in comparison.”

“And if what that deserter said is true?” Toothless gums smacked together, eyes narrowing at Benjen. “If the Others truly have risen?”

Grey eyes rolled. “I highly doubt that.”

Aemon leveled a finger at Benjen. “Remember, Lead Ranger, complacency and closed mindedness have toppled stronger and smarter men than you or I.” Legs wobbling, he finally allowed himself the luxury of sitting down. “I still don’t know why Ned Stark entrusts me with Jon Snow’s name day gift from his father.” He gazed at the stone wall in a specific spot, hiding a secret alcove where the
precious bundles rested. “He stored them in Winterfell for sixteen years, didn’t he?”

“If the storm does come,” Benjen replied. “And our families play as large a part as we both feel they will, this is the only place they will truly be secure from the wrong hands.”

Nodding, the Maester glanced out the window. Tired eyes settled on Jon. He wrapped a friendly hand around Samwell Tarly’s shoulder, helping him with his swordsmanship. “You speak true. Pardon me for being selfish, but it feels wonderful not to be alone again.”

SIX MONTHS LATER

“It isn’t like Robert to call a meeting of the Small Council so early,” Eddard Stark, Hand of the King remarked to his companion, both meandering down the winding halls of the Red Keep.

Renly Baratheon nodded, delicate features contorted in a pensive frown. “Something must have spooked him. News about someone or something that he would pay particular attention to.” The youngest Baratheon sibling laughed. “I can count on one finger the matters that would fit on that list not involving jousting, drinking, feasting, or whoring.”

“Quite so.” Ned considered Robert an old friend - one of the reasons he accepted the position as Hand of the King - and accepted as true even the unsavory aspects of his personality. All of the peace and prosperity of the last decade had been Jon Arryn’s work. Robert was too busy immersed in his vices to make an actual attempt to rule.

In the corner of his eye, Jon spotted a thatch of gold hair next to the Master of Coin. “What is Joffrey doing with Lord Baelish?” he asked Renly in a low whisper.

The youngest Baratheon clicked his tongue. “They’ve been rather chummy in the last few weeks, Littlefinger often talking to the boy about this and that regarding the kingdom.” At that moment both of the two turned, eyes falling on Ned and Renly. Littlefinger managed to put on a warm smile, while Joffrey viewed them with barely disguised derision. “I have no idea why, mind you. No one but his mother can stand that boy.”

“His mother and Sansa,” Ned added. It was not a match that he wanted, seeing the boy in action over the past months. How Sansa could still care for him after what happened with her wolf… Walking into the Small Council chamber, Ned put it aside for another day.

Robert’s anger clouded the room from the moment Ned entered. Not angry - he was livid, face nearly purple from rage. Varys, the plump Master of Whisperers, stood off in a corner trying to make himself unnoticed. “Your grace?” Littlefinger finally asked, having entered last from his discussion with the Crown Prince.

A wood-fitted scroll found itself chucked at the Master of Coin’s head, only an agility normally reserved for a younger man allowing him to dodge it. “Fucking Seven Hells! She’s pregnant!” Before the four assembled could draw the wrong conclusions, Robert continued. “The Targaryen bitch is pregnant!”

Ned’s blood turned to ice. Jorah had informed him of this development barely after he arrived in King’s Landing, and he hoped to keep this from Robert. A furtive glance was directed at Varys - apparently Ned wasn’t the only person to have spies in the Dothraki camp. “Ned!” The King’s bellow caught his attention. “Did that Mormont cunt tip you off to this?”

“No, your grace. He hasn’t said a word, though I can’t be sure if he’s even alive.” The lie rolled
oddly seamlessly off his tongue.

Letting out a hiss, Robert threw a cup at the wall. Wine sloshed on the stone floor. “Now, the horse lord will have no reason not to cross the Narrow Sea!”

“Brother,” Renly said. “I highly doubt the Dothraki…”

“Shut it, Renly. If I wanted a faggot’s advice I would ask for it!” Face reddening, Renly nevertheless shut up. “I must nip this in the bud now. The bitch must die!”

The ice in Ned’s veins only increased in concentration. “Robert, to kill a mere child? A young woman with child herself? That isn’t the man you are.” It actually was, but this had to be stopped at all costs.

The King wasn’t hearing any of it. “You listen to me, Ned! If you do not accept my order, then you pack up and get out of this city!” Tempted to do just that, Ned nevertheless clamped his lips together.

“You cannot let this occur,” Ned demanded of Varys as the two walked together near the Hand’s office. The meeting had concluded ten minutes before, an enraged Robert formally condemning Daenerys Targaryen to death.

“The birds are ready to fly, Lord Stark,” the fat eunuch stated, voice flat and not giving away anything. It was always what unsettled Ned about Varys - his total lack of emotion, though that was an asset in King’s Landing rather than a detriment. “It would be unusual to change such orders so suddenly. Especially if it is a deviation from what the King so desires.”

Running a hand through his hair, Ned’s brain worked on overtime. Robert had been driven close to madness by the Targaryens before, and there was no doubt in the northerner’s mind that the King intended to fulfill his vow to wipe every single one of them off the face of the earth. ‘I have to protect her, at all costs.’ His honor commanded it, both to Lyanna and to Jon. But how could he go about it?

“The duty of the hand is to carry out policy in the King’s best interests, is it not Master Varys?” Ned finally replied. “Even if it means protecting the King from his own initial instincts.”

Still nothing escaped of Varys’ true thoughts. “That is the traditional role of the Hand, yes.”

‘What I have to arrange is something that will both protect Daenerys in the long run and be framed as in Robert’s best interests.’ A ghost of a smile formed on Ned’s face. “From what I know of the Dothraki, they would never follow a woman.” At least not an ordinary woman. “Take away the Khal, and child or not they will descend into infighting between pretenders that have no desire to honor the agreement between Drogo and Viserys Targaryen.”

A twinkle shone in Varys’ eye, a first from what Ned had seen. “And so if we kill the Khal, all threats to His Majesty vanish without having to stoop to killing a hapless girl and her unborn child.”

The flat expression formed once again. “I shall say, Lord Stark. You are far more cunning than most give you credit for.”

“And what do most say?” Ned grinned.

“They say you are routine and predictable, always in pursuit of a lofty ideal rather than the smartest course.”

“That is true, to an extent.” Honor brought victory, even if the victory was long term. Such is what his father taught him, and Ned passed it on to all his children. “Please see to it that my orders are carried out… in the name of the King.”
Varys bowed. “Of course, Lord Hand.”

Shutting the latch to his office, a sigh left Ned Stark’s lips. “The gods have mercy on me,” he breathed. He couldn’t fathom how Jon Arryn could have lasted even one year among this pit of vipers. Cersei was more a jackal than a lion, Pycelle more a cutthroat than a maester, Renly a friend but overwhelmingly self-serving, and Petyr Baelish… Had it not been for Catelyn’s assurance that he could be trusted, Littlefinger perturbed him the most. The man was a snake, rich thanks to lax morals and oily to the core.

And now he was grafting himself to Prince Joffrey. That worried Ned, but on seeing the letter resting on his desk that apprehension started to fade. Picking it up, he opened it and began scanning the scrawl.

Lord Stark,

Yes, the information you informed me of is greatly worrying. Something is brewing, what I cannot be sure of. Jon Arryn would never inquire into Robert’s bastards if it wasn’t of importance.

I never trusted my sister-in-law as much as I could throw her, and I know that she is ultimately behind this. There is no other explanation that makes any sense.

I will head to King’s Landing with all haste.

Regards,

Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Dragonstone

Removing a strand of gold from her neck, Daenerys felt a soft thump from inside her belly. Unable to stop the smile spreading on her face, she placed her hand gingerly on the rounded bump - only for a second thump to strike her palm. A pleased sigh left her lips.

“Calm down little one,” she cooed, rubbing her eight month baby bump with unadulterated adoration. Inside her stomach was a little boy or girl. ‘My little boy or girl.’ A tiny human half her, and half his/her father. ‘Father.’ A mix of pure happiness and grief crossed her mind at the thought of her child’s father. “Hush my sweet,” she couldn’t help but say in her native Valyrian - the one phrase she could remember her mother say to her. “Issa loves you, and I know daddy would love you just as much.” Tears came to her eyes. “I love him just as much. I wish we could be a family.” Dany closed her lids tightly. She would not give up hope.

Her child simply kicked against her hand yet again, as if indicating his or her assent.

Luckily, her sad thoughts were broken by one of her handmaidens. “I have something for you, Khaleesi.” Resting on a tray carried in both hands was some kind of concoction. “Straight from the best healers in Vaes Dothrak.” Countering the common narrative of all the Dothraki being vicious savages, the central city of the horde had a vibrant commercial scene to it. Plenty of merchants and travelers pawning their wares on the returning warriors.

Taking the metal goblet from the tray, Dany sniffed it - only to recoil. Her nose wrinkled. It smelled pungent and awful. “What in gods name is that?”

“Boiled herb tonic, Khaleesi, courtesy of Ser Jorah.” Her handmaiden swooned over the dashing Westerosi knight. “To give strength to the Stallion that Mounts the World.” By the tone of her voice, she believed exactly what Drogo called the child in her womb.
Rolling her eyes at Ser Jorah’s devotion and overprotectiveness - Dany secretly found it quite endearing, not ever having a real father figure in her life - she figured that there were worse things that she could do. Her stomach flipped at thinking back to when she ate the whole stallion heart raw. The Dothraki way to ensure a healthy baby, it took all of her steel not to hurl it all up and gift Drogo with a terrible omen. Instead, she finished it and gave him a positive one. Upon proclaiming a son named Rhaego dwelled inside her, he looked the part of a proud father who had sired a great warrior.

Gulping down the hellish concoction, Dany never really thought of her child by that name. She was not sure on the sex, and she did not want Drogo to be his or her father. It was not as if she hated him, far from it. The once brutish and aloof Khal had an endearing loyalty that made him hard to like upon truly knowing him. But Daenerys’ heart belonged to another - one she likely would never see again.

Desperate for something to distract her from thoughts of him, her gaze fell upon the three eggs resting in their sand-filled box. A place of pure honor. Reaching down, she picked up one that was pure black, red lines marring the intricate scales. Illyrio was right, they were the pinnacle of beauty. A symbol of her people - a relic from her family’s past. ‘The creatures Aegon and his sister-wives flew from these shores to conquer the whole of Westeros.’ What Dany wouldn’t give to see them fly through the clear skies once more.

Without thinking, she placed the ossified egg right on the brazier. It was not out of any plan but pure instinct. She wanted to see the egg in the heat. As her handmaiden prepared her clothes for the evening, Dany heard something - movement? It intrigued her, hands pressing against the scorching egg and feeling a flutter. Almost like her own child…

“Khaleesi!” At once Dany pulled her hands away, shocked by the scream of her handmaiden. “What were you thinking, you’ll get bur…” Grabbing her hands, the other woman quickly inspected them to find… no injury. No burns, not even redness. Just Dany’s distinctive pale skin. The baby kicked his or her approval at the revelation.

‘A dragon does not burn.’

All of a sudden her brother stormed into the tent, dragging a whimpering Doreah by her hair. “You!... Send this Whore!” he snarled, indignant and enraged. With a shove, Doreah was thrown to the floor in tears. “To give me commands! ME! The rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“Forgive me Khaleesi,” the whimpering girl cried.

Glancing down with a comforting look, Dany would have knelt down had it not been for the enormous bump containing her child. “Hush, dear. It’s alright.” The smile morphed into a hard scowl as she looked at her brother. “Does it pleasure you, brother, to abuse a hapless woman?”

Viserys was taken aback at his sister’s pure coldness and steel - even in their dealings before, she had never challenged him directly unless Jorah Mormont was there to back him up. The surprise quickly changed to anger. He’d show her not to wake the Dragon. “How many times do I have to tell you, sister…” Viserys hissed, approaching her. “You do not command me!”

“There was no command,” she responded evenly. “All I did was invite you to a feast tonight in honor of your unborn niece or nephew.”

“Do you think I care about some half-breed Dothraki chattel?” he replied incredulously. “And what use is a feast in this shithole?” Rage building, he began to toss jewelry and goblets to the floor. “This place smells of manure and piss!”
When one hit her in the torso, Dany started to fear for her baby. “Stop it, stop it now!”

Her words only angered him further. “I’m not here to dance with the horsefuckers. I am here for one purpose, to get an army to take back my Kingdom!” Viserys’ mouth hovered inches from her face, flecks of spit flying out. “Everything else is expendable, including you and your half-breed!

Protectiveness rising up - an innate maternal instinct that boiled like dragonfire within her - a clenched fist slammed into Viserys’ jaw. Being innately far weaker, given her short and slender frame not having skill in hand to hand combat, it didn’t cause him to fall. “Do not,” she ground out through clenched teeth. “Do not speak of my child in that way.”

Any sense of rationality left her brother, his eyes blazing. “YOU DARE STRIKE ME!” A vicious backhand sent her to the floor, Viserys climbing on top of her as best he could, given the bump. “You have woken the dragon.” Dany struggled as best she could as her handmaiden’s watched in horror. “You are a horselord’s slut and your spawn is a filthy halfbreed. I should kill it now, keep the bloodline pure!”

Fingers curling around a chain of gold coins, Dany branded it as a mace and flogged her brother’s face, catching him in the side of his cheek and forcing him off her. Scrambling to her feet with an agility normally lacking in a pregnant woman, she reached for Saracen an unsheathed it from it’s scabbard. Cursing vilely, the rage turned to pure terror as Viserys found Valyrian steel pressed against the skin of his neck. He looked at Dany as if he never saw her before… the meek girl he had been able to dominate was gone now. In her place was pure dragonfire.

“If you dare,” she breathed out as evenly as she could. “Even try to harm my child, I will kill you.” There was nothing in her voice that caused the threat to be anything but real. “I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, descendent of Old Valyria and the great Aegon the Conqueror. You will never raise a hand to me again.”

Inwardly, Dany took a perverse pleasure at watching her brother squirm.

It was this scene that Jorah burst in on, joined by her Dothraki bodyguard. In his harried state, he barely noticed. “Khaleesi, come quickly,” he breathed out.

Dany’s blood turned cold. “What happened?” This could not be good at all.

“The Khal… he’s been poisoned.”

Violet eyes widening, Dany tossed Saracen aside and began to rush to the tent flap - only to cry out in sudden pain. Jorah watched as a gush of wetness trickled down her trousers. “The baby…” she said weakly.

Jorah and her handmaidens were quickly on her. “Fetch the midwife! Quickly.” Dany didn’t hear much else, slowly drifting into unconsciousness.
Khaleesi

Cold. The first thing Daenerys felt was a deep chill that burned her skin and knifed through to her very bones. Blinking, her teeth chattered as she wrapped her arms around herself to keep as much warmth in her body as she could. It wasn’t enough. Fire could not kill a dragon, but ice could.

Suddenly the cold vanished. Taken away, the silver-haired princess began to notice her surroundings. Grey, everything was a uniform grey - dull, lifeless. The stench of metaphorical death and decay, something once great that was now rotting and crumbling from its very core. Stepping forward, Dany immediately noticed she was not clad in her Khaleesi leather, but rather in a dark grey dress, hem and skirt reaching down to two combat boots tailored to fit her. The outfit not of a Khaleesi, but a warrior queen.

Stepping gingerly through the ruined edifice of the building, pentagram-styled windows shattered grotesquely, Daenerys suddenly found herself rising high in the air. Whatever she was in disappeared, the ground beneath her morphing into a massive pyramid that towered over the dreary landscape. In the distance, a golden figure stood tall, hair the color of precious metal as two booming horns resonated far and wide. What had to be hundreds of thousands fell prostrate, forced to worship this being.

The setting shifted again, Dany flung what seemed halfway across the world - back into the freezing cold. Torch appearing in her hand, the darkness all around her vanished into blinding white as a massive gate opened to reveal a massive blizzard. What awaited her on the other side made her heart skip.

Jon Snow, in the flesh. Slightly older, more hardened. And even more handsome than before. She walked up to him, as if on autopilot. His gentle hand cupped her cheek. “My Queen,” came the gravelly voice she loved so much. “My Empress.”

“My King,” Dany replied with all the affection in the world. “My Emperor.”

In the distance, a faint moan suddenly appeared. Immediately her wolf tensed, turning around and unsheathing his sword. The moan grew louder, turning into an all encompassing rasp that chilled Dany to the very fiber of her being. Jon looked at her, eyes replaced with flame. “Winter is here.” And a black mass fell upon them…

Shooting upright, Daenerys awoke to her panting breaths and sweat pouring from her brow. A dull ache permeated from her entire lower half. Only the low light of several braziers banished the stuffy darkness of the tent.

“She’s awake.” Turning her head, there was Ser Jorah, his face spread out in a wan and relieved smile. “You gave us quite a fright, Khaleesi.”

Reaching for a waterskin by her furs, Dany felt instantly better as she drank. Memories poured in. “The Khal is dead?”

“Yes,” Jorah replied. “He was poisoned, likely by agents of Robert Baratheon.” He sighed. “His bloodriders are already beginning to jockey for control of the Khalar.”

She snorted. “Opportunistic swine.” Eyes then widened, Dany’s hands going for her stomach. The bump was no longer there. “Gods, my child…”

Jorah was at her side almost immediately. “Calm down, Khaleesi. Trust me.” Whistling, in came her
two handmaidens. “They are fine.”

“They?” Looking to her front, all words left Dany as her violet eyes stared in wonder. Gently, two small bundles were placed in the crooks of her arms. Twins, she gave birth to twins.

“Two perfectly healthy little babes,” Jorah beamed, playing the part of a proud grandfather. “A boy and a girl.”

Dany looked over her two children, already falling helplessly in love with them. Her son sported a dark tuft of hair, tiny eyes already showing a hint of violet like hers. Her daughter was the opposite, sporting the silver mane of a Targaryen but eyes as grey as smoke. They were beautiful. They were hers.

‘They look just like him.’ It made her love them even more.

Waiting for Doreah to leave, Jorah crossed his arms and stared at Dany with eyes both stern and inquisitive. Rocking the now full princess gently in her arms, she knew exactly what was coming. “Khaleesi…”

“I hope I can trust you, Jorah.” The statement was flat, Dany sparing a glance on the twins to keep her grounded. This would be… quite emotional for her. Someone who she wished was here wasn’t, and could never be. Not to mention the horde of now-squabbling Dothraki and her arrogant, uncaring brother that waited outside.

The former Lord blinked, features softening. “You can trust me with your life, Khaleesi.” Kneeling, a gentle hand caressed her son’s soft cheek in the bassinet. “The twins are not Dothraki. Neither resemble the Khal in any feature.”

“I am their mother, Jorah.” It was a cop out, but Dany wasn’t ready to breach the subject herself. “They are half-Targaryen.”

“Aye, their features are Targaryen. The Prince’s eyes and the Princess’ hair… but the other features, they are Westerosi.” His gaze settled on her once more. “And I know this to be true, a son of the North that I am. Their father is a northerner, isn’t he?” Tears prickling in her eyes, unable to stop herself, Dany nodded. Jorah reached out and stroked her arm comfortingly, as a father would. “Was it him? The boy in Pentos?”

His image flashing before her eyes, Dany took in the chubby face of her daughter. Though looking mostly like her, those grey orbs exactly like him - her love. “Yes, Jon Snow is their father.” It was said. There was no going back now. After their short time together, Dany now had two tiny little beings, part her and part Jon. ‘Targaryen and Stark. Dragon and Direwolf.’ “Fire and Ice,” she said softly.

Something imperceptible crossed over Jorah’s face, her companion and father-figure seemingly processing the immense news that had been disclosed to him. “Does anyone else know? That you had…” He chose his words carefully. “Were with Eddard Stark’s bastard…”

“Do not call him that, Jorah.” Dany warned firmly, rocking the baby in her arms. “He is a good man, and deserves better than that.” The look in her eye proved it was not a request. Nodding, Jorah offered a silent apology. She sighed. “No, no one else knows. Doreah knows that I had someone whom I was interested in, and I have a feeling Lord Stark had an idea.” He was too observant not to figure it out.

Remembering the feeling of Ice against his throat, the determination in Ned’s eyes, Jorah agreed with
his Khaleesi. “What do you intend to do now, Khaleesi? Their birth at the time of the Khal’s death can be either auspicious or unpromising.”

Her daughter snuggling in her arms, Dany closed her eyes. What was she to do now? The Dothraki worshipped strength, and her place in the Khalsar would be quite unstable now - especially if the twins’ true parentage was revealed. And even if she maintained control, there was her birthright, her children’s birthright. She had the future of House Targaryen in her hands. And then there was Viserys, holding a stronger claim, but childless and incompetent. No man would follow him into battle, Dany was certain of it.

But could she accomplish it? Could she, a woman, reclaim her family’s birthright. Her children’s destiny as royals.

“If I could bet on anyone being a ruler, I’d bet on you, my beautiful dragon.”

If there was anyone Dany trusted, it was her love.

“I am Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, scion of Aegon the Conqueror and Old Valyria. Khaleesi of the Dothraki,” she announced. “I will not let my brother destroy our birthright with his incompetence. I will not allow my children from being denied their place in this world. They are Targaryens, and as the true Queen of the Seven Kingdoms I legitimize them.”

Wide-eyes, Jorah opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. Proud tears filled his eyes. He had wished for this, prayed for this, knowing that out of everyone that could rule only Dany truly deserved it. Silently, he lowered himself onto one knee. “Daenerys of House Targaryen, first of her name, Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, I on this day pledge my life and my fealty to you.” As soon as she acknowledged his pledge, he looked at the two infants. “What shall their names be?”

“Rhaegar,” Dany said without hesitation. “His name is Rhaegar, Prince Rhaegar Targaryen.” There seemed no better name for her beloved son than that of the noble Crown Prince - her eldest brother that she had never known but heard so much about. He was a great warrior, something she knew Jon would support. It was why she had chosen Rhaego as the Dothraki name. Dany was positive that her children would be Jon’s, but seeing them with the distinctive Stark features only proved it to her. It couldn’t be a Dothraki name.

“A noble name for a fine Prince,” Jorah smiled, already protective of the royal children. They didn’t have a crown yet, but Daenerys was his queen. No one in the entirety of the world could hold a candle to her. “And the Princess? Would you like a Targaryen name, or a northern one?”

Brushing the soft silver tufts of hair on her daughter’s head, Dany knew it should be a northern name. ‘Jon deserves it. Though he is half the world away, he is their father. My love.’ There were plenty of women in Jon’s life, his family whom he loved. One stood out though… whom he talked about with the most fondness. “Arya. Princess Arya, after Jon’s sister.”

Jorah nodded. “Ned Stark’s youngest daughter. She had just turned four last time I was in Winterfell.” He laughed. “A hellion, if I remember.”

Little Arya took that moment to yawn, tiny form wriggling in her blanket as she drifted off to sleep. Setting her down next to Rhaegar, Dany kissed both on the forehead. “Mommy loves you, little ones.” Face radiating love and adoration, inside Daenerys’ will hardened in determination. ‘I will make you proud, my love.’ She knew her destiny, and for the first time in her entire life she had something to fight for.
It had been just four days since the birth of her children - and the death of her husband, Khal Drogo - and Dany could feel the tension permeating Vaes Dothrak like a thick fog. As Jorah had told her, a Khalasar only had loyalty to strength. A Khal that could not ride or could not fight was as good as gone, and a dead Khal contained no strength. Already, out of the crop of a dozen pretenders two stood firm in their leading claims for the mantle of the great Stallion: Haggo, a former bloodrider for Drogo, and Moro, a skilled warrior and raider. Only the fact it was within the great city itself and the uncertainty surrounding the sudden death and sudden birth of the Stallions that Mount the World had kept the final struggle for leadership from happening.

Just the amount of time Daenerys needed. Clad in a black leather tunic and trousers - an outfit fit for a Targaryen conqueror, she had recovered and rested enough to stake her claim in the fight. “Are you sure it is happening today?” she asked Jorah.

“Yes,” replied the fully armored knight. Behind him was Doreah and half her bodyguard - the other half and Irri remained with the Prince and Princess, sworn to the death to defend them. Viserys was nowhere to be found, likely brooding in his tent. Dany didn’t miss him. “When these things happen in Vaes Dothrak, all contests for leadership happen directly outside the Rearing Stallions.”

“Since they fight to the death?”

“Aye, those that seek to rule the Khalasar fight to the death. They worship strength, thusly the strongest warrior will take over. The last one alive is the new Khal.”

Feet kicking up small puffs of dust, Daenerys allowed herself a small smirk. “Perfect.”

Formed into a semicircle along the outer approach to Vaes Dothrak, a crowd in the hundreds watched as the whittled down competition of two men prepared to battle it out for the Khalasar. But the approach of their Khaleesi changed matters - it was sufficiently rare that a fallen Khal’s wife concern herself in matters such as these. Eventually Haggo and Moro were forced to acknowledge her. “What is she doing here?” asked Moro, pointing to Jorah.

“You dare engage in this opportunistic jockeying while your great Khal’s body is still warm.”

Haggo laughed. “Foolish Andal, Drogo is still a corpse, and a corpse cannot ride, fight, or lead. A real man must take over.” His eyes narrowed. “So why is she here?”

Approaching the two, standing straight and proud as the blood of the dragon, Dany didn’t shy away from the towering figures. “I Daenerys Stormborn, as your Khaleesi seek the leadership of the Khalasar. To carry out the will of the great Khal Drogo.” A moment’s silence passed before the two warriors bawled over in laughter, thinking her ridiculous.

Eyes flickering between the laughing Haggo and Moro - not to mention the other Dothraki with an eye on the position - Dany’s lip curved upward in the ghost of a smirk. It reminded her of her brother, the day she told him not to marry her to Drogo. How he dismissed her, found her a fool. Someone not serious trying to control her own life. Jon never saw that, and thanks to him the silver-haired princess was able to take charge of her destiny.

“Jorah.” The knight took a wrapped bundle and pulled down the horse blanket cover.

Arm darting back, Dany’s fingers gripped the sharkskin and drew forward. The grey-silver blur of Saracen’s blade swished through the air, nimble feet gliding across the dirt-strewn ground. One advantage of her slight stature - far better mobility and flexibility in combat against opponents that relied on strength. Haggo, who certainly counted in that regard, hadn’t even brought up his khopesh before Saracen disemboweled him. The finely honed and sharpened Valyrian steel sliced through his
skin and flesh like butter. Guts spilling, he collapsed in a heap.

It was over in seconds, Dany turning to Moro before anyone could really react. The small distance needed to be covered allowed the skilled warrior to bring up his khopesh to block Dany’s first slash, but the form was sloppy. The Targaryen had surprise on her side, and she exploited it for everything it was worth. Rapid movements causing him to try and hack, it was a fatal miscalculation. One downward blow from Saracen and his head rolled on the ground, severed from the limp torso.

Stepping away from the blood pooling on the ground, Daenerys extended Saracen in a threatening pose. Crimson liquid coated the blade for all to see. “Is there anyone else that seeks to challenge me.” While there had been many pretenders, with Haggo and Moro dispatched easily by their Khaleesi any interest had waned.

Jorah’s insights had been correct. The Dothraki worshiped strength.

“Commander!” Jon shouted, stepping off the floor where he had slid. Lord Commander Mormont stared with his narrowed, peering eyes at the confusing scene in front of him. Ghost, outside the spartan quarters, began barking and clawing at the door louder than before.

“What in the old gods is this?” Mormont inquired, voice hoarse with age and experience. The direwolf was literally slamming against the door.

Before Jon could respond, a scuffle drew his attention back to where the… corpse rested. Only it wasn’t a corpse anymore. Standing despite the sword impaled through its gut, the sallow grey thing pulled it out without a single indication of pain. “Shit,” he murmured. The rotting jaws of the… monster opened in a furious snarl.

Acting on instinct, Jon grabbed the lantern in the Lord Commander’s hand by the central cylinder - flames licking out of it - and hurled it at the figure. Already drenched in cheap, sour wine from the dining table, the ragged clothes and mottley skin ignited at once. The snarls turned to furious screams before the fire took its toll, finally killing the creature.

Jon was not about to risk anything however. “Move!” he yelled, pushing his commander out the now open door, Ghost nipping at their heels. Flagging over a builder, he pointed to the officer’s quarters. “Get Ser Alliser and other rangers, now!” It was only then that he allowed himself to check his hand for burns. Jon’s eyes widened at what he found.

The skin was untouched. Just the way they were before the skirmish.

A flash of dull steel, sword tip leveled directly at the crib where Princess Arya slept soundly next to her brother, Rhaegar. Neither infant noticed the drama unfolding around them, though no one else had that innocent luxury. “I am not asking, dear sister, I am telling you. I want what was promised to me,” Viserys hissed at the head of the tent where Daenerys sat - the mantle of the Khal, or in this case, the Khaleesi.

“Don’t even think about it, Viserys,” Jorah ground out, trying his best not to kill the man who threatened the Prince and Princess. “They will kill you.”

Viserys let out a barking laugh. “Kill me? They can’t. I’m in their sacred city, where they cannot shed a drop of blood.” His eyes turned back to his sister. Dany kept her composure even when her children were in danger. She stared into her brother’s eyes - there was not even a trace of love, of
affection in them. They may have been blood, but they were not family. “You may think you have control here, but you do not. I am your older brother, head of our house. You will obey my command, and I command you to give me my crown! The crown I was promised!”

One of the new bloodriders opened his mouth to yell at the upstart but was silenced. “Enough.” All sounds cut off, voices died down at the will of the Khaleesi. “You will have what you want, Viserys of House Targaryen.” Dany saw her brother’s eyes twinkle in victory. “A golden reward, a recognition of what you truly deserve.” Turning to whisper something to her chief bloodrider, she kept one eye out on him.

Smiling softly, Viserys visibly relaxed. “Well.” A laugh left his lips. “Good. It’s all I wanted.” He lowered his sword. “What I was promised… that’s all.”

Though he seemed happier, the tension still filled the still air as Dany rose. She walked past him to where Jorah stood by the royal cribs. A soft hand stroked their cheeks lovingly. “Take him,” she told her bloodriders in Dothraki. At once, two of them advanced on Viserys.

Without batting an eye they grabbed his arms, pinning his legs between theirs. “No! Unhand me!” While Viserys wasn’t lacking in will or gusto in trying to break free, his own meager strength paled in comparison to that of the burly bloodriders. “I am the Dragon! You can’t harm the Dragon!” All the while, Dany coolly and calmly grabbed several of her gold medallions and tossed them in an empty kettle heating over the fireplace. ‘This is what happens when you threaten my children,’ she thought without emotion.

Everyone was silent, Jorah, Doreah, and all the other Dothraki in the tent watched their gentle and loving Khaleesi morph into Valyrian steel, a ruler that would make her ancestors proud. All except for Viserys, who managed to piece together what was transpiring. “No, Dany. Please, tell them to let me go.” Tears ran down his eyes in pure terror. “Tell them! I’m your brother!” She didn’t even spare him a glance.

To gasps and Jorah’s horror - and eventual wonder - Dany reached into the steaming pot. Without screaming, without pain, her cupped hands brought out a puddle of liquified gold. Daenerys approached her brother with nothing but a small, innocent smile on her face. Viserys writhed and screamed, trying to escape the hold of the two burly bloodriders. They forced his hand out. “I am the dragon!” he shrieked. “You cannot kill the dragon.” Gods, he was an embarrassment to their House in Dany’s mind.

However, her smile never faltered. “Don’t worry, sweet brother.” Her voice dripped faux sweetness, as if still an innocent, sheltered girl. Cupped hands hovered above his left hand. “Fire cannot kill a dragon.” Separating, the rivulet of molten gold poured down as her brother’s screams blocked out every other sound.

Lids half-closed, the overwhelming throbbing and stinging of his bandaged hand kept Viserys from the mercy of sleep. Delerium fogged his mind, yet he still had enough strength to raise his head. “Whaa… where am I?” It occurred to him that he was being frog-marched through Vaes Dothrak.

“Quiet!” came the barking reply of his Dothraki guard.

Viserys didn’t bother to learn Dothraki, but the context managed to keep the list of possibilities short. In his delirium and overwhelming pain, he could barely think. “Take… me to my… army. Am the dragon.” Feet dragged on the sandy soil. Those guards loyal to Daenerys were not attentive to his comfort after all.
The sounds of crackling torches, drums, and funeral horns grew ever louder in his half-listening ears. Suddenly, a fist slammed into his gut. The sharp pain and wind wheezing out of his lungs focused the mind like no other. “Stand him up, tie him to the post. The Khaleesi wants him to see this.”

“Mormont?” Opening wide - with great difficulty, lids feeling like bags of sand were weighing them down - the prince saw the former Lord of Bear Island staring back at him. “Make them unhand me.”

“I would rather have them burn you alive, but that’s not my call.” A dark smirk crossed his features. “We now know that it can be done.”

Rage and humiliation boiling inside him, Viserys lunged at him with his left hand… only for him to scream in pure anguish as the nearly charred digits brushed against Jorah’s stomach. “Gods! I am the dragon!”

A chuckle left Jorah’s lips. “After this, you will have your chance to prove to all of us that you can become King.” He gestured to what looked like a massive funeral pyre - the embalmed body of Khal Drogo rested inside. “After our Queen’s demonstration…”

“Queen! That horselord-slut is no queen!” Such earned him another punch to the stomach… and one to the jaw.

“After our Queen’s demonstration,” Jorah continued. “You will be banished to wherever you seek to go. Consider that a gift of mercy from our Queen.” He lifted the Prince’s left arm. “And let this be a lifelong reminder that you are no true dragon.”

Before he could respond, a chilling silence fell upon the entire horde. They were gathered in a massive well, looking upon the pyre resting upon a small ridge - high enough for all assembled to see. Out stepped his sister, hair done up and dressed in the regal brilliance of a Targaryen queen. Jorah stepped towards her, and hanging back a few feet from her were her handmaidens, each holding one of the royal twins.

“Are you sure about this Khaleesi? Even after the gold, I’m still nervous.” He pointed to the pyre Daenerys smiled and leaned forward, kissing Jorah on the cheek. “I know you swore yourself to protect me, Ser Jorah, but trust me.” Stepping gingerly to where Arya and Rhaegar rested, she kissed each of them. “Mommy will be back soon, my angels.” Soft face hardening, soon she stood face to face with her brother.

“If you expect me to bend the knee, sweet sister,” he spat, “You will have to wait till the world ends.”

She merely chuckled darkly. “It is a good thing that you are not the sole champion of our house, brother. I hope you find your actual destiny.” Leaving it at that, she ascended to the pyre’s edge and gazed out at the assembled horde. “Dothraki.” She began in her now fluent grasp of the language. “I count you as my Khalasar, but today I hereby unshackle you from your chains. You may go about your way, seek out your own destiny. If you choose to follow me by your own free will, I promise never to let you down. To consider you not as my servants, but as my family. Anyone that wishes to hurt you will be immolated in pure dragonfire.

“Previous Khals, brave and noble as they were, measured your worth in middling amounts. They looked at the villages they could pillage, how many women they fucked, or how many horses the great cities of the coast could bribe them with. Khal Drogo thought differently, vowing that my children would be the Stallions that Mount the world! I will carry his legacy, take you across the Narrow Sea in the wooden horses that float. To leave the great knights and cities that think you mere
barbarians cowering at your feet. If you follow me, you will have this.”

A huge cheer rose from the Dothraki, an ever rising wave of war chants that soon drowned out any other sound in the entire city… only to turn to screams and gasps as Dany turned and walked directly into the now alighted pyre. Even in his pain, Viserys gaped in shock.

The hours drifted by, time interminable. Several times the tied prince fell victim to his pain - only to be jerked back to consciousness by the Dothraki guard. Soon it was dawn, the sun still not poking out from behind the mountains that formed the eastern edge of the Vaes Dothrak bowl. The fire had died down, Jorah approaching the smoldering wreckage. In the middle, Viserys could barely make out the sitting form of his sister.

A loud screech drew his attention, then his wonder. And his horror. “It can’t… impossible.” Perched on his unharmed, unburnt sister were three tiny dragons - one black as coal, one a dark forest green, and one bone white. Dragons reborn.

An entire horde followed the lead of Jorah Mormont, kneeling to their queen. The Unburnt. The Mother of Dragons.
Visions of a King

If there was a more emotionless figure in the entire Seven Kingdoms than Stannis Baratheon, Ned Stark did not know of any. A powerful warrior and amazing strategist, but with all the compassion and warmth of a statue. Still, as the King’s brother and Lord of Dragonstone - normally a title reserved for the Targaryen Crown Prince, a thought which made Ned’s heart catch slightly - the reserved Stormlands nobleman was the honorable choice for the problems that faced the realm.

“And so my idiot brother-in-law killed your aide and left you crippled,” Stannis said flatly, as if stating a fact - of which he was. “For the swordsman that killed Arthur Dayne, that seems a bit underwhelming against someone who’s claim to fame was stabbing a man in the back.”

For someone so emotionless, Stannis sometimes could deliver the best humor. “He had more men, it happens.” It had taken a while to get used to the cane, and the resulting soreness in the shoulder. The limp would annoy him for the rest of his life, Ned figured.

Ned’s eyebrows furrowed. “The King’s life is in peril, and I think it involved Jon Arryn’s interest in his bastards.” Stannis rolled his eyes. “Considering how Jamie Lannister wanted my investigation stopped, they have to be involved.”

“Jamie is too dumb to be involved in such matters. Cersei… the bitch probably is, as is Tywin. The Imp… I doubt it.”

“Catelyn says Tyrion Lannister got the knife that nearly killed my boy from Littlefinger, and that I could trust Littlefinger.”

Stannis looked at him as if he sprouted two heads. “Littlefinger? I’d sooner trust the cockroaches in my stables. I wouldn’t doubt if he killed Jon Arryn, though not with those oily hands of his.” Feeling that the Lannisters had poisoned the former Hand, Stannis had fled to Dragonstone just in case - it had taken Ned Stark’s intervention to bring him back with twenty-five trusted swordsmen. “And he’s getting close to my nephew?”

He nodded. “Aye, angling his options I believe.”

“And yet your daughter is still betrothed to Joffrey,” the lord deadpanned - anyone but Stannis would have let out a laugh. “Did the incident with the wolf change her mind at all?”

A frustrated chuckle left Ned’s lips. “No, she’s still as enraptured with him as ever.”

“Really?” Stannis snorted. “No one but his mother would like that little golden-haired brat.” There was little sentimentality in the middle Baratheon boy - aside from his daughter there really wasn’t anyone that Ned suspected he loved.

“Well, Sansa seems to. Calls him her golden lion…” Trailing off, Ned’s eyes widened, drawing a puzzled look from Stannis. “Tell me,” he finally said. “Do you remember any of your ancestors being fair of hair?”

If Ned’s expression puzzled Stannis, the question tumbling from his mouth didn’t help matters. “Uhhhh… not to my knowledge. Our grandmother was a Targaryen, yet father remained dark of hair. A Baratheon’s seed is strong, that’s what he always said…” His eyes widened, catching on. “You can’t possibly…?”

Nodding, Ned knew he had to be correct. “Jon Arryn’s last words were the same as the old saying
your father had.”

For someone both disciplined and circumspect, even Stannis’ statements were limited to profanity. “Well fuck.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” stuttered Samwell Tarly, looking over the palm. “You gripped the lantern body, where the flames flicked out?”

Seeing the unmarred skin for the thousandth time, Jon sighed. “Yes, I did. Must you keep asking me that, Sam?” He had answered the question over and over again. Thorne had called him a liar, disputing the entire story told by him about the crazed man in the Lord Commander’s chambers. Lead Ranger Royce seemed to believe him, as did Grenn, Finn, and Pyp. Lord Commander Mormont… he seemed out of it the whole time, as if thinking. Same with the Maester, Aemon.

Mormont had been forever grateful for Jon’s action - hence the presence of a Valyrian blade on his scabbard. ‘Longclaw, oh would Dany love to see this.’ Somewhere they shared now, if she kept the blade he gave her.

All and all, the only one who didn’t question anything about his story was Sam - the only person who seemed fully on his side since Dany… Jon shut his eyes tightly, willing away memories of her. It would only serve to pull his soul deeper into melancholy, and he couldn’t afford it. Far from being the noble calling his uncle made it seem, the Watch was a den of vipers. One that wished to bite him most of all.

“Is Ser Alliser making you doubt it? You had to kill that thing somehow, Jon. And if you weren’t burnt doing so…”

“Just forget it, Sam. It’s impossible that I could avoid burns, so something else must have happened.”

The rotund thinker was unperturbed by Jon’s attempts to push him away. ‘Another trait he shares with Dany.’ Jon couldn’t explain why he was drawn to protect the fat weakling that Sam appeared to be as soon as he arrived at Castle Black, but in time the trust and friendship managed to form. “Come on, Snow. This is a mystery. Only those of Old Valyria… if I recall correctly, can possess burn-proof skin. They used it to ride dragons.”

A hearty chuckle left Jon’s lips. “Please, Sam. I knew… someone,” he ground out, fighting back the longing. ‘Dany.’ “Someone of Valyrian blood. That doesn’t apply to me.”

“We all know Maester Aemon…”

Jon cut him off. “She wasn’t Maester Aemon.” Sam was going to weasel it out of him anyway - along with Robb, he could trust him with his life. Even still, he hesitated with the words.

He hadn’t counted Sam to be as intuitive as he was. “Well, the only surviving Targaryens besides Maester Aemon are the son and daughter of the Mad King. Did you know them?” At Jon’s nod, Sam laughed. “Didn’t know you were so worldly, Jon. Essos? And meeting the Mad King’s children.” He patted Jon on the back. “Next thing I know, you’ll be telling me that girl you told me about was the Targaryen Princess…” Eyes widened in recognition. “No… really?” Sam literally squeaked.

Sighing, Jon nodded. “Aye. Daenerys Targaryen. She was the one I mentioned.” It had come up while they were both scrubbing the dining tables in the mess hall, the conversation going from their vows to sexual prowess and the fact he had been with a woman once before seemed pertinent. He
had kept the identity of his lover a secret, but now it was out.

“You loved her, didn’t you? I can tell from your voice that you still do.”

“Enough about that,” replied the brooding steward, face flushing a dark crimson. This was not something he wished to discuss further - brought too many unwelcome feelings. Dany was gone and he had to live with it. “Did you find out anything about what I faced in the Lord Commander’s quarters?” Thorne had been convinced it was a Wilding, and browbeated anyone who thought differently. The old bear seemed to disagree with the assessment, Jon could tell, but he kept it to himself. Thus, Jon convinced Sam to get to the bottom of it themselves.

Nodding, Sam stumbled a bit trying to get something out of a small chest that housed his worldly possessions. Jon couldn’t help but smile - Sam was so unsuited to fighting it was comical, but there was no one better to provide advice and analysis. “Um… yes. I think it was a wight.”

One eyebrow rose. “A wight? Those aren’t anything but myths and legends from the story of the Long Night.” Jon remembered being told that story back as a kid, cuddled up with Robb and Sansa - back when the three of them were thick as thieves.

“Not necessarily, Jon. Think about something Maester Aemon once told me. If you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, is the truth. No human could have survived a sword thrust to the chest.”

“Perhaps I didn’t hit the heart.” Sam raised an eyebrow, casting doubt on that. Jon’s thrusts were always true and accurate. “Point taken, but still? A wight?”

“It says in the texts, only fire can kill Wights. Why do you think the Wildings always burn their dead? Think about it, wildling raids to try and get over the wall have tripled in the last year. Your uncle disappeared, but no peep from any wilding bands - they like to show their work off… sorry.” Sam had the decency to look apologetic.

Sighing, Jon let it go. He had grieved enough for Benjen, though there was no proof he was actually dead. “Tis fine.” A thought came to mind. “There was that deserter my father killed before I left for Essos. He said something about the White Walkers. I thought it was just gibberish…” This whole line of thinking was liable to be foolish, but how else could he explain what he saw?

Sam looked determined. “I’m bringing this up in the next meeting…”

“No!” Jon knew that would be a bad idea. This had to be told, even if it turned out to be a crock. He could just hear Dany’s beautiful voice urging him to stand up and take the initiative. “Thorne will have us locked up for madness. It has to be to the Lord Commander. Lead Ranger Royce as well, he has a good head.”

“Maester Aemon too.”

Jon laughed. “Seems we have a plan then.” A shiver coursed through him, under his cloak. Suddenly it just got a bit colder.

It was an interesting sight for Lord Petyr Baelish, watching the small, rosy-cheeked Crown Prince pace nervously. Confined to his quarters after visiting the King’s sickbed, upon Littlefinger calling upon him fifteen minutes prior there had been nothing but fear and apprehension written over his face. “I don’t like this!” Joffrey cried, running a hand through his hair. “A boar’s tusks? Laughable. His enemies did this. My father’s enemies tried to kill him because they are afraid of his greatness.”
And even the dullest of rocks drew moss on occasion. Sometimes Littlefinger felt that the golden-haired Prince could have some hidden wits about him, but even a minute spent with him killed that hypothesis. It only made the situation perfect for him. With his reputation, it had taken a while for Cersei to stop sending guards to watch his every move with her precious Joffrey. But the Prince liked his counsel, just as he had hoped. “Your father does have many enemies. The Starks could be behind this, trying to put your uncle Stannis on the throne. This could be retaliation for the poisoning of the Dothraki Khal by Targaryen forces, as well.” ‘Or a move by your mother,’ he didn’t say, though it was his top idea.

“They will all die once I take the throne!” Joffrey hissed. Suddenly, he turned pale. “But what if they come after me? I must have my guard doubled. Get more loyal soldiers from my grandfather.” He did have some decent ideas about military reforms, even if they were practically infeasible and mired in the same megalomaniac delusions.

“Your grandfather is a strong man, your Grace,” Littlefinger opined, lips curved in a winning smile. “However, he wasn’t there when your uncle was captured by Catelyn Stark…”

“Fuck my uncle. I wish he died in the Eyre.” When Joffrey held a grudge, he kept it.

Littlefinger pulled back slightly. His first instinct wasn’t to hitch his wagons to Joffrey, it went against his usual tactic to play sides against the other and keep options open. But Ned Stark was suspicious of him, despite the trust his beloved Catelyn had in him. Stannis hated him. With one side closed to him, Littlefinger was left with being able to cultivate the brash and manipulatable prince. “Of course, his treatment of such a noble young Prince is disgraceful.” Some people were susceptible to the most oily of flattery - one of those was the Crown Prince. He loved when it was so easy. “But your grandfather… when he isn’t present, his family ends up in danger. Your mother cannot protect you, young Prince.”

He braced for the fury from the boy. “You’re wrong!” Joffrey sent a goblet toppling to the floor. “Mother loves me. She will keep the swine back!”

“Like she protected your father?” Time to sink in the knife. “Like how she got Arya Stark punished after she and that commoner attacked you.” Littlefinger just managed to suppress his dark smirk at the cringe from his future king. It may have been petty, but King Robert’s biting tongue and lack of any affection for his children - legally true, despite Stark and Stannis’ hunches that Littlefinger knew to be the truth - cut the Crown Prince deeply. “She loves you, cares for you, but cannot be trusted in a crisis.”

A tear fell from Joffrey’s eye, fist clenching. “She… she couldn’t get justice for me.”

“Queen Cersei is a sharp woman, but she is but a woman. Weak and frail.” Collapsing to his knees, Littlefinger knelt for his soon-to-be king. “You have my honor and pledge, Joffrey, first of your name. Let me protect you from your enemies.”

Staring at such a high lord, one of the wealthiest men in the Seven Kingdoms bending the knee to him - to him - sent an electric thrill through Joffrey’s system. He liked this, liked it greatly. There was no better feeling, than ruling. “Rise, Lord Baelish.” The Crown Prince took a seat. “So how will you protect me, when my mother can’t?”

Littlefinger allowed his smirk to finally show on his face. “Leave that to me, my Prince.”

“Unhand me!” For a puissant, Joffrey was kicking and writhing with the stamina of warriors twice
his size. It took three Stark guards to heft him out of the throne room, Ned bringing the rear with two others against the Kingsguard - sans Barristan. “You will all be hanged for touching your king!”

“Gag him!” ordered Stannis, running his sword through the chain mail of a city guardsman as if it was paper. It had been hell in the throne room, the armored wedge formation cleaving through the line of Kingsguards but leaving half the combined Stark/Baratheon number down. Cersei had been screaming - to Stannis’ rare delight - and Littlefinger promising that you couldn’t bet against him, but the King had been secured. Though the Hound slayed ten men to do it. “We need to make haste for the docks, the ship to Dragonstone awaits.”

A Baratheon bannerman darted out of an alcove. “My Lord, we’re holding back reinforcements at the Red Gate but if they rush us again…” a croak left his lungs, grey blur of a sword passing through his midsection. The bannerman toppled to the floor in two bloody heaps.

Looking above, Stannis couldn’t help but growl. “Ser Gregor.” Ned noticed the massive hulk as well. ‘So this is Baelish’s surprise.’ The infamous Ser Gregor Clegane, sword drawn and ready to defend his King.

Wordlessly, the Mountain raised his sword and locked it with Stannis’, the two beginning an intense duel. “Keep them at bay,” yelled Ned, raising his blade and darting into the fray. His cane clattered on the ground, injury stabbing through his system but adrenaline masking the pain for now. Moving to thrust through a gap in Clegane’s armor, the Mountain noticed Ned’s assault at the last minute and essentially shoved Stannis back, sword parrying the new threat just in time. Two Stark guards joined the developing melee and it became four to one… momentarily. The Mountain caught a sword in his thick, armored hands, squeezing until the steel snapped like a twig. A second guard charged but found himself brained by the hilt of Ser Gregor’s sword, fitted with a small mace at the end for just this eventuality. Back to two to one.

His armor was thick, Clegane managing to use his left arm as a shield to block attacks from whichever of the two Lords wasn’t attacking him. Thrust after thrust, parry after parry and neither of the two fighters were any closer to beating back Joffrey’s impromptu defender - nor did the Mountain manage to kill them as easily as he could innocent women and children. Nevertheless, time was being eaten up and they had little time.

Stannis snarled and managed to slice open a gash through a join in Clegane’s armor. The beast groaned but stayed on his feet, unshaken. Ned hit Clegane’s armored fist, slicing off two fingers but still not even shaking the giant from his watch.

“My Lord! They’re breaking through!”

“He has my knife!”

Suddenly, Stannis cried out as Joffrey stuck a knife into his side, having managed to use the chaos to break free of his captors. The Lord of Dragonstone batted him aside like a limp rag but it opened his frontal defenses - something that the Mountain used decisively. “Fucking bastard!” left Stannis’ lips, his last words before Clegane’s sword essentially caved in his skull.

Determined to kill the Mountain, despite the intense pain in his leg Ned summoned the courage to charge his enemy, only to be pulled back, knife at his throat. “I told you never to bet against me, Lord Stark,” Littlefinger smirked.
And so it was. Hearing Ilyn Payne stride behind him, feeling the firm, clammy grasp forcing him to the chopping block, Joffrey and the crowd egging him on - Ned Stark knew that it would soon be over. It was a calming effect really. Part of him was glad that his struggles, his pain would soon be over.

But with Sansa’s screams in the background, a figure mounting a statue in the distance that Ned felt was his beloved Arya, the promise he made to Lyanna still ringing in the back of his mind, he was also glad for his foresight. That others would keep his honor upright after his failure.

A small, cold prick on his neck - the sharpened blade soon to bring the sleep of death - Ned looked out to see Arya gone. ‘Be safe, my child.’ Sansa screamed for Joffrey’s mercy. ‘Be safe, all of my children.’ He closed his eyes. ‘And now it is your time, Jon.’

The prince who was promised.

Then blackness.

Nuzzling the fluffy, down pillow, King Joffrey moaned in contented bliss. The lad felt on top of the world - of which he pretty much was. King of the Seven Kingdoms, quarters guarded by the elite of the Kingsguard including his personal bodyguard, Ser Gregor. The life and death of anyone and everyone in the Realm in his hands.

It was quite the power trip, How easy it had been to order Ned Stark’s death and watch his head tumble from his corpse - and show Sansa where it had been mounted on the city walls. For Joffrey, it translated into the most relaxing sleep of his life.

Out of the corner of his eye, a figure loomed at the edge of the bed. “What is this?” Joffrey moaned sleepily. “I told you that I wasn’t to be distur…” A cursory glance with one eye led to both shooting wide open, feet and hands scrambling to push as much to the headboard as possible. “No, you’re dead.” Standing directly by the massive bed was Robert Baratheon, skin a mottled grey and a red splotch of crimson on his nightshirt.

“Joffrey Waters,” the apparition hissed. “Your rule shall be sturdy, standing the test of time as gold. God among men, until the greatest enemy arrives as prophecy told.”

Breathing rapidly, blood dripped from his father’s eyes and onto Joffrey’s bare chest - still youthfully flat, bare of hair. “I am your trueborn son,” he said in terror. “And I will rule longer than you.”

“Beware the bastard, son of your predecessor. True of birth, but lowly of life.” Blood poured out of Robert’s orifices, despite the pale death that surrounded him. “Only he will destroy you, the Lord of Light alight.”

“Azor Ahai?” Joffrey blinked, remembering something his tutors had said long ago. “He is my greatest enemy?”

Blood poured from the dead monarch’s mouth, but his voice was as clear as thunderclaps. “On female flesh his sigil makes it’s call, Azor Ahai walks among us, and your reign will fall.” A meaty hand reached out and gripped Joffrey’s wrist. The King screamed, eyes closing as skin burned from pure cold…

Scuffling boots on wood filled the room. “Your Grace!”

Opening them once again, the burning cold was gone, as was the apparition of his dead father. Joffrey was alone in the bed, guards surrounding him. Meryn Trant was the closest, sword drawn. “Your Grace, I heard your scream. Are you…” He reached for his liege’s hand.
Joffrey wrenched it away. “Don’t touch me!” He never wanted his guards to see him afraid again. “Bring me my manservant, now!” Lungs sucked in labored breaths. ‘I am trueborn. I am trueborn.’ Hopefully he’d forget the obvious nightmare by the end of the day.
“Come on, Rhaegal, I know you can do it like your brothers.” Twirling the small chunk of horseflesh in her fingers, Daenerys watched the youngest and smallest of her dragon children with a maternal humor. The green dragon didn’t have the same stamina as Balerion and Eddaron, both almost ravenous in their appetites - whereas Rhaegal was picky, as if uncomfortable without special care. “Dracarys.”

Finally, a small tongue of flame left his mouth and cooked the meat. “There you go, my sweet. Why is it so difficult with you?” she chided. Rhaegal cocked his scaled head to the side, blinking. It caused a laugh to leave Dany’s lips. Dragons were mysterious and intelligent creatures, so if there was something fundamental missing in his life then the growing dragon would clearly notice it. However, now fed, he let out a screech and flew into the sky to find his brothers.

“My Queen,” entering the tent, Ser Jorah walked straight up to her. Unlike the rest of her subjects, Jorah had earned the right to dispense with the usual protocol of supplication and greeting - while not as elaborate as in Westeros or the city states of Slaver’s Bay, the Dothraki did have their customs. “There are a group of visitors that wish to speak to you. Exiles from the homeland.”

Now this piqued Dany’s interest. “And I take it that you believe I should see them, for if you didn’t they would have already been dealt with by either yourself or my Dothraki subordinates.” Accustomed to her rapidly growing cunning and leadership, Jorah nodded. “Very well, send them in.” After he exited the tent, she sighed. What she would give to just be able to sit and relax with Arya, Rhaegar, and her dragons. The twins had already fed from her an hour before - Daenerys had absolutely forbade any wet nurse being summoned, instead insistent on feeding them herself regardless of whether it was undignified of a noblewoman of her stature - and she missed them something fierce.

But her duty mattered, her commitment to her House mattered. Daenerys Targaryen would rule the Seven Kingdoms once again, as both a Queen and as a mother. She would just have to find the right balance. It was what she wanted. ‘It is what Jon would want.’ Dany bit back the thoughts of her love, the ever present specter of her dreams. The thoughts would only distract her.

Sitting at the head of the room - where Drogo had once ‘held court’ in the Dothraki style - Daenerys had timed it perfectly to coincide with Jorah entering with two other men, one old and hardened and the other young, dashing, but no less hardened. “May I present Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen,” announced the Northern nobleman, standing firm with his hand extended toward her. Daenerys stood magnificent, clad in a azure blue dress from Qarth, gold Dothraki necklaces draped around her neck, and Saracen tied menacingly on her hip. Every inch a queen. “…Rightful Queen of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Mother of Dragons, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Unburnt, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.” The two men knelt before her, bending the knee.

Unlike others who may have enjoyed watching another human being supplicate themselves to her, Daenerys wasn’t that sort of ruler. Over-penitence disgusted her, and those that demanded over-penitence disgusted her even more. “Rise and state your names and titles.”

The older one rose first, looking Daenerys in the eye but still acting humble - grieved even. “My Lady… I am Ser Barristan Selmy, and this is my nephew Theodosius Caryn.”

“My Lady,” stated Theodosius, clasping a fist hand on his chest. “It is an honor.”
Daenerys noticed Jorah stiffening. “Do you know this man?”

“Aye, Ser Barristan Selmy is one of the greatest fighters in the Seven Kingdoms, and the commander of Robert Baratheon’s Kingsguard.” At that, Dany stiffened as well, hand drifting to Saracen.

Taking a step forward, two Dothraki guards drew their swords at Theodosius - but he made no attempt to go further. “Please, Queen Daenerys. We do not come to harm you, but to join you.”

“Join me?” She kept her gaze expressionless. ‘Having Balerion at my feet would be far more intimidating.’ An idea to be reserved for when the black Dragon was further grown. “How would someone, at least in your uncle’s case, a noted servant of the Usurper come to the decision to join me?” While skeptical, Dany was also genuinely curious.

Gaunt, as if from seeing a ghost, Barristan approached the throne, next to his nephew. “Robert Baratheon is dead, your Grace. His son, Joffrey, rules on the Iron Throne. He has killed all that stand in his way, and is proving to be a monster. It was then that I knew I had to find you, to seek your forgiveness and do what is right for the realm.” Bowing his head, he once again bent the knee.

“Allow me to join your Queensguard as I was at the side of your late brother.”

Eying him curiously, probingly, Daenerys’ mind debated on what to do. Certainly, she could kill him as a Usurper dog. It seemed Jorah was leaning that way. But Jon had always said that a person should conduct himself or herself with honor and mercy - only to resort to brutality when absolutely necessary. ‘The Stark way.’ Targaryens weren’t inherently like that, hence the house motto ‘Fire and Blood.’

‘The Targaryens were forced from their rightful place thanks to mindless brutality.’ Her course was set. Dany would take these two in - for now. Time would tell if they were loyal.

“So Ser Barristan,” Dany addressed him. She hadn’t quite decided yet whether they would be a permanent fixture to her retinue. That would be fleshed out at a later date. “If you were in my position, what would you do to acquire a significantly powerful infantry force to supplement my Dothraki light cavalry?” Daenerys was humble enough to admit she was no expert in military tactics, and there was no shame in seeking the counsel of someone other than her bloodriders and Ser Jorah. If anything, the wisdom of such an idea would provide further information as to whether to trust him or not. “I may presume that you would not advise basing my army around the sellswords of the Free Cities.”

An impressed glance crossed Barristan’s eyes. “That is correct, your Grace. Sellswords, even ones such as the Golden Company that can function as a rather impressive standing army, their loyalty is a question mark. If they themselves, or their benefactors, deem they can find a better deal elsewhere, then any patron is out of luck. No, only an army that is loyal will serve your ends.” He smiled at her. “And there is only one of that kind in Essos.” A finger stabbed at a city on Slaver’s Bay, in the center of the map.

Dany blinked. “Astapor?”

It was Theodosius that responded. “Yes, more specifically a slave army renown for its fighting prowess. Their proper High Valyrian name is long and hard to pronounce for a Westerosi…” Ser Jorah chuckled and Dany couldn’t help smirking at that. “But they have an informal and far more infamous name - the Unsullied.”

“Your Grace, this is a rather… enormous request,” coughed Tyrion Lannister. It was only his first
A week back in King’s Landing - the King’s Landing now ruled by his nephew - and only his third day as the interim Hand of the King. Already he wished he could pull his own hair out and smash something in frustration.  “To issue these many death warrants on issues that do not involve treason?”  ‘And on innocent children…” While he may have been able to issue the sort of rough discipline that Joffrey needed, his mother refused to meet out, and his father couldn’t care less to implement, now that the vicious idiot was the King it was impossible. Tyrion could only obey or by a miracle convince him.

“The Hand speaks truly, Your Grace,” Littlefinger added, surprising Tyrion. Coming to King’s Landing and finding the snake one of Joffrey’s top political advisors had been a shock - but outmaneuvering Stannis Baratheon and saving the King where Cersei could not had been a masterstroke.  “There is no purpose in this.”

Normally smug and vicious, as he sat at the Small Council table the King seemed ashen.  “The King’s will is law, therefore the King’s will must be done.” The words were croaked out.

“But your Grace.” Eyes blazing at Tyrion, the dwarf lowered his gaze in supplicance.  “Finding all of your fathers… alleged bastards would be an enormous undertaking. How do we even know which ones to find?”

Stuttering, the ancient oaf Pycelle dropped a ledger on the table.  “Now excuse me, Lord Hand, but Ned Stark had compiled copious notes built on Jon Arryn’s.” A hacking cough left his lungs, disgusting Tyrion.  ‘How that filthy coot is still alive continues to baffle me.’  “We will be able to find them easily.”

“Then it is settled,” boomed Joffrey, ending debate.  “The city garrison will find every one of these swine and kill them. Meryn Trant will oversee this.” Eyes shifted to the figure standing next to Ser Gregor, both the official bodyguards to the King.

A sick grin spread on his face.  “It will be a pleasure, my King.”

“I am surrounded by sadistic bastards,” Tyrion muttered inaudibly. From how Varys snorted softly, he figured the shifty eunuch must have heard him.

The doors took that moment to swing wide open, a page entering.  “Your Grace, there is a visitor for you in the Throne Room needing your audience.”

“I thought I wasn’t to be disturbed,” hissed Joffrey, the page starting to cower. Tyrion sincerely hoped this wouldn’t be a repeat of the minstrel debacle.

Deliverance for the hopeless page came in the form of Petyr Baelish.  “Apologies, but I was the one that arranged this. These visitors arrived from Dragonstone just two days ago seeking your audience, and I believe that they will prove useful to securing your continued reign.”  Tyrion joining the others in the retinue to stand and bow as Joffrey rose, they all formed a line behind their sovereign corresponding to their status. While the highest official rank, he was behind both Littlefinger and his sweet sister, each flanking the diminutive King from either side.

“And how is any visitor so crucial to his reign?” Snide came easy to Cersei - having known her all his life, Tyrion should know. While not as smart and far less effective than Littlefinger, at least the Imp could read her.  Baelish was as enigmatic as ever.  “From Dragonstone no less? Perhaps a last ditch attempt by supporters of Stannis Baratheon…”

“NO!” screamed Joffrey.  “He is Stannis the traitor! Even in death, he deserves no titles!”
The retinue was silent, including Tyrion. The lad never would raise his voice at his beloved mother… until now. Had it been any other instance, the look on his sister’s face would have sent him into a fit of giggles. “Forgive my, your Grace,” she allowed. “Stannis the traitor could have set this up in case of his death.”

“I assure you, honored King, I can personally attest to their trustworthiness.”

Joffrey pursed his lips. “Uncle, what say you?”

Tyrion blinked. “You have the best of guards, your Grace.” He spared a glance at both Trant and Ser Gregor, skin crawling. “I’m sure there is no danger with at least hearing what the visitors have to say. Lord Renly has the city surrounded, and we could use any aid to make your coming victory all the more decisive.” Choosing his words carefully, even he could find himself on Joffrey’s good side from time to time. From the death stare Cersei gave him, staying on the King’s good graces was vital in more than one way.

The King nodded. “Very well.”

Two loud horns announced the presence of the King, an idea suggested by Baelish and one Joffrey fell in love with - with everyone in the Throne Room bowing deeply at the booming sound, Tyrion had to admit it was a pretty hefty power trip. Arrogantly draping himself on the Iron Throne, a plush cushion placed on the hard surfaces of the melted swords of Aegon the Conqueror’s enemies, Joffrey gestured the gathered persons to stand. “And who do we have today to see me?”

“My King,” Littlefinger announced, “May I present to you Melisandre of Assai and Ser Davos Seaworth. They have traveled from Dragonstone, braving vengeful Baratheon loyalists now allied with Renly the Traitor to arrive here.” Tyrion’s eyes drifted to the two figures. One was a rather hardened sea dog of a man, bald and tough. The other… one of the most striking women he had ever seen, blessed with fiery red tresses and high cheekbones. ‘Oh if I wasn’t a dwarf.’ At least he had Shae. “Please state your business with Joffrey of House Baratheon, First of his name, King of the Andals and the Rhoynar and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.”

Curtsying in her flowing dress, the Lady Melisandre gazed up at the Iron Throne. “Great King, I am honored and humbled to have set my eyes upon the Golden Prince.”

A snort left Joffrey’s lips. “It may be lost on you, but as all can see I am the King.” Derision marred his fair features. “I am a busy man, so be out with what you want or I’ll see you hanged.”

“Your Grace.” Davos knelt, speaking for the first time. His eyes were kept trained on the floor as he addressed his King. “The Lady Melisandre is a powerful priestess, and she seeks to inform you about the Lord of Light.” In his mind, he wasn’t sure he believed it himself, but the Red Priestess was an enigma. Lord Stannis entrusted him to care for her, and he would do so.

‘The Lord of Light?’ Tyrion was in mind to chuckle sarcastically. From what he had heard, worshippers of the fringe cult were common in Essos and spreading amongst the smallfolk in Dorne and the Crownlands - all hogwash in his opinion. But what shocked him was how the King immediately sat ramrod straight, eyes widening. It wasn’t lost on Littlefinger or Cersei - Pycelle was too bullheaded to notice. “Say your piece, now!” Joffrey demanded.

“There is a prophecy, honored King. One that tells of a Long Night, of one that will rule all that stands before him. Of the return of the great one, the lightbringer.” Joffrey visibly stiffened, all color draining from his face. “Stannis Baratheon believed he was the Prince that was promised, or that he would keep guard of the Kingdom for when the Prince arrived.”
“Stannis the Traitor was a troubled man with many delusions of grandeur,” Cersei dismissed, slightly perturbed that Joffrey hadn’t gone into a fit of rage at his uncle’s actual name. “The Lord of Light is a myth.”

Standing firm, Melisandre did not back down. “I can assure you, the prophecy is real. Stannis was consumed by it, and he set in motion a chain of events before he left Dragonstone that even I cannot control. Only the Great King can stop the coming chaos… the King standing before us.”

“Though your devotion to our King is commendable, we cannot spare any time for nonsense…”

“See to it that our guests are treated to the best of accommodations, Lord Baelish,” Joffrey ordered, interrupting his mother.

‘Well this is interesting.’ Tyrion made a mental note to get to know this Melisandre quite well in the future.

It was a small meeting - off the books so to speak. There would be no official records of it. No scribbling into the logs by Castle Black’s scribes to immortalize it for future generations of Night’s Watchmen. The meeting might as well have not existed, and that was the point. With such a sensitive subject that could result in the worst sort of punishments for the men that sought such a gathering, a need to know basis was enforced to ensure dialogue free from prying eyes. None of that made it any less intimidating for Jon Snow. All the great Watchmen of his day were present.

At the head was Lord Commander Jeor Mormont. Already intimately familiar with Jon, his personal steward, the Old Bear was still pensive and quiet from his experience that fateful night. As if he could never shake a nagging feeling deep inside him. His leadership hadn’t slackened, regardless of his newfound tendency to seek solitude in his quarters whenever not needed elsewhere.

First Ranger Qhorin Halfhand, a grizzled veteran of many a ranging expedition. Having enlisted in the Watch at age fifteen, his body was covered in scars from battles against wildlings and fearsome snow creatures. With the disappearance of Benjen - Jon’s heart ached for his lost uncle - Qhorin was the perfect choice for First Ranger by Lord Commander Mormont. No other knew as much about the wildling political structure than he, making him a vital addition to the meeting.

Maester Aemon Targaryen, old and frail but with a mind sharper than any within a thousand miles. Formerly the Crown Prince, he relinquished his claim for reasons still unknown to Jon, instead donning the robes of a maester and the black of the Watch. Head filled with knowledge and wisdom, the wealth of millennia dwelt within him.

Alliser Thorne, great warrior as he was… was not present. A deliberate move by Jon and Sam, for he would dismiss their findings without a moment’s hesitation. However, he was also their immediate superior. The reason Jon was a steward and not a ranger. Under all vows of a Watchman, to shun your direct superior could be great dishonor. You risked your life doing so. But this was worth the risk. Jon knew Dany would have made sure he did it. If he was sure of the information’s importance, which he was, she wouldn’t rest until he made his case. That helped steel his nerves, to an extent.

The Lord Commander broke his silence. “You have requested this meeting, Snow. Tarly. Out with it.”

‘We have no confidence in Thorne’s decisions…’ The obvious answer died on Jon’s tongue, and
Sam was too nervous and meek to vocalize anything. “Lord Commander, we believe the person that attacked both you and myself was not a rogue bandit searching for gold. The conclusion in the official record was incorrect.”

The Old Bear raised his eyebrow. “Are you questioning your commander? Ser Alliser prepared the report.”

“Yes.’ Jon pursed his lips. “No, I am not. I am simply raising a point that his conclusions were based on second-hand observations, and those are more likely to be in error.” He had to choose his words very carefully. The three leaned in to listen. “There is no doubt in my mind that the attacker was a weight.”

Three pairs of eyes blinked, staring incredulously. “Weights? There haven’t been any of those in thousands of years,” exclaimed Halfhand. “Most say they’re a myth, even.”

“What evidence do you have of this conclusion?” asked Maester Aemon, curious.

“Um… we’ve conducted our own research of the ancient texts,” Sam stammered, setting several books on the table. “Based on what Jon Snow has told me of the attacker, his grey skin, death by fire, and glowing ice blue eyes correspond to both the account of Bran the Builder - first Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch - and the epic poem by the great bard on the Long Night.” He passed around the old manuscripts, laboriously collected. “No one has seen one for millennia, but records of them do exist.”

“I know these poems,” Aemon recounted. “If this person matches what Snow and the Lord Commander saw, then I would be very worried indeed. A new threat is on the horizon.”

Halfhand scoffed. “So a bunch of ancient poems should lead us to believe that we have weights and white walkers beyond the wall. I’m skeptical.”

“Once you eliminate the impossible,” said Jon in response. “Whatever remains, however improbable, has to be the truth.” He noticed Maester Aemon smile in… familial pride? It was the same smile that Robb, Benjen, or his father would give him upon a successful spar. “Lord Commander, you saw this creature. You must know what we say to be true.” All was in the hands of the Lord Commander. If Halfhand was skeptical and Aemon slightly supportive, then only the Old Bear could break it in favor or against him and Sam.

Finally, the old commander spoke. “Let us say we believe you, Snow.”

“But sir…”

“Quiet, Qhorin. We are being hypothetical at this point. I understand how Alliser wouldn’t believe us - his fixation and focus on the Wildling threat is an asset to us, but new threats can faze him.” Mormont could criticize, while an underling doing so could destroy them. “But if the attacker is a weight, then why haven’t we seen more of them in the last years, hmmm?”

“I would assume that the first persons they would come in contact with would be the Wildlings, sir.” Common sense, Jon had found, was sometimes lacking in military command tents - even among the most powerful warriors. “One must see what the Wildlings are doing. Have they made any major changes in their structure? I do know that more and more have began sneaking over the wall to raid the South.”

Aemon smacked his gums, looking at the First Ranger. “Qhorin, didn’t you tell us that the Wildlings have began gather around Benjen’s predecessor, Mance Rayder, as their King?”
“A Wildling King?” Sam looked shocked. “There hasn’t been a King north of the wall in recorded history.” All glanced at Halfhand.

“The clans started banding together about two years ago. Deep ranging expeditions planned by Benjen Stark and myself couldn’t find a location where they are potentially massing, but several villages were found abandoned and we’ve fought scouting parties made up of warriors from three or four clans - that’s how I got this.” He pointed to a scar on his cheek. “To tell the truth, that was when Lord Umber at Last Hearth started complaining of increased Wildling raids.” It wasn’t definitive evidence, but Jon and Sam’s theory began to appear less far-fetched than before.

The discussion continued for nearly an hour among the five of them, ranging from expressing the still significant doubts about the worst case scenario of the return of the Long Night to various solutions to fortify the wall. With Robb and the Northern Army essentially camped out in the Riverlands, there was no hope of extra reinforcement. If Mance Rayder or an as yet unconfirmed white walker army tried to break through, all they had was the brothers of the watch.

“Snow,” stated the Old Bear, breaking a heated debate between Halfhand and an increasingly resolute Sam. “You saved my life. You sought this meeting. What course of action would you take if you were in my shoes?” The way he said the last few words, to Jon it seemed as if Mormont was considering the possibility as likely.

Taking a deep breath, Jon remained confident and determined. “Someone needs to infiltrate the Wildlings. Find where they are massing and investigate why. If it is white walkers,” the execution of the deserter flashed before his eyes, “Then the Wildlings will have the best way to prove that. Any infiltration could be disguised by the simultaneous launching of a massive raiding party on our part,” he added. Dany flooding his mind, along with the nightmares of his father’s head being cut off by Joffrey the monster, he couldn’t stand being out of the action any longer. “If need be, I volunteer to be the infiltrator.” All stared at him with wide eyes, as if he was a condemned man.

Stroking his beard, Mormont took his time to respond. “You are certainly your father’s son,” he said. Suddenly, he laughed. “I like it.”

Perhaps he had sealed his death warrant after all.

All was dark in the Lannister military camp, a few drunken soldiers and their exalted shouts carrying over the flickering torchlights. Hood draped over her fiery features, the Lady Melisandre dismounted her horse and tied it to the hitching post next to the massive tent. With merely a raven dispatched and a horse borrowed from Ser Davos, she was confident only the person of her interest would know of her arrival.

‘He is not of Kingsly blood, but it doesn’t matter.’ A more… liberal interpretation of the ancient texts had revealed that the ancestors of Kings were sufficiently kingly for her purposes. Melisandre wasn’t keen on using Joffrey in the manner she wished, especially due to what she had heard about his ‘proclivities.’ Her target was far different, and while ruthless, sufficiently noble for her to handle.

“Are you sure about this, Lady Melisandre?” asked her companion, the faithful protector. Ser Davos had taken his oath to Stannis quite seriously. Even after his patron’s death he made sure to protect her, whether or not believing same as the deceased Lord of Dragonstone that the Red Priestess was the key to the ultimate victory.

Looking back over her shoulder, she allowed a rare smile. “Keep watch on the horses, Davos. I shall be back soon.” With that she flipped open a tent flap and stepped inside.
The figure stood alone, back to her, at a large map table resting in the middle of the tent. In the corner rested an austere cot where the Lord would rest his aging bones. Melisandre spared a quick sweep of the rest of the tent. Aside from a few golden goblets and intricate tapestries depicting the Lannister sigil the entire furnishing pattern was austere. It heartened the Red Priestess, confirming to her that this was the right man. ‘So like Lord Baratheon, so unlike the young King.’ What had to be done, had to be done however. All for the Promised One.

“Don’t think that I don’t know of our presence,” Tywin Lannister stated flatly. His voice, though hoarse with age, was firm and decisive. “Or of your true nature.”

Walking till she was directly across from him, Melisandre ran her hand along the map of southern Westeros. “You are dwarfed by Renly’s armies, isn’t that correct?”

Eyeing her with narrowed slits, Tywin’s innate mistrust was found lacking in observing this woman. “He outnumbers us 80,000 to 40,000, not to mention the 10,000 defending the city itself. Depending on what the Tyrell armies do now that he has married the Rose of Highgarden, we are likely outmatched in the field of battle…” An eyebrow rose. “Unless your Lord chooses to intervene.”

A smirk found its way on Melisandre’s lips. He was perceptive. “These armies… they’re nothing but toys to the Lord of Light.” She stepped along the table’s edge, closer to Tywin.

“If your Lord truly has power, then perhaps you could tell him to burn our enemies.”

“Lord Lannister, I don’t tell the Lord anything. I am merely a servant of his will.” Only steps away from the tall Lord, she ran her long nails on a stag marker – one that clearly was Renly Baratheon. “I have seen the path to victory, and victory will be yours.”

Tywin smiled wanly. “Much as I trust my own military skill, unable it was to prevent my son from falling into the Young Wolf’s hands, Renly is loved by his men and is not likely to blunder into harm’s way. Defeat his army I may do, but he will live to fight another day - with the numbers to win a protracted war.”

Gazing at him with flame in her eyes, Melisandre calmly shrugged off her cloak and opened the robe underneath. Soon she was bare, exposed to the Lord of Casterly Rock. “You are unmarried, Lord Lannister. The father of three. Your prowess is unmatched, and if you give yourself to the Lord of Light, he will see to it that you are given a victory. That your enemies are crushed.” Pulling his wide-eyed face to her, ear to her hot mouth, she whispered into the shell. “Your grandson may be on the throne, but you are the true ruler… my King.”

Gripping her fiery red locks, Tywin smashed his lips against hers and pinned her to the table. Melisandre smiled.
The Battle of Blackwater Bay

The scene in the Baratheon camp north of Storm’s End was chaotic - but there was a certain order to it. Clumps of armed foot soldiers, archers, and cavalry dashing every which way, with screaming knights and officers directing them towards the many moored boats on the quays. Supply were strewn everywhere, serfs and conscripted noncombatants darting by to load them into the ships. It seemed as if the entire Stormlands and Reach were behind Renly Baratheon.

‘And here we are, ready to present the North to him.’

Eventually, Robb Stark, Catelyn Stark, and the rest of their retinue managed to secure a few noncombatants to take charge of their mounts. It was so surreal, being not just a future Lord but as a Monarch in his own right. Certainly the current regime in King’s Landing didn’t view his claim as legitimate, but having defeated the Lannister host on the battlefield and capturing the Kingslayer himself added a more practical type of legitimacy. Robb was their equal, and was being treated as such.

“Your Grace, Lady Stark,” announced the armored form of a Baratheon Kingsguard… the female armored form. “King Renly and Queen Margaery have been awaiting your arrival for some time now. They are ready to welcome you to the Stormlands.” She stood tall, menacing yet noble at the same time. This was a powerful warrior even in spite of her gender.

Catelyn knew exactly who she was. “Brienne of Tarth.” She had known her father well, and the young Brienne from the last time she saw her hadn’t outgrown her tomboyish attitudes. “I didn’t know you found service at King Renly’s side.”

Leading the two Starks to the ornate command tent - bearing the sigil of King Robert - the iron faced lady allowed herself a small smile. “His grace will make an excellent King, avenge his brothers from the Lannisters.” Brienne glanced at Lady Catelyn wryly. “As with his marriage, His Grace is one of those rare few that know the value of a strong woman, be it in body or in mind.”

“I have raised my boys the same way,” remarked Catelyn, smirking at Robb - who had the good graces to look away with a knowing innocence. ‘Even Jon.’

Two guards pulling the tent flap back, Catelyn and Robb stepped inside the massive tent. There, seated on an oaken throne, was Renly Baratheon. On his head rested a crown, and next to him sat the Rose of Highgarden. While her husband nodded in acknowledgement of his guests, Margaery Tyrell beamed in greeting. Robb noticed a faint twinkle in her green eyes, and bowed. “Your Grace, my Lady.”

“Robb of House Stark, King of the North, and the Lady Catelyn Stark,” announced Brienne. “Presenting to Renly of House Baratheon…” Continuing to recite the litany of titles, Robb glanced towards the throne. What kind of red blooded male would he be to not to notice one of the most beautiful girls in the Realm, and he had enough experience to tell she seemed to like what she saw. ‘If only she weren’t the Rightful Queen.’ He could almost hear his mother scolding him for taking the risks he was, so covered them with a regal mask.

His mother hadn’t wanted to come, but the Northern Lords felt - and he agreed - that the Young Wolf supplement his battle skills with that of diplomacy. Robb knew he was experienced in that front, and had to obtain such knowledge if he were to be a great King for the North.

“Greetings, Young Wolf. Lady Stark. Welcome to Storm’s End Camp,” Renly stated after the titles
had been announced. “You must be famished. Please, before we talk business, allow my household to provide you with food and drink.” That did sound lovely…

Almost an hour later, the servants were clearing the last of the plates off the table. “Now then, sweetpea,” the would be King addressed his bride. “Do please leave us. I have business to discuss with my guests.”

“Husband,” replied Margaery, “This seems to be a discussion that I could provide…”

“I’m sorry, dear,” Renly replied in a sweet tone - but both Starks could sense the ice in it. “But that wasn’t a mere request. I will come see you once I’m done.” With a kiss on her forehead, Renly bid her farewell. While rather polite, Catelyn knew no Stark would have ever disrespected their wife or female relative in such a way. Judging from the fist Robb formed underneath the table, he agreed. Or was it something different? In possession of a mind as well as beauty - something she shared with the Tyrell rose, and her famous grandmother - Catelyn could see the instant spark of lust between her son and the would be Queen. ‘Good thing this meeting is only for a day or two.’ Robb’s honor was enough to prevent him from sullying his good name in such a manner, but then again, Catelyn would have said the same of Ned.

‘But he did honor you.’

Renly broke the contemplation. “Now then, your emissaries had arranged a framework for you and I to enter into an alliance - we have common cause, I to take the throne and avenge my brothers, and you to avenge your father, Young Wolf.”

“There is more to strategy and motive than vengeance, your Grace,” Catelyn said.

“And what is it that you truly wish for? The rescue of young Sansa from the Red Keep?”

Biting her lip, Catelyn would have moved heaven and earth to rescue her daughter. Both her daughters. In her hesitation, Robb answered for her. “We wish… I wish that the North achieve its rightful place. The rest of the realm understands us not, and with what the Targaryens did to us and what Joffrey likely plans to do, our independence is non negotiable.” Catelyn was impressed - her son sounded every inch a leader.

Nodding, Renly smirked slightly. “I have no issue with independence for the North, as long as you swear the same loyalty to me as your great father swore to Robert. That alliance between them and Jon Arryn brought over a decade of peace. An alliance between us will have the same consequences once Joffrey’s head is mounted on a pike. And that will be soon, as I plan to assault King’s Landing within the fortnight.”

“If you plan to do so, what role do we play?” Robb was genuinely curious. Renly was still a far better strategist than him.

“The Lannister army under Lord Tywin still exists. It needs to be pinned and defeated even after the capitol falls.” He raised a glass. “May this alliance last a thousand years.”

Setting down the sleeping figure of her young son, Dany kissed his little, pink cheek. “Sleep tight, sweet Prince. Dream of how a mighty warrior you shall be, and of the great Kingdom you will inherit.” The seven-month old Rhaegar Targaryen yawned in his sleep, arms stretching up. A once hardened heart melted into goo, Dany feeling such love for the little tiny creature before her. Soft crying from the other crib in her personal tent - guarded by four elite Unsullied soldiers picked by
Greyworm, her top commander - drew her attention.

“My sweet little one,” she cooed, clutching Arya close to her. Even with her features, she reminded her so much of Jon. It warmed her heart and made it ache at the same time. The wails lessened, but she remained as fussy and discomforted as before. “Please don’t cry, what could be bothering you?” What with securing the Unsullied, preparing battle plans, and raising three unruly dragons, the time needed to morph from a confused girl into an experienced mother was limited - handmaidens helped, Missandei being quite the natural much to her surprise, but Dany insisted on keeping her children close as opposed to most noblewomen. She loved them, and aside from Saracen they were her only connection to Jon.

Rocking her daughter back and forth, Dany wracked her brain for why Arya could be crying. ‘Cloth dry. Missandei fed her only an hour ago. She doesn’t look or feel sick.’ If it was loneliness, or missing her mother, Arya would have calmed down. Normally composed and regal, Dany was close to crying in pure frustration. ‘Jon would be laughing his ass off at this,’ she thought. Desperation made one look outside the box. “Would you like to hear about your father?”

Abruptly the wails stopped, Arya blinking her grey eyes at her mother. Dany almost burst out laughing at the irony of it all, but couldn’t. She missed Jon desperately, so it was only natural that even their one-year-old children would spiritually crave closeness with their father. “Well then, let me tell you about the North’s greatest swordsman - born of House Stark, the most honorable House in all of Westeros…”

“The future of our house rests on you fathering children for His Grace.” Her former beauty withered by age - though most said it had slowly transferred to the new generation - the Queen of Thorns still possessed the sharpest of minds. “You must just try harder, my dear.”

Sighing, Margaery’s beauty was marred with frustration. “You don’t know how I’ve tried, grandmother. It is of no use.” She paced back and forth, chestnut hair swinging madly. “I have kept all the lights off. Made myself up to look like a boy.” Her nose crinkled at the rather foul memory coming to mind. “Not to mention having Loras in the same room as I while…”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Oleanna spat. Much as her father denied it, both Margaery and her grandmother had accepted Loras’ proclivities… they didn’t like it, but accepted it. “Even your brother can sleep with women if he so wants. Don’t tell me that your husband…”

Margaery nodded. “Nothing I can do leads his appendage to stiffen, and even with Loras there he cannot finish inside me.” Stray tears fell from her eyes - she knew most noble women would have to endure being married to someone they did not love for political reasons, but to be married to a man that liked only men? Inhaling, she summoned her grandmother’s infamous steel. “I fear he will never quicken me.”

Muttering something foul, Oleanna rose and hobbled to a window with her cane. “I was afraid of that. You must try to bear him a son and you are fertile now.” Her wrinkles deepened in thought. “Perhaps… I think I may have a solution to this.”

Pulling the cloak tighter over her head, hiding her face in the darkness, Margaery Tyrell stalked through the darkened camp. To her right the waves crashed into the rocky coast. The name for the Stormlands was apt, and luckily the ships were all moored in the Storm’s End harbor, which was protected by a storm barrier breaking the waves. If anything, it joined with the post-feast lethargy among the men to help cloak her from discovery. Margaery’s husband wouldn’t care, as he was currently enjoying himself with Loras in the warmth of the royal tent.
And therein laid the problem. The “perfect” marriage arrangement for the Reach and House Tyrell could only work if she delivered King Renly - soon to be the undisputed King of the Seven Kingdoms once Joffrey was deposed and King’s Landing was his - a son and heir. However, with her husband unable to finish himself with any but a man, she was stuck. Stuck with what her grandmother felt was the only solution.

It would be simple enough after the fact - if Renly was anything like his brother, get him drunk enough to pass out and he’d believe anything could have happened before losing consciousness. Loras would play ball. No matter how hard he loved Renly, his loyalty to their House was unquestionable. The complexity entered with finding a person who would both be willing to commit adultery with the Queen and one that resembled Renly enough to avoid uncomfortable questions. Covered in bulky and flowing garments, Margaery could never deny her renowned beauty. She was truly the Rose of the Reach as many called her, suitors crawling on their hands and knees for her till Renly Baratheon swooped in. Seduction wasn’t too bothersome a chore, her grandmother taught her well in that particular art. But who would be trustworthy enough not to blab - someone with a stake in the game.

Finally, with many to choose from, only one tickled Margaery’s fancy. And he was the one who’s tent was about to host an unexpected visitor. Pulling the flap back, she stepped inside.

The brazier had died out, but in the summer heat it was actually better that it did. Creeping closer to the bed, Margaery was about to remove her cloak when a knife found itself pressed to her throat. Her blood turned to ice, body shivering in terror.

“Identify yourself,” Robb Stark growled, blanket slipping down his torso - bare due to the temperatures in the south. Fingers shaking, Margaery managed to complete the task of lowering the hood of her cloak. Hard eyes widened in surprise. The knife lowered. “Queen Margaery, what are…?” Suddenly self-conscious, Robb covered his torso with the thin blanket.

His actions endeared him more to Margaery, who fought a laugh. In a world of backstabbing noblemen, willing to kill their own mother for more power or money, the Starks had honor - were above it all. The Young Wolf still might not go for it, so she would have to lay the seduction thick. “I could see you eyeing me since you got here, Robb Stark.” She slid out of her nightdress, revealing her naked form.

“We… can’t do this…” Robb tried, but couldn’t will his hands to resist. Every man had at least one weakness. The Young Wolf found one.

Straddling him on the bed, Margaery never dropped her smile. “I’ll be quiet.”

Arms straining to push the oar through the choppy waters of Blackwater Bay, Davos Seaworth deftly maneuvered the small craft towards one of the caves that dotted the cliffs off King’s Landing. These were only accessible by sea, and while there were plenty of caves within walking distance he had been informed by his ward that solitude was preferable. Sparing a glance at the visage of Melisandre, moonlight illuminating her fair features, Davos reasoned she had a reason to wish for it.

“And it begins soon,” spoke the Red Witch - as Stannis always called her. “They’re massing for the assault.”

Looking over his shoulder for a moment, Davos managed to pick up the flickering lights as they glided through the water. What had to be over a hundred ships, likely all packed with Baratheon troops. “They’re following Stannis’ plan then. Well that is to be expected, considering most of his
advisors and officers flocked to Renly.”

“The youngest Baratheon betrayed his kin by abandoning him at the capitol,” Melisandre mused as they pulled into the cave. “The Lord of Light may not interfere in the affairs of men, but through his servants justice will be rendered against the guilty.” Rising from the boat, even the billowing cloak was unable to disguise her pregnant belly.

As with the cave, Davos didn’t bother to try to discern what Melisandre’s game was. His gut told him that he’d rather not know. “The night is dark and full of terrors,” he muttered, igniting a torch to banish the blackness. “No wonder men cherish fire so, even if it can burn.”

A soft laugh left the Red Woman. “A rather deep statement, coming from a simple man. Though I doubt you do not hold complications, Ser Davos Seaworth.” Stepping gingerly on the rocks, she studied him. “You claim to be a reformed smuggler, meaning you have had times as a bad man while also meaning you have redeemed yourself with good. But a half-rotted onion is rotten completely. One can only be good or evil.”

“If your lord truly does care about a scoundrel like me, then I’ll hope I am the former.” He couldn’t say that watching over her - be it for Stannis, King Joffrey, or Tywin Lannister wasn't interesting. Such was his life. Interesting.

Sitting down on an outcrop, Melisandre eyed him curiously. “We are both knights, Ser Davos, if unconventional. But an onion has layers, as you do. It is hard to catch a glimpse underneath yours.”

It was at that point that she removed her cloak, leaving her swollen body bare to the elements.

“Lords protect us,” Davos gasped, his torch suddenly glowing three times as bright.

“The Lord of Light is the only true god, Ser Davos.” Folding her hands in her lap, Melisandre sat still. “We must wait now.” In the distance, a massive roar filled Davos’ ear.

It had begun.

“Where are our soldiers, Imp!” Joffrey snarled at his uncle. More Baratheon soldiers were pouring in, the last of Renly’s ships docking. Out in the bay, the licks of green flame still illuminated where dozens of ships and thousands of men had been dispatched into a watery grave. His uncle’s idea, a good one he grudgingly admitted. “You promised your wildfire attack would cripple them.”

“Your Grace, it did cripple them.” Gritting his teeth, Tyrion did his best not to slap the King as with the smallfolk riot - a vicious idiot described him well, but with his blood up and the wrong Clegane standing right next to him, it wasn’t the safest time to deliver hard lessons. “If it hadn’t been for the preliminary strike, they would have swarmed the walls by now. Sandor Clegane managed to beat back an initial assault, but they’ve rallied. We don’t have enough men for a protracted battle.”

Joffrey nearly tumbled back in fright as an arrow smacked one of the stone battlements right next to him - had the faceless archer been more accurate, young Tomman would have been King. “What… what should we do?” All bravado had leached from him. The arrogant boasting to Sansa prior to the fighting seemed so small compared to the glaring reality of impending death.

Looking at the assembled garrison below, Tyrion gulped. “Nephew, this is a time for you to lead your forces. Show them that you are willing to fight alongside them, to fight for your city and your kingdom. Lead us to slip around them and annihilate the Baratheons.”

While his uncle’s romanticized portrait of him fighting off his uncle’s forces appealed to him, the
crippling fear remained. The messages from the Red Keep still remained in his mind. His mother wanted him to join her, his uncle wanted him to lead the fight, and Lord Baelish nestled squarely in the middle by wanting him to stay in the defenses. To allow the King to fight hard but not needlessly risk himself.

“I will stay here and defend the battlements. You lead the charge.”

Tyrion sighed. He honestly expected much less. ‘I can barely hold a sword,’ he thought to himself, ‘Yet I must lead the charge. How… ironic.’ With that he dashed off.

Glancing about, Joffrey barked a command. “Archers, bring more archers to the wall before...”

Suddenly, a door to a battlement was kicked open to reveal Loras Tyrell - armor drenched in blood, the Highgarden heir and right arm of Renly himself raised his sword, Baratheon guards behind him. “We meet again, Joffrey. Your uncle sends his greetings.”

Hands shaking, Joffrey drew his own sword. “Ser Gregor, kill him.” Sometimes the battles came to you.

“AHHHHHHHHH!” Davos grimaced, one part of him wishing he could help while the other advised him to back as far away as possible. The latter won out, to an extent. “URRRRRRRRGGH!”

Melisandre’s screams echoed through the cave - obscuring the chaos of the battle outside. Grabbing her hair as she told him to do, Davos couldn’t help but observe the scene before him. The Red Woman was one of the great beauties of the realm. Not now though, not under the current circumstances.

The prospect of having to deal with Tywin Lannister’s child did not appeal to him. Of the three that existed, one killed the King he was sworn to protect, one was a bitch that Stannis thought was sleeping with the former, and the third was a drunken imp, the best of the lot. What would the fourth be?

Davos soon got his answer. “ARRRRRGGGGHHHHHHH!” His eyes widened and muscles shook as instead of a baby, a black cloud flowed out of the Red Woman. More literally clawed out with wraith-like hands. “The Lord of Light demands justice!” she shrieked. The wraith was fully out, taking the shape of a humanoid form. “Deliver it unto those that seek evil!” A pitched scream left the dark shroud, racing through the air to some unknown prey.

“Well then.” Close to shell-shocked, Davos couldn’t help the calming quip that left his trembling lips. “My decision not to cross you seems to be working out for me.”

“Drop anchor!” yelled the captain, the massive weight smacking onto the muddy ocean bottom, the fleet flagship held itself only a hundred yards from the city walls - just about to fall. Renly felt on top of the world. Standing just in the entranceway to his cabin, the sounds of battle filled his ears. What had looked nearly like defeat and was now just wisps of green flame and debris on the sea surface. Soon he would be King. Soon he would sit upon the Iron Throne.

“Husband!” cried out Margaery, trembling from apprehension. “You may be killed, being so close to the battle.” It was already killing her that Loras was fighting on the city walls.

Scoffing, Renly looked back at her. “That will not happen, wife. I will be King, and you Queen.” Confidence ringed his handsome face.
The words stabbed deep. Her passion with Robb Stark - however satisfying and amazing it was - hadn’t produced a child. She had bled one week before, and would have had to start over. The fortunes of House Tyrell under King Renly were vested on it.

Lady Brienne caught her eye. “Don’t worry, my Lady. I will make sure no harm comes to him.”

Her words were spoken too soon, for both jumped as a black wraith passed through the wooden walls of the ship - a wraith looking exactly like Tywin Lannister. Floating behind Renly, a translucent dagger formed and sliced through his resplendent Stag armor, impaling on his heart.

“Nooooo!” Brienne cried, Margaery just stunned silent. The wraith shrieked and vanished just as two Baratheon guards stormed in. They saw Brienne, knelt at Renly’s side, and assumption took over.

“You’ll pay for this, bitch!” one snarled, charging. Brienne drew her blade. Margaery, recovering her wits, tried to explain but it was too late. Brienne killed both and stripped her armor off, plunging into the dark depths to make her escape. The Red Woman’s plan worked - the pretender was dead, and only four knew the truth.

It spread like wildfire. One Baratheon archer with sharp eyes noticed their leader’s fall outside Renly’s Kingsguard, and while those turned on Brienne of Tarth, in his panic the archer hollered to his unit: “The King has fallen!”

Panic and mass hysteria were the most contagious diseases in the human condition. Soon, even in the heat of battle, news of Renly’s demise had infected the Baratheon army. Already facing the determined defenders on the walls and being slammed into by a strategic envelopment under Tywin Lannister arriving on the scene, the news of their King’s death was too much. The army broke, fleeing as fast as their feet would take them. Tywin owned the field.

“Come back you cowards!” roared the normally suave Loras Tyrell, soon distracted by his final comrade’s torso being run in by the King’s sword - a lucky hit considering the blow was sloppy and made with a hand shaking from fear. The blow that was reserved for the great heir to Highgarden came from the Mountain. Revenge for the fated joust, Robert Baratheon’s last, was best served cold for Gregor Clegane. But it was served, Loras Tyrell’s face smashed in just as Stannis’ was.

Ten minutes later, the battle was over. Ninety thousand Baratheon and Tyrell forces had assaulted King’s Landing by the sea. Only fifteen thousand escaped, forty thousand captured and the rest dead on the beaches or in the water - Tyrion Lannister and the Lady Melisandre had delivered a great victory for King Joffrey, First of his Name. None south of the Riverlands could challenge his hegemony over the Seven Kingdoms.

And oh how the South would howl.
The Red Wedding

Biting cold seeped through the thick cloth and furs, but Jon continued to inch ever forward. He slowly turned his head, making eye contact with Tormund Giantsbane. The redheaded wildling nodded, the dozen or so hunters hunkering down completely prone. A loud trumpet twenty or so feet to their front almost made Jon freeze, but the Night’s Watchman turned Free Folk hunter kept his cool. One must never spook a herd of mammoth - until the right moment. Each of the lumbering beasts fed off the sparse grassland west of Hardhome, enjoying the last crop before they migrated south - at least it was what they normally did. Furs covered in straw and face painted with dried mud, Jon and the others blended into the grass.

Through the stalks of grass, he could see Mance Rayner crawling in between the tree-like limbs of the mammoth herd. The former Night’s Watchman had gone fully Wildling, adapting to the position as the King north of the wall. In hunts, the Wildling clan chief always took point. As King, the role was only magnified.

It had been several months since Jon was allowed into the wildling camp as something greater than a prisoner. He had not wanted it to end up this way - for Halfhand to die while only Aemon, Sam, and Lord Commander Mormont thinking he was anything but a traitor, but it had worked. Mance had eventually deemed his sincerity genuine. ‘Which it is, to an extent.’ No information was forthcoming about the so-called white walkers, but the sheer size of the wildling - or Free Folk, as they preferred to call themselves - host at Hardhome stunned and terrified him. If a host that sized broke through the wall… Tormund and the other companion Jon had… come to know constantly bragged about the eventual march on the wall, but not much more than they would do it.

The warbling bird call began to pick up, Jon slowly looking upward at the crow - warging still confused the hells out of him. ‘Mance is in position.’ Time seemed to still, as it always did before the sword was about to fall. A fly taking off from a blade of grass, soft snow blowing in the breeze, a wisp of hair falling atop his eye. All were noticed in the mere seconds before it happened.

Each herd was led by a large bull, the lead bull. Fur usually grey with age, he had won the mantle of leadership through years of constant fighting and struggle against pretenders and the elements. Where he went, the others went. When he panicked, the herd panicked. Erupting from where he had crawled slowly and stealthily, Mance immediately went after the lead bull. It didn’t take much to enrage it, guttural cries and swipes with the spear. Quick on his feet to avoid the long tusks, Mance nicked the trunk with the spearpoint, causing the mammoth to let out a pained trumpet.

“HAAAGGGGHHHH!” Mance raised the spear, yelling at the top of his lungs as the massive bull rose atop its hind legs. The bull’s feet slammed on the ground, breaking into a gallop - joined by the entire herd, following their leader in a stampede. Quickly rolling out of the way, Mance blew on his whistle.

Leaping from his hiding spot, Jon let out a war whoop of his own, joining the other wildling hunters in their broken charge.

The chase brought the herd to a large gorge, chosen specifically to isolate the herd’s stragglers. In the van, the lead bull took the bait, Jon pumping his legs through the freezing air to keep up with the more experienced wildling hunters. Spotting the flickering flames of the campfire and flaming arrow - which fit perfectly with the fiery thatch of red hair on the archer’s head - Jon slowed to a trot as Ygritte released her projectile. It slammed into the old bull forming the rear, the pain distracting it and slowing it long enough for the wildling hunters to catch up.
With the rest of the herd disappearing from view, the ragged wings of the semicircle converged around the mammoth.

“Tormund! Make your throw!” The wildling hurled his spear with all his might at the beast’s heart, but it merely struck a glancing blow on the shoulder. Jinking and weaving with an agility not imagined for something with such a bulk, trying to take down the mammoth by spearthrow was likely impossible in Jon’s calculations. ‘There has to be another way.’ His mind quickly settled on a tactic by northern pikemen used at the Battle of the Trident against Targaryen heavy cavalry.

“HEEEYYYY!” Charging directly in front of the mammoth to the bewildered shock of the other hunters, Jon thrust the spear until it smacked into flesh, drawing it back with a splatter of blood impacting on the snow. Sleek footed, he had darted back a respectable distance before the beast spotted him. A roar bellowing from its trumpet, the mammoth charged - instead of running, Jon held his ground. It was soon upon him, and he quickly jumped out of the way.

A sickening shriek left the beast’s mouth as it ran right on the spear embedded in the ground, stone tip following the path of least resistance into the heart. Ambling forward several steps, it collapsed on the ground dead.

“Son of a bitch.” Such was the least profane sentiment of surprise from of the hunters. Exhaustion seeping into him with a vengeance, Jon tried to rise but was unable to.

Tormund’s face contorted in a grudging yet warm respect. “You’re a crazy cunt, crow.” Laughing, he drew Jon up from the ground and smacked his back. Soon the other hunters joined him, gushing over the “Crazy Crow” and his insane bravery.

Taking a swig from his waterskin, Jon wiped some of the straw from his furs. “So what are we gonna do about the herd? Think they’ll leave the area?”

Tormund laughed. “You gotta wisen up, Crow. When we need em, the giants’ll take care of it.” As if controlled by the warrior’s words, the two massive humanoids arrived and began ripping chunks of the mammoth, ready to take them back to Hardhome. “You’d think those big ass cunts would help us here, but no… hunting’s too dirty for them.” He spat in the direction of the lumbering giants. Luckily, neither noticed him.

Beginning to catch his breath, muscles sore all over, Jon looked over to lock eyes with Ygritte. She smiled at him, warm and inviting. He smiled back.

“Robb!” In an instant, what was a happy occasion to celebrate an impending marriage descended into pure hell.

A thick arm wrapped around her waist, rough with ill intentions rather than gentle with passion. Acting on instinct, Catelyn forced her elbow straight into the unnamed man’s gut. A satisfactory groan was heard. Her eyes never left her numb, grieving son, kneeling alone among the bloodbath developing around him. “Wendel! Get Robb out of here!”

Suddenly, cold steel pressed against her throat. “The Lannisters send their regards.” Catelyn's blood turned to ice. ‘Bolton.’

Hauling Robb up, away from the still form of his murdered wife, Wendel Manderly gripped the Young Wolf in a tight arm lock while brandishing a carving knife menacingly in the other hand. “I did this,” Robb murmured, mind in shock. “She’s dead.”
“Snap out of it, Young Wolf!” yelled the Manderly heir, hurling the knife at a charging Frey cutthroat. All the exits were cut off... except one. Snarling from a swinging sword that sliced a deep gash in his belly and a shallower one in Robb’s side, he barrelled past another - barging into the latrine annex, door left open by a careless Frey. “Swim!” Punching Robb in the face, watching as the King in the North snapped out of his torpor. “Hold your nose and swim!” Wendel just managed to shove his king down the shit-smearred tunnel before an arrow pierced his heart.

Pushing Catelyn Stark into the grip of two burly Frey men, Roose Bolton shoved through milling men and stepped over puddles of blood to reach the latrine. Two men fired crossbow bolts down the hole, a futile gesture if he had ever seen one. Wrenching himself between them, Bolton stared down the offending, reeking hole. Nothing. “DAMN!” he screamed, slamming his fist against the stone wall. It would leave nasty cuts, but he didn’t care less.

“You’ve lost, traitor.” Bolton turned to see Catelyn Stark, face bruised and lip cut, but eyes shining with defiance. “As long as the Starks live, your masters will never rule the north.”

Seized by an uncharacteristic anger, he stormed across the hall and gripped her by the neck. “I will rule the north, no one else.” Her defiance remained. “You are lucky that Lord Baelish demanded you be taken alive. Otherwise, I would have made a real version of the Bolton sigil.” That of a flayed criminal, hanging on an Andrew’s cross. “Take her away.”

Already, the two crossbowmen were summoned before Walder Frey. “He’s dead,” one declared.

“Then show me his body,” rasped the aged Lord of the Twins.

The soldier gulped. “But my Lord, you can’t expect someone to survive down there...”

Snarling, Frey stuck a knife deep in the offending soldier’s heart. “Seven hells, are there any fools under my command that wouldn’t botch the simplest job!” Bolton watched him rant and fume with a dispassionate calm. Tywin Lannister entrusted them with three tasks: to kill Robb Stark, capture Catelyn (at the insistence of Lord Baelish), and the destruction of the bulk of the Stark bannermen. Execute all three, and the threat in the north would wither without a King for the lords to rally around, leaving everything ripe for Bolton to take over - and Robb Stark just escaped.

If the Freys were too decrepit and narrowly ambitious to deal with the situation - many people were when their carefully laid plans went awry - then Bolton would deal with it himself. “The wolf is dead, at least even your men couldn’t botch that.”

Currently screaming at his bastard, Frey turned violently, eyes angry. “My men are...”

“The most loutish, parasite-ridden incompetents in the entire Seven Kingdoms,” Bolton sneered. “But as your son-in-law, I have a duty to protect your hide as well as mine, so listen to what I have to say.”

Silence reigned in the hall, the smell of blood adding its metallic aroma to the air. Black Walder spoke up. “Perhaps we should listen to...”

“Shut up.” Frey narrowed his eyes. “So what do you propose we do?”

Bolton smiled. “Take one of these random corpses and slice off the head, one that someone stabbed a knife through the face. Then sew the head of the Young Wolf’s beast to it and parade it through your camp. No one, and especially Tywin Lannister, will know the difference.” The story would then be heralded far and wide that Robb Stark was dead, and Bolton wagered that no one would think a shit-smearred boy would be the King of the North. If he approached Winterfell, Bolton’s men would put...
an arrow in his heart, and everyone who knew his face were either dead or elsewhere. “Meanwhile, send the best and most discreet bounty hunters to find him and kill him.”

A sickly, twisted grin formed on Walder Frey’s face.

Light streamed in through the skylights, casting the cavernous throne room of the Meereen pyramid in a rather uneven illumination - part light part dark. Resisting the urge to demand a chair in the ironically throneless room, Daenerys stood regal as the next visitor was brought in. While in Westeros all Lords were seated when receiving anyone, finding it as a measure of control and domination, the opposite was true in the far lands of Essos. Atop her raised platform, one had to stand to be truly superior to the subjects below.

“Please state your business,” she announced, letting Missandei translate into High Valyrian. Dany could understand the language fluently, but her dealings with the slavers of Astapor proved the wisdom of having an interpreter. Unsullied guard flanked the room - there to protect her regardless of whether Jorah, Barristan, or Grey Worm were also present. Not that she really needed it. Strapped to her hip was Saracen, and Dany knew exactly how to use it.

The man before her was a mere peasant, and he reached into his cloak to pull out a charred lamb skull. “He says that he was tending his flock when a great winged beast appeared out of nowhere and devoured it all.” Missandei, who essentially was always at Daenerys’ side since she freed her from slavery, had concern in her eyes. Both knew what the man was talking about.

‘Oh Balerion, my sweet. Not again.’ Sighing, Dany clasped her hands together. “Was this beast black with red stripes?” Best to confirm.

After an exchange, the shepherd babbling fearfully in a very thick accent, Missandei’s eyes widened. “No, he says that it was mostly green in color.”

Careful to not show surprise, Dany was still shocked. “Tell...“ she cleared her throat. “Tell him he will be paid three times what his flock is worth, and see that he gets the money in gold.” Professing his thanks, an Unsullied guard escorted him out. Deflating, Dany allowed her mask to drop. “I thought for sure it would be Balerion, but Rhaegal?” Sure, the green dragon was often moody and sullen, but he and Edderon were usually well behaved compared to their black brother.

“I have heard that his handlers often find it hard for him to eat anything.” Missandei added, walking down from the raised dias. “I’m not sure about dragons, but I’ve seen humans and mammoth grow this way when they’re lonely.”

‘Lonely?’ The dragons had their brothers, and her. When she took the twins to visit them, the dragons cared for them as much as she did. But then, dragons were very spiritual, social creatures. The old Valyrians would always bond with one dragon for life - did Rhaegal seek a rider? Dany had a feeling that Balerion was destined to be her rider, but Eddaron wasn’t as moody as Rhaegal. ‘I hope that my brother isn’t Rhaegal’s destined rider…’

Two running feet along the stone floor brought her out of her musing. “Issa!”

A wide smile spread on her face. “Sweetlings. Come here!” With a warm tone only reserved for them, Daenerys allowed the twins to run straight into her arms. A little over two, they were already precocious and natural prodigies - a fitting mix of their parents. She looked up at Jorah, who was behind them. “Where is Doreah?”
Jorah chuckled. “No idea.”

Rolling her eyes with a smirk, she kissed their brows. “You shouldn’t be running in the hallways alone.”

“But it’s fun,” Rhaegar said, looking at her with his father’s expression.

“We were playing dragon.” Arya’s grey eyes joined him. Their looks made Dany melt. The Targaryen blood was strong in them, but Jon’s Stark blood was sturdy itself. Had she still been living amongst the Dothraki, there would have been some uncomfortable questions - but the horse warriors were back in the great grass sea, a contingent of ten thousand cavalry still attached to her in the city stables.

At that moment Doreah rushed in, wild eyed and panicking. “Mi’Lady, I cannot find…” Eyes settling on the two young Targaryens buried in their mother’s skirts, she visibly deflated. “Oh… there they are.” Giggles left the twins’ throats at their handmaid's disheveled state.

While Dany found it quite amusing as well, this behavior couldn’t be rewarded. “Stop it, sweetlings. You know better than to worry Doreah. Her heart could have stopped.”

At least this time, they looked ashamed - normally they had a mischievousness Dany was certain came from their father, in Arya more so than Rhaegar. Such was how Jon described his sister and brothers. “Sorry, Issa.” Both Valyrian and the common tongue came easy to them.

She could never stay mad at them for too long. Hugging them too her once more, Dany motioned for her personal handmaid. “Missandei, please help Doreah escort these two to their chambers.” Smirking at her, the Naathi motioned for the twins to follow her - which they thankfully did.

Turning to Jorah, Dany couldn’t help but huff. “Sometimes I think they have too much of their father in them.”

“Knowing the Stark clan, they can be quite adventurous. Ned Stark’s late sister was famous for it, Khaleesi.” Dany’s smile fell. ‘The one my brother kidnapped.’ The girl that started the entire rebellion. She decided to change the subject. “Did the Sons of the Harpy strike again?”

Jorah winced. “One of our supply convoys of beef from the grass sea was ambushed, five men slaughtered, including two Dothraki riders. Your cavalry commanders want blood.”

An old Valyrian saying came to Dany’s mind. ‘A hand for a hand leaves the whole world burned.’ “Double the guards on the convoys, and randomly schedule them. Have the Second Sons patrol the outskirts of the city for any raiders.”

“If my Queen commands it, then it shall be done.” Two sets of eyes swiveled to see the confident, arrogant form of Daario Naharis. Since defecting to her and bringing 2,000 Second Sons with him, Dany had kept him around and in her circle of advisors - she had noticed his admiration and loyalty to her manifested themselves in other ways, furtive and appraising looks cast her way in as inconspicuous a manner as could be. Daenerys usually ignored it, but sometimes loneliness and an increasing hopelessness in ever seeing Jon again weakened her resolve.

“Good, I am glad that my authority isn’t challenged among those underneath me,” Dany replied, to a smirk from Daario. Jorah just scowled, no love lost between him and the sellsword - Dany reasoned it was parental overprotectiveness, though he knew she could handle herself.

Laughing, Daario sauntered up to her. “I shall see you later, my Queen.” Wiggling his brows, he left. Dany rolled her eyes, but found it somewhat charming in a brutish sort of way. ‘Compose yourself.
You are a Queen.’

Hours later, Dany found herself on the balcony of her quarters. Even in the equatorial heat of the south, the sheer height of the pyramid brought an intense chilling breeze out from the sea. Dany tightened her light wool cloak around her. Setting her hands down on the cool stone, the vast expanse of the great city spread below her. For the first time in months Dany felt free, removed from the toil and agony of ruling. Free to be herself, to be the person that her long lost love adored.

A bellowing screech ripped her eyes from Meereen below to the tip of the pyramid above. Stretching his growing wings, now the same width as a small ship, Rhaegal’s green scales were instantly recognizable. Footclaws gripping on the stone, he let out yet another screech that echoed through the wind.

Smiling, Dany met his eyes. “Rhaegal, my sweetling.” Sniffing about, he crawled along the stone to the overhang - closer to her. Dany reached her hand out, palm open to rest against his scaly snout. Snorting, the green dragon’s eyes shut and he nuzzled her palm, for an instant. Lids flicking back, the yellow-black eyes shocked her. Dany’s bond with her son said it all.

Sadness. Loneliness. Lack of purpose.

“Sweetling…”

Bellowing a cry the loudest Daenerys had ever heard from him, Rhaegal ascended into the heavens. Gripping the stone, eyes trained on him, she watched as his green form disappeared into the clouds to the north. A gnawing pain tugged at her heart, as if this was the last time she’d ever see her son again.

“Your Grace,” Missandei called out from inside. “Is everything alright?”

Trying her best to calm the raging tempest in her soul, Dany knew that no one here could truly understand her. Wouldn’t truly care about her feelings and internal emptiness. Only one could, and he was halfway across the world. Perhaps she did need some mindless pleasure, if only to distract her. She knew her resolve weakened by the day. “No, I am alright.”

‘Oh Jon, I wish it was you here.’ Sighing, she turned and headed back into her chambers.

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

It took several seconds for her brain to comprehend it, but Arya quickly caught on. There was Robb, her brother, paraded as a corpse through the Frey camp. A direwolf head was sewn on the neck - mouth opening in a strangled scream, nothing came out. The loving and devastated sister warred with the hardened woman, each pulling her in different directions.

Leading their mounts, Gendry covered her eyes with his palm. Clegane, someone with far less sentimentality or empathy, snorted. “Well, that’s it then. Have to deal with you brats for a while longer.”

Arya heard nothing but the raucous cheers from the Frey men. “THREE CHEERS FOR THE YOUNG WOLF IN ALL HIS GLORY!”
Images flashing in Arya’s mind, there every time she closed her eyes or nodded off to sleep. Even Gendry couldn’t calm her down or banish the painful thoughts, and he had been with her since the beginning - since they fled King’s Landing. Clegane couldn’t care less about either of them, but his muscle and skill with a sword were why she didn’t just slit his throat and force Gendry to run away. They’d need him in case of danger…

Which she was walking right into. Common sense was ignored, all Arya hearing being their jeers about gutting Robb and his wife - her sister-in-law whom she never met. Sauntering right up to them before Gendry or Clegane could stop her, the innocent expression on her face, it took several moments before they all noticed her. “What do you want?”

“Can I have some food?”

“Fuck off.”

“But I’m hungry.” Childlike innocence could be a great asset.

“Which didn’t you understand, girl. The ‘Fuck,’ or the ‘Off?’” Spitting at her, the Frey cutthroat - Lord Walder wasn’t one who cared about having actual soldiers under his command - turned back to his meal. The last decision he ever made.

Her small knife coming out from the sheath, Arya used surprise to draw the man back by his hair. Down thrust the blade over and over again into the cutthroat’s chest and neck, his screams filling the forest. Up went his companions, one managing to grab at Arya.

“Oy, Suzie!” Turning around, letting go of Arya’s collar, the cutthroat’s last sight was Gendry’s enraged face. The hammer smashed into his side, shattering his ribs and sending one through the heart like a stake. Forgetting about their comrade under Arya’s knife, the other two charged at Gendry only for Clegane to run his sword through the slob’s gut. Blood gushing on the dried leaves and moss, the Hound easily batted away the other’s blade with a metallic clang and beheaded him. Barely breaking a sweat, his eyes turned to where Gendry was pulling a shrieking Arya off the first man’s corpse, face and chest a gaping mess from the knife blows.

“And what in seven hells was that?” The Hound’s voice dripped with a bored annoyance. Arya did not respond. Not paying either of them any attention, she wiped her knife on one of the corpses and put it back in her sheath. Rolling his eyes, Clegane sheathed his sword. “I ain’t gonna hit ya. Boy, do it.”

Gendry smacked Arya upside the head. The girl jerked her head up at him, jaw dropped in shock. Nothing was hurt - well, perhaps her own ego. “You just slapped me!”

“Cause that was stupid! And you could have died!” Gendry didn’t back down. “You’re too important to me.”

Arya huffed. “I’m not some sissy maiden who can’t think for herself.”

“Would you have done the same to me, had I done something insane?” The look on his face belied how right he was.

Unable to respond with more than a groan, Arya conceded the point. “Fine, whatever.” Something came to her mind. “Hey, Hound. Why did he have to do your dirty work?”

The Hound didn’t even look back, busy putting the Frey bannermen’s rations on his horse. “Cause you actually like him, wee Stark. Won’t be likely to stick a knife in his gut if he pisses you off.”
A moment’s silence passed before it was punctuated by a roaring laughter from the apprentice blacksmith. Arya glared at him, but Gendry didn’t even look remotely guilty.

“Why don’t you just go fuck already? Then you’d stop being a pain in my ass.” Gendry laughed harder, while Arya flushed red and turned away.

Butterflies darting from flower to flower, wings fluttering through the warm air of the capitol, the gardens of the Red Keep were a beautiful and tranquil sight. One of the few of those within King’s Landing, a city that fit the common trope of ‘Disease-filled cesspool.’ The last set of Kings from the weak and mad last Targaryens to Robert Baratheon, who allowed Petyr Baelish to spend the Realm’s fortune away to dazzle the masses with plays, festivals, jousts, and cheap grain while the city stagnated into filth. It wasn’t a problem for the elite, who ensconced themselves within the Red Keep, multi-story homes on hills guarded by cutthroats, or in villas dotting the rivers and coasts of the Crownlands. Meanwhile, the smallfolk had to endure the filth and disease.

Looking out at the city itself from the beauty of the garden, Tyrion Lannister couldn’t help but recall how things had gotten far, far worse. The Battle of Blackwater Bay had been a year ago, and the resentment the populace felt for the Boy King had changed to unadulterated joy once the siege was lifted and the food poured in again. Joffrey was hailed as a hero, Tyrion’s father - as the new Hand of the King - made sure the story spread of how Joffrey defeated Loras Tyrell in single combat, driving the Baratheon forces into the sea. The rumors that Renly died from… black magic were hushed up in the gauntlet of street celebrations.

This had died rather quickly. After weeks of hushed meetings between Tywin, Littlefinger, and the Great King - in which, in his capacity as Master of Coin, Tyrion had to submit various reports on the cost of what had to be a massive construction project - the royal directives had gone out. Taxes were increased, every treasure and all property held by the rebels that sided with Renly and Robb Stark seized. Thousands of tons of stone were ordered from every quarry in the known world, unloaded from the ships by conscripted urban poor. Initially they were promised wages and food, but it increasingly looked like slavery. Obscure laws were cited by Baelish declaring the King as ‘Ruler of all, the master of the people in the Kingdom,’ but the slavery comparisons stuck. Something big was being planned for the edge of the city, and barrels of wildfire were positioned in a line from the Red Keep to the building site for a massive avenue through the city.

And now all that stood in Joffrey’s way were gone.

“Tell me, Lady Melisandre,” Tyrion asked of his companion. “What do you make of the rumors that Robb Stark is not dead?”

Smirking slightly, the Red Woman glanced down at Tyrion. He suppressed a shiver. For a lover of beautiful women, this one turned his blood to ice. “If it is the will of the Lord of Light, then he shall live.”

While Tyrion would never have authorized such a despicable move - though it wasn’t shocking to know that the vile Walder Frey agreed to it - it wasn’t up to him. The King may have spent more time with Littlefinger than his own Hand or mother, but they still held sway over most policy that didn’t involve the special project in the capitol. ‘Whatever that is.’ Both Frey and Bolton insisted that Robb Stark was dead and hundreds saw his body sewn to a wolf’s head, but the head had not been confirmed by those on the Small Council. It was… a confusing situation. King Joffrey was happy though, celebrating by executing several ‘traitors.’ “Catelyn Stark hasn’t said anything, even after I brought young Sansa to her cell. Either she knew we were watching, or Robb is likely dead.”
“The fucker’s alive.” Both turned to Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, another unlikely hero to emerge from the fray. “I saw his momma. Looked strong, like the Queen. Mommas who lose kids always cry like babies.”

A chortle left Tyrion’s lips. “You have a way with words, Ser Bronn. A regular poet.” His illustrious companion snorted. “I do have another question for you,” he said to the Red Woman. “The Lord of Light. When he was last alive, his given name was Azor Ahai, no?”

“That he was,” Melisandre answered, heeled boots clicking on the stone.

“I have heard my nephew scream in his sleep on occasion.” The garden was deserted, Tyrion had made sure of that beforehand, but kept his voice low regardless. Little birds flew everywhere. “His rants vary, but always involve either ‘The mark,’ ‘Son of my predecessor,’ or ‘Azor Ahai.’ The second one explains why he ordered all of his father’s bastards murdered, but if he’s afraid of Azor Ahai, why do you serve him?”

A booming thunderclap, and the shockwave that followed, nearly sent Tyrion to his knees - resting his small form against a column to keep from toppling. Gripping the stalk of an orange tree with long fingers, a ghost of a smile rested on Melisandre’s face - no answer was forthcoming. In the distance, a gout of green-white flame cut across the great city. The planning and preparations were over. Construction had begun, a fitting symbol to the now unfettered absolute power that their King held over the realm.

‘Seven protect us.’
“Easy does it! Easy does it!” The massive sled lurched forward slightly, nearly hacking off limbs and crushing bodies. “Hold it steady, you fucking lummox!” Tormund Giantsbane snarled at the giant. “I almost got me leg crushed! Keep that beast cunt in line.” He got a roar of answer from the bearded giant, but nothing else. No one messed with Tormund, even one 25 feet tall.

Making sure the towering lummox kept the mammoth calm, Jon went back to unloading sacks from the sled. “Those things make good beasts of burden,” he remarked offhandedly to his… friend? Tormund tolerated him well enough, not nearly as much as Ygritte - Jon shuddered at the thought of Tormund in that position - but aside from a general abrasiveness the relationship was more of a benign rivalry. Styr on the other hand… he’d eat Jon as soon as look at him.

Tormund simply snorted. “Aye, once you beat the wild out of em.” A belly laugh left his throat. “One thing about us north of the wall, ya can never beat the wild out.” Jon had to agree. The northerners were practically Essosian nobles compared to the Free Folk.

“I wouldn’t attempt to try,” Jon deadpanned. He placed the last pack down, filled with chopped firewood. Far better than the dried mammoth dung chips. They had plenty of those, but they smelled rancid - and from someone that grew up near stuffy northern stables, rancid for Jon was rancid.

“You better not, crow. I’d make a worse foe than a charging cunt beast.”

“Jon Snow barely survived that time, didn’t he?” Feeling a punch on the shoulder, Jon rolled his eyes. Some people expressed their affection in different ways. Some, such as Sansa, would kiss on the cheek. Some, such as Arya, gave off affection in the form of physical attack. Ygritte was among the latter. “Now excuse me Tormund, he’s mine now. Unless your shit hide has something else?” A half-mutter, half-growl left Tormund’s lips. Intelligible, but from how Ygritte pulled him along, Jon felt that it meant he didn’t need him anymore.

As night fell, the tent the two of them shared - chastity among the Free Folk were a recurring joke, much like the Dothraki - had a roaring fire going in the center. Jon hated himself for succumbing to his baser desires with Dany still out there, with his love for her still strong. ‘She’s better off without me though.’ A bastard was not fit for a queen. Fit for her bed perhaps, but not by her side. “I long to see the land beyond the wall,” mused Ygritte, allowing her hard exterior to slip off. “To sit outside all night to watch the stars. The great hunter must look amazing while doing so.”

It took a while for Jon to realize what she was talking about. “We call it ‘Azor Ahai’ back home.”

He put his hands close to the fire, seeking out the toasty warmth. “If you do go over the wall, my brother would probably hunt you all down.” It wasn’t personal, just a statement of fact. “Wildlings are hated for their raids and piracy, killing and stealing everything not nailed down.”

A low laugh left the wildling’s lips. “You still know nothing, Jon Snow.” Pouring yet another steaming helping into her clay cup, Ygritte looked Jon in the eye. “We don’t seek to get over the wall for greed. Our lives depend on it.”

Eying her warily, inwardly Jon filed away every word. “In what way? Life here is hard, but we’re all making due.”

“When winter comes, Jon Snow, it will be unlike any winter in a thousand seasons.” Pulling him to
her, the two of them clung to each other. Holding the shaking Ygritte, all Jon could see when he closed his eyes was a pair of azure blue dots glowing in the distance.

‘Winter is coming.’ Did the motto of his House exemplify the answer well enough?

Hoofbeats filled the din of the small forest road - more of a sunken clearing through the trees rather. “What the bleedin’ fuck are you fucking about for?!” hollered the team leader. “Walder Frey isn’t paying us half our weight in gold to mill around like idiots.” He was paying the bounty hunters handsomely to find Robb Stark - and would have an even bigger reward for the team that brought him to the Twins dead or alive. Janos Clint could just taste that reward, and would slit a thousand throats to get it before the other teams did.

“Thought I heard something in the brambles,” replied the trooper, spear out as he peered through the bushes while still on horseback.

“It’s fucking nothing!” Clint screamed back. “We have a bead on the cunt. He’s headed to the Westernlands. Either you get on his tail or I kill you myself.” Scowling, the trooper nevertheless complied.

With the hoofbeats nothing but faint memories, Robb finally emerged. His heart was racing, eyes wide and scanning for any form of human life. ‘Nothing.’ Even alone, the former King in the North turned fugitive refused to let his guard down. Months of little sleep and constant panic left him near emaciated and fatigued. But he kept going.

Why, he did not know. He had essentially lost everything. His father’s title, his title, his land, his wife, his child… But something kept him going.

After managing to crawl out of the collected feces of the Twins - the bouts of vomiting had been intense afterwards - Robb had headed due south, deeper into the Riverlands. Frey and Bolton likely expected him to go north and stick on the banks of the Trident to get across, so he did the exact opposite. Now, the bounty hunters were following him here.

Waiting for nightfall, the cloudless night easily exposed the North Star. Robb knew his path: Castle Black. ‘If there’s any refuge for me, it’s with Jon.’ He only hoped his brother was still alive. Or that he’d stay alive long enough to find him.

Disaster had struck - the entire city was in uproar. An Unsullied commander, one well liked in his occupation district for his fairness to all sides, had been found murdered in an alley. Tips led to the whore that helped set up the killing, and other tips led Daario and Grey Worm to find the murderer hiding in the wall of an inn. In custody, the assassin was identified as the second son of a prominent nobleman, one of the 30 hardliners Dany had singled out to execute for their support of the slave crucifixions. And, causing her the most grief, he was a member of the Sons of the Harpy. Relegated to raiding supply convoys and killing freedmen, now they were more directly targeting the Targaryen forces.

Something had to be done, but her small council was divided. Ser Barristan reminded her to resist the same course of action as her father, to hold a trial. It went against her initial instinct that had led to the crucifixions and the burning of Astapor. Needless to say, many agreed with that initial instinct.

“A trial is just a waste of time, Mhysa. Due process…” Mossador protested, borrowing the word
from the common tongue, albeit it being a rarely used one at that. “Means nothing to the Masters, or freedmen. All they understand is force!” His intelligence and passion for his fellow freedmen had impressed Daenerys (joining other top freedmen such as Grey Worm or Missandei), leading to his appointment to her council as a representative of the community. “He should be executed tomorrow.” Both Daario and Jorah nodded, agreeing with the sentiment.

Taking a drink from her water goblet, sunlight glinting from both the liquid and golden rim, Daenerys pondered the quandary. There was a dividing line, Mossador, Daario, and Jorah standing on the side of summary execution while Barristan, Hizdahr zo Loraq, and Hizdahr’s father in favor of a trial. Pleasing one side would alienate the other, and with the Sons of the Harpy running about that was dangerous. Ruling was not easy, and she had heard her brother Rhaegar often say that the reason no one placed a cushion on the Iron Throne was to remind a ruler of that fact. “Grey Worm.” Her Unsullied commander clicked his heels in acknowledgement. “You are a freedman. What say you?”

“If you wish for deterrence, killing him is the only way.”

“Khaleesi, may I speak.” Eyes turned to Missandei, who received a nod from her queen. “If deterrence is your goal, then agree with those arguing immediate death. But Ser Barristan makes a point about honor, and respect. I have been beside many leaders in my life - some less noble than others - but the only thing keeping them together was belief and respect in themselves. If you cannot abide by what you choose, then you do not deserve leadership, Khaleesi.” Silence rested in the conference chamber following Missandei’s blunt words, the interpreter having care to hang her head in humility. Daenerys glanced at her other advisors. Grey Worm seemed impressed, while the others were a mix of shocked and... uncertain. Barristan’s tale of her father, the Mad King, weighed heavily. ‘He had killed the two Starks without even a hint of legitimacy. The grandfather and uncle to my beloved. To my children.’ Could she live with herself if she made a decision similar to his in the most important respect? Daenerys did not know.

Luckily, one person spoke up at that time. “Your Grace, there may be an alternate avenue of decision,” said Theodosius, Barristan’s nephew. While mediocre as a soldier, he exhibited a genius in innovation and tactics. He and Daario were responsible for Yunkai’s fall, and certain modifications to weapons brought from the far east had greatly assisted the slave rebellion that put the Targaryen banner atop the Great Harpy. As such, Dany appointed him her Master of Science - it was rare he stepped out of his workshop ever since.

“Speak, Ser Theodosius.”

Given the floor, he looked her straight in the eye - confident, it impressed her greatly. “I believe that you must do the honorable thing, and have a trial for the prisoner.” Mossador glared at him with daggers in his eyes, Daario smirking, as if saying Theodosius was an idiot. “You must be shown as just, if only to counter the perception of your… ancestors once you return to Westeros.” He did have a knack for tactics, Dany admitted. “The judges must be three, one from the masters, one from the freedmen, and one not of Meereen.”

It seemed reasonable. “And how would you then deter further violence?”

“Not with the trial, your Grace. One must look elsewhere.” A small smirk rested on his face. “The Unsullied are too valuable to you to waste on garrison duty. They should be the tip of your spear, and have no source of replacement.” Grey Worm said nothing, but Dany knew it to be true. They were powerful, but irreplaceable in the short term. “The Second Sons... they are nothing but sellswords.”

At that, Daario was on his feet. “My men are the elite. I’d like to see you last one minute in a fight
with the worst warrior among them.” The outburst caused Dany to frown. Daario was… sweet in his own way to her, but rarely got along well with her advisors. His skill on the battlefield and loyalty kept him in her esteem, however - such was what caused her, in a moment of weakness, to accept him in her bed. Missing Jon, wine proved itself a bad idea for loneliness. It was no question that he wanted it to happen again, but Dany rebuffed every hint thrown at her since.

“I meant no disrespect, Ser Daario,” Theodosius said, but the sparkle in his eye belying how he did intend to. “But they are sellswords. What Meereen needs to keep the Sons of the Harpy in line is something special. Something unique. I propose that we train and arm able bodied men in the freedman community.” He let the point sink in, a pregnant pause lasting for several moments. “As my illustrious colleague Mossador has said, the former slaves of Meereen are loyal to their Mhysa. I expect them to flock to the cause - less powerful than the Unsullied for sure, but an untapped pool of hundreds of thousands that can easily be replaced if lost.”

His cavalier regard for the replaceability of her people notwithstanding, Daenerys found the plan a welcome one. As the table descended into mindless squabbling, she noticed that the pro-trial side felt this to be an insult while the summary execution side wasn’t placated enough. “This solves nothing about the treatment the masters gave us!” Mossador hissed.

“I would think having your own men in arms would lessen your fears,” countered Theodosius.

“There will be a massive outcry. The people will be up in arms!” Loraq Senior wailed.

“If they weren’t already in arms, then we wouldn’t be here now would we?” asked Jorah.

“Enough!” Had she been alone or had less self control, Dany would have laughed merrily. “When neither side is satisfied, that means the plan is the right one. You may have your auxiliary force, Ser Theodosius.” Offering her a small smile, he bowed, eyes twinkling with ideas. “Ser Jorah, you, Mossador, and Loraq will be the judges in the prisoner’s trial, to be held tomorrow.”

“It is an honor to serve you in any respect, Khaleesi.” Jorah was on board, Loraq the younger seemed resigned to his fate, while Mossador glowered but swallowed the bitter pill. Dany resolved to have a talk with him before sunset.

The room emptying, Dany was left alone with Ser Barristan. The grizzled warrior had lost none of his skill, and quickly joined Jorah and Missandei as one of her top confidants. “That was not an easy decision to make, your Grace.” He found a spot on the stone wall to lean on, close to where she sat on the window ledge looking out at the city. “You did the right thing.”

“Your nephew made it easier to do so, in all fairness,” Dany replied with a wry grin. “The freedman levies will assist greatly when I finally land on Westeros.” Her eyes flickered back to the city. Above, she could see Edderon and Balerion soaring high in the sky. Her white-scaled child dove steeply to the sea - fishing. He was joined soon after by his brother. A tear pricked her eye. “Do you think Rhaegal is safe?” It had been months, and there was no sign of her child.

“I’m sure he is, your Grace.”

“I couldn’t bear to imagine him dead.” A horrible thought came to mind. “I will not lose any of my children, Ser Barristan.” The flash of Targaryen resolve glowed in her eyes.

Nodding, he placed a hand on his heart. “I will defend all of them with my life.” His own eyes softened. “Young Rhaegar… I didn’t know his father, but I knew Ned Stark. I see much of the Stark nobleness in him. He’s brave, but has honor.”
A warm feeling passed over Dany, remembering her Stark.

“He reminds me of your brother as well, Arya too. There isn’t a man I knew more closely than Prince Rhaegar - the stories they tell… it’s just not him.”

“Tell me about him, what kind of man he was.” All she had heard were either the normal horror stories or the skewed stories Viserys pushed on her.

A wistful smile crossed Barristan’s face. “He was a strong warrior, skilled at fighting. But he hated it. The Prince loved the simple arts, especially music. He would play his fiddle all day sometimes. Often, he and I would sneak into Flea Bottom in disguise and play for the children.” Dany beamed at the story, loving the side of her family not mired in conquest and madness. ‘I would live a life like that if it meant I could be with Jon,” she thought. Then, Barristan’s smile changed. “You need to talk to Ser Jorah.”

Daenerys cocked her head. “Jorah? Why?”

Standing, Barristan was back to pure formality. “I heard things at home, your Grace, things I have just now pieced together. Ask him where his real loyalties lie.” And with that, he walked out, leaving Dany to ponder his warning.

It was called the ‘Blue wind’ in the words of the Free Folk. Jon didn’t understand the meaning of it, and everyone laughed at him when he asked about it. Blizzard, swirling winds and snow drifts as far as the eye could see - which wasn’t far. Vision was restricted to only an arm’s length in front of the eyes at the worst point. Wildling tents were built for weather like this shrieking in from inland, allowing the hardened inhabitants of this godsforsaken land to ride it out. Dressed in the thickest furs, rations and Longclaw strapped to his back, the blue wind made a perfect cover for Jon to escape.

Snow clinging to his scraggly stubble, Jon took one last look back at Hardhome. The blizzard obscured… everything, but he could still make out the walls. His mission - if it could be called that - was a wash. Jon was now an expert on the Wild… Free Folk. Their culture, customs, lifestyle, future plans… everything. ‘Castle Black needs to know what’s coming.’ A whole army, dozens of tribes totaling nearly one hundred thousand wildlings descending on the wall. Only the best of preparations could even hope to grant victory to the Watch. On the other hand, no sight of the white walkers nor wights had been found. Whatever information he could draw out about the unknown specters had been gleaned from King Mance, Tormund, or… Ygritte.

Whether it was coincidence or the providence of the old gods, the women Jon seemed closest too were always the most difficult of the fairer sex. ‘First Dany, then Ygritte.’ Oh how Robb would have laughed, Arya and Bran too. A loud sigh left his lips, sound lost in the howling wind. In his time here Jon had grown close to her - even cared for her as a husband would a wife. Noble to a fault, he couldn’t bear to break her heart, which as strong as she was, his leaving would end up doing.

But his heart always belonged to another. For all his aloofness and insane bravery in the face of peril, Jon Snow remained in the thrall of Daenerys Targaryen - and always would be. Selfish as it was, his relationship with Ygritte was always just to banish the loneliness. He did care for her, but she would never be Dany. ‘And Dany can never be mine.’ A Queen could never belong to a bastard.

“I’m sorry,” he said into the vast whiteness, no one hearing him but the snow. “But I have to go home.” Trudging off into the wilderness, not one part of Jon realized that deep down, ‘home’ referred to Daenerys.
Waking up, the redheaded archer stretched under the thick furs. The patch next to her was empty. “Jon Snow?” she called out, looking around. Feeling the chill, Ygritte wrapped the furs around her slim, nude form. Feeling a bile rise from her gut, she peeked outside. There was nothing to be seen but snow - blowing, blinding snow.

“JON SNOW!”

Above, masked by the grey-white clouds of the angry heavens, a single crow circled the ground. Two milky eyes zeroed in on the lone figure - black form visible in the swirling white mass. Far away, its handler processed everything. The hue and cry would be raised momentarily. It was now a race, time and endurance all that mattered.

Even in what was still summer in most of the world but early autumn at this latitude, the chilly wind out from the great ocean penetrated the thin cloak. ‘Back in Westeros at last.’ For Viserys Targaryen, it was not as he expected it - at all. In his mind there had been blaring trumpets, massive crowds throwing confetti and flowers into the path of marching soldiers ahead of his golden chariot entering King’s Landing.

Instead, he had to draw the thin fabric tighter over himself, muttering low curses at White Harbor and House Manderly. Viserys hated the north, hated the cursed land and its inhabitants - especially one particular bastard. If he had his way, Viserys would kill Jon Snow himself. But first… ‘There is nothing left for me in Essos.’ Illyrio had abandoned him. The Iron Bank wouldn’t even entertain his claim. With the North in disarray after the death of Robb Stark - any Stark’s death brought a smile to his lips - the people would flock to their rightful king…

Not looking where he was trudging, Viserys was knocked to the ground. Hunched above him was what would be a handsome man in his prime apart from the hobbled gait, trembling form, and faraway eyes. He apparently led a group of horsemen.

“Reek!” demanded the leader. “Watch where you’re going. And who is this shit?” The heavy northern accent masked what Viserys figured was an authoritative demeanor. “Fegan, get him out of here.” Down descended a burly fellow with bulging muscles, marching to where Viserys cowered.

“What the hells?” The guard grabbed Viserys’ gloved hand, causing the fallen Prince to howl - the burns still hadn’t completely healed. “E’s got gold on ‘is arms.” Grabbing up the battered rucksack, he pulled out the glinting blade. “A pretty fine sword too.”

The leader dismounted, advancing. “Let me see that.” Inspecting the sword with pensive, peering eyes, Viserys felt a sinking dread as his milky eyes twinkled with recognition. “Reek, come forward.” The hobbled, broken shell of a man obeyed his master. “Tell me, what is the inscription on the sword?”

Trembling, shifting eyes avoiding eye contact with anyone, he finally spoke up in a meek yelp. “Fire and blood. It’s… Valyrian, but recognizable. It has a dragon head.”

Smiling, he patted the man’s head as one would pet a dog. “Good job Reek.” A malevolent grin spread out over Ramsay Bolton’s face. His mind raced with all that could be gained from this, once far-fetched notions now charging into the realm of the possible. “Well call me a bitch. Get the chains Reek, we’re going back to Winterfell. Looks like I found me a Targaryen.”
Dragon of the North

Biting cold, freezing cold. Cold so vicious that it felt as if a fire devoid of warmth sliced through the very flesh of one’s being. Yet, Bran felt nothing but a gentle numbness. His legs, repaired and uninjured, glided like sleigh rails along the thickly matted snow. It was so serene. Soft snowflakes meandered through the air in their slow descent to the ground.

For the first time since his injury, Bran felt carefree. Unburdened by the intense pain and anguish done to him by Jamie Lannister.

Then, the already hellish cold plunged into an icy inferno, Bran facing blackness - only a pair of glowing blue eyes pierced the void.

Suddenly, his body thrown back in an intense rush, in a blur the snow disappeared in front of him to be replaced by the exact opposite. Rocks, sand, a red waste of a land as far as the eye could see - with a high tower of smooth stone directly ahead of him, surrounded by scraggly trees. “Brandon.” His head swiveled around, an ancient voice calling out for him. “You must find it. Go to the Dragon, for you must find it.”

Bran collapsed, everything spinning.

From the bed of furs, Bran’s eyes opened. Not a hair was out of place, sweat nonexistent. To any observer, the crippled Stark should have held a tranquil night of sleep when the opposite was true. Now awake, he drew the notice of Meera Reed, his companion and… friend. The others were sleeping, blissfully unaware what was about to transpire. “Bran. What’s wrong?” Though he was usually sullen and taciturn, Meera had been with them long enough to understand exactly what this mood meant.

“We have to go south.” His voice was low and monotone. Bran met her eyes. “We have to go to the Dragon Queen.”

Jon had always thought he’d make it. With a significant head start and the blizzard covering his tracks, all that was needed would be to survive the elements and he’d be back in Castle Black. However, he’d underestimated Free Folk skill and tenacity. They hadn’t lived off this desolate land and not grown strong from it. So in hindsight, it shouldn’t have surprised him to come face to face with a stony Ygritte, an arrow pointed at his head and a barely suppressed look of rage all over her face.

Sharp pain consumed him as a mammoth-leather boot slammed into his back before he could reach Longclaw - not that he would have, inviting an arrow through the eye. “This is what ya get for dragging me from my fire, crow!” Tolerating him he did, but Jon knew Tormund would have turned on him the second they were on opposite sides. They weren’t friends.

“Burn him alive!” yelled one Wildling hunter. Jon counted five, along with Tormund and Ygritte.

“Feed him to the dogs!”

“Tie him to a mammoth and make the beast run!”

Hefting him up, Tormund smirked. “You’re glad Styr didn’t find ya. I’m only plannin’ to beat ya to death.”
Suddenly an arrow zipped past their heads, Ygritte shouting. A body fell to the ground. Clad in rags, a cursory look identified the obvious dead flesh. “What the…”

Hands burst from under the snow, two grabbing onto the legs of wildling warriors and dragging them down. Soon torsos were exposed, corroded weapons slicing through the unarmored flesh of the hunters.

“The dead are here!” Ygritte screamed, notching an arrow and plugging another in the skull.

Snarling with rage, Tormund drew both his short battle axes akimbo and brained one before it could fully emerge from the snow. Another skeletal shape charged at him but a sharp kick to the leg made it fall, the axe removing the head entirely. The others had a far worse time of it, one wight hacking through the torso before Ygritte fell it. Only headshots working, she made each arrow count.

Rolling onto his back, two hands burst from the snow where Jon rested - then a rotting head, blue eyes finding him and mouth opening in a shriek. Drawing Longclaw, the shriek gurgled into silence as the Valyrian steel sliced through the face. Pain gone in the heat of battle, Jon leapt to his feet and joined the fray. No more emerged from the snow underneath, but reinforcements for the dead charged from nearby, swarming them. Jon flexibly dodged one which didn’t break its charge towards Tormund. Steel clashed with flesh and bone as he sent another undead corpse back to pure death. A skeleton dug its fingers into his skin, drawing blood. Its bones shattered from an enraged stab. One fresh wight seemed to possess some of its past fighting skills, the battered sword it carried clanging against Longclaw’s shining steel. That didn’t last long, and arrow smacking into its chest as Jon cut the torso in half. His eyes met Ygritte’s for a moment before both went back into the fighting.

Swinging one-handed, Longclaw decapitated a head. More kept coming. A mix of fresh corpses, decayed remains, and walking skeletons advanced with a singular determination to end them. With only four humans left, it was just like a cavalry charge was upon them. They’d be swarmed unless Jon got them together. “Hold together!” he screamed. “Form a square, back to back!”

One wildling tried to run toward them but was swarmed by five wights hacking away with their rusty weapons and clawed hands. Tormund and Ygritte made it, and formed a triangle back to back with Jon. Arrow after arrow left her bow, Tormund’s axes and Longclaw ripped into dead flesh. Another gnarled hand sliced his skin, this time at his shoulder. Stabbing straight forward, Jon impaled it through the chest and jerked upward, slicing the upper torso right up the middle. Another wight was batted aside right into the blade of Tormund’s axe, the wildling seconds later returning the favor for Longclaw. Hack. Stab. Slice. Parry. Hack again. Ice blue eyes dimmed out, bodies piling up.

Soon, Tormund was atop the last one. “Fucking! Die! You! Fucking! Cunt!” The axe pulverized its skull into a mashed splatter.

“Tormund!” Jon yelled, pulling him back. “Enough! They’re gone!”

“Don’t speak too soon.” Oddly muted, Ygritte pointed to the snowbanks and ridgelines all around them. The dead were coming, in greater numbers.

Fingers tightening around the hilt, Jon held Longclaw firm and true. Ahead of him, a solid line of skeletal monsters charged. Every passing moment they closed the distance, putrid flesh surrounding all three humans in a ragged circle. “Looks like this is the end.”

Spitting a fleck of blood onto the ice white snow, Tormund nodded. “Aye. If I’m gonna die though, let’s fuck the cunts up.” His two axes were at the ready.
“Let’s.” Ygritte notched another arrow onto her reflex bow, ready.

Closing his eyes for a moment, silver hair flashed through Jon’s mind. ‘Forgive me, Dany.’ His ears were filled with the strangled moans of the undead. ‘I tried to live for you.’

Past the swirling clouds, dark and angry even as the sun shone brightly in its unobstructed glory, he beat his leathery wings. For months he had pushed himself to the limit. Mother abandoned, brothers abandoned, the only home he had ever known abandoned, all that drove him forward was an urge. A sheer force of will that he knew was his calling - his destiny. Something was out there, someone that needed him and that he needed.

The rider. His rider. One with the blood of Old Valyria, same as him. It had been millennia since the first Freeholders had tamed his kind, and the instincts that predated the great Doom still burned bright. There was nothing that brought him to this desolate land but that urge, that inner homing beacon. It was faint, stronger here, but faint. An agonizing screech left his throat. What if he never found the one?

Suddenly the beacon bloomed intensely. A sense that only the bonded could hold marked the ground, filling him with that sense of purpose that had been so lacking. But there was pain as well - pain and fear. Terror. The one was in danger, shadowy shapes filling his eyes as if he saw them himself. Roaring the war cry of his kind, wings beat hard as he plunged into a steep dive. He could almost hear the order coming from his mother, from the one. The freezing air around his jaw superheated as the red-orange plume formed.

‘Dracarys.’

Teeth clenched in fury, Jon raised Longclaw, ready to slice downward at the shrieking ghoul racing toward him. A rusted sword was clutched in its hand, rotting jaw open and a deep blue in its eyes. One moment it was right upon him… and the other it disappeared in a gout of red-orange flame billowing out of the clouds like the wrath of the gods themselves. The fireball bloomed like a scorching flower, engulfing a sizable portion of the beasts. And then he saw it.

“What the fuck…?” Tormund captured exactly what Jon wanted to… but just wasn’t able to say out loud. Emerging from the clouds was a green beast. A dragon, there was no escaping it. A real fucking dragon! Roaring, another tongue of flame burst from its mouth as it banked around in a circle. The attackers were immediately immolated. Their ancient bones and decayed flesh were no match for the fire, going up like pitch and tar.

Dragon or not, crazed shrieks reminded them that their enemy had no breaking point. They just continued forward, a half dozen charging through the gaps in the dragonfire. One collapsed immediately from an arrow through an empty eye socket, while Tormund bellowed and smashed his axes across the head of one after the other. Sharp steel flashed orange off the dragonfire as Jon sliced one through the torso. “Fuck you!” Channeling his inner Tormund, profanities flew from his mouth, Longclaw dicing another two.

And then the moans stopped, no sounds left but crackling fire. There were no wights left. They had won.

A loud roar brought the present situation crashing upon Jon. Beating its large wings, the dragon kicked up a cloud of snow as its clawed feet slammed into the ground. “Get back!” Tormund yelled, pushing Ygritte behind him. Jon could tell they wanted to run, but were too terrified to make a move. He wanted to run, but something was telling him not to. A voice in his head, one of instinct, banished all the fear from him - at least in part of his mind. There was nothing to fear, it said. The dragon wouldn’t hurt him.
Glancing to his right, Tormund was... shaking. Literally shaking. It would be hilarious to Jon if it wasn’t caused by a large dragon looking straight at him. “Of all... the ways I could die... being lunch for a fucking... dragon wasn’t one of em.” Raising his hand with one ax he gripped tightly, the green monster hissed and snapped his jaws.

“Stop,” Jon said, not addressing the beast but more like a hopeful begging - as if Arya and Bran were roughhousing with him and he wanted it to stop. However, Jon’s jaw nearly dropped when the dragon drew back slightly, a loud but... almost tranquil purring leaving its mouth. ‘Did it just... obey me.’ In a split second, Jon’s mind switched back to its insane bravery mode. “Tormund, Ygritte. I need you not to panic.” Slowly, he sheathed Longclaw.

“What the fuck are you doing?! Tormund yelled in a whisper as Jon inched forward to the beast. “Are you daft, crow?”

Jon wasn’t listening, all five senses directed to the dragon. It was large, twenty-five feet long at least with dark green scales and razor sharp teeth. A low hum left its lips, the smell of smoke wafting from it. For some reason, Jon felt as if he needed to speak to it. “Easy, I’m not here to hurt you…” Staring at the slit-like yellow eyes, something told him that it had a name. That he had a name… a specific name… “Rha... Rhaegal?” It was a one in a million guess, but the dragon hooted, lowering his head in what had to be a submissive gesture.

“Well I’ll be fucked.”

Not knowing where the name had come from, Jon just knew. As if it were instinct. “Easy Rhaegal.” Setting his palm on the beast’s snout, he watched Rhaegal close its eyes and purr - just like Ghost when Jon was petting him. He swore he could see into the dragon’s soul...

A muffled thump caused the spell to be broken. The curious look on Jon’s face turned to horror. “Ygritte!” Prone on the snow, when Jon reached her there was no color left in her face, eyes glassy and half closed. Dying. “Where are you hurt?” A cursory look found the middle of her furs soaked in blood, which was already starting to freeze.

“Doesn’t, hurt,” the wildling ground out. A hand reached out to slowly cup his cheek. “I love you, Jon Snow, but I know you love... another. Go to her.” She smiled weakly.

“You’ll be just fine,” he replied, not believing it himself.

What was almost a laugh left her lips. “You. Know nothing. Jon Snow...” Voice fading, her eyes closed for the last time.

Gently laying her in the snow, Jon shed a single tear for Ygritte. He did love her - Dany was his one true love, but a little place in his heart would remember the fierce Wildling girl that had been his constant companion for much of his recent life. She deserved better. She should have seen the other side of the wall - the Free Folk deserved to be safe, away from the monsters. He believed all of them now, and they deserved to not be cannon fodder in whatever being led the dead.

“We’re gonna need to burn her,” Tormund warned. Remembering the wight in the Lord Commander’s room - ‘It seems so long ago, where it began’ - Jon knew Tormund was right. ‘How will we get a fire for her...’

As if reading his mind - perhaps it was exactly that - Rhaegal let a puff of flame consume Ygritte, a fitting send off for the wild redhead. Staring at the dragon, Jon felt the meld of minds between them. The last time he felt this was on a dark, cold night with Ghost. He had stared at the growing dire wolf, feeling the connection between them grow as he connected with his mind. And now it was the
same thing, the same feeling. Jon couldn’t explain it. It was unexplainable.

The last of the flickering fires were starting to die, leaving piles of ash and some charred bones remaining. Jon didn’t know anything about dragons - he’d now have to read everything about them in the Castle Black Library that he could find, which meant he’d have to tell Sam, who he felt could keep the secret - but dragonfire had to be the most powerful flame known to man. However big and powerful Rhaegal was, if more wights showed up he’d be overwhelmed. “We need to get out of here quickly, before those things come back.”

“Knowing what I’ve been told, they usually prowl in groups. Much as I’d rather not be your prisoner, don’t really have a choice in the matter now do I?” Since he’d be dead if it wasn’t for Jon, Tormund must have deployed all his gratitude - not much, but it was something. “But how are we gonna get to the wall without freezing to death?”

Looking at Jon, Rhaegal hooted, as if telling him something. Jon eyed him over. ‘You want to… fly us out of here?’ The green dragon twisted its neck, thin crests fluttering. His snout nudged Jon’s shoulder, again acting just like Ghost. ‘I’ll take that as a yes.’ Much as the thought should terrify him, Jon knew there was no other choice.

“Well, got any ideas, crow?”

Jon merely cocked his head, staring at Tormund. Waiting for the wildling to catch on.

Tormund blinked. “You want me to…” He pointed to Rhaegal, Jon’s face serious. “Oh no, no way in hell you crazy cunt. I would rather have my dick sucked by a giant than get on that fucking thing’s back.” Rhaegal growled, teeth baring at Tormund.

‘Easy boy.’ Jon was sure that the dragon would never be this easy to handle, especially for someone he just met, but the confusing bond they seemed to innately share and the situation they were all in must have been sensed. Dany did tell him that dragons were known to be very intelligent, at least in Targaryen lore. “Well Tormund,” Jon mused, squinting and looking off into the distance. “We’re days away from Hardhome and the blizzard isn’t going away soon. It’s either come with me on the dragon’s back, or go alone in the middle of wight country. Your choice.” Despite everything that happened, Jon couldn’t help but smirk when Tormund grumbled profanities but nodded.

Shoulder only coming up to Jon's eyes, the Night's Watchman exerted little effort to climb atop Rhaegal. His wounds stung and joints ached, snow burning into his skin. ‘At least you're warm,’ Jon thought, amused and grateful. Rhaegal responded with a grunt - as if thanking him. ‘Um, you're welcome.’

“I'm gonna die from fallin' off this blasted dragon, and the crow is talking to himself.” Huffing in annoyance, at least Tormund’s uncharacteristic fear was amusing.

He wasn't sure how flying was, but Jon could guess. “Hold on tight.” Hand gripping the spiny ridge tightly, Jon whispered to Rhaegal. “Fly us south.”

Normally only responsive to Valyrian, the bond of his rider was so strong that Rhaegal heard the order loud and clear. A beat of the wings brought him to the air, the screams of his passengers lost in the currents.

Watching from a distance, a lone crow’s eyes morphed from a glassy white back to their normal hue. Everything that needed to be discovered was discovered. Plans would have to be changed, and delays made. Fate, for most at Hardhome, had irrevocably changed.
This was it. This was his moment - the weak, cowardly boy that earned his father’s disgust and loathing couldn’t come back. “Beast stay back!” He had to be strong, hold the sword with a firm resolve. Gilly and the baby depended on him, and only him, for survival. “You will not take them!”

Without a care in the world, its company of two dozen walking skeletons waiting in the background, the blue-grey beast clamped its hand over Sam’s sword. Squeezing, the steel shattered. A backhanded smack sent Sam flying into a tree.

“You can’t have him!” Gilly’s screams cleared his mind like a bolt of lightning. Despite the aches stabbing through him, he drew the one weapon left on his person - the dragonglass dagger.

Above, flying low over the trees, a sharp gaze caught a still. The unmistakable image of a white walker. Jon had never seen one, but it could be no other. ‘Bank around.’ The dragon obeyed.

Blue eyes shining in triumph, the white walker reached out to take the bundle in the girl’s arms when a snarling Sam charged. Even shocking him, the dagger sunk into the muted ice blue skin like it was butter. Screaming in pain and hate, the beast writhed for several moments before shattering into millions of tiny pieces.

Their commander dead, all at once the line of wights dropped their jaws in piercing screams, charging straight for Sam, Gilly, and the baby. Holding the dragonglass daggers, despite the utter hopelessness of the situation the Tarly outcast found his inner steel. “Stay behind me, Gilly.” They drew closer, blue eyes flashing. “Stay behind me!”

‘Rhaegal, light ‘em up!’ Jon held for dear life as the green dragon dove.

Dragonglas at the ready, in an instant the line of wights was vaporized. The red-orange fireball caused Sam to topple, knocking down Gilly in the process. Undisturbed and sleeping through the entire ordeal, the baby started to wail. Gilly scrambling to calm him down, as his lids fluttered open - aches all over his corpulent form - Sam stared in stupefied silence as a dragon emerged from the blackness to land before them. The shock amplified when he saw who was on the dragon’s back, or more accurately one of the persons on the dragon’s back.

Jon’s ragged boots hit the snow with a small puff. “Damn cunts,” cursed Tormund, gazing at the charred bodies. “They’re everywhere, and are gonna overrun Hardhome one of these days.”

“I’ve thought of that possibility, Tormund,” Jon shot back at him. A shriek left the dragon’s throat. “Rhaegal, heel.” Compliant with his rider, at least for now, he gurgled to warm his system. Gently running his palm along the scaly neck - a stirring of affection instinctively brought forth that he usually reserved for Ghost - Jon finally met eyes with Sam.

“What, but…” Sam gaped like a fish. “How… Jon… dragon…” Walking over to him, Jon knelt and set a hand on his shoulder. “How’d you get a dragon?”

“Deep breaths, Sam.” He sighed. “If it helps, I’m just as confused by the situation as you are.”
Deal with the Devil

It had taken five straining pairs of arms to dump the steer carcass onto the dirt floor of the abandoned barn, but from the way Rhaegal set upon it with gusto was worth it to Jon. It hadn’t been a month since the green dragon had flown into his life at just the right moment, but he almost felt like a… son to Jon. Slowly running a hand along his neck, Rhaegal had etched himself right alongside Ghost in his gallery of loved ones, non human lest he was.

“I still can’t fucking believe it.” Jon turned to glare at Grenn, who quickly shut up. Only Jon, Ghost, Sam, and Tormund could approach the dragon without complete and utter caution - and Rhaegal only tolerated Sam and Tormund. The brother in black knew he couldn’t take care of a dragon without more people than already knew, so in came Grenn, Pyp, and Finn. His brothers among the brotherhood, friends since the beginning, Jon knew he could trust them with his life. Along with them came a young boy, a northerner by the name of Ollie. His family was murdered by wildling bandits that had gotten over the wall - ones Jon had personally tracked down and killed upon his return. He was immediately loyal, and the only one among the group that watched the dragon with awe instead of suppressed terror.

Petting Rhaegal’s snout, Jon made his way to the door. “I’ll be back soon, Rhaegal.” Another death glare was in due for Pyp, who looked at him as if he sprouted two heads. ‘They looked at me like that when Ghost started to grow big, and this is much more bizarre.’ Exiting the barn, Jon turned to all of them. “Alright, now you can talk.”

“How in the fucking hell did you get a dragon?” Finn burst out. “I mean, of all the people that the long dead beasts of fire would go to…”

“Alright, alright… enough.” Jon was humble, but that went too far.

Tormund laughed. “He’s got a point, king crow.” Despite Alliser Thorne being the acting commander - Jon finding out that Mormont had died in a mutiny - Tormund still saw Jon as the big man in the Night’s Watch. Hiding out here as Rhaegal’s personal guard instead of being a prisoner in Castle Black, most of Jon’s cadre regarded him with suspicion, Ollie most of all. The redheaded warrior was an acquired taste, in Jon’s experience. “You crows should head back before the asshole starts asking questions. I’ll hold the fort here.” Clasping Tormund on the back, Jon and his group mounted their horses and galloped in the direction of Castle Black.

“Umm… I thought about it Jon,” Sam said, their horses slowing to a trot. “I looked at some books in the library…”

“Nothing shocking about that,” murmured Grenn teasingly, only to clam up following another glare from Jon. Everyone still remembered what happened during training with Ghost - Thorne and his loyalists hated the ‘pig,’ while the current circle were all friends.

“Only those with Valyrian blood had bonds with dragons, and those were quite deep. A dragon and his rider would connect for life.”

“Whoooo, Snow. Nothin’s getting over da wall now,” hooted Finn.

Jon rolled his eyes. “Shut up.”

“I have to ask,” Sam continued. “Do you have any Targaryen blood in you? Any Valyrian at all?”

He shook his head. “Nothing on the Stark side. My mother…” Perhaps she had Valyrian blood after
all, but then his father had said she was of the north. ‘Oh father, why didn’t you just tell me?’ Jon
would never know who gave birth to him - only being apart from Daenerys hurt him more. “I don’t
know.”

“Has to be it. There’s no other explanation…”

“Enough Sam!” Jon cut him off. “Thorne doesn’t care about what you and I discovered about the
white walkers. He won’t do anything to stop it, and is just going to battle with the wildling army till
we’re all walking corpses.”

“They should all die,” Ollie muttered, still bitter about his family.”

“Ollie, it’s better to have them alive and fighting our common enemy than amongst the dead. We
took down the swine that attacked your village already.” He quieted down, pondering Jon’s
arguments. The lad didn’t know whether to believe Jon, but then again, Jon had a dragon. “Alliser
hates me…”

“He hates all of us, Jon,” remarked Grenn.

Jon shook his head. “No, me especially, and he’s going to ignore any plan I come up with. We’ll be
dead by the time he gives in.” He gripped the reins tight in his fist. “I’m going to have to run for Lord
Commander.” The soon to be known fact that none thought he could succeed wouldn’t deter him.

A cloud of gloom had covered Highgarden since the Battle of Blackwater Bay. Their beloved Loras,
heir to House Tyrell, was killed by King Joffrey according to the bards. The vast majority of the
Tyrell Army perished on the city walls, or were crushed in the Battle of Bitterbridge. Held down by
a holding force while Tywin Lannister moved to rescue the capitol, he marched back and defeated
Mace Tyrell in a strategic envelopment that wiped out the other half of the combined army of the
Reach. Only exhaustion and bankruptcy kept the Reach from falling right there with both its warden
and heir dead, leaving the fair Rose of Highgarden and the Queen of Thorns to manage the battered
domain following the disasters.

And now, a visitor from the capitol - an important one - was here. Someone that could change the
course of the entire Realm.

“I understand how difficult it could be for you to trust me…”

Margaery, the Rose of Highgarden, scoffed. “That is an understatement. I know it was you that
caused Renly’s death.”

“It had to be done,” Melisandre conceded. “For the sake of justice. Besides, I know you prefer
another.” The statement caused Margaery to blink, the Red Woman turning to the iron matriarch of
House Tyrell. “King Joffrey is ready to begin his project, but to do so he needs men and resources.
Hand Tywin seeks to use the strengthened army to crush all Houses that opposed him, while Lord
Baelish is planning to strip them of all riches to pay for their projects. Prince Doran of Dorne has
formed an alliance despite the bad blood, his son Tristan betrothed to Princess Myrcella.”

“Dorne would never side with the Lannisters. Even someone as weak and spineless as Doran.”

A small smile curved on Melisandre’s face. “Lady Tyrell, you could easily have me killed as soon as
look at me. Why would I lie to you?”

Oleanna narrowed her eyes. “Why are you here, then?”
“Because the Lord of Light wills it,” was the cryptic response.

Before either Tyrell could respond, a dispatch rider burst into the room. Much of the Tyrell Army had been destroyed, but there were still enough guards to man Highgarden. “My Lady, the Lannisters are moving!” he croaked in labored breaths. “Tywin Lannister is on the march. His advance guard has already entered the Reach.” The Queen of Thorns stayed stone faced, while Margaery began to panic.

Oaken cane smacking against the stone, Oleanna chuckled. “Dear Margaery, you must always plan five moves ahead. Our army is but a shadow of its former self after your brother and Renly lost it all either on the walls of King’s Landing or to Tywin Lannister’s pincer following that debacle.” She leaned her frame on a stone column flanking the window. “I have stashed fifteen of our grain transports in a small port north of Oldtown, just in case we needed to escape.”

Margaery felt numb, the level of denial that had endured since Renly’s death giving forth to glaring, chilling reality - and it petrified her. “We have nowhere to go, grandmother. Everyone we have is either allied with Joffrey or not a friend to us. Perhaps we should try to make peace, offer me to Joffrey in betrothal to keep him from coming after us…”

“Joffrey was always going to come after us! The Florents allied with him, and they need our resources for whatever gigantic project that madman thinks he needs to build.” Oleanna gripped her granddaughter’s shoulders, shaking her. “Use the mind I gave you! We will die, and with you the last of the Tyrell blood will die if we don’t leave! You will go! If I have to beat you till near death I will!” Faced with the wrath of the Queen of Thorns, aged but not yet beaten, Margaery’s protests collapsed. In time she would deploy her grandmother’s will - just not today, and not to said grandmother.

Watching the familial interaction from afar, Melisandre waited for quiet to settle before speaking. “There is one safe place for you, somewhere that will not be threatened by the Lannisters, by the golden false prophet.”

“And where is that?” Oleanna asked, sick of the riddles - she hated the prophetic claptrap. Melisandre simply smiled. “The place I have foreseen, the place resided by who that was promised.”

Viserys was a light sleeper. It wasn’t by choice, but living on the run from Robert the Usurper’s dogs and, after Daenerys tossed him out of the Khalasar, the collected scum and criminality of society. Now, confined to the dreary cell in Winterfell Castle - ironic considering his hatred for the Stark family - such a skill came in handy to prepare her for whatever threats came his way. In this place, booted feet clacking on the stone floors sent a shiver of dread through Viserys’ body.

Door groaning as the key unlocked it and the hinges creaked, the presence of a hulking guard. He involuntarily cringed, spotting the truncheon hefted in his hands. “Get up!” The guard didn’t wait for Viserys to comply, barreling in and yanking him upright.

“Unhand me!” he mustered, defiant to the end. “I am the dragon!”

“Shut up!” came the responding hiss, guard pulling him out roughly.

The sunlight was soon hitting Viserys’ skin – trapped indoors for the last month, the shining orb in the sky was greatly welcome. Truncheon prodding onto his back, he stepped along freshly cut wood as he gazed at the teams of men repairing the partially burned castle. ‘So the Starks suffered a
Essentially throwing him inside one particular room, the guards shut it with a bang. Viserys glanced around furtively. A roaring fire cracking in the fireplace, room dark and cozy but sparse of furniture. Only a single table and two chairs decorated the room - with one being occupied. And sitting on it was the same man that captured him, still with that same satisfied grin on his face. The one that made Viserys’ blood freeze. “Welcome, Prince Viserys,” announced the man, mouth full of well cooked beef. “Come sit. I won’t kill you.” Eyes hardened. “I may if you don’t sit, though.” Viserys sat. The same broken, hunched over man shuffled over, setting another plate of food. It smelled delicious. “Thank you, Reek.”

Viserys took a bite, using whatever self control he had to not gobble it all down. “Who is that?”

“No one important. Used to be the heir to the Iron Islands, but not anymore.” Meeting Viserys’ eyes, he chuckled. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Ramsay of House Bolton, heir to the Bolton title and future Warden of the North.”

Violet eyes inspected him warily. He didn’t have the noble air of a great aristocrat - even for the barren wasteland of the north. “I thought the Starks held Winterfell.”

“They did, but my father and I took it from them.” Ramsay laughed cheerily. “Nedd, Arya, Bran, Rickon, and Robb Stark are dead. Sansa and Catelyn are trapped in King’s Landing, and Jon Snow is stuck in Castle Black where he can’t bother anyone.”

“Good.” Anger boiled within Viserys. “You should have that Snow bastard killed,”

Ramsay’s eyebrow rose. “Oh? I’ll talk to my father about that.” Inside his mind was racing. ‘And why would you want that to happen?’ Whatever reason, he knew he could manipulate it.

“Forgive me, Bolton, but why am I here? Why haven’t you killed me, besides the fact that you couldn’t have the balls to kill the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms.”

Ramsay’s lips curled into the rather wolfish grin that Viserys had seen before. “You see, we are both in a bit of a quandary when it comes to our goals of power and victory. You have the legitimacy but not the resources. I have the resources but not the legitimacy.” There was a pregnant pause before he continued. “I am proposing an alliance. A bartering of sorts.”

“And what would we barter?” Viserys was starting to warm up to this place.

“Simple.” The grin widened into something approaching a sneer. “I’ll get you your throne. Afterwards, you give me your sister.”

Windows left open, the cool breeze wafted into the enormous bedchamber atop the Pyramid. The dank, stuffy heat was vented well and made the desert tropical landscape bearable. And even in such comfort, Daenerys’ body refused to drift off to sleep. Resting below the covers, staring at the ceiling, no change of position could ease her discomfort with the situation. Even as her hold on the city was becoming more and more secure by the day… her heart clenched in anguish - hidden anguish, but anguish nonetheless.

Twisting onto her side with a huff, her hair splayed out like a halo over the plush pillow. A hand reached out to ghost over the empty space to her left. So alone - the size of the bed only magnified how lonely and empty her life was. All the power in the world, all the glory of reclaiming for her House what rightfully belonged to it had no meaning if she was forced to enjoy the spoils alone and
unloved. Daenerys closed her eyes, imagining that instead of an empty sheet her hand was running over the muscular shoulders of her love. ‘Oh Jon, I miss you.’ Nearly four years since they last held each other and she still remembered everything about him. Dany forced herself to, not wanting him to be just another forgotten memory, one she knew of but couldn’t really discern anymore. ‘I wish you were here with your family, ruling with me. Being this Queen’s King.’

A gentle creaking of the door caused her to bolt upright in the bed. A hand involuntarily went for Saracen resting on the nightstand next to her. No assassin would take her down without a fight. “Show yourself.” Her voice was cold and even.

What responded was a soft, unmistakable voice. “Issa?”

Dany immediately melted, putting her sword back and softening her own voice. “Arya, sweetling? What are you doing, come here.” Even with the darkness, she extended her arms in a welcoming gesture. Whispering scuffles of bare feet - nearly inaudible - brought not only her precious daughter, but her handsome son as well. “My darlings, is something wrong?”

“Bad dream, Issa,” Rhaegar replied, his lip quivering. Arya nodded, indicating the same. Even the scions of two mighty families, of wolf and dragon, got scared.

Their childlike fear broke their mother’s heart. “Come here with Issa on the bed, sweetlings.” She couldn’t resist them at all, being nearly the perfect blend of their father and her - of Stark and Targaryen. “Oomph,” Dany grunted as Arya scrambled over her, settling into her left side as Rhaegar settled into her right. She chuckled softly at the coziness of it all, wrapping hands around both of them and embracing them tightly.

“Your Grace.” The door opened wider and a worried looking Grey Worm stuck his head in. Short sword out, he looked ready to do battle. “The twins are missing.”

Dany wanted to laugh. “Look at the bed, Grey Worm.” The knowing widening of his eyes was priceless.

“Oh. Well, good then,” he finally managed to say in heavily accented common tongue. “I will be nearby if you need anything, your grace.” With that, he closed the door to her chambers.

Settling into a comfortable collective position, Dany kissed each of her three-year old twins on the head. “Want to tell me what happened?” They shook their heads, tightening against her. “Alright, what would you want me to talk about.”

“Tell us about daddy,” Arya said.

“Was he really a great warrior like Uncle Jorah says?” Rhaegar asked.

Deep down, Dany knew that the twins would end up asking about their father. Given that Jorah was the only one aside from her that even knew of him - though Ned Stark was legend even halfway across the world - it was only natural he’d be the one to prompt their questions. In any case, Daenerys had no compunction to answer. Just that thinking of Jon brought a pained longing to her heart. “He is, sweetling. One of the best.” If Jon had joined the Night’s Watch as he wanted to, he had to be a great one. “Your daddy is one of the finest swordsmen in Westeros.”

“Where is he now?” Arya asked with wide eyes - they were a stormy grey, exactly like his. “Why isn’t he with us, Issa? Does he not want us?”

Dany stroked her silver hair, trying to comfort her daughter. “Of course not, sweetling.” How could she tell Arya or Rhaegar that Jon didn’t even know they existed? ‘If Jon knew, he’d be here.
Renouncing his vows and putting his life at risk.’ Only Dany wished he were here as well, damn any consequences. “Daddy loves both of you, my sweet dragonwolves, but he is a Watcher on the Wall. A Stark has always served on the wall, protecting against the dangers of the icy north. Bad people, monsters, he fights to protect the realms of men…” She trailed off, noticing the soft breaths of her two children. They were both asleep, serene and curled up next to her. Soon she joined them, images of her long lost love flashing in her mind.
Lord Bolton

The sigil of House Tyrell was a rose, a symbol of the most radiant beauty and perfection. Highgarden castle truly complied with such a daunting standard to live up to. Nestled on the banks of the Mander River, sparkling waters glinting in the sun as they flowed to the Western Ocean, the white castle walls oversaw all for miles around from atop a lone hill. Vibrant green and other colors dotted the slopes under the battlements - roofs equally colorful - from the apple, citrus, and magnolia trees carefully maintained by the groundskeepers. Across the landscape as far as the eye could see were the flat wheatfields of the breadbasket of Westeros, stalks fluttering in the tranquil breeze as the farmers tended their newest record harvest.

Once Tyrell but now watched over by the golden lion banners of House Lannister hung over the castle walls, Highgarden intrigued Lord Tywin Lannister, Hand of the King. Even with the sheer gloom and decay that infected the once shining example of Westerosi nobility following the deaths of their Lord and Heir, the rose gardens were carefully maintained and the grounds immaculate. Sullen from seeing countless smallfolk and prisoners rounded up for “retributive labor” - as Lord Baelish put it - by the hated Lannister armies of the despised King Joffrey, the groundskeepers never shirked from their duties. Intriguing, but ultimately one question that Tywin found quick to dismiss.

“My Lord,” stated Kevan Lannister, Tywin’s cousin and a trusted commander - it had been he who kept the Tyrell army pinned while Tywin marched to save King’s Landing from Renly Baratheon.

“We have proof that the Red Woman was here.”

Tywin nodded, hands spread over the map table, face blank as stone. “She must have warned them then. Margaery and the Queen of Thorns could be anywhere at this point.” It was… unfortunate, but didn’t change the calculus one bit. The Reach was firmly in Royal hands.

Then again… there were always potential problems with any certainty. “While the rightful heirs to Highgarden are still at large, your hold over the Reach will always be in doubt, Lord Tywin.” Leaning casually on the far wall, Prince Oberyn Martell’s presence irritated Tywin to no end. Required to be included in any strategy conference due to leading the Dornish armies as a direct result of his brother’s illnesses, there was no love lost between them. Oberyn hated Tywin for the actions of the Mountain during Robert’s Rebellion, and the hate had only grown in the years since.

Nevertheless, Dorne was an ally of King Joffrey of House Baratheon, first of his name - only secure due to the lack of any other recourse and the betrothal of Tywin’s granddaughter to Prince Tristyn, but an alliance nonetheless. Dornish armies had invaded the Reach from the south, secured the fealty of House Tarly at Hornhill, and prevented any real resistance from forming along with the stronger Lannister pincer to the north. Hence Prince Oberyn. “They have no army, nor much treasure. The Tyrell coffers are only a small amount less than what our intelligence were forecasting.”

“Believe whatever makes you happy, Lord Lannister,” though flippant, Tywin could detect the hidden contempt in Oberyn’s tone. “Still, I will obey my brother’s commitments to the letter. I hope that certain… individuals in the capitol are as loyal to their official masters as I am.” Dropping the innuendo, he chuckled and headed off to find Elyria. ‘The girls of the Reach are beautiful indeed.’

Narrowing his eyes, Tywin shrugged it off. Oberyn could be blowing smoke out of his ass, but he would investigate upon getting back to King’s Landing. Currently, the Tyrell treasury would have to be loaded and shipped out. Plenty to ease the realm’s crushing debt and help pay for his grandson’s building projects.
Empty of all but the small council and the most loyal of all the Sovereignguards - having been renamed to highlight the changed nature of the King’s authority - the cavernous hollow of the throne room served to amplify the booming anger in the King’s voice. “How have they not been captured?!” Joffrey’s face was red, screaming his lungs out. The propaganda persona crafted by Littlefinger portrayed the King as the wise, precocious leader guiding the Realm to a new age of glory. With the vast majority of King Robert’s staff purged until only a few loyalists remained, Tyrion was one of the only people who knew the real Joffrey of House Baratheon, First of his Name. “I ordered her head on a pike!”

Figure hunched over, Littlefinger angled his body towards the Iron Throne. It was now policy to never gaze upon the sovereign. Something about the “mere mortal” eyes that weren’t fit to even behold the figure of their King. Tyrion couldn’t believe that his predictions of how his nephew would govern would be wrong - of how the “Vicious Idiot King” would outdo even his most terrifying nightmares. “All Highest, it appears that they were warned of the combined attack by Lord Tywin and Prince Oberyn by the Lady Melisandre…”

“I KNEW SHE’D BETRAY ME!” Joffrey thundered, standing from his throne. Aside from the guards, the King’s Fool, and a servant girl - meek and trembling as she and the Fool were the only persons who could set eyes on him, and Joffrey had a high turnover among personal servants - Baelish, Tyrion, Lord Varys, Maester Pycelle, and Queen Cersei were the only souls before him. “How could any of you not know that the bitch was set to save the Tyrell whores?!”

“If I may, All Highest.” Stepping forward, Tyrion found it far easier to avert his gaze than the others - he could feel Cersei’s dagger like eyes trained on him. “I am sure that Lord Baelish’s lack of oversight over the Red Witch wasn’t intentional.” The Imp felt a sense of schadenfreude at lessening Littlefinger’s loyal advisor image. “She had hidden her true intentions from all of us. On my orders, the Sovereignguard searched her room, and they found this letter addressed to you personally.” Tyrion had read it, and it made no sense to him:

Enjoy the fruits of your realm, King of Gold. The golden one will come so far, come so close to achieving the great victory and rule over all he sees, only to fall.

Azor Ahai is reborn. The Prince that is Promised will fulfill his destiny. The mark will find you, King of Gold. And with it, so shall the Lord of Light.

Joffrey’s gloved hand smacked the servant girl on the back of the head. “Bring it to me, whore!” Scurrying to Tyrion, matted hair covering her eyes from his vision, the frightened mouse of a thing gave the parchment to Joffrey. Out of the corner of his eye, Tyrion watched as Joffrey struggled to parse the lines - he had never been the best reader. But eventually he did, and it was as if all blood had drained from him.

Minutes passed before he spoke once more. “Find her, Varys.” His voice was low, as if all the anger had been replaced with dread. “Destroy her from existence.”

“As you wish, All Highest,” the Master of Whisperers replied.

“All Highest.” Cersei stepped forward - all happiness, whatever amount she had ever had, was gone with the deterioration of the relationship between her and her eldest son. Not even Jamie’s return had changed that. “Perhaps it is time to make sure your hold on the Realm is secured.” After an almost inaudible acknowledgement from Joffrey, she continued. “The Riverlands are under our control, as well as... Dorne.” From the way she ground out the last word, Tyrion knew that if Joffrey turned on him, Cersei wouldn’t bat an eye - she still hadn’t forgiven him for sending Myrcella away. “We need to secure the Vale, as well as the North.”
“Mother, I presumed that Grandfather’s deal with Lord Bolton gave us the North already.”

‘Where is she going with this?’ Cersei may have been an overly emotional bitch, but Tyrion would never claim she wasn’t smart. “The northerners are a wild lot, and what I propose would solidify the Vale as well. We give Lord Bolton’s son Sansa Stark.” Now this sounded like the Cersei Tyrion knew. With Robb Stark dead and the North vanquished, there was no need for Sansa to remain in the south.

Littlefinger approached, a bit frantically. “All Highest, allow me to accompany Lady Stark to the Eyrie and Winterfell. I can represent your interests in dealing with the Boltons and Arryns.”

“Very well,” Joffrey said, his voice still hesitant. “Anything else?”

Tyrion noticed Littlefinger recovering from his little episode over Sansa Stark. ‘He still loves Catelyn.’ Had it not been for him, the dwarf knew, all the Starks would have died at the Red Wedding. Baelish hated the wolves of Winterfell, but Sansa was all Tully, at least in looks. Tyrion pitied her, that being one of the reasons Joffrey despised him. “All Highest, the Iron Islands are still in rebellion against you, and have yet to submit.”

“You must kill them all.” Unlike the past literal screaming sessions, Joffrey’s heart wasn’t into the bloodthirsty command. ‘All this over the Red Woman?’ Everyone ignored it out of self-preservation, but Tyrion still pondered the turn of events.

“There is another way, All Highest. The brother of Balon Greyjoy has reached out to me, asking for the great King of Gold’s backing in ruling the Iron Islands for himself. He has offered his alliance, and a fleet of ships once the take over is complete.”

Firmness began to return to Joffrey, the idea of an ocean-going Navy to extend his power quite appealing. “Do what you need to do, Lord Littlefinger. Dismissed.” And with that, he whisked himself away, servant scurrying behind him. Leaving the throne room, Tyrion noticed Cersei talking with Pycelle. As soon as they locked eyes, her look blazed fire.

As soon as his sister was out of sight, Tyrion collapsed onto the stone wall. Breathing hard, the weight of every atrocity bearing down on him, it became unbearable. ‘That monster will destroy us all, corrupt us all.’ Baelish had unleashed a force that no one truly understood, he and the Mountain fitting Joffrey with the same self-confidence in himself that were possessed by Aegon the Conqueror and Robert Baratheon. While Aegon’s drive was ambition and Robert’s was torpor and gluttony, Joffrey’s was madness. With the initial thousands of smallfolk “serfs” gathering to begin labor on Joffrey’s monument to his own thirst for self-aggrandizement, death had become mortal.

“My Lion.” Shae’s gentle hands were like cool water to an overheated body. Tyrion’s breathing slowed, enough to bring his wits out of the cloud of terror that had engulfed him - a cloud not even alcohol could solve. “What is wrong?” Tyrion looked up, seeing the concern in her eyes.

Clarity dawned on him. “We have to leave. We have to escape this.”

“And I know just the place.” Neither had noticed Lord Varys approach right behind them.

Slamming the door shut to his private quarters, the King of Gold found himself sucking in labored breaths. The walls were closing in, crushing his chest like a vice. Not even torturing his servants, or his Fool, would break his mood. All the talks of his growing empire and consolidating the gains passed over him, the message from the Red Witch searing itself into his black soul.
Hunched over, sweat pouring down his brow, suddenly an arctic chill permeated the room. “No, it can’t be!” Turning, Joffrey was surrounded by the corpse of his father - same as years ago.

“The King of Gold, long shall he reign, no mortal man, no normal bane.”

“So I shall rule forever?” he asked hesitantly.

“The Lord of Light, the previous son, his rule will win, his time soon come.”

“How do I stop him?”

“A woman born of storm, fair of skin and eye, the golden face she sees, a realm divide.”

His mind was racing. “I must stop this woman. I must never see her.”

Blood seeped from his gutted belly. “The mark of the warrior, branded by one employed, one God she crowns, one God destroyed.”

An overwhelming headache blinded Joffrey, and a split second later, he opened his eyes. The specter of Robert Baratheon had vanished.

An arrow sailed past his head, embedding itself into the ground several yards away. Cursing, Robb Stark cracked the reins, urging his horse ever forward. ‘Almost, almost there.’ The icy towering sheet of the Wall loomed large in the distance, the huts of Mole’s Town only a hundred yards to his right. Robb could taste the safety of the battlements of Castle Black.

Trouble was, so did Walder Frey’s bounty hunters. They found his trail only days before. And like a dog with a bone, they weren’t giving it up. If Robb didn’t get to Castle Black quickly enough, his head would be in a basket heading for the Twins soon enough.

Behind him, the ragged line of horsemen charged across the unpaved, dirt road, clumps of grey-brown soil kicked up behind them. Mounted archers aimed their reflex bows, many just missing vital portions of Robb’s body. He urged the horse to go faster. The animal might be blown because of this, but with the dark walls of the castle looming nearer and nearer below the towering ice and stone carved by magic, it would only be a sprint to the finish.

“Kill him!” screamed the lead bounty hunter, watching as his quarry neared the still open gates of Castle Black. One of his archers readied his reflex bow to make one last shot when a javelin embedded itself into his midsection, toppling him from his horse. “All stop!” Obscenities tumbled from his lips as the castle gate swung shut.

Burly men in black cloaks muscled Robb Stark to the top of the castle walls. “Who are you?! What are you doing here!?” Eying him over, the Night’s Watchman hollered down the battlements. “Where is the Lord Commander?!”

“He’s here!” yelled the reply. Robb’s eyes widened, recognizing that voice. ‘Is that… the Lord Commander?’ Sure enough, Jon Snow emerged at the top of the stairs - older and bearing the scars of experience. Behind him was a young kid, and a red-bearded man in furs that had to be a wildling. Jon’s eyes widened at spotting Robb, then shifted back to the milling bounty hunters. His men tightened their bowstrings. “I am the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. What business do you have here?”

The lead hunter spat on the ground. “I bear the authority of Lord Walder Frey, Warden of the Riverlands. A dangerous fugitive and enemy of His Grace, Joffrey Baratheon, is within the castle.
Glancing at Robb with a quizzical look on his face, Jon hardened his stare upon the bounty hunters. “Why does it seem that you never really had this fugitive in the first place for me to return him?” Nearly all of the brothers in black started laughing - even Robb managed a smirk. ‘Oh, I missed you Jon.’ “The Wall is a refuge for all willing to fight to hold it. If you dare to enter, it will be your heads decorating our battlements.” By the reactions of the watchmen, Jon’s threat was not an idle one.

By the looks of the reactions below, their foes thought the same. “You’ll regret this, bastard.” Making obscene gestures, one by one the bounty hunters galloped off.

Two Starks stared at each other, the first glimpse each had for the other man since that sunny summer’s day three years before. Both had changed, grown, hardened, suffered, lost… “Lord Commander,” Robb finally said, respect clouding his tone.

“Lord Stark,” Jon countered, nodding his head.

Emotion finally overcoming the two brothers, their arms wrapped around each other in a crushing, fraternal hug.

“Attention!” came the barking command in low Valyrian. The column of men - all freedman recruits from among the slums of Meereen - halted in perfect order. “Form left!” As if controlled by some unseen force, they swiveled into a row, a hundred wide and three deep. “Advance!” And with that they marched toward an imaginary foe hundreds of yards away on the parade ground. From her perch above on the lower balcony, traditionally used by Kings of Meereen to address their subjects while remaining inside the Great Pyramid, Daenerys watched her newest soldiers. “Magnificent, aren’t they?”

“Indeed, Khaleesi,” replied Ser Jorah, standing beside her. “They are far from the caliber of the Unsullied, but skilled soldiers they are.”

A small chuckle left Dany’s lips. “Amazing how Theodosius was able to whip them up into shape so quickly.” She could see the dashing figure below atop his horse, clad in light Westerosi garb emblazoned with the Targaryen sigil. It brought satisfaction to Dany seeing fluttering flags bearing the Three-headed Dragon interspersed among the men. It had also been Theodosius’ idea, to make the army one of the Targaryen realm rather than that of the individual factions fighting for her - the Unsullied had already adopted the same “color bearers,” but the wild Dothraki were resisting and the Second Sons absolutely refused.

“The program has been an overwhelming success, Khaleesi,” Missandei stated. “We were planning for conscription, but the sheer amount of volunteers made that unnecessary. Grey Worm told me that all of them are enthusiastic to fight for Mhysa.” Overhead, two loud screeches didn’t even turn heads among the marching soldiers - indifference to the presence of the two mighty dragons being one of the first things Theodosius and Grey Worm taught the recruits.

Dany glanced to the sky and smiled at Balerion and Edderon play-fighting above the city. Despite some teething problems - especially for Balerion, who had the nasty habit of attacking the livestock of the mountain sheep and cattle ranchers - they were beginning to exert their aggression through less dangerous means. They loved the twins, and their mother, Dany even starting to ride her New Black Dread. Although, she thought with sadness, the tempering of their anger may have been as a result of their brother’s disappearance. She missed Rhaegal. ‘The second of my loved ones to leave me.’
A thought occurred to Dany, one that she had been putting off - but now was as good a time as any. “Missandei, will you check on the twins. I believe it is time for their reading lessons.”

“Of course, Khaleesi,” the Narthi translator stated, bowing and stepping out. It was just her and Jorah now, alone.

“I heard things at home, your Grace, things I have just now pieced together. Ask him where his real loyalties lie.”

Ser Barristan’s words echoed in her head. What was she supposed to think - her oldest advisor, the closest person that she ever had to a father. Did he betray her? Dany could count on her fingers the number she could trust implicitly. ‘My babies, my children, Missandei, Grey Worm, Ser Barristan, Jon…’ Could she not even count on his loyalty? The grey-blue dress that fit her curves snugly suddenly felt constricting. It couldn’t be true.

Out with it. “Ser Jorah, I have been informed that you may not be as completely loyal to me as I have thought.”

Turning, Dany saw his breath hitch. ‘It is true.’ She felt like vomiting. “Khaleesi,” his eyes begged for forgiveness, “I was in a desperate state. Stateless and unwanted…”

“And so you turned against me? Gave your oath to another?” Her hand tightened on Saracen, always strapped to her hip. Suddenly it made sense. “What did you do for this person?”

Rooted in place, Jorah knew he had to come clean or face her wrath. “I sent him letters, of what transpired in your life. From the time we left Pentos to the time the twins were born…”

“Is that why Drogo was poisoned? Did Robert intend to poison me because of what you told him?” It took every bit of her willpower not to scream.

“Of course not, Khaleesi. It was not Robert whom I sent it to.”

“Then. Who?”

“Ned Stark.”

Silence descended over the two of them. Knees weak, Dany took a step back. Her jaw dropped. “Ned Stark?”

Jorah nodded. “He found me before your wedding.” His hand reached into a small pouch beneath his shirt, drawing out a piece of parchment. “He offered me this, a full pardon, in exchange for my oath to protect you.” Dany took the pardon in her hand, reading the contents. It was dated the day before her wedding. “He said that he had to protect his family. It wasn’t until the twins were born that I truly knew what he meant.”

Sitting, Dany felt tears prick at her eyes. “You are dismissed, Ser Jorah.” And he did, leaving her to ponder the munificence of someone supposed to be the arch nemesis of her family.

‘The grandfather of my children.’

Celebration should have been the mood at Winterfell, and for good reason. For the first time since Robb Stark departed for the South - soon to be King in the North - the castle’s Lord had finally returned to dwell within its halls. However, none of the usual throngs of happy subjects and wreaths
of blue roses greeted Roose Bolton. As the man that killed their Lord, the pregnant Lady of Winterfell, and sent the beloved former Lady to the Lannister dungeons, Bolton was hated. Branded a traitor and an oathbreaker, the vilest of insults. No one would say it out loud, but the Boltons would have no love from their new subjects.

This fact was not the cause of Lord Roose’s sullen mood. Truth be told, he could care less what the smallfolk thought of him. If they so much as looked at him the wrong way, he’d have no compunction ordering his men to slaughter them as he did to the pregnant wife of Robb Stark. No, his anger was directed at something else entirely - or rather, someone. “Do you have any idea the jeopardy you have put our cause in?”

“Calm down, Lord Bolton,” Ramsay Bolton remarked back. His father had legitimized him as his heir soon after arriving at Winterfell - by the looks of things he was regretting it. “Do you not realize how much of an opportunity this is for us?” A hand gestured to the figure of Viserys Targaryen, once more clad in the royal garments suitable for a person of his stature. “He is the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“In exchange for your loyalty Lord Bolton,” Viserys said magnanimously - a rather hard tone for him to master. “I will grant you complete dominion over the North, as well as name you my hand.”

Roose regarded the Targaryen as one would regard a slug - Ramsay did too, but was more inconspicuous about it. “And you consider yourself in the same caliber as Tywin Lannister of Petyr Baelish?” He turned to his bastard son. “Obtaining power is noble, but only smartly! If King’s Landing found out about this, both our heads would be on a pike!”

Rage was bitten back. “I have spoken with Ned Karstark and Smalljon Umber, and they are both willing to back us in installing Viserys on the throne.” Not exactly, but who would begrudge a little white lie? “I am sure both the Freys and the Vale would back us, not to mention Dorne and the Reach.”

“I have prepared ravens to be sent at your command, my Lord,” said the new Maester, sent by the Citadel upon Maester Luwin’s death.

Narrowing his eyes, Roose sighed. “You are still my trueborn son, and I cannot undo it. You will still be my heir.” ‘Until a new son is born from my new wife.’ The words were left unsaid, but Ramsay understood them all the same.

“Of course... father.” Smiling warmly at Roose, a split second later the elder Bolton found a knife embedded between his ribs - impaling his heart. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. A cackling laugh left Ramsay, getting hard at the sight of his father’s shock. “Poor, naive Lord Bolton. So busy betraying others, couldn’t see how you were the one being betrayed.” Ramsay pulled out the knife, watching his father collapse lifeless on the stone tile.

“Reek, clean this up!” he yelled at what was once Theon Greyjoy. Wicked, twisted grin faded into a sad frown. “Maester, inform the men. Lord Roose Bolton has died. Poisoned, by his enemies.”

Swallowing, the Maester nodded. “Poisoned by his enemies.” Viserys couldn’t help but smirk. Now Ramsay was Warden of the North, and now - secretly - hand of the Targaryen King.
Sons of the Harpy

Normally a boisterous cacophony of shouting and backslapping - comprised of essentially the dregs of the Seven Kingdoms, only during official duties would anyone expect the Brothers of the Night’s Watch to act in any disciplined sort of manner - the communal hall was instead quiet. Devoid of any real life. Growing up among the boisterous Northerners of Winterfell, Jon normally enjoyed the lively rough and tumble. But with his brooding nature, he relished his solitude. His father was the same way.

The whole matter reminded him of the meeting Jon had partaken in before his long infiltration mission north of the wall. Instead, now he was seated at the head of the table, the youngest Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch in three centuries. A great honor, but one he had never expected.

Glancing to his right, there was another eventuality he had never expected. Emotion surged through him at the sight of the brother he once thought dead. Any hit of protests by Thorne or his cronies had been silenced with a murderous glare, Robb being given immediate asylum among the brotherhood. Thanking all the gods for their grace in keeping his brother alive, Jon had no compunction including him in his own inner circle - having spent the last week locked up in the rooms Jon gave him, all felt he needed something to draw him out of what was haunting him. Joining them were Sam, Maester Aemon, and Tormund, the wily Wildling starting to grow on Jon. Much as he tried to deny it, it went both ways.

“I still can’t come to accept this, Jon,” Robb stated after a long silence. “White walkers and wights north of the wall, like the bedtime stories of our childhood? They’re just myths.” He then shrugged his shoulders. “Then again, I would have also thought one mad if he said my half-brother would end up having a tame dragon, so who am I to doubt the plausibility of this story.”

A hearty chuckle leaving his lips, Jon rubbed Ghost’s furry head, the direwolf resting beside him. “Believe me, brother, no one was more shocked than I… though Tormund nearly pissed himself.” The wildling sent him a murderous look in response. “But the threat is serious. Mance Rayder and others north of the Wall basically told me that the entire Wildling host is seeking to fight their way south because of the threat of the dead.”

Tormund nodded. “Aye, better to die trying to be free of them than end up part of the Army of the Dead.”

“So are they planning their attack?” Robb didn’t trust Tormund - no real Northerner would toward a wildling, too much bad blood. “With their numbers they could do it easily.”

“Mance isn’t stupid - King Crow over there,” he pointed at Jon. “Knows all of our plans. Unless one of the fucking fools is now in charge, and they wouldn’t because the Wildlings will only follow Mance, he’s waiting at Hardhome for another chance.”

“How far would they follow Mance?” Four pairs of eyes looked at Jon.

Meeting his eyes, Tormund shrugged. “Likely to their deaths if need be, though I can’t say for sure. Ya’ can’t tame a Free Folk.”

“Where are you going with this, Lord Commander?” asked Aemon, speaking up for the first time. No hostility was in his voice, only curiosity.

Sighing, Jon looked over all of them. “For 8,000 years the Night’s Watch has sworn to guard the
Realms of Men, and for 8,000 years we have failed in that oath. The Free Folk, all of them, are part of the Realms of Men.”

Robb looked incredulous. “You can’t possibly believe that Jon! You’ve seen the wildlings rape and kill south of the wall. You’ve fought them since coming here…”

“And I’ve fought with them, brother!” Jon snapped back. “I know what the threat is, north of the wall. And it isn’t the Free Folk.” He turned to Tormund. “You may not be walking around in chains, but you are a prisoner of us all the same. What if I free you. Can you convince Mance to accept my proposal?”

“What proposal?”

Taking over - as one of the stewards, it was Sam’s job to go over logistics. “Essentially, we have enough land north of Last Hearth to settle thousands of people far away from any other northern domain. The ground is suitable for certain crops and is perfect for grazing… whatever you do graze”

“You will be allowed south of the wall, I will see to it. As long as the Free Folk agree to fight with us.”

A laugh left the red-bearded wildling. “The day I ask my comrades to fight with a crow, is the day they cut my guts out of my belly and make me eat them. They’ll never bend the knee to you.”

“I’m not asking them to. As far as I’m concerned, Tormund… we are equals.”

Leaning forward to stare at Jon, Robb exhaled deeply. “Jon, I know you. If whatever you saw north of the wall was enough to convince you of this, then even though I still can’t fathom it I will stand behind you.” Jon was grateful, eminently so. To have the great Young Wolf behind him, a brother’s love, was greater than most else.

Interrupting them, the door opened and Ollie walked in. “For you, Lord Commander. From a dispatch rider.” He handed Jon a sealed letter.

“Thank you, Ollie, you’re dismissed.” Breaking the seal, Jon’s face was impassive as he read the letter. “Hmmmm, looks like we have a new ally - and a new opportunity.”

“What is it, Jon?” Sam asked.

“Seems like a small fleet of ships has anchored at Eastwatch, the Lady Olenna Tyrell and Lady Margaery Tyrell among them.” An audible crack was heard through the room. Jon stared at Robb, who had snapped a metal spoon that he had been toying with in half from shock. From his reaction, Jon had his ideas about why. He couldn’t help but smirk. “Something you’re not telling me, brother?”

The cell was dark, yet the only one in the squalid prison that was made sure not to be damp and mold-ridden. It was a precaution that the Lannisters did not take – well ever. But Catelyn Stark viewed certain elements in the Red Keep as more partial to her survival than Cersei Lannister. The screams and smells of blood and piss from other rooms belied the manner that her goons usually treated the enemies of the King of Gold. None of the guards were allowed to beat her, but they were far from gentle, bruises often dotting her body. Stoic but using most of her Tully willpower to keep herself that way, most of the time she was curled in a ball in the corner of the cell. ‘How did this happen? Why have the gods forsaken us?’
At that point the door to the cell opened, and she braced for the upcoming strong hands gripping her limbs for forced-feedings. It didn’t seem like the time, but Catelyn had no sense of timing anymore. There was no sunlight, no clock, no sense of routine. But… none of that happened. There wasn’t even a voice, only a shadow obscuring the low light of the hallway. Catelyn’s lips curled in a growl, refusing to turn around. ‘Why has he come back?’

She had wrenched her gaze away as soon as she spotted him. “What are you doing here?” she spat. The one person she thought she could trust - thought that she could count on. He had fought against Ned, but that was likely Cersei’s doing, and Joffrey had been the one to kill him. But there was no earthly reason how he couldn’t have a hand in the Red Wedding.

For the first time in a long while, a sincere smile rested on Petyr Baelish’s face. “I am here to see you, Catelyn. To tell you something important.”

Catelyn turned away, putting her back to Littlefinger. “I have no interest in what your sadistic master has asked you to say to me.”

“It is about Sansa.” That did draw her attention.

The pain still infected her. Giving Sansa away to the Boltons - to the swine that betrayed them and could have very well tracked down and murdered her eldest son? And Littlefinger had the gall to request gratitude for his role in shepherding Sansa out of King’s Landing - out of the skillet and into the roaring flames. She’d be much more of a threat in the north than here. ‘Is this my punishment, dear gods above?’ A tear fell down her cheek as more footsteps entered the cell. ‘Was all of this retribution for my treatment of Jon?’ Catelyn had given that boy a hellish childhood, all for nothing - for a reason that ended up meaning nothing.

“Mother?”

Shocked at the voice, Catelyn turned around to be confronted by her daughter. “Sansa!” The young redhead ran into her mother’s embrace, the two of them sobbing. Despite being in the capitol for many months, this had been the first time she had seen Sansa since Ned departed with Robert those many years ago. “Thank the Gods that you’re alright.”

“We felt that you two should speak at least once before the time arrives.” Looking behind them, she could see an odd collection - Varys, Brienne of Tarth, and the brothers Lannister.

Looking her over, Catelyn could see her daughter wasn’t the same innocent, silly girl that left Winterfell. A hardness had been burned into her, adding untempered Valyrian steel to her gracefulness. She was inexperienced, but had all the tools to be a formidable political player.

It both made Catelyn proud and broke her heart.

“I will be sent back home, mother,” Sansa said with resignation in her voice. “I have to do it, get away from… Joffrey,” she hissed the last word. “At least I will be close to Castle Black. Do you think Jon could rescue me?” She seemed to have reasoned it, not immaturely hoped for it.

Catelyn managed a smile. “Yes, Sansa. Your brother would if he knows you’re there.” Sansa stared at her with wide eyes, hearing her mother refer to Jon this way. In the last years she had beat herself up inside for never accepting Jon as she did Robb, Bran, or Rickon. Sansa wished she could see him one more time, just to beg forgiveness - a tiny speck of emotion left in her otherwise hardened soul, and it seemed her mother felt the same way.

“We have to go, mi’lady,” Brienne stated.
Hugging one more time, mother and daughter separated. “Lady Brienne, remember what you promised to me?” The lady knight bowed, her vow to protect the Stark girls still solid.

Soon, it was just Catelyn and the three men. She purposefully ignored Jamie Lannister, who didn’t blame her. After making sure Tyrion could escape the Red Keep unseen, his job was done - Joffrey was about to have Tyrion purged and he couldn’t let his brother die. “Well then. I should be off before Cersei worries. Take care brother.”

“You as well, brother,” Tyrion called to his retreating form. “Lady Stark, we have to get you out of here at once.” The dwarf - the same dwarf she once tried to have killed - strode up to her. His face standing came to the same height as her sitting. “It isn’t a shock to know that my father and sister want you dead. He feels insulted that you cheated him out of killing the Young Wolf and that Littlefinger prevented your death.”

“And for some reason, Cersei wishes that all Starks die,” stated Varys in his flat tone. “Now that Baelish is escorting Sansa Stark north, any day now you are likely to receive a knife slashing through your throat. We would like to prevent that from happening.”

“I take it that this isn’t out of the goodness of your hearts,” Catelyn sneered.

Chuckling, Tyrion sat next to her. “I don’t know about him, but I had rather interesting travel with you the last time. What better company?” For all that she hated the Lannisters, Tyrion had a sort of drunkard-like charm about him.

“Somehow I expected the Night’s Watch’s domain to be decrepit and run down.” Olenna Tyrell ran her hand along the rotting beams of Eastwatch Castle. “Comforting to see they outdid my expectations.”

Chuckling, Margaery shook her head. “Well grandmother, not all of it failed to impress me.” The veritable matriarch of the Tyrell family followed her granddaughter’s eyes to the Wall, ice and stone towering above all but the clouds in immense glory.

“Built of magic long ago, dear granddaughter. The Night’s Watch had nothing to do with it.” On her own, she shifted her gaze to the anchored ships. Eastwatch Harbor - sparse as it was - gave the barks and grain transports a safe home with the choppy northern waves. With Essos either allied with Joffrey or too dangerous for them, and the Iron Islands essentially at war with everyone, the Wall was their only option. They had sent a messenger to Castle Black asking for asylum, and Olenna prayed to every god she knew to grant them salvation.

“Mi’Lady.” One of their most loyal bannermen, risen high in the ranks due to numerous losses on the battlefield but earning every single promotion, had approached them. “A rider from Castle Black has arrived, bearing a dispatch from Lord Commander Jon Snow.”

Margaery’s eyebrow rose. “Ned Stark’s bastard boy?” A sharp mind like hers remembered plenty on matters of state. ‘And Robb Stark’s half-brother.’ Along with other, less pure reasons for remembering - though a pallor of sadness clouded her upon thinking of the deceased Young Wolf.

“Hmmm, not surprising,” Olenna mused. “The Brotherhood in Black makes no distinction there, and if he has even a fraction of Ned Stark’s brains and courage, he’d go far. What does the dispatch say?”

“It is addressed to the Lady Margaery, Mi’Lady.” Two perfectly manicured eyebrows rose. “It
requests a parlay in exchange for control of your fleet of ships, and…” he seemed confused. “Lord Commander Snow wishes that it be as productive as the ‘Meeting at the coves,’ though he wouldn’t partake in the ‘same manner of diplomacy.’” The suggestions dripped with knowing innuendo.

Eyes widening till they almost covered the entire socket, there was no disguising what the innuendo meant. ‘Only two people in the world knew of that. One was here with her, and the other... ’ He was alive, then.

Oleanna thought along the same lines, but was more circumspect. “We will parlay, but I want to hear his terms before we give him our ships.” Seemed that House Tyrell could still make it out of this hard time with something after all.

After what had to be days of jostling, ocean waves, and subsisting on dried beef and sour wine, the sound of a crowbar groaning against a wooden lid was music to Tyrion’s ears. Light soon poured in, temporarily blinding him. “Good morning,” Varys said in a cheery mood - or as close to a cheery mood as the emotionless eunuch could. He moved to the second crate, freeing Catelyn Stark.

Crawling out, Tyrion blinked rapidly until his eyes adjusted. “Given that we’re alive in Essos and not being decapitated by the Mountain, our great escape was a stirring success.” Shae, unrecognizable enough to escape having to be smuggled out, helped him up.

“Well, we managed to evade loyalist patrols, and Pentos guards - I have a friend that made sure of that.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Tyrion groaned, stretching. Even at his height, the crate was cramped - gods only knew how bad it was for Catelyn Stark. “The Master of Whisperers has little birds everywhere.” It was nice to breathe air that wasn’t reeking of stale wood. “On to Meereen, and the Targaryen queen.”

“However,” Varys allowed a... confused look to cross his face. Something had to be rather unexpected to rankle the Realm’s chief spymaster. “I did run into someone that... I didn’t think would have been found in Essos...” Varys trailed off as a group of four people, and one large wolf, stepped inside the warehouse.

Coughing from the remnants of the wooden stank, Catelyn looked up only for her eyes to widen. Could it be? Joy bubbled up inside her, but it was all too unforeseen. “Bran?”

The crippled young boy heard his long lost mother’s voice. “Mother.”

Sandals smacked against the dusty cobblestones as a surprised excitement dawned on the children’s faces. “Mhysa! Mhysa!” Both born into bondage, their delight at coming face to face with the silver-haired western queen that gave them freedom was unmatched.

Two Unsullied moved to block off the children, potential security risks as the Sons of the Harpy were known to use innocents as auxiliaries in their terrorist attacks. They caught them, breaking their runs. “Stand down, troopers,” Daenerys announced, mindful both of her image to the people and her need for security. A smile on her face, she reached between the guards and handed the younger child a single flower that had once decorated her hair. The beaming smiles of the children, before they scampered off, were priceless.

“I don’t see why you must do this,” Daario Naharis flippancy remarked as they continued walking
along the street, hand on the sheathed hilt of his sickle. “There’s too much of a security risk for not staying in the Pyramid.”

Snorting, Dany shifted her eyes to the sellsword. “So narrowly focused, Commander. The only reason that I am the Queen is through consent of the governed. Had the former slaves not risen up, we wouldn’t have taken Meereen - they must know that their Queen loves them all, master and freedman.” With a beaming smile, she waved at a group of middle-class shopkeepers, apparently Targaryen loyalists from their reaction.

Daario allowed himself a scoff. “Royal power grows out of the blade of a sword, Daenerys. It is that simple.” He was loyal and proved his loyalty as a close confidant - still, Daario’s informal conversation did skirt the line. It implied to Dany that he considered them closer than they were. Saying nothing, Grey Worm appeared to think the same.

“You told me once that I could never survive fighting enemies within and without.” She gingerly stepped over a flattened piece of cattle dung - Dany made a mental note to order the creation of a sanitation department, creating jobs for freedmen and former master alike. A clean city was a calmer city. “When my enemies from without come knocking, I need Meereen behind me.”

Daario nodded, a wistful smile on his face. “I did say that, didn’t I? I was in the most… pleasant of places.”

Cheeks burning red, Dany finally remembered when he said it - the night they shared together. “Yes, it was. But it cannot happen again.”

“You say that now, but just wait.” Turning her head, Dany scowled at his cheeky grin - but the sound of sudden screams in the streets prevented her from saying anything about it.

A harried runner - clad in the generally slapdash uniform of the Second Sons - sprinted to Daario’s side and whispered something in his ear. The sellsword’s perpetual smirk morphed into a angered frown. “We’re heading back!” he yelled, pushing Dany back the way they came. Around them, Grey Worm and the Unsullied readied their spears.

“What’s going on?” Dany shouted, trying not to collapse over her feet as her one-time companion and loyal lieutenant was essentially shoving her forward. Panicked throngs of people were fleeing in the opposite direction - away from the Pyramid and Royal Quarter.

“Double time march!” The Unsullied formed into a two man wide column as they marched through a connecting tunnel, the Queen in the middle. “Sons of the Harpy.” Dany’s blood ran to ice - they’d been quiet lately, but it was too good to be true. “They slaughtered some of my men close to here. Reinforcements are on their way, but we need to get to…”

About a third of their light was cut off as the entrance and exit to the tunnel were suddenly blocked by the clang of doors slamming shut. From hidden alcoves they appeared. Flowing robes of nobility, golden masks shrouding their faces with an image of godly terror, two dozen knife-wielding foot soldiers of the Sons of the Harpy emerged into the void - their ultimate target, the Targaryen Queen, was tantalizingly in reach. And standing in their way were Daario and a mere seven Unsullied.

Blood gushed from wounds as spears pierced through unarmored cloth, but being trapped in close quarters took their toll on the Unsullied. Long and with its blade resting at the tip of the seven foot pole, a spear did not have the useful advantages of proximate flexibility that the short swords and daggers of the Harpies. The Unsullied troopers were elite in the use of their weapons, but the sheer swarming of Harpies smashed through the formation. Blades flew through the air, spears impacting with flesh as one by one the Unsullied fell. Grey Worm, the strongest warrior of all of them, impaled
and slashed throats of countless enemies, but succumbed to the sheer numbers with a knife through the abdomen. Daario had better luck with his sickle, perfect for close quarter combat and fighting to keep a protective distance between the savage partisans and his Queen, but even he fell to superior numbers. Slashed across the chest, a sharp kick sent him head first into a stone column.

Heart beating out of her chest, mind retreating into a protective shell, Dany closed her eyes for a split second. Daario was down, her Unsullied soldiers dead, Grey Worm fighting for his life and losing. It was her and the Sons of the Harpy, golden-tunic clad noble youths salivating at killing her while her honored commander watched, helpless to do anything.

Reinforcements weren’t coming in time. Her children wouldn’t come in time. She was alone.

You are the Blood of the Dragon.

‘Blood of the dragon.’ Face like stone, but expression roaring like the Black Dread. Calmly and smoothly, she withdrew Saracen from her scabbard, the curved Valyrian steel glinting from the sparse rays of sunlight streaming in. Gripping the sharkskin hilt with both hands, she raised it, daring the hesitating line of expressionless gold masks to attack her.

Screeching a harpy-like war cry, one obviously young and brash guerilla fighter charged at her. Knife over his head, it was child’s play for Dany to sidestep him. Saracen slashed down, separating head from body. The line of the guerillas staggered a few inches, recalculating their approach. The diminutive, feminine queen had the heart of a dragon inside her - roaring with a fury without even opening her mouth.

Reigniting the war cry of the Harpy, the line surged forward in one swarm attack - but hemmed in by the narrow alcove, it negated any real advantage the swarming could give them. Dany quickly gutted one in the midsection, swirling around to catch another in the gut. Blood spurted onto her, sweat drenching her brow. Bells ringing all around them, the unarmored torsos under their golden tunics gave little protection to the honed metal of her ancestral homeland. Petite figure an asset rather than a liability, Dany jinked and weaved between two hulking guerillas, Saracen tasting blood as it sliced through a thigh as if it was butter. A quick spin brought a gurgling cry of anguish as the blade severed a spinal column.

Quickly noticing his Queen fighting for her life, Grey Worm rallied his will to fight for his. A surge of energy entering him once more, his spearpoint sliced through a Harpy’s unprotected neck. The four others surrounding him pulled back at the ferocity. One lunged but ran right into the spear. “ZA TARGARYANA!”

A dull sword - caked in grime but blade still plenty sharp - sliced across her abdomen. Dany cried out, a snarl following as Saracen cut up through the belly of a Harpy. Red tinting her vision, but sheer force of will propelling her forward, she impaled the steel into another. The thrashing body went limp as blood spurted out around the embedded hilt, almost superhuman strength maneuvering the body to take two sword slashes. An impromptu human shield.

Shrieks, guttural screams leaving the previously silent Harpies, suicidal courage and zeal brought them charging at the Dragon Queen once more. Only this time the fatigue and blood loss was starting to overpower her. Her blade sliced through cloth, flesh, and intestine once more before a knife slammed into her shoulder. Daenerys cried, another sword cutting across one of her legs. She collapsed onto her knees, grip on Saracen failing. Three menacing Harpies stood over her, knives at the ready. From the faint sounds of Grey Worm behind her, he was just now dispatching his last attacker.

Not enough time. Her children flashed before her eyes, now set to rule themselves. Resigned to her
fate, Dany’s eyes slid shut as the Harpies raised their swords. The last image was of her love, handsome features bringing some comfort. ‘I’m sorry, Jon.’ She tried to survive for him.

And then the world exploded. Sent back nearly five feet from a sheer explosive force - almost dragonfire with bits of black smoke that crumbled the stone wall barely away from her - Dany’s ears rang. Cuts covered the length of her arm and legs, the wind knocked out of her. Shouts that seemed like whispers registered, dark, shadowy forms fanning out from the hole. One looked like Theodosius in his Targaryen battle armor, a cloak of his family billowing behind him.

“Kill any left alive!” he seemed to hollar, stabbing a wounded Harpy on the ground through the chest with his sword. Behind him, through the blinding light streaming in from the outside, rested a contraption Dany had never yet seen - mounted on a carriage like a small catapult, it was a tube of metal, glinting in the sun.

“MY QUEEN!” was the last thing she heard before slipping into unconsciousness.
A vast grassland, from the horizon to the bottom of the battlements. It seemed familiar to Dany, but also different. Unlike the vibrant green or golden tan of high stalks that carpeted the lands of the Great Grass Sea, this was a more muted grass. Drab yet no less alive. Eyes gazing about, a serene comfort cloaked Daenerys, as if she was home. She had never once seen this land, never once graced the unfamiliar battlements and walls of the rather functional castle - yet there was a familiarity to it that she couldn’t place.

“Where… where am I?”

“You’re where Jon was raised, my lady.” Startled, swiveling her head around, Dany was taken aback at the sight of Lord Eddard Stark - a small smile on his lips and a calm expression on his face. He was dead, so this couldn’t be real. “You’re in the north.”

“Winterfell.” It wasn’t a question, she knew.

“Aye. It ain’t much, but it’s home.” The two of them trained their eyes downward, at the courtyard. A group of boys were milling about, wrestling together. “My brothers and I, thick as thieves,” Ned laughed.

Dany felt a longing, a tug deep down inside her. With her childhood on the run, and the nature of her brother, she had never had the image of family harmony before her. Never really had a family. But at least she had the twins, who were as rambunctious as the Stark children before her. Their grandfather and great-uncles. “Was Jon like this? With his siblings?”

A merry laugh left Ned’s lips. “Oh yes, he, Robb, Bran, even Arya would scuffle every chance they got. Joined at the hip… whenever my wife wasn’t around.” A great sorrow crossed over his features. “My second greatest regret. I failed, and as a result Jon suffered.”

Tears welled in Dany’s eyes, remembering how Jon described the situation to her. How Catelyn Stark shunned him - causing many in Winterfell to do the same. How in an attempt to please her mother, Sansa would ignore Jon even though brother and sister did truly love and care for each other. It broke her heart - and apparently it broke Lord Stark’s as well.

“I told her. Told her the truth,” he mused cryptically. “But it was too late to help Jon in that way.”

Dany looked at him. “Told her about what?”

Ned’s emotional smile returned as a girl rode into the castle astride a horse - face fair, figure slender, features stunning, and hair wild and fierce. A veritable she-wolf. Dany stared at her. Her features were so much like Jon, a feminine version. “About her. About her son.”

Before Dany could reply, Ned turned to her. “Do not be sad, sweet Daenerys. You aren’t as alone as you think.” Whiteness enveloped everything around her...

Eyes flying open, Daenerys attempted to shoot upright but was stopped by a stinging pain in her abdomen. “Ahhhh,” she winced.

A comforting hand was placed on her shoulder. “Calm down, your Grace.” Dany looked up to see Missandei sitting next to the bed, watching over her. “You have to take it easy.”

“Where…” both the vivid dream and a general fatigue was dulling her senses. “What happened?”
“You’re in your chambers, your Grace. The Sons of the Harpy launched a revolt, killing many and burning parts of the city, but it was put down by General Theodosius and his auxiliaries.” Missandei placed a wet rag on her forehead. It felt amazing to the touch.

Dany swallowed, trying to eliminate the foul taste in her throat. “Who was injured?”

A flash of… hurt passed across Missandei’s eyes. “Grey Worm was badly wounded, and is bedridden. Daario’s head was bashed on a wall, and he hasn’t awoken - you took several gashes to the limbs and torso, but the maesters haven’t seen any sign of internal bleeding or infection.” She brought the silver-haired queen a goblet of water, which Dany gladly drank.

It was at that moment that she noticed a tight weight on her sides. Pulling back the covers, she saw two little forms curled up on either side of her.

“They couldn’t sleep without knowing their mother was alright,” Missandei told her with a small smile. “As soon as the maester said you were stable, I brought them to see you.”

“Thank you, Missandei.” With love in her eyes, she gently stroked Arya’s silver hair. Her children, all five of them, were what mattered most to her - along with Jon and the throne. They were the closest things she could have to her love, and she loved and treasured them more than anything.

“You aren’t as alone as you think.”

Laying back, Dany pondered what Ned Stark meant by that. ‘Did he mean the children? And who was that girl’s son?’ She knew Lord Stark had a sister, but he was the one her brother kidnapped, so that couldn’t be her. Fatigue overcoming her, Dany closed her eyes. The pondering could come later....

“You do drive a hard bargain, Lord Commander Snow,” the old woman remarked, cane clacking against the worn wood of the battlements.

Jon couldn’t help but give a modest ghost of a smirk. “It wasn’t easy, going up against the Queen of Thorns after all, but I’m glad that you see fit to assist in this important venture for the entire realm.”

Olenna Tyrell huffed. “Bringing wildlings south of the Wall. Armies of corpses led by genocidal ice monsters. Personally, I think you are insane, Jon Snow. But I am in no position to judge what you will use my fleet for, just bring it back.” She turned and jabbed a sharp nail in his chest.

“I plan to,” Jon replied. He looked behind the elder matriarch to the young rose, bowing slightly. “Lady Margaery. I am sure you are quite tired from your long journey. Allow Lord Stark to escort you to your quarters. They aren’t up to your standards, I’m sure, but it’s the best we could do.”

Smiling at Jon, Margaery shook her head. “It isn’t a problem.” Her eyes flickered to Robb, and then to the floor. “Are you sure you don’t need to rest, grandmother?”

“Nonsense. This one here still needs to show me the Tarly boy. No one is conducting any naval planning session with Ser Davos without me being there.” The determined scowl of a woman 40 years junior, Jon found himself nearly being dragged towards the meeting hall.

Now, it was only the two of them. The fallen Young Wolf and the wilting Rose of Highgarden, close to falling. “I guess I’ll bring you to your quarters,” Robb finally said quietly, exhaling deeply. This wasn’t like the famed Young Wolf, terror on the battlefield - but with all that had happened, especially between the two of them, he couldn’t help it. ‘You’re your father’s son.’
“Yes, that would be best.” The two walked side by side, not a word shared between them for interminable seconds. “I’m sorry about your wife,” Margaery offered. “The Freys should pay for what they did.”

“Aye,” Robb ground out, suppressing his grief. His time to mourn her had been in the days following his arrival at Castle Black. Both on his journey north and in the coming months, Robb knew he couldn’t afford to. ‘And now she is here.’ The Tyrell Rose had only gotten more beautiful in the years that passed, and the night they spent together was one of the few good memories of the years since his father left for King’s Landing.

Despite his brooding exterior - in ways worse and in ways better than Jon Snow, brothers but so different - and general gloom, Robb had only grown more handsome to the southern beauty. Reaching an unremarkable wooden door, Margaery gathered these was her quarters. “Thank you for the escort, Lord Stark.” She looked him in the eye. “If you need to talk, a widower to a widow, I’m always here.” Leaning up on her tiptoes, she pecked his rough cheek and disappeared inside.

Rubbing the spot with his fingers, Robb felt that unfamiliar spark - the one even Talisa couldn’t arouse in him.

To say that Cersei Lannister had been enraged that both Tyrion and Catelyn Stark had vanished would have been an understatement. Jamie cringed at the memory of her piercing shriek, one that broke glass and was joined with the near destruction of her furniture - the bedroom Cersei slept in had once been the Mad King’s study, and her brother could only speculate that the Targaryen Madness might have spiritually rubbed on his sister and lover. Tywin was just as mad, but he was more… self-controlled about it.

However, the only true madness ripping through King’s Landing was that of the King. His most Holy Highness. Joffrey, Jamie’s own son, though no one left alive besides he, Cersei, and perhaps Tyrion knew that. Ever since the Red Woman had disappeared - hells if Jamie knew what she mattered to either Joffrey or his father, the only two that really dealt with her - Joffrey had been distant, sequestered in his suite of rooms for most of the time. More and more young, female servants were forced into his employ, and he had spent much of his private discussions with a disgraced Maester named Qyburn and a former aristocrat turned proselytizer that called himself the High Sparrow. Qyburn was also chummy with Cersei, but the “High Sparrow” often spent hours talking with Joffrey. About what, Jamie didn’t know, but he had an inkling that certain edicts such as having everyone not within the Sovereignguard or Small Council to prostrate themselves to the King were ideas of the High Sparrow.

It all was eerily like the last days of the Mad King, though Jamie doubted he could raise a sword against his own son. Cersei would never forgive him.

A hand then gripped his shoulder, causing him to jerk back and half draw his sword. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Ser Jamie,” growled Meryn Trant, sword already menacingly out. ‘Damn it!’ thought Jamie with a scowl. He would have to double his retraining with Bronn.

“What do you want, slug?”

The sadistic freak only grunted. “The Queen Mother wishes you to come to her chambers, alone.” Narrowing his eyes, Jamie only nodded and pushed past the guard. He could damn well find his way to his sister’s chambers - he was intimately aware of it and its location after all.

Closing the door to the room behind him, making sure it was latched tight, Jamie found Cersei
tucked in a rocking chair near the window. The same chair that she used to rock her children - their children - when they were mere babes. A forlorn look had planted itself on her face, blank eyes staring at the window. “Sister? Sweet?” Jamie was by her side, kneeling so that he could meet her face to face.

“We need to secure ourselves, brother,” she said, voice flat and distant. Her fair, well-defined features now directed itself at him. “Our son is a great man, Jamie. You have to know that.”

He had his doubts, but he would never voice them. “Of course he is, Cersei.”

“All of this, it’s caused by the advisors.” Her voice morphed into vitriol, something Jamie had seen slowly consuming her even before her marriage to Robert Baratheon. Only when they were together was she her old, vibrant self - but that was even rarer since that day in the Winterfell tower. “Baelish, the High Sparrow, our own deformed beast of a brother,” she spat. “Qyburn is decent, but Joffrey will only be safe from his own mind if he has his family. You, me, father, his siblings…”

She was clinging onto hope, something Jamie didn’t really have when it came to their son - containing the damage seemed the best avenue, but if Cersei could be right, he was willing to take the chance. “You’re right, dear. Lannisters stick together, and fuck everyone who isn’t us.”

The words bringing a triumphant grin to her face, Cersei smashed their lips together in a hungry kiss.

Nearly thirty minutes later, a sated blonde rolled off her lover, both naked and relaxed. “Gods,” Jamie gasped, trying to catch his breath.

“I tired my lion out, didn’t I?” Cersei purred with a grin, manicured finger tracing Jamie’s pec. “I summoned you here for something else, but you had to be so irresistible, didn’t you brother?”

“Not my intention, believe you me,” he laughed.

Suddenly growing serious, Cersei hugged him tight. “Bring our daughter back to us, Jamie. Make our family whole again.” The Kingslayer used his good arm to match her embrace, losing himself in the woman he loved more than anything. Whatever it took - just for a little while - to forget that she had just asked him to declare war on Dorne.

And this was more like it. The entire brotherhood not on sentry duty along the wall had been gathered in a great hall, making the raucous northern feasts looking like a garden party in the Reach. All that was missing were whores and drunken bars. “Brothers…” He attempted, but the yelling and shouting was too loud. Jon turned to Ollie and nodded. As his father’s pages had done during meetings in Winterfell, the young boy smacked the stone time with a long stick, cracks echoing through the hall. It got quiet very fast.

“Good,” Jon grinned, “Now I have your attention.” He brought his hands together, looking over all of the men. Like both his father and his predecessor, Jeor Mormont, he sought to be the fair leader but with a spine of steel. “Let’s bring this meeting to order.”

Almost immediately, Janos Slynt shot up. “Lord Commander,” he spat, as if hating referring to Jon in that manner. “I must demand that you cast out the defeated pretender from Castle Black.” He pointed directly at Robb, who sat next to Sam Tarly. “And the women traitors!” Neither Margaery nor Olenna were present at this meeting, but were new residents of the castle. “They do not belong here!”

“Oh shut it, coward!” heckled Grenn, smacking his cup on the table. “I wasn’t the one who hid in
the woods when we took down the deserters.”

“Say that to my face, swine!” Slynt shouted, having to be held back by Thorne. Jon rolled his eyes. The moron probably counted on someone to stop the fight so he wouldn’t have to.

More banging on the stone by Ollie ended the shouting back and forth once more. “Enough! No one is being forced out as long as I am Lord Commander. Not at the behest of the unlawful Warden of the North or when the Tyrells have given us use of their fleet.” He and Robb shared a nod.

“For what reason do we need a fleet?” asked Thorne. Unlike his allies, he had some sense of civility. Hence why Jon appointed him First Ranger - that and his experience at fighting. With the old Bear dead, he was literally the best out of all of them. He was obedient and respectful… for now at least.

‘After this…?’ Leaning forward, Jon looked across the entire room. Only a few knew of what he planned - Ollie had been the hardest to convince, and while he was still loyal, he still was skeptical - and Jon knew what would happen.

As he finished, the chaos began. Over half of the Night’s Watch were enraged. “We let them through our gates? The gates we’ve defended for thousands of years?” asked one incredulously. Jon recognized him as one of his supporters. That just set out another back and forth among the men.

“Listen to me!” Up rose the Young Wolf, resolute in support of his brother. “There is no more honorable man than Jon Snow. If he says this is a threat to the world, then we must believe him.”

“For thousands of years,” opined Thorne. “We have fought the wildlings. They have killed us, burned our villages…”

“And we have burned thiers.”

Finn stood up. “I will follow you to the death, you know that. But is there another way?”

Sighing, Jon looked his friend in the eye. “We can either live with the Wildlings, or add them to the Army of the Dead.” More murmurs broke out, some starting to come around - the Night’s Watch had seen so many miraculous things north of the Wall. Couldn’t the white walkers be among them? “There is no argument here. Those are my orders.” He turned to Slynt. “Ser Janos, I want you to take over the grounds of Eastwatch.”

The bald visage of the former garrison commander visibly balked. “But that place is deserted! No one’s bothered to exist there until the Southerners set anchor.”

“Aye, best patch it up the best you can. If we’re to use it as an anchorage, it has to be as well fortified as Castle Black is. Take the chief builder and ten of his men with you…”

A sneer formed on his face. “I was charged with the defense of King’s Landing since before you soiled your swaddling clothes, bastard,” he spat. “Keep your damn Eastwatch. Send one of the mad fools who cast a stone for you.”

Grumbles and jeers came from the others. “Rumor has it,” Robb stated glibly. “That while Renly Baratheon attacked from Blackwater Bay, you were hidden in the wine cellar of the Red Keep.” Another round of jeers were sent at Janos Slynt’s expense, while he got as red as a ripe tomato, enraged.

Wishing he could laugh, Jon had to remain aloof at a time like this. “That is enough, Lord Stark.” His eyes narrowed, centering on Slynt. “That was not a request, that was - and is - an order. Gather your belongings and ride for Eastwatch. Now.”
Face contorted in revulsion, Slynt shot out from his bench. “Fuck you, bastard!” A defiant finger stabbed at him again and again. “I’m not going off to freeze my balls off for you, your defeated shit of a brother, or the damn Tyrell bitches, all so you can betray us all to bring wildling scum south of the wall! I will not have it!”

“So you refuse to obey my order?”


Sensing Robb’s hands balling into fists, Jon felt his own wave of anger build up. A deathly, icy calm descended over Jon Snow. He knew what he had to do. “Pyp, Robb, Finn, take Janos outside. Ollie, fetch my sword.” The boy nodded as Jon stood. ‘Come to me,’ he shouted in his mind. While Sam had his theories, Jon still had no clue about why he had such a connection. But if he was going to ask his men to do what had been unthinkable for the Night’s Watch, he would show them that he was no ordinary Lord Commander and this was no ordinary time. ‘Come to me, and do not hurt anyone.’ He couldn’t help but smirk for a split second. ‘Just act scary.’

Pyp and Finn hauled Slynt out of his seat, who writhed and yelled in protest. When he almost escaped, Robb slammed his fist into Slynt’s side, not stopping the yelling or the writhing but lessening it. Thorne stood menacingly in the way of the door as Robb, Pyp, and Finn followed with a still squirming Slynt. A tense standoff ensued, the Young Wolf locking eyes with the Lead Ranger. Unluckily for Slynt, Thorne stood aside and allowed them to pass.

“He won’t dare touch me! I’m not afraid…” Slynt screamed but Jon ignored him, eyes flickering across the grounds of the castle. Men were milling about, his loyal soldiers setting up the chopping block for the coming punishment. Above on the bannister stood Olenna Tyrell, Margaery Tyrell, Tormund, and Ser Davos Seaworth - a capable man, Davos. Jon could tell. And there was the Red Witch. She gave him chills, the way she could see directly through him. But Jon couldn’t think about that, his connection growing stronger and stronger by the second.

What was a low murmuring among the milling crowd of Night’s Watchmen turned into stunned silence as a loud screech was heard. A dark green shape passed overhead, bat-like wings spread far across. Jon smiled as Rhaegal landed in the middle of the castle grounds, letting out his high-pierced adolescent shriek to the heavens. Hardened brothers of the black found fear etched into their faces, the tough-minded Tyrells and Ser Davos gaping. Even those that knew about him were knocked back, Robb and Sam flinching automatically. Only Jon stood firm - and the Red Witch. Walking up to Rhaegal to the shocked men, the dragon merely snorted and lowered his head submissively.

Putting his hand on the scaly snout, Jon rubbed up and down. ‘Rhaegal, stand down.’ The green dragon roared, but drew back, menacingly waiting right next to the platform. ‘Good boy.’ Running up the steps, as satisfactory as it would be to burn Slynt alive he couldn’t. ‘He who passes the sentence must swing the sword.’ Jon was his father’s son. As he passed Robb, he knew that his brother understood.

Grabbing Longclaw from Ollie, he drew it from his scabbard and handed it back to the boy. Now, Janos was shaking. Jon could smell piss from his direction. He was even more pitiful. “If you have any last words, say them now.”

Fear all over his face, Slynt began begging. “I’ll do what you will, you are my commander. I was wrong.” Jon raised the sword but then he cried, “MERCY!” The blade halted in midair. “I’m afraid. Please, I’ve always been afraid.” Barely a moment passed before Longclaw claimed yet another kill. Rhaegal raised his neck in an ear-splitting roar. Wings billowing, he ascended into the sky, leaving a stunned courtyard in his wake.
Watching as Janos Slynt’s head rolled away, Jon turned to the rest of his command. “Anyone else not willing to obey my orders?” There was silence. “Good, then let’s get the operation going.” Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Jon faced Robb.

His brother offered a small smile. “You made father proud, Jon.” Nodding, Jon turned slightly to the bannister, and could swear that Melisandre had a triumphant expression.

Looking away, Aemon Targaryen had a tear in his eye. There wasn’t a day that went by where the old Maester didn’t marvel at the fact that someone so dear to him was so close - a comfort to his aging soul, driving his will to live. But… what use was it? Did he deserve to know the truth? He was certainly old enough, and could be counted on to keep it a secret. With what news was dripping in about Essos, the Targaryen name was being established once more.

Most of all, he wanted to have his family back. A sigh leaving his lips, Aemon ducked back into his room.

“A dragon, a fucking dragon.”

“Snow could have burned poor Janos. He will burn us all!”

“What the fuck do we do? What the fuck do we do?!”

“Shut up, all of you!” Alliser Thorne felt a persistent throbbing in his head. It had appeared ever since Jon Snow was voted Lord Commander over him thanks to the deciding vote of that old bastard Aemon, but this latest development only made it worse. “This changes everything… and yet changes nothing.”

“We cannot go forward now that he has a dragon, Alliser.”

Thorne wanted to strangle the man for his stupidity. “This only makes it more important, but we will wait. That dragon won’t be close by forever.” The other men nodded.

“Please, Lord Caryn,” Dany stated, gritting her teeth from within her closed lips. Despite a dose of milk of the poppy - not enough to make her groggy, but enough to dull the pain - her tightly bandaged wounds still ached, especially when she moved. Daenerys always believed that a throne had to be uncomfortable to remind the ruler that to rule was not for their personal glory. Yet that made sure she had to resist the urge to groan and curl into a ball due to the pain. “Please tell us about this new invention of yours.” The one that saved her life and that of Grey Worm and Daario, though the latter was still unconscious.

Bowing in front of his queen, the new Lord Commander of the Targaryen Combined Army - essentially comprised of the Unsullied corps, the Dothraki cavalry, and the Freedmen Auxiliaries - cleared his throat. “In my travels around the world, I came across a particularly useful invention while I explored the eastern lands. They have their own word for it, and translated as best as I can into the common tongue would be ‘gunpowder.’ It is a powerful, yet controllable, explosive.”

“And you use it with your metal tubes?” Dany asked. She normally wasn’t a technical person, preferring marital and political arts.

“Oh yes, my Queen. We’re using bronze for now, though I am still working on making them both lighter and more powerful.” He brought out schematics scribbled on parchment, handing it to Daenerys. “The powder and solid projectile goes in the muzzle here,” his fingers pointed out the specifications. “And are rammed down. A match ignites the powder at the breech, and fires the
projectile. Far more powerful than a trebuchet, and far lethaler to both men and fortifications.” He grinned a cocky smile. “Give me fifty of them and I can take any castle in the known world.”

Nodding her head, Dany found that pleasing. While sort of enigmatic, never really socializing and spending all his free time in his quarters or the foundries of the city, she couldn’t deny that Theodosius was a brilliant thinker. Her dragons couldn’t be everywhere at once. Having a less powerful substitute for their destructive force would prove very beneficial. “How many have you made so far?”

With this, he looked downcast. “With my other projects eating away at my funds, my Queen, I’ve only made two prototypes.”

“You shall provide my army two hundred, General.”

Eyes widened, the normally self-assured commander - a trait of confidence shared with his uncle, no one ever doubting they would be ready for a fight - gulping. “Your Grace, I have made great progress in constructing the prototype, but there are still design flaws that need to be corrected before I could even…”

“Your Queen demands two hundred for her army,” Dany repeated, steel in her voice. A good plan executed now was better than a perfect plan executed later. She narrowed her eyes. “Or is there a reason as to why you cannot provide them to me?”

Wiping sweat off his brow, he shook his head. “Not at all, um, your Grace. The design does… work. I will get on it at once.”

“See that you do, general. You are dismissed.”

As Theodosius attempted to leave, he passed the court chamberlin, tasked with managing who would enter the throne room to see the Queen. He was a former master, now loyal to the Targaryen realm. “Your Grace, a group of travellers from Westeros seeks an audience with you.”

‘A group from Westeros?’ Dany shared a raised eyebrow with Missandei, who merely shrugged, and with Ser Barristan, who nodded. “What are their names?”

“One of them is Tyrion Lannister, your Grace. Travelling with Lord Varys of King’s Landing.” At the name Lannister, Dany tensed up. The same Lannisters that joined Robert the Usurper - that currently ruled Westeros. The ones that killed her niece and nephew. “Lord Varys bears a letter from Illyrio of Pentos, attesting to his harmlessness and trustworthiness.”

“Bring me the letter.” Taking it from the chamberlin’s hands, Dany recognized the writing as Illyrio’s. “Is that all of them?”

What the chamberlin answered made her tense even more, blood racing through her veins. “They travel with a Lady Catelyn Stark and her son, your Grace.”

Immediately, Barristan and Theodosius leaned down to her ear. “You have to kill the Lannister,” spat the younger General.

“I know Catelyn Stark, your Grace,” Barristan said, taken aback by his nephew’s vitriol. “Both she and Tyrion Lannister are the noblest of aristocrats.”

“Lies!”

He ignored his nephew’s outburst. “They will not harm you if you treat with them.”
“No, the Lannisters would only harm innocent children, and Catelyn Stark would only abuse a small boy that did nothing to her. The father of my children,” Dany spat.

Barristan blinked, shocked by her vitriol. “I assure you, your Grace, you must be mistaken. I would never imagine she would be a cruel woman.” Dany knew he was wrong, even if he didn’t know it himself. Her mind raced with ways that she could bring revenge on Jon’s childhood tormentor, from throwing her in the dungeons or feeding her to her dragons.

But she could almost see Jon’s sad face, the honorable man that she loved silently beseeching her not to give in to her dishonorable instincts. Sighing, she waved Barristan back and straightened her posture - oozing regal bearing. “Send them in.”

“You cannot do this!”

A glare cut Theodosius off. “Do not question me, general.” Seething, he stormed off, turning the corner as soon as the party entered - Dany resolved to order Barristan to get to the bottom of his rage, but more important things loomed.


A wave of the hand shut him up. “Greetings,” Missandei stated. “You are in the presence of Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen. Rightful Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men. Mother of Dragons, Breaker of Chains, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea. The Unburnt and Protector of the Realm.” The list of titles always wowed the weak minded, and based on their reactions none were such. “State your business.”

Catelyn Stark’s eyes met Dany’s, and both knew at that moment that the younger Queen knew everything. “Your Grace,” she said, curtsying. “My son, myself, Lord Tyrion, and Lord Varys request asylum in Meereen…”

“I am well aware of what loyalty Illyrio Mopatis gave to me,” the silver-haired Queen allowed after each of the three pleaded their cases, “but that doesn’t render my consideration of you any less skeptical, Lannister. Or you, Lord Varys. Both of you served the Usurper and his son with distinction.”

Unable to help himself, Tyrion laughed. An eyebrow rose on Dany’s forehead as the others looked at him in horror. “If by ‘with distinction’ your Grace, you mean ‘to the point that he was ready to execute us,’ then you would be correct.” He may have been a Lannister, but she liked his spunk.

“What my companion meant to say, your Grace,” interjected Varys, “Is that we are not trusted by Joffrey the Mad because of our actions. None of us want him on the throne, and only ask for the chance to prove ourselves worthy supporters of the Targaryen Dynasty as the esteemed Illyrio believes us to be.”

Closing her eyes and letting out a deep breath - much as Balerion or Edderon would do, both calming and menacing - before the violet orbs zeroed in on the guests. “If you do prove yourselves loyal, especially you Lannister, then you will be great assets to me. Therefore, you will be given quarters inside the Pyramid. My Unsullied will show you to your quarters.” The gaze softened at the
young boy. His features were pure Stark, tugging at her heartstrings. But then she shifted to his mother, and the emotionlessness returned.

As they were led out by the Unsullied guards - mere 'escorts’ after all - Dany stood. “Lady Stark.” The woman turned, visibly tensing at her voice. The Queen of Meereen may have been the Mother of Dragons, but her voice was like a searing ice. “Come to my solar. I have another matter that I need to discuss with you.”
Battle of Hardhome

Catelyn Tully Stark was born into politics. Learning from the side of her father and her uncle the Blackfish - many used to say it was a shame that she were born a woman and her ineffectual brother Edmure born a man - as the wife of Lord Ned Stark and mother of King Robb Stark she had never lost her resolve. Even as bandits attacked her party while transporting Tyrion Lannister, ironically now her traveling companion under far different circumstances, she refused to give in to terror. Which only made it all the more shocking that she found herself trembling inwardly at the fiery gaze of a twenty-year old girl.

‘Not just any girl, the Targaryen Queen. The mother of dragons.’

“Let us dispose of any diplomatic bluster, Lady Stark,” Daenerys said icily. “Both of us know why our face to face meeting is fraught with tension, correct?”

There was no doubt that this girl wasn’t born to rule. “Yes, that is correct. Lord Stark…” her eyes closed for a moment, grieving once more for her dead husband - the husband that had always remained true and faithful to her. “The late Lord Stark told me everything.”

“My children are Jon’s.” Catelyn was partly surprised by this. Though she knew the Targaryen girl was pregnant - Ned had to have had a hand in having the horselord poisoned rather than her, knowing Robert’s vile obsession with killing every Targaryen over a lie he told himself - she had assumed they were half-Dothraki. ‘But they are dragons, mostly dragons but with strong wolf blood.’ “Does this pose a problem for you?”

“No.” Long last, the truth had purged all resentment from her system. It shouldn’t have been there in the first place, and it would long be Catelyn’s shame. “What are their names?”

Narrowing her eyes, Dany decided it was of no harm to tell her. “As rightful Queen, I legitimized both. Crown Prince Rhaegar Targaryen and Princess Arya Targaryen.” There was some amusement in how stunned Lady Stark was at the last name. “They are both half-northern in blood, so one deserved a northern name. Who better than Jon’s beloved sister.”

Oh how Catelyn missed her beloved youngest daughter, likely dead somewhere in a slum in King’s Landing. “You are more gracious a person than I was expecting, or that I deserve.”

“You made my Jon’s life the worst of all seven hells while he was growing up. Broke him as a person, all over his parentage.” Dany’s anger was an active volcano welling deep within her, about to explode. But she kept her cool. “An innocent baby.”

Catelyn said nothing - there was nothing she could say. She merely dipped her head in shame.

“I wanted to have my dragons burn you the moment I heard your name, but a wise man that I named my dragon Edderon after told me of my father. Of what he did to his father and brother.” Dany could still visualize the dinner in Illyrio’s hall as if it were yesterday. “I swore I would never be like him, and I won’t. For the sake of your son and Jon’s brother, I will spare you and welcome you, but if you treat Jon’s children as you treated Jon, I will have no qualms of ending your life.”

There was no hesitance in Daenerys’ tone, and Catelyn believed her. “I promise that will never happen again… I am truly remorseful, and deeply ashamed. It wasn’t even worth anything, given the true facts.”

A thin eyebrow rose. “Continue.”
Trembling slightly, emotions long buried from necessity let out at last, Catelyn clasped her hands together. “Ned… he kept a huge secret. One that seemed so far-fetched based on what is in the conventional wisdom, but he had proof. I didn’t believe it at first, but I know it to be the truth.” She took in Daenerys’ icy violet eyes - the Queen gave nothing away. It was quite humbling to have someone thirty years her junior outmatch her in every way. “About his sister, Lyanna, and your brother, Rhaegar.”

One of the last things she ever expected this to be about, surprise flickered on Dany’s face. ‘Rhaegar… my brother…’ And with the young Stark girl, all the stories… “My brother kidnapped and raped your sister-in-law, and she died in childbirth. I am not proud of it…”

“Please, your Grace,” Catelyn cut her off. “She did die in childbirth, but as the Crown Princess.”

Eyes widened at that. “Lyanna was married to Rhaegar, documents hidden at Winterfell prove that. Ned showed them to me, before… he left.” The anguish of her misdeeds still ate away at Lady Stark, but this was the right course of action. “In Dorne, before she died in my late husband’s arms, she gave birth to a son. The trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen.” Even with years to digest it was still so incredible.

To Daenerys, it felt as if her entire world was spinning out of control. “A trueborn son?” Under primogeniture, a child of the eldest son always ranked higher in the line of succession than any sibling, boy or girl. If this child was alive, then he had a higher claim. Dany didn’t know whether to feel elated at another one of her blood or sick at the throne she had long fought for belonged to another… to a part-dragon, part-wolf just like her twins. Oh the irony. “Is this child alive?” she asked, heart clenched.

“Yes.” This way, being the one to tell the Mother of Dragons about her long-lost nephew, the father of her children, brought Catelyn face to face with what had burned within her for decades. “Lyanna promised her brother, my husband, to protect the child. Robert Baratheon and Tywin Lannister were determined to kill every Targaryen…”

“… to which they killed my niece and nephew, and forced my brother and I to flee Westeros.” The story was coming together for Dany - and one thought did emerge as to where it could end. ‘Is…?’ No. It couldn’t be. The gods could never be that kind to her.

Catelyn nodded. “Aye, they did. My husband was an honorable man.” Daenerys did not object, knowing this first hand. “Even if it meant that he had to seem a man of dishonor. Accept a permanent stain on his character. Call the trueborn heir his bastard son.”

One could hear a pin drop in the solar. Shock still, hands gripping the arms of her chair, the news hit Daenerys like an oncoming plains mammoth. “Jon.” The one word, one name - name of her live - left her lips like a whisper.

“Jon Snow, the boy I insanely hated out of petty jealousy and vicarious spite, is not Ned Stark’s bastard. He is Jaehaerys Targaryen, the trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark. The union of ice and fire, of dragon and wolf.” Her heart was heavy, watching the young woman before her react to news that turned an entire worldview upside down. But she had to know - if anyone deserved to know, it was Daenerys Stormborn, the Mother of Dragons. The father of Jon’s children.

Lurching to her feet, Dany gripped the wooden back of her chair to avoid toppling over. Her windpipe clenched. Jon was her blood. Jon was a Targaryen, a Dragonwolf just like Rhaegar and Arya. ‘My nephew.’ The true heir to the throne, greater than the claims of her or her brother.

Knowing it wasn’t her place, Catelyn still stood. “Your Grace…”
“Leave me!” came the reply, as pure dragon as she was. Nodding, Catelyn obeyed.

Door slamming shut behind her, crack echoing through the room, Dany sucked in the fresh air lungful by lungful - letting it settle her system. Her heart raced, thoughts rapid. Everything had changed, and yet nothing did. Targaryens married within the family, hence her longstanding belief that she would have to marry Viserys… but no longer. Ever symbolic, the true Crown Prince would have been her likely husband if there had been no Rebellion… and gods or god or fate had brought them together anyway. Brought them to fall in love.

“Do not be sad, sweet Daenerys. You aren’t as alone as you think.”


The northern gales were surprisingly absent on this voyage. Normally beating upon any ship with a captain dumb enough to venture it out into these waters north of the wall - not that anything really ventured north of Karkold other than small fishing boats - Davos Seaworth was glad for the relative calm. Watching seasick landlubbers aboard boat was amusing and all, the wildling Tormund Giantsbane the worst of the lot, but in his vast experiences during his smuggling days found him in winds that would test even his iron stomach. Best avoid them, and pray for rain.

Shouting a command to three roustabouts manning the main sail, he went back to his fruitless searching. “Where is that boy?” Davos reasoned he should address the Lord Commander more respectfully, but he was a mere boy to him. ‘Hells, most of the power players here are mere youngsters.’ At least Stannis Baratheon was his age…

Speaking of youngsters, only a few feet ahead of him passed Margaery Tyrell. Even aboard ship she had a beauty to envy all women. “Good day, Ser Davos,” she said, smiling kindly. They had gotten quite used to each other on the voyage north from the Reach.

That made her perfect for his question. “Same to you, mi’Lady. Do you know where the Lord Commander is?”

“Ah yes.” She pointed to the bow. “Up ahead on the forecastle, alone and brooding. Do you happen to know where Lord Stark is?”

“In the stern, going over matters with Giantsbane.” He couldn’t help but smirk at how she sped off. If Jon Snow was the overall commander and Davos was the fleet commodore, Lady Margaery was in charge of the naval logistics. Normally scandalous for a woman to handle, she insisted and neither Jon nor Robb Stark objected - not that Davos would expect the latter to once it was fleshed out that she would stay aboard ship for the actual fun, given the way he looked at her. ‘Young love.’

Jon Snow was unlike any commander he knew. He was no king, yet could have been a great one - no demons like Stannis, overconfidence like Renly, gluttony like Robert, madness like the Mad King, and all of the former along with pure idiocy like Joffrey. The brooding, man of few words that the Bastard of Winterfell was made one under his command wish to fight for him. Was not afraid to get into the thick of the fray but also giving a damn about his men’s lives.

Perhaps Davos had found his proper patron.

“Ser Davos.”

Shaking himself out of his contemplation, Davos found Jon staring at him. “Forgive me, Lord
Commander, for disturbing you.”

Black cloak covered shoulders shrugged. “Eh, better that you did.”

“Something eating away at you?”

“No…” Jon looked back at the sea. “Just thinking about those lost.”

Images of the Battle of Blackwater Bay flashed in Davos’ mind. Of the men that sailed off with Stannis to help Jon’s father in King’s Landing - including his own son - that were never seen again. “Can’t help that, but better to look at the future.”

“Aye.” Eyes bored intensely at the waves. “If we don’t rescue the free folk from the dead, then we’re doomed.” Davos stayed silent - he still thought the lad was daft there, but who was he to speak on that? He had seen the red witch. Jon looked at the onion knight. “Where is Lady Margaery?”

An amused snort. “Looking for your brother.”

Jon laughed. “I am sure something is up between them.” Those were the same looks he gave Dany and she gave him.

“I wouldn’t be a good analyst there,” Davos replied.

“Are you sure this is wise, marrying the Lady Stark? It would essentially mean declaring war on the Lannisters.”

“Perhaps it is time that we do so! That is my throne!”

“Calm down My King. Lord Karstark is just cautious, after all.” A pause. “Lady Stark will secure my hold on the North until it isn’t necessary anymore. I have assurances that we will not declare war yet, but we will. Once then, you will be proclaimed King with me as your hand.”

“And then we march south with the North, Vale, and Riverlands behind us!”

“I may have to tidy up some… loose ends,” the way he said it made Brienne of Tarth shiver from her hiding place. “But yes. Joffrey will die and you will be the sole King.”

Turning her attention from Podrick bringing hay to the horses, Brienne gazed back upon the tower of Winterfell. In there was the Lady Sansa, whom she had sworn before her mother and the Seven to protect with her life. It was only two weeks ago that Lord Baelish had married her off to Ramsay Bolton, after three months where he had seduced, married, and survived Lysa Arryn - her body falling down the Moon Door. Brienne had a feeling she was murdered, but couldn’t prove it.

Her mind replayed the overheard conversation again and again between Bolton, Karstark, and the mysterious silver-haired man. Was he a Targaryen? Had to be. ‘What in hells is going on?’ Sansa was in danger, she was sure of it, but the stubborn Stark had refused her help after her Aunt’s death and didn’t respond to her offer. But Brienne was patient. If the candle appeared in the tower as she had told Sansa, then she would save the girl.

Such was her duty.

Nothing much had changed in Hardhome since Jon Snow had left it during that fateful blizzard. It
was just as scrappy and rough, domesticated mammoth hauling blocks of wood and supplies around
the camp, wildling children running and fighting in jest, and the adults breaking their backs to eek
out an existence at the top of the world. The large, central yurt where Mance Rayder ‘held court’ was
thick with the pungent smoke from burning mammoth dung chips. Jon was used to it, and he and
Tormund couldn’t help but share amusement over how both Robb and Margaery blanched at the
smell. ‘They wanted to come ashore, after all.’ He insisted that Robb wait at shore and Margaery stay
on the ships, but his brother wanted to back him up and the Rose of Highgarden insisted on
representing the Tyrells.

However, there was a sense of defeat among the wildlings. Normally proud and untamed, a malaise
had gripped Hardhome, one that Jon hated despite his Northern upbringing and Night’s Watch
training. He should hate them all, but came to respect the Free Folk. Such was why he was here,
currently at a loss of how to convince them of his plan.

“You talk about the fucking Wall, King Crow?” asked a female chieftain incredulously, a skilled
archer if Jon remembered correctly. Jeers followed from most of the other chieftains, Mance staying
quiet as ever on his ‘throne.’ “The wall was built to keep us out…”

Silent till now, Robb jumped in. “According to legend, Brandon the Builder constructed the Wall
after the Long Night. As the Lord of Winterfell, the wildlings have caused great damage to the
North.” ‘Easy brother,’ Jon wanted to say. It didn’t seem like a good idea to piss off their hosts.
Robb, however, was more diplomatic than his history with the Freys gave him credit for. “But if the
stories I have been told by all of you are true, then there was a greater threat, one that all of us should
care about stopping.”

“When has a crow cared about us?” another chieftain growled, hardened gaze throwing daggers at
Jon and the other Westerosi - yet after Tormund beat to death one who spat insults and tried to grope
Margaery, basic decorum was adhered to, of a sort.

“In normal times we wouldn’t, I am ashamed to say. But the past is irrelevant now.” He looked them
all over, making sure to meet eyes with all of them at least once. “The dead don’t see the difference
between southerner, crow, or free folk. We’re just a threat to their goal and meat for their army.”

“And you think the… dragonglass would stop them?” asked another.

Jon nodded. “Aye, I’ve seen it happen.”

“Bullshit!”

“Who cares?! We’re sitting ducks here!” Tormund shouted. “Even a bunch of cunts would see living
for a chance is preferable to being some corpse soldier!” Jon noticed Margaery smile slightly. The
wildling may have been crude, but he got the point across. Even better, many were starting to come
around, nodding at his statement. After admitting to killing Ygritte, the fate of Jon’s head had been
questionable before Tormund defended him and told the true story. “I’ve served with Jon Snow. He
may be a prissy southerner.” Robb couldn’t help but chortle at that. “But he fights hard, and is
noble.” Tormund placed a hand on his shoulder. “I trusted him with my life, and he never gave me a
reason to doubt it.”

Poised and dignified even someplace so far removed from the Reach, Margaery stepped forward.
“House Tyrell is prepared to support Lord Commander Snow with its fleet of ships. Designed to haul
grain, they will fit thousands of… Free Folk and their beasts of burden.” A slight boasting, but
enough.

“There is considerable land lying fallow north of Last Hearth,” Robb added. “No one has used it for
centuries, and I as the son and heir of the great Ned Stark join Jon Snow in pledging it to the Free Folk if they agree to common cause.”

More murmurs among the chieftains. “Better to trust King Crows and the soft lady than die here.” Even skeptics like the female chief were starting to agree.

“Fools.” The bald chieftain, apparent leader of the hardliners, sauntered menacingly up to the three Westerosi. “As soon as you all get aboard their ships, they’ll push your bodies into the Shivering Sea.” He passed by Jon, then Robb, then Margaery - who to her credit stood firm and unafraid, truly a woman stronger than her title as the Rose of Highgarden would suggest. Tormund ended up getting the worst look of all. “Take your ‘New Life,’ and your glass, and shove it up your arse.”

A loud growl filled the room. The head giant bared his maw at the chieftain. “Tormund!” His finger pointed at Jon. “Snow!” Grunting, he slammed an open fist against his barrel chest. “Go south, must!.” As ringing an endorsement as ever.

Silent through the whole discussion, deeply contemplative but with dark eyes aware of everything around him, Mance Rayder, King Beyond the Wall, stood tall. He walked right up to Jon Snow, staring him in the eyes. “I can tell whether someone is a liar, because I’ve dealt with many in my life.” His gaze shifted to the assembled chiefs. “Jon Snow was one of us. He proved himself, killing a mammoth single handedly. I know he tells the truth, he, the Lord Stark, and the Lady Tyrell. We will go south, and save ourselves!” There were scattered cheers, far from uniform, but it seemed to Jon that the hardest part was over.

Oh how he would rue that thought.

Samwell Tarly stared at the old man in disbelief - the Maester of Castle Black’s words defied all the odds. And yet they solved every unexplainable mystery that the disgraced scion of Hornhill ever encountered. ‘Jon’s hands. The dragon.’ Unburnt. Blood of the Dragon. He opened his mouth several times, but nothing came out. Jaw awkwardly flopping like a fish, it all seemed like some surreal joke nonetheless.

“Jon…” he finally croaked, “Is a Targaryen?” As for what went through his head when Maester Aemon asked for advice to soothe his ailing heart, to cleanse his soul of a secret…

The cold draft chilling his ancient bones to the core, Aemon nodded. “The long lost son of my great-great nephew.” Emotion clogged his voice, able to openly talk about the reason as to why he was never alone anymore. “A Targaryen alone in the world is a terrible thing. I would have died long ago had I not known I was never alone since he arrived.”

“That is why the dragon obeys him… because he has Valyrian blood. The dragonriders of old…” Shock wearing off, Sam felt a slight excitement at this new discovery. And yet… “But his love for Daenerys Targaryen? She would be his aunt, correct?” Jon would not like that.

Aemon nodded. “Yes, though the same age that is what they are. But it is of no consequence,” he dismissed. “Had Robert Baratheon not rebelled, I have no doubt they would have married. Love may be the death of duty, but… “ he trailed off, remembering a prophecy he had once heard. ‘Ice and fire.’

Sam, less emotional and melancholy, came to quick conclusions. “He has to know. You have to tell him.” Aemon was silent. “Jon has existed his entire life feeling he is a bastard, when he is the true King of the Seven Kingdoms!” Good, bad, or indifferent, he was determined to let him know the truth.
Sighing, Aemon knew he had to. “I will tell him when he returns.” The room suddenly got much colder. It seemed as if something was planning to make that a challenge.

Hardhome was a blaze of activity. The to and fro of boats from the Tyrell grain fleet to the few jettys that the wildlings had built was a maze of crisscrossing paths and oars. Each small shuttle was filled to the brim with as many Free Folk as they could carry, the few large rafts moving the young mammoth beasts of burden that would serve their owners south of the wall. Jon had to commend the skill of Ser Davos on shore, Margaery on the boats, and the Tyrell crews. Without their fantastic work, the whole morning and early afternoon would have been a clusterfuck of epic proportions to get the irascible and untamed wildlings out.

His eyes settled on the female chieftain, bringing her children and comforting them as they wedged into a boat with fifteen other wildlings. Priorities were to the women, children, and skilled craftsmen with enough strong warriors to keep them all in line. They had reached the bare minimum to keep the Free Folk culture alive.

Even still… “How many have we got on board? Nine thousand out of how many?”

“Do I look like I can count?” Tormund shot back at him.

“Regardless, we’re leaving too many behind.”

“Free Folk are stubborn,” Mance stated flatly. “Took me twenty years to gather all the clans together. We’ll probably get twelve, seventeen thousand out of here with the remaining eight coming along later.”

Tormund snorted. “Lack of food will bring them around. The Dead have already turned nearly everything up here.”

Grabbing the dispatch from one of the sailors, Davos’ boots squelched through the frost-covered mud as he found Jon, Robb, and Tormund. “Lady Margaery says they’re at about a third capacity at this point.”

“Not enough,” Jon said, concerned.

“We’re prepared to abandon all the equipment and stores,” Tormund stated. “That can be replaced. Lives can’t.”

“Jon!” The Lord Commander turned to find Robb trotting up to him. “The chieftain of the Burned Men Clan has changed his mind, adding his four hundred to our total wishing to leave.”

A rare smile poked out onto his face. “Good, you and Finn get them prepared…”

Below the railing, the latest boatload began climbing the hung nets toward the deck. While most noblewomen of Westeros - aside from the majority who wouldn’t bother leaving their castles - wouldn’t sully themselves by dealing with smallfolk of any stripe, Margaery Tyrell was in the heat of the action. A soft hand reached out to help two small children climb over the top. “There you go, dears,” she said kindly.

“I want my mother,” one whined, holding back tears.

Margaery hugged them to her. “She’ll come soon, I promise.” She turned to Jon’s page, clad in a small black cloak of the brotherhood. “Ollie, get these two to one of the braziers, warm them up.”
Ollie’s face showed… displeasure at having to deal with wildlings in any manner besides killing them, but he obeyed.

Suddenly, Margaery felt an unnatural chill pierce to her very bone. The air around all must have dropped considerably. A cacophony erupted aboard ship as every dog began to bark, every mammoth stowed below decks letting out a trumpeting hoot that resonated in every ear.

Head turning slowly from where he and Robb were talking, Jon saw the ominous cloud of swirling ice and snow blowing over the rocky crags and toward the plain of Hardhome. “Seven Hells,” came the murmur.

“I thought we’d have more time,” Mance said beside him. And then the panic started. One by one, the shouts of fear and terror began to echo from beyond the wooden gates. “SHUT THEM!” Mance screamed, running as fast as his legs could carry him. “SHUT THE DAMN GATES!”

It was here. They were here. Of this Jon had no doubt, the dead had arrived. It was all up to them now, get as many out as possible before the jaw snapped shut and Hardhome was completely overwhelmed. The panic hadn’t yet reached the docks, but it would. “Davos!” he yelled. “You and the Tyrell men get as many onto the boats as you can!”

Fear of the unknown was etched into the sea dog’s eyes. “And yourself?”

“I’m staying. Robb, get on!”

“I’m with you Jon.” He drew his own sword. “Somebody’s gotta protect your ass.”

“If they get through the wall,” Tormund said. “We’re all dead.”

Jon knew this, knew the hopelessness of it all. “Night’s Watch! With me!” Even then… Running, he cleared his mind and searched for the connection. ‘Come to me, boy. I need you. We need you.’ His mind yelled with all its strength. ‘Come to me.’

Atop a mountain some ways away, a pair of lids shot back, eyes wide at the distress call from its rider. Leathery wings spread apart as the beast rose into the air. Dragonfire brewed in Rhaegal’s belly, ready to defend his father and rider to the death.

Chaos, terrible chaos. Wildling warriors dashed towards the wooden wall blocking the entire mass of dead from swarming the camp. No great barrier of ice and rock, nor even a simple stout stone wall, it was. The wood had already been penetrated in many places. Trickles of corpses, some fresh in death and others walking skeletons had clawed their way in and were killing indiscriminately. Jon swung Longclaw wildly, slicing a skull clean off before jinking and sending the Valyrian steel right into the breast of another.

A heaving breath filled with ice was sucked into his lungs as he dispatched the wild sword swing of another. He had lost Robb in the chaos. Tormund, Finn, Gren, the other chieftains… all were unknown to him in the frenzied fight. Giants stampeding through the camp, smashing corpse after corpse in their wake, were too big to lose track of - together the ragged line had held them at bay for the most part, but it was only a matter of time before the wall fell.

Two charged at him in a frenzy, jaws peeling rotting flesh as they opened in animal snarls. A swift kick sent one sprawling, Longelaw earning another kill when Jon brought it down upon the other’s head. An axe to the spine dispatched the other one. “Thought you could use a hand,” Mance Rayder said dryly.
“I had it under control.”

“Sure you did.” The King beyond the wall held up the bag of dragonglass blades. His gaze shifted. “Watch out!” Warned by Mance’s shout, Jon just manages to dart out of the way as a walker swings the sharp edge of an ice spear at his gut. Toppling to the ground in a heap, he watched helplessly as the King beyond the wall swings his own battle axe at the monster. It shattered upon contact, ice spear twirling above before striking home in Mance’s gut. With the lifeless body now upon the ground like a sack of grain, the similarly lifeless being swung at Jon. The Lord Commander brought Longclaw up, a vain attempt to parry…

CLANG!

To Jon’s wide eyes, and to the gaping jaw of the white walker, the Valyrian steel held firm - unbroken. Yelling a cry at the top of his lungs, Jon swing around, the ancient sword slicing through the beast’s midsection. It left nothing but ice.

Breathing deeply, Jon looked up at the ridge. A cluster of mounted men rested atop the rocks. Horses were dead, nothing more than rotting flesh or bone while their ice blue riders stared down below. The white walkers.

“It’s gonna fall!” Tormund - at least he thought it was Tormund, spoke true. The wooden wall collapsed from the sheer weight of the horde, snarling dead swarming over it like an ant colony after a dead caterpillar. It was then that the world erupted into flame, welcome heat hitting Jon’s skin. ‘Just in time. Good job, boy.’

Eyes centered on the figure that could only be his rider, Rhaegal used all his strength to spit dragonfire on the mob of tormentors set to do him harm. Jet after jet laced from his maw, the unprotected corpses falling like ants to a wave of water. A solid fence of flame, thin but solid, separated the snarling host from Jon and the others he was protecting. Twenty-five foot wings flapped in the air as he banked around. The fire wouldn’t last for long, and Rhaegal would hold them back as long as it took for his rider to escape to safety.

Hearing the exultant cheers from his men, feeling Robb try to guide him back as Tormund finished off another wight, a glint of sun caught Jon’s eye. To the left, atop the high crags with the other white walkers, walked the imposing figure. Skin as blue as ice, the pale crown atop his head made him indistinguishable to all. The terror of many a child’s horror tale. The Night King. Within his grasp rested a pointed spear, raising high. He hurled it into the air with all his strength.

Jaws dropped and eyes widened in terrible wonder as the spear struck true.

“NO!” A wave of pain slammed into Jon Snow, feeling the same burning cold and stabbing anguish that the spear had sliced into Rhaegal’s shoulder. Arm lashing out, three wights crumpled into broken heaps of bone and flesh as the Lord Commander’s legs pumped towards where his dragon was falling. The panicked cries of Robb and Tormund - along with the deep bellows of the giants - were faint in Jon’s mind. Like Ghost, Rhaegal was his. The dragon and he shared a connection, and he’d be damned to every hell if he didn’t save him.

The green dragon, now covered in mud, snow, and his own blood, had luckily landed on the inner side of the fires. It bought him time, currently spent weakly trying to dislodge a few corpses trying to crawl all over him. Hearing the pained shriek, Jon hurled Longclaw like a javelin into the back of a wight, Rhaegal’s jaws clamping down on the other. Grabbing the sword, Jon reached his beast’s head. “Easy, buddy. It’s almost over.” Rhaegal hooted weakly, nudging Jon’s side. A gaping but shallow cut across the dragon’s side underneath the wing oozed blood. It looked worse than it had to be, but unless Rhaegal could get to safety he was doomed. “We’re gonna get you out of here…
somehow.”

Turning to face the ridgeline, Jon could see the Night King, now off his undead horse and staring down with another ice spear in his hands. Longclaw raised itself at the ready. “Just try it.”

Eyes meeting, the Night King let it fly…

Only for the Valyrian steel to shatter the ice into crystals, muted sun sparkling off them. He wouldn’t try that again, but with the fires dying out, if Jon couldn’t get Rhaegal out then the hordes of dead would do the job just as well. One group was just about to stampede over it.

Bellowing a guttural war cry, the corpses were batted aside by a log-wielding Giant. One straggler was smashed by Tormund’s hand axe as Robb grabbed Jon’s cloak. “I’m not losing another brother, damn you! Come on!”

“Rhaegal!” Jon cried, the panic in his voice dying as a second giant gingerly lifted the dragon into his arms, as if carrying a child. ‘That works.’

Tormund grabbed his axe. “Stop fucking around, cunts! Let’s go!” The snarls grew ever louder as a second mass charged from atop the cliff. Sickening crunches impacted against the stone and dirt, but they kept coming. Robb literally hauled Jon out of there, them and Tormund falling into place behind the giant carrying Rhaegal while the other swung wildly with the log, covering them.

“Hurry!” True to his duty, Davos manned the last boat - with just enough room for the three survivors. The two brothers leapt into the craft, boots scraping along the hull. Tormund followed, a skeleton on his back as he smacked onto the wood. Four swords smashed into the attacker, a small splash marking its watery grave while bigger splashes announced the giants wading into the bay. One held the moaning Rhaegal high above her head, both tall enough to walk along the muddy bottom. Through his connection, Jon breathed a sigh of relief. His dragon had made it.

Thousands of pairs of eyes watched the land, still with the dead and undead. The last futile screams echoed from the remaining dying. A sight not seen since the days of legend thousands of years before played out, the single figure of the Night King walking towards the jetty. His army parted for him, like waves clearing a path through a stormy sea. Glowing blue eyes locked with Jon’s, soulless anger at losing a promising specimen meeting resolute determination. Slowly, hauntingly, the Night King raised his arms.

Aboard ship, as Rhaegal was gently placed on the deck, Margaery Tyrell stared at the shore in terrified wonder - Ollie by her side in the same manner. On the boat, Davos and Robb mirrored the Rose of Highgarden’s expression. The Young Wolf spared a glance at Jon, who replied with a mournful gaze of confirmation. All at once, thousands of freshly dead Free Folk rose as one, fodder to the Night King’s army.

There was no doubting the threat now.

Lord Bolton,

Since my last letter, I have been informed by a reliable source that the dragon that Lord Commander Snow, Lady Tyrell, and Lord Stark have in their arsenal is dead. Killed by the cold North of the Wall. Yet they bring an army of wildlings to threaten the entire North.

He may have the support of the majority, but there are true brothers that fight for the Watch as I do. My men will do whatever they can to end this threat before it can truly form, but I implore you and
the King to plan for if I fail.

Gods save the Targaryen Dynasty.

Ser Alliser Thorne
For the Watch

“I can definitely see the Stark in them,” quipped Tyrion Lannister, watching Arya and Rhaegar playing happily in the corner of the solar. “You can easily tell the features of both families though.”

‘Not always,’ thought Catelyn, picturing the twins’ father. He was half Targaryen himself, but was pure Stark - such was what made Ned’s story so believable, what made her anger at the young boy so easy. Stark blood, more accurately his mother’s blood. Her gaze drifted to the children. They had taken to her almost from first sight, and they reminded her so much of her children that it was hard not to fall in love with them.

“What you did to Jon, no one can go back and change. If you do wish to repent, Lady Stark, you can start by giving our children the love that he deserved.”

The dragon queen had been clear, and Catelyn was determined to atone.

“I’ve arranged for your son’s transport to Qarth in a week’s time, Lady Stark,” Tyrion said. “I’m not sure why he’s going, though. His explanation did not make sense.”

Catelyn laughed. “Neither did I when he told me, though the Reeds managed to understand.” The significant history between the Reeds and the Starks, not to mention how Meera Reed looked at Bran when no one noticed... she trusted them.

“He’ll be well protected, I can assure you that.” A detachment of Unsullied and auxiliaries packed a hell of a punch. A frown crossed Tyrion’s face, remembering who the boy was. “Lady Stark... you have to know that I had nothing to do with what happened to him.”

Placing her knitting down, Catelyn nodded. “Aye. I know that now. I doubt you knew about your brother and sister... in the tower.” Both turned away, searching for something to change the subject. “I saw the Queen earlier. She looked quite happy.”

Jorah leaned back, eyes meeting Catelyn’s. “The Khaleesi has been walking on a cloud recently, deliriously happy.” A wistful smile appeared on his face as he thought of it. Daenerys deserved such happiness at all occasions, but such happiness was a rare occurrence in her life. “It was all following her conversation with you, Lady Stark.”

Eyes shifting back to the playing children, Catelyn was silent for a moment. “Oh? I am glad to hear that is the case.” She knew exactly why, and to tell the truth she should have realized it was likely. Neither she nor Jon had grown up together as Jon and his ‘siblings’ had, and even if they had this scenario would have happened. The Targaryens were far different from the other noble houses when it came to incest - not that the constant cousin-betrothing noble houses were much different. Seeing the mixed Stark/Targaryen twins laughing and enjoying their innocence, it drove home that Daenerys was celebrating her extra, far deeper connection to Jon than had been true before. ‘Preordained,’ as Ned had told her.

“What did you tell her, if you don’t mind me asking?” It had to do with the Stark bastard, her children’s father. Jorah was sure of it. He knew Dany well - knew what made her tick.

“I would like to know this as well.” Innately curious about his new Queen, Tyrion leaned forward.

Eyes flickering between the two, Catelyn knew that this - of all things - needed to be held close to the chest. “She wanted to know the truth about what had become of Jon Snow, understandable given her... their children. It freed her heart knowing that he was alive the last I heard.” It was not her
place to disclose Jon’s true parentage - while the less that knew the better, given Robert’s obsession could extend to Joffrey or Tywin, it was Her Grace’s choice of whom to know.

By the look on the two men’s faces, neither believed her.

Luckily, she was saved by two tiny Targaryens. “Grandmother, lunch!” Little Arya looked at her with a beaming, innocent smile despite her bold nature. She definitely took after her namesake.

Being reminded of her own darling yet frustrating Arya both warmed and pained Catelyn, but she wore an uncharacteristic softness nonetheless. “Excuse me, gentlemen.”

“She’s hiding something,” Jorah concluded as soon as they were both alone.

Tyrion nodded. “Yes, most likely. We shall know the truth if the Queen sees fit, though.” Inwardly, the dwarf was chuckling. ‘The Dragon Queen and the bastard of Winterfell.’ He remembered the brooding, sullen youth from the feast long ago. ‘Wolf and Dragon… love is strange, sometimes.’

The first major blizzard of the year had just dissipated, an auspicious omen for the superstitious among the northerners. In more practical terms, it meant easier transport from the various castles and lordships across the realms - if by sea, river, or land, the lack of blistering winds allowed it to happen. Lord Ramsay Bolton sent the ravens out as soon as the air cleared, gathering the most powerful families north of the River Trident in the name of the Targaryen King… at least in theory.

At the head of the large map table, Viserys Targaryen stared at it in anger. “This is all the support we can marshal? You said you could rally all the northern lords!” he screamed at his Hand.

Flashing his well worn mask at his King, Ramsay Bolton gestured to the map. “The Manderlys have been torpid ever since Lord Wyman lost his son at… it doesn’t matter. The Glovers are busy trying to retake Deepwood Motte from the Ironborn, and the Curwins…” Ramsay thought for a moment. “Actually they have no excuse for not showing up, apparently.”

“See that they are made an example of!” Viserys demanded. At long last he finally had a domain to rule - if not in name yet - and he wouldn’t let disobedient lords or Usurper’s dogs make him out to be a fool. His loyal Hand would see that his will was carried out.

Said ‘loyal Hand’ grinned. “It shall be done, your Grace. Even still, their forces were largely decimated in the War of the Four Kings. My armies and those of Lord Umber and Lord Karstark hold the best forces the North has to offer. The seven thousand total are augmented by the Frey armies.”

Attention turned to Walder Frey’s party, having journeyed from the Twins. “While I may have to keep several thousand remaining in the south to protect against incursions or uprisings, the combined armies of the Riverlands are a healthy nine thousand strong. This includes other loyal families.” Old and sharp, he disguised his contempt for the ‘King’ as mere elderly cantankerousness. Had Ramsay not loved a challenge he’d have envied him.

“Very good. I trust we can assault the Lannister swine quite soon then.”

The room was silent. “Your Grace,” began Ramsay, “I have reason to believe that Robb Stark is alive.”

“What?” Viserys took it more calmly than expected. “Well where is he?”
“North at Castle Black, a personal guest of Lord Commander Jon Snow.”

For some reason the mention of the Stark Bastard set him off. “JON SNOW IS STILL ALIVE?! Kill him! I want him dead! I COMMAND IT!”

‘Interesting.’ Ramsay was curious as to the enraged reaction, but would investigate later. “I have conceived of a special plan to deal with the Stark’s, your Grace, in case primary plans go awry. Rest assured, they will die.”

“See to it, then.” Without another word, Viserys stormed out of the hall.

As soon as the red/black cloaked wannabe King exited the map room, Smalljon Umber let out a snort. “And I thought your father was a cunt, Bolton.” A greenish loogie spat from his mouth to where Viserys had sat. “Takes every bit of my willpower to not bash his teeth in.”

The patented twisted grin of Ramsay’s curved on his face. “As satisfying as that would be, Lord Umber, you mustn’t.” Hand to the King in all but name, he took in the dispositions on the ground. “Jon Snow, Robb Stark, and the Night’s Watch will be dealt with soon, so aside from the wildling invaders in the north who are of no real threat, our forces are prepared to take the fight into the rest of Westeros.”

“We are in no shape to fight the seasoned Lannister armies,” countered Black Walder. “The rebellion by the Blackfish already threatens our hold on Riverrun.” He swallowed, knowing that it was his task to keep the ancestral home of House Tully out of the hands of Catelyn Stark’s uncle. “Lord Baelish could procure us the Knights of the Vale…”

“He can’t be seen as consorting openly with Targaryens,” countered Ramsay. “It would threaten his position at King Joffrey’s side.”

Ned Karstark joined the conversation, having been silent. “I know Lord Royce. He won’t side with us unless ordered to.”

“Then we’re doomed to failure…”

“Shut up!” Ramsay was so close to losing his temper, but it retreated back into his grin - he’d expend his stress later, with Myranda and some unfortunate soul. ‘Perhaps another time with Sansa, keep her broken.’ The possibilities were endless, and he greatly enjoyed what he’d do when he finally had his hands on the Targaryen Dragon Queen. ‘The strongest are the most fun to break,’ as he always thought. “Joffrey, from what I know, is a fickle fool. Easily distracted.” Ramsay looked over all the men. “He’ll end up going on some goose chase for his special project. Once he’s distracted, we will strike.” A glass was raised. “To the… Targaryen dynasty.”

No one doubted his lack of sincerity, though there was a wonder if their King would think the toast quite real. “To the Targaryen Dynasty!” they joined him in cheering.

In the high tower, a single candle flickered.

“In and out, the Lannister says.” Steel swinging, the yellow-swaddled Dornish soldier - more reminiscent of an eastern sellsword than a Westerosi knight - groaned as Ser Bronn of the Blackwater’s sword impacted with his gut. “It would be quick and clean, the Lannister said.”

An arrow whizzed by Jamie’s head, the aristocrat knight, removing a knife from his belt and chucking it into the heart of the unlucky archer. ‘Should’ve fired from a distance.’ His bad arm
wrapped around a slight, dainty figure. Princess Myrcella Baratheon, sister to the King and officially Jamie’s niece. “It wasn’t my fault our cover was blown.”

That honor belonged to Meryn Trant. Bronn and Jamie were just about to bluff their way past a guard checkpoint out of the inner palace, only for the hulking psychopath to embed his sword through the guard captain’s midsection. “Thank you, cuntface,” the hero of Blackwater Bay sneered. “Now all of fucking Sunspear is after us.” He dodged another arrow, this one from afar.

The three of them managed to sneak into Sunspear quite easily, only an unfortunate experience with a patrol on the outskirts - Jamie managed to hold his own despite the missing hand, which was a boost to his confidence even if not even close to his past skill - marring the infiltration. Getting his daughter away from Prince Tristan’s suites was child’s play. Now though, Oberyn Martell was leading the entire Princely guard battalion after the trio… “Hold on, sweetling,” remarked Jamie to his… daughter. “We’re almost there.”

“I’m scared, uncle. Couldn’t I have stayed with my betrothed.” The young girl was quite sheltered, for which Jamie thanked the gods.

“Not up to us, dearie,” quipped Bronn, cutting down another Dornish guard. “Blame dear old mommy.” Breaking down a door, the sound of crashing waves filled them with relief… only for it to sour immediately.

Standing right on the dock, drawing scared and nervous looks from the smallfolk rowers aboard the small boat, was Oberyn Martell - the famed Red Viper. Clutched in his hand was a golden royal spear, a scowl on his face. “Well, well. Jamie Lannister is in my grasp.” He chuckled. “I would have much rather had your father, or Ser Gregor. But you’ll do nicely.”

“Get behind me,” Jamie whispered harshly to Myrcella. The scared blonde nodded, face an ashen white. “Just let us go, Oberyn. We don’t have any quarrel with you. We just want to get my niece back to the capitol where she belongs.” He, Bronn, and Trant readied their swords, the former two wishing Oberyn would stand down while the latter looked eager to spill blood.

“She belongs with her intended, but that is of no concern to me.” He shrugged out of his cloak, tunic trim to his athletic body. “Twenty years ago, your father had the Mountain rape my sister, and then kill her and her children. I feel that justice is overdue, and I will not let such a chance at justice slip my fingers.” Leaping in the air, he spun sideways and lunged straight at Jamie...

The Prince of Dorne, despite being outnumbered three to one, fought like a man possessed. Fluid in his movements, a dancer matched with skilled brawlers, for every glancing wound received he inflicted four slicing assaults, sending Trant to the ground and Bronn into the water where he struggled to swim towards the reachable sides of the boat. Jamie, the main target of his rage, fought as well as he could with one good arm, but a feint to the left allowed the Red Viper to use his shaft to trip his legs. The Kingslayer collapsed onto the wood jetty, sword falling from his hand.

Spear twirling, Oberyn spat at Jamie’s prone form - ignoring the cries from Myrcella. “Your father had my sister raped! And killed her children. I hope he remembers her name when I send him his son’s head in a basket.” He raised the spear, a grin of triumph on his lips.

In his smugness, he did not pay attention to Jamie’s bad hand. Or it’s gold prosthetic. Lashing out, the heavy metal slammed into Oberyn’s foot. Pained screams joined with crunching bone as he fell to the ground. Behind him, Meryn Trant rose to his feet with sword in hand. Jamie’s eyes blinked away the pain of his earlier wounds - only to widen in horror. “NOOOOO!”

Too late. With a snarl, Trant thrust the sword right into Oberyn’s face. The handsome vesage that
charged many a woman out of her dress - and many a man out of his breeches - was no more, a mere gaping mass of bone, blood, and brains. Dead, a fate that Jamie would have killed to prevent.

As soon as their boat escaped the jetty, Jamie and Bronn both grabbed Trant and slammed him into the bottom of the boat. "What the fuck was that! What the fuck did you do?"

"The little bitch… in my… way," he wheezed through Bronn’s hand around his throat.

"Do you just know what you’ve done, you sadistic halfwit. You didn’t kill some smallfolk or a sword teacher from Essos. That was the fucking Prince Oberyn of Dorne!" Frantic punches did not dislodge Bronn’s grasp. "Your cunt brain will bring Dorne to war with us!"

The Kingslayer grasped his friend’s shoulder. Much as he would like Bronn to squeeze the life out of Trant, he did not want the responsibility of explaining to Joffrey why one of his favorite guards was dead. "Leave him." Bronn complied, adding one last punch for good measure. Jamie slumped on one of the hard wooden planks that served as a seat. The exhaustion of a near constant thrill ride both from two days sneaking into the palace and a mad dash out of the palace before the sun could move a mere inch in the sky had finally crept up to him. Breathing deep, he heard the sound of soft sobs behind him.

"Uncle Jamie…” It was Myrcella, fear and trauma overwhelming her. Paternal instinct overcoming him, Jamie pulled her into his embrace. "Did I cause all this?"

Gently stroking her hair, Jamie let her shaking subside. "Not at all, sweetling. Not at all.” She was innocent in this - perhaps one of the only few left in this world that could claim that title.

"Well, at least I got to sample the best pussy Dorne had to offer.” Jamie scowled. Leave it to Bronn to ruin the moment.

On shore, Ellaria Sand - flanked by a troop of guards - came upon the still body. Screaming to the heavens, she fell to her knees and cradled her lover’s corpse in her arms, the still pooling blood now soaking her gossamer silks ignored. In her mind, a desire for revenge developed, one that would tear Dorne apart and have effects far beyond the sandy soil of the southernmost realm in the Seven Kingdoms.

“Is that the last of em?” Looking to her left, Margaery watched as Jon and a very handsome-looking Robb walked toward her. Their attention was then directed back to the courtyard as some remaining stragglers and Mag Mar Tun Doh Weg stepped through the ice tunnel, a trio of adolescent mammoth in the center. A grunt from Mag the mighty alerted his comrade, Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun, outside the gate to Castle Black.

"If I understand the giant’s language, and I certainly do not.” Margaery smiled when Robb let out a soft chuckle. “Yes, all thirteen thousand have made it through the gates and safety."

Jon nodded. “Good.” He looked towards the winchlift. “Ollie! Tell them to close the gate!” An eye glanced at the other side of the castle, where Thorne and his group clustered. “They don’t look happy.”

“Fuck em.” Robb resisted the urge to spit in their direction. “We all saw the Army of the Dead. He didn’t.”

A shudder coursed through Margaery. “I still can’t believe it.” Olenna still didn’t, but trusted her granddaughter not to be a fool. “But thanks to you, Jon, that monster was denied thirteen thousand
“I just wish I could have gotten out more…” A waddling form caught his attention. “Sam? Are Gilly and little Sam alright?”

The Tarly nobleman offered a small smile. “Oh yes. There was a tiny mishap with some of Thorne’s boys, but Ghost helped in that.” Ghost let out a happy bark, trotting over and licking Jon’s hand. He was almost fully grown, and stood a high as a large goat.

“Good boy, protecting Sam and Gilly.” The direwolf loved the praise, nuzzling Jon’s side. He was glad at least one of his dear companions was doing well at the moment. Lethargic and in pain from his injury, Rhaegal was nestled in the Castle stores, sleeping most of the time. It was painful for Jon to watch. “So what is it?”

“Aemon wants to talk to you.” Margaery then excused herself to speak with Ser Davos about the land for the wildlings, so Jon and Robb followed Sam.

Entering the Maester’s quarters, Jon shucked out of his cloak in the toasty warmth and placed it on the hook next to the door. “How is Rhaegal?” Having tasked Aemon with the dragon’s care, Jon was confident that the Targaryen would nurse him back to health - and quite a bit concerned at Rhaegal’s condition. One could say the dragon had become sort of like a child to him. “Are his wounds healing?”

“Rest assured, Lord Commander,” Aemon chuckled, finding Jon’s father-like concern amusing. “Dragons are mighty beasts. He’s taken a beating, but will heal as long as he has enough rest.” The relieved look on Jon’s face was worth it, the Lord Commander getting a slap on the back and a manly half-hug from his brother. A sigh left Aemon’s lips, the maester resting his old bones in a chair. “Frankly, it wasn’t because of Rhaegal that I requested this chat with you.” Nodding, Jon waited for either to speak but no words came out. One could hear a feather drop in the maester’s quarters.

Pursing his lips, it was Sam that broke the awkward silence. “Jon, Aemon and I know who your mother is.”

Blinking, Jon thought he didn’t hear Sam correctly. “What?” Surely he must have misheard… “It is true,” the Maester drolled.

“But how is this possible?” Robb was just as stunned. “Father told no one.” “Only that she was of the North.” Not a day went by that Jon didn’t silently beseech his father to have told him about her before he left for the south. “That’s just it, Jon.” Sam’s hands were sweaty, meaty fingers fumbling together from nerves. “Aemon knows who your mother and father are.”

“My father is Eddard Stark.” Jon was in disbelief that this was up for contention.

Closing his eyes, Aemon felt a wave of sadness cloak over him at what he needed to do. “When you arrived, Lord Commander, your uncle gave me a letter written by Ned Stark, along with certain documents that told the truth. Lord Eddard Stark was not your father.”

“How dare you say that about him!” Robb yelled. His mother and Sansa may have wanted it that way, but he, Arya, Bran, and Rickon loved Jon and knew he was their beloved brother. A hand went for a dagger clipped to his belt. “He is a Stark.”
“Actually Robb... um... your last statement is true.” Sam was stammering, praying to any god that was out there that Jon wouldn’t be hurt too badly. “He is a Stark, but not one by name.”

Placing a hand on Jon’s shoulder, Aemon truly wished he could see his family’s face. “Son, your mother is Lyanna of House Stark. Your father is Rhaegar of House Targaryen - heir to the throne and my great-great nephew.”

It took a moment to register, time standing still and pure inertia carrying him forward - but then it hit. Harder than a punch to the gut. Harder than one of the Night King’s ice spears. Jon felt his knees buckle, collapsing into the chair. It couldn’t be true... it had to be a lie, but why would Aemon lie to him? Why would Sam lie to him. His mouth opened but all words died on his lips.

Next to him, the Young Wolf was ensnared in a half-ashen, half-enraged mood. “No! You lie!” Robb shook in fury, but also fear that it could be true... that Jon really wasn’t his brother. That their father had built their entire lives and the entire course of the Kingdom on a lie. “Jon is my brother! He cannot be a Targaryen! It’s impossible!”

‘Is it?’ Suddenly it made sense, all the mysteries explained. Jon, shaking, looked at his palms - scarred but unburnt. His inability to be burnt. Rhaegal - the deep connection he had with his dragon. Daenerys, his magical connection with her. How they had fit together so perfectly... Jon knew it to be true. However far fetched it was, it had to be true.

He felt close to throwing up.

Robb was still arguing, fighting for Jon’s past identity - but it was increasingly hopeless. Even he was realizing what had to be the truth. “I saw the documents Benjen Stark gave to Maester Aemon,” Sam related. “I saw his unburnt hand long ago. We all saw him with Rhaegal. Jon is Jaehaerys Targaryen, son of the Crown Prince and Lyanna Stark. There was no kidnapping or rape, they were married. Jon is their trueborn son.”

“Father could not have lied! He was too honorable for that!”

“Had the Baratheon spies learned of this...” Aemon stated, voice weary with fatigue and emotion. “Jon would have been killed with the same brutality as Rhaegar’s other children.” He stared at Robb, and then at Jon. “Your father, Ned Stark, took on this responsibility. He was more honorable than any reputation could have foretold.”

“What honor? He fucking lied! Lied to mother, to me... to all of us!”

The pressure, the vice constricting his heart grew too much. Jon bolted out of his chair, hand over his chest. “I need to be alone.” With that he stormed out of the room. Ghost whined at his pain, but the door slammed shut before the direwolf could follow.

“Jon!” cried Robb, heart clenching for his brother. He attempted to follow but was stopped by the gnarled fingers of Maester Aemon.

“Let him be, for now, Young Wolf. He needs to process this.”

The former King in the North collapsed in his chair. “I still can’t believe this.” For his entire life, Jon had wanted to be like him, the trueborn son of Ned Stark - only now the dream was impossible.

Only to be replaced by a heritage far more illustrious. True King of the Seven Kingdoms. ‘Oh father, why didn’t you tell him?’ No response was forthcoming.
Swinging the saddle atop the horse, Theon turned to look at his childhood companion. “Sansa… I cannot stay. I belong at home.”

“Theon…” While the anger at him for his betrayal, for the Sack of Winterfell hadn’t truly gone away, he had saved her. It was Theon that deceived Myranda. When she and Brienne had nearly been trapped by unsuspecting Bolton bannermen, Theon had distracted them and allowed her and Podrick to hit them from the flank. She owed him her life, and he was essentially family - the only family she had since leaving her mother and watching Littlefinger chuck her Aunt out the moon door. “I cannot thank you enough. Please stay safe.” He offered her a weak smile, the first time he had since being taken prisoner.

Watching the fallen Greyjoy ride off, Sansa felt Brienne walk up next to her. “So if we ride for most of the day, we should be in White Harbor in two weeks. There, we can obtain a ship to Slaver’s Bay quite easily with the coin you stole from Winterfell…”

“We can’t go to White Harbor.” Voice pallid and emotionless - the memories of Ramsay’s pleasure still haunting her subconscious - Sansa turned to her… woman-at-arms. “There are only two choices for where to go, given the current feelings toward the Starks.” The vast majority of the world either wanted them dead or feared their presence would lead to death. Ramsay hadn’t said it outright, but the total lack of any familiar face aside from Theon hammered it home. “Anywhere populated in the North will kill us to curry favor with Ramsay and Viserys.”

The lady knight narrowed her eyes, pondering the truth of Sansa’s statements. “Which do you fear more?”

A valid question - one a bit complex. “Ramsay…” She shut her eyes, willing the pain to subside. “He is evil, but is smart. Viserys is an idiot but ill tempered and thuggish. If anyone was to do something brash and stupid, it is him. He’s the more dangerous in the short term.” It had been pure chaos since news had come that Dorne was mired in civil war - with the killing of Prince Oberyn by the Lannisters, his widow had launched a coup and killed the ruler. Now, she and her hardliners were battling the loyalists led by Prince Tristan, who were soon to be joined by the Lannister army marching down from the Reach. King’s Landing distracted, Viserys had emerged and proclaimed himself King along with the North and Riverlands behind him. In all the hustle and bustle of preparing everything, they had escaped. The power-hungry Viserys wouldn’t like any complications. Sansa remembered how he had beaten her for an off-hand comment, one Ramsay would have shrugged off - he was more brutal, but was discreet about it.

Brienne remembered the conversation that they had, between himself, Ramsay, and Lord Karstark. “He means to kill you as soon as he betrays the Lannisters and takes the throne. I overheard him, planning to take Viserys Targaryen’s sister as his queen once the Mad Prince is on the Iron Throne.”

‘Daenerys Targaryen.’ Jon’s love. Sansa nodded, the creamy skin of her face blank in acceptance. “And he’ll kill Viserys soon after, leaving him as King. Finding that royal fool was the best thing that could have happened to Ramsay. Made him a player for a much greater game.” Heading to White Harbor - though offering the greatest safety if they escaped to Slaver’s Bay and Jon’s lover - was impossible. Ramsay would have soldiers everywhere. “The only other option is to the north.”

“Castle Black?”

“Aye. To my brother.”
My son,

If you are reading this then I am not on this earth anymore, and either Benjen or Aemon have told you the truth about your heritage. After all that happened on Essos, all that has happened and come to light about the seven kingdoms, I would have told you myself if I had the chance. I beg your forgiveness for this and letting you live in unhappiness and illegitimacy because of a lie, and know that I only had what was best for you in my heart.

Tears welling in his eyes, Jon quickly wiped them away to avoid staining the old parchment. Even long dead it seemed as if Eddard Stark were speaking to him through the words. ‘Why, father… why didn’t you tell me?’ But could he still call Ned Stark his father? Wasn’t he his uncle instead? Fresh tears formed and blurred his vision once more. He wished he wasn’t weak, but on this he couldn’t help the onslaught of emotion. It was worse than the army of the dead.

Blinking, he read on.

All that was said in the stories are lies. I am witness to the truth, and in this letter I put to rest the one lie that I have ever told you. Your mother, my sister, fell in love with your father. They married in secret, and you are their trueborn son Jaehaerys Targaryen and the true Targaryen heir. If it weren’t for Robert and his failure to grasp that Lyanna truly despised him, the tragedy that followed wouldn’t have occurred.

Jon, I wish you did not have to grow up as a bastard, but the stain on my honor and the pain you endured allowed you to live. Robert was determined to kill every last Targaryen. Your half-sister and brother were killed as mere children as a result, and Daenerys and her brother forced to live on the run in Essos. I hate that I did this to you, but you deserved life.

The great Eddard Stark, honorable even when cunning and deceit would have helped him, had one stain on his honor. Laying with a woman not his wife - fathering a bastard. He had endured all that shame to protect his sister? His nephew, holding the oath sworn before the old Gods and the new. Even in his moment of great pain, Jon couldn’t feel anger at his… father.

He had sacrificed so much - all for Jon and his sister. The child that he loved as a father would and the sister that he loved as a caring brother would. Jon’s mother. “Mother…” She had been at Winterfell this whole time.

“Dany…”

Your connection with Daenerys… it was preordained, Jon. Had Robert and Tywin Lannister died in their vile rebellion, you two would have been betrothed. She is as much a natural Queen as you are a natural King. I know that I taught you honor, and am proud that you were such an excellent student. But please, Jon, your mother told me on her deathbed that she fell in love with her dragon the moment she saw him - looking at you in Essos, I realized the same about you. You take after her as much as you take after me and Rhaegar. Do not throw away what you have with her. Join with her and your loving siblings to restore this land to honor. To fulfill the prophecy. This is your destiny and your happiness.

Know that I love you, son. I loved you from the moment I held you in my arms, and I know that your mother and father felt the same way.

No matter what, you will always be Jon, my son. But remember who you are, and who you were born to be.

And who you were born to be with.
Eddard Stark
Lord of Winterfell

Your Ever Loving Father.

Letter dropping from his hand, the sheer weight of what had been told to him hit Jon like a stampeding mammoth. All his life, he had wanted to be a Stark like his brothers and sisters… but to learn he was not even that…

‘Not true. Half-Stark. Half-Targaryen.’ A trueborn Targaryen. Heir to the Seven Kingdoms, a greater claim than the Mad Prince and Daenerys.

‘Dany…’ She wanted that crown, fought cities and forged kingdoms to obtain it, and yet it mattered not. He was in line to rule. He did not want it. “I Do Not Want This!” he screamed to no one. He didn’t even want to be Lord Commander, only thrust in this position because no one cared about the threat of the dead. And his love for her, for his aunt. How could Jon ever feel the same way when it was his love for her and duty to keep his promise to her that drove him on?

And deep down, Jon had to come to terms with the fact that he viewed Daenerys no differently. Thinking about her, imagining her form nestled close to him heated his blood to intensity. She was his aunt, and yet he wanted her. ‘Am I without honor?’ he thought, or was Ned correct. Was his… father correct? “Mother,” he urged, looking up at the rafters. He finally knew who she was, not a nameless, faceless image but a real person. “Please, I need someone. Anyone. What do I do?”

The door swinging open shocked Jon out of his contemplation. “Lord Commander.” It was just Ollie, who paused for a moment at seeing his idol in such a disheveled state. “One of the wildlings, he says he knows your Uncle Benjen, that he’s still alive.”

Jon quickly shook away his sadness, bolting upright. “Benjen? Are you sure?” Someone who knew… someone who could give him real answers… about his mother. “Said he was First Ranger.” Ollie smiled, glad he could give the closest person he had to a father these days some good news. “This way. Hurry!”

Thorne was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. “I’ve interrogated him a bit. He says he saw Benjen about the time of the last full moon near the ruins of Craster’s.”

“He could be lying,” Jon replied, hoping he wasn’t. Of all the stories he heard about Lyanna Stark, he wanted to know about his mother from someone who knew her. ‘My mother.’ “Where is he?”

“Over there.” Thorne pointed to past a milling crowd of men. Jon pushed through them, only to stop in his tracks.

A single burial cross, made of cheap wood, bathed in orange torchlight. One word was scrawled on it. ‘Traitor.’

Realization washed over Jon. Mind sharp, it dawned on him exactly what was going on - the ruse, the bait, the betrayal. His command. His brothers, betraying him and the Watch. Turning, ready to fight if need be, the sneering face of First Builder Othell Yarwyck lunged at him before a searing pain engulfed his gut. First the wind knocked out of him, and then pain.

“For the Watch.” Yarwyck withdrew the knife.

Looking over the others gathered around, mostly just milling there, only three others seemed to Jon
to be participating. Ollie looked at it all in horror, Karl Tanner holding a knife to his throat. It was small comfort that his page hadn’t betrayed him. Small, but still comfort.

Another blow hit him, this time the knife bringing immediate pain. “For the watch,” hissed First Steward Bowen Marsh.

Throwing Ollie to the ground as if he meant nothing, the soulless face of Karl Tanner soon came to view. Jon resisted the urge to spit in the assassin’s face. How he hadn’t ended up mutinying at Craster’s home was a mystery. His knife sliced through Jon’s lower abdomen. “For the Watch.” Two others followed, mere footsoldiers but ones that were avid followers of Thorne. Their knives left Jon’s abdomen a gutted mess, blood soaking his entire tunic. Weak, Jon fell to his knees. He wanted to let go, to give in to the sweet, painless bliss… ‘You are a Stark. You are a… Targaryen.’ A wolf did not give in.

A dragon did not give in.

And lastly came Thorne, a flat, satisfied look planted on his face. Triumph, but not arrogance. The satisfaction of a goal completed. Fighting the pain, not allowing a bit of anguish to cross his face, Jon averted his gaze to Ollie. The boy was terrified, tears falling down his cheeks at seeing the one he looked up to the most in life so close to death. “Ollie.” Jon forced a smile, selfless to a fault. “It will be alright.”

“Not for you.” The last blow slammed into his heart. Thorne withdrew it, satisfied look still on his face. “For the Watch.”

In the distance, a roar of pure anguish left Rhaegal, muted by his injuries and the thick stone of Castle Black’s walls. Barely hearing it, Jon toppled into the snow. Blackness enveloping his vision, cold numbing the intense pain and wetness seeping into his clothes, Jon knew death was soon upon him. Willing every bit of mental strength, he pictured the radiant form of Dany.

His aunt.

His love.

And then nothing.

Erupting out of bed, Daenerys was drenched in sweat, breathing hard. Sleep had been uneventful, peaceful even - dreams of her love and of a happy future filling her subconscious mind with happiness and joy, emotions that were rare in her life and only came when he was there or when she dealt with the twins. Then suddenly… Pain. Terrible pain.

And then nothing. As if all meaning had been snuffed out, yanked out of her life.

Heart beating out of her chest, Dany stumbled out of bed. Her arms grabbed at anything to steady herself, sending goblets and candlesticks clattering to the floor. Tears streamed down her face. There was no knowledge of what had happened, only that something horrible had.

About Jon.

“My lady!” Missandei was at her side within moments, warned somehow of the problem by whom, Dany didn’t know. Steadyling her by the shoulders, the advisor searched the Queen for any physical injuries. “Are you hurt?”
“Something… happened.” Her panicked breaths made it hard to speak. “My love… what…”

“You are correct.” The flat, drone-like voice of Brandon Stark stated from his ‘wheelchair,’ a special Meereenese invention that had been a gift from Dany to her love’s brother. “It is Jon. He has passed.” Dany knew him to be correct. She just knew.

The anguished screech from the royal chambers echoed across the entire city.
Jaehaerys Targaryen

“Come out of there, Stark.” Alliser Thorne sounded like he was enjoying this. Sword ready, the bulk of Grenn and Davos blocking the door while Ghost growled, Robb wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. “Come out and we’ll make sure to hand you over to King Viserys and Lord Bolton in one piece.”

In the back of the large cellar, Rhaegal hooted angrily, though his cries were weak and without fire. Since the Battle of Hardhome and especially since Jon’s death, the green dragon hadn’t been the same despite his healing injuries. “Looks like we’re fucked,” Olenna quipped, brushing off a stray piece of lint from her dress. “They outnumber us, Snow is dead, and the dragon isn’t even have fire anymore.” She was cut off from a menacing growl from Ghost.

“Shut it!” Robb yelled, ears perking up. “From the scuffling outside, looks like Margaery, Pyp, and Ollie came through.” After the chaos following Jon’s death, Robb quickly locked all he could trust in the cellar where Rhaegal rested with Jon’s body. The three were sent for reinforcements, and from Thorne’s profanity and the constant banging it looks like they had arrived. “Alright, on me. One, two, THREE!”

Chaos had gripped the grounds of Castle Black, but there was no fighting. Not in the least. The massive forms of giants Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun and Mag Mar Tun Doh Weg and the sheer bulk of the wildling host that Tormund arrived with quelled attempts by Thorne to drive them back. One was dumb enough to charge Tormund, but the warrior killed him easily. Drawing his sword at Tanner’s throat, Robb’s enraged scowl was tempered by the soft hand of Margaery Tyrell, unharmed and escorted here by the redheaded Free Folk leader. “Put down all your weapons. There is no need for any more bloodshed than has already been spilt.”

“Fuck you, cunt,” Tanner spat.

Ice drew blood, enough to hurt but not enough to cause much harm. “Give me a reason, traitor,” Robb hissed. “Give me a reason.” Unfortunately for his baser instincts, Tanner shut up.

The thwick of a drawstring was followed by a dull wet slap. Grunting, Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun pulled an arrow out of his thick arm. While the crossbow was designed to punch through armor, against a giant it was nothing but a mere insect sting if not hitting a vital area. The Night’s Watchman - a member of Thorne’s faction - suddenly lost his bravado. He wanted to flee, but his legs wouldn’t work as the giant stared at him. Without breaking a sweat, Wun grabbed the screaming watchman and smashed him against the wall, blood coating the stone he threw the limp sack of meat into the center. Mag Mar Tun Doh Weg let out a deep bellow, quelling any further funny business.

“You traitors!” Thorne snarled at his men.

“The only traitors here,” Margaery said icily, “Are the ones that drove knives in the back of their Lord Commander’s heart.”

Tormund in his face, axe clutched in his hand, Thorne refused to give an inch of ground - admirable in a way. “The Night’s Watch spent millennia defending Castle Black against the Wildlings!”

“Aye,” deadpanned Tormund. “Until today.” A loud cry shrieked in the air. Ollie, knife in hand, charged at Thorne to avenge Jon Snow. The big bulk of Samwell Tarly held the struggling boy back.
“Let me kill him!” Ollie yelled, but aside from that the violence had ended. Two large giants, a menacing white direwolf, and a weak yet still terrifying dragon joined with hundreds of Free Folk in quelling any dissent.

Soon, a group of stretcher bearers, watched the whole way by Robb, Davos, and the Wildlings - Wun and Mag proving to be the best of guards - moved Jon’s body to the Lord Commander’s quarters. Rhaegal whined in agony at the sight, while Ghost fell alongside the stretcher and nudged Jon’s hand in a desperate attempt to wake him up. Behind, dark blue fabric brushed the snow, Melisandre following with her hands clasped together.

The terror and fight or flight exhilaration of the moment finally passed, those that loved and cared for Jon were free to expel their emotions. Close to collapsing, Robb fell onto Margaery’s shoulder and sobbed. Despite the questioning look from Olenna, the Tyrell beauty wrapped her arms around the Young Wolf and comforted him. Gilly did the same for Sam, his thickset arms holding his de facto wife and child close to him. Maester Aemon was beyond tears but looked close to death, hand clutching his heart from his chair. Face morose, Davos stepped beside Melisandre, who was staring down at the body. “Do you think you have something… up your sleeve for this?”

The Red Woman didn’t look at him. “Saving a life is far more difficult than taking one.” She ran her hand along Jon’s wounds. “I will need something powerful. Something he can draw great strength from.”

Her head turned at the scraping of wood on stone. “I believe I have something for that,” Aemon rasped, heading for a large chest in a corner of the room.

Light, blinding light. It was all that Jon could see, narrowed eyes scanning his surroundings. It appeared as if he were standing on a cloud, looking out at an empty, sunny landscape.

“Hello, my son.”

Startled by the sudden voice, Jon swiveled around to find someone he hadn’t seen in quite a while. “Father?” Smiling warmly - allowing his affection for the boy he raised as his own to spring forth unencumbered - Ned Stark opened his arms wide in an easily understood gesture. Emotion overwhelming him, Jon returned the embrace. They grasped tightly, manly yet comfortingly at the same time. It felt as if he were a small child again, comforted by his father in the moments where Lady Stark was out of sight. He fought back tears.

“There there, son. It is alright.” Ned suppressed his tears as well. “You are safe.”

“Am I dead?” Jon pulled back and looked his father in the eye. Gone were the stress lines of leadership, the wrinkles of age - he looked like a man in his prime, which told Jon everything he needed. “This is the afterlife, isn’t it?”

Ned couldn’t lie to Jon. Not anymore. Never again. “Aye, this is it. And you have died, son.” The former Lord of Winterfell watched as sadness crossed Jon’s face, as if he had failed someone and hated himself for it. It tore Ned apart. “But it is not your time.”

Blinking away tears, Jon looked up at his father. “What do you mean?”

Smiling, Ned drew Jon to him with an arm around his shoulder. “Walk with me, son.” The two began a stroll off into the distance, quite an ordinary paternal moment. Wispy vapors were kicked up by their boots, solid under them. “You know now, don’t you?” There was no doubt about what he
“Aye.” Jon nodded, twisting his head to look at his father. “Why didn’t you tell me, father? Why didn’t you tell me about my mother. That you are really my… uncle?” Emotion caking his voice, Jon knew that Ned had told him everything in his letter. But he wanted to hear it from him now that he had the chance.

Sighing, Ned looked genuinely remorseful. “I’m sorry, Jon. I should’ve told you before you went off to the wall. Seven hells, I should’ve told you as soon as we left Pentos, but you have to understand the depth of Robert’s madness.” Pain crossed his features. The pain of buying into a lie that took so much from him - that brought nothing but ruin. “He was so in love with your mother, but she hated him. Hated his whoring, his boorishness, his vices. But he was all oblivious to it - and so was I.” Ahead of them, the expanse of whiteness began to end, replaced by a horizon of vibrant green. “I should have known that she’d never allow herself to be kidnapped.” He chuckled. “Arya takes after her in that way.”

Jon couldn’t help but smile, thinking about his beloved sister. “Robert couldn’t accept it, could he?”

“No, not in the slightest. He convinced my brother of the rape, he and Tywin Lannister spreading the story far and wide. The rest…” he trailed off. Jon knew what happened next. Ned turned and grasped Jon on the shoulder. “He would have killed you, Jon, just like your half-siblings. I had to keep that from happening. For you. For her…” He no longer stopped himself from softly sobbing. “I beg your forgiveness, for everything. For forcing you to grow up a bastard, but I had to keep you safe, Jon.”

Hearing his father, the great Eddard Stark, break down in front of him led Jon to do the same. Pent up emotion and pain was let out in full, the two of them embracing tightly - father to son. ‘I don’t care,’ Jon thought through his tears. ‘He is still my father.’ “I forgive you, father.” Seeing him in such a way, raw and visceral, freed his soul from the anguish over his crisis of identity. Ned would always be his father, and Jon understood.

After some time had passed, their burden leaching out, Ned pulled back with a small smile. “Come, there are two people that I want you to meet.” They had reached the edge of the clouds, Jon stepping onto the grass as one steps onto a sandy shoreline. A soft breeze whipped the blades around as it cooled Jon wonderfully. This truly was paradise. “This is the afterlife, but it is not yet your time. You are destined for far more Jon, but there is still one issue left to resolve.” Ned’s lips pursed. “It is about Daenerys, son.”

Jon sighed. “She is my aunt, father.”

“Aye, she is, but it doesn’t matter.” Walking side by side, they both looked every inch northern warriors. Ned was so proud of his son. Rounding the base of a gently sloping hill, he stopped, smiling. Jon looked at him with a puzzled glance until he spotted them too.

It was a man and a woman, hands clasped together in a show of affection. However, when they saw Jon, they broke apart in surprise and awe. The man was tall, hair cropped to about Robb’s length and broad shouldered - strength exuding from him. Clad in a warrior’s tunic, he nevertheless had the air of a gentle, soft-spoken man of great culture. The woman… she had the classic northern beauty. Wild and fierce, passionate and loving, the physical manifestation of the North. Wearing a dark blue dress, she reminded Jon of what Arya would be like in a decade or two.

In an instant, Jon knew who she was. “M…” He knew what he wanted to say, but could barely form the word. It was just so surreal. “Mother?”
Lids welling with tears of love, Lyanna Stark Targaryen nodded. Her mouth curled into a beaming smile. “My sweetling.” Unable to resist, Jon ran into her arms. All walls fell as he was a little boy again, seeking the comfort of his mother at long last. Feeling him bury his face in the crook of her neck, Lyanna sobbed joyously. “My baby boy.”

Her embrace felt warm, supreme comfort leaching into Jon’s system. Only when he was together with Dany did he feel this much at home - truly at home. It was all he ever wanted, the love of his mother. Jon didn’t even try to hide his emotion.

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Jon turned his head to see the smiling man, tears in his eyes as well. “My son.” Lyanna reluctantly let him go, happily pushing him towards his real father. Rhaegar Targaryen, proud and strong, couldn’t hold himself back now that he finally met his beloved child. “You are a man.”

Jon knew who he was, by instinct. “Father?” Looking at Ned, the man who he always called father nodded, giving him permission. “Father.” Jon fell into the man’s embrace.

Rhaegar was crying openly now, holding his son tight. “I’m sorry, my son.” The Targaryen looked Jon in the eye. Dark violet met grey. “But you turned out so well.”

“We’re so proud of you, Jaehaerys… or Jon, whichever you prefer,” Lyanna beamed. “You’ve become the man I always dreamed you’d be.”

The name sounded so foreign to Jon’s ears - it was hard to imagine that it was what he was supposed to be, the Crown Prince of the great Targaryen Dynasty. Quite a change for a once humble bastard. He just smiled and hugged his parents once more. “This is all I ever wanted.”

“I know it is, son,” Rhaegar stated. “Much as I would want this never to end, it will soon.” A serious frown crossed his face. “Jon, great evil is threatening to wipe out all that is held dear. You have to be ready for it.”

Looking at his father, and then at the man he always called father. “What can I do? I’m just…” He stopped himself. It wasn’t true. “Everyone thinks I’m but a bastard. I couldn’t even command the Night’s Watch without my men betraying me.”

“Look at me, Jon.” Rhaegar could see much of himself in Jon, much as his physical appearance was mostly Lyanna and Ned. He was determined, fearless. A natural warrior and leader. “You are no ordinary person. You are the Prince that was Promised, the one destined to vanquish this evil. To succeed where I and all others failed. You and Daenerys.”

Fresh tears formed at the thought of his beloved. “But she is my aunt, father. How can I…”

A gentle hand stroked his cheek. “Do not worry about that, sweetling.” His mother smiled softly. “You love your dragon just as I love mine. There is no need to feel ashamed.”

Ned interjected himself, reluctant as he was to interrupt his sister and brother in law. “I knew she and you were connected the moment we arrived in Pentos. There is no doubt that she is the one for you, Jon.”

“I do love her.”

“Don’t let her slip out of your fingers. You’ll need her, Jon, for what comes. Fight it together.”

Rhaegar nodded. “Yours is the song of ice and fire.”
Suddenly everything started fading. “Our time is coming to an end,” Lyanna said sadly. “Just remember, Jon, that we love you and are with you.”

He hugged her one more time. “Please don’t leave me, mother.” Jon finally had the love he always wanted.

“Never. We will always be with you.” With his mother’s words ringing in his ears, the love of his parents in his heart, Jon felt the world beckoning him back. The light grew faint as it shrunk into the darkness.

Ramsay had always said that it was amusing to make the peasants scurry about in fear, like common slaves - watching him carry the dried logs to the nearly complete pyre, Viserys Targaryen agreed with his Hand. It was rather amusing. “Hurry it up!” he yelled. His hand throbbed underneath the gold glove, cracked and blackened skin itching and burning in pain. The pain was often unbearable, and it only spurred his anger and drive to show the world that he was the true king. “Hurry this up or you’ll be on the pyre as well!”

“Calm down, your Grace,” cautioned Ramsay, leaning in to whisper into Viserys’ ear. “This will begin soon, and then the traitor that sought to betray your swift ascension to the Iron Throne will get what is coming to him.” Inwardly, he simmered. Losing Sansa and his own servant had driven him to a rage not seen since he found out his father’s wife pregnant. Two servant girls has mysteriously ‘vanished’ as he and Myranda worked out their frustration. Not that he cared about Sansa or Reek in the slightest, but it was a loss of face - one he could not afford.

Today would reclaim that strength, and placate his ‘King’ at the same time. And everything was ready. Stepping forward, atop the dias while all other dignitaries, guards, and watchers were milling on the ground, Ramsay read off the charges. “Lord Curwin, you have been found guilty of treason against your leader, Viserys Targaryen, second of his name. Rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms. This sentence is death.”

A haughty snarl on his face, Lord Curwin spat in the direction of his King. An older man, greying at the temples, he was a capable leader and only managed to escape the Red Wedding due to commanding forces in the field. He knew the charges were trash and Ramsay knew that as well - the real reason he was about to be immolated was that he sent an emissary to the last meeting of the northern lords held by Ramsay rather than come himself, which enraged Viserys. “I will not dignify that mad cunt with any statement of mercy.”

Teeth clenching in anger, Viserys lost it. “Enough! BURN HIM!” The torch bearer hesitated, only stepping forward at a discrete nod from Ramsay. Lowering the torch, the tar covered kindling went up in a split second. Soon a roaring inferno took hold. Silent and defiant until the last, the flames eventually coaxed a scream out of Lord Curwin. Most shied away their eyes, some hardened and numb despite the terrifying scene. Ramsay projected a facade of indifference - he enjoyed this, but not openly.

Only Viserys did, a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye.

“Exactly like the Mad King,” recounted Ramsay’s special guest a while later, Lord Curwin’s body now a charred skeleton. “I was old enough to remember him. His son has the same mad bloodlust about him. And he can’t control it.”

The last statement was obviously a compliment for Ramsay, and he allowed himself to accept it. “True, but he is my King and I will serve him. You understand this loyalty quite well, Lord Baelish.”
Littlefinger smirked. “Why yes, I do.” The massive distance from the north to King’s Landing had worked to his advantage. It wasn’t until Tywin Lannister’s forces - supplemented by every bannerman loyal to the Golden King - had already entered Dorne that the news of the Targaryen presence in the north reached Joffrey’s ears. It had been quite easy for Littlefinger to slip out of the Eyre on a ‘scouting mission’ before the angry orders that he take the entire Vale north to smash Viserys Targaryen arrived. “But with all the advice a King gets, he is often at a loss over what strategy to implement.”

“Can you guarantee us the Vale? Even with the Riverlands and the North behind us, not to mention the war in Dorne, the opposing force is elite.”

“Are you sure the Wildling host north of here isn’t a threat?” Littlefinger raised an eyebrow.

Ramsay grinned like a hyena. “We’ve taken care of that. Jon Snow is dead, and the Wildlings leaderless.”

Knowing that Sansa would likely head there, Littlefinger made a mental note to verify it for himself. “If you hold up your end of the bargain, then what could possibly prevent me from holding up mine?”

Eyes trained on her destination, she didn’t see the burly man until the front wheel of her pushcart nearly tripped him over. “Oof,” only footwork of a far sprier man saved him from falling flat on his face. “Watch it! Cunt!” he snarled at the young girl.

“I’m sorry sir.” Arya allowed herself to flinch. “Would you like an Oyster? Only one silver per.” The former highborn daughter gave her best innocent look.

“I know what I’d like to buy,” the man’s companion said, dressed in the same loose clothes of a Braavosi laborer. He leered and grabbed Arya’s ass through the cheap dress she wore.

If Arya wanted to kill him, he’d be dead already with a knife through the throat - luckily for her cover, the first laborer intervened. “We’ll get some young cunt later, come on. You’re not making me fuckin’ late again.” Cursing under his breath, the groper nevertheless followed. Waiting until they were out of sight, Arya went back on her route.

“OYSTERS, CLAMS, AND COCKLES!” she called out to whomever passed her by on the dirty streets and algae lined canals of the bustling Essosi free city. Usually a delicacy of the rich that lived in the marble collonaded city center, the poor and middle class near the docks flocked to purchase the sea creatures, leaving her with a nice profit.

Perfect cover for an initiate of the Faceless Men.

“Will the girl tell me her name?” Low light from the few fires within the temple did not banish the dank blackness that encompassed the various faces mounted on the walls. Turning, the girl with no name saw the burlap-spun shift and long hair of the lead priest of the Many Faced God - bearing the name Jaqen H’ghar within the walls. The girl knew that the request was not one whatsoever. Standing from her meditation, her eyesight had fully returned after months without. “The girl has no name.”

A pained cry left her throat as a staff smacked the open flesh of her upper calf, felling her. “The girl will answer correctly,” said the waif, sender legs stepping over the girl that had once been Arya Stark. From past experience and the sadistic grace in which she hefted the staff, the girl knew the
Waif would hit her again.

“The girl has no name, lest whatever name the Many Faced God desires her to have.”

Nodding, satisfied, H’ghar steps toward her. He motioned her to stand before him. “And who was the girl before?” They had played this game before, and the girl knew exactly what to say. It had essentially become the truth after all.

“The girl was once Arya Stark, born to Lord Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully Stark.”

“And what happened to her?”

Taking a deep breath, she answered unhesitatingly. “She is dead.”

Lips curling into that weak, reserved smile of his, H’ghar nodded once more. “Good, for you have provided the Many Faced God with enough offerings.” Her gaze drifted to a quartet of the faces decorating the wall. “It is good that Arya Stark is dead, for you will be journeying into her life one more time for a great offering to the temple...”

The names of her new targets still echoing in her ears, Arya darted her head behind her in one quick motion - eyes picking up everything important. No one was obviously following her. The Order wouldn’t be nearly as conspicuous in that manner, though as an initiate she had an eye for such things. It was reasonably safe in any case. Safe enough for Arya to take a left away from the main canal leading to the docks instead of a right towards it.

“OYSTERS, CLAMS, AND COCKLES!” Laborers and smiths in the forge district flocked to her for the cool, fresh seafood, many reaching out with soot-crusted hands without regard for hygiene. Rambunctious and iconoclast that she was, Arya still grimaced, the highborn lessons from her mother on general cleanliness one of the few she took to heart. Pushing the cart along, she put it to a stop right in front of a particular forge. By a certain junior blacksmith.

“Glad to see you’re not dead.” The young man, muscles bulging as he moved logs and bags of charcoal, didn’t make eye contact. He knew the drill.

Arya allowed herself a small snort. “Not smart to bet against me, after all we’ve been through.”

Gendry couldn’t help but chuckle for an instant. “True.” Eyes flickering to Arya and then back to his work, he couldn’t help but appreciate how much she had grown since the two of them - broken and destitute after a group of bandits attacked them and probably killed Sandor Clegane - had arrived in Braavos. He couldn’t help but miss her, but from what Gendry heard about the Faceless Men, it was best that they stay out of contact. Hence his job. But if she returned. “Something happened, didn’t it?”

‘He always was smarter than his origins predicted.’ Fat Robert wasn’t the sharpest tooth in the wolf’s mouth. “They want me to kill someone. Two people rather.”

“Who?”

“My brothers, Jon and Robb. The Boltons paid them.”

He didn’t have any outward expression, but lowered his voice all the same. “At least this means Robb is alive. Most think him killed at the Red Wedding.”

“This is serious, Gendry,” Arya hissed. She still didn’t look at him, selling a handful of cockles to a passing merchant. “I thought I had lost myself, lost my identity to the Order. This is why they gave
Gendry snorted. “You’re not going to do it. I know you too well, Arya. You love your brothers and even your sister too much to truly hurt them - not that you’d likely admit it.” He laughed quietly.

Arya wanted to smack him - half-playfully of course. “I will not, but if not me then they’d send someone. That’s why I have to go.”

“And why I’m coming with you.” Gendry wouldn’t have said otherwise. He knew his destiny, and it was tied to the feisty tomboy of the north.

Sparing one glance, for the fleetest moment, Arya gave Gendry a genuine smile of affection. Through thick and thin from that horrible day where she witnessed her father executed while Sansa screamed for mercy beside a grinning Joffrey, he had been there for her. Hardened with years of suffering and experience, the bastard son of the late king Robert had been the one shining light through the darkness - ironically, the only other that came close was the Hound of all people, though his reluctant protection earned him a spot off her list.

He was the closest thing to the shining knight that Sansa had always swooned about. The feelings that occasionally bubbled up did terrify Arya.

However, she was a Faceless Man, so could easily suppress it when need be. Her gaze dropped to the filthy cobblestones. “There is a bulk carrier departing for King’s Landing noon three days hence from pier seven. I will expect you to be on it.” Heading back to her route, Arya didn’t need to look back at Gendry to know he would be there.

“Make sure they’re tied nice and tight, Grenn.” Scowl planted on his face, Robb looked each of the men in the eye.

One was visibly shaking. “This isn’t right.” He simpered in fear. “Black magic is an abomination.”

“Aye, but so is killing your own commander. Breaking his trust.” Anger and pain from his own experience with such betrayal bubbled up. The Young Wolf moved on.

“Please, tell my father that I died fighting the wildlings.”

Shaking his head, Robb glanced at Karl Tanner, who only smirked. “Mind if I have a little time with the Tyrell bitch before?”

Robb nearly attacked him, but Margaery stepped forward, calm and poised. Tanner grinned a wry smile before it turned into a grunt of pain - the knife wedging between the bones of his left foot.

Thorne just waited proudly, silent on his pole. “Anything to say?”

He looked down in disgust. “Nothing to the son of the Usurper’s dog.” Almost laughing, Robb instead walked away. Passing the still form of his cousin… brother, Jon was still his brother in every way - Robb heard the Valyrian chants of the Red Witch. “I’m not comfortable with this.” Despite growing up in the North, Robb shivered from the cold. Not just the cold. “Jon was raised among the old Gods, as was I.” The whole cult of Azor Ahai was just a perversion to him.

Margaery put a comforting hand on his shoulder - both ignored the slight electric shock passing between them. “And I was raised in the light of the Seven. We have to trust her, though. You want your brother to live, Robb.” Caring for him, she willed with all her strength that this would work. Jon
was the right one to lead them against the dead, she knew it.

“Does anyone know if this would bloody work?” Leave it to the Queen of Thorns, swaddled in a bundle of furs, to put the question on everyone’s lips so bluntly.

Tormund spat on the ground. “I hope it does.”

“Oh, it will work.” Davos pointed at the Red Witch, who was clipping bits of hair from Jon’s locks to put in a small brazier. “I have seen that woman do things out of nightmares. Raising the dead is one of the… least complicated things the Lady Melisandre is capable of.”

“After what I saw north of the wall.” Margaery shuddered, “Nothing would surprise me.” Ollie nodded, torch in hand. His eyes were lined with tears for his father figure still lost to the cold realm of death.

“Bring forth the offerings.” Finished with her rituals, Melisandre watched as Finn, Grenn, and Pyp trudged forth through the snow - each held a single large object in their hands. Dragon eggs, three of them, as pure as when they had been a wedding present long before. Each protected by the patriarch of a nearly dead house when Benjen Stark gave them to him years before. Inspecting the eggs placed just to the side and lower edge of Jon’s corpse, Melisandre took a small knife out of her cloak. She slit two small cuts in Jon’s hands and the same for his feet, resting the palms and soles flat against the scales. It had to be perfect.

Stepping back, out of the way, she looked at each of the gathered. Robb, Margaery, Davos, Olenna, Sam, Aemon, Grenn, Pyp, Finn, and Tormund. “We are gathered in this frozen land, friends and family of the great Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch and the Prince who was Promised.” At long last, after a lifetime of centuries searching, Melisandre knew she had found him. “The night is dark and full of terrors.”

“The night is dark and full of terrors.” No one ascribed to the cult of the Lord of Light, but all wanted Jon Snow to return.

Grabbing the torch from Ollie, Melisandre began chanting again in high Valyrian. Walking towards the prepared pyre, all watched her closely, red hair whipping behind her in the chilling wind. “Lord of Light, we ask you to bring your new form back to the land of the living. To return and deliver the earth to peace and safety once more.” She stopped at the point where the tar had been laid, a line directly to the pyre. “With this fire I proclaim you reborn!”

As soon as the torch hit the tar, the flame raced towards the waiting fuel source. Waves of heat slammed into the waiting persons, Melisandre obscured by the tall and crackling flames as wild and fierce as the red locks around her face. “I hope this works,” Robb whispered to Margaery.

“It’ll work.” Davos hadn’t lost any confidence. The time in the cave when the demon rose from the Red Witch never left his mind. All felt a chill in their bones - even the hardened Maester Aemon - when the haunting song left Melisandre’s throat. Melodic, uninterrupted. A steady stream of a chant so beautiful. A song so eerie.

The flames engulfed the body, heat warming the cold skin to scorching temperatures. Screams left the three traitors, licking flames beginning to catch on their cloaks and trousers. Primal instinct led them to seek flight, to escape, but the tight ropes prevented them from doing much but squirm and wail. Only Thorne remained silent, his will strong. Nothing but the hellish voice of the Red Witch filled his ears. Through the roaring fire it was an icicle stabbing through his ears, the sound of a demon. Head dropping to glance at Jon, his eyes widened.
In the last moments of his life, Alliser Thorne watched as all he once knew evaporated before him. Watched as the perfidy of his decisions became nothing but real.

Still for nearly three days, gaping wounds still open through his chest - each one fatal on their own - none of the flames left a single mark on Jon Snow’s body. The roar of the fire was punctuated by cracks, scales on the eggs sheared apart.

Three piercing shrieks - joined by a booming roar of fury from Rhaegal, still nursing his wounds at Castle Black - were heard by all as Jon Snow’s eyes flew open.

Such was an unlikely, unfathomable sight for most. One that a person would not expect when asked to conjure up the image of a dragon. Fierce, terrifying, vicious, destructive, those yes. But a great dragon purring contently as a small, delicate woman of sheer beauty gently stroked his snout was not on that list. In all fairness to those people, though, Daenerys Targaryen was probably one of the only people who engage in such behavior. Her hand softly glided along Balerion’s scales. Her child missed her, after a long time exploring the wilds of Old Valyria with his brother - Dany knew she should spend more time with them, and bring the twins along. They shared her lack of fear, being carefree with the massive beasts.

To her right, Edderon dozed peacefully. He was always the gentlest of the brothers, Balerion the fiercest with his adolescent mood swings and Rhaegal somewhere in the middle.

Rhaegal.

‘Jon.’

The pain hadn’t gone away, and while she had largely forced herself to snap out of her haze it wouldn’t budge. Dany had lost her love just after learning about the depths of their connection. Petting Balerion was soothing, but still inconvenient.

“They are magnificent creatures.” Startled from the noise, Dany turned and was faced with a low-lying mop of tousled hair.

“It is not wise to sneak up on a dragon, Lord Tyrion.” Her voice was only half serious. “But yes, they are magnificent.”

Chuckling, the imp headed towards her. “I’m afraid it isn’t ‘Lord,’ your Grace. My father is Lord Lannister, I am just a lowly servant of his. You’ll run into him soon, him being the leader of the Royal Armies. He’s probably laying waste to Dorne at the moment.” Close to Balerion - closer than he ever would have gotten had the great Mother of Dragons not been present - he made one further step only to draw back at an irritated grunt from the black-red beast.

“Settle down, Balerion, settle down.” With a soft motion of her hands, the dragon calmed down. “He is vicious, but not to my friends and allies.”

“I hope I can be counted among that list,” Tyrion stated. Dany only smiled. “I always wanted a dragon as a baby.” The memories came quickly for the dwarf. Melancholy, but few memories from his childhood were even happy enough to be called that. “I begged my father for one. ‘It doesn’t even have to be a big dragon,’ I told him, but alas, they were all gone.”

The story was both amusing and sad for Dany. “The last dragons were very small. Cat-sized if my brother is to be believed, due to them being chained up by my ancestors.” She stroked Balerion’s snout once more. “Dragons deserve to fly free. I made sure to train them so that they can be trusted
Looking at her, Tyrion chuckled. “I’d hope so.” He glanced back at the Pyramid. “I actually met Jon Snow, back at Winterfell. He… impressed me. Imps and bastards, we share a kinship in that fact.”

Tensing, Dany almost countered that her beloved wasn’t a bastard, but held her tongue. “Peel away that, and he is almost the perfect match for you. Hardy Stark blood, cures the Targaryen madness.”

The two talked for a while before Tyrion left, leaving Dany alone with her dragons.

In an instant the scaled skin tensed up. Reptilian eyes narrowing in fury, Balerion threw his head back sharply. The red-black dragon’s jaw opened wide and his roar boomed across the entire city. To his right Edderon added his higher-pitch shriek to the din, white scales contrasting with the blackness of the starry sky above. Flame erupting from their mouths and aimed for the sky, Daenerys backed away several paces. Tripping over the train of her dress, she trembled at her children’s sudden fury, scared of them for the first time in her life - she had never seen them like this, so agitated. So defiant.

So exultant.

And suddenly it came to her, The connection, one so deep in her bloodline dating back to the dragonriders of Old Valyria. One between a rider and his or her dragons - but something her brother had once told her about the great Aegon the Conqueror. A family legend. ‘Aegon and his sister-wives shared that connection, with each other. How they coordinated the Great Conquest from far and wide…’ Dragons were greatly spiritual, as near magical as could be. So too was said were great dragonriders.

Dany felt it in her bones. In her soul. The connection was so strong, their connection, that the vice gripping her heart evaporated in a split second. Jon was alive. Her love had come back to her. There was no doubt he had left this world, but by the gods’ blessing he had returned.

But he was in danger. Dany could feel his pain as if it was her own. He needed help. He needed her.

And she would go to him. Without a moment’s hesitation, Daenerys made her choice.
Sansa

Gently stroking the large scales of the beast’s snout, Rhaegal’s warm skin was welcome to Jon in the harsh cold of the north. He shivered, almost feeling the same all encompassing cold of death. It was shocking, emerging from that cold into a raging inferno - among other, far more shocking things.

“Come on, boy. You can do it.” Jon gave the green dragon a smile. “Give me a little flame.” Cooing softly at his rider, Rhaegal opened his mouth… only for a puff of smoke and a cough to follow. He lowered his head, as if ashamed. Patting him reassuringly, Jon sighed. “Has it been like this since we returned?”

“He was too weak when he returned from north of the Wall, my Lord,” said Maester Aemon, sharing his fellow Targaryen’s pain. It had been determined by consensus that Jon’s death absolved him of his oath to the Night’s Watch. Finn had been voted Lord Commander, while many had settled on the title of ‘Lord’ for Jon at the urging of Robb and Margaery. “The wounds have healed for the most part, but no fire has left him even when the mutiny occurred.” Jon nodded. Ghost had gone into a frenzy when Jon had died - had Rhaegal been able to breath dragonfire, Thorne and the others would have been charred to a crisp far earlier.

“But there’s nothing physically wrong with him?” Davos implied, glancing at the Red Witch. The priestess had essentially become the spiritual advisor of Castle Black.

Face impassive, Melisandre walked up to Rhaegal. Only a few could approach the dragon’s head without getting a snarl. Somehow sensing that she was why Jon survived, Melisandre was one. “A dragon is intelligent and mystical. They bond to a rider for life, and his rider is clearly you, Jon Snow. But the dragonriders of Old Valyria raised them from hatching. Without the one present from hatching, I doubt he will ever breath fire.” She shrugged. “At least that is my best guess.”

A deep chuckle was heard. “I never would have expected it.” Tormund looked at the dragon that saved his life north of the Wall. “A heartbroken dragon.” Though his people were setting up on the land Jon promised them, he came by to Wintertown and the castle for supplies on occasion.

“Somehow that doesn’t often show up in the legends,” Davos deadpanned. Laughing softly, Jon’s hand stroked Rhaegal’s jaw. The dragon nuzzled it gently.

The sound of a single blow of the horn caused Jon to instinctively reach for Longclaw. ‘No one’s ranging beyond the wall, and the wildlings are all here or dead.’ Tense moments passed as he waited for a second horn… and inevitably the third. The tension gratefully passed as the southward lookout called out, “Open the gate!”

In rode three mounted figures, two of them in armor. The other… eyes wide and emotion rising, Jon stared at the third person. Tired, worse for wear, and shivering, her bright and vibrant red hair made no secret of who she was. ‘It can’t be…’ but she was.

Eyes zeroing on the figure she hadn’t seen since the Stark family was fully together all those years ago, Sansa’s heart hitched. He was older and grizzled from fighting, but one close look proved him the same selfless Jon she had remembered. She dismounted, the surrealness of the moment not keeping her from keeping a tight hold on her cloak. Ramsay didn’t let her dress well and she didn’t have the ability to change yet.

Not a word needed, as soon as he was close enough Sansa jumped into his arms. “Jon.” For the first time in years she finally felt safe. “I missed you, brother.” Jon just held her tighter. She had never been close to him as Arya was, yet he loved her all the same.
“Sansa?” Looking up from Jon’s tight embrace, the redhead’s jaw dropped. There was Robb, alive and well.

Jon letting her go for this, she ran into the awaiting hug from her second elder brother. “I thought you were dead.” Sansa couldn’t stop the errant tears from falling now, so filled with joy at the unexpected bonanza found at Castle Black. Both her older brothers, alive and well. Aged and hardened with the pain and anguish of life, but alive nonetheless. Overwhelmed with emotion, Sansa hugged Jon tightly once more. After so long in hell, watching nearly everyone she loved die or being torn away - of enduring horrors she could never have imagined - all she wanted was to be with her family again.

The loud grunting behind her drew her attention, yet what had been a mere cursory glance turned into a near panic. Eyes wide, she broke the embrace and backed away, terrified. In her emotion she just hadn’t noticed the large green dragon resting in the castle grounds, but she noticed now. “Jon… what… a dragon…” The beast cocked his head at her, curiously inspecting the human that his rider was apparently close to.

Jon sighed, guessing this was inevitable. Sansa deserved to know. ‘Aye, a dragon.”

“How is this possible?”

“There is something you should know, Sansa.” Meeting Jon’s eyes, Robb knew what their brother wanted to have happen - it would devastate Sansa most likely, but she both deserved the truth and could be trusted with it. “We should be in private for this.”

While Brienne and Podrick watered the horses, the three of them entered Jon’s quarters. Rising from her seat, Margaery Tyrell noticed the third person among the two brothers. “Sansa Stark.” They had met while her brother had been at the capital, in a time long ago. She moved to hug her as one would a friend. From the expression on Robb’s face, the family needed time alone. She nodded. “You look famished. I’ll have the cook make you a hot meal while I get some warmer clothes.” With that, she was out of the room.

Out of nowhere three bat-like shapes swooped down from the rafters above. Sansa shrieked while Robb only laughed - he had gotten used to the game the little ones played. They banked around and all landed on Jon, chirping excitedly at their father. Jon extended his left arm as a perch to join with his shoulders. Used to Robb, they sensed a strange presence. One screeched at her. “No,” Jon scolded. “Not Sansa.” The dragon lowered its head, chastised.

It took a comparative while for Sansa to overcome her shock. “You have more dragons?” There was no mistaking it. Resting on Jon were three dragons - small enough to clearly be infants.

Smiling at his children, Jon nodded. “Meet my children, Sansa.” His voice dripped with love. He cared for his dragons unconditionally. Exactly as with Dany, his siblings, Ghost, and Rhaegal.

Still looking unsure, and quite a bit scared, Robb couldn’t help but smirk. “They’re an acquired taste, but sweet in their own way, trust me.” They were generally kind to those close to Jon - gods help anyone else though.

“Let me introduce you. Girls, this is Sansa, your aunt.” The dragons stared at her intently. Jon pointed to one with light blue scales and grey hues. “This is Lyanarys.” ‘After Aunt Lyanna,’ Sansa thought. He shifted to one with lilac scales and hues of silver. “This is Rhaella, and last but not least.” He patted the head of an orange dragon with streaks of red, “Is Sansenya, named after my sister.”

Heart catching, Sansa felt her sisterly love and past guilt both rise. ‘I was such an ass to Jon, and yet
he named a dragon after me all the same.’ She shook the thoughts away. While Sansa did intend to
beg for forgiveness, there was a pressing matter to attend to. “I am touched, brother,” she said
sincerely. “But I am still curious as to why you are in possession of dragons?!” It was so
incomprehensible that it defied rational thought.

Jon could sense Sansa’s disbelief, and turned away. She had been so relieved - beyond relief, even -
to see him after all these years. He couldn’t stand breaking her heart with the truth. Noticing their
father’s discomfort, the dragons hooted and flew off him to curl on Ghost’s back for warmth as they
were apt to do. The direwolf looked at the creatures, and then went back to his rest.

Sparing his brother the pain, Robb decided to tell him. “Sansa, please sit.” Taking a seat next to hers,
he took Sansa’s hands in his. “Jon is not our brother.”

Blinking, Sansa thought she misheard him. “What?” the seriousness in Robb’s expression proved she
had not. “Do not say that!” Robb had always been the closest to Jon… after Arya of course. “Don’t
tell me you’ve let mother’s lies get to you as well. He is our brother!”

Much as it touched him to hear Sansa defend their bond, Jon knew he had to kill it. “It is true, sister. I
am not a Stark.” Regardless of her furiously shaking head, he pressed on. “I am your cousin, son of
Aunt Lyanna.”

“Aunt Lyanna?” If what he was saying was true, then at least they were still related - quite closely.
“If not father, then who…” It couldn’t be true. It just couldn’t.

“Sister,” Robb said. “Jon is the trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Aunt Lyanna. He is
Jaehaerys Targaryen, the true heir to the throne.”

Gazing at Jon, tears in her eyes, she wanted to argue but knew at that moment that it had to be true.
“Father lied to us…” she murmured. “You’re not our brother…” openly crying, she ignored their
pleas and fled out the door, needing to be alone.

“This is suicide, your Grace.”

“The Lannister shits have all their forces in Dorne. We can afford to be bold initially, but our main
focus should be King’s Landing.”

“Leaving the defenses of Meereen underequipped will hurt.”

“I wish I could say the North would rally to you, but I do not think they would revolt against the
Boltons.”

“Khaleesi, I advise against this…”

“Biding our time and seeking alliances would be wiser.”

Closing her eyes, Daenerys felt a pounding migraine coming on. She had called the staff meeting of
her advisors and generals to finalize plans for her long awaited invasion of Westeros, but it had
collapsed quickly into anarchy. Grey Worm, Catelyn Stark, Jorah, Theodosius, Tyrion, Varys, and a
recently recovered Daario all went at each other like arguing children, yelling and insults being
arrows sailing back and forth. Sharing an annoyed look at Missandei, the interpreter grabbed her
bronze-tipped staff and banged it on the stone floor. That got everyone’s attention. “Enough. The
main goals are set, this is just to discuss details.”
“Your Grace, please reconsider,” stated Varys.

“Production on the cannon has… been slow, your Grace,” Theodosius confessed. “We only have fifteen, but if we land the entire force in Dorne, we can destroy Tywin Lannister’s army in a decisive battle.”

“Do not count the Lannister forces out too easily, Ser Theodosius,” Tyrion warned.

An accusatory finger pointing straight at Tyrion, Theodosius seethed. “If you wish to protect your father, I would sleep lightly lest you go into the eternal sleep.”

“General, you will not speak such a way in my presence,” hissed Dany. Grunting, the general stormed out. “There is no going back. We will land on Dragonstone while a smaller force will take White Harbor and march on Winterfell. Dismissed.” One by one the small council shuffled out. “Lord Tyrion.” The Imp stopped, turning as his Queen calling his name. “I would like a word in private with you.” Soon, it was just them in the map room. The Unsullied guards waited outside, and Saracen was tied to Dany’s hip. They were safe. “You don’t approve of my plan, do you?”

In his time at King’s Landing, Tyrion had seen every sycophant and bullshit artist tactic known to man or god. King Robert wanted nothing but the best of news so as not to distract him from his pleasures, and Joffrey was often fond of literally killing the messenger. Daenerys was not such a ruler, and he vowed not to put on airs. “No.” He sat in the chair closest to her. “While I would wait till we had more ships, that is not what concerns me. Why divide your forces? You should put everything into Dragonstone rather than risk attacking Ramsay Bolton in the North.”

Closing her eyes, Dany remembered the feeling that night with Balerion and Edderon. How she just knew - Jon was alive and needed her. “I appreciate your honesty, Lord Lannister. But I know why we must go about such tactics. Call it a Queenly hunch.”

Tyrion wasn’t arrogant enough to fancy himself a genius military tactician. ‘Jamie inherited father’s martial talents after all.’ “As you wish, your Grace.”

A smirk crawled onto Dany’s face. “My curiosity is peaked though. Why does Lord Theodosius have such an animosity towards your family?” Normally so well kept, since the Imp had arrived her master of industry had grown rather sullen and misanthropic. “Was it due to his uncle’s dismissal?”

Shaking his head, Tyrion laid his head back. “Oh no, this predates anything I have done or could do. Long before that, I’m afraid. His parents were Targaryen loyalists, and my father had them murdered in their sleep.”

Dany pursed her lips. “I see… It seems as if most of the world’s misfortunes can be traced to only a few of its people.”

Offering a sad look, Tyrion nodded. “Yes, it would appear so. Gods only knows how it would end.”

Entering the room of her children a fair amount of time later, Dany leaned on the door jam with a smile of happiness. The twins played happily on the floor, imagining they were Targaryen conquerors defending their realm. With the stress of it all, the planning of the invasion and worry over Jon, her beloved dragonwolves gave her the peace and joy she so longed after.

Soon, they noticed her. “Issa.” Rhaegar ran to her, hugging her skirts. “I saw father.”

Dany raised an eyebrow. “You did?” He nodded happily. “Where?” She was curious.

“We saw him,” Arya explained, tossing her silver hair back with an annoyed look at her brother. “In
a dream, Issa.”

‘The same as mine, almost…’ It warmed her heart that they had the same connection with their father as she did. Hugging them both, Daenerys got on her knees to hold them close. “Soon my darlings. Soon, we will see your father.”

A harsh crackle of the whip resonated through the air. “Move you dogs!” The snarling command was then given in low Valyrian by yet another beefy overseer, this one Essosi. Packed together close in cattle pens, the shuffling mass of swarthy-skinned human beings proceeded forward.

Cloak over her head, Arya Stark cursed under her breath. “Welcome back to Westeros,” she remarked sardonically, in words so low only her companion could hear. To think the King’s Landing she had left was a paradise compared to this.

Gendry Waters looked at the sullen faces of the onlookers at the port - and then to the even more sullen faces of the milling slaves. Snagging premier hammock berths in the merchant ship from Braavos to King’s Landing, they had both heard the mass of humanity and the occasional hairless mammoth crammed in the holds below. “And I thought slavery was banned in Westeros.”

“All on Joffrey Baratheon’s Westeros,” Arya replied, spitting out the hated name. Be it Essosi denied the usual markets in Slaver’s Bay after Daenerys Targaryen emancipated their slaves, Dornish prisoners taken in Tywin’s goal to ‘Make Dorne Howl,’ or ordinary Westerosi peasants impressed as ‘bondservants’ by Lords eager to escape the crown’s high taxes, all enslaved at Joffrey’s decree. “He’s on the top of my list.”

“Be careful,” Gendry hissed. “Someone could be watching.” Arya failed to argue back. ‘He has a point.’

In the distance, a Dornish slave collapsed into the dust. The guards set upon him like vultures, whips and clubs brought to bear. When they finally dispersed, the man was completely still. His fate was likely better than when a young woman collapsed similarly - one overseer grabbed her by the hair and dragged her away. It didn’t take much thought for Arya to picture what was going on.

“No as many smallfolk as before,” Gendry observed as they walked through the city center. Both looked up into the steadily rising shape in the distance. “No surprise why.”

“The sooner we get to the Mud Gate, the safer we’ll be.” Arya pulled the hood tighter over her head. The guard presence was just as intimidating, though they were nearly all strange fuckers with shaved heads and chains draped over their loose shifts.

A cluster of people was gathered at the old Sept of Baelor - newly decorated with a gold statue of King Joffrey. “People of the Realm!” called out an older man in a dirty shift. “We must give thanks to the great Golden King, God among men. The Seven sent him to this earth to bring us out of our wicked ways and toward enlightenment. It is through labor that we have salvation, it is through his generosity that we have hope…”

“Old fool.”

“More than that, Gendry. It’s… calculated. Joffrey’s madness is getting more intricate.” Arya spat on the ground. “Very dangerous.” They ducked down a side alley.

Only to notice a commotion up ahead. People were scrambling out of the way as if from a leper. “Uh oh.” Being over six feet, Gendry saw it first. The glistening heads of soldiers - Sovereignguards.
“Hide!” grabbing Arya, he forced them into a deserted shop, nestling behind a heavy tarp. “We can’t make a sound”

Arya clenched her teeth. One sound and the guards could ferret them out. Through a small rip in the tarp she could see who was in the litter. ‘Cersei.’ Her fist clenched around Needle’s hilt. ‘You’ll get yours one day.’ Soon, however, they were gone - and Arya allowed herself to relax… and notice how close together she and Gendry were. Her breath hitched.

Before him was the girl that haunted his dreams for years. A spitfire since they met, she still had that fire within her - a fire that he found irresistible. Unable to fight it, Gendry quickly closed the distance with the she-wolf, locking their lips. It was chaste, but passionate. After a shocked moment he could feel her meld into the kiss before she pulled away.

Glancing down at the girl with a satisfied, happy grin, he noticed her shocked expression. “Something wrong, Lady Stark?” Something about the way he said the last, in a manner not at all for propriety’s sake, made Arya blush bright red. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No…” she said. Arya didn’t want Gendry to think he acted improperly - he had been her only rock in the storm of the years since her father’s death. “It’s just…” she bit her lip. “I’ve never had one of those before.”

“Oh.” It was his turn to look a bit sheepish. The strong blacksmith with an uncertain look. It made Arya want to giggle. ‘Jon and Sansa would be laughing their asses right now if they saw.’

“Now that I think about it… I’d like to do it again sometime.” Leaning on her tiptoes, she pecked him on the lips, making him grin again. “But not until we get the hells out of this fucking city.” He nodded. The sounds of marching echoing in the distance, the two of them melted back into the crowds of smallfolk.

Resting atop the battlements, Jon enjoyed the moments of peace and quiet that he was rarely allowed to have. The twinkling stars of Azor Ahai’s belt gazed down upon him in the moonless sky. “Melisandre thinks that I am Azor Ahai reborn,” he mused. “What do you think, girl?” Curled up on his chest, Sansenya blinked at her father. “I know, doubtful. But then again, me being the true heir to the Realm would have been doubtful as well.”

Hooting, the infant dragon basked in the warmth of the fire. Unable to produce flame themselves, the cold affected them more than their larger brother. Stroking her head, Jon wondered what Daenerys would think of him. ‘Would she still love me, now that I am her nephew?’ He still loved her, gods he loved her. Dany’s silver hair and radiant smile haunted and blessed every dream of his, gave him the strength to continue. ‘I can only hope she still would.’

“Brooding as always?” Jon looked to his right to see his sister, smirking. He grinned as she sat down next to him. “Old habits are hard to break, aren’t they?” Clad in thick furs, she was no longer shivering. Bathed and well fed at Margaery’s orders, Sansa looked like a new woman.

“Aye.” Jon hand fed Sansenya a cube of meat. “I’m sure we picked up more than one new habit on the way.”

Eying the orange dragon warily, Sansa sighed. “I wish we had never left Winterfell, that father never left.” She shuddered at her younger self’s hopeless infatuation with Joffrey. “I keep wanting to go back and scream ‘Don’t go, you idiot!’”
Jon chuckled. “Things have definitely changed since then.”

Staring at the sky, then at the dragon and back at the sky, Sansa reflected on everything she now knew. “Of all that I expected when deciding to come to Castle Black, finding Robb alive and you a Targaryen with four dragons were not among them.” The sadness welled in her, that Jon wasn’t her biological brother. “I’m sorry for the hurt you must have felt.”

“It did hurt at first.” The loving faces of his mother and father - both Ned and Rhaegar - comforted him, knowing that they loved him more than anything. He laughed grimly. “You always used to say that I wasn’t your real brother. Now it’s true.”

Grabbing his shoulder, Sansa looked Jon in the eye. “You are my real brother, Jon.” She pulled him into a hug, silently begging for him to believe her. “I love you, brother. We’ll always be siblings, even if you happen to be the true King.” Both laughed softly, that fact so profound it was amusing.

A slight screech drew both of their attention. “Looks like someone is feeling left out,” Jon said.

Chirping at her namesake, Sansenya leapt from Jon’s shoulder to Sansa’s. “She is cute, once you get used to her,” laughed Sansa, slowly reaching out with a finger to stroke the orange dragon’s tiny head. Sansenya chirped once more, nuzzling the digit. “You’d think dragons would be of ill temper.”

“They are… with most.” Jon had learned that the hard way for the most part, Rhaegal once nearly biting off Pyp’s hand before he intervened. Luckily, the large beast had given him enough experience to better discipline the girls. “Sansenya is the most docile of the lot, although that is relative. If Davos hadn’t had some of his fingers amputated…” he trailed off. Sansa only laughed again, petting the dragon on the head. Jon was glad to see her so carefree. “She was always the proudest and haughtiest, which is why I thought of you when naming her.”

“Shut up.” The two shared a grin, the long dormant sibling bond finally emerging in full. In the break in their conversation, Sansa couldn’t help but feel the regret and shame rise up. It had not diminished one iota since learning about Jon’s heritage. “Jon… after father… and especially after we thought Robb…” Just the memories were too painful for her, her raw soul open and vulnerable now that she was in private with family. Jon understood - their family had suffered so much since Joffrey… hells, since Robert’s Rebellion. “I always imagined a time would come where you would rescue me from that hell.”

“You’re smart, Sansa. You found your own way out.”

“Not when I was that young.”

Tossing another cooked piece of meat for Sansenya, Jon patted Sansa’s knee comfortingly. “I would have come if I could.”

“I know.” She bit back tears. “You were always a good brother, loving us. Even when I was such an ass to you.”

“Sansa, we were children…”

“Don’t make excuses.” The orange dragon cocked her head at her father and namesake, curious as to why they were arguing. “I was terrible to you much of the time, admit it.”

He chuckled at her determination. “You were occasionally awful.” Chewing on a skewered chunk of chicken, the memories of his brooding childhood returning. “I mustn’t have been easy for you to relate with, thinking I was a bastard and all.”
“Even if you were, that didn’t make it right. Arya, Robb… none cared. Mother should have been better. I should have…” Remembering the servants talking, the gossip between her and Jayne Poole about him - and he was the true King the whole time. The best blood in the entire seven Kingdoms, Valyrian nobility and Northern royalty. ‘And yet he’s still Jon.’ ‘I’m sorry, Jon. For all of it.’ Sansa placed her hand on his. “Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive…”

“Forgive me.”

Jon smiled. “Alright, I forgive you.” Leaning in, they pulled each other into a warm, filial hug. “You remind me of father, just as stubborn and determined.”

She beamed at the praise. “He may be your uncle, but you take after him greatly as well. You share his sense of honor, and his bravery.”

“Father was like that. So was Rhaegar Targaryen.” The image of the proud, warm-hearted warrior came to his mind.

“It is still shocking,” Sansa mused. “The stories we were all told about Rhaegar and Aunt Lyanna were all lies.” Her mouth curled into a scowl. “Fucking Robert. Fucking Lannisters. From what you’ve told Robb and me, Rhaegar was a good man. Nothing like Joffrey… or Ramsay.” Her mentioning the current occupant of Winterfell made Jon wince. The courier’s letter still crinkled in his pocket. Only he knew of its arrival, and he decided not to show it to Sansa until going it over himself. However, Sansa hadn’t gone through her struggles without picking up on a few things. “Jon… what are you hiding from me?”

“It’s nothing…”

“Don’t lie to me, Jon.”

Resigned, Jon removed the rolled paper and broke the wax, flayed man seal. Sansa’s breath hitched, that seal completely recognizable. “I received this early in the morning. I hadn’t the stomach to read it.” Unfurling the letter, he began to read. “To the traitor Jon Snow, bastard son of the Usurper’s dog…” he looked puzzled at that line. “The one who let the Wildlings south of the Wall. Winterfell is mine, bastard, come and see. Your brother Rickon is in my dungeon…” Jon’s breath hitched. “His direwolf pelt lies on the floor of my King. Hand yourself and your dragon to my King and my bride back to me and I will spare both your brothers, your men, the Tyrell whores, and your wildling lovers. Do not, and you will watch as I skin them all alive. As…” Jon trailed off.

“Jon.”

“Jon.”

Read it.” Her firmness left no wiggle room.

Gulping, Jon continued, wishing he could have Sansenya, Rhaella, and Lyanarys disembowel him. “As my men rape your sister over and over. As my dogs devour your brothers, and then my King will turn your dragon against you, bastard.” Jon scoffed, as if Ramsay thought he knew the truth.

Sansa felt her blood boiling. Now, having escaped her own hell and reunited in the loving embrace of her beloved brothers, her fear and trauma at the hands of Ramsay and Viserys was replaced with a white-hot anger. From its perch on her back, Sansenya screeched, feeling the rage from her namesake.
“‘Signed, Ramsay Bolton, Lord of Winterfell and Hand to King Viserys Targaryen, Second of his name…’ oh that’s just fucking perfect.” Jon’s rolled his eyes. “Of course he has to show up.”

Raising an eyebrow, Sansa looked puzzled. “You know him?” The gears in her mind turned. “When you were with father in Essos… you met Daenerys Targaryen and… oh.”

Jon nodded. “Yep. Back when he was merely pretending to be a King. We didn’t hit it off.” His sister’s look clearly demanded an explanation. “I sort of knocked him on his royal ass while sparring.” Jon couldn’t help but smirk at the memory.

Blinking, Sansa’s lips curled upward as merry laughter left her mouth. The dragon chirped and leapt to the ground as she rocked in mirth. It had been so long that she had felt even a bit carefree and she loved her brother - for that was what he was - for giving that back to her. Laughter was a rare commodity in Joffrey’s capitol and in Ramsay’s Winterfell. It was only with Jon or Robb that she could feel safe and not guarded enough to indulge in it. “The tantrum following must have been quite amusing.”

“It was.” Jon laughed with her. Craning his neck to see the grounds, a look of melancholy crossed his face. “What will we do? As long as Viserys and Ramsay have Winterfell then they can kill us all.”

“It’s obvious, we take it back.”

“With what?” Jon extended his hands. “Much as I would like to go and tell the Boltons to pack up and leave, I don’t have an army.”

Her eyes narrowed in determination. “You have Wildings, dragons…”

“Rhaegal can’t spit fire and the others are mere hatchlings.” He gestured to Sansenya, barely the size of a small dog. “The Wildlings don’t follow me. We can’t attack Winterfell with the mere hundreds we have now, Sansa.”

Sansa stood. “As long as Viserys can hold grandiose notions of being a King and Ramsay holds Winterfell we are not safe. They are not safe. Winterfell is our home Jon. Ours. And Robb’s. And Arya’s, and Bran’s, and Rickon’s, and Father’s, and both our Mothers’. We have to fight for it.”

Heart heavy, soul weary, Jon stood as well. “I’m tired of fighting.” Despite being a mere twenty-one, his eyes looked decades older. “I’ve killed men, monsters, women… even myself. I left the woman that I love with all my heart in the other side of the world, and I most likely will never see her again. All I want is peace, Sansa. Peace.”

Wordlessly, Sansa hugged him. “So do I, Jon. So do I.” The pair stood there, motionlessly, for several moments. “But if we do not fight, then we will never have it.”

“Yours is the song of ice and fire.”

“If I am the true King,” he finally said, pulling back. “Then perhaps I should claim my birthright.” Sansa’s resulting grin matched the fire of her hair.
The Dragon Moves North

It was a festive mood in the great hall of Winterfell. The long tables had been taken out and replaced with one circular table. Their King - Viserys III Targaryen - was absent, drunk from the latest bout of pain in his arm. Better, thought Lord Ramsay Bolton, Hand of the King. ‘The vicious oaf would just fuck everything up.’ Not that Ramsay wasn’t vicious, but he was smart. Raising a mug of ale in a cheer, once the hubbub died down he stood up. “Life goes on, my friends.” His face was all smiles. “As life moves at a fast pace, we should all enjoy things.” Ramsay leaned down to kiss the cheek of Myranda, his lover and partner in crime. “One thing this lovely lady has introduced me too…” He picked up a staff. “Stickfighting.”

Laughs came from the others, which Ramsay joined in. “No, it’s quite intriguing. They do it in Essos.” He began to walk around the table slowly, passing the allied lords. “Good for tiny men such as myself.” More laughs. His grin never faltered. “With the war we are facing, we’ll need every advantage. Our enemies… we have more, not just ‘King’ Joffrey or the other lioncunts he keeps around, but also to the North.” News that Jon Snow, Robb Stark, Margaery Tyrell, and Sansa Stark - his own wife - were massing an army of Wildlings and Northerners to take back Winterfell had spread far and wide.

“And then, in war but also in peace, we need to prioritize loyalty.” The assembled Lords and commanders cheered, quintessentially northerm in their garrulousness. “Loyalty of a Lord to his King. Of a Hand to his King, and of a King to his men. The latter is the most important, but can only be achieved if the first two are followed to the letter.” He grinned, gesturing with his arms. “Wouldn’t you agree, my friends? Because when loyalty is not given by subordinates, we get abominations - such as Cersei Lannister running nations.”

Agreeable laughter echoed from the lords, the Lannister Bitch one all could hate. One of the amused diners was an older lord, pledged to Ramsay and Viserys but as of yet undecided on who to support in the coming power struggle. As the Hand to the King stopped behind him, the Lord had no idea that Ramsay knew of this.

Grin morphing into a snarl in but a split-second, Ramsay raised the staff. With a snarl he smashed it against the head of the Lord. Face transformed into the sadistic demon he truly was, Ramsay hit him over and over.

“Fuck.”

“Seven Hells.”

The murmurs and cursing of his allies not even registered, Ramsay only stopped when the audible crack of the obviously dead lord’s skull caved the brain in. Tossing the brain and blood covered staff onto the table, he took a few breaths before the smile returned. “Loyalty. It is the most important thing.” He calmly went back to his seat as human blood pooled on the table.

Already, Daenerys found her two senior advisors waiting for her in her solar. “Lady Stark. Hand Lannister.” With Catelyn’s loving treatment of the twins and her sharp mind, Dany was growing to value her counsel - same with Tyrion, who she had made her Hand not two weeks prior.

Hearing their greetings, the queen’s mind was still replaying the conversation she had had not ten minutes before.
“You are not going to Westeros, Daario. I need you here in Meereen. The city is on a knife’s edge, and I need someone I trust to protect it and its people.”

“Fuck Meereen, and fuck the people. They are not who I swore myself to.”

It hadn’t been something she looked forward to, crushing Daario’s hopes like that. He was a strong ally of hers and challenging company, but it had to be done. Both for her as a Queen and for her as a woman. ‘He just has to get over our night together.’ So far Daario refused to, though he hadn’t really said anything since he was wounded.

“The army is readying itself at a fast pace.” Tyrion balanced a chalice in his hand, filled with wine. “The Dothraki already have their horses prepared to disembark, and fifteen thousand freedmen auxiliaries are fully trained and eager to fight.” He did not mention how General Theodosius nearly punched him when he visited to get the information.

Staring out the window at her armada, hundreds of ships ready to take the largest army ever assembled to Westeros, Daenerys’ gaze rested on one of them. One with a Kraken emblazoned on the foresail. “And what do you advise regarding the Iron Islanders? Their offer is very generous, and the woman would be far better to be on the throne for me than the uncle they speak of.” She turned, finding Catelyn shifting uncomfortably. “On the other hand the man, Theon was it… did raid your home and kill nearly everyone in your keep. He nearly killed your two sons.” Fire burned in her violet orbs. “An attack on the family of my children is an attack on me.”

Seeing Catelyn’s indecision, Tyrion chimed in as the voice of reason. “As satisfying as it would be to engage in vengeance, ladies, you must remember that your children are alive.”

“Only one is confirmed to be alive, Tyrion.” Dany hadn’t felt safe sending Bran to Qarth, but the boy was oddly persistent - he was well protected, in any case.

“The deal Yara Greyjoy presented us in the past week is generous, as you have said, your Grace. Petty vengeance in the place of sound strategy does not ever work, as you know personally, Lady Stark.” Of course she remembered, given that having Tyrion captured at knifepoint for allegedly setting an assassination attempt on Bran Stark nearly caused Ned’s death sooner than it happened in reality. Tyrion hoped she had learned that lesson.

Pursing her lips, Catelyn sighed. “Bran is alive, and I know that he did not murder Rickon. From what he told me of Ramsay Bolton’s… proclivities. He’s suffered enough. Theon’s redemption was saving Sansa.”

“He could be lying.”

Catelyn shook her head. “I could tell he wasn’t. Take the offer from the Greyjoy’s. You need the ships. Iron Island caravels and carracks are the best there are at battle. While the troops are being unloaded at Dragonstone, they can screen the landings.”

Nodding, Dany sat on one of the couches. “Very well. They will be spared and welcomed onto the war council, for now. I still don’t trust them.” She had a feeling Jon would punch Theon in the teeth before even saying one word. It made her smirk.

“Speaking of the war council, how did your meeting with the sellsword captain go?” Tyrion watched her with a raised eyebrow. “Did you let him down gently?”

Dany narrowed her eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

A laugh escaped the Imp’s lips. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you. Half puppy dog and half hungry
wolf.” Filling the wine cup in his hand with more of the straw-colored liquid - the white vintage was better than Dornish red, though he’d drink horse piss wine if it was the only vintage available - he took a hearty sip. “As your Hand, it is best that I know these things.”

Clasping her fingers together, Dany closed her eyes and exhaled. “Yes, I dallied with him once. It was a mistake then but I am fond with Daario Naharis as a commander. I told him that I wished him to stay in Meereen, to hold it in case the Masters shake themselves out of their torpor and attack. Then, he confessed his love for me.” It was… sweet, but she had no feelings for him in the slightest. Her heart belonged to another.

“He won’t be the first one to love you, your Grace, nor will he be the last.” He drank another gulp. “You are a Queen, and are planning to be Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. You will need to make alliances through marriage. That will win you the Realm, more than any show of military might.”

Her jaw set in determination. “There is only one I will marry. Jon Snow, the father of my children.”

“He would help bind the north to her,” Catelyn noted, expecting Tyrion’s counterpoints.

“I did consider him first, and he’s a top candidate given what I remember of him, your Grace. However, love cannot take the place of strategy and duty. Much as it would pain me to hurt you in this way.” Tyrion, being lucky in finding and keeping the woman that he loved but having endured a marriage based on politics, wished not to hurt his new Queen. He had grown to care for her. “But, marrying a bastard could jeopardize your standing.”

Instead of blowing up, Dany only smirked. She nodded at Catelyn, who smiled softly. “Tyrion, it is time I inform you of the truth.” He leaned forward, curious as to what she could mean. “Jon Snow isn’t Ned Stark’s bastard.”

This, Tyrion did not expect. “Um… so who’s child is he?”

“He is the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark, the trueborn son.”

Blinking in disbelief, Tyrion shifted his gaze to Catelyn Stark. “Aye, it is true. I was shown the marriage documents by Ned himself. Rhaegar and Lyanna were lawfully husband and wife.” The guilt still ate at her. “After Lyanna died, Ned took him as his own to protect the Targaryen child from Robert Baratheon’s wrath.”

Silence reigned for the moment, two sets of feminine eyes set upon the Lannister dwarf - gauging his reaction. The curly beard and mustache hid it for a moment, but soon the immense grin that began to form erupted into raucous laughter. Wine spilled over the floor as he shook with mirth. “Oh Eddard Stark,” he wheezed between chuckles. “Just when I thought you couldn’t be more honorable.” Tyrion struggled to compose himself. “Pretending to have a bastard and dishonoring yourself in order to protect your beloved sister’s child from a fat tyrant bent on killing all Targaryens? If it weren’t Ned Stark I wouldn’t believe it.”

“So you believe it?” Catelyn asked, a bit surprised by his… unexpected reaction.

“Yes.” Gulping down the last of his wine, Tyrion had managed to regain composure. “Believe me, if you were trying to lie then this wouldn’t have been it.” He sat back down, a hand on his stomach. “Well, this… clearly changes things. The incest issue isn’t a problem for your House, so that problem isn’t a problem at all. Being the heir to the Seven Kingdoms and having Stark blood makes him… he has the most noble blood in all the Realm. Targaryen and Stark. I suppose you can get both political benefits and marry for love, your Grace.”
The beaming smile of a woman in love returned to Dany, just as it had when she found out the truth about Jon. “Yes, honored Hand, I am lucky.” She rose. “Excuse me, I will be visiting my children.”

As soon as she had left the room, Tyrion started laughing again. “Jon Snow… oh Robert, you fat cunt. If only you knew.”

Catelyn scowled. “Joffrey will be just as determined to be rid of him.”

“That is true, only I doubt Jon Snow would let him without a fight.”

“You don’t have to be here,” Robb whispered to his sister as the opposing party galloped ever forward. Behind the hills, the tops of Winterfell’s towers were just visible. Nestled in the van of the collection of lords and commanders - Davos, Tormund, Brienne, the Blackfish, Lyanna Mormont, and others, all collected through the cajoling and wheedling that they could bring to bear (Sansa and Davos had proven quite adept at diplomatic dealing). Securing the Blackfish had been a coup, but the neutrality of the Glovers, Manderys, and Curwins really set them back. The two Starks watched as the fluttering flayed man and three-headed dragon banners approached.

“No.” Sansa’s voice was as hard as steel. “I have to.”

After what seemed like hours, the Targaryen/Bolton party reached the Starks. Tension permeated the air. “My beloved wife,” Ramsay finally said, eyes settling on Sansa. “I’ve missed you terribly.” He turned to look at Robb. “Thank you for returning Lady Bolton to me safely.” Almost manic in his enjoyment of this moment, Ramsay looked at each member of the opposing party. He shared a laugh with his King, Viserys looking as haughty as ever. “So, where is your bastard commander?” He giggled, although anything out of his lips sounded sinister.

“He probably ran away, Hand,” Viserys laughed, though it was anything but sinister. He rested his gloved hand against the gold cast of his left. “Fled like the cowardly bastard he is.”

Allowing herself a smirk, Sansa looked back at the horizon. There was a small, low-flying speck. “Actually, he should be here quite soon…” A loud shriek - deep and booming - resonated across the plain. All the Bolton allies but Ramsay flinched while the Stark men grinned. Flapping hard, low off the ground, swooped in the green form of Rhaegal. Perched on his back was Jon Snow, dressed every inch a Stark warrior.

Planting himself on the ground, Rhaegal let out an ear-splitting roar. His rider held on with the skill of an expert. ‘Rhaegal, sit.’ One grunt left the beast’s maw and he relaxed on the ground, narrow eyes blazing at his rider’s foes. Jon gazed at each of the men opposing him. Some, like Viserys - much to Jon’s chagrin and amusement - were visibly cowering. Others, like Smalljon Umber, flinched but recovered their icy contempt for their enemies.

Ramsay, on the other hand, wasn’t perturbed at all. On the contrary - much to Sansa’s annoyance, though she kept it hidden behind narrowed eyes - his mania seemed increased. “Oh wonderful, the rumors were true.” He giggled again. “I always wanted to see a dragon… not that it will matter to you.” A grin spread across his face. “Had the beast been able to breathe fire, you would have taken Winterfell already. I’m sure you would have convinced him of that, dear wife.”

Sansa merely shot daggers at him, impassive and waiting for Jon to start. Stroking Rhaegal’s neck - more to calm his own anger than the green dragon’s - Jon let the silence stretch out the tension. “State your terms, Lord Bolton. Or should I address the Mad Prince instead?” Jon suppressed a smirk as Viserys nearly turned purple at the old insult.
Biting back profanities, the interloper King tried to recover his regal composure. In reality, it just looked ridiculous. “It doesn’t matter bastard. My Hand will inform you of my terms, which are lenient considering what you deserve. Hand, you may proceed.”

“Alright.” Ramsay was giddy. “Dismount and kneel before the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms, and the King will grant his clemency to all of you traitors. For he is a man of mercy.”

The grin never vanished. “Oh, and the King will be wanting that dragon, and I my wife. They belong to their rightful masters, not a bastard son of a fallen Lord and a southern whore.”

‘If only you knew,’ Jon thought.

Ramsay continued, smirking darkly. “Also, His Grace will release your younger brother as an act of mercy.”

“How do we know you have him?” Robb asked. At that point, Smalljon Umber tossed the rotting head of a direwolf. That put an end to that.

“There is no need for a battle.” Jon played the haughty, nonplussed monarch better than Viserys ever could. ‘Why not, I have Targaryen and Stark blood.’ Two royal lines. “You and me, fight to the death. Like the old ways.”

“You can throw the Mad Prince in as well.” Robb chuckled dryly. “From what I hear, it would still be one-on-one.” The Stark forces couldn’t help but laugh at Viserys’ expense, the Bolton commanders suppressing their smirks and snickers.

Ramsay ignored it, agreeing silently. “He’s good.” He looked at both Robb and Sansa. “Your bastard brother is good, and from what I hear, a great swordsman. I don’t know if I can beat him, but I do know that the armies of the rightful King will slaughter you. Not a hard choice to make.”

Eyes narrowing once more, Sansa looked him straight in the eye. “You’re going to die tomorrow, Lord Bolton. You and your false King.” Urging her horse, she galloped away.

With Sansa gone, Ramsay couldn’t hold his manic glee. “You are fine men.” Giggles left him. “My hounds will love to feast on you. I haven’t fed them in seven days. They are hungry. Wouldn’t it be quite the sight, my King?”

Grinning, Viserys spoke himself - the fact that he let Ramsay steal the dominance of the conversation obvious to all but him. “Do thank you for taking care of that dragon, bastard. I shall need it for my reign.” As if sensing the words from the interloper, Rhaegal growled menacingly. “Don’t worry about your sister though, my Hand will only use her as long as she is useful.” Laughing, he glanced at Ramsay. Jon could sense the contempt from the Bolton Lord, and could sense that Viserys was too stupid to pick up on it - not that it surprised him. “As I told her long ago, I would let the whole world fuck her if it gave me my throne.”

It took all of Jon’s strength and self-confidence not to murder Viserys where he stood. Dany. Viserys had sold Dany to the same monster that his sister had been enslaved to. At that moment Jon knew what was going to come. There would be no deals, no treaties. This was no ordinary war, with a conquered and conqueror. Only a victor and a corpse.

Flickering torches banished the darkness from Winterfell’s courtyard, the black sky waiting above the light as a shroud threatening a malevolent descent. Ramsay Bolton, gazing at the dazzling array of flayed man banners of his House - he ignored the Targaryen three-headed dragons, finding them
as irrelevant as his supposed ruler - gingerly avoided the ice slicks that dotted the ground. Marching men melted the snow, and since there were a lot of them there were a lot of re-frozen ice patches that caused quite a few injuries.

Shaking his hand at the struggling servants dragging a huge contraption on wheels, he made his way over to his King. “You summoned me, your Grace?” Innocence dripped from his tongue.

Clutching the golden sheath covering his claw of a hand, the blackened skin inside itching and hurting, the mix of pain and alcohol in his system was causing the Targaryen interloper to rage. “He has a dragon! That half-breed northern bastard cur has a dragon!” Viserys’ eyes blazed madness. It was clear which side the coin had fallen on. “My horselord slut sister is behind this, I know it! They fucked each other and now she sent him a dragon! A dragon meant for me!”

That said dragon looked as if it wanted to eat Viserys alive amused Ramsay to no end, but he declined to state it. “Do not worry, your Grace. The dragon was wounded north of the Wall, and so is no threat. Our allies from the Riverlands have ensured this.” He motioned to Black Walder Rivers, the bastard son of Walder Frey and in co-command of Viserys’ army.

Pulling the tarp off, the King blinked at what looked like a giant crossbow. “What the hells is this?”

“It is a scorpion, your Grace. Tywin Lannister was having them designed in King’s Landing for when your sister deploys her dragons in a potential war. I managed to purchase three smaller ones before you were formally announced as King.” Black Walder hefted a thin spear-bolt. “It fires this at high speeds, ensuring both accuracy and penetrating ability.”

“I want the dragon alive, Hand!” Viserys snarled.

‘Thinking I’d kill the dragon, as if I’m as stupid as you?’ Ramsay only smiled at his ‘King.’ “Of course, your Grace. The bolt is only to weaken the beast.” He reached into a box, two bannermen having pried it open when they walked in. Out came a grappling hook, long and with a stout rope tied at the end. “We’ll wheel these bastards close once the beast cannot move

Running his hand along the wood, Viserys grinned like a hyena. “This pleases me.” A look of puzzlement crossed his face. “But how will we get the dragon close enough to take it down? Jon Snow won’t charge at us, will he?”

Even the fool could have moments of sanity, Ramsay figured. He gestured to the kennel, lips contorting into that same sadistic smirk. “Leave that to me, my King.”

It was dank in the command tent. Darkness having fallen long before in the early dusk of winter, the light and warmth given off by the fires only filled the space within the canvas walls with smoke and musk. Most were used to it, however, the Northmen and Free Folk especially. It didn’t stop any from the planning at hand.

“Our scouts have picked up activity on the Kingsroad,” Davos breathed. “The Freys have arrived, led by Black Walder.”

“Damn,” said the Blackfish. “Of all those backstabbing weasels, he’s the most capable on the field - though that isn’t saying much.” Jon cast an eye on his siblings’ uncle. The men he brought with him nearly turned the tide, but the Freys threw that advantaged down the latrine. “So what do we now have?”

Grabbing a large staff tipped with a wooden block, Robb began moving pieces into position. The last
time he had gone over something like this had been prior to the Red Wedding - and that hadn’t gone well at all. He prayed daily that it wouldn’t happen to Jon. “We have thirty-five hundred Wildlings,” he nodded at Tormund, who had delivered bigly. “One hundred-fifty Tyrell pikemen, four hundred assorted horsemen from the northern houses, and nine hundred Tully infantry.” He watched as Davos moved the enemy into position. “Meanwhile, the Boltons, Umbers, and Karstarks have over five thousand men on their own, and the Freys - conservatively - probably boosted that number by four thousand.”

“So we’re outnumbered by three thousand. Especially on cavalry.” Leaning on the table, arms spreading out, Jon felt the long odds hitting him. “We need to have them come to us.”

“Speak for yourself, King Crow.” Tormund crossed his arms. “Mounted knights will cut us down like a knife through meat.”

“That’s why I’m having our men dig trenches on either side, which’ll protect our sides. If we can get them to attack, they can tire themselves on our defenses long enough for the Tully infantry to swing around and hit them on the flank. Envelopment.”

Lyanna Mormont huffed. “We could have doubly enveloped if the Glovers hadn’t wimped out.”

“Aye, but the plan is the best we have. If we hold, victory is ours.” As the commanders and Lords left the tent, Jon reflected on how little he believed himself.

Soon, it was just him, Robb, and Sansa. Arguably the only Starks left alive. It was… surreal. Standing for the first time since the meeting began, Sansa looked at Jon with a weary look. “Brother, I fear you have made a terrible error.”

“Sansa, Jon needs his sleep for the coming fight…”

“Robb, we should hear her out.” Jon was not going to be the person that allowed no question to his leadership from those he could trust. “The plans could be better, but we did what we could…”

“You met Ramsay for but one conversation. I’ve lived with him, known him in ways you could never fathom or stomach. You are playing right into his hands.”

Eyes darting from Sansa, to Robb, to the table, and back to Sansa, Jon sighed. “I know Viserys, Sansa. I’ve spent the same time with him, as Robb did with the Freys. He is a fool and will blunder into our trap.”

A frustrated chuckle left Sansa’s lips. “If you think that pompous fool is in charge… Ramsay is the one here. He manipulates people, enjoys manipulating people. Ramsay never falls for tricks, he is the master trickster.”

“His numerical superiority makes him overconfident,” Robb interjected.

“You don’t know him.”

“Then how do we get Rickon back, Sansa?” Robb’s face was plastered with emotion.

Sorrow and pain crossing over Sansa’s face, she forced it behind her mask. “You’ll never get him back. Give up thinking that you will, he’s Ned Stark’s trueborn son. He’s a greater threat to Ramsay than a bastard, a fallen King, or a girl.” She looked straight into Jon’s eyes. “Jon, do not fall for his tricks.”

Stepping forward, Jon put his hand on her shoulder. “Sister, I know what you are trying to say, but I
haven’t played with sticks in the time we were apart. I’ve fought worse than Ramsay Bolton. I’ve defeated worse than Ramsay Bolton.” He gestured to the table. “We’ve pleaded with every house and we’re lucky to have this many men, to have a dragon that can at least fight on the ground. Every day he grows stronger, so we can’t delay. There is no better time to strike.”

“It’s not enough!”

“It’s all we have!”

Silence fell over the three of them… two of them, Jon noticing that Robb had stepped out - for what reason he couldn’t fathom. Sansa stared at him, eyes cold with resigned sorrow. “Jon, if Ramsay wins…” she bit her lip. “I don’t intend to be taken alive.” The rightful King watched as she left the tent.

‘There’s only one avenue left to me,’ she resigned herself to make her deal with the devil, a tear falling to the snow below at the situation her family found itself in.

Gazing blankly at the various unit designations on the map, Jon lashed out. His fist slammed on the intricate colors and squiggles. Everything was falling apart, defeat was likely. “I can’t even protect my own family.” He wondered if this was what his father thought. What both thought, Rhaegar on the floodplains of the River Trident or Ned in the Tower of Joy - hells, even Robb at the Red Wedding. “Gods damn it!” Jon needed air. He needed to feel the cold.

The freezing winds hit him like a relieving cup of water on a hot day. No matter how much dragonblood coursed through his veins, there was no doubt that Jon was a northerner through and through. ‘Ice as well as fire.’ Cold focused his mind. Cold was his element, and only Tormund could challenge him for fighting experience in icy weather. Jon looked at the maze of tents. These were strong men, hardened men. They could win.

“You have to promise me something... “ Jon’s ears picked up muffled voices. Peeking round the tent, he made out two figures. One was his brother. “If something happens to me, to Jon, I need you to get Sansa and the dragons. Take them to Eastwatch and sail for Slaver’s Bay, Margaery.” Margaery, so that’s where Robb went.

“Why there?”

“Because that’s where my mother is. Ask for her, and for Queen Daenerys.” Jon’s heart hitched at the mentioning of Slaver’s Bay. “They will keep you safe. I... “ Emotion clouded Robb’s voice. “I’ve lost so much already. I can’t lose Sansa to that madman… I can’t lose you…” Seeing the two of them embrace, lips touching comfortingly, Jon allowed his brother privacy. There was no way he’d intrude in such an intimate moment. He had noticed the stolen glances between the two, and silently wished his brother well - Robb deserved a second chance at love.

‘Dany.’ If there was anyone that could help him in this fight, it was her. Staggering to the edge of the encampment, Jon took in the inhospitable northern wilderness - his home - in despair. “Why didn’t I contact her?” Sam had alluded to it. Sansa had basically said it back at Castle Black. Perhaps it was disbelief, perhaps he figured she wouldn’t love him anymore… perhaps even after everything he now knew Jon still felt himself unworthy. And now, it was too late.

“Lord Snow.” Or was it? Striding next to him, Melisandre looked out to the same expanse of wilderness as he did. “Calming yourself before your victory?”

“I admire your optimism.” A bird passed overhead, a crow. “Did you see that in the future?”
“I follow the signs the Lord of Light gives me. And everything he shows points to a great victory by the Prince that was Promised.”

Despite his doubt in what the Red Woman preached, both his true mother and father believed just the same. They were convinced he was Azor Ahai reborn and told him as much. Even still, a question popped to mind. “You said dragons are very mystical creatures. Is it the same with dragonriders?”

She glanced at him. “I’m confused at what you request, my King.”

“Can a dragonrider communicate with another? The same way they communicate with their dragon?” Jon hung on the hope. The last hope for victory, no matter what Melisandre’s god said.

Blinking, the Red Witch pondered it. “I have heard stories told of Old Valyria. The bond between dragon and rider is forged by a special connection, which is only why a dragon can connect with their birther and their rider. If riders have a connection between each other, then their connection would have to be strong.”

Hanging his head, Jon stared south at where his childhood home rested - unable to see it through the hills and woods but almost making out the tallest spire of the castle’s tower. “Melisandre.”

“Yes, my Lord?”

“If I am to die on the field of battle…” Sighing deeply, closing his eyes for but a moment, Jon felt the weight of it all falling upon him. All he wanted was peace. For it to be over. His being resurrected before was a sign, but did he want to perpetually cheat death? ‘I’ll leave it to the gods to decide.’ ‘Do not attempt to bring me back.’

Eyes widening for a split second, the Red Witch eventually nodded. “I can make that promise, Lord Jon Snow, because it will not happen. You will be victorious.”

“You seem to be the only confident one,” Jon chuckled. Either that or break down.

“The Prince Promised has destiny to fulfill. It will not end on a simple battlefield outside Winterfell castle.” With that, she strode away, leaving Jon alone with himself. A place Jon was quite familiar with.

The Red Witch’s words swirled in his mind. ‘Could he communicate with her?’ it was obvious that he and Rhaegal had a connection - dragon to dragonrider - and that connection was shared with his children. But would such an action with Dany be a stretch?

Sansa was right though. Their army was vastly outnumbered now that the Frey forces joined up with Ramsay. The armies of Viserys Targaryen were superior to theirs in every way, only a fool would deny it. Much as he wished it were different, much as he would like to hug Sansa and tell her that they would win, Jon couldn’t. He’d be dead on the field once the battle concluded if a miracle didn’t occur.

There was nothing to lose for trying.

Kneeling in the snow, eyes closed yet head angled towards the partially obscured stars, Jon focused his mind. “Dany, my love.” The words of affection, so long banished from the isolation and fundamental loneliness of his vows and his position in the North, tumbled out. They felt strange to the tongue, yet supremely right at the same time. “If you can hear me, please. We are in peril, and need your help. I need your help.”

Nothing but the harsh wind replied to his plea.
Hands on the railing, silver hair whipping in the steady breeze, Dany watched her two children with a smile. From their time on the open ocean, Balerion and Edderon had grown to be excellent fishermen. Their long necks and the gusty winds allowed them to glide over the water and ambush the large fish from above. She loved to see them so happy and carefree - though the longing for the still missing Rhaegal still gnawed at her.

“Your Grace.” Dany turned her head to see Missandei step up to her. “I can report that the twins are safely ashore at Dragonstone. The raven from Lord Varys arrived barely ten minutes ago.”

A sigh left her lips. “Thank the gods.” Daenerys missed her babies desperately - they hadn’t left her side since they were born, though she was sure they’d be protected. But when she found Jon again, it would be best if he knew what he was expecting before they met for the first time. She hoped that he wouldn’t be angry.

Placing a tanned hand over her lilly-white one, Missandei smiled. “Don’t worry, if he’s as amazing as you make him out to be, then he’ll love them.” Dany looked at her gratefully, silently thanking her for the comfort.

Suddenly, an unseen flash hit Dany. Her eyes opened wide. “Jon.” It was as if she heard his words standing right next to him. Every word.
“You can’t!” A frazzled, frustrated Tyrion Lannister ran his hand through his shaggy hair in supreme frustration. “The most important woman in the world can’t run off into the unknown because of some daydream.”

Clad in a white coat lashed tightly over her thick, woolen dress and Saracen clipped to her hip, Daenerys wasn’t about to explain the innate bond of a dragonrider. Such only went over the heads of a non-Valyrian. “He is in danger, Tyrion.” She silently called on her children, eyes searching for them above the fleet. “I am not going to let the father of my children die.” Her voice was as firm as steel. “Not when I am so close to having him back.”

“We’re close to shore,” exclaimed Catelyn Stark, pointing to the sandy beach and forests of the northern coast. Theon had charted them to be fifty miles north of White Harbor. “At least head there with the legion of Unsullied if you think Jon’s life is in danger.”

Through the clouds dived the massive beasts. Almost fully grown, they dwarfed even many of the Ironborn ships. “There is no time, Lady Stark. If there’s any help to be gotten from me flying to him, then it is worth it.”

“How will you rule if you’re dead? Will you break the wheel if you’re dead?” Tyrion beseeched the Queen to listen.

Dany wheeled around, anger and fear all over her face. “Then what would you have me do?”

Inhaling a deep breath, Tyrion hoped the Queen would see reason. “My nephew, he is determined to rule the world as a god. He’ll lay waste to anything between him and that goal. You’re the only one who can stop him.”

“If you die,” Catelyn pleaded. “Then all is lost. Everything, all of us, it’ll be over before it even began.”

A massive vessel, converted from shipping heavy grain milling tools and bulk goods from King’s Landing to Meereen, the fo’castle was large enough to hold the massive bulk of Balerion. Running a hand along his snout, Dany began climbing onto his back. Edderon circled close above them. “If I let Jon die out there,” she turned, looking them both in the eye. “Then there’s no point in any of it. I’ll be just as bad as Joffrey.”

Mounting Balerion, he let out a piercing bellow and vaulted into the sky. The wind whipped through Dany’s braided hair as her two children ascended ever heavenward.

“I’m coming, my love. I’m coming.’

Howling winds shrieking through the gorge-lined valley, Lord Petyr Baelish looked back at the Eyre. It grew ever smaller as the riding party inched along the mountain trail for the Kingsroad, their leader returning to the capitol. He would miss the place. Not for the inhabitants nor the luxuries, but the sense of having his own personal fiefdom in the realm. In King’s Landing, he was but a manager for the mad, vicious god-king that all served. ‘Not forever. Soon.’

“My Lord!” A courier rode up to him, the banner of Arryn gripped in his left hand. A dispatch was held in his right. “It bears the royal seal, mi’Lord.”
Tipping his hand, Littlefinger broke the seal of the Chimera - no self respecting god-King would resort to a mere stag or lion for his sigil. Joffrey demanded something grander, and the part-lion, part-eagle, part-snake with antlers on its head was chosen. He unfurled the message.

Under orders of the almighty god-King Joffrey, you are to deploy the Knights of the Vale to crush the northern insurrection led by the bastard traitor Ramsay Bolton and the Targaryen usurper.

Qyburn, Master of Whisperers

Grinning, Littlefinger locked eyes with the courier. “Send a message back to the capitol that I have done as the almighty requested.”

“At once, my Lord.” And he galloped off.

Littlefinger chuckled quietly. “Why not?” he said to no one in particular. “It technically is true.” None had to know the circumstances of why he sent the men north, or the now burned letter he had received that led him to do it. One way or another, Petyr Baelish always got ahead.

An eerie silence clouded the plains of Winterfell. In the distance loomed the grey battlements and towers, almost ghostlike to those that were prepared to die over who would dwell within. Surreal acceptance and thinly veiled fear gripped the wildlings, northmen, and riverdwellers within the ranks of Jon Snow’s army, but in their commander the sight of who had been led on a rope before all left him with a different kind of fear.

“Seven hells,” breathed Robb, feeling the same fear. Jon shouldn’t go for it, but the similar move would have been his top choice. At least his brother had a dragon.

Rhaegal chafed underneath Jon, picking up on his rider’s emotions. When the boy - Rickon Stark, long missing - began to run with arrows following him, the dragon expected Jon’s urging to follow. He spread his wings, laboring to keep even the slightest bit airborne.

Sheathing another arrow onto the bowstring, Ramsay felt his massive hard on straining against his pants. He let it fly, purposely missing the delightfully scared boy by nearly three yards.

“Come on. Hit him already!” Patience was not Viserys’ strong suit. This was his moment, finally at the head of a powerful fighting force of elite men. With the Bolton hoplites, Karstark cavalry, Umber men-at-arms, and Frey irregulars, he would take the Seven Kingdoms. If his damn Hand would fight.

Suppressing an urge to bury his steel-tipped arrow in his King, Ramsay looked to his side. An amused glint shone in his eye. “Ready when you are, darling.” Returning his smirk, Myranda signaled for the tarp to be removed, exposing the Scorpion to the open air. Wheeling it forward, she took careful aim…

‘Down.’ Wings flapping wildly, straining to keep in the air, Rhaegal obeyed his rider and went for a bumpy landing. Sweat poured down Jon’s brow despite the cold. Seeing the small form of his brother and another arrow land only three feet to his right, he grabbed onto one of the green dragon’s neck spines and leaned down. Jon stuck out his gloved hand. ‘Come on Rickon. Run. RUN!’

Terror all over his face, Rickon reached out for salvation. Rhaegal roared as another arrow began its downward plunge. Jon strained as far as he could safely go. Fingertips came closer and closer… contact!. With all his strength Jon heaved his young brother onto the back of his dragon, feeling his clenching heart finally relax. ‘Rhaegal, get us back to our forces.’ The dragon gave a grunt of approval, beginning to power back into the low air.
“Fire!”

Winches cranked all the way back, the scorpion’s torsion-based firing mechanism released. The steel-tipped dart shot out at a high velocity, speed and aerodynamic shape ensuring accuracy. Myranda’s aim was true. Dead center for the shoulder joint between the torso and the left wing…

The bolt slammed into Rhaegal out of nowhere. It was as if a sledgehammer rocked the massive beast, a shriek of agony resonating across the battlefield. Jon, nearly jostled off his dragon, held Rickon tightly and gripped the spines as if his life depended on it. They all felt the jolt as Rhaegal slammed into the ground - it was on his feet, but a hard landing.

Myranda whooped, lasciviously gyrating her pelvis in celebration of her well-aimed shot. Noticing his King finally happy again, Ramsay did not rest on his laurels. “The dragon is still mobile. Hit him again!” Mechanists dashed forward to reload and reposition the scorpion.

Pushing up, resuming his upright stance, the dizziness clouded Jon’s vision. He had no idea of what was afoot except that it would undoubtedly happen again. ‘Run, Rhaegal. Run.’ But just as the dragon turned to crawl back to the Stark lines, a second bolt slammed into his right leg, falling him again. There was now a persistent limp.

“The dragon is disabled!” Ramsay signaled to his signaller. “Full charge! I want Jon Snow’s head!” With two sharp blows of the horn, the Bolton and Karstark cavalry erupted out of their positions.

None of this was ignored in the Stark lines. “Protect your commander!” screamed Robb, unsheathing his sword, he could see his signaller giving the orders. Podrick and Brienne by his side, deep bellows from Mag and Wun, the Stark line surged forward.

Sensing Rhaegal’s pain through their connection, Jon immediately hopped off the dragon’s neck to inspect the damage. Two bolts protruded spitefully out of the scaly skin. He quickly pulled them out - luckily, they weren’t barbed and slid out easily. Rhaegal whined loudly but seemed better. The limp remained, however.

“Jon!” Looking up, Jon found Rickon frantically pointing behind him. At the sight before him, Jon could clearly see what spooked his brother. A wall of men and horses, banners of Bolton, Karstark, and Frey fluttering in the air as they surged forward. At the rate they were coming, Jon and Rhaegal would be enveloped in less than a minute.

“Rickon, get to our lines! Do not stop running!” His brother did as he was told, scrambling off the green dragon’s back and racing away. “Do not stop!”

Meeting Rhaegal’s eyes, Jon placed a gloved hand on his snout. “I’m sorry, my friend,” he offered. The green beast purred low and soft, as if absolving him of blame. Turning back to the enemy forces, Jon unbuckled his scabbard. Longclaw emerged in a fluid motion, scabbard falling to the the muddy ground. The Valyrian steel shone in the overcasted light. Time seemed to slow to a crawl for Jon, noticing the smallest things in a surreal yet vivid picture. He could make out the individual faces of the charging enemy, raising his sword to go down like a warrior...

Only for his own cavalry to shoot past him and slam into the enemy line. A colliding of flesh, steel, and wood all together. Lances ran through men, spurting blood and guts over the trodden ground. Bodies were thrown back off their horses in twisted, mangled heaps. It was as if all order and control around Jon descended into a charnelhouse of slaughter and chaos. Crimson liquid spattered his face, the coppery smell hitting his nose. It didn’t take long for the stench of death to descend over the field, the cold helping somewhat. A flash of steel shook him from his reverie, Jon raising Longclaw to block the blow heading his way.
“Nock!” Davos shouted, watching the archers draw their bowstrings. In the maze, he couldn’t make out the difference between friend and foe. “Damn!” ‘Can’t take down our own men.’

On the opposite side, Ramsay had no such compunctions. “Nock! Loose!” The arrows sailed through the air, impacting both the Stark forces and his own without mercy.

“The only dead of our own will be peasants,” scoffed Viserys Targaryen, laughing.

Gaze shifting to the side, Davos spotted a target. “Shift right! Shift right! Loose!” Over a hundred arrows arced up and then down, impacting into the Frey lines. More an unarmored mob with weapons and ferocity, the sheer weight staggered from the volley mere moments before they smashed into the better armed but outnumbered Tully dismounted men-at-arms - the desperate flanking maneuver ended as quickly as it began, but the Blackfish held his men against their sworn enemies with a righteous fury. The Tyrell pikemen formed the center as they hacked their way through the numerous cutthroats. They may have been blocked from reaching the others by the Frey host, but they’d take down as many as they could. If the Frey soldiers were good for one thing it was plentiful sword fodder.

The blow was easily dispatched, and Jon slammed his sword across the small shield. Wood gave way to the Valyrian steel, followed by a jab for the throat. Arteries and windpipe severed leaving a gurgling sound around the tip as the soldier fell. Recovering his bearings, Jon raised Longclaw and sliced it across the front of a Bolton cavalryman. Crimson blood spurted over his uniform as he collapsed to the ground, his horse continuing its panicked gallop. Men mounted and men dismounted engaging in brutal hand to hand combat, Jon swerved out of the way before a Karstark knight ran him over with a lance - only for the knight to have his head removed by a Hornwood sword. He jinked again, Longclaw slicing an arm clean off a dismounted Bolton knight. Whooshes reaching his ears, Jon crouched while arrows pockmarked the dirt around him. Threat over, he managed to reach a Mazin soldier and save him from an enraged Bolton. Blood dotted his leather vest as Jon removed Longclaw from the man’s gut. “Get to Tormund…” he barked until an arrow slammed into the man’s eye. “Fuck!”

“WILDLING LOVER!” Out of nowhere charged a Bolton trooper with his axe raised high. Jon readied Longclaw to taste blood once more. He could see the color in the trooper’s eyes when a riderless horse, tongue out in pure panic, slammed into the trooper in its frenzied flight. What was left was a screaming heap, white bone protruding out of torn flesh. “MAMA! MAMA!” Snarling, Jon drove his blade into the trooper’s gut.

When Rhaegal roared, the whole battlefield heard him. His claws and teeth were stained with blood and flesh. Bolton and Karstark men gave him a wide berth, but that didn’t stop the green dragon from toppling horsemen with his thick tail, using his heavy head to smash unlucky men into the ground like pulp. One was plucked from his horse, screaming in primal terror as Rhaegal tossed him into the air and chomped, lower half disappearing down his gullet.

So consumed was he in his contribution to the orgy of blood around him, the two knights charging him didn’t register until two horses - one snow white and the other a dark chestnut - raced past him. The enemy knights were no longer a threat. “Just like always,” Robb spat, leaping from his horse and tossing away the bloody, broken lance. “I have to clean up your messes.”

Ice and Longclaw dispatched two more troopers, the former slicing the head clean off while the latter batted aside a wild swing before cutting open the gut. The brothers fought back to back, glinting Valyrian steel soiled with red. Another Karstark trooper found his head caved in by Brienne, joining the trio by smashing her mailed fist into an attacker meant for Jon. Her normally coiffed hair was wild and stained, sweat and blood from a cut to the forehead matting much of it to her skin. Still
holding her shield, it came in handy as more Bolton arrows joined the party.

Davos cursed mentally. “We’re just sitting with our dicks in our hands.” He drew his sword.
“Charge!” The archers surged forward, ready to join their brothers.

Eyes focused like sunlight on the dragon, Viserys chafed in the saddle - the pain in his hand was ignored with his blood up. “Send them in! Now Hand! I will not lose my dragon.”

Ramsay nodded to Myranda. “Go with Smalljon, and keep the beast away from the main mass.” He turned to the burly nobleman. “Smalljon, you’re up!”

A grin crossed the bearded face. “Who holds the north?!” A whoop left the throats of the Bolton hoplites. “WHO HOLDS THE NORTH?!” The whoop was louder. “Forward! Keep formation! Umbers with me!” The second line surged forward, organized as opposed to the cavalry charge.

Watching a man hurled screaming through the air - inwardly grinning at Rhaegal’s fighting spirit - Jon ran another through with Longclaw. “Where are the fucking Tullys!” he yelled, Robb slashing an axe-wielder right through the middle.

Brienne was giving back as good as any man could have. Even yet, her clothes were soaked with blood and her armor was dented and pierced all over with shallow punctures. A broken off arrow was embedded just above her breast, but she didn’t feel a thing. “The Freys are blocking them off!” She removed a lance embedded in the ground and hurled it into one of the few remaining mounted knights.

Suddenly Jon was knocked on his belly, something heavy on his back. Try as he might he couldn’t shake it off at first. ‘This is it.’ But then, wet liquid began to pool and he shrugged the weight off - a corpse with an axe buried in his skull. There was no doubt who did it. “You’re not leaving us behind, King Crow,” grumbled Tormund, pulling Jon up.

“No! No, please!” The wounded Bolton trooper’s pleas were ignored as Tun smashed him with his massive foot, at the van of Marg and the entire Wildling host. They had arrived for the battle.

“Bloody hell?” Awe and fear paralyzed the entire Stark army as the Bolton phalanx arrived, marching quickly and ahead of the ragged line of Umber warriors. They split into a fork, moving to surround the Wildlings. “Attack outward!” Jon screamed, but the intimidating sight of the flayed man shields only forced the Free Folk inward, bunched together. Disaster.

Grinning, Ramsay nudged his King on the arm. “Magnificent, isn’t it?”

Viserys was not at all disappointed. “With this army, I’ll be dining in Casterly Rock by month’s end.”

The Bolton Phalanx locked their shields, forming an impenetrable wall on three sides. With the Tully’s and Tyrells blocked by the Frey host, and Rhaegal blocked off by a separate hoplite detachment, there was no denying it. The Starks were surrounded.

“Is there any reason why Lord Baelish isn’t here?” Sansa could barely hear her own yell over the fast galloping horses. Scouts had reported the battle had been joined, and so the relief force picked up the pace. If they got to the battlefield too late…

Yelling at his men to keep the advance steady and stick to formation, ‘Bronze Yohn’ Royce shrugged on the saddle. “Said King Joffrey demanded he return to the Capitol.” He cracked the reins
and forced his way to the front, managing the formation.

Turning to Margaery, riding expertly beside her, Sansa raised an eyebrow. “I hope Joffrey doesn’t cut out his tongue, or worse.” She wouldn’t put anything past him at this point. Even Ramsay - damn him - had limits to his cruelty. “The Lannister’s couldn’t have known what transpired.” Littlefinger had used every bit of his skill and cunning to meet with Sansa without anyone being abreast of it, especially not Joffrey’s agents. It was through that meeting that the redhead was given the ability to arrange today’s relief force.

“Be careful. I’ve met Baelish once and heard his reputation.” Margaery did not want to see her friend hurt - nor her friend’s family, especially her handsome older brother. “If he’s not playing all the sides against the other, I would be shocked.”

“Perhaps.” Around them, shouts and scuffling from the knights drew Sansa’s attention. A black shape passed overhead. One she was familiar with thanks to her brother.

“Gods in heaven,” the Tyrell Rose breathed.

Regardless of her new view of Jon, a small part being old Sansa persisted in doubting Jon about having met the Dragon Queen - one all in King’s Landing had feared. There was no doubting it now.

“Ramsay is fucked,” Margaery said matter of factly.

Sansa couldn’t help the smile that crossed her face.

“Fire again!” Whooshing filled the air as the thick rope shot out from the Scorpion. A group of men, built like oxen and insanely brave, grabbed at the loose line while the attached grappling hook dug into scaly flesh. “Keep him down! Keep him down!” Myranda shouted at her command, clusters of pikemen surrounding the green beast. Even wounded and isolated from any assistance, the massive dragon was no easy conquest.

Crushing yet another Bolton bannerman with his powerful jaws and sharp teeth, Rhaegal hooted in pain as the fifth mooring line brought him ever closer to being subdued. Restricting his range of motion even the slightest bit. Piles of bloody corpses and torn up body parts ringed him. He called out in terror, begging for his rider to save him.

Marching inward two steps, the hoplites of the Bolton phalanx impaled dozens of wildling warriors among the thousands they had trapped. With shields sparse, the fur clad fighters were sitting ducks. As the echoing shouts from the top of the mountain of dead signaled the arrival of House Umber, Jon grabbed Robb. “You and Brienne smash the phalanx. I’ll deal with Umber. Go!”

“Run at the phalanx!” Robb shouted, wading through to charge between the spears. A thrust of Ice drew blood, while Brienne swung her blade with such ferocity that it split both the flayed man shield and the skull of its holder in half. Tormund and the other Widlings followed the crazed northerner, their nimble, unarmored forms perfect to weave through the pikes. Tormund pulled down a shield and drove his axe through the hoplite’s shoulder. On the other side, Wun batted the pikes aside and began pulling men to their deaths. Mag grasped a bundle of at least five pikes, ripping them from their owners and using them as a single club against the phalanx. But despite it all - including watching Wun rip a screaming hoplite in half - the hoplites refused to bend. Sheer mass of the men behind kept it from buckling. Well-trained and drilled, hardened vets of the War of the Four Kings, a new man quickly replaced every one killed. Onward marched the phalanx.
Still outnumbered over three to one, the beleaguered Tullys formed an inverted V with the Tyrell pikemen at the head. “Push through!” yelled the Blackfish, hoping by sheer momentum that he could hack his way through the Freys and hit the phalanx from the rear. However, the Frey horde was too large and too concentrated in the center, the wedge tapering out in the sheer mass of bodies. Running through a brute with only five teeth to his name, the Blackfish met the eyes of Black Walder. If he couldn’t get the patriarch himself, then his bastard would do. “Black Walder!” Nearly twice his senior, the old man bulldozed through three men as his blade clashed with the opposing commanders.

Atop the hill, Viserys grew impatient once more. “Damn fools. Tell them to finish the bastards off.”

“Calm yourself my King,” soothed Ramsay, his cock straining his breeches at all the death and carnage. He’d fuck Myranda hard, tonight. “It will be done. Pay attention to your dragon.”

Calming his innate panic, Viserys was indeed mollified. Another grappling hook dug into Rhaegal’s wing. Upon pulling by the roustabouts, Myranda grinning in triumph, the dragon’s wing fingers gave way and he collapsed to the ground, screeching and thrashing with his jaws to kill any Bolton that got near.

Parrying an Umber thrust, Jon slashed a diagonal cut across the attacker’s chest. What remained of the exhausted northern men-at-arms clashed with the rested soldiers of House Umber, the northern brethren abandoning all brotherly amity in a fury of petty feuds and betrayed rage. Davos’ archers fired their arrows over open sights, felling a dozen Umbers at point blank range. Smaljon dueled with Podrick and wounded him, but a mass of frenzied Wildlings separated them before he could finish the job. He soon came face to face with Tormund.

The fleeing was a flood, shoving Jon to the ground. Panicked feet trampled all over him. Robb and Brienne had to have failed, the demoralizing whoops of the hoplites everpresent. Even Wun, Mag, and Rhaegal’s bellows were beginning to slacken. Straining, dirt and blood splattered all over his fatigued and battered body, Jon struggled to breathe among the packed mass of four thousand writhing bodies.

Piercing through the unusual quiet, a dark shape shot by high above. Time stood still, hundreds of individual clashes pausing as every man so engaged watched the bat-like specter hug the bottom of the clouds sheathing the landscape. Jon knew exactly what it was. As a dragonrider he couldn’t mistake the massive dragon for anything else. It’s black body banked over the battlefield, and Jon’s eyes zeroed wide to the silver-haired rider. “Dany?”

From the packed mass of the soldiers below, with trumpets blaring Dany knew she had arrived just in time. Tears of finding Jon in the heat of battle - through their connection, she found him instantly - were blinked back. Now was not the time. ‘I’m here, my love.’

While the horns blared louder and louder, Tormund drew back his head and smashed Smalljon Umber with it, using the distraction to rip off the Lord’s ear with his teeth. A piercing scream left Smalljon before Robb decapitated the disfigured head with Ice. “FORWARD!”

“CHARGE!” There was no mistaking it. Two dragons circling above, columns of knights bearing the banners of the Vale surged as one unit, bloodlust up to strike a blow for their land and their honor. Atop the hill, Lord Yohn Royce at her side, Sansa couldn’t believe her luck. She shared a glance with Margaery, who smiled. Both then looked up at the dragons in the air - the one uncertainty as the tide most definitely turned.

Drawn by sight, scent, and innate connection to his long lost brother, Balerion’s roar was unlike anything Daenerys had ever heard. Triumphant, relieved. Her gaze found her child as well. She lit
up. “Rhaegal!” Only she could hear the word over the roar of the wind and dragon - but Rhaegal heard it loud and clear.

Roaring of his own accord, strength seeped back into Rhaegal’s body. A stoking heat not felt since the jagged spear of the Night King first made contact with the green dragon’s flesh filled him. Watching the men strain to keep the beast down after the vigorous thrashing returned, Myranda could see the first speck of orange-red ignite within his mouth. “Men! Load a bolt…” Her sentence cut off as a tongue of flame shot out from Rhaegal’s maw and engulfed her completely, spreading to the roustabouts that held him down. He burned all that tormented him with an enraged fury.

The rally of her child filling Daenerys with determination, she angled Balerion down for where Wun and Mag marshaled their tired, wounded bodies with a new vigor at the phalanx. Out of the corner of her eye she could just make out Jon leading his men over the pile of dead. “Dracarys!” The gout of flame singed the tips of the two giants’ hair as the hoplites in front disappeared into the inferno. Warmth banished the unnatural chill away, Dany basking in the feeling.

“URRRRRRRGGGGGGGHHHHH!” The bellowing cry that left their throats was joined by the entire Stark army.

Horse stepping back involuntarily, Viserys blinked. “Wha… what?” One moment, he had been on the verge of complete glory… and now it was falling apart completely. “Daenerys?” It still hadn’t cliqued.

Watching his lover immolated, while still outwardly cool Ramsay was entering damage control mode inside. “Archers! Nock! Aim for the knights!” If he could hurt the Vale charge perhaps his Phalanx could manage to swing back…

“FUCK!”

“RUN AWAY!”

A flash of white and grey caught Ramsay’s eye before a searing heat erupted not twenty feet from him. Horses panicking in fear, Viserys toppled from his into the mud below in an undignified heap. Ramsay, more skilled as a horseman, managed to quiet the beast and was able to see the white dragon glide by. Flame erupted in a continuous stream as Edderon charred to death at least a third of his archers - the rest fleeing as fast as their feet could take them. Even the most hardened of soldiers had their breaking point.

His eyes turned back to the thatch of red hair in the distance. His wife. Sansa noticed this through the wreath of flames, barely having shifted from gazing at her ‘husband’ since she and Lord Royce crested the hill. The Vale knights had split into two columns, one House Arryn and one House Royce. The Arryn column slammed into the unprotected rear of the Bolton phalanx. All attention kept to the front, they had nothing defending behind them and were slaughtered by lance and sword. House Royce’s column wheeled around the phalanx’s semicircle, right into the flank of the Frey horde. Barely armored as it was, against the steel tipped weapons of the Knights of the Vale they were nothing more than beasts to the slaughter - the Blackfish used the distraction to run his sword through Black Walder’s gut, destroying whatever discipline House Frey had. A smirk crossed Sansa’s lips, the meaning easy to decipher.

Resigned, Ramsay motioned for his retinue to ride back to the castle. Nearly left behind, Viserys only managed to scramble back onto his horse in time to catch up in a hurried gallop. “Do something, Hand! Stop them! You said that the Vale would declare for me! Save my army!”

“Fucking shut up!” Ramsay snarled. “My King,” he added with venom. The Targaryen obeyed,
shockingly chastised.

Winging a blast of fire into a cluster of Frey men, Dany led Balerion into a looping bank worthy of the best dragonriders. The stench of fetid death and charred corpses wafted to even this height. The battle was clearly won, any sort of coordination among the Bolton ranks broken. Many clusters were even surrendering, seeking whatever mercy their foes would toss their way. A screech from the black dragon focused her attention. There was Jon, a wildling and two giants by his side as they charged toward the castle… was that Winterfell? It seemed far drearer than Jon had always described it, but from what she could tell Jon hadn’t been in it for a long time. Urging Balerion towards the castle walls, Dany was determined to finish this once and for all.

“Close the gate!” Men were dashing about, the courtyard in sheer chaos. Such had changed so massively since the day Robert Baratheon had arrived - not even one person from that time was even present within the walls. “Mi’Lord, where’s our army?” asked the garrison commander.

“Dead on the battlefield, though their army’s little better,” Ramsay replied evenly. “It appears the Dragon Queen has arrived.” Viserys, alone and shellshocked, was merely muttering to himself. “We still have Winterfell, and if the Dragon Queen is in charge we can exchange that puissant fool to her in exchange for…” His words were interrupted by two bellowed war cries. The sentry opened his mouth to shout when a pike ran him through the middle. Grabbing a bow and quiver of his own, Ramsay barked at his remaining men. Get atop the battlements! Fire on any that come close!”

Archers scrambled atop the walls and mantlets, some firing and some shouting for reinforcements. A loud slam echoed, rattling the gate on its hinges - followed by another and another. “Two giant cunts! We need more men…” And in a split second the battlements disappeared in a gout of flame. Men charred into ash-crusted skeletons on the spot or writhed in agony, the pork-like smell of burned, acrid flesh joining the plethora of smells in the Winterfell courtyard.

In a flash the wooden gate burst into hundreds of flaming shards. The fireball blossomed, smoke and flame shrouding the entrance to the castle. Many knocked over from the blast wave, even the most hardened soldiers pissed themselves as an immense black dragon - a silver-haired Queen Visenya reincarnated perched atop its neck with a glinting blade in her arm - mounted the battlements. His maw opened and unleashed an ear-splitting roar while two giants and two dozen free folk and northern warriors poured in. Arrows flew and swords clashed. A minute hadn’t even passed before all the Bolton resisters were dead or surrendering.

Eyes darting from Robb, to Jon, to Mag, to Tormund, to the still mounted Daenerys, and to Jon again, Ramsay chuckled. “Well, Snow. I think I’ll take up that old offer of yours. Us, one on one.” He quickly nocked an arrow.

Heart clenching for a moment as Ramsay let an arrow fly, Dany calmed herself at seeing Jon block the bolts from hitting him. Plopping on the ground, her boots squelching in the mud, she focused on the surprising sight of her own brother. Viserys was dressed regally but looked just as craven and terrified as the last time she had seen him. What a disgrace to House Targaryen - but he could wait, Jon would come first.

Fist flying into Ramsay’s face, every punch flashed an image into his red tinged eyes. Sansa’s abuse. Robb nearly getting his throat slit. Rickon just escaping death. All the pain and anger now being taken out on Ramsay Bolton. “Jon, stop!” Robb attempted to yank him by the shoulder but he shrugged him off, still punching and leaving the once grinning face a blood-soaked mess.

“Jon.” Sansa, her voice a carbon copy of Catelyn’s but without the loathing, finally drew his attention. Their eyes met. She wanted him dead, but not this way. “Enough. Someone is here for you.” The Dragon Queen had arrived, and Dany knew her long suffering brother deserved this.
Jaw not working, shaking all over, Viserys felt as if his whole world was crashing down in a massive earthquake toppling the stone walls. “No. No! This is impossible!” He screamed to the heavens. “You are my slut sister, and you are a bastard son of a traitor! I am the King! THE TRUE KING! THE TRUE…” A fist slammed into his face, knocking him out cold.

“Shut it!” Tormund growled, spitting on his face.

Eyes turning away from the bleeding form of Ramsay Bolton, deep breaths and the huffing pants of a large dragon sapped the rage from Jon’s system. Turning, his grey eyes locked with pure violet - the violet that had haunted and graced his dreams for years. Violet that could belong to only one woman. For the first time, Jon truly grasped what had just happened. Who had just arrived.

His gaze hadn’t lost its effect on Daenerys Targaryen. Not after many years. The handsome boy that she had last seen at her wedding to Drogo was replaced by a man. A grizzled man, covered in blood and gore and the scars of many campaigns and battles. He enchanted her all the same - just like before. A shiver passed through Dany at Jon’s stunned, intense stare.

She was here. She really was here. At that moment, everything else mattered nothing to Jon. Only the ethereal beauty finally back in his life. “Dany.”

Tears filled Dany’s lids. “Jon.”

All else cast to the wayside, their legs effortlessly carried them closer and closer until they slammed together in a crushing embrace. Jon lifted her in his arms, eyes closed as the warmth he had missed for so long finally hit his skin again. The dragon queen buried her face in his neck, Dany caring not that it was covered in grime and flecks of blood. She felt at home. At last, she was where she belonged.

Not letting her go, Jon pulled back to gaze into her eyes. Deftly removing his glove, he cupped her porcelain cheek. Dany sighed dreamily as she nuzzled the palm. Without words, they closed the gap and crashed their lips together.
The fires were everywhere. Deep within Sunspear, the stench of smoke and death hung in the air as the Lannister armies engaged in an orgy of rape and murder. Her loose tunic and headscarf caked in blood and greasy black soot, Tyene Sand scrambled through the winding alleys and corridors of her native city. Her long daggers had slayed many a Lannister - but it wasn’t enough. Never enough. All thoughts of victory were gone when the Grey Lion broke through into the Princely Palace. Now, there was only survival on the mind of the last member of her family true to Dorne. Not a puppet of the Chimera.

“This way, my Lady,” the lead guard urged. They were dressed in the attire of simple peasants - the hope was to melt away into the countryside and fight an irregular war until Dorne was free. Such thoughts seemed hopeless to Tyene. She had once thought that the true Dornish patriots, ones that loved her father Oberyn and her aunt Elia and hated the Lannisters for murdering them, would vanquish Joffrey’s army. It didn’t come to pass, the Lannister armies instead making Dorne howl. There was less of a chance that they could win now with much of their population enslaved in King’s Landing and with her cousin Tristane as Joffrey’s puppet. But it was still a chance.

Lord Tywin Lannister, Hand of the God-King and Supreme Commander of the Army of the Holy Chimera, had many names. The Indomitable, dating from when he was Hand to King Aerys. The Grey Lion, dating from when he saved King’s Landing during the Battle of Blackwater Bay. Now, with the campaign through the southernmost tip of Westeros leaving death, slavery, and burnt out fields and forests in its wake, he drew a new name. The Doom of Dorne. Tyene remembered when he had entered the palace just as she, her mother, and her sisters readied to escape. Standing before them, he looked every inch the doom.

“Elyria Sand,” he had said, bowing slightly. “It is an honor to accept the surrender of such a lovely woman.” His sparkling green eyes remained in Tyene’s mind, their color no less piercing with age. She and her sisters had fought him… fought the Mountain. They had felled Tywin’s dog, wounding him grievously for what he did to Elia, but Tywin Killed Nymeria and Obara, capturing her mother. Tyene had barely escaped the palace alive.

They reached a small gate, an individual-sized carving in the city walls used for patrols. “There are men waiting several miles away, just beyond the mountain cliff face…” A knife cut off the guard’s sentence, slicing through his neck and causing bright crimson liquid to splatter over Tyene’s clothes. The other guard turned but another blade sliced his head clean off.

“Going somewhere, my lady?” asked Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, the ghost of a smirk on his face. His leather fighting tunic and loose chainmail were just as dirty and bloodstained as Tyene’s, sword bloody. He had been fighting hard as well.

“Not before I send you to hell,” she snarled, charging him. Bronn was forced back, sword shifting quickly to block the dual parries and slashes. He jerked forward, putting Tyene off balance. But this lasted by a moment, the agile woman twirling with the grace of a dancer and continuing her frenzied attacks.

Blocking a downward slash by Bronn with crossed blades, Tyene shifted them apart and twisted. Bronn’s sword clattered to the ground leaving him bereft of weapons. What Tyene didn’t count on was the Hero of the Blackwater finding this perfectly fine. Out of nowhere came a front kick, felling the Sand Snake, wind knocked out of her. By the time she caught her breath and began to reach for her daggers, sharp steel poked at her windpipe.
Blade at her neck, Bronn knew he could end this girl’s life with just the flick of his wrist. But behind the anger, the hate, there was only fear. A scared girl that had lost her family - something eerily familiar to Bronn. And so time stood still. No move to end her life, no move to spare it. Just a hanging status quo, tension in the air so thick a knife could slice through it.

Commotion in the alley behind broke the reverie. He quickly made a decision. “Go.”

Tyene blinked. “What?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Bronn hissed in frustration. “Unless ya want Tywin Lannister to put yer head on a pike next to your sisters, go!.”

Scrambling to her feet, Tyene was just about to disappear into the woods when she turned. “Why?” Her curiosity got the better of her.

Breathing deep, Bronn shrugged. “Got a weakness for Dornish girls, I guess. Now get.” Her moment’s amusement before she ran off into the brush made him chuckle. ‘Now that’s a lady for me.’

Just then, a squad of soldiers burst out of the city. House Tarly by their sigils. “Any more, my Lord?” one asked Bronn, gesturing to the corpses.

Bronn gazed out at the woods one last time. “No. Just two fuckers trying to flee. Keep five men at the gate. The rest of you with me.” Back into the chaos.

“Much colder than I remember.” Tyrion looked out at the expansive snowfall pockmarked with circles and ovals of winter grass. A beautiful sheet of white marred by hardy life. The Lannister knew his father and sister would see it as an apt metaphor for the North - beautiful desolation made ugly by the people that lived in it. “I hate to sound like a droll punmaster, but dare I say that ‘Winter is Coming.’”

Catelyn Stark rolled her eyes. “Don’t you have someone else to annoy? Missandei perhaps?” The wave of her hand cast the attention to the Naathi translator, trying to get Tyrion out of her hair. She now knew he had nothing to do with Bran’s near death, but he could still be most irritating.

He cast her eyes at the translator, who’s sullen frown remained. “I wouldn’t bother a lovely woman pining for her lover. I’m not my sister, Lady Stark.” A battalion of Unsullied marched with them as the Queen’s personal bodyguard, but Grey Worm wasn’t among them - he stayed with the bulk of them at Dragonstone to help Varys, Jorah, and Theodosius coordinate the main army. Missandei hadn’t been the same since. ‘A man with no cock can enchant a woman so?’ Tyrion resolved to pick the reserved warrior’s brain for some secrets to try out on Shae later on.

“One of the Dothraki then?” Gods save her from the Imp.

Swigging from his canteen, he grimaced at the sour ale but was grateful for the warmth. “The Dothraki? They’d have me chained and dancing for their amusement within five minutes.” It was ironic, finding himself in the same inner circle as the woman that nearly had him thrown out of the Moon Gate at the Eyrie. “With Varys in Dragonstone, who else to receive the honor of my superb wit.”

“Aren’t most of the people who compliment your ‘superb wit’ people you pay for their company?”

Tyrion mimed an arrow to his chest. “Oh, thy hath wounded me.” He drained the canteen, but
decided not to refill it. He wanted to be sharp once the convoy reached Winterfell and the man that had won over his Queen’s heart. Ahead rode three hundred Dothraki led by Daenerys’ bloodriders, shivering underneath their thick pelts. Behind him and the Unsullied marched nearly a thousand freedmen auxiliaries. The possible alliance with the North would be sealed with the gift of needed troops.

The possible alliance… “Given what the Mad King did to the Starks, the Northern houses will not take kindly to our Queen.” Grudges among the north ran deep. “They didn’t support Renly’s claim - instead proclaiming your son King in the North. That will cause headaches for us to deal with.”

More on the North than on Daenerys. With her love for Jon Snow - Jaehaerys Targaryen - she’d be far more agreeable than any Glovers, Manderlys, or Karstarks.

Closing her eyes, the topic unnerved her more than his previous irritation. It hit too close to home. To her dishonor. “Perhaps I or my children will help defuse the situation. Queen Daenerys is not the Mad King, and a personal touch could go a long way.” A gust of wind slammed into them from the north. The Essosi shivered, but Catelyn took it in stride. “Her marrying a northerner would help.”

“Considering a marriage to Jon Snow, are we? Premature it would… oh fuck it. If they’re already married when we get to Winterfell I wouldn’t be surprised.” The Queen had a knack of getting what she wanted. She wanted nothing more than Jon Snow. “If he were to get a title, that would actually help considerably. King in the North perhaps?”

“My son Robb is King in the North.”

Scuffling from two of the Dothraki distracted Tyrion for the moment. One probably bumped into another and it escalated into a fight to the death - which their clan elder was trying to stop. ‘Oh the simpler people of the plains and the hills.’ “I mean no disrespect to him, Lady Stark, but the Northern Lords proclaim a King in the North by acclamation. After the Red Wedding do you think he could ever resume his title? Or that he would want it?” From the way she looked away, Tyrion knew he had gotten the point across.

Staring at the white sheet that had blanketed the northern plains, Catelyn felt the harsh cold. “I still remember the day that Ned brought him to Winterfell, from the south. No mother, and saying he had strayed and that this baby boy was his bastard. I loved Ned, and it killed me to think he had betrayed me.” The memories tumbled through her head. “When I was pregnant with Sansa, Jon fell sick. I remember praying to the Old Gods and the New to take him. To let him die. And he grew worse, and I realized what I… the evil I had done - all because of Ned’s mistake. So I prayed again to save him, promising that I would raise him as my own. The Gods kept their promise… but I didn’t. All that had happened to my family since was because I couldn’t give mercy to a motherless boy.”

Tyrion was silent, chafing in his seat. What could he say to that? What could anyone say to that?

Lady Stark laughed humorously. “And now, not only is Jon leading the North, he is really the trueborn heir to the Seven Kingdoms. Ned was true to me this whole time.” A tear fell from her eye. “All that had happened… was all for nothing.” Cracking the reins, she galloped ahead of the Lannister, wishing to be alone.

“Lord Tyrion.” The Imp turned quickly, finding Missandei having roused from her lonely contemplation. “You have met this Jon Snow, correct?” She had heard the Lady Daenerys talk about him countless times, to both her and the children, but wanted to know what he was like in his homeland. More about the real person that had her lady’s heart.

Making him think a bit, Tyrion searched through his mind for the few moments he had spent with Jon Snow. ’If I had known he was Rhaegar’s son, I would have glued my cheek to his hip.’ “He
was… just like Ned Stark in a way. Brooding and withdrawn, but with a noble heart. I could tell he
wanted to do the right thing.”

His words seemed to lighten a bit of her melancholy. “In my life, every highborn that I met only
cared about their power or their class. The Lady Daenerys was the exception - if she wishes me to
serve Lord Snow as well, I will do so. But… I am glad that he will likely make me want to serve
him.”

Tyrion nodded. “All of us could stand to be more like them.” He pulled the cloak tighter over him.
‘Beastly cold.’

Only a week before, Daenerys had imagined Dragonstone to be immensely cold - now, teeth
chattering even with the warmth of the fire within the hearth and the woollen dress, she couldn’t
manage to get any warmth into her body. All that kept her from making Balerion douse her with
dragonfire was the black cloak draped around her form. A contented smile crossed her face. Eyes
fluttered closed as she inhaled the deep scent she had long missed. ‘Jon.’ Noticing her woefully
underdressed for the North, he had draped his Night’s Watch cloak around Dany’s body. ‘So loving.
So caring.’ It was just like him to do so, and she hadn’t taken it off since.

Dany absentmindedly stroked Ghost’s soft, white fur, the reflections of the momentous day still
weighing on her. To say that the reception she had gotten after her passionate kiss with Jon - quite
anticlimactic after storming Winterfell atop Balerion - was tense would be putting it mildly. Ghost
had been the most enthusiastic, practically leaping on the woman he had known so long ago when
just a pup and licking her face. He hadn’t left her side since, likely guarding his master’s most
important asset Dany thought with a happy sigh. Rhaegal… it had been an unexpected delight to see
her child alive and having taken Jon as his rider. The green dragon lost no love for his mother,
though was more keen to fly off with his brothers after the battle.

“Would you like some tea, your Grace?” Looking up, Dany saw Margaery Tyrell smiling, two
steaming cups in her hands. “The servants brought us a pot. I think it would warm you up.”

Dany smiled. “Thank you, Lady Margaery.” The warm liquid spread heat as it slid down her throat.
The Tyrell rose had welcomed her the most warmly, essentially taking charge of the household when
Jon excused himself to handle prisoners and the elimination of all Bolton detritus in the castle with
his brother and sister. Ser Davos and Lady Brienne had been cordial, while the wildling - Tormund
Giantsbane if Dany remembered his name - made her laugh with his inappropriate cracks about Jon
“Working off his battle energy” with her. Little Rickon was a delight, having taken to Dany almost
immediately despite all he had been through. All that bothered the Dragon Queen was Sansa and
Robb, though their hesitancy was only natural.

“Where is my brother?” Dany asked Margaery. That Viserys was here intrigued her. She never
thought he could manage to marshall a bum fight in a brothel, let alone wrangle an actual army by
himself.

Margaery’s eyes narrowed. “I wouldn’t know, nor do I want to know where that slug is. Jon or
Robb would…” At that moment the three Starks walked in, conversing about someone named Sam
arriving with an important package left in the Lord’s chamber. It ended when they saw Dany.

“Lord Jon,” Dany said. “Lord Robb. Lady Sansa.” Sansa immediately excused herself, not scowling
but closed off. Robb gave her a small smile while Jon, handsome as ever, merely looked at the floor
sheepishly.
Margaery got the hint that Dany radiated. “Robb, let’s find our chamber.” The word choice was not lost on any of them, but a story for another day. Soon it was just them left.

“Daenerys.” Jon reached out his hand. “Let me escort you to the Lord’s chamber.”

His gravelly voice sent shivers down her body. Dany smiled and gladly took it. It was surreal as Jon led her through the halls of the northern castle. Darkness had fallen outside, only torches keeping the black of night at bay. She looked back at Jon, drinking in his sight. He had grown, muscles firm and face pockmarked with the scars of a hard life. The same scars as hers, though external rather than internal. ‘Oh, my love. What have we gone through while apart?’ Dany had every intention of sharing all of what they had been through, but not tonight.

Jon couldn’t look at Daenerys. To do so would have left him speechless at her beauty. He was a warrior, not the same sixteen year old tongue tied in front of the most gorgeous woman on earth. The hand he kept glued to the small of her back sent electric tingles along his skin. Gulping, he found his father’s former chamber. The room fit for a Queen. “Here we are, Daenerys.”

Biting her lip, Dany waited by the door to the Lord of Winterfell’s chambers. ‘Why is he hesitating?’ she thought. She wished to act regally until they were alone in their room, but gods. Just being close to Jon was stoking her to the point of combustion. Her dragonwolf would be the death of her. But then, his hand left its perch on the small of her back. Daenerys immediately felt an unnatural chill where it had been.

“Good night, your Grace.” Every part of him wanted to sweep Dany into his arms after the passionate kiss they shared and… reacquaint themselves - but propriety stopped him. Jon turned and began along the corridor. She was no longer a young girl, but a Queen. The rightful heir to the Seven Kingdoms and a Targaryen. With his hope to unite the Northern Lords to deal with the Army of the Dead, what message would it send if he slept with a Targaryen immediately upon her arrival? What message would it send if she slept with a mere bastard...

Sadness overwhelmed Dany, joining with her loneliness. He had just left her alone, withdrawing back into his brooding self. Just like when they first kissed in Pentos. ‘No, I did journey on dragonback to the North to have Jon withdraw into his insecurity.’ A weak girl allowed herself to be lonely. The Dragon Queen took what she wanted.

Stopping in his tracks, Jon realized he was still thinking of himself as a bastard. A damn bastard with no birthright. But he had every birthright, Jaehaerys Targaryen - Targaryen and Stark. He loved Daenerys and did deserve her. She did deserve him, and wanted him. “Dany,” he said lovingly, turning… only for her to leap into his arms.

“Jon!” Dany kissed him, kissed him with the pent up fervor of years of desire. She melded into him, caring not one bit about propriety. No one could disturb their happy reunion now.

He lost himself in her, feeling the hole in his heart disappear. He had his dragon back, the beautiful enchantress that haunted his dreams.

An unnatural giggle left Dany’s lips as Jon hefted her into his arms, carrying her horizontally. She wrapped her arms around his neck, enjoying the closeness. It had all returned - the same feelings and affection from before. Time had separated them, but hadn’t dampened what they felt for each other. ‘Blood of my blood.’ This man was destined to be hers. Watching him nudging the door open with her leg, Daenerys lavished Jon’s strong jaw with little kisses. Now they weren’t Queen and Commander, but two reunited lovers reconnecting.

As the wooden door closed with a thud behind them, a sound hit Dany’s ears that she hadn’t heard in
nearly four years. Surprised, she looked at Jon - her love shrugged, smiling sheepishly. He set her down just as the three dragon hatchlings dove down from the rafters, screeching up a storm. They flocked around Jon in a joyous frenzy. “Hello girls,” he said, chuckling awkwardly. “Yes, daddy’s back safe and sound.” The dragons chirped and nuzzled him with their snouts - like Balerion, Rhaegal, and Edderon used to.

Reassuring his daughters that he had returned, Jon looked at his long lost love gaze upon the sight in pleased wonder. “You reacted better than Sansa did when she first met them.” With the blood of the dragon, she wouldn’t be as shocked.

“Of course.” She cleared her throat, the emotions threatening to overwhelm her. “I just wasn’t expecting more… I thought my dragons were the only ones.”

“I was surprised myself, believe me.” Noticing Dany for the first time, each dragon stared intently at her. Suddenly they all leapt from Jon. Circling the silver-haired Queen, they excitedly landed and nuzzled her as well - Dany laughed merrily at the attention. “Allow me to introduce you. This is Sansenya, after my sister.” Moving his finger to the other dragons, his smile suddenly fell. Jon hesitated, nervousness seizing him. “This is Lyanarys, after my mother. And Rhaella… after my grandmother.” The last words hung in the air, silence between them other than the chirping dragons.

Biting her lip, Daenerys met Jon’s gaze. “So you know? You know the truth?”

Realizing that Dany knew as well, Jon let out a sigh. “Aye, I do.” It did not need to be articulated, what they both meant. “My father… Ned Stark, told me by way of a letter he left with my uncle at the Wall. Same as with the dragon eggs, a present from my father… my real father to my mother.” A tear left his eye, memories of their loving smiles and warm embraces from when he had died. He shifted back to Dany, who was wearing an unreadable expression. “Dany? Does this bother you?”

She shook her head, joy spreading across her face. Soft yet firm hands grasped his. “Blood of my blood.” Dany had never truly believed in Gods, or fate, but seeing the one she so loved turn out to be someone so close… so intertwined in their destinies - it proved to her there was something higher in the world. “Jaehaerys Targaryen. My family, one who does love and care for me.” Tears ran down her face. “We are meant to be together, Jon.” Dany could notice a sadness in his eyes. “Are you bothered by it?” Her heart clenched at the thought that he might.

Jon sighed. “It was hard at first, Dany…” A flash of pain and heartbreak crossed her violet eyes. “No… not like that.” Jon cursed internally, hating himself for starting that way. Raising her hand, he kissed it lovingly, feeling her relax. “I loved my father, more than anything. It killed me not to be his son. Then I was…” He paused, not wanting to tell Dany of his death like this. “I saw him, and my real parents in a vision. They told me it was alright. That we were destined to be together.” Now it was his turn to softly cry. It should have felt weak, but for the first time in his life he felt truly safe with someone. To let go and be loved. “I love you, Dany. You are my family.”

Warmth and tenderness filled Dany at that moment, the Dragon Queen falling deeper in love with her beloved northerner. “Oh, Jon. My family.” Stroking her thumb across the rough skin of his hand, Dany moved to embrace him. “I never really had a family, Jon. My mother died giving birth to me, and my brother was cruel with bitterness. He told me upon my learning about Drogo, that he would sell me as a whore to the entire Dothraki horde for his throne - then he’d take me for himself to make a pure heir.” Dany felt Jon tense. He didn’t have to speak for her to know that he was planning to kill Viserys at this point. “My love.” She pressed her lips to his, calming him. A tender look crossed her face, softly reaching up to cup his cheek. His close beard prickled her skin. “I know you would never do that to me. We are meant to be together, this only proves it.”

Jon pulled her back into him. “You will never know that pain again, I swear it. I’m your family, as
are Robb, Sansa, and Rickon. You’ll always have love.” He hoped the words, mushy as they sounded to him were calming for her - what did he know of romance and feminine wants? His time with Dany had been short and Ygritte was not one for that.

A loud roar caught their attention. The three dragons began screeching in response, taking flight and diving out the window. “Looking for their brothers.” Smiling wide, the Dragon Queen crossed the small distance between their heads and crashed their lips together. “The best things that happen to us,” Dany said between deep kisses, “Me coming to you, ending up in your room.”

“Our first night together,” Jon mumbled happily against her lips, remembering those same words. “It is now the first of many.” He let out a groan as the nimble fingers of his dragon ghosted on his chest underneath his tunic.

Desire and hunger coursed through her system at his hard muscles. It was a foreign feeling after so long, but feeling Jon’s tongue dance with hers and his body close against hers brought the memories and familiarity crashing back. “Mmmm,” she purred as he began to caress her sides. “My dragonwolf.” Her core clenched at the intensity and passion that Jon exuded when with her. She wanted more. She needed more. Reaching for his tunic, Daenerys quickly slipped it off him to finally get skin to skin…

By the time Jon finally realized what had happened, the strangled gasp had already left Dany’s mouth. ‘Shit.’ Eyes wide and centered on his scars - the scars of that fateful night - her hand flew to cover her mouth. He could see the tears cloud the lovely violet orbs. “I didn’t intend for you to find out this way,” he offered sadly. Jon had planned to ease her into it, but when in bed the Dragon Queen was… irresistible.

“It wasn’t just a dream,” she murmured, gasping again. “You really did die.” There weren’t many weaknesses for Daenerys Targaryen, the scared and meek girl hardened and honed by experience. Jon was one of them however, and the Mother of Dragons melted aside as the truth about her love was unearthed. Dany allowed Jon to pull her into an embrace, clutching to him desperately and burying her face in his warm chest. “I did lose you that night.”

‘She felt it.’ Jon wasn’t surprised. As the battle showed, their connection was strong. “Dany…” He rubbed circles in her back, trying to calm her. “I’m here. Listen to my heartbeat. I’m alive.”

Daenerys could hear it, feel it thudding against her cheek. It soothed her sobs. She clutched at him ever tighter. “I could have never gotten to have you again.” ‘But I did.’ The skin under here eyes streaked with tears, Dany pulled back. A trembling finger moved to trace the most prominent scar. Right over his heart, courtesy of Alliser Thorne. “H… how?” Who did the Targaryen Queen have to feed to Balerion for nearly taking her dragonwolf from her.

Guiding her to sit on the bed, Jon kept her close to him. “I brought the Wildlings south of the wall, and some of the men didn’t agree.” Dany looked up at him, listening intently. “The Night’s Watch… we’ve fought the Wildlings for millennia. And I let them south. It… caused a lot of disagreement and the former Lord Commander stabbed me through the heart. Robb executed him.”

“But how did you live?” His heartbeat calmed her, soothed her sadness.

“The red witch brought me back with fire, and thus the dragons were born.” Jon kissed the top of her head.

Dany gave him an astonished look, one filled with awe and love. “The unburnt.” No words were ever needed between them at this moment. At this point, only one thing could reassure them that each was there to stay. Together, forever. While previous movements were rushed and desperate, the
kiss now shared was slow and needy. One of reassurance as well as lust. Dany’s hands weaved into Jon’s dark hair, grabbing onto the thick strands.

Tongue dancing with hers, Jon moved to the tight, woolen dress still draping her form. Unbuttoning the clasps deftly, soon her skin was bare to him. Gods, the years had left her even more beautiful than before. “Dany.”

Her hands tugged on his breeches. “Off,” Dany said in a commanding, low voice. “Get them off, Jon.”

“Anything for my Queen,” he replied, stoking the flames of desire ever hotter inside Daenerys. Whatever clothes left on melted away, leaving them both naked and intertwined sensually. “I missed these, my dragon.” Jon smirked, kneading her breasts.

“Mmmmm, they missed you… oh Jon!” He had taken a nipple in his mouth, latching on like a newborn babe. Her fingers tangled in his hair. “Gods, don’t stop.”

Stop he didn’t. The two lovers lost themselves in each other. Bodies tangled together, they rolled around on the bed in their passion. After lavishing her breasts, Jon rolled back on top of her and stared into the amethyst eyes he loved so much. Her hair glistening in the low light of the crackling fireplace - she was breathtaking. “Dany. My queen.”

Daenerys ran a hand along his shoulder, marveling at the strong and virile man above her. His expression was one of rapture and love. “My King… please.” Fusing their lips together, Jon wasted no time in pushing inside her. Dany moaned into Jon’s mouth. ‘Yes! Fuck, yes!’ It had been so long, but worth it. Finally having Jon inside her, where he belonged. The one man she ever loved.

“Fuck, Dany,” Jun mumbled as they kissed desperately. He began to rock inside her, feeling her tight walls constrict around him. She was so wet, so desperate for him. Had Daenerys Targaryen demanded anything of him at this moment he would have given in. Such was the hold she had on Jon Snow. Breaking their kiss, he began to lick her neck, coaxing a deep moan that drove him wild.

The sensations made Dany see dragonfire. “Oh, oh, oh.” Her love was claiming her, making her his - she always was, even when Drogo and Daario shared her bed. They were nothing, compared to Jon Snow. Jaehaerys Targaryen. “Please. Harder, my dragonwolf.” Dany wouldn’t last long. Neither would Jon, both missing this so much. She pulled his hair back and resumed their hungry kiss. A scream echoed down his throat as Jon picked up the pace. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck.’ Her walls spasmed.

“Jon!” The flame enveloped her in warmth and pleasure.

Her climax triggered his, Jon feeling his seed empty rapturously into his Queen. They kissed the whole time, riding out their pleasure wrapped together. But soon the kiss was broken, both panting from the ride. Letting out a groan into the soft, flushed skin of his lover’s neck, Jon lazily rolled to the side. Acting quickly in the chilled room, he pulled the furs to cover the both of them. Dany breathed a happy sigh and curled up against him. Holding each other. Burying his face in her silver locks to inhale her scent. It felt so… right.

Basking in the afterglow of their lovemaking, Dany pressed her entire body to his under the covers. The warmth radiating off their skin banished the northern chill. She ached to be close to him in every way. “My dragonwolf, if you are to be a proper Targaryen King, there will be something you need to learn.”

“I already know how to ride a dragon, my queen.” The husky way he said it sent shivers down her spine. “Both types.”
Furrowing her brows, it took a moment for Daenerys to understand his innuendo. She flushed, smacking him on the chest. “Stop it.” Dany couldn’t help her laugh. It was just delightfully intimate and loving between them. “You’re going to have to learn Valyrian.”

“Will my tutor be you, or someone else?” Jon asked innocently. She peered up at him, curious. “I doubt you would find it honorable for me to try and distract someone else.” His voice was flat, but his grey eyes danced with amusement.

She smacked his chest. “Shut up.” They both smiled, Dany leaning up to begin a sensual, slow kiss - one of their shared love. Only for it to break upon his wide yawn. “Tired, my dragonwolf?”

“Ayyyyee,” he lazily drawled. “Battle does that to a person, my dragon.”

Snuggling into his chest, a feeling so long missed, Dany kissed his scar. “I love you, Jon. No matter where I was - the Great Grass Sea, Astapor, Meereen - I never stopped.”

Drowsiness overcoming him, Jon held her tightly. “I love you too, Dany. North of the wall, on those dark nights, you were the one thing that kept me alive. That kept me going.” The last thing he felt before the darkness of sleep coaxed him into it was the feel of Daenerys Targaryen’s smile against his chest.

Eyes sliding open, Dany peered into the darkness of the Lord’s bedroom. The fire had died sometime in the night and left the room quite cold. It was a foreign feeling to her, having lived all her life in warm climes. However, the thick blankets and something warm to nestle beside kept the chill at bay.

Through the low moonlight she stared at the sleeping form of her beloved. Daenerys softly cupped his cheek, Jon’s soft breathing causing her heart to catch. He was out cold, the exertions of the battle and their lovemaking draining even his youthful stamina. In sleep, the true heir to the Seven Kingdoms looked so peaceful. So relaxed and unburdened. Leaning up, Dany kissed his jaw. “My beloved.” No victory, no crown could compare to the feeling of being with Jon Snow. Once they were both reunited with the twins, her family would be complete.

Slowly, carefully, Daenerys inched her way out of the bed. Jon’s strong arm wrapped around her made it difficult. She managed however, instantly feeling both the cold and the loneliness - not to mention the soreness between her legs in which she grinned slightly at. Slipping her dress and Jon’s warm cloak over her nude form, Dany watched as Jon turned onto his side, hugging the pillow. “Mmmm, Dany,” he mumbled in his sleep. ‘Oh, my love.’ Even in his sleep he couldn’t stop thinking about her.

Stepping out of the door, Dany took one more look at her sleeping dragonwolf. She hated to leave him even for a moment, but there was something she needed to do.

Curling up by the door, Ghost’s furry white head quickly perked up when Dany entered the hallway. Better than any guard - a pony-sized direwolf. The silver-haired Targaryen ruffled his head, Ghost’s ears tilting back in relaxed delight. “Stay here, boy. Protect him for me.” The direwolf licked her hand. “I’ll take that as a yes.” Grabbing a torch mounted on the wall, Daenerys proceeded down the hallway.

Nearly five minutes later, Dany cursed in Valyrian under her breath. The corridors of Winterfell were tight and winding, unlike the spacious, airy passageways of the Great Pyramid of Meereen. ‘Is that the same lantern that I passed twice…’ Further curses tumbled out as she headed for a new corner, frustrated at the prospect of twisting and turning all night through the…
Twin gasps echoed, Dany turning the corner to nearly run into someone. Stepping back several paces, her fear dampened at the sight of red hair. “Lady Sansa.”

Breathing deeply, Sansa nevertheless recovered her bearings and curtsied - noble training kicking in. “Your Grace.” She couldn’t help but noticing Jon’s cloak around the Dragon Queen and what it signified. ‘Good, he deserves to be happy.’

A soft hand guided Sansa upright once more. “No need for formalities. You’re Jon’s sister. You may call me Daenerys.” This was the woman who would be her sister when she and Jon were eventually wed - the thought sent joy through her system.

The Dragon Queen was nothing like what Sansa had imagined Targaryens to be. Of course the conquering dragonrider showed up on the battlefield, but the vicious monster - like Viserys - was nowhere to be seen. Instead, the Targaryen before her was caring and loving. Someone she could tell was worthy of her beloved brother. It would take a while for her to open up, or to fully trust Dany as Jon did, but Sansa resolved she could try. “Alright, Daenerys. Please call me Sansa, in that case.” She smiled softly.

Dany returned the smile. Looking back at the corridor, she let out a defeated sigh. “I seem to have gotten lost.”

Imagining the great Daenerys Targaryen befuddled by simple corridors caused Sansa to giggle. “Believe me, if I didn’t grow up here I’d be hopelessly lost as well. Where are you heading?”

“To find my brother.” Dany scowled. “I need to see him.”

The scowl was returned by Sansa, any friendliness draining from her eyes. It… was so familiar to Daenerys. She had seen it in the mirror many times. Haunted. Bitter. “He’s locked up in the kennels with Ramsay. I’ll take you.” Side by side, the two women stalked through the corridors. Not a sound echoed but the flicker of torches and the soft patter of their boots. “Your brother, was he always such an asshole?”

Sansa’s blunt question caused Dany to snort. “Not always. He was very kind in youth, but years of poverty and blind ambition made him bitter. Cruel even.”

“Did he…” Sansa wasn’t sure why she was probing… perhaps she wanted someone who understood her pain. Jon and Robb loved her and would kill Ramsay if she asked, but they didn’t understand. “Did he hurt you?”

Dany closed her eyes, breathing deeply. “He used to, if I disobeyed or disturbed him. He’d also say how he would force me to bear his ‘pure’ children.” The memory hurt, but Dany steeled herself. She wasn’t that scared girl anymore.

“So did Ramsay.” Dany swiveled her head, shocked. ‘So that’s what it was.’ The silver-haired queen had known it was so familiar. “He… enjoyed it.”

“I’m sorry, Sansa.”

The redhead shrugged. “He’s going to die tonight, so it doesn’t matter. What really hurts is my family. Jon, Robb, and Rickon are alive, but Arya isn’t. Bran isn’t.” A tear fell from her cheek.

‘Bran, oh Gods…’ Dany had forgotten about him. “Your brother is alive.” Sansa’s eyes lit up. “Your mother… she arrived in Meereen. Bran was with her.”

A desperate hand clutched her arm. “Bran is alive, and coming here?”
“No.” Some of the excitement fell, but the relief was still there. “But he’s alive and well in Essos. It slipped my mind, but… I’ll tell Jon after.” They entered the snowy courtyard, Dany tightening Jon’s cloak around her.

Just as they were ten feet away from the kennels, Sansa tugged on Dany’s arm, holding her back. “Is there something else you haven’t told my brother, Daenerys?” She crossed her arms, scowling.

Biting her lip, Dany could tell that the northern woman could see right through her. They were alike, strong women born through hardship. It bequeathed to them a keen understanding of the other. She couldn’t hide this from Sansa. Given they were basically family, Dany didn’t want to.

“I’m waiting.” Her eyes were cold.

“Jon…” Dany sighed. “Jon has children.” Blue eyes widened, Sansa’s jaw dropping. She obviously hadn’t expected that. “After he left Pentos, I found out I was with child - I bore him twins.”

Sansa didn’t know what to say. She’d thought the Dragon queen would have had some political betrothal or a lover back in Essos, not that Jon would be a father. “Are you sure they’re his? You were married to the Dothraki leader.” It had been the talk of King’s Landing a month before Joffrey became king.

A wide, dreamy smile formed on Dany’s face. “They look so much like him.” The smile fell when she noticed Sansa still scowling. “With all that happened… it just didn’t seem like the right time to burden him.” Dany felt terrible, but with Jon’s nature she needed to tell him when he couldn’t panic or hate himself.

Opening her mouth to scold the Dragon Queen, Sansa shut up. The more she thought about it, Dany was right. Jon would brood and hate himself, and he needed his rest and happiness after the battle. “I understand… but you need to tell him tomorrow - or I will.” Her voice was as firm as Valyrian steel. The frown changed to a soft smile when Dany nodded. “I was an aunt all this time. What are their names?”

Joy filled Dany, imagining their father playing with them in Dragonstone - which would happen soon. “Rhaegar after my brother… and his father, and Arya after his other sister.”

Sansa chuckled. “I get his dragon and Arya gets his daughter. I guess I know where the pecking order stands.”

“The dragons are our children, Sansa. They are as much mine as the twins. By naming Sansenya, Jon shows how much he loves both his sisters.” The two smiled at each other, before a groan from the kennels caught their attention. “Shall we?” Sansa nodded decisively.

Blinking, lids heavy with pain and fatigue, Ramsay lifted his head. It felt as if a bag of stone was holding it down. Trying to wipe away the muck coating his face, his arms wouldn’t move. “What… the fuck…” They were bound He gazed around in the blurry surroundings. “Sansa?” There she was, standing in front of him - the Dragon Queen beside her. “So you’ve brought a guest, dearest wife.”

“You are a disgrace to our House, slut sister.” In a locked adjoining cell was Viserys. The cell happened to be the most rancid and shit-filled. It was clear they had been arguing for some time before he woke up. Spitting at her, Viserys did his best to look regal in the shit-lined cell. “First you rule over horse barbarians, and then slaves, and now you sully the bloodline with the bastard son of the Usurper’s dog and some Stormlands whore!”

It was obvious to Sansa that the Dragon Queen loved her brother, loved him desperately. Rumors of
her exploits in Essos and how Daenerys loved her people there - even those enslaved. One in particular came to mind, how she had the cruelest masters in Meereen crucified for doing the same to young slave girls. Sansa waited for the inner Dragon to release itself at Viserys’ insulting ways. ‘Gods know he deserves it.’

To her surprise, Daenerys’ lips morphed into dark smirk. Sansa raised an eyebrow. ‘Why does she… oh.’ She smirked as well. “You are mistaken, beloved brother, on the third. Jon is no bastard.”

“What are you talking about?” Viserys asked, rage clouded by puzzlement. Ramsay was listening intently.

Still smirking, Daenerys looked at Sansa, permitting her to do the honors. The former Lady of Winterfell eagerly took the task. “Jon is trueborn, the son of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen, your older brother and Crown Prince.” The sight of the paling Prince Viserys made her feel oddly content. “He is the true King of the Seven Kingdoms.”

“So you see, dearest brother, Jon is what you could never be. Both the best of blood - Valyrian nobility and the Kings in the North - and the best in leadership.” The Dragon Queen leaned close to the bars, violet eyes blazing dragonfire. She could tell he knew it to be true, by how he shook from the terror of his birthright ripped away. “You are nothing, compared to him. You are no Targaryen, no King.”

Silence reigned for what seemed like an hour. Suddenly a giddy laugh pierced the void. “Oh my Gods!” Had Ramsay not been tied to his chair, he likely would have bawled over in pure mirth. “You dumb, fucking cunt.” He hadn’t laughed so hard since torturing Theon Greyjoy. “You know, when I was planning on killing you as soon as I had a baby with Targaryen blood.” The train of thought was punctuated with even more laughter. Viserys stared at Ramsay, eyes wide as saucers at how deeply he had been deceived. “I thought no one could stand in front of me to take the Iron Throne. But there was one… the Stark bastard… and not even a bastard…” The giggles continued, eyes boring in on the two women. “I could die happy knowing that no matter what, my king, that you’ll never know one day of ruling.”

“Die happy, Ramsay?” Daenerys watched as Sansa’s satisfied smirk fell, facade returning. She scowled as well, looking at the man who nearly butchered her beloved. “Your House will die. Your name will be forgotten, a mere afterthought in the story of how the Starks and Targaryens reclaimed their realm. But if you insist…” Something dark swirled in those blue eyes. “I will oblige you.” Reaching for an axe handle, she hit the bars with a resounding clang.

Our trotted several large dogs, fur black and dark grey. They circled their master. Ramsay chuckled. “My hounds would never harm me.”

“You didn’t feed them for seven days, you said so yourself.”

“They are loyal beasts.”

“Valar Morghulis, Ramsay Bolton.” Dany watched as the dogs sniffed at him with the same righteous judgement that found the vicious masters crucified, ignoring his commands to heel. “All men must die, and the evil always pay the price eventually.” She was proven right when the dogs lunged forward, starved bites ripping at their master’s body.

Silently, the two women walked away, a bond forged between them. Huddled in the corner of his cell, Viserys closed his eyes, the screams and engorged barks ringing in his ears.
“Stop looking like you want to collapse drunk,” Walder Frey snarled at his two guards. It was dank in the empty great hall, flickering torchlight still leaving a dark pallor over the Lord of the Riverlands - he wasn’t looking forward to what he’d have to do to keep that title. “Seven fucking hells, after my idiot bastard killed off my best men, I have to walk around with you two cunts keeping the assassins off my back.” Though nothing would compare to the indignity of having to crawl back to Tywin Lannister now that the Bolton bastard and his Targaryen idiot failed.

“Yes, my Lord,” one guard murmured. The other stood mute.

At least Jon Snow couldn’t head south without the Twins. ‘And if the dragon bitch does anything, I’ll burn it all down.’ Perhaps making the Blackfish besiege his own castle would be in order. ‘I might have him watch as his nephew is gutted from the battlements.’ The prospect made the old Lord grin. “Where’s my dinner!” The grin didn’t last long.

Out scurried a servant girl with a plate in hand. “I’m sorry, my Lord.”

“About damn time,” Frey croaked, salivating at the steaming meat pie. “I’m bloody starving here, useless cunt.” The girl put it on his plate, placing a knife and fork behind it. “Where’s my damn son? If he’s putting his cock in some servant girl’s bumhole again…”

“He is here, my Lord.” The girl then said. A confused look crossed Walder Frey’s face before the girl pointed to the pie. “Right, here.” One guard leaned over in curiosity, the other still and mute. Pulling the crust aside, Frey uncovered a thumb amongst the ground meat.

Bile rose in his throat. “What…”

“It was hard to do,” the girl droned, “Grinding him up. He put up a fight, and his flesh was stringy. Then again, you Freys aren’t the healthiest of noble houses.” The curious guard moved to draw his sword, but the other drew a hammer far quicker and bashed in his skull. A thud resonated as the corpse fell to the ground, Frey’s eyes darting in panic between the surviving guard and the serving girl.

His eyes widened in terror when the girl reached for her chin and… pulled off her face. Underneath was a younger girl with short hair, wearing a small smirk of triumph. “My name is Arya Stark of Winterfell. I wanted the last thing you ever see, Lord Frey, to be a Stark smiling above you.” Attempting to flee, the guard behind Walder Frey gripped his shoulders tightly, holding him in place.

Without a shred of remorse or hesitation, Arya drew her blade and sliced across the Lord of the Riverlands’ throat. Blood spurted out, air sputtering from his lungs creating frothy red bubbles. Soon the struggles stopped, the last gasp of Walder Frey echoing through the hall at the height of his power.

Looking down at Arya, Gendry nodded. “Winter has come for House Frey.”

Arya smiled at her lover. “The north remembers.”
Feeling the sun’s rays stab through the window shades, Jon’s eyes fluttered open. Blinking away the grogginess, but once he did he couldn’t help the small smile on his face. Curled up next to him was Daenerys - his dragon - half on top of him and clutching his chest tightly. Gently stroking her back, Jon’s eyes raked over the naked form in his bed. She was so beautiful, so perfect. He felt blessed by the old gods and the new to have her beside him once more.

“It’s not polite to stare at your Queen.”

“Oh?” Jon smirked, watching Dany try to appear asleep and regal. Moving his hands to clutch her waist, Jon pulled her on top of him, earning a slight yelp. “Now you’re awake, my Queen.”

Yawning, Dany nuzzled her head on Jon’s chest. ‘The best pillow in the Seven Kingdoms.’ Gently, she kissed the scar over his heart - the injury that almost killed him. She resolved to kiss it at least once a day, remind herself that Jon wasn’t going anywhere. “I could get used to this.”

“And what would that be, my dragon?” Silver hair down and forming a halo around her face, she looked like an angel.

Running her hand along Jon’s jaw, Dany marveled at the kind, strong, honorable man she had fallen for. “Being with you. Blood of my blood. My one and only.” The father of her children… children he didn’t even know existed. “You need to tell him tomorrow - or I will.” Sansa’s words echoed in Dany’s mind. She didn’t plan on telling him about her visit to Viserys - too much for him to worry about. ‘But he needs to know about the twins. Our twins.’ Dany knew he’d be an amazing father. “Jon.”

“Mmmm hmmm?” Feeling randy, Jon was busy thumbing her nipples.

“Oh…” Dany willed herself to focus. “Jon… I have to tell you something.” While she loved his touch and his relaxed, loving attitude - a welcome change from his normal brooding and self-doubt - she had to tell him. “Stop.” Her hands grabbed his wrists, bringing them down.

“This must be serious,” Jon frowned.

“Did… did you ever hear any news about me in Winterfell or Castle Black?” She bit her lip.

“Not much. I knew some about the capture of Meereen, and that you had dragons after Rhaegal came to me, but that’s it. Why?”

Dany sighed. “When I was… with the Dothraki, I fell pregnant with twins.” She saw Jon’s eyes widen. ‘Out with it, Daenerys.’ “They are yours, Jon. You are a father.”

Of all that Daenerys could have told him, the fact that he had fathered children with her without even knowing it hadn’t been one he imagined. ‘Bastards named Snow… or Blackfyre.’ Ice formed in his veins. They had only slept together for a grand total of a few days, but in doing so he had fathered bastards. Something he had sworn never to do… to never burden any woman or any child with that disgrace.

“Jon… my love…” Dany gripped his chin. “Listen to your Queen. Don’t.” Tears threatened to form at the self-hatred on his features. “Please.”

“I fathered bastards…”
“No!” She kissed him, willing the thoughts away from his mind. “They are the legitimate prince and princess, my love. My children.” She took his hand and placed it over her belly, where the twins had once been. “Our children.” Her thumbs stroked his stubble-covered cheeks, feeling his tension slowly dissipate. “They know nothing but love, I promise.”

Looking at her, at Dany, Jon knew she told the truth - but it was still hard. Everything he had vowed… why he stayed a virgin for so long while Robb and Theon enjoyed their times in Wintertown, had been shattered. “I never got to see them. Dany… you know if I knew that I would have…”

“Yes, Jon. I know you would.”

“What are their names?”

“Arya and Rhaegar.” When Dany smiled and told him, Jon felt his heart clench. ‘Arya and Rhaegar. After my sister and father.’ Quite fitting, and names that showed how much Dany had loved him as far as they had been from each other. Catching his look of love, Dany slammed their lips together, the kiss quickly becoming heated.

Their tongues tangling together, Jon groaned as Dany’s lips trailed from his mouth to his chin and neck. “Dany… ahhh… can I ask you something?”

“You may, Jon Snow,” she purred, attacking his neck with licks and bites.

“Were you… ever betrothed to anyone in Essos?” It had been bothering him.

Not wanting him to dwell on it, Dany reached down to stroke his hard cock. “No.” She sucked on his pulse, smirking as his length twitched in her grasp.

Jon was about to lose control. “Well… I ask because, mmmm, you’ll need to make alliances.”

“Tyrion said the same, that marriage is the best tool.” Suddenly she understood where he was getting at. Amethyst eyes stared up at him. “Are you seeking a betrothal with me, Jon Snow?”

He nodded. “It would help with the North, my Queen.” In his brooding way, the betrothal was on the table.

Dany lunged forward and kissed him. ‘Yes, yes, yes.’ She poured every bit of love and emotion into the kiss. “I accept.” Grinning madly, the silver-haired queen kissed down his body. She had always wanted to do this to Jon - now her betrothed. “Let us celebrate, my King.”

Jon could have sworn his eyes rolled back into his head when Dany’s tongue licked a trail up his length. Tossing aside the furs, any concern about the cold was dashed by his need to see his betrothed. “Dany… gods.” Her violet eyes twinkled at him as she hungrily took the whole length into her mouth, bobbing up and down. Jon felt himself get closer and closer to release… and he needed to be inside her.

An unqueenly squeal left Dany’s lips as Jon hauled her back up to straddle his waist. The squeal turned into a luxurious, wanton moan when he slid inside her. “Fucking hells, Jon.” The coarseness of the Dothraki hadn’t left her vocabulary. Some highborn ladies were quite prudish. Not the mother of dragons. Grabbing Jon’s hands, she brought them to cup her breasts as she raised and lowered herself on his cock. Their eyes met. ‘Love comes in at the eyes.’“You feel so good inside me, my King.” Oh, how she loved him so.

The fire that she ignited within him made his Targaryen heritage feel far more apparent. Heat surged
between them as Jon began to thrust up, earning a scream from her. He was close, and wanted her to be close. “My Queen,” he breathed, pinching her nipples.

That did it. “JON!”

“Dany!” Grunting, he shot his seed deep inside his dragon, continuing to pound away to lengthen her release. She collapsed onto him, pushing her tongue into his mouth in a languid kiss. He pulled the furs back onto her trembling skin.

Mewling contently, Dany stroked the planes of his chest. Jon knew exactly how to turn her into jelly. How to give her the purest pleasure she had ever known. “I missed this so much.” Kissing his cheek, loving how his beard tickled her lips, Daenerys noticed Jon staring out at nothing in particular. “What are you thinking about, my King?”

Jon sighed. “I still can’t believe I’m a father - to children without wings and scales.” He kissed her forehead. “What… do they look like?” Emotion caused his voice to waver. The northerner hadn’t even seen them and he loved them already.

Her heart melted at how Jon asked about their children. Daenerys knew he’d be a wonderful father - it was one of the reasons she loved him so. “Rhaegar has my eyes and your hair, while Arya has my hair and your eyes. Otherwise, they look like a mix of both of us.” She rested her head on his chest, right over his scar. “They speak both Valyrian and the common tongue, precocious, strong, and kind at the same time. Myself, Lady Catelyn, Jorah Mormont - we told them about you, Jon. They love their father.”

“I want… I have to see them… but we can’t. Not yet.” There was just so much to do, to get the northern lords together and try with Sansa and Robb to get them to ally with the Targaryen queen. It hurt him, but Maester Aemon’s words came to mind. ‘Love is the death of duty.’

A small chuckle left Dany’s lips. It morphed into happy laughter at the puzzled look on her dragonwolf’s face. “Jon, my love, you do realize we have dragons.” Watching the realization come over him was quite amusing. Traveling across continents was far easier on dragonback. “Tyrion will probably want a meeting after he arrives between your advisors and mine. After that, we’ll leave.” She kissed him again. “Besides, I’ll need to coordinate things in Dragonstone anyway.”

“That you do.” Jon brought their lips back together - it started sweet, but their lack of clothes and intense desire led one thing to another. In no time they were kissing unabashedly, rolling around on the bed. “Do we have to rise this minute?”

Dany moaned. “Not yet… oh…” She moaned as Jon slipped back inside her. “I think we have some time.” Closing her eyes, Daenerys let her beloved King take her to the stars once more.

Cup clutched between his bony fingers, Pyat Pree placed it in front of Bran’s mouth. “You are quite the boy, Brandon of House Stark. Great magic resides within you. Not much is needed.” The shade of the evening only filled a fourth of what it would for any other warlock. As Bran drank it, his lips turned only the faintest shade of blue.

Finishing it, the grimace on Bran’s face refused to go away. “Couldn’t you stir some sugar into it or something?” Since King Xoro Xhoran Doxos granted he and his party both room in Qarth and the ability to study with the warlocks in the House of the Undying, the one thing that drove Bran insane was the foul drink.
“To do so would dilute its abilities, young Stark,” the warlock replied. “Now let us begin.”

Bran turned to Meera - she hadn’t really left his side since they arrived, given that Hodor now knew how to deal with Jojen’s affliction. “You can wait by the door if you want, Meera.”

“No!” Meera grabbed Bran’s shoulder, rooting herself in place. “I stay with him.” She didn’t trust the wraith-like warlock as far as she could throw him. He had ulterior motives - was hiding something. There was no doubt in her mind of this.

Said wraith-like face curled into a supposedly friendly smile - more like a malevolent sneer. “But of course. The magic is more powerful when proximate feelings of care and love exist. Focuses the soul.”

At the word ‘love,’ a blush formed on Meera’s tough exterior and she backed away from Bran, waiting patiently a few steps away.

Pyat Pree stepped forward and looked into Bran’s eyes. His face mere inches from Bran’s. “Trust in your power. Trust in the magic flowing within. Lose yourself in your vision…”

The voice of the chief warlock grew fainter and fainter. Blackness enveloped Bran’s vision, his eyes rolling back into his head.

Waiting amongst the scorched ground and ripped up trees was an old man - one Bran had seen countless times in his dreams. In his visions. The one thing about them he wouldn’t tell the warlocks, for what reason even he didn’t know. “Hello again, Brandon Stark.” The old man’s expression was one of a lifetime of pain, loneliness, and wisdom, but he looked genuinely pleased for Bran to be there. “Your time with me isn’t long, us being so far apart. We must make the most of it, then.”

Bran stepped toward him, gliding across the ground. “Who are you?” It wasn’t like before, when he hadn’t been crippled. Here everything just seemed surreal - as if he were floating.

A wistful smile crossed the old man’s lips. “In due time.” He pointed around him. “What do you see?”

Shuddering, Bran felt a dark chill fill his body - odd, since the day outside looked as hot as a day could be. It was soon clear why. What had once been a vibrant landscape had changed into a scene of death. Ash and bones littered the ground as far as the eye could see. Human bones. Ox bones. Giant skeletons of mammoth. All jumbled together. There were even fresh corpses and corpses in various stages of rot, vultures and rats picking at them. “Where are we?”

“The center of the world.” A massive horn sounded off in the distance, and it was then that Bran saw it. A towering structure, one that shouldn’t have been as massive as it was in such a small time. But there it loomed, casting much of the landscape dark in its shadow.

“King’s Landing?”

“Yes. Once great, now a den of great evil.” A massive ramp led up to the pyramid - stone faces enveloping the small mountain that served as its base - as it was slowly being erected. Thousands of slaves and dozens of plains mammoth hauled giant blocks of stone, thousands of other slaves putting them into place. “The mountain of the God-king.”

Seeing the gleaming golden statue atop the pyramid, Bran nodded, recognizing the face from long ago. “The head of the Chimera.”
Wiping a sheen of sweat off his brow, Sandor Clegane grimaced as a Faith Militant with a sadistic sneer smacked him across the back. “No slacking!” Clegane gritted his teeth and placed two hands back on the rope slung over his back - muscles strained as he added his strength to the thirty labor slaves dragging the massive stone block up the ramp of the pyramid. Five years before, the cunt militant would have had his head caved in by the Hound. Now…

“How you talked me into this I don’t have a fucking clue,” he growled at his companion, right next to him.

Beric Dondarrion laughed, humming happily as he helped pull the block. “What better place for the Lord of Light to take us than here.” Beric and Thoros of Myr had found Clegane after Arya Stark left him to die - and brought him back to the capitol. Thoros had a vision, apparently, while Beric said the best place to hide was in plain sight. Clegane didn’t believe in Beric’s insane ‘Red God,’ but the latter did make some sense even though he wouldn’t admit it. “Don’t you want to serve your god-King?”

Sandor just glared at him. ‘Serving that fucking cunt once was enough for me.’

A commotion halted the line, overseers rushing down the ramp. A mammoth tied to one of the massive stone hauls had collapsed. Its anguished cries told Clegane all he needed to know - it was dying, exhaustion and fatigue taking its toll. The overseers were having none of it, one of them bringing his whip down on the beast again and again. “Fuckin’ bastards,” he muttered under his breath.

“Didn’t take you for an animal lover.” Sometimes Beric’s teasing humor made Clegane want to kill him. It would be easy enough.

“Cruelty for cruelty’s sake is for cunts - like my brother.” When the Hound killed someone, he did it quickly.

The throng still blocked by the now dead mammoth, Faith Militant and Essosi overseers began grabbing up other slaves to help them unharness the beast. “So, what do the cunts say about Joffrey?” Clegane asked in a low whisper. He gestured to the procession nearing the base of the ramp, the Sept of the Chimera in the background. Guards, nobles, and high priests clustered marching in formation and the High Sparrow leading. In the center was a massive litter held aloft by hulking slaves. Meryn Trant and Qyburn, Master of Whisperers, walked on either side. Nestled within several layers of red and gold gauzy fabric was the god-King himself. At Beric’s look, the Hound shrugged. “Curious.”

Beric laughed again. “Some say he came from the stars. Others say that the gods themselves swept down from the heavens to place him in his mother’s womb.”

Clegane blinked before bursting out into a belly chuckle. ‘If they only knew…’ He spat on the dusty ground. “Fucking idiots. If that little shit came from the stars, then this,” he pointed to his burned skin, “Is a beauty mark.”

“You’ve always had a certain prettiness about you, Sandor,” Beric replied glibly, earning a death glare.

At that point, Meryn Trant hollered. “HAIL THE KING!” The slaves dropped to their knees, setting the litter to the ground. A great horn resounded, Brother Ansel Lannister blowing through the massive instrument whose boom could be heard clear to Dragonstone.

What happened next was conditioned into every living person in King’s Landing since it had been
decreed the year before. Driven in to a point where it was instinctive. Sandor and Beric scrambled off their knees and onto their bellies. Over one and a quarter million inhabitants - two hundred-fifty thousand slaves - prostrated themselves prone in a wide circle centered around the litter. Any that didn’t would be sacrificed to the god-King, which made for great motivation. Sandor found the whole thing insane, but he also did not want to die for Joffrey of all people. All but the rustle of the wind and the occasional grunt of a mammoth was heard once the horn fell silent.

Soon, the only one left standing was the High Sparrow himself. This alone signified him as one with the utmost power in the Realm of the Chimera, a high honor one wouldn’t have expected based on his homespun shift and unkempt features. Hands still crossed over his chest, the High Sparrow hurried over to the grand litter where his sovereign sat. He weaved through the knelt retinue and sovereign guards, squeezing between the bowed Qyburn and Meryn Trant. Penitent, the High Sparrow fell to his knees and shielded his eyes in the god-King’s presence.

A bony hand extended out, nudging aside the flimsy gauze. The fingers were tipped with golden fingerclaws styled after the great beast that was his sigil. Narrowed eyes scrutinized the monument ahead of him through the gauze and the veil of golden silk that draped his entire form. “Why aren’t they working harder?!?” snarled Joffrey.

Only the High Sparrow was permitted look at Joffrey directly. His hands remained in front of his face, eyes peering through the slits between his fingers. “What would you have me do, all Highest?”

A savage grin curled on Joffrey’s face, clawed hands forming a fist. “Sacrifice one!”

Nodding in understanding, the High Sparrow rose and scurried back to the head of the column. This had happened before, and his conscience had always been satisfied that the will of the Seven was being carried out by their child. The manifestation of their divine providence on a world so wicked. “The god-King is displeased with the lack of progress.” Impurity of the soul was to blame, and so the evil specters needed to be cast forth to reclaim purity. “Bring his Highest an offering.”

Clegane kept his head low, as did Beric. This had happened a few times before, and the sadists that comprised the Faith Militant and overseers always picked someone who’s head poked up…

“Her!”

Turning his head, Clegane watched as an overseer whipped through the cluster of slaves to reach a comely young woman. She started to shriek in terror as the Faith Militants hefted her up and carried her to the side of the ramp. “Oh Holy Seven, at the command of your child on this Earth, we seek your forgiveness and grace with this offering.” The High Sparrow raised his arms. And such was the last Sandor saw of the girl, her mouth open in a scream of terror as the Militants tossed her over the side. Screams that ended with a sickening crunch.

One sharp blow of the horn brought everyone up - back to work as Joffrey’s party headed back to the Red Keep. “Another day in King’s Landing,” Beric quipped.

“Fuck King’s Landing,” spat Clegane, grabbing his hold on the rope.

“Twin children, a boy and a girl?” Once Jon knew the secret wasn’t one that needed to be kept within the little family. Sansa found out Jon knew, so she told Robb. Jon told Davos, the Lady Melisandre heard it from somewhere, and Robb had obviously told Margaery. “Your three dragons are famous the world over, but the future of House Targaryen isn’t? I find that odd.”
Dany laughed - the Rose of Highgarden had a way of making one like her. Along with Sansa, the three were quickly growing close in the three days since having arrived at Winterfell. “I make sure they stay out of the spotlight for now. The dragons can protect themselves, obviously. My twins… not till they’re older.” The Dragon Queen had experience detecting manipulators from the genuine article and, at least in this case, Margaery Tyrell was the latter. She had lost just as much as herself or Sansa had.

The three of them waited in the courtyard, servants and bannermen rushing about for the impending arrival of Daenerys’ entourage. “Jon must have been elated, though it’s hard to imagine him without a brooding scowl on his face.” Margaery mimed one, and it was quite close. A small laugh was shared by all, in innocent fun. One never knew when it could all go to seven hells.

“He never wanted children,” Sansa said once the laughter died down. “Never thought anyone would love him enough to marry him.”

Margaery frowned, looking at where the object of their discussion stood, arguing with Robb and Davos over something. “He’s a good catch, apart from being a bastard… not that it matters anymore. If he truly is going to be King in the North, then he’d make a great choice for you, Daenerys.”

“Yes he would,” Dany replied, beaming. “And one was already made.” The three women shared matching smiles, muted as though Sansa’s was. It would take a while for her to open up fully, though Dany was glad of the bond they had forged. “I presume something between you and the other Stark brother will be brewing? A match between the North and the Reach is quite desirable.”

A blush formed on Margaery’s face. It wasn’t just news of Jon and Dany sharing a room that had gone through the rumor mills of Wintertown. Dany had heard of the other coupling talked about when she, Sansa, and Margaery visited the smallfolk in the village the previous day. “We haven’t gotten that far, yet. But I’m sure grandmother is plotting something.”

“Olenna is both scary and one to admire,” Sansa replied, a sentiment the other two ladies shared.

From the tower blared a horn. “Column approaching! Targaryen banners!” At once the entire courtyard moved into rows in order of importance - quite the deja vu for many. This time, however, Jon was in the front. Dany slid by his side, hand finding his underneath their cloaks.

The reunions were cordial and pleasant in some respects - Tyrion and Jon sharing quips like old comrades - and heartfelt in others. The three Stark children all embraced their mother immediately, Catelyn falling to tears at the sight of little Rickon, who she long thought dead. Things became tense when she and Jon locked eyes, though Jon’s honor and her deep curtsey diffused much of it… for now at least.

Dismounting from her horse, Missandei quickly found her Queen - who immediately hugged her. “My queen, I am profoundly glad that you are alright. I was gravely worried.” Eyes darted to Ghost, slightly fearful of the white beast. ‘First the dragons and now this…’

“No need, Missandei. I have my dragons.” Daenerys grinned. “All of them. Plus Ghost here.” The large direwolf nuzzled against Dany’s side. “He is harmless, I assure you,” Dany said, seeing her aide relax. Both their gazes were drawn back to Jon Snow, who was currently conversing with Robb, Sansa, and Catelyn in hushed tones.

The translator did not miss the deep longing in her Queen’s gaze. She turned her head back to the enigmatic northerner. “If it is within my place, your Grace, I understand what you see in Jon Snow.” Inspecting eyes did a once over, and liked what they saw. “He is… quite handsome.” Missandei’s gaze then fell on Robb Stark. “Perhaps it is a trait of the men of House Stark.”
Dany chuckled. “Oh yes.” Jon’s northern looks never ceased to light dragonfire in her core. “Wait, I thought something happened between you and Grey Worm…?” It wasn’t hard to realize the two were captivated with each other - even given the Unsullied Commander’s dourness.

“Many things, happened,” smirked the translator, blushing.

The smirk was returned. ‘Oh, I love when Jon does those things…’ “But then why the wandering eyes for Robb Stark?”

“There is an old saying on Naath, Khaleesi. A person can never be too old or too in love to look. Besides, he only has eyes for the Tyrell woman.” Laughing with Missandei, Daenerys had to admit it made sense. The Starks had attractive northern features about them, and for Robb and Sansa - Rickon too - their Tully blood made for a nice combination. But Jon… she shuddered with desire as he looked at her with a small smile. ‘The things that man does to me.’ Dany smiled back when Jon bade farewell to his siblings and began trudging towards her.

Reaching the two women, Jon bowed slightly. “Lady Missandei, welcome to Winterfell.” He could tell that she was important and loyal to Dany, and thus had no problem in his mind.

“Thank you, Lord Snow. And thank you once more for protecting Queen Daenerys.” For the woman that freed her from bondage, Missandei would owe everything to.

Dany stifled a laugh at Jon’s taciturn look. “I think she protected me, rather. The Queen is a remarkable woman.”

“That she is.” Missandei already liked Jon Snow. ‘He compliments Daenerys well.’

Turning back to Dany, Jon adopted his leader mask. “Lord Tyrion wants to call a strategy meeting before, and I quote ‘I get hopelessly drunk after two days’ riding.’” Dany rolled her eyes. It sounded like Tyrion alright.

“I’ll find my way there, Khaleesi.” Missandei headed for Catelyn Stark, eyes twinkling at providing the lovestruck pair another moment alone.

Slipping in next to him, Daenerys looked at Rhaegal. He had just began to wake up, jaw opening in a large yawn that made her giggle. The queen was in a purely good mood for the first time in forever and wasn’t letting go of it. “You don’t know how happy it makes me.”

“What?” It took a moment for Jon to realize she was talking to him.

Smiling, Dany looked at Jon. “To see Rhaegal is safe.” She wrapped her arms around his neck - once all the northern lords arrived, it would be a while till they could be openly affectionate. “To see you bonded with him.”

Jon gave a sheepish, modest look, shrugging. “The dragon saved me from some tough scrapes, and I him.” He knew she needed to know about the injuries he sustained from the Night King, but that was best served all at once at the meeting.

“You are his rider, Jon. That is no usual bond.” Just then, Rhaegal roared and took off, replaced in the Winterfell courtyard by his larger brother. Looking for his mother and rider, Balerion roared louder and deeper, drawing all attention. He stopped in front of Jon menacingly, sizing up the newcomer. Dany watched, terrified something might happen, but relaxed slightly when Jon stood his ground. The mighty Dread Reborn never harmed Arya and Rhaegar, and from the way he peered at Jon wasn’t about to harm their Targaryen father.
Fearless - well… mostly fearless - Jon slowly placed his hand on Balerion’s snout. He had done this with Rhaegal hundreds of times, but for the larger and more imposing dragon… Growling, large nostrils sniffing the new human, Balerion grunted and then darted his tongue out to lick Jon’s face. A roar then bellowed out as he took to the sky to find his brothers.

Jon stood there, face covered in slobber. “What just happened?” He began to wipe his face clean.

Stunned for a moment, slowly a wide smile curled onto Dany’s face as she approached Jon. “He loves you.” Laughing joyously, the dragon queen threw her arms around him. “He barely even lets Missandei touch him. Aside from me, the only ones Balerion loves are our twins… and you, my beloved dragonwolf.” If there was a need for yet another sign that they were meant to be, this was it.

Chuckling, Jon kissed her. “Shall we, my Queen?” He extended his hand for her to take.

Pale hand slipping within his, Dany nodded. “Lead the way.”

Stepping through the courtyard, a thought came to Jon once they reached the stairs. A thought that twisted his insides. ‘What if she doesn’t believe me about the dead?’ He doubted most would… hell, Robb was a northerner, and it took him seeing the Night King at Hardhome to realize the threat was real. For someone that hadn’t stepped one foot in Westeros her whole life… ‘Tyrion didn’t believe it when Benjen told him.’

What would happen if Dany didn’t believe him? Didn’t believe Robb, Margeary, or Davos? After all they were to each other, after their unofficial betrothal, only to lead to a schism between the North and the Targaryen forces. Whether it was decided to take on Joffrey first, or the Army of the Dead, to have Dany not even considering the threat of the dead would be too disastrous. Even with the Riverlands and the Vale he didn’t have enough men. Not nearly enough. Jon had to convince her - he had to.

Daenerys moved to enter the planning room when she was tugged back. She was met by Jon’s intense gaze, grey eyes swirling with a silent plea. “Jon, wha…” Her words were cut off.

“I need you to promise me something, Dany. Promise that you’ll trust me in there.”

“Oh, of course, Jon. Why wouldn’t I…”

“No, I need you to trust me.” Voice low, he was begging. “In there you will hear unbelievable things, and I need to know that you’ll believe me.” Jon cupped her cheek, willing to see implicit trust in her lovely features. “Please.”

Heart clenching, close enough that her forehead leaned against his, Dany knew that her dragonwolf would never lie to her. “I promise, Jon.” Relief crossing his face, he brought their lips together in a sweet kiss. Hands weaved tightly together, he threw open the thick, wooden door and led her inside.

The cluster of men and women all stood from their seats as the Queen and the leader of the Army of the North walked in. Jon immediately noticed the table had been replaced with a large map-table of Westeros. ‘For Ramsay and Viserys to plot their conquest of the Seven Kingdoms,’ he thought bitterly. It wasn’t a worry now - though there were far bigger worries for all of them. Taking a seat at the head of the table, Jon immediately missed Dany’s closeness when she rounded to the opposite end. It was for the best since they were still officially two different sides in the great Game of Thrones, he conceded.

Dany looked at each of the men and women in the map room. All of a sudden - lost in the chaos of battle and elation in being with Jon again - the weight of it all had descended upon her. An errant
hand glided along the lines representing her homeland. The homeland she hadn’t set foot on since she was but a baby. Her eyes fell on Jon once more. ‘Together, we will conquer the Seven Kingdoms. My beloved and I.’ “So, shall we begin?” On one side sat Catelyn, the Blackfish, Tyrion, Missandei, Olenna Tyrell, and Ser Davos. On the other rested Sansa, Robb, Margaery Tyrell, Tormund, and Lyanna Mormont. In the corner, on a plain stool, sat the Lady Melisandre. Quiet, but her piercing eyes seeing all.

“If I may, your Grace.” Tyrion, drumming his hands on the table, looked at Jon and then at his Queen. “When Queen Daenerys told me of her plan to send her forces to the North, I was skeptical of how any ruler of the North would bend the knee - even to one he loves. However, new developments... “ It was unsaid as to what those were. Everyone at the table knew of it and could be trusted to keep the secret. “…have made that whole business irrelevant.”

“One cannot expect the northern houses to fully bend the knee to a Targaryen,” Sansa voiced. “I’m not trying to insult you, your Grace, but that is a fact - considering our history.”

Daenerys nodded. “I take no offense, Lady Sansa. While I seek to reclaim my family’s birthright, I do not wish to subjugate the North as my brother did.” She looked at Jon, both warmth and a steely determination in her eyes. A dragon, menacing and passionate at the same time. “The real threat is Joffrey Baratheon and his rule to the south, the North being an ally that I need. As a result, Lord Snow and I have contracted a betrothal as a signal of my good intentions.”

Whispers broke out, some a bit shocked though Jon noticed his siblings and Margaery silently congratulating him in their own way. “We plan on announcing it openly once all the Northern Lords arrive, but we feel that our trusted advisors deserve to know.”

Catelyn Stark couldn’t meet her Queen’s gaze - her chamber had been right next to the lord’s chamber, and she had heard every sound. “It would have been better to discuss this before...”

“Oh do shut up,” Olenna remarked offhandedly. “I highly doubt that you didn’t consider the probability of this from the beginning, Lord Tyrion.” Not one for bullshit, the Queen of Thorns.

“Right, my apologies.” The Imp knew when he had been bested in the game of wit. “This betrothal is the right thing for our cause, but it means little in the scheme of things because Jon has no title.” At Daenerys’ frown, he clarified. “For such a marriage to have the unifying ties that we hope for, at the very least Lord Snow needs a Lordship… preferably, given the northern antipathy towards the Targaryens, his own Kingdom.”

“Yes.” Lyanna Mormont spoke firmly, almost like a younger version of the Tyrell matriarch. “We northerners are proud and will not submit in the face of what the Mad King did to Lord Rickard Stark - I’m not sure I could.” She looked in the direction of Daenerys.

“I wouldn’t ask you to overlook it, Lady Mormont.” Dany admired her spunk.

Nodding in thanks, Lyanna continued. “I don’t care what name he is. The north needs an equal to represent us and he is it. He must be King in the North. If you, Queen Daenerys, accede to him being proclaimed such, the Northern houses will stand behind you in the coming fight.”

For someone who had fought living corpses, who had marshalled an army of dragons and giants, it stood to reason that nothing could truly hit Jon with disbelief - but this did. ‘King in the North?’ Daenerys stared at him intently, no doubt imagining them ruling to world together. It seemed so surreal to Jon, though. He barely wanted to be Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. Now they were discussing him ruling over the whole of Westeros and leapfrogging to that by taking the Crown of Winter...
“Securing the North will allow us to march for King’s Landing immediately.”

“The Reach and Dorne should be rallied to our side.”

“We have to take Joffrey at once.”

Hearing the various proposals from Dany’s political advisors, along with those by his own that were not at Hardhome with him focused Jon’s soul. None of this mattered. Kings and oaths and Houses, it all meant nothing with the survival of humanity on the line. He knew his priorities - and the pettiness only made him angry.

A resounding smack echoed in the room from where Jon slammed his fist against the wood. It was shocking, given the normally cool and calm demeanor of the dour northerner. Many seemed to think him mad. Daenerys saw something different - something that filled her with joy. ‘Don’t wake the dragon,’ as her brother always said. He wasn’t a dragon, but her beloved was. “This means nothing. We must focus on the true enemy to the north.”

Tyrion blinked. “True enemy to the north… you just defeated the true enemy to the north and he rots in Winterfell’s dungeon. Joffrey, on the other hand, is both alive and in possession of a massive army. He will stop at nothing until our heads are mounted on pikes outside the Red Keep…”

“Every man, woman, and child on this earth will die by the end of winter if we don’t fight the Dead!”

A moment’s silence ensued, half of those present puzzled and the other half grimly determined. His love was - sadly for him - among the former. “I’m sorry, Lord Snow,” Missandei said. “But is that a figure of speech… or a euphemism?”

“Not a euphemism, Lady Missandei. I’ve seen the Army of the Dead. The Night King is real. The Long Night was real and it will happen again once the dead cross the Wall.”

“Oh not this again.” Tyrion laughed, rolling his eyes. “First your uncle at Castle Black and now you. I know you fought north of the Wall, Jon Snow, but we don’t have time to believe in myths and legends…”

“Lord Tyrion.” Jon had opened his mouth to retort, but Dany had spoken first. “Do you consider my betrothed to be trustworthy?”

Tyrion blinked. He hadn’t expected his queen to challenge him directly - though he should have. “He was raised by Ned Stark, so I would.”

Daenerys sighed. She found it hard to believe as well, but the vision from long ago - after her labor with Arya and Rhaegar. It haunted her, matching exactly what Jon had just said. Ice crept along her skin. Even her innate dragonfire couldn’t banish it.

“The Night King is real, I’ve seen it.” Davos stood with his leader. “So has every one of the Free Folk, Lord Robb, and Lady Margaery.”

Jon had to make them understand. “He will destroy everything. Targaryen, Stark, Lannister, or Baratheon, names mean nothing to him - just more meat for his army. Only fire, dragonglass, and Valyrian steel can destroy them, which is why your dragons are so important.” Even then, everyone looked skeptical… even Daenerys.

“It is not hard to understand that men tend to disbelieve what they do not see… or wish not to see.” Formerly quiet, all eyes turned to Melisandre. “The prophecy foretold of the Prince that was
Promised, and of a Princess that will ride alongside him to the ultimate victory.” She walked around the table, her eyes deep and piercing. “I knew from the moment I saw him that Jon Snow… Jaehaerys Targaryen was this Prince, and from her triumphant entry onto the battlefield, Queen Daenerys was destined to be his companion through the Long Night. Certainty comes rarely, but for this I am certain.”

“I’m certain you do believe this, Lady Melisandre,” Tyrion began. “But…”

A curt laugh from Jon interrupted. “I’m sorry Lord Tyrion. I just remembered my father once saying that everything said before the word ‘but’ is ‘horseshit.’” Chuckles and stifled snickers echoed through the room - Sansa, Robb, the Blackfish, Olenna, and even Daenerys amused at the quip.

Tyrion, a man of great humor, laughed. “A wise saying, so I will get to the point. Belief in these intangible points is one thing, and I do find you trustworthy Jon Snow, but concrete knowledge is another. My nephew is a monster, and his goal is to rule over Westeros as a living God. He’s surrounded by a new High Septon that essentially stokes this behavior. Before long he will destroy this entire land if we don’t stop him. Only the Dragon Queen can stop him, and we must concentrate on that above all else!”

Looking around the room, and then to Dany, Jon allowed for a pregnant pause. Turning back to Tyrion, he locked eyes with the dwarf. What he then said made ice course through Dany’s veins. “If we don’t deal with the Army of the Dead, then she’ll be the Queen of a graveyard.”

One could hear a pin drop in the map room. Dany stared at Jon, the icy chill soaking even the thick Night’s Watch cloak she still possessed. ‘Could this Army of the Dead be real?’ Even for someone who hatched dragons it seemed so far fetched. ‘Jon begged you to promise to believe him.’ Daenerys had seen the earnestness, the desperation in Jon’s eyes prior to entering the room. He would never lie to her.

She would rather it be a lie. The prospect of facing both the second Mad King and an army of ice monsters was daunting to say the least.

It was Sansa that broke the heated, accusatory silence. “The Wall will serve as enough protection until the other lords arrive. Joffrey’s army is likely still in Dorne and will take months to move into position. We have the time to adequately determine which threat is more pressing.”

“Agreed,” replied the Blackfish, both he and Catelyn impressed of how resolute the young girl was. A Stark’s fortitude and a Tully’s cunning. “The Vale mountains and Riverrun will anchor us against a Lannister assault. I’ll secure it and make sure the Freys get what they deserve.” Fists clenched, Brynden Tully exited the room - soon, the others followed suit, leaving just Jon and Daenerys.

Seeing her staring at the thick line representing the Wall, Jon rounded the table to stand next to his betrothed. “So do you believe me, Dany?”

Daenerys closed her eyes, fingers tracing the Wall symbol. “Yes, though I don’t want to.”

“Neither do I.” Drawing her silently into his arms, Jon placed a kiss on her forehead. ‘I will keep her safe,” he thought. ‘Be it Joffrey or the Night King, I will not let them hurt Dany or my family.’

Lacing up the rope that served to keep his trousers from falling around his ankles, the Hound returned from the privy to find someone curled in his cot. “Hey, buddy. That’s my cot.” He always served to ask nicely the first time…
“Fuck off. First come first serve.” Sandor’s lips curled in disgust. ‘Dornish cunt.’ In the communal slave pens dotting the plains west of King’s Landing that housed about two thousand each, only one hundred or so cots and hammocks had been distributed. The man was right, they were first come first serve… technically. There was a reason this one was the property of Sandor Clegane, and it was always the recent arrivals from Dorne or Astapor that didn’t realize it.

‘Seven Hells, and to think I had a good two weeks.’ “I’m gonna ask you one more time, get your ass out of my cot, or I’ll make you wish ya did.” A group of about three dozen were already crowding around to watch the coming show.

The Dornish newcomer didn’t get the message. “What part of fuck off do you not understand?” His back remained to Clegane.

“Well,” Sandor replied in a glib tone. “I did ask nicely.” Growling, he hefted the bastard up into his arms, holding the now cursing and writing man high above his head. “Enjoy.” Without fanfare he dumped the squatter onto one of the roaring firepits, backing away quickly to avoid the hated flames. It took a moment for the Dornishman to regain his composure, but soon he was screaming and scrambling to get out of the flames before they burned him too severely.

Whistling, Sandor plopped back into HIS cot. “I tried to warn him,” Thoros of Myr said from the cot to Clegane’s left.

“Dornish are all the same,” Sandor grumbled. “At your throat or at your feet. You’d think after Tywin crushed them all that they’d learn, but no such luck.”

“You have a gentle bedside manner, my friend.”

Cocking his eyebrow, Clegane stared at his somewhat acquaintance. “Why so cheerful, Thoros? I expect it from Dondarrion, but not from your scraggly mug.”

Thoros snorted. ‘I’m offended. I’m usually quite cheerful.’ ‘Beric is right.’ The Hound’s scowl was amusing. “But yes, I did manage to gain release.”

That was surprising to Sandor. Not the dirty innuendo, but what it actually meant. ‘Release… he managed to conduct an escape.’ ‘Where?’

The former knight turned secret priest grinned. “To the one promised.”

Ruffling his brother’s shaggy hair, Jon hugged Rickon tightly. “Do take care of yourself. Listen to the maester’s lessons, alright?”

“Don’t leave, Jon.” The youngest Stark - barely young enough to handle the trauma of the last six years - hadn’t taken the idea of Jon heading to Dragonstone very well. “I don’t want to lose you now.”

Hugging him again, Jon pointed to the three milling dragons. “See those there. They’ll make sure I get to come back, alright?” Tears in his eyes, Rickon nodded and kept his composure. “Now run off to your mother.” It was best that he not stress himself, and once he was gone Jon turned to Robb.

“You’re the Lord of Winterfell again, Robb. Take care of the place and make sure the ravens go out to the other Northern houses.”

“You can count on it.” The already had houses Hornwood, Mazin, and Mormont as well as the Vale lords and Brynden Tully. Once the rest arrived it would be time to unite against the common
enemies. “I’ll keep you informed on when Sam and Aemon arrive from Castle Black.”

Jon nodded. Looking at Sansa, he hugged her last. “I’ll watch over the little ones, brother,” she said warmly. For some reason, the young dragons were the most agreeable with Sansa - aside from their mother and father of course. “And I’ll keep the lord’s chamber well kept when you return.”

The former Lord Commander looked puzzled. “It’s rightfully Robb’s, or yours. I couldn’t…”

“You are a Stark, Jon,” Sansa said with sincerity. “You have just as much wolf as dragon.”

“Don’t sell yourself lightly brother. The battle would have been lost without your fortitude.”

“Daenerys and the knights of the Vale…”

“Had Ramsay held his hoplites back, they could have butcheted the charging knights. An the scorpions would have been hell on Daenerys’ dragons.”

Jon didn’t know where Sansa got her military knowledge, but it was spot on. ‘The knights of the Vale…’ “Can we trust Littlefinger? He is heading back to King’s Landing.”

“We can’t trust him fully,” she replied after a moment’s thought. “But we’d be fools to think of him as a pawn of Joffrey either.” A thought popped in Sansa’s head. “Jon, before you leave. A raven came from the Citadel. A white one. Winter is here.”

Feeling the snowflakes hit his skin, Jon laughed softly. “Father always promised, didn’t he?” The three Starks shared wistful, fond smiles of the man now gone - it was in this form that Daenerys approached them. She was dressed in her riding finery, and Jon’s cloak.

“Thank you,” she said to her two soon to be siblings. “For all that you’ve done for myself and my retinue.”

“It should be us that thank you, your Grace,” said Robb, bowing his head slightly. Sansa nodded as well. “Tell our niece and nephew their aunt and uncle love them.”

Dany beamed at the two Starks. “Of course.” Taking Jon’s hand, she led him to the waiting dragons. “I’m glad they’ve warmed up to me.”

“I told you, my Queen,” Jon replied. “They are your family now.”

Kissing his cheek, Dany broke off to head to Balerion. A grin formed on her lips - the queen was certain Jon’s eyes were rooted to her backside. “Dragons know commands from their riders, but will better respond to Valyrian.”

“And what Valyrian word do you say to get them to fly?”

Dany climbed atop the red-black dragon as a Dothraki warrior would mount a horse. ‘To get them airborne, ‘Sōvēs.’ You can use ‘Valahd’ for if you want them to go faster in the air.”

Jon furrowed his brows, standing next to Rhaegal’s large shoulder. “Sōvēs,” he mused out loud. He was sure he butchered the beautiful Valyrian command. From the rapidly forming smile and amused glint in his love’s eye, Jon knew he had. “I didn’t butcher it that badly.”

“You did, with that Northern accent of yours.” Dany laughed merrily, taking pleasure in these sweet moments with her dragonwolf. She slid onto Balerion, hearing him growl contentedly from the contact with his mother.
Settling in on Rhaegal’s back, Jon leaned forward and rubbed his neck. “Ready, boy?” The green dragon hooted in response. “I hope you are, cause I don’t know if I am.” The former Lord Commander had ridden Rhaegal before - plenty of times - but aside from his first flight over the wall with Tormund, Sam, Gilly, and Little Sam he had kept it at low altitude to familiarize himself with dragonback riding. Crossing much of Westeros was another thing entirely…

Casting a look across to Balerion, Jon caught Dany’s eyes. She smiled at him. A smile of pure, unadulterated love. Jon still couldn’t believe it. The most desirable, unattainable beauty on the earth had fallen for him. Fallen for Jon Snow back when he was nothing but the unwanted bastard of Winterfell. ‘If she could love me and trust me, then I can trust myself.’ Another hoot left Rhaegal’s throat, joined by Balerion and Edderon. His children comforting him.

“Ready, Jon?” Dany yelled out to him.

“Aye.” A roar boomed across the snowy fields as Balerion charged into the air, Edderon right after. He looked toward Rhaegal’s face. The dragon turned his head back to look at his rider. “Sōvēś.” Gripping the neck spines tight, it served him well when Rhaegal lurched into the sky.
If there was any advantage in having wolfblood mixed with that of the dragon, Jon knew it had to be his adaptation to the cold climes of the north. Now, high above in the clouds with hands wrapped tightly onto Rhaegal’s neck, the skies were not so different to the swirling snows of Winterfell winter. The same chill. The same blistering wind. All were alike, and Jon’s hardy northern blood made him suited for it.

Gazing across the expanse of air, bits of wispy clouds separating them, was his beloved. Straddling Balerion with the ease of an expert, Daenerys looked breathtaking. The consummate Targaryen Queen more at home on dragonback than anywhere else. ‘Well, perhaps more at home in our bed,’ Jon couldn’t help but think. Regal and fiery, the perfect combination in both ruling and intimate life. ‘Gods, I love her.’

Her head turning, she met his gaze and smiled, pointing down. Sure enough, the sparkling waves were crashing against a rather large island. ‘Dragonstone.’ Where his ancestor Aegon the Conqueror planned his invasion of Westeros. ‘Down, boy.’ Roaring - twin roars coming from his brothers - Rhaegal descended rapidly. The green fields grew bigger and bigger the faster he descended, Jon involuntarily bracing for an impact… that never came. At a last gasp the green dragon flapped his wings with a powerful gust, arresting his descent until it was no more than a thud on the ground.

Compared to Dany’s graceful slide down Balerion’s shoulder, Jon’s dismount was more of a barely-controlled fall. Merry laughter rang behind him. “Don’t laugh. Before now I’ve only ridden Rhaegal once at above tree height.” His cheeks flushed red.

Seeing the blush, Daenerys thought it was adorable. ‘My Dragonwolf, not so dour after all.’ “You did amazingly, Jon.” Hugging him, she felt Jon relax as she kissed his cheek. “You have the blood of Valyrian dragonriders in your veins. All you need is practice.”

“Most likely,” Jon replied, kissing her on the lips. Pressing against her lithe body sure did wonders for the chill still in his system.

Heavy breathing drew Jon’s attention, and sure enough there was Rhaegal. His slit eyes gazed at him. If the beast had been human Jon would have identified it as the way he used to look at his father. Behind, both Balerion and Edderon hooted, sort of like Robb and Arya trying to get him to join in a game. Chuckling - Daenerys smiled at the sound of Jon’s laughter, finding it refreshing and beautiful - Jon petted the dragon’s nose. “Go be with your brothers.”

Snorting, Rhaegal turned to Daenerys - who did the same. He then hooted back, the three dragons lifting off into the air together. “He has a strong bond to you, my love,” Dany said, resting her arm over his shoulder and leaning on it. “No wonder he travelled across the seas to find you.”

“Yes.” Jon felt it could be from enduring near death at the hands of the Night King, but did not want to hurt Dany with such a memory. She was spooked about the White Walkers already.

“Khaleesi?” Both turned to see several people and a troop of Unsullied guards arriving at the cliff face. In the van was Jorah Mormont. “I take it the battle was won, then?”

“Yes, a close run thing,” Dany said. “But a victory. We have an alliance, the North, the Vale, and the Riverlands… more or less.” Turning to the Unsullied, she began speaking in Valyrian. Jon didn’t follow, though he planned on asking Missandei to teach him as soon as they returned to Winterfell. A Targaryen that didn’t know Valyrian was the same as a Stark who couldn’t walk in the snow.
Shifting his eyes, Jon was then face to face with Ser Jorah. “You served at the Wall, with my father, yes?”

“Jorah Mormont.” Jon knew who this man was at first glance. He looked just like the Old Bear. “I was his personal steward. He was a great man.”

Jorah’s eyes glassed over, the hardened knight seeing fond memories flashing before his eyes. “My father… he no longer lives, does he?”

“No.” Jon shook his head, sharing Jorah’s sense of loss. Jeor Mormont had been his mentor, a hero in his eyes. “He died bravely, trying to save his men. Lyanna now rules Bear Island.”

“Maege’s daughter? Knowing her, Lyanna’s probably a spitfire.” Jorah grinned.

“That is an understatement.” Seeing the knight’s eyes falling to the sword strapped to his hip, Jon place his hand on the pommel. “I saved his life, from a monster. He gave me his sword, Longclaw, that was supposed to go to his heir…”

A raised hand stopped him. “If my father thought you should have it, then as his son I must respect it. I brought disgrace to House Mormont, and the man who won the heart of Daenerys Targaryen has proven himself far worthier of the sword than I could ever be.” The two nodded simultaneously, one northerner to another. High honor, the way of their land.

Finished speaking with Daenerys, the stone-faced Essosi stepped forward. Jon felt he wouldn’t want to face this one in battle. “You Jon Snow.”

“Aye. You must be Greyworm.”

Greyworm nodded. “Thank you for protecting Queen Daenerys. You have gratitude from I.”

Jon shrugged. “I’d say it was she that protected me, but thank you.”

Cutting in, laughing, Dany grabbed Jon’s hand. “Come, Lord Snow. Time to meet the Prince and Princess.”

Feet clattering along the grey floors, Jon ran his hands along the intricate murals that decorated the walls. Images of history, of the Valyrian Empire and the Freehold that followed it. Of Aegon’s conquests. Of the history of the Targaryen family. His family. It hadn’t yet sunken in completely - he wasn’t just a Stark, but a Targaryen as well. A wolf and a dragon, the mix of two great houses. Of fire and ice. Once barely in possession of an identity at all, now he had two, the absolute best of all noble blood in his veins. Betrothed to a dragonrider and with two children from her that he never even met - more dragon than wolf. It was overwhelming.

“Hey…” His deep musings were broken by Dany, cupping his cheek. “Why are you brooding, Jon?”

“Nothing, just…” He looked outside to where the dragons were circling. “Nothing.”

Firm hands brought him back to her. “You’re just as much a Stark as you are a Targaryen, Jon.”

Dany smiled. “They are still your family.” He smiled as well. His beloved knew exactly what to say.

Muffled Dothraki curses and scuffling sandals broke them from their enchanted moment. “Where are those two, I’m going to…” A pretty woman with olive skin turned the corner and ran straight into Jon and Daenerys. “Your Grace.” She bowed. “I did not know you returned.”
“Calm down, Doreah,” Dany remarked. “This is Jon Snow, my betrothed.” The handmaid's eyes went wide. “We have come to see our children.” Her subtle focus on ‘our’ only made Jon’s heart clench. She wasn’t hiding them at all, broadcasting their relationship with pride.

“Well… you see.” The Dothraki former slave almost wanted to die - there was no telling if the Queen would have her dragons do the deed quite soon. “I’m not sure where they are.”

Doreah’s panic was starting to affect Daenerys when the sound of childlike laughter echoed faintly through the halls. Jon felt his heart clench, hearing the joyful voices. “I've got you, Torrhen Stark,” came a girlish voice. “Bend the knee!”

“The King of the North never bends the knee,” replied a boy, trying to sound noble but interspersed with giggles. “You will feel the wrath of winter, Visenya.” From the looks of it they were having a grand old time, reminding Jon of the days when he and Robb, and then Bran and Arya played around in the courtyard at Winterfell. Happy memories.

At that point the sources of the voices ran into view, laughing and smiling as they playacted their fight. “Told you the dragon would defeat you,” giggled the girl.

“The direwolf will rise again… Issa!” The boy - Rhaegar, saw his mother and beamed. Moving to run into her arms, the prince instead ended up running smack into Arya instead. “Watch it Arry!” He rubbed his shoulder.

But Arya didn’t hear him. Ignoring her nursemaid - ignoring her mother, who she had been initially excited to see once more, to concentrate on the man in a black leather tunic and with tied up raven hair. He was so familiar to her, but she just couldn’t place him.

Feeling his body sag, heart beating out of his chest, emotion swirled through Jon. For the second time of his life he felt like crying. Upon first glance there was no doubt they were his children - half him and half Daenerys. Rhaegar had the same Targaryen looks as his true father, but with the northern resoluteness that characterized himself, Robb, and his other father Ned Stark. Arya looked just like a mixture of his beloved and her namesake whom Jon also loved dearly. They were perfect, his children. ‘I’m your father.’ Jon wanted to say it, tell them who he was, but the emotion of seeing them for the first time was so overwhelming that he was just silent.

‘That man… I’ve seen him before.’ An image came to Arya’s mind, one cloudy and dreamlike… Suddenly she gasped, little grey eyes widening. She looked at the man, and then her mother, who was smiling and tearing up at the same time. ‘Fa… father?’

Rhaegar caught on then and there, eyes widening as well. “Father?”

Noticing Jon was lost for words - hitching his breath and trying to stop the tears from forming in his eyes, and for once the douer northerner was losing - Daenerys nodded. “It’s your father.”

“Father!”

“Father!”

As if automatically, Jon fell to his knees and opened his arms wide just as two bundles slammed into him. He closed around them in a tight embrace. There was no stopping the tears anymore, his normal brooding nature vanishing from the icy stabbing at not being there for his children’s lives and the rays of warmth at finally being with them banishing the ice away. “Your father’s here, my sweetlings.”

Arya buried her face into his chest, inhaling his spicy northern scent and feeling fully safe and
secure. “I knew you’d come.”


“Never. Daddy’s here, now. Daddy will never leave.”

Openly crying, Dany watched the scene tenderly. A stray hand wiped the tears from her lids. It was this - this right here that meant more to her than any throne or crown or kingdom. Family. Her family. Her beloved Jon and her dear children. Their children. ‘Together at last.’ Then, a strong hand encircled her wrist and yanked her down. Yelping softly, soon it was her that was nestled in the embrace as well. All kneeling. Jon’s face buried in her hair. The twins sandwiched between them.

It had been on Dragonstone where Daenerys Targaryen found her family wrenched away from her. It was now on Dragonstone where she found her family reborn.

“You see here?” one of the wildlings - Tormund if her memory was correct - said, pointing to a large wooden pike nearly half a foot in diameter. “The damn Boltons would have ridden right through us with their horses had the other southerners not stopped them.”

A smirk formed on Sansa’s face - it was amusing to hear the likes of the Starks or the Hornwoods referred to as ‘Southerners.’ To the Free Folk, anyone living south of the wall was a southerner. “Go on, Tormund,” Ser Davos asked.

Grinning, he picked up the pike with both hands. “Those cocksuckers with the spears…”

“Hoplites. They’re called hoplites,” Davos offered, jovially.

“Whatever.” Many of the wildlings had tried to murder the Bolton prisoners - there had been many - to settle the score that they caused. Since they were lacking a house to serve at the moment, Tyrion had suggested to Jon, Robb, Daenerys, and Sansa that they be sent to Meereen as a reinforcement… at least until they redeemed themselves. Having bent the knee to both House Stark and the Dragon Queen, the new Stark bannermen had been sent to White Harbor to take the voyage to Slaver’s Bay. “Their spears nearly stopped old Mag over there.” The grizzled giant grinned, grunting softly. Being a giant, the soft grunt was rather loud. “If a weak cunt of a spear could do that, imagine what these bitches could do to horsemen.”

They did look impressively stout and deadly, Sansa noted. “I like it. Have the Free Folk warriors equipped with them.” At Tormund’s nod, she turned and left the armory.

Just as the outdoor chill hit her, Sansa heard a familiar flutter and screech, followed by something perching on her shoulder. A small smile crossed her face. “Hello, girl.” Sansenya chirped happily, nuzzling her small but growing head on her namesake’s offered finger. “You are growing quite well. Your parents would be happy.” Emitting a low whine, the orange dragon lowered her head. Sansa figured it was as close to a look of sadness as a dragon could give. “I know. I miss him too.” Even surrounded by soldiers and loyal guards, Sansa didn’t feel completely safe from evil such as Ramsay unless both Jon and Robb were present.

Hearing twin screeches upon reaching the stairs to the balcony, she extended her left arm in expectation. Sure enough, Rhealla and Lyanarys, perched themselves on her, hissing and snapping their jaws at each other. “Enough,” Sansa told them sternly, and they obeyed. They seemed to have an attachment to Sansa, not loving her as deeply as they did their parents but allowing her to touch them and obeying her commands - only Robb, Margaery, and Missandei shared such a skill, and
they were all out inspecting the Dothraki and Unsullied. Sansa was sure Jon’s twins would be more… agreeable since they wouldn’t grow up with the capacity to spit dragonfire.

‘Jon has children.’ It still shocked her to think about it, that he was a father and she was an aunt. Looking down at the courtyard, where the memories returned of him playing with Robb, Bran, and Arya while she sewed and minded her lessons inside. ‘Where I shunned him.’ Guilt and bitterness filled her, the dragons sensing it and quieting down. At least now Sansa had a chance. Jon loved her all the same, and deep down Sansa always had as well. ‘He’ll be a great father, I know that…’

“Sansa.”

The acting lady of Winterfell turned, face still stone. “Mother.” Upon the sight of her the dragons hissed and took off. They didn’t like Catelyn, as if having a sixth sense about the past. It was mirrored in Sansa’s icy gaze. The warmth and joy of their reunion had dissipated and the recent anger bubbled forth. ‘But a good lady wears a mask when in public.’ “Any news from Uncle Brynden?”

“Yes. He’s reached Moat Cailin and scouts reported that the Twins are open.”

This drew Sansa’s attention. “What?” They had given her great-uncle a third of the Vale Knights to deal with whatever remaining forces Walder Frey had, expecting a tough fight. Now the most strategic bridge in the Seven Kingdoms was open and undefended. “Did he flee south like a rat off a sinking ship?”

Catelyn shook her head. “Apparently, the entirety of House Frey was massacred by unknown parties. Lord Walder’s throat slit, his eldest son mutilated, and the rest poisoned. Whatever Frey men remained melted away into the countryside.”

Sansa shared her mother’s look - the look of justice being served. “Good. He can rot in hell.” A thought occurred to her. “Is Uncle Edmure alive?”

“Yes.” Her mother seemed quite genuinely relieved by that. “He was freed by the scouts and reunited with his wife and son.”

“Send a raven to Moat Cailin. Tell Uncle Brynden to march to Riverrun immediately and secure it before any of the Lannister-allied houses do.” If they held the castle then the land routes to the Vale would be open, and it would essentially secure everything north of the River Trident for Jon and Daenerys. Sansa knew it, and she bet that Tywin Lannister knew it as well.

Her mother seemed impressed and swelled with stoic pride. “Of course my Lady.” The pride only provoked another steely glare. Catelyn knew it too well, the glare that Daenerys sent her way for the first month in Meereen - the one Robb cast her as well. Now that all knew the truth, the reckoning for her actions had come, and it was all deserved. “Sansa…”

“When did you know?” For all her anger at her mother - for not only shunning Jon but for essentially making herself shun Jon as well - she remained composed. The words carried no emotion. “The truth about him, I mean?”

The elder woman closed her eyes. “The night of the feast, when the King arrived. Your father and uncle Benjen told me.”

“No wonder you allowed him by Bran’s bedside… rather than send him away.” That had been odd to Sansa at the time. For the young girl she had been, it had caused her to be nicer to Jon as well before they left. “I just can’t understand why father didn’t tell you at least… not that it justified what
“It didn’t.” Catelyn knew she deserved every bit of this from her children. She admired it actually, how close they were with their brother. Robb had grown humble, strategic - a true Lord. Sansa had become the definition of a lady, poised and calculating. ‘If only it hadn’t turned out the way it did.’ It hadn’t been the first time that she prayed to the gods for the chance to change things.

Looking back at the courtyard, the perch on the balcony was always the calmest part of the castle for Sansa. Mostly because of all the memories it brought. When her niece and nephew would come, she smiled inwardly at the joy it would bring. Such joy had been missing for so long in this place. “Jon has already forgiven you. Daenerys, Robb, and I haven’t but he has. Likely tells all of us who the better one is. The one fit to rule.”

Catelyn closed her eyes, the arctic wind blowing against her face. “Yes, it does.’

Sliding the whetstone along the sharp steel - dulled by constant use on the battlefield - Podrick Payne kept darting back to the two women on the balcony. To one of them in particular. His time with Brienne had tempered his innate shyness, and the incident with the whores Tyrion and Bronn acquired for him did increase his confidence, but when in the company of the fiery-haired northerner it had all come back. There wasn’t a more breathtaking sight.

“You look distracted, lad. Is it a girl?”

Podrick blinked, not knowing what to say in these situations. While battle could drum bad fighting skills out of a youth, only experience with women not your family, knight, or paid companion could overcome youthful shyness. “Um… I… well…”

Another belly laugh left the wildling. “There’s only two things that can get a man this distracted. Food for one that’s starvin’ and a pretty lady.” Podrick’s flickering eyes betrayed him, and Tormund traced them to the balcony where the lone woman rested - Catelyn having retired to the solar. “Ah, the King Crow’s sister. Good choice. Us gingers are beautiful, kissed by fire.”

Trying to stammer a reply, Podrick failed to make a noise. Instead he grabbed the sword and went back to sharpening it. There was no way he would discuss his secret longing with the boisterous wildling. One word to Lord Snow and Longclaw would be thrust up his gut for even thinking about his sister.

The wildling never got the hint. “With a woman, boy, you have to go in strong. Like with my woman. A great golden beauty, taller than any woman alive…”

There was no mistaking who Tormund referred to. “Lady Brienne?” This was news to him, some of Lord Tyrion’s fondness for gossip having transferred to his former squire. “You’re… with her?”

“Not yet, but I’ve seen the way she looks at me.” ‘Contemptuously,’ thought Podrick as the wildling began to opine about having giant babies with her. The young squire wondered if Tormund’s feelings - though far more boisterous and exaggerated - were essentially what his were in regards to the Lady Sansa. She was the daughter of the great house, blood impeccable on both sides. He was just a simple squire, unfit no matter how many times he saved her.

Looking up, Sansa had gone in. Hearing Tormund still talking, Podrick sighed and went back to sharpening his blade.
“Father?” Setting the precious bundle in his bed, Jon gently ruffled his hair. Rhaegar was a hellion, tiring himself out with all the running he had done with his sister - it took all of Jon’s Night’s Watch endurance to keep up. ‘Just like Bran… before his fall.’ A sudden protective urge sprang forth like a growling wolf. A wolf protecting its cubs. “The snow, is it everywhere?”

He smiled, kissing his son’s brow. “It covers everything. Quite annoying actually, but it protects us from outsiders. Northerners call it General Winter.”

“I can’t wait to see snow.” Propping his hands under his head, Rhaegar’s violet eyes met Jon’s - they were exactly like Dany’s. “Are there Direwolves there? Packs of them.” A yawn formed, sleep beginning to overcome the little Prince as he snuggled on his pillow.

Covering him up with the blanket, Jon stroked his cheek. “No packs, but I do have a direwolf. His name’s Ghost, with fur as white as snow.” A smile curled on his son’s face as he fell into the gentle embrace of sleep. Wiping away a tear, Jon turned and walked to the other bed. “Good night, my sweetling.” Arya never ceased to make his heart clench, looking the perfect mix between his mother and his beloved.

“Stay with us, poppa,” she softly cried, reaching for his cheek. Her fingers stroked Jon’s prickly beard. “Don’t go.”

Jon kissed her cheek. “I’ll be right in the next room.” Both Visenya and Rhaenys had been protective mother dragons from what Dany had told him. The King’s chamber in Dragonstone castle had been built with a doorway to the nursery in case either Queen had to rush to their children. “Momma and poppa will be here in a heartbeat if you call.”

Eyes fluttering shut, Arya nodded. “Love you poppa.” Then she was asleep like her brother.

Heading for the door, Jon couldn’t stop the few tears from hitting the stone floor. “Love you too, sweetling.”

Where once the great throne room had been filled with color and light, to Jamie Lannister it now reminded him of the darkest of dungeons. His Divine Majesty, the Golden Chimera prefered to hold his infrequent - bordering on never, which was the case for his attendance at the small council - sessions of court at night. Only a smattering of candles banished away the darkness and the once vibrant stained glass had been bricked over, while two braziers gave the area around the Iron Throne itself any light. Rumor was that the King more frequently held meetings in the dungeon itself, but Jamie had luckily never been summoned. Those that were alleged to have never returned.

Naturally, his eyes fell on Cersei - her bewitching golden hair standing out among the darkness. Armored boots clacking on the stone floors, he quickly arrived at her side and kissed her cheek from behind. “Sister.” Jamie noticed her tensing up before relaxing at the sound of his voice. It pained him.

“Brother,” she replied, outwardly reserved but with a hint of warmth. Though she would always be beautiful to him, Jamie hated the state she was in. Her eyes were sunken, from stress rather than hunger though her appetite wasn’t the best. Cersei looked years older than she was, and there was a nervousness about her that threatened to break her. Before she had strode through the Red Keep as if she owned it, but now - even when their father was there - the walls had ears.
And the King was their son. “Do you know why we were summoned here?” Besides them, there was a nervous, hunchbacked Pycelle, Iron Bank representative Tycho Nestoris, and Littlefinger - who was, in his own unctuous way, looking nervous.

“No one tells me much anymore, but my sources tell me that the problem in the North has been taken care of.”

“Well that should be good news, right?” The victory at Sunspear had been heralded with a week’s thanksgiving. “Why hasn’t Joffrey hailed it?” They spoke in hushed tones.

Cersei gave him a pained grimace. “Bolton and Viserys Targaryen were defeated by Ned Stark’s bastard son, an alive Robb Stark, the Vale Knights that switched sides, and the Dragon Queen.” Jamie grimaced as well. The eventuality that their father had been warning of and preparing for had finally come.

Unlike when the King sounded his arrival to the whole city, a simple gong heralded his presence in the throne room. Cersei fell to her knees, as did Jamie and all the others. It was a privilege of Joffrey’s munificence and trust - the most anyone had seen him give to his family since making Tywin his Supreme Commander of the Armies following the Battle of Blackwater Bay - the ability to merely be on one’s knees in his presence rather than prostrate himself. It rankled Jamie, but he said nothing.

As the ringing of the gong still echoed through the throne room, in walked the royal procession. In the van was the High Sparrow, arms crossed over his chest as always. Surrounded by his guards was the King, draped in a veil of silk that obscured his face. Waddling along was the fat form of Dontos Hollard, the King’s fool and the only person besides the blind servant girls that attended to the King who was permitted to look upon Joffrey. Rounding out the rear was the ever-scheming vestige of Qyburn. Jamie didn’t trust him when the false Maester brought him back from the Riverlands with Brienne of Tarth, and the feeling had only grown since.

“This evening,” began the High Sparrow, as he did on all private meetings of the small council. “We implore the Seven to hear our thanks for the gift of their child upon this earth.”

“We say our thanks before the Seven,” everyone repeated. ‘What happened to my son?’ Jamie thought. Cersei blamed it all on the High Septon, Tywin on Qyburn, but Jamie thought differently. ‘He was always cruel, but it was Littlefinger that planted the seed.’ Since then the madness had just grown and grown.

Taking a seat on the Iron Throne, a cushion placed there for his comfort, Joffrey peered at each person. “Let us begin. Pycelle,” he barked. “Why is it getting colder? I had to wear additional clothes this morning.”

“Forgive me, all highest,” bumbled the old man. “But the Citadel has said that winter has arrived.” Joffrey hissed. “One day I will control the weather to prevent this. Right, Sparrow?”

“Of course. The Seven are kind to their child.”

Likely preening under his veil, Joffrey next turned to Littlefinger. “Lord Baelish, has the dragonspawn been drawn and quartered for his rebellion by the Vale?”

Trembling, Baelish nodded. “That rebellion was put down, but I beg your forgiveness for informing you, your highest, that another rebellion has formed.” There was silence. Gulping, he continued. “The Dragon Queen has returned from Meereen and landed in the North. She has joined the forces
there, deposed her brother, and allied with the treasonous Vale knights to oppose you.”

“What?!” Under the gauzy fabric, Joffrey felt his heart beating out of his chest. The walls were closing in. Enemies everywhere, dangerous and ready to pounce. He didn’t feel safe, not even with the swords of the Mountain, Meryn Trant, and thousands of completely loyal Faith Militants. And his army… “WHERE IS TYWIN! WHERE IS MY ARMY!”

“He is in Dorne, my son. Fighting to keep your kingdom intact…”

“He Needs to Be Here!”

“If I may, all highest?” The Chimera’s withering gaze, made all the more mighty and terrifying by the fabric white as sun-washed bone covering it, fell on Littlefinger. “A detachment of heavy cavalry and light men-at-arms has arrived in port today, under the command of Randyll Tarly.”

There was silence from the King. “Is he a fool?” The contemptuous scowl fell on Ser Dontos, still sitting in the corner.

“His record is distinguished. Combined with the men we have in the Crownlands and Westerlands, you’ll have an army of over forty thousand,” Littlefinger said, voice dripping with oiled words. One must only make the sovereign’s last thought of you a grateful one. All other mistakes would be forgiven. A sidelong look at the Lannister twins only proved that it was not the Chimera that could burn him.

“And the dragons?”

It was Qyburn that answered the King. “The scorpions have been delivered to all formations, all Highest. They were effective in the battle at Winterfell, and will be even greater in a more concentrated formation. Attack now, while surprise is still on your side.”

“Yes, they must attack at once. But not Tarly.” A finger pointed below the dias. “You, uncle.”

“All Highest?” Jamie was confused. “I am your loyal guard, sworn to protect you from all harm.” ‘My son as well.’ His son… a monster. It wasn’t because of Joffrey that he served loyally.

Snapping his fingers at Trant and Blount, they scrambled down the steps and began stripping the Kingsguard markers from Jamie’s armor. “You are now a general in my army. Go forth and destroy the North as I should have done when I thought Robb Stark to be killed.” Blood boiled within him. “Turn every settlement to the fire. Burn it all to ash!”

“No! You can’t!” Cersei couldn’t get the images from her mind as soon as her son said for Jamie to head north. Images of Jamie beheaded, impaled, a large dragon burning him alive at the hands of the Targaryen queen. He had barely survived one foray into the north. Breaking protocol, she climbed the steps and grabbed his shoulders. “Don’t do this my son, do not risk your family…”

A backhanded slap sent her falling. “Do not touch me!” Joffrey snarled. “You may be my mother, but you are a mere mortal! I am a god!”

At the beginning of her son’s reign, Cersei had seen his outbursts as those of a child - a cruel child, but one still innocent of the evil gripping the world. But now, one look in his eyes… not that she could see them directly anymore… only made it clear to her the monster that he had become. ‘No! He is still my child. My eldest.’ No mother stopped loving her child no matter what he became.

But Cersei was afraid of him, nonetheless.
“Shall I teach this one a lesson, not to disrespect her King?” From the growling in Meryn Trant’s voice, it sounded like he’d enjoy it.

Before Jamie could do something incredibly stupid to protect her, it was the High Sparrow that interceded. “Discord among the righteous only benefits the wicked, all Highest.” Humble, penitent before his god, the former nobleman knew the imperfect King only needed the right guiding hand. “The Queen Mother’s heart is in the right place, so perhaps a private refresher on the true meaning of the faith is all that is needed.” Still as a statue for agonizingly long minutes, Joffrey finally waved his clawed hands. Trant stepped away from Cersei, allowing Jamie to kneel next to her. “She should rest now, your highest.”

“Of course.” His tone had softened, mollified that the threats were ending. “Mother, see to it that you have that looked at.”

It would be the only thing close to an apology Cersei knew would be given. “Thank you… all highest.”

Turning to the High Sparrow to dismiss the meeting, Joffrey involuntarily staggered back. ‘Here, he’s here!’ The ghostly vestige of Robert Baratheon. Instead of the mottled grey of a corpse, he was ethereal. Pale, but blood still dripped to the ground. “No.” His voice was filled with terror. “No…”

“Woman born of storm, fair of eye…”

“It’s her, isn’t it?” All around him waited silently, breath bated with concern but no one willing to risk provoking his wrath. “The Dragon Queen.”

“Golden face she sees, a realm divide.”

Nearly falling over, only the helpful arms of Meryn Trant studied him. “Master of Whisperers. Where is the Dragon Queen.”

“My little birds have her in Dragonstone, your highest. With her two children.”

“Kill her. I want her dead! SHE MUST NEVER SEE ME!” If such a request puzzled those in the room, none voiced it. They knew better.

Qyburn allowed a smile. “I have already seen to it your highest. From a person desperate to prove his loyalty towards you.”

“A great crime, to harm a woman and child,” opined the High Sparrow. “But it is necessary for those that have defied the will of the Seven’s chosen one on this earth.” Nothing but the flickering candles answered him.

“This is suicide, my Lady.”

It was still surreal to be called that - hells, it was still surreal for Tyene Sand to be in the very situation she was in. Staring at the stars through the vision slit, it truly hammered home how isolated and weak she was at the moment.

“We are having trouble with procuring replacements and reinforcements,” said another one of her generals. In the chaos and vacuum that Tywin’s march through Dorne had brought, most of the populace had flocked to Trystane’s government - for security and bread if nothing else. What men and women they had were scattered among the wilderness in isolated hillside dugouts and tunnels
such as this one where Tywin’s men couldn’t root them out. “How will we inspire the populace if you leave?”

“And how will we hope to win without allies?” she hissed back. “We were always loyal to the Targaryens. Now that the Dragon Queen has arrived in Westeros, she is the only hope to shake off the yoke.”

It made her generals uneasy. “Our loyalty to you, as to your father, is unquestioned. But how can you place confidence in the family that betrayed Elia Martell for some wolf-bitch from the north?”

Tyene grimaced. “So we let the Lannisters, who killed Elia and her children and enslaved many Dornish, rule us because the Dragon Queen’s brother fell in love with a northerner?” There was silence. “Can you transport me to Dragonstone?”

“Yes, my Lady.”

“Then do it.”

A loud moan left Dany’s throat, mouth opened in a wide gasp. “Oh Jon, seven hells. Mmmm…”

Hair still tied in his bun, Jon poked out from his perch between her legs. “Did you say something, my Queen?” He was just as bare as she was.

Her eyes blazed dragonfire at him. “Get back down there, my King.” Fingers curled into his raven locks and urged him back with the determined fury and passion of a dragon - back to the wondrous things he was doing with his mouth and tongue. As soon as the wet organ touched her even wetter core, Dany moaned loud enough that even the dragons fishing in the seas surrounding Dragonstone could hear. “My gods, how are you doing this to me?”

Jon couldn’t help but smirk, licking up a trail along her slit. Such was their new routine since that first night at Winterfell - making up for lost time. They would retire to their chambers. Always together, their positions august enough not to raise protest along with the raised eyebrows, yet news of their betrothal helped smooth any issues. Once there they would undress the other, lovingly or frantically, always passionate. And then Jon would carry his betrothed to bed - or she would push him on the bed. This time instead of pushing inside her, Jon had the hungry urge to feast on her.

“Unnnhhh…” At first Dany did not have a clue as to what Jon was doing, kissing down her body. The Dothraki didn’t do this, nor did those she knew in Essos. ‘Gods, they are missing out.’ His tongue parted through her folds in its mission. The heat ever present inside her rose to new heights. “Don’t. Stop.”

“You do not rule over this bed, your Grace,” he said in his dark, husky wolf growl. Savoring her taste, Jon already knew he couldn’t get enough of his dragon. Ygritte had been musky and delicious in her own way, but Daenerys was something else. Her moans spurred him forward, drove his lust and hunger. Spreading apart her folds, Jon plunged his tongue as deep as he could.

Daenerys was sure Balerion had enveloped her in a tongue of flame. A scream left her lips, fingers pulling so hard on Jon’s hair that they freed his locks from the loose bun. The pleasure was so intense that she slipped into High Valyrian without even knowing it. “Kessa. Tolī. Oh Jon. Nyke jorrāelagon ziry.” His tongue doubled its pace, Jon likely turned on from her babbling. Swiping over a particular spot inside her - one that never ceased to erupt dragonfire within her when they made love - Dany shattered to her one and only King. “JON!”
Lapping up the gush of wetness pouring out of Dany’s core, Jon grinned in satisfaction. Nothing like making the indomitable Dragon Queen a limp rag to stroke one’s ego. Quite a change from his normal stoic humility. ‘Only for Dany,’ he thought. Kissing her navel, he looked up to find one pale arm dashed about her face, mouth open in a silent gasp as she trembled from the aftershocks. “So was this to your Grace’s satisfaction?”

“Gods, Jon.” Able to open her eyes finally, they bored into her dragonwolf’s grey orbs. “How did you learn to do that… so well?”

“The Lord’s Kiss, you mean? All I need is the motivation, Daenerys Stormborn.”

“Come here. You’re too far away.” Jon was happy to oblige, pulling himself up to her and placing a kiss over her mouth. Crushing their bodies tightly together, leg wrapped around his and arms looped over his back, Dany continued the languid kiss. “I love you, Jon.”

“I love you too, Dany.” Giving her a break before he would send her to the stars once more, Jon allowed the events of the day to fully sink in. “I really am a father…” He rolled over onto his back. The comfortable temperatures of the island, chilly but warm compared to the north, precluded his need for a blanket - goose down rather than the northern furs.

“Yes you are.” Dany perched herself on her elbow, admiring the fine specimen that was the man she loved. “Two children and six dragons. They all love you, Jon.”

That rare, loving smile crossed Jon’s lips. “I love them too.” He pushed back on his side and cupped Dany’s cheek. “And their mother.” Jon watched with rapture as she leaned into his palm, eyes fluttering in contented joy. “I will never leave any of you again. I promise.”

When Dany thought he could never get any sexier or more amazing, her dragonwolf went and said something like that. “Together, my love. Forever.” Arms pulling him close, Daenerys felt she couldn’t stand another moment without his touch. “When I take back the Iron Throne from Joffrey, I want you by my side. To rule with me.”

Jon sighed. “You don’t have to. I never wanted even a lordship, let alone the crown.” He looked at her. “You’ve planned so long to have the throne. Fought hard for it. It’s yours.”

“Jon…” The fact he would so willingly give her his birthright only proved to her that he was the man she needed. The King the realm needed. “My love, I don’t want the throne unless you rule alongside me. The endless spokes of families on the wheel that keeps turning… we will break it. Together.” She placed her hand on his shoulder. “Blood of my blood, it is the both of us that will leave this world better than the one we inherited. As equals.”

“I never thought I would be… I was a mere bastard. Content to live at the Wall for the rest of my days. And now I’m the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms?” Pulling away, Dany saw insecurity, self-doubt in his eyes. “Do I really deserve it? I was merely Lord Commander and my men killed me for it.”

“You do deserve it, Jon. There’s no one who deserves it more.” She kissed his cheek. “Rhaegar will learn to be a King from the best, for you already are a great leader, Jon.” Lips placing a flurry of kisses on his cheeks, nose, eye, and forehead, Dany hugged Jon tightly. “I’ve been dreaming of this day. All four of our family, together… forever.” She kissed him, cupping his face.

“Five,” Jon mumbled against her mouth, mirroring her kiss. Feeling her pull back, a puzzled look in her violet orbs, Jon realized he hadn’t told her. ‘How did I not tell her?’ He had planned to tell her the morning after the battle… but she beat him to it with the news of the twins. “There are five living
“Viserys is not a Targaryen.” The Dragon Queen returned, face stony and voice tinged with anger. “As Queen, I’ve decided to revoke his legitimacy as punishment for his crimes. He is no Targaryen.”

“Ugh…” Jon rolled his eyes. “First off, thank you for reminding me that I’m related to that slug.” Dany snorted, amused. ‘At least my father was a great man - and Dany…’ He placed his palm on her soft cheek, stroking the milky skin with his thumb. “There are five Targaryens, my dragon. Your great-uncle Aemon.”

Dany stared at him, mouth slack. “My great-uncle… Aegon V’s brother?” Jon nodded. “H… how do you know him?”

Gently stroking her back, it brought Jon great joy to see his love reunited completely with a family long thought dead. ‘Now I know why Maester Aemon always kept me close.’ “Aemon was… well is the Maester at Castle Black. He’s very old and essentially blind, but his mind is sharp and will strong. My…” Jon’s breath hitched for a moment. “My uncle Benjen told him about my heritage, and he told me right before…” His eyes moved to the scar on his heart - where Dany rested her hand.

“I… I thought all Targaryens had been killed but Viserys and I…” Tears welled in Dany’s eyes. Jon kissed the tears away. “Aemon is coming down from Castle Black with Sam Tarly, a good friend of mine. You’ll see him when we return.” He leaned up to kiss her forehead. “He loves you, you know. Whatever information that came in from Meereen and Essos, he would pour over it.”

“Our family lives.” She had always thought that… given her brother’s humiliating stain on the house, she and the twins were the last Dragons. Not anymore. She had her beloved dragonwolf, and now her great-uncle as well. “I love you so much, Jon.” She buried her head in his dark, northern hair. “You’ve brought nothing but light and joy into my life since we’ve met.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Dany.” Feeling her snuggle against him, Jon smiled. “You and Aemon will get along, and the same with Sam.”

“Mmmm, are you and he close?”

“He’s my best friend, at the wall. Sam was born of a noble house in the Reach, but his father hated him because he was bookish rather than athletic. He actually wasn’t shocked of my parentage.”

“And why is that, my love?”

At that moment Jon felt a chill on his skin, recalling that moment when he had faced a wight for the first time. It’s mottled grey skin, glowing blue eyes. “One of the dead had gotten into the Lord Commander’s quarters… Ser Jorah’s father. I had lost my sword trying to defend against it, and the monster was strangling me.” He felt his queen tighten her hold on him. “The Lord Commander then entered with Ghost, allowing me to break free, and I grabbed a lantern and managed to burn it alive… the fire didn’t burn my hand.”

Staring at him, Dany saw Jon in a new light - the same as she had when his… their daughters first showed themselves to her. “The unburnt.” Just as she did, Jon had braved the flames and came out without a scratch. Blood of the dragon. “Fire made flesh.” Taking his hand, Daenerys kissed the palm lovingly.

Jon smiled before fire blazed in her violet eyes and he soon found himself pinned to the bed. “Dany?”
Keeping his hands pinned above his head, Dany kissed Jon hard and moved to suck on his neck. “You and me, Jon.” She bit his shoulder. “The Iron Throne is ours… We will rule together, for our family… all of us.” Her lips returned to his. “My King.” Jon flipped his betrothed over, the couple lost in their desire.
Planning a War

Spoon slicing through the ground meat and cheese like it was butter, Arya brought the steaming concoction back to her mouth. “This is delicious, Hot Pie.” Glancing across the table, she watched a smile form on the face of her older yet still portly friend. “What do you put in this? Some kind of Riverlands herb or something?”

“A good cook never reveals his recipes till he dies or retires,” chuckled Hot Pie, seated across from Arya and Gendry.

The former blacksmith’s apprentice swallowed. “You’ve honestly become a better cook since we last saw you, and I don’t know how that’s possible.”

Shrugging bashfully, Hot Pie motioned to Arya. “We’ve all changed. Can’t believe I thought you were a boy once, Arry. You’ve grown very pretty.” Arya - not one to express her emotions - couldn’t help but blush while Gendry scowled. “I knew you two would get together. The Brotherhood actually had a pool going on over when. I believe… Beric Dondarrion would have won the prize.” Gendry cracked up while Arya just snickered softly. “So are you going back to Winterfell.”

Humor gone at the mention of her childhood home, Arya pursed her lips in a puzzled grimace. “Why would we go there? Viserys Targaryen and the Boltons have it.” After hearing what the swine did after the Red Wedding, Arya had added them all to her list. However, she was additionally puzzled when Hot Pie leaned in.

“Well didn’t you two hear? The Boltons are dead.” Both Arya and Gendry were silent, so Hot Pie continued. “Viserys declared war on the Crown, but then Jon Snow came down from Castle Black with a Wildling Army and a dragon and won the Battle of the Bastards.”

Hearing Jon’s name focused Arya completely - it was if a sledgehammer had hit her. ‘Jon. My brother. Alive.’ She hadn’t heard anything remotely concerning him since he had given her Needle in her room, though Arya had thought about him considerably. And here he was, in control of the North. His home. Her home.

“Wait, a dragon?” Gendry’s disbelief snapped her out of their reverie. “Don’t be an idiot. There hasn’t been one for centuries.”

Hot Pie bristled. “It’s true. Everyone’s talking about it!”

“And I remember everyone in Flea Bottom talking about Cersei Lannister having a secret cock. Doesn’t make it true… ow.” Gendry rubbed his shin from where Arya had kicked him.

“Shut up,” she said, only half serious. Gendry had learned early on that being with Arya meant getting thumped about half the time - it was how she expressed affection. “Who did you hear it from?”

“Tully bannermen mostly. They’ve been flocking toward Riverrun after the Freys were assassinated…” He eyed Arya wearily, still shocked the young, tiny girl had done that. “And not just one dragon. There are three in Winterfell.” He pounded his fist on the table as if to punctuate his point.

“Three? Now you’re just shittin’ us, mate.” Gendry took a big spoonful of pie, glad to satiate his hunger. Traveling on the Kingsroad without much money didn’t include plentiful food.
“Yes. Right in the middle of the battle, in swooped the Dragon Queen on her own dragon.”

It didn’t shame Arya to feel a sense of childlike exhilaration run through her at the image. A modern day Visenya or Nymeria charging forth dragonback, just like she had idolized during childhood play at Winterfell. And now, her beloved brother Jon had taken back her home along with the Dragon Queen - which meant the new Nymeria was an ally of his. ‘A safe haven.’ Likely the first since her father had been captured. “Gendry…”

“Before you say that you’re going to Winterfell and there’s not a fucking thing I can do to stop you, I’ll save you the trouble by agreeing to go.” The blacksmith smiled as Arya’s eyes lit up. She may have been ruthless and cold most of the time, but he could always make her eyes sparkle. “Hot Pie, you up to it? Good cooks are like blacksmiths, they are in demand everywhere.”

Mounting her horse, Arya looked back at Gendry and Hot Pie. The latter had demurred, but it wasn’t long since they left the inn till he ran out to join them. ‘Bonds of friendship.’

Wind rustling through the woods, carrying the icy chill of winter even in the Riverlands, Arya clutched the reins tighter. She was going home - to Jon, now allied with the Dragon Queen. Now with dragons. ‘With enemies the same as my own.’ With Walder Frey dead and the Hound largely having redeemed himself, there still remained many on her list. Closing her eyes as she rode behind Gendry, she began repeating the names just like old Yoren taught her. The names she would eventually all give to the Many-Faced God.

“Joffrey, Cersei, Meryn Trant, Ilyn Payne, Littlefinger, the Mountain, Amory Lorch, the Waif, Tycho Nestoris, Viserys Targaryen.” Dutifully, religiously, she began again. “Joffrey…”

Groaning, Jon’s eyes fluttered open to a warm pleasure spreading through his lower body. There, at the foot of the bed, was the mighty Dragon Queen with her lips around his cock. Her eyes twinkled as they stared at him. “Oh good,” she said, lips leaving the head with a pop. “You’re awake.” A long tongue darted out and licked hungrily from the tip to the base.

“Dany…” The ministrations of his Queen reducing the White Wolf to a limp rag, all he could do was gasp and grab Dany’s head. His fingers weaved into her hair. Only she could reduce him to this state - and by the smirk on her lips, she knew it.

“I was getting dressed for the small council meeting soon, but you looked so delicious that I couldn’t help myself.” Dany loved doing this to Jon. She loved Jon - more than anything. The groans coming from his mouth spurred her forward. “Give me your release, my soon-to-be King. Shatter into your Queen’s mouth.” With that, Dany sucked his tip and took him deep.

“Fuck!” Jon felt his cock erupt into her mouth, Dany’s tongue swiping over him to prolong the pleasure. “Thank you…” he panted. “For that.”

Licking the remainder of his juices from her lips, black wool and leather dress making her look every inch a warrior queen, Dany leaned down to kiss him softly. “Anything for you, my love. Now get dressed for the meeting.” She kissed him once more and rolled off him. “The children are with Doreah, and the small council is expecting us.”

He stared at her incredulously. “Now hold on. It’s my turn now.”

Dany stood up anyway, scooting to the edge. “No time, Jon. We’re already skirting our punctuality. However, her eyes slithered shut when his arms wrapped around her. Palming her breasts through
her dress, Jon’s mouth lavished open-mouthed kisses on her neck. “Jon… mmmmmmm…” She felt
him smile against her skin. His beard tickled her skin. But while she would have loved to just fall
into bed and let him ravish her, they couldn’t. “Not… now.” Forcing herself from his grasp, she
stood up. “Later,” she offered with a smile, leaving the chamber.

Chuckling to himself, Jon shook his head. “Little tease,” he said to Ghost… only Ghost wasn’t there.
Sighing, he scrambled out of the bed and reached for his breeches. He just finished strapping his
direwolf-emblazoned leather tunic on when there was a knock at the door. “Enter.”

The door swung open and in walked an older man. His white hair and beard were cropped close,
clad in similar leather armor and a warm smile on his face - one weathered with the weight of
experience and loss. Jon recognized the same look, one he wore often in the mirror. “My Lord,” he
bowed. “I am Ser Barristan Selmy. The Queen asked me to be your personal guard while you are on
Dragonstone.”

Jon blinked, taken aback. The great Barristan Selmy, legendary Kingsguard and someone Jon had
often idolized as a child. Willing himself to move, he took the proffered hand. “Well, I wouldn’t be
able to find someone more skilled to keep me safe, Ser Barristan. It is an honor.”

“The honor is mine, my Lord. I served your father… Rhaegar. He was one of the finest men I have
ever known.” Guilt welled in Ser Barristan’s eyes. “I was unable to save him on the field of battle, so
I understand if you wish to dismiss me from your service.”

Pondering the old man’s words, Jon finally met his eyes. “Ser, if Queen Daenerys saw fit to assign
you to me, then you have proven yourself worthy.”

The Knight smiled wanly. “The Dragon Queen is a remarkable woman, and from what I’ve heard
you are just the same. The Seven Kingdoms are in good hands.” Nodding, Barristan just paces
behind, Jon slipped Longclaw into the scabbard and headed for where the council was meeting.

Striding through the winding corridors and large hallways, Jon’s eyes darted to a row of windows
open to a sort of inner courtyard a floor below. There were the twins, taking outside lessons from a
bearded tutor while Doreah kept her eye on them. Seeing their smiling faces, rapt with attention to
the lessons before them, Jon couldn’t help but feel his heart burst with love. His children, part of him
and part of Dany. If there was anything that he was now fighting for… it was those two darlings in
the courtyard.

“They always asked about you.” Jon felt Ser Barristan’s hand on his shoulder. “I didn’t know what
to say, so I told them about your father, Ned Stark. But Queen Daenerys always told them stories
about you, how you were someone they could be proud of.”

Some self-deprecating comment rose to his lips but Jon bit it back. Much as his old personality was
hard to change, he knew Dany despised it. If he was to be a King, he had to be more regal. “I shall
strive to be exactly that.”

The map room hadn’t changed since Aegon the Conqueror had planned the invasion of Westeros
with his sister-wives. It had the look of a dark cave, braizers and candlesticks providing the needed
yet low light with dark clouds forming above through the maw-like opening of the window.
Mounted in the middle was the famous table, granite surface sculpted with a terrain map of the
entirety of Westeros - Dorne to the Land of Always Winter. Known military concentrations were
marked, clusters in Dorne and in and around Winterfell.

All present bowed to Jon as he walked in. “My Lord,” said Lord Varys, the first from the door. “An
honor to meet the son of Prince Rhaegar.” Jon shook his hand, taking the blank stare in the Spider’s
eyes. This was not a man to trifle with, fat eunuch or not. Someone to respect but not trust fully until further notice.

“Jon Snow.” General Theodosius was next, expression friendly but with a hint of pain in his eyes - one Jon had seen in Robb’s ever since they reunited. “I look forward to the many battles ahead.” The Dothraki bloodriders weren't as impressed, looking him over as if a curious, puny insect. Grey Worm was cordial and slightly trusting, but Jon noticed the Unsullied commander was still sizing him up. And lastly, Dany, as radiant as ever...

Sharing a tender look with his betrothed, it immediately iced over when the Greyjoys entered the map room. Jon leveled his gaze at the old ward of Winterfell. Theon Greyjoy. He registered Dany grasping his hand, trying to keep him from doing anything rash but it was too late. His legs were already carrying him to the Ironborn Prince.

To his credit, Theon had a posture of remorse and barely concealed pain. “Jon.” He offered, eyes guilty but still meeting those of the northerner that was rounding the massive table. “How’s Sansa? Is she safe…” Theon was cut off when a fist slammed in his face.

Dany gasped, watching as Jon wordlessly grabbed Theon by the straps of his armor. The dragon had been woken, her King taking his own personal vengeance on a threat to his family. But fear filled her as Yara moved for the sword on her hip - Ser Barristan noticing this and placing his hand on the hilt of his own sword to protect Jon. Yes, Theon betrayed the Starks, but he was an ally that Dany could not afford to lose… nor could she bear it if Jon was hurt.

However, as soon as the dragon was unleashed did the wolf return, menacing but reserved in its icy rage. “What you did for Sansa…” Images… imagined horror stories of what Ramsay had to have done to his sister… flashed in his mind. “What you did for her, is the only reason that my fist wasn’t a sword.” Theon nodded, understanding and not resisting. Shoving him back, Jon calmly walked by a relieved Barristan - Yara relieved and guarded as well, eyes glaring daggers at Jon’s back - and took his position beside Dany, hands placed flat on the edge of the table.

“Perhaps we should begin,” offered Varys, voice flat and monotone.

The topic before them was generally the same as the one in the north. The announcement of the betrothal and the Army of the Dead, followed by how the Targaryen Armies should proceed against the Lannisters. As Jon predicted, the matter soon descended into a heated debate.

“You need to attack King’s Landing now!” Perhaps the subtlety and intrigue normally characterizing grand political power plays were a thing of the past within the Dragon Queen’s Small Council - at least her War Council. Yara made a decisive slash with her finger from Dragonstone to King’s Landing, and then from the North to King’s Landing. “Burn the Red Keep to the ground with your dragons, then deal with Tywin Lannister once you hold the capitol.” Once translated, the Dothraki all voiced their loud, boisterous agreement by smacking their chests with their fists.

There was disagreement from Theodosius. “The Capitol is but a point on the map. An eyesore if there ever was one. We don’t need it but they do. Blockade it from the sea with everything we have before the damn Ironborn under Euron Greyjoy arrive, and put the rest under siege with every soldier you and the north has to offer. Make Tywin come to you.” He slammed his hand down on the ridged stone representing Dorne. Jon could see the righteous fury in his eyes. “Tywin is the goal. Not any fixed point in the map. Destroy his army and Joffrey is powerless.”

The arguments continued along those lines, though all agreed that she should go on the offensive immediately and wipe out the enemy in one campaign with all she had. Only Varys and Jon remained silent. The former sat quietly, taking everything in. The northerner merely studied the map,
shifted his eyes to glance at Dany for a stolen moment, then went back to the map.

She placed a hand on him. “We are at war,” Dany said when he finally looked at her, broken from his brooding. “My forces are dispersed across the world. My advisors are all divided on what direction to advance in.” There was nothing but steel in her tone, the dragon in full force. “What do you think I should do?”

“Daenerys.” Hearing the slight tinge of affection and familiarity in his voice, her anger and steel melted. Jon visibly chafed, opening and closing his mouth as if trying to find the right words for the moment. A politician or orator he wasn’t - but a leader he was, nonetheless. “You have done… incredible things,” he finally began. “Things that no one would have ever thought possible. Bringing emancipation to the slaves, commanding an army of Dothraki and free Unsullied from Astapor to Winterfell, joining the Targaryen dragon with the Stark direwolf.” The last brought a very hint of a smile, one he reserved only for her and his siblings. Those that he loved. To all others, he was the brooding, icy wolf - but one that would raise his inner dragon if need be.

“Although none of us are doubting such extraordinary things, Lord Snow, the art of military tactics cannot…”

“Let him finish speaking, General Theodosius,” Dany interrupted icily. The general quieted, sufficiently chastised. “Continue, Jon.” There was symbolism in her use of his first name. The others may have been advisors - trusted advisors - but Jon Snow was her partner. Her equal.

Looking at the commanders and politicians around the table, Jon met each’s eyes to ensure that he was not that kind of arrogant leader. But rather one of humility. Loud roars from outside echoed, the dragons voicing their displeasure with the lightning and thunder preceding the coming rainstorms. “No one thought dragons would ever come back to Westeros. I rode one into battle and I was still in disbelief.” His gaze returning upon her, Jon covered her hand resting on the table with his. “You made the impossible happen. The people that follow you and will follow you believe that you make the impossible happen. To bring them a life better than the shit one they’ve lived or the hellish one that Joffrey would give them. Burning your way to victory would destroy that. Would make you into no different than the Kings that ruled before you.”

Many did not find themselves impressed by Jon’s plea to mercy and honor. “Pretty words do not win battles, weakling.” One of the bloodriders remarked dismissively. “Only killing wins battles, and the sky monsters are the best killers.”

“What is the use of winning battles if there is no foundation for what comes after?” Jon asked, leading for the bloodrider to snort. Worrying about consequences wasn’t the Dothraki way. They raided, took what they wanted, and left. “We need the people to stand behind Daenerys if we are to break the cycle of rule by fear that has gripped the Seven Kingdoms by Kings for generations. What better way to do that than to fight the true enemy of all of humanity?” He jabbed his finger into the Land of Always Winter on the map.

General Theodosius remained skeptical. “While I appreciate your honor and zeal for your cause, Lord Snow, what proof do we have that this ‘Army of the Dead’ even exists?”

“I have seen it with my own eyes. Every living thing that dies can be risen into the Night King’s army. What honor do we have if we squabble like children and allow the true enemy to smite us all down?”

“Your honor did not serve your father, Jon Snow,” hissed Yara. It reminded Jon of Theon from before, when he was just the ward of Winterfell. His sister was smarter, but just as crude and ill tempered. “Having honor is bad strategy.”
Grimacing, Jon’s fists clenched. The wolf in him was fighting the dragon equally within him. “I’m sorry, but the Ironborn grand strategy for the War of the Four Kings. How many castles do they still control on the mainland? What lands does Balon Greyjoy now rule?” The words were delivered flatly, but there was no mistaking the caustic effect. Yara crossed her arms, scowling. Theon said nothing, eyes averted.

Silence hung in the map room before Daenerys broke it. “Lord Varys?”

Quiet the whole time, the Spider had been taking in everything said around him - the tactic that led him to survive serving four monarchs in his lifetime. “I serve the realm, your Grace. The people. I know you are the queen that will deliver for them and not for yourself or the lords or your close allies, and from what I know of Lord Snow I feel the same about him.” His little birds reached everywhere, and aside from the deepest secrets such as Jon’s true parentage, he knew most of the comings and goings of the world. “I am not of knowledge of the dead beyond the wall, but if you seek the betterment of the people of Westeros, you cannot act like Joffrey. Jon Snow is right in this regard.”

Dany closed her eyes, making her decision. “We will not attack King’s Landing,” she commanded, her tone leaving no room for further argument. “I am not my father. As to whether we attack the Lannister armies or focus on the Army of the Dead…”

The meeting was broken by a Bloodrider, brusquely barging inside and marching straight to Dany. Conversing in Dothraki back and forth, Daenerys nodded. “Jon, Lord Varys, to the throne room. It appears we have a visitor.”

It was certainly imposing. Lady Tyene Sand wasn’t someone of low birth who would be awed into silence by the shittiest castle owned by the lowest Lord in the Seven Kingdoms - Prince Oberyn hadn’t bothered with the distinction between trueborn and bastard, raising his bastards as his own and availing them to the best Dorne had to offer, be they luxuries or melee instructors. Growing up in a childhood filled with gilded palaces and hallways of travertine and pink marble, Tyene nevertheless felt slightly intimidated at the majesty of Dragonstone. This was no grandiose monstrosity to satiate a glutinous King’s garish taste, but rather the imposing palace fit for a conqueror. And Aegon and his sister-wives were by far the greatest single conquerors in history.

Being led in by the Unsullied guards that had first captured her at shore, clad in simple gold and brown combat attire of a Dornish rebel, Tyene found herself gazing at the figure seated on the throne. Silver haired. The descendent of Aegon the Conqueror, set about on her own campaign of conquest and subjugation.

Without Missandei, it was up to Lord Varys to announce Dany’s presence in the throne room. "You stand in the presence of Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, Rightful Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men. Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. Mother of Dragons and Queen of Meereen. The Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, The Unburnt, The Breaker of Chains."

As the titles were recited, Tyene noticed the Queen standing stone-faced. An emotionless scowl - apart from a sort of default regal contempt that Tyene recognized - was all that existed of outward features. The Dragon Queen was striking and of small build but there was no doubt of the determination of a conqueror. She was the embodiment of the Targaryen motto: Fire and Blood. None of this surprised the daughter of Dorne.

No, what piqued her curiosity was the man standing next to the throne. Far too tall to be the
distinctive form of Tyrion Lannister, the Queen’s Hand, was this one. ‘A northerner,’ she thought dismissively. The brooding features, dark hair, and no nonsense build gave it away, and any member of House Martell would be dismissive of them since Lyanna Stark had caused Rhaegar Targaryen to betray her aunt Elia. However, by being next to the Queen he must have commanded great respect in Daenerys’ eyes, so Tyene had to be weary.

“Speak,” Daenerys offered, gesturing to Tyene. She didn’t look much older than herself or Jon. Glancing at her beloved, Dany remembered how she had said the generation of their parents had brought everything to near ruin with their squabbles and jockeying for power. ‘It is up to the young to set the world to rights.’

Dipping her head in respect, Tyene pushed her headscarf down to reveal her short locks. No one showing respect to a monarch would keep their head covered unless they were an armed guard.


Dany pursed her lips. “Yes, I heard about the sack of Sunspear. My condolences on the loss of your mother and sisters.” Losing the potential for an alliance with Dorne stung, namely for the ability to force Tywin to fight on two fronts.

Tears of grief threatened to well in her eyes but Tyene fought them off. Her mother barely mourned her father, instead choosing to honor his memory by avenging his death. ‘So to will I, for Obara, Nymeria, and my parents.’ “They fought as honorable Dornish warriors and statesmen. I would be honored to live up to their example.”

At that moment the northerner leaned in to whisper something to the Queen. The Queen responded in hush tones, and Tyene did not fail to catch the tenderness by which Daenerys Targaryen regarded the man. ‘Her lover? Betrothed?’ Was that how she intended to ally with the North. A reminder of the circumstances of her sibling, Rhaegar, angered Tyene but her quarrel was not with them. “Tell us, Lady Tyene,” the northerner finally responded. “Your cousin Trystane rules Dorne as of now. As family he is likely to grant you a pardon, so why do you seek Queen Daenerys’ counsel rather than his?”

“Because he is weak, nothing more than a puppet of the Lannisters.” Eying him with distaste, she shifted to the Dragon Queen. “You and I share a common enemy, your Grace. We both wish to see the Lannisters burn.”

“That is correct, we both have enemies within House Lannister,” Daenerys began. “However, the question wasn’t asked by me, it was asked by Lord Jon Snow. In the future, Tyene Sand,” she remarked coldly. “You will address my betrothed with the respect and honor he deserves.”

Jon Snow. ‘Eddard Stark’s bastard.’ The nephew of the woman that so disgraced her aunt Elia. Someone who’s family Tyene would have to forgive if she were to gain her desired goal. “Forgive me, Lord Snow. I meant no disrespect.”

To Tyene’s surprise - though it shouldn’t have been, given the infamous Stark honor - Jon seemed to shrug any grudge off. “What is it that you are seeking, Lady Tyene?”

“An alliance between Free Dorne and the Dragon Queen. One to destroy the false King Joffrey and liberate my homeland.”

Dany’s eyes narrowed. “And to do so you are willing to bend the knee?”

“Yes.”
Meeting Jon’s gaze, Dany gestured to him to lean in. “This is our chance to bring Dorne into the fold, my love,” she whispered.

“I’m not sure if she’s trustworthy, Dany. And it wouldn’t be easy. People tend to follow those in control of the cities.”

“So we shouldn’t take her offer?”

“I didn’t say that. Tyene Sand isn’t going anywhere. Keep her close and see if she can be trusted before legitimizing her claim.” There was no doubt that Dany would if she so chose - she had planned to do so to Jon before finding out he was already legitimate.

Watching Jon step back, Dany planted the mask back onto her face - though this time a bit more cordial. “Well, you must be tired from your long journey. My guards will escort you to your rooms while Lord Snow and I consult further on your offer.” As Tyene was led away, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was a guest or, rather, a prisoner.

Feeling the sun’s rays warm her cheeks, Sansa was glad for the break in the snowfall. Temperatures were still nowhere near enough to melt even a portion of the white blanket that covered the ground though. But this allowed the snowdrifts to be shoveled away and clear the roads, perfect as to the gathering of new forces in and around Winterfell. The northern lords would soon arrive, and they already had an important visitor. One she was currently helping out of the sleigh.

“Don’t worry about me, young lady.” Smiling toothlessly, Maester Aemon Targaryen peered at her with almost blind eyes. “My body may be old but I have the spirit of a man much younger. Help the young mother and her child.”

“It’s fine, Maester Aemon, I’ve got her,” laughed Sam, guiding Gilly and the adorable toddler swaddled in her arms down from the sleigh. “Lady Sansa,” he greeted, bowing slightly.

Sansa smiled. Jon was right, the awkward, bashful attitude was quite endearing to people that didn’t have the personality of an asshole. “Sam, it’s good to see you and Lady Gilly again.” They had gotten along decently at Castle Black, Gilly having a heart of gold and Sam’s intellectual heft proving a great asset.

“Do you know where the Winterfell library is? I need to see Jon about something.”

“Now, now, Samwell,” chided Aemon. “You’ve just arrived. Settle your family down first.”

The whole scene was amusing to Sansa, who couldn’t help the small grin on her face. “Maester Wolkan will take you to your rooms. Jon isn’t here at the moment, but at Dragonstone with Queen Daenerys.”

Distracted slightly by a gurgle from Little Sam, Sam nevertheless insisted. “I need to send a message to Jon at Dragonstone. There was a text at the library in Castle Black that I just discovered that alludes to something very important.”

“Very well. Maester, I need you to prepare a raven…”

“FUCK!” Head snapping around, Sansa only just saw a rapidly moving blur before she was brusquely shoved to the ground, a heavy weight on top of her. Blinking in confusion and fear, a flash of Ramsay mounting her with a disgusting leer on his face filled her mind and she screamed. ‘NO! NOT AGAIN!’ her thoughts shrieked as she lashed out with her fists. But a crash to her left abruptly
brought her out. Turning, Sansa saw the sleigh hit the walls of the castle.

Finally looking up, there was Podrick Payne, sheepish and with a bruise on his right cheek. He extended a hand and pulled her up. “Forgive me, my Lady, but you were about to be crushed.”

Breathing hard, Sansa only nodded. She faintly felt Margaery rushing over, looking her over for any injuries. “No… thank you.” Offering him a smile, at that moment the lowly squire seemed to her the dashing knight she had always hoped to meet - he may have been young and awkward, but he was brave. “Thank you, Podrick. I am in your debt.”

A small smile curled on his face. “No, my Lady. It was my duty.” Turning, he trotted off to wherever he was supposed to be. ‘At least there are some good men left in the world not related to me,’ Sansa couldn’t help but think.

“My Lady.” Blinking, her reflexes still a bit sluggish from her brush with death, Sansa took a moment before registering Maester Wolkan. “Dispatch from Lord Snow in Dragonstone. Arrived by raven just this hour.”

Nodding, she took the rolled up paper. “Thank you, Maester.” Watching him lumber away, she unfolded it with Margaery and Olenna waiting. Her eyes narrowed, rapidly perusing the message. “There’s division in the camp there as well. Queen Daenerys’ generals and… the Greyjoys…” ‘Theon made it,’ she thought. Sansa still didn’t forgive him completely, and Robb probably wanted to gut him like a fish, but she was glad that he made it to his sister. “Want to go for King’s Landing immediately, while Jon still thinks the Dead are more important.”

Olenna snorted, having ambled in after her granddaughter. “Maybe if Tywin was in charge… Hells, even that cunt Littlefinger. Joffrey and the ‘High Sparrow’ are insane and Cersei has the trustworthiness of a jackal. They have to be taken out first.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you.” Sansa went back to the message. “Seven Hells. The Dragon Queen is moving her forces to the mainland in order to consolidate a single front against both the Lannisters and the Dead. Seven thousand Unsullied and fifteen thousand auxiliaries departing for White Harbor, while thirty-five thousand Dothraki cavalry are to be ferried to Gulltown in the Vale. Oh this is just perfect.” Rolling her eyes, Sansa unceremoniously crumpled the message in her hand. “More mouths to feed in Winterfell…

“...And what message will this send to the Lords of the North, Vale, and Riverlands for both an Essosi army and a Dothraki horde to set foot on Westerosi soil,” Margaery finished for her. That was just the point. It wouldn’t. There were two natural boogeymen for the people of the Seven Kingdoms to scare their children and have nightmares about: the White Walkers and the Dothraki - not to mention the general distaste for slaves, which was technically what the Unsullied and the Meereenese regulars had been.

Jon - and by extension, Sansa - had his work cut out for him when he returned. Especially now that he was both a Targaryen and betrothed to one.

“And this mammoth had fur?” Curled up on either side of him, both Arya and Rhaegar were engrossed in the tales of their father north of the wall - not that Dany had seen them tire of anything in regards to their father. She hadn’t either, leading to some rather… pleasurable experiences for the both of them. Noticing the familiar sparkle in her eye, Jon smirked.

‘That woman will be the death of me.’ While they were spending time with their children - he was
glad that Dany shared his distaste of the ‘hand the children off to a nursemaid’ method of parenting common among noble families - was not the place to make sexual innuendo. Not when neither could do anything about it. “In the far north the mammoth are covered in woolly fur. The Free Folk and giants make their thick coats from it.” It brought a warmth to his heart to see the twins hang onto his every word. “They have large hunts, where a single warrior is entrusted with throwing the spear that takes down the beast. Last time it was held, I was that warrior.”

“You, poppa?” Arya’s eyes widened in shock.

“Of course it was poppa. He’s the greatest warrior ever.,” her brother declared.

Family. Such was what Daenerys wanted more than anything - more than even the Iron Throne. Here, with her love and her children without the worries of battle or ruling, this was what she craved. Where she most belonged.

What happiness and tranquility the dragonpack had was shattered as a distant explosion rocked the castle walls. Frightened murmurs left the children’s throats as Dany froze, eyes wide. Jon’s reflexes were far more honed from his years at the Wall. Longclaw out before a word could be said, he motioned for Dany to move the children away from the door. ‘I wish Ghost were here,” he thought bitterly as he moved to cover the entrance. When it burst open the blade rose to strike…

Only for Jon to lower it when Grey Worm appeared. His face was flustered, the slightest hint of panic marring his usual scowl. “My Queen,” he began in Valyrian. Then noticing that Jon was there, he switched to his still halting common tongue. “A large raiding party assaulting castle from the sea. Yara Greyjoy says they Ironborn.”

Curses left Jon’s mouth. Of course the other side of the Iron Islands civil war would eventually do Joffrey’s bidding - or at least try to take out their rivals. “How many?”

“I’m not sure. Fifty or so."

‘And most of our army is holed up in camp or on the ships in this rain. Fucking hells.’ The enemy picked the best time to attack. Jon sheathed Longclaw but donned his armor. “Are the Unsullied garrison and Yara’s men holding them off?” Grey Worm nodded. “I need several men guarding this room, quickly.”

“Jon…” Dany clutched the trembling twins close, neither of them fully grasping what was going on but picking up on the tension. ‘Please, don’t be the hero…’

He strode over, kissing Arya and Rhaegar’s foreheads before placing a deep kiss on Dany’s lips. “Stay with the twins. I’ll be back soon.” Jon offered a small smile and then was off with Grey Worm.

“Issa, will poppa be safe?” A pair of piercing grey eyes stared at her, small versions of her love’s. Dany nodded at her, holding them close. The door opened again revealing Doreah and four Unsullied. The handmaiden ushered the twins into the nursery, Dany staying behind while the guards divided in half between the room. Sighing, she sad facing the crackling fire, praying to whatever god was listening to keep Jon safe.

“I thought he’d never leave.”

Blood turning to ice, Dany’s head jerked back to see a dark shadow perched in the window ledge. A grappling hook gripped the overhang - how none of them heard anything was a mystery. The guards dropped their spears in defensive stance, sharp tips pointed right at the intruder.

The figure stepped out of the shadows to reveal a large, muscular man. “My, my, I admire his taste.”
His Ironborn coat was soaked from the sea spray. Close beard covering his perpetual half-grin, half-snarl, he towered over her, gaze hungry. Whereas Jon radiated warmth, this one was menacing. Malevolent. “I suspect he went to where my idiot niece and nephew are.”


“You catch on quick.” His eyes darted to the nursery, twinkling as if they discovered buried treasure. “While I love the company of a pretty woman, I have places to be. Hand over the brats and I won’t bother you or the bastard again.” Crashes and a scream from Doreah saw three more Ironborn enter through the windows for the nursery - only Euron remained in the massive bedchamber/solar.

Dany’s eyes blazed dragonfire. “You will die before you have them.” Hand darting to grab Saracen off a table, the blade glinted in the firelight as she drew it.

Euron sneered, grunting in triumph. “Feisty.” He drew his own short sword. “I like that in a woman.” The blade flashed as he lunged...
“THE GATE WON’T HOLD!” screamed Theon, firing an arrow through one of the firing slits. “Fucking rain!” Several snarls left the Dothraki bloodriders while the Unsullied remained silent, muscles straining to keep the heavy wooden doors shut against the relentless strain. It was this scene that Jon and Greyworm wandered into. “Jon! They’ve got a fucking battering ram to the gate!”

“How in Seven Hells did they get close enough to the gate?” Didn’t the defenders have archers manning the walls?

One of the Dothraki archers collapsed with an unmanly shriek, an arrow embedded in his heart. Grabbing another Dothraki by the scruff of his leather jerkin, Yara shoved the bow into his hands and pushed him into position. “It’s the rain, Lord Snow. Can’t see your cunthair through the fucking storm.” Another bang resonated from the door. “FUCK YOU!”

“The door won’t hold much longer, Lord Snow,” remarked Greyworm. Assessing the situation, Jon agreed. Whomever had attacked them, they picked the best night - though if Joffrey wanted to kill the queen or capture the castle he was using too many or two few men respectively. ‘What is his angle?’ The Ironborn would break through, so they had to prepare for it.

There was only one way to do that. “Fall back!” Jon yelled, taking charge of the situation. The Unsullied compiled while it took several moments for the Dothraki and Ironborn to get into good order. “Nock!” If the damn invaders were to get in, they’d meet withering fire. Arrows slid into position as hands drew bowstrings back.

A twang ran out as one arrow sailed and hit the door, the repetitive bang of the of the battering ram already cracking the jam. One Ironborn youth had the decency to look sheepish and embarrassed.

Jon grimaced. “Does nock mean loose?” He looked at the entire line. “DOES NOCK MEAN FUCKING LOOSE?”

“NO!” cried the men. The door was about to give way.

“Men, with me!” Jon raised Longclaw in the air, just as he had at Hardhome and Winterfell. Joffrey may have let others do his dirty work, but Jon Snow fought alongside his men. “Let’s tear em the fuck apart!” Undulating Dothraki chants joining with the low Ironborn howls and Unsullied clattering their spears against their shields, the battering rams smashed through the gate. Ironborn rushing in, they were met with arrows and the charging defenders slamming into them.

Spurts of blood marred the muralled walls as the arrows hit home. Steel met steel as the Ironborn fought the Targaryen soldiers. Shrieks left the Dothraki, in their element with blood lust and carnage. The Unsullied stayed in formation, using their spears and shields not unlike the Bolton hoplites to keep none of the invaders from charging deeper into the complex. ‘Why are they attacking here?’ Jon still wondered even as Longclaw parried a wild stab before slashing through leather armor as if it were paper. One Ironborn screamed obscenities as he charged, Jon blocking the axe’s downward swing before he kicked him in the groin.

‘...to distract from their main objective,’ he finished, driving his sword through the gap in the armor of the felled Ironborn. Jon’s eyes widened in realization. “DAENERYS!” He didn’t even hesitate to take off back to the royal chambers.

“Lord Snow!” Greyworm called out, slamming his shield to push back another soldier into the
waiting blade of Yara Greyjoy.

“Go! Cockless cunt, we’ve got this!” Lashing out at another one of her comrades turned blood rivals, the salt throne pretender noticed the Unsullied commander following his future king through the corners of her eyes. “Come on fuckers, you gonna let a fucking girl show you up?!” With a guttural battle cry the Targaryen forces charged their attackers.

Thunder booming close to shore, Tyene involuntarily backed away from the window. There wasn’t much that the combat-trained noblewoman had to fear, but for some reason thunderstorms were on that list. She flicked her hair with nervous energy. ‘Why can’t it just end?’ Gods, how her sisters had teased her endlessly about it - thinking about her sisters just brought another bout of melancholy upon her. They deserved better ends. They deserved to be avenged.

‘And how will you do that while you’re locked up in this room?’ she thought angrily. If she had been the queen, then this protective measure would make sense to her. Tyene, however, hated it nonetheless. She was given every comfort, but being restricted by guards wherever she went still constituted imprisonment in her eyes. ‘If only I can make her understand my sincerity…’

Suddenly, a pair of grappling hooks scraped against the stone windowsill. Not long after two hulking men with leather armor emblazoned with the kraken hauled themselves in. Swords at the ready and hard scowls on their faces, when their eyes fell on Tyene the Ironborn soldiers’ expressions morphed into lustful leers. Tyene wanted to spit in disgust - both at them and the fact the Unsullied had confiscated her twin blades. “Well well, what do we have here?”

“Drowned god, I fucking love this job,” hooted another, literally drooling. “So what’ll it be, cunt? Gonna make it easy on yourself, cause one way or the other you’re gonna get the fuck of your life.” Dropping his sword, he began loosening his trousers.

‘And these are supposed to be the top naval fighters in the world?’ Not when they thought with their little head, Tyene supposed. Well, it worked to her advantage. ‘Like momma taught us…’ “I don’t think big men like you have ever sampled Dornish pussy.” Her voice dripped seduction, accent pronounced and deep.

“Ah, a Dornish cunt. I heard they were the best… ulgh…” Distracted by his lust, he hadn’t noticed Tyene managing to dart forward and take his knife. One quick series of moves and blood poured from the cut in his throat, sprinkling the surviving Sand Snake with crimson specks of blood. The other raised his sword but Tyene was quicker. Aim true, the knife shot forth and embedded itself in the Ironborn’s heart. Eyes widening, he collapsed in a boneless heap.

Racing to the door, Tyene pulled it open to find the two Dothraki guards dead on the floor, chests sliced open. An Ironborn corpse joined them, slit throat pooling blood all over the floor. Screams and clanging metal echoed through the hallway. Instinctively, she grabbed a second knife from one of the corpses and darted through the cavernous corridor to the heart of the action.

Ser Jorah, after all that had humbled him in his life, wasn’t often gripped with rage. Having your wife betray you after causing you to commit acts that brought either exile or death did that to a person. Eyes white hot as he brought his sword down at the Ironborn brute that threatened the innocent children of his Queen, the suppressed anger of years and years erupted in an inferno. To his left an Unsullied fell, head sliced clean off by an attacker while the two remaining formed a protective screen around the Prince and Princess - who were huddling under the latter’s bed in pure
fear. To his right a brute jumped upon Doreah, who was clawing at him in terror. With another howl he brought the sword down to slice off the Ironborn’s hand.

Far from felling him, the berserker only grew angrier and charged right into Jorah’s chest, slamming them both against the nursery door. The flimsy wood caved and sent the Bear Island knight to the ground. Shoulder twinging with stabbing pain, cloudy eyes noticed the one handed berserker grab a knife from his belt to finish the job. Jorah waited for the inevitable. “Forgive me Khaleesi…”

A gurgling sound then escaped from the Ironborn’s mouth, knife protruding from his throat. A lithe figure stood behind. “Ser Jorah,” the figure said in accented common tongue.

“Lady Tyene.” A pained grunt left his lips as he hauled himself up. Movement behind her caught his eye. “Watch out!” He raised his sword to take on the attacker who had kicked Tyene in the chest.

Quick on her feet and nimble, the Sand Snake wiggled her body and leapt back upright, lashing out with a round kick to the Ironborn’s temple. Crying out in pain, he stumbled back, allowing her the opening to charge back into the nursery. Sword in hand, Jorah charged right behind her.

Blade slicing downward, Euron chopped the spearpoint off the Unsullied trooper’s weapon before grabbing the broken staff. “AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH!” he snarled, running his enemy through with his sword. A grin crossed his bloodlusted face. “Looks like it’s just you and me, gorgeous.” Tossing his blade from hand to hand, he spread his arms, taunthing the Dragon Queen.

Sweat ran down Dany’s brow. Bruises covered her body from Euron’s blows, dress sliced and splotched with her own blood. Nevertheless, she raised Saracen, not backing down.

His grin widened. “It’s gonna be fun making such a strong cunt my slave.”

“A dragon is no slave,” she roared, darting forward. Daario Naharis had taught her the nimble fighting styles of Essosi sellswords. Sidestepping the brute strength-heavy downward blows Euron sent against her, Dany sliced across Euron’s chest.

“ARGGGGG! Fucking bitch!” Snarling, he backhanded her hard against the cheek, sending Dany to slam against the stone wall. She cried in pain, stone bruising her already battered body. Grimy fingers wiped blood from the edge of his chin. “Not bad for a lady,” Euron chuckled darkly. He hovered over her like a demon, Dany backing herself against the wall - no blade, no dragons, she felt naked and defenseless.

The tiny girl open to her brother’s abuse. “Please,” she heard herself say, voice the same as the frightened girl. Before her crown. Before her dragons. Before Jon. “Please don’t hurt me.”

Smirk darkening, Euron stepped closer. “Trust me, all bitches love it.” His hand moved to loosen his trousers.

A loud thump then echoed through the room. What followed was even louder, bringing down the door with a resounding crash. In dashed a cloaked figure, Valyrian Steel sword glinting in the firelight. ‘Jon.’ Behind him was the leather-armored form of Greyworm.

Gazing upon the scene, it didn’t take long for Jon to put two and two together. A cry escaped his throat - one only describable as a combination of a dragon’s roar and a wolf’s snarl. Setting upon the Ironborn King, Euron only just deflected the blade before it could split his skull in half. He hissed from the pain of Greyworm’s spear grazing his abdomen. Eyes blazing with Targaryen fire, Jon brought Longclaw down again and again with righteous fury. A lucky blow sliced the Ironborn sword in half, a kick to the chest knocking the wind out of Euron and sending him to the ground.
“You dare to harm my family?” Jon growled, pointing his sword downward at the Ironborn’s stomach. “Winter has come for you, Euron Greyjoy.” He readied to pierce the swine’s heart.

Rage blinding him, Jon failed to notice Euron’s legs until one had swept across his legs, felling him. Euron grabbed a sword from a fallen comrade but found Greyworm on him with short sword drawn. It was easily parried, his bulk managing to push greyworm back as Jon scrambled back to his feet.

Eyes locking with his tormentor, Jon registered a hyena-like grin being sent his way. The grin of a man that had nearly stabbed his betrothed through the middle and abducted his children. Snarling, every inch the White Wolf and Grey Dragon, Jon charged. He swung Longclaw with murderous force, but Euron was far too nimble. Out he leapt into the void - the Valyrian steel smacked against the stone, chipping it. Jon peered out into the darkness, fierce rain soaking his hair and matting the strands on his forehead in the few seconds prior to withdrawing back in. One of the Unsullied wordlessly handed him a cloth. “Thank you,” Jon offered, using it to dry off as best he could. Euron had to have died from the fall… probably, but he had the look of a survivor. The dragons would be of no use, not in this weather. Rhaegal had enough trouble in snow, let along this. “Greyworm, get a patrol and kill any Ironborn or find any corpses,” he ordered, sheathing Longclaw. “Now!” Slamming his fist against his open palm, Greyworm immediately complied - respecting Jon far more after the northerner proved himself in defending his Queen.

Looking at Daenerys, the couple wordlessly walked into the other’s embrace, the Queen burying her face in his neck and he kissing her brow. They held each other desperately, squeezing tight - all that could pry them apart were two soft voices. “Poppa.” Breaking the embrace, Jon stormed with a look of panic into the nursery with Dany hot on his heels. His gaze immediately found the twins. Neither he nor Dany cared about anything else as they rushed to embrace them. Tears fell from the Targaryen heirs, proud royals but children nonetheless. It took all of Jon’s strength not to join them in sobs - although these were of horrified relief.

“Hush, sweetlings,” Dany cooed, remaining strong for their sake. “Let’s get you out of here.” Allowing Jon to heft them up, one in each hand, Dany watched as they buried their faces into his leather tunic. She soon thanked the Gods for that. Ironborn and Unsullied corpses littered the floor, grisly wounds still spilling blood on the stone and one head severed off its body. Poor Doreah lay slumped on the wall, face still frozen in fear in the paleness of blood loss. A long cut across her throat explained why. ‘Oh Doreah.” Only she and Ser Jorah had been with her through it all.

The lone figures remaining were Jorah and Lady Tyene. Both’s blades were drenched in crimson liquid, clothes and armor ripped. Two pairs of eyes, one grey and one violet, met them in a silent, desperate expression. ‘Thank you.’

Joffrey Baratheon may have brought the stench of death to Dragonstone to finish off the last of Rhaella’s brood, but the heirs were safe. The Dragon Queen was safe. The Dragonwolf was safe. And filled with a terrible resolve.

Reaching out to brush another crinkly page in the decades-old transcription of a centuries-old text, Samwell Tarly suddenly found himself engulfed in darkness. A quick check found that the candle had burned out without him even noticing. “Damn it,” he murmured, reaching into his Night’s Watch cloak - nothing was better to keep out the cold, and the drafts that blew through the stout walls of Winterfell could barely compare to the massive gusts from atop the Wall - for the spare he always carried.

The heir to Hornhill turned brother of the Night’s Watch turned ametuer Maester felt naturally at home within the dusty walls of the Winterfell library. Ignored by the Ironborn when they burned
most of the castle and subsequently ignored by the Boltons - Roose hadn’t run the castle for long and Ramsay had no use for books - the arrival of Sam finally found the dust wiped from the texts and the words within perused for the good of the Stark cause. It was at least three times as big as the library at Castle Black. Sam hoped that it would shed more light on the issue he had nearly figured out. The fight against the Dead was still running into a stone wall despite six dragons at Jon and Daenerys’ disposal, but perhaps what he found could help keep the disparate factions and Lords in line.

Fishing out the spare candle, he peered around for the holder and match when his arm accidentally spilled melted wax all over his cloak and notes. “Seven Hells,” Sam cursed, the coarseness of the Night’s Watch still tempered by his gentle nature. Scribbled with countless ideas and thoughts about pressing problems, he moved to furiously wipe the wax off. Books and papers fell to the floor from his clumsy efforts.

A low orange light suddenly appeared. “Here he is. You were right.” Sam turned his face to find Lady Sansa, placing a lantern on the table and kneeling to help pick up his papers.

“No need for that, mi’Lady,” he stammered, scrambling to do it himself.

Sansa waved him off. “It’s fine, Samwell.” Jon had never left work to his subordinates out of expectation. It appeared that it was a Stark trait, humble even with their noble birth.

Gilly, however, had annoyance written all over her face. “There you are, dumb git.” One hand gripping Little Sam tightly, she extended the other to smack the back of his head. “Our son wakes up in the middle of the night missing his daddy, and I find the other side of our bed cold and you in the damn library.” She was clad in a rumpled northern-style dress, likely hastily thrown on. They were plain compared to the elaborate silk or cotton gowns his mother or sister wore, but Sam still thought she looked breathtaking in them. “If it wasn’t for Lady Sansa, then I would be completely lost.”

“Oh…” Sam felt his… paramour for lack of a better word, place his adopted son in his arms. The two-year old sleepily smiled at him, snuggling into his warm cloak. It warmed Sam’s heart, the former heir never thinking that someone so disgraceful or hated by his father would ever attract anyone not by coin. But here Gilly was, with a child that was essentially his no less. “I’m sorry, Gilly.” Sam watched her soften. “And forgive me, my Lady. It was not my intention to deprive you of sleep.”

The redhead waved him off. “Nonsense. I… wasn’t sleeping anyway.” Aside from that first night at Castle Black following her escape, Sansa couldn’t remember a night in recent years when she had truly slept soundlessly. Too many nightmares. Ramsay, Joffrey, her father’s death… they all rushed back vividly following her flashback a week before. And that was due to Squire Payne’s great kindness.

“Been there,” Sam replied with sympathy. By now Little Sam had fallen asleep in his arms and Gilly was helping him clean up the wax. “I’ve been trying to solve Jon and Queen Daenerys’ budding problem with stubborn groups such as the Northern Lords or potentially Dorne.” The North never enjoyed being under the southern yoke, and the Martell words were ‘Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken.’ Such sentiment would likely be found all over the territory that Jon and Daenerys would claim together. “There’s something I’ve confirmed in ancient history that may work.”

“Please elaborate.” Sansa slid into the bench seat next to Sam, peering at the texts. Officially in Jon’s absence, though he held no title apart from the respect he won on the battlefield as the liberator of the North from Viserys Targaryen, Robb as Lord of Winterfell was in charge. However, the weight of his past had crashed down upon him. Her brother sullen and increasingly isolated, it was Sansa that took up the mantle of Lady of Winterfell alongside her rank as Jon’s unofficial Hand.
Leafing through the book in front of him, Sam found the passage that illuminated it all for him. “Alright, Maester Aemon kept a decent collection of items on Valyrian history - given his ancestry, not surprising.”

“Valyrian…” On Gilly’s tongue, wilding accent and all, the word sounded quite foreign. “Isn’t that where the Queen is from?”

“Yes, although centuries removed that is.” Sam pointed to a particular passage. “What I didn’t know was that before the Valyrian Freehold there was an entity called the Valyrian Empire. Quite short-lived.”

“Empire?” Sansa furrowed her brows. “I’ve never heard of such a word.”

“Neither did I, and the books at Castle Black didn’t contain any explanation of how it was founded, only of how it collapsed.” He patted the text below him in triumph. “This explains it, and the key to how it will help the royal couple lies in how the Valyrian King dealt with the constant rebellions of the Ghiscari people…”

Arya Stark felt annoyance course through her icy veins. Here she was, a daughter of the North, shivering and huddling close to the fire she was supposed to stoke like a King’s Landing maiden. ‘Northerners are supposed to be used to the cold. Firm up, Arya.’ The former faceless man hated that she had to keep her palms right at the edge of the flames to keep the frostbite away - or at least the sensation of impending frostbite away. The fact that the nineteen year-old girl probably never experienced a true winter in her memory did not register through her annoyance.

Her shivering body may have kept her focus on the fire, but Arya’s honed senses weren’t dulled one bit - especially not enough to miss the slight crunch of booted feet on soft snow. “You’re lucky that I love you and know your footsteps, Gendry Waters,” she said flatly, but with an amused smirk. “Or else it wouldn’t end pretty, sneaking up on me like that.”

The smirk grew wider as two arms circled around her waist. “One day I’ll sneak up on you, Arry.” His Flea Bottom accent contrasted plainly with her Northern lilt.

Lips pressed against the skin of her neck, coaxing a low moan from Arya. “Mmmm, keep telling yourself that.” With so much hell in her life, she lived for these small moments of affection with the one person that had been by her side for all of it.

“AAHHHHHHH!” Keen as their senses were to danger - though even a deaf man would likely have heard the screaming - Arya drew needle and Gendry grabbed his hammer, both tensing in fighting stance.

“Hot Pie?” Arya called out.

Twigs snapping and leaves crackling, the aforementioned cook came sprinting out through the woods. Brambles smacked into him but he did not seem to notice, face contorted in fear as he lumbered swiftly towards his companions. “MONSTER!”

Arya’s eyes widened when out from the brambles bounded a large grey-white beast. Almost as tall as her, its fangs were bared and ears pulled back in anger. A low, snarl-like growl left its mouth. ‘Direwolf.’ The fierce creature native to the North and the sigil of House Stark. But there were no direwolves in the Riverlands. “Motherfucker,” she heard Gendry murmur, readying his hammer to take the beast down while Hot Pie hid behind them. She had seen the move before, a quick strike to
Recognition flashed in her eyes. ‘Is that?’ Gendry moved to strike the snarling beast. “WAIT!” The
direwolf quieted while Gendry faltered, gazing at Arya as if she sprouted two heads. Setting Needle
upon the ground, Arya softly approached. ‘There is only one Direwolf in the Riverlands.’ A small
smile of hope crossed her face. “Nymeria?”

“Arya, what are you doing?!” Gendry hissed, horror over his face as the woman he loved got on her
knees before the beast. “You’ll get yourself killed!”

Pushing him out of her mind for the moment, Arya’s eyes locked on the direwolf’s. “I know we had
to part, girl, but I’m back. I am heading back home… to Winterfell. My brother is there, and your
brother is probably with him.” Slowly, taking note of the direwolf’s bared teeth though it wasn’t
growling anymore, she raised her upturned palm. “Come with us. Come home, girl.”

Growling once more, Nymeria stepped slowly to Arya. Her head met hers, yellow-rimmed eyes dark
and menacing. Trying to keep her breath even, Arya didn’t say a word as the large snout took several
large sniffs. Then the direwolf seemed to deflate all of her tension. Tongue darting out, Nymeria
began happily licking her long lost owner. But no proper direwolf ever forgot a scent.

Joyful laughs left Arya’s lips. “Stop it girl… that tickles.” Grabbing Nymeria’s fur, she began
tickling her neck as the licks kept coming.

“Well I’ll be damned.” Gendry snorted, a ghost of a grin on his face. ‘That girl continues to surprise
me,’ the apprentice blacksmith thought. A thud behind him showed the different reaction from Hot
Pie. Luckily, the snow managed to soften his fall, fainting from the fear rapidly leaving his body.
Gendry’s grin only widened. “Hell of a life.”

The howling wind could be heard even from deep within the crypts. Keeping her fur cloak tight over
her body, Margaery Tyrell at least drew comfort in being out of the sleet outside. ‘Damn northern
blizzards.’ Growing up her entire life in the sunny plains of Highgarden, it amazed her how people
like her lover could even stand a week in these conditions.

Speaking of her lover… “I knew I could find you here.” After bringing up the courage to ask Sansa
where he had been disappearing in the middle of the night, she had told her.

Turning his head slightly to signify he registered her presence, Robb Stark turned back to the specific
crypt. “I’m sorry. I’ll be up soon, you didn’t have to come.”

“It’s alright.” Striding to right beside him, Margaery took a moment to study the enigmatic former
King of the North. His looks hadn’t changed a bit from their… indiscretion at Renly’s camp at
Storm’s End. Shaggy brown hair, chiseled jaw, muscular body - he was a very attractive man,
combining the brooding Stark charm with fairer Tully beauty. Reaching out to trace a finger along
his jaw, watching as he closed his eyes at her touch, she could sense the changes. Before he had
been innocent, brash, inexperienced to the greater games of the world. In all fairness, so had she. But
it weighed on him far more. Looking at the crypt, she realized why. “I didn’t know she was buried
here.”

A sad smile formed on Robb’s face. He stared at the inscription. Talisa Stark, Queen of the North.
There was no statue yet, but the sarcophagus was only a week old. “Some surviving Stark
bannermen found her in the river and took her to Wintertown. I made sure she had the burial of a
queen.”
“She must have been lovely.” Some would have been jealous, but with the loss of many in her family, Margaery understood. Seeing a tear fall from Robb’s cheek, she drew him into a hug. “Don’t cry, Robb.”

“It was my fault.” With the threat of the Bolton’s gone, his guilt had returned full force. “She needed me to protect her. My people needed me to protect them, and I failed.”

Margaery softly stroked his back. “You were betrayed, Robb. We all miscalculate, but in the end it was treachery and not stupidity that caused this.” Cupping his cheeks, she kissed him. “Would Talisa want you to destroy yourself?”

He sighed. “No.” Gazing into her eyes, he brought their lips back together. “Thank you, Margaery. I love you.”

She couldn’t help but smile widely. “And I you.” Hugging him close, she thanked the Seven for the second chance.

Fingers curling around the golden goblet resting on the table, Tywin Lannister poured himself another cup. The wine was watered while the bottles serving his guests weren’t - it was a shame to dilute the fine Dornish red, but the political advantage of the family came before personal comforts. “I trust your sea voyage was uneventful.”

“It was,” replied Razdal mo Eraz, sipping at the wine. “Luckily, most of the Dragon whore’s fleet is anchored at Dragonstone or White Harbor.”

Belicho Paenymion, dressed in the colors of Volantis, was slightly drunk. “The Ironborn did an excellent job of screening, though I do warn you that eleven transports managed to slip through the blockade and are heading to Slaver’s Bay as we speak.” Blunt in the way only an inebriated mind would be in diplomatic parlay.

“Oh?” Tywin smiled. “So she is sending Westerosi forces to Meereen I would assume. That would mean the alliance with the North has been established.” Glancing out at the gardens around him, Tywin had to admire the late Doran Martell’s taste. They truly were beautiful. Hating the Martells that he did, Tywin was the bigger man to admit it. “The harbors in Westeros are very active, both her moving troops to the North and our forces heading back to King’s Landing. I’m afraid we won’t have the manpower to spare.”

Unlike his more ‘cultured’ colleagues, the low born slave trader Yezzan zo Qaggaz hadn’t drank a drop. Tywin admired that. “It is not manpower we seek, but mere… assistance.” He handed a scroll to the Lannister Lord. “This is our formal offer to the great King. We both have a dragon infestation, and are in need of proper slaves.”

“You have slaves.” The practice personally didn’t bother Tywin, even though his grandson’s… efforts made no sense to him.

Eraz frowned. “Uppity slaves, as we call them. However, the construction projects of King’s Landing are perfect for them.”

“We can take care of an important part of the Dragon whore’s empire for you, and provide a profitable alliance.” Qaggaz gestured to the scroll.

Tywin skimmed through it, liking what he read. He raised his cup. “A toast, to the Reign of the Dragon Queen. Short as it will be.” A toast that was shared by the three guests.
“Words cannot describe the gratitude I have for your actions that night, Lady Sand.” Atop the Black Throne of Aegon the Conqueror before his formation of a united Westeros, the munificent smile on Daenerys’ face was completely genuine. Had it not been for Tyene Sand, Jorah would have died and Euron would have probably taken the twins - her fists clenched at the thought of him. No body had been found by the search teams. ‘He got away!’ If she ever found the Ironborn again, Dany vowed to have Balerion burn him alive.

As it stood, she owed the Dornish resistance leader a huge debt. One she hoped to repay.

Tyene, on her part, curtseyed modestly. “Anyone with a sense of morality and honor would have done the same, your Grace.” She swallowed, remembering what her mother had made her vow after Oberyn’s dead. “The innocent among us do not deserve to be harmed.” ‘I understand that now.’ “You need not reward me.”

“But I shall.” Straightening her back, Dany radiated power and prestige, black woolen dress with a red trim and a silver dragon pendant around her neck. There was no denying she was a queen. Violet eyes quickly made Varys’, the rotund eunuch nodding ever so slightly. Advice and confirmation was what advisors were for - but this decision was hers and Jon’s. “And if the future King was here, he would agree. Tyene Sand, do you bend the knee and swear allegiance to me?”

Without hesitation, Tyene did so. The Martell creed was ‘Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken,’ but Tywin Lannister’s campaign of rape and death had driven them to desperation. Daenerys Targaryen would be a kind ruler, a benevolent one. “I swear myself and my people to Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, first of her name.”

Rising from her throne, Ser Jorah and Greyworm not far behind in protective pose, Daenerys slowly walked until her toes were mere inches from Tyene’s hand resting on the smooth granite floor. “As the rightful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms,” she began, placing her palm on the Sand Snake’s shoulder. “I hereby legitimize you with the name of your father and his house, and name you the rightful heir to your family’s title. Rise, Tyene of House Martell, second of your name, rightful Princess of Dorne and Lady of Sunspear.”

Eyes bugging out in shock, Tyene stood. All composure had left her as her jaw was slack. ‘Legitimized… me?’ Never in any of the various scenarios did she ever imagine this to be one of them. Not only to be the pretender to the throne of Dorne against her cousin, but as a legitimized daughter of Prince Oberyn. “My Queen, you overwhelm me with this honor.” Still standing, Tyene nevertheless kept her eyes downcast. She was taller than the Dragon Queen but still felt her inferior in every way.

A soft, melodic laugh left Daenerys, grasping Tyene’s hands. “It was my betrothed, Jon Snow, that suggested it. He is just as grateful to you for saving our children, the Crown Prince and Princess, regardless of him not being able to attend this audience.”

“Please extend such to his Grace as well.” She returned the Queen’s smile. “He and I are not dissimilar, since Lord Snow and I share a common status at birth.”

“Watch yourself,” hissed Greyworm, face in a deeper scowl than usual. The Unsullied commander had grown an immense respect and gratitude to Jon after he saved Dany from Euron, almost as if he was glad for her to have a man that would protect her.
Tyene, though, lowered her head. “Forgive me my Queen, I did not mean offense.” Being a bastard was less of a stigma in Dorne. She was sincerely trying to form a bond.

“It is alright,” Daenerys said. “Jon has come to terms with his ancestry, considering it is not something to have little pride for.” Now was not the time to reveal the truth, much as the truth made Dany swell with happiness. “Most of my advisors have departed for Winterfell, to secure our new alliance. As the Princess and Warden of Dorne, I hope you attend.”

Grinning, she curtseyed again. “At your command, my Queen.”

It was surreal for Daenerys. Boots clacking on the granite floors, intricate carvings of ancient Valyrian conquests adorning the walls, she was in awe at how far she came. As long as she had rested her feet on the grass and snow of her ancestral homeland, for the girl that had lived on Essos for the vast majority of her life it still was hard to fathom. She was home. Daenerys Targaryen had returned to reclaim her title.

And the voices she began to faintly hear proved that it wasn’t just her title she was fighting for. “Poppa, are the bad men still out there?” Dany heard the fear in their voices.

She wouldn’t be fighting for her title alone, either. “They won’t hurt you, my sweet daughter.” Jon’s tone seemed flat, but it was actually brimming with emotion. Most couldn’t be able to tell, but Daenerys could. “I would do anything to protect both of you. Your mother, your aunts and uncles, our dragons, my direwolf…”

“Will we get to meet the direwolf, poppa?” A small smile curved on her lips at Rhaegar’s childhood enthusiasm. They would be alright, despite the trauma of Euron’s raid.

Dany heard Jon laugh. “Of course. He’ll love both of you. Don’t be scared of him, he only harms enemies of the Starks.”

“We’re Starks, right?” Arya seemed adamant. “Momma is a dragon, but you’re a wolf. We’re dragonwolves.”

“You are. My dragonwolves.” After some muffled sounds and two kisses, Jon entered their chambers. Black circles under his eyes, he rolled his shoulders and groaned in melancholy. About to stomp tiredly to the bed, he looked up and stopped in his tracks at the sight of his betrothed. “Dany… I didn’t hear you come in.”

Wordlessly, Daenerys walked into his chest and hugged him tightly. “How are they?” she asked, face buried in his chest.

Jon sighed, wrapping his arms around his beloved. “Getting better.” It had been her idea, allowing him to watch over the children for the last days. He deserved to know the blood of their blood - bond with them as deeply as Dany had. Running his fingers gently along her spine, Jon enjoyed the contented purrs against his chest. “They’re happy during the day, but still have nightmares.” He felt Dany grow hotter from each word he said.

“I will burn Euron Greyjoy alive.” She had every intention of having Balerion do the deed. “Him and Joffrey both.”

Tightening his hold, Jon used his inner ice to cool the fire. The wolf warring against the dragon. Steel versus passion. His beloved was all fire, while he had Stark blood to temper the Targaryen. “Daenerys… I cannot lose my family.” He pulled back, exposing him at his most raw. “Arya, Rhaegar, Sansa, Robb… If I lost even one of you…”
Heart breaking at his pain, she kissed him. “You will not lose us. You have Longclaw, I have Saracen, and we both have armies and dragons.” Daenerys wished she felt as confident as she sounded. “We will relocate to Winterfell. It’ll be safer for the children there.”

“Until the Night King comes.” Nowhere could his family be safe, all corners of the world either in Joffrey’s reach the Night King’s. He could not take both at the same time, not even with six dragons and tens of thousands of men. “Daenerys, do you believe me about the Army of the Dead.” Jon grabbed her waist. “I need you to believe me.”

The chill in his gaze left Daenerys colder than she had ever been. “I believe you.”

It was Jon who then kissed her. “The Night King is the greatest threat to mankind, but the Wall shields us from him. I can’t see how he gets through, not at this time. Joffrey, though, is an imminent threat.” Images of Euron nearly atop Dany were seared into his memory. “He will never stop. Tyrion is right. The only way to obtain our united front is for him to die - for us to kill him and take the Seven Kingdoms.”

Daenerys smirked darkly. “We will end his horrid reign. You and me, my love.” The exhilaration morphed into a gasp of lust as Jon ran his hand along her stomach. Searing their lips together in a passionate kiss, the two royals fell onto the bed.

“I need you Jon,” Dany gasped. The mood changed suddenly to frantic lust - Jon from a wolf to a dragon in a heartbeat and she loved it. His lips blazed a trail of licks and bites down her neck and shoulders, sucking at her flesh. “Don’t make me wait.”

Jon shoved his trousers down without even bothering to unfasten them. Unperturbed by the ripping fabric, he hiked her dress to find nothing beneath it. “No underclothes?” he asked her, eyes meeting hers, which were so dark a violet to be almost black.

Nodding, she wrapped her legs around his hips, urging him inside her. “Ahhhh.” Her dragonwolf always stretched her going in. It defied logic but Dany grew even wetter. “Take your dragon, Jon. Make her roar.”

Growling, Jon slammed their lips together as he began a furious pace. A groan bubbled up from deep within him, her walls deliciously tight around his length. ‘Gods, she is perfect.’ Jon wanted to shatter her beneath him. To tame the ferocious Dragon Queen till she was nothing but a limp rag. The sounds of their hips smacking together again and again mixed with the ripping of fabric, her hands tearing his tunic apart from sheer lust and nails digging into his back. Pulling out to only slam into her again, Jon realized that she was wearing too much.

A gasp left Dany as her betrothed ripped the top of her dress, exposing her breasts to his hungry mouth. “Jooooonn…” she moaned, him latching onto a nipple as he continued to fuck her harder and harder. Daenerys ran her nails down his back, screaming as she suddenly tumbled over the edge. “FUCK, JON!”

Pumping harder into her to draw out her climax, Jon couldn’t help but wince at the sting. Once the cloud of contentment dissipated, Dany looked at him with concern. “You scratched up my back, Dany,” he chuckled.

Dany smirked, rolling them over until she was straddling his still hard cock. “Let me make it up to you, my King.”
Rows and rows of golden armor, the glare of the sun reflected off the metal nearly blinding for miles around. Chimera, Lion, Archer, and other banners from various Westerlands and Stormlands houses fluttered in the breeze. It seemed as if all of Westeros was marching to war against the Dragon Queen and the Northern Bastard.

Cersei Lannister knew better. Though impressive and vast, the total size was no larger than thirty thousand. A considerable amount, especially with the hope of reinforcement at Harrenhal by the loyal Lords of the Riverlands, but nothing comparing to the Dothraki Horde or the main Lannister army.

Despite the threat the Dragon Queen and her bastard lover posed to her son’s rule, Cersei cared not about it. No, her attention was riveted to something else entirely. Elite Lannister heavy infantry in the van, directly behind were the army’s commanders. Lord Randyll Tarly, Lord Paramount of the Reach. His son and heir Dickon Tarly, Randyll’s initial heir having proved unworthy. Lord Selwyn Tarth of Evenfall Hall, sworn to Lord of the Stormlands Tommen Baratheon despite his daughter and heir being sworn to Sansa Stark. Lord Leo Lefford of Golden Tooth, one of her father’s best subordinates from the Westerlands. And finally, atop a snow white stallion was Jamie Lannister, former Kingsguard and heir to House Lannister. The one who drew Cersei’s rapt attention, eyes riveted on the faint but instantly recognizable form of him.

A tear flowed down Cersei’s cheek, burning a hot rivulet along the pale skin. “Jamie.” Watching him march off to war was hell on her. ‘Never enough time. Never enough.’ Their moments together were always fleeting. Robert, drunk and smelling of the perfume of various whores, stumbling in her bed every now and again. Whenever their father visited it was impossible. And then Jamie’s capture and what followed. ‘I was such a fool.’ Blind in her anger at being left alone for so long, alone to suffer the wrath of war and her son’s gripping madness, she had spurned Jamie.

‘Damn me. Damn…’ She caught her thoughts, stopped from condemning her firstborn to eternal damnation in each hell. But it was hard, watching him and his madness. Knowing that each step he took from it brought her closer and closer to breaking her love for him. Cersei had learned a lot as her son devolved into something akin to a beast. Learned of the madness within her as well. Jamie helped her, he comforted her. She needed him and now he was gone.

Unlike before, she would not cry over him but welcome him when he returned. Picking herself up, Cersei wiped the tears away and headed down from the balcony to her quarters.

An old man blocked the middle of the hallway. Clad in a dirty burlap shift, brown and marred with dirt, he gingerly moved a wet rag across the stone. Back and forth, back and forth. Water slooshing as he wiped away the grime. Cersei paid him no attention aside from annoyance. There were no guards to protect her at this moment - they were rarely there anymore, likely a sign of how far she’d fallen in her son’s favor - so she addressed him herself. “Out of the way.” Instead he stood, and her eyes widened and fists clenched. “High Sparrow.”

Smiling wanly, the once wicked man gentlemanly stepped aside. “Of course, Queen Mother. Do pass by. No need to mind me.”

Most of the small council’s motivations were easy for Cersei to figure out. Littlefinger’s was power. Qyburn’s was knowledge. Pycelle’s was luxury. The High Sparrow, arguably the second most powerful figure in the Seven Kingdoms, was an enigma to her. Someone she both feared and regarded as beneath contempt. ‘Ridiculous, he could live in a gold palace but chooses to wash the floors.’ She forced herself to be polite. “Thank you.”

He held up an extra rag. “If you so desire, cleaning the floors works wonders to clean the spirit.”
Her eyes glared at the rag with disdain. “A man of the people? Is that your game? Is that why my son keeps you around?”

“Dearest Queen Mother, do you take me for someone so petty and cynical?” He bent to grab another bucket, sloshing some of the soapy liquid onto the stone. “My only desire is to serve the gods.”

“Do not expect me to be that naive,” Cersei spat. “Is it gold you want? Or women? Give me my son back, free from his madness, and I will ensure you more luxuries than you could ever desire.”

A slight chuckle left his lips. The High Sparrow looked anything but intimidating, but Cersei could see there was steel underneath the aging frame. “Baelor the Blessed tried to bring piety and honor back to this land, but he failed because those around him viewed his piety as madness.” Cersei blinked, the old man believing the long held rumor that Baelor died not of starvation, but of poison by his family and advisors. A martyr rather than a zealous idiot. “The great King has his zeal and passion, passion that will bring the Faith of the Seven back to this land after so long ignored.”

Laughing at the sheer ridiculousness of it all, it began to die out once Cersei realized he was serious. “You are no better than I, High Sparrow. At least I admit that I act from my family’s best interest.”

“I remind myself of my humility whenever I can, and serve your son because he is chosen by the Seven. He understands this.” Standing tall, his piercing green eyes bored into Cersei’s. “Selfishness among the great houses is the reason our beautiful land is in such a sorry state. We must all make sacrifices, offer our hearts and bodies to the Seven. And we must all be punished for our crimes, from the lowliest street urchin to the highborn children of Tywin Lannister. Whatever high crimes against the Gods they commit.”

Cersei’s blood turned to ice. ‘Does he know?’ No one really knew. Ned Stark and Stannis were dead, Tywin refused to believe the rumors, Jamie would never tell a soul, and the other small council members were too terrified of Joffrey. ‘How could he know?’ “You have no proof of any crimes of mine, nor Jamie’s.” She said, finally. “Try not to yank the lion’s tail unless you have a plan for the teeth.”

The High Sparrow went back to his task. “Enjoy the day, Queen Mother. I shall pray for your brother’s safety.” Eyes narrowed, Cersei simply walked away.

Dashing through the halls of Winterfell in a slow jog, Podrick Payne’s brow was furrowed in a slight panic. Dragons spotted far off, the hue and cry had already been made to prepare for their arrival. As such, he forgot to knock on the door of the room he sought to enter. “Lady Stark, we’ve spotted…” At the sight before him, a bright red blush formed on his face and he turned away, mortified. “Forgive me, my Lady.”

Clad in her sleeping shift, Sansa had been brushing her hair at her vanity table when Podrick burst in, initially startling her into a little jump. Eyes grew wide in irrational fear, sweat beginning to mat her skin - Ramsay’s favorite pastime was bursting in on her like this. The culprit was visible through her mirror. “Pordrick, get out!” Hearing the door shut closed, she brought her hand to her heart, feeling it beat nearly out of her chest. Sansa closed her eyes and willed away another flashback. ‘If anyone isn’t Ramsay, it’s Podrick.’ It was quite obvious the awkward squire was just in a hurry and nothing sinister was going on, but her mind still went there.

‘Yet he would never have been in a hurry if it wasn’t important.’ Sliding her grey dress over her form, she made her way to the door. ‘He’s not Ramsay. Ramsay is dead.’ As Sansa imagined he’d likely do, he was pacing and cursing himself under his breath - seeing her, he went white. “Lady
Sansa, please forgive me. I shouldn’t have…”

Sansa held up a hand. “It’s fine Podrick. Just please knock next time.” She couldn’t help but smile at his frantic nod. It was oddly endearing. “What is happening?” The sounds of a hustle and bustle were resonating through the castle walls.

“Lord Snow and Queen Daenerys’ dragons were spotted heading to Winterfell.” Brienne and Robb had already alerted the entire castle.

‘Jon is back.’ The thought made her smile wider. She couldn’t wait to lift another worrisome problem from his shoulders. “Let’s go then, everyone in the courtyard.”

All the inhabitants of Winterfell were assembled in the courtyard, air cold as ever but with the rare sun shining brightly above. Just like before. Of course, Sansa, Robb, Catelyn, and Rickon were the only ones left that remembered the fateful morning when Robert Baratheon and his retinue arrived. The visit that started it all. Started the wars and massacres and tyrannies. Yet they endured. ‘When one wolf dies, the pack survives.’ Eddard Stark had passed into the next world, yet his pack remained strong - and even grown by three members, four if Aemon was counted.

Glancing at him, separated by Sam, Gilly, and little Sam, Sansa leaned in to whisper to the rotund highborn. “He seems nervous.”

Sam chuckled. “He is meeting his long lost great niece. Aside from Jon he’s never seen a family member in decades.” He leaned down to ruffle his son’s hair, coaxing a giggle from the boy. “Jon doesn’t count, cause he thought himself a bastard for most of it.”

To her left was Catelyn, Rickon, Robb, Margaery, Davos, Tyrion, Melisandre, and the rest of the line, many else behind them. “Another King arriving in our home,” Catelyn remarked.

“Our true King,” Sansa said. It was different. Before, the arrival of the guests of honor led to great sorrow. Now, the arrival of the guests of honor would lead to the renaissance of the world. Of this Sansa was uncharacteristically optimistic. She didn’t have faith in most, but she did in Jon. “Our true King and Queen, mother.” Catelyn remained silent, resigned to the coolness from her eldest children.

Twin roars echoed through the air as dark shapes shot across the skies over Winterfell. Many jumped, but the Starks and nobles stood firm. Dragons were fearsome and awe-inspiring. Their riders were the benevolent Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow. If anything, the dragons would bring only safety to them. Circling, they gradually lowered in the air until the hooting beasts hit the ground with a thud, folding their wings.

Jon descended first. Longclaw at his hip, direwolf Stark hanging across his neck and a red Targaryen dragon emblazoned on his black armored tunic, he looked every inch the cross of ice and fire. Before even greeting anyone, he moved to help Daenerys from her dragon. She was dressed similarly, in a northern gown colored in red and black. Sansa, as the acting Lady, was the first to move towards them. “Lord Snow… Queen Daenerys.” She curtseyed.

Looking at her like she sprouted two heads, Jon chortled. “Seven hells, we haven’t been gone that long, sister.” And with that he scooped her into a brotherly hug.

Laughs erupting all around, the formality of the situation lifted and a throng of people crowded among the royals. “Jon, good to see you in one piece.” Robb thumped him on the back. “Thank you for preventing the Dothraki from tearing him limb from limb,” he quipped to Daenerys.

“They won’t, yet,” she smirked at Jon, earning another chorus of laughs. Greetings exchanged all
around, the pack was still as close as ever. “Oh, Jon. Shouldn’t we…”

Beaming, the same smile that Ned used to wear when watching his children spar, Jon waved over two small forms. They had hung back near the dragons, but now stood close to their mother and father. “Everyone, this is Rheagar and Arya. Crown Prince and Princess.” They looked everyone over, smiling at Catelyn. She smiled back, happy to see them again.

Robb, first to react, knelt before them. “Hello, your graces.”

“Uncle Robb?” Arya said hesitantly, looking up at her father to ensure that she got it right. Jon nodded. The ice broken, soon the entire Stark pack was fawning over their youngest members.

“Direwolf!” The twins’ eyes lit up as Ghost trotted out. Sparing his father and mother a lick to the palm, he basked in the attention of the twins. They shared the same smells as both Jon and Dany, screaming ‘friend’ at the highest volume. The young dragons soon joined, excited at the return of so many of their loved ones. Once again, happiness returned to Winterfell after such a long absence.

Squeezing Jon’s hand, both of them enjoying the sight of their children - all of them - enjoying life together, Dany heard a throat clear. “My lady.” The voice was old, worn out with over a century of pain and experience. Her breath hitched. Something in her told Daenerys exactly who it was.

Turning around, she came face to face with Maester Aemon. Aemon Targaryen. Toothless, stooped over, hair grey, and wrinkles marring his skin, the eyes remained a bright amethyst. As bright as when he was in his prime. “Uncle…”

A tear fell down his cheek, Ameon reaching up to slowly slide his hand down her face. Daenerys remembered Jon warning of his near blindness, so she didn’t mind. Her family, together at last. “You look just like your mother.”

The rooms provided were not significant - a mere infinitesimal fraction of the King of Qarth palace. A sitting room, a latrine, a room for bathing, and a single spacious bedroom, all for Brandon Stark’s entire retinue and guards. There was little moonlight from the crescent above, but he could see perfectly. Jojen resting on a cot in the corner brought in for his use. Hodor snoring on the plush chair, something far more comfortable than any bed he had ever used. And right next to him on the large bed, separated by two feet of space, was Meera. As the only woman, Bran’s more gentlemanly urgings had led him to offer her the most comfortable position. It amused him to see her long blush before she accepted.

We must speak, young Stark.

Hitting him like a mounted charge, the flash of light momentarily filled Bran’s eyes before the darkness returned. It was him… the one from his visions. Disappearing since joining him at the outskirts of Joffrey’s capitol, now he demanded an audience in the middle of the night.

Wiggling out from under the heavy covers - an insistence of his that drove Meera insane, given the far-southern heat of Qarth - Bran reached for the small ceramic bottle on the nightstand. It looked like any potion bottle, but inside it contained shade of the evening.

The blue liquid was strictly prohibited outside the Warlocks’ private stocks, but Bran knew the risk was worth it to have some by his side. Drinking about half of it, he wondered quietly if it would work outside the House of the Undying. Something about the magical energy present in an apprentice warlock only in certain places… a rush of dark blurs belied what Pyat Pree called his
innate power.

A mist surrounded Bran, humidity drenching his skin with a soaked pallor as he glanced around him. “Hello?” Nothing, not even an echo. “Is anyone there?”

Another swivel found the cloaked figure of the man in his dreams, old and gnarled. Bran yelped and almost fell, but caught himself. A raven circled above the man’s head. His face was set into a grimace. No warmth to be found. “Danger lurks everywhere.”

“Wha…” Before he could even ask his question the world began to spin around Bran. Faint cries rang in his ear, as if he was passing by at high speed. Holding up his hands, a wave passed through him as he came to a halt. It was a cozy tent, log fire crackling in the fireplace. Stag banners fluttered lazily, though these had no crown between their antlers.

A muscular figure clad in armor - oddly familiar for some reason - swept past Bran as if he didn't exist at all. Stepping forward, the young Warlock watched as the man gulped down a cup of mead, unfurling a letter that was gripped tightly in his hand. Reading with great difficulty, the man shook, white as a ghost. Bran could only just pick out one of the lines of the letter...

Robert, I have tried desperately to do my duty as my father requested of me, but I cannot. Your very touch fills me with revulsion, knowing that not hours before it was on the bare skin of some whore. Rhaegar would never dishonor me so, and it wouldn't matter if you were King and he a peasant for I would always choose him...

'Robert... King Robert?' True enough, the figure was the Usurper himself, minus about fifty pounds. With an enraged snarl he tossed the letter into the fire. "Ned! Ned!" he screamed out into the world. "She's not here. I don't know where she could have gone."

Head pounding, Bran found himself shooting into the blackened air. One vision to another. He was now in an alcove, somewhere in an ornate building of red brick and marble. “You must take this, place it in his evening wine. A Dornish white would cover the taste.” A man, swathed in expensive cottons and silks. Clipped to his belt was a gold-hilted Valyrian steel blade. One Bran recognized immediately.

“And then we can be together?” said the other figure, a woman.

“Of course.” He kissed her brow. “The fat one will have no choice but to pick him as his Hand. That is when I will strike.” There was more but Bran heard not. His eyes rolled into his skull, transported to yet another vision.

The torches flickered in the darkness. Bran found himself somewhere familiar, the hallways of the great pyramid of Meereen. A wail, which quickly morphed into a girlish giggle echoed in Bran’s ear. “Oh Jon… Your Queen commands you to be here.” Further giggles left Daenerys Targaryen’s lips, an empty chalice of wine in her hand. Had she tried to drink away her loneliness?

“My Queen?” Entering through the doorway, there was the sellsword. Bran didn’t remember his name, but remembered his smug attitude and skill at combat. “Are you alright?” Beaming, face flushed with inebriated serenity, Dany attempted to stand but stumbled. “My Queen!” The sellsword caught her in his arms, holding her. Quite closely.

“Mmmmm…” Dany’s eyes peered at the man holding her. “Jon, is that you?”

Silence held for several long moments. “It’s me,” the sellsword finally said.

Giggles erupted as Dany haphazardly flung her arms around his neck, convinced in her drunken state
that he was her beloved. “Take me to bed, my wolf.” Bran wanted to yell the truth as they moved away but he found the irresistible force pulling him back.

“She failed!” someone spat, faces and shapes obscured by the shadows. All around Bran rested heads, mounted on the walls and eyes closed in a serene death. “The girl is still Arya Stark.” ‘Arya?’

A sigh followed. “She had potential, great potential, but a girl does not get a third chance.” A pregnant pause. “A waif knows what to do…”

The image evaporated in a flash, replaced by a dingy tavern room. It stank of piss and spilled beer. The light was low, but such accommodations did not discourage the heated conversation by those seated at the table mounted in the middle of the room.

“How can you still be under contract? Meereen has fallen!”

“You weren’t taken to Westeros, Naharis. What is a sellsword who isn’t being paid to fight?”

Sitting in the middle of the cluster of men was the sellsword, face set in stone. “I have sworn my loyalty to Queen Daenerys Targaryen.” His statement was plain, but Bran detected a sadness behind it. The resentment of a lover spurned? “My word is my bond.”

“Oh, of course, your oath is so valuable. That is why you killed your commanders at Yunkai after swearing an oath to them.”

Before the sellsword could draw his blade, another spoke. “Shut it, Tazal.” An older man, rough and wise, bore his eyes into the other. “Daario, the Dragon Queen seeks to end the chaos in the world. We thrive on chaos. She will bring ruin to all sellswords.”

“What would you have me do, Strickland? Betray her?”

“No, stay loyal to your own kind.”

The remaining words and voices grew faint as the old man stepped in front of Bran. “For the great ones. The Lightbringers. Grave danger lurks everywhere.” Before Bran could speak further light enveloped him.

Sweat drenching his sleepwear, a loose shift that drew favor in Qarth, Bran sucked in gulps of air as he returned to the conscious realm. His head spun. ‘Danger… it surrounds Jon.’ Instinct told him that the Targaryen queen was now with his brother… cousin, and they were both surrounded by sharks and snakes. But what could he do? An apprentice Warlock halfway around the world, only rare visions allowing him to peer into what he sought. Bran groaned in futility.

“Bran…” came a sleepy voice to his left. “What’s wrong?” Leaning over him, Meera looked him over with concerned eyes. “Please try to get some sleep before training tomorrow.” Nodding, Bran watched her snuggle into the covers, serene. It was a beautiful sight, something he hoped wouldn’t be corrupted with what was to come.

‘Jon, Daenerys, be prepared.’

“I must say, Lord Snow, never have I seen our Queen so… serene.” Felt boots crunching on the patches of dust-like snow that marred the stone floors - though many in the north would consider the white substance the epitome of beauty and purity - Tyrion Lannister craned his neck to look up at his future King. “I would have to ask Ser Jorah, but it is a decent assumption that it be true years before I
Arm strung on the parapet, Jon smiled at the sight of his betrothed. She was engaged in animated conversation with Maester Aemon, the two walking in tandem through the empty courtyard. Two dragons reunited - while Jon was one, he knew his looks were fully that of a wolf while both Dany’s and Aemon’s were classically Valyrian. While Maester Aemon had a joy about him that brought his aged form galloping back to life, it was Daenerys that entranced Jon. Surrounded by the family that had so eluded her entire life, Tyrion was right. She was happy.

At the longing look on his face, Sansa couldn’t help but cover her lips in suppressed mirth. “Lord Tyrion, I believe we all know the cause for her Grace’s newfound happiness.” Though she did not trust him completely, Tyrion had a decent heart and wasn’t cruel. Daenerys trusted him and she had began to trust Daenerys. Still, if he was there to give advice to Jon, Sansa found no reason why she shouldn’t be present as well. Happy shouts drew her attention, and coaxed a genuine smile. “The children are enjoying themselves.”

“Darest I say that the Prince and Princess haven’t seen snow before.” Tyrion chuckled, watching Arya and Rhaegar tossing snowballs at each other. “They have taken to their father’s ancestral home quite well.”

Jon laughed. “Aye, they have.” He felt happiness course through him watching the twins tackle their mother, all three of them laughing merrily. Something not seen in House Targaryen in decades. Perhaps it was the Stark influence.

“It is good to enjoy these times while they last, brother,” Sansa remarked. As the twins began to throw sticks for Ghost to catch, Jon sighed. ‘I almost lost them.’ Joffrey Baratheon lurked to the south, a malevolent shadow ready to strike at the ones Jon loved the most. ‘And the greatest shadow is still to the north.’ Fists clenched. The threats existed but Jon wasn’t a simple brother of the Night’s Watch anymore. He was the heir to Rhaegar Targaryen, the rightful King and betrothed to the Dragon Queen. “When do the northern lords arrive?” The Vale lords were already at Winterfell and Catelyn could speak for the Tullys.

Sansa detected an icy steel to his voice. ‘The wolf in him.’ “Lord Hornwood has returned, and I received a raven from Deepwood Motte saying that the Glovers will be here by the end of the week. They should all be here by then, I believe.” It was not an exact science, but the Northern word was its bond. If the lords said they were coming, then they were coming.

“They will not take the news of our betrothal well,” Jon remarked acidly. Resignation was on his face. “I cannot begin to think what they will say about my heritage.”

“You are a Stark.” Sansa wanted to pull Jon’s hair out if he said it again. “Aunt Lyanna’s blood runs in your veins just as much as Rhaegar’s. The fact that you have Targaryen blood is an asset.”

“I agree with Lady Stark.” Tyrion was impressed. She may have been a late bloomer, but the years of hardship had shaped Sansa Stark to be the true inheritor to her mother’s cunning. “With Rickon just a boy and your older brother’s… let’s just say his past tenure as King will leave many to seek new blood. As the trueborn son of Lyanna Stark, who even I heard was beloved in the North, I don’t think they would ever hold it against you as long as you take the Stark name.”

Jon blinked. “First, if I’m a legitimate Targaryen, wouldn’t taking the Stark name mean I renounce the title to the Seven Kingdoms?” While the old Jon would have jumped head first at the chance to claim the Stark name as his own, what reason would Tyrion want for such if Dany wished him to rule by her side as a Targaryen King. ‘You know nothing, Jon Snow.’ Ygritte’s taunting voice in his
head reminded him that it could be for some valid reason. "Second, I doubt the Northern Lords would accept Daenerys as their queen, marriage to me or not."

A sigh left the Imp’s lips. "Yes, that is an issue. While they will undoubtedly be loyal to you, even my nephew and the… problems to the north may not be enough to have them abandon their irrational hatred of the Targaryens."

"Irrational as in how the Mad King burned their Liege Lord alive and had his eldest son strangled to death?" Watching Tyrion wilt slightly, Sansa softened her tone. "But if we show Lyanna wasn’t raped… and there’s something that could be done, Jon." Her eyes sparkled, a bright contrast with their usual emotionless pallor. "One that would allow you to remain King in the North while also having Daenerys rule over the Seven Kingdoms."

"And how would we manage that? Not easy to keep your kingship if you must bend the knee," Jon remarked sarcastically.

"Sam told us something about the history of Valyria. You would be both King in the North… and alongside Daenerys… Emperor."

Jon raised an eyebrow. "Emperor?" Hearing Sansa and Tyrion explain it to him, the brooding northerner couldn’t help but feel his doubts dissipate as to the feasibility of it all. But… it was then that he realized all his concern had been masking something else - something deeper. He would have gladly fought for his and Dany’s birthright with the same passion as he fought to save the Wildlings or reclaim Winterfell, but… "I don’t want to rule. I never did." He turned away. "I am not an autocrat. I try to be honorable, but it isn’t enough." 'I tried, but was killed anyway.'

Stroking his beard, Tyrion wracked his brain for a line of thought that would persuade his reluctant ruler. ‘The King shits and the Hand wipes.’ Although this was less wiping than preventing the King from shitting over himself. "Lord Snow… what has past tradition gotten us? Mad Kings? Idiot Kings? Slavery? Rebellions? Never ending war? You do not wish to rule, but doesn’t that prove to the world that you are the one to accept the challenge? That her Grace is the one to join you in challenging the old order?" He watched as Jon’s lips pursed, eyes closing.

"Jon." Sansa set a comforting hand on her brother, rubbing his back softly. "Sometimes, Jon." She took a deep breath, her experiences coming to mind. "The only way to set things right is to break with the past. If we are to survive this coming war against the Night King, you and Daenerys are the only ones that can shrug off the hatreds of yesterday.” It was profound - it was as if just yesterday that Sansa remembered begging her mother that father betroth her to Joffrey. They had all changed.

Digesting both their words, Jon glanced back at the courtyard. Dany was kissing each of the twins’ cheeks, love written on her face as she poured her love onto them. After conversing with Aemon, Catelyn Stark took the kids with her, saying something about their lessons. Ghost trotting behind them, Jon heard both Rhaegar and Arya calling her "Grandmother."

‘Grandmother.’ The woman that had tormented, ridiculed, and disparaged him since birth was now the grandmother to his children. Feeling the bitterness rise up, Jon let it melt away when he saw Catelyn’s face. She loved the twins. Loved them like her own, it was written all over her face. Jon hadn’t yet confronted her about the past - he simply wanted to just avoid the issue - but with the bitterness remaining inside him it didn’t seem to be reciprocated. Whatever resentment had left her, and for something so profound it couldn’t have just been learning of his heritage. “Aye. Perhaps we do need to break the hatreds of yesterday.”
“Mmmmm.” Semi-awake, Daenerys Targaryen flipped from her left to her right, arm plopping onto her bedmate.

Or at least to where her bedmate was supposed to be. Though his masculine, smoky scent still wafted into her nostrils, Dany’s touch was instead greeted by a pillow tugged against her. ‘Well shit.’

Groaning quietly, Dany rolled onto her back and stretched, fingers brushing the headboard. If it had been the morning it wouldn’t have surprised her much - neither snow nor sleet could keep Jon from his essentially Kingly duties around Winterfell. His sense of duty was one of the things she loved most about him, though them always waking up together had become such a pleasant new tradition.

Faculties slowly returning, Dany’s ears picked up the crackling of the fireplace. ‘The fire always burns out by morning.’ Scooting till she was sitting up, there was Jon. He sat silently in front of the flames, shaggy black curls visible atop the back of the plush chair. Daenerys could tell he was brooding darkly without even seeing his face. Quietly, she slipped out of the bed and draped a thick woolen robe over her nude form.

Jon didn’t notice her, at least she figured he didn’t. Behind him, Dany wrapped her arms around his neck. He tensed. “Can’t sleep?” she asked, kissing the crown of his head.

“Aye.” Thoughts dark, a sense of relief spread through Jon’s body at her touch. “Go back to bed, Dany. No need to get up on my account.” He didn’t want to worry her - he’d kept his fears and worries to himself long enough to be used to it.

What Jon didn’t count on was the stubbornness of a dragon. Sighing, Dany disentangled her arms from his neck and grabbed a second chair. It was lighter but still cushioned, making it easy to slide it close to the other. Wordlessly, she sat upon it and cuddled close to Jon, resting her head on his shoulder. “It’s hard to sleep in an empty bed anymore,” she whispered, fitting their fingers together. “A Queen needs her King.”

Raising her hand, Jon dropped a loving kiss to the pale flesh. “A King needs his Queen.” He never understood why so many great men could cause their wives great pain by taking mistresses, his own ancestors included. He gazed upon her as if she were the Maiden herself. Not only the problem of bastards, but Jon could never feel for anyone what he felt for Dany. “It’s always better to have loving company” ‘Mostly…”

“I thought you had Ghost for that,” Dany teased lightly, snuggling against the crook of his neck.

Jon chuckled tiredly. “When my brother…” ‘Cousin.’ “Bran was on his sickbed, his direwolf protected him from an assassin. Ghost will do the same for our children.” His gaze drifted back to the fire, unreadable. “If I must be alone, so be it.”

Dany squeezed his hand. “I love you, Jon.”

“And I you, Dany.”

She looked up at him, taking in the tired, haunted eyes. Slowly, she reached up to cup his cheek. “What happened, Jon? Why aren’t you in bed with me?”

“It’s nothing… just a dream.” Jon was grateful that Dany had not seen him wake a while ago. Sweat coating his body like a sheen, lungs sucking in gulps of air as if a drowning man, it had been brutal.
“Only a dream.”

“Only a dream?” Dany didn’t believe him for a moment. Rather than anger or annoyance, she merely kissed his jaw, his close-cropped beard tickling her nose. Her other hand shifted to rub his chest, the Dragon Queen loving the feel of her Dragonwolf’s skin. “It couldn’t be just a dream if you’re here. What troubles you, my love?” Dany could feel him relaxing from her touch.

Turning towards her, Jon’s breath hitched at Daenerys’ tender gaze. Silver hair ethereal in the orange-red firelight, she looked so beautiful, so loving. She really did love him so. Jon could always trust her.

‘But I want to keep her safe.’ He felt the intense urge to protect her from everything.

‘She’s the Dragon Queen. Let her help you.’ For some reason, the second voice in his head sounded like Sansa. “It was the Night King. He was in my dreams.” A shiver coursed through his body. He could still feel the icy cold draping over him.

Dany hugged him tighter. “Oh Jon.” Her hand found his heart, feeling the tension dissipate. “What happened?”

Dropping his head, Jon rested it on hers. The scent of her hair, of her, calmed him. “I saw him south of the Wall. In Winterfell, in Dragonstone. He… he turned everyone. My siblings, my children… you.” A tear fell down his cheek. “I had Longclaw in my hand, but… I just couldn’t…” Such is what brought him to the fire. Back to what his Targaryen blood was. ‘Fire made flesh.’

Naturally hot, it wasn’t often that Daenerys felt cold. Cold from within herself. The cold that seeped into her very bones. Now was one of those times. The tale of the Long Night hadn’t been one that Viserys taught her during their childhood, but Sansa had filled her in on it - Margaery on the details of Hardhome, where she had seen it… seen him. “How did it happen? With Rhaegal?” Margaery had been vague, while Robb said it wasn’t his place to tell her. She sensed his reluctance. “I need to know.”

Resigned, Jon knew he had to tell her. It was painful, for Rhaegal was his dragon. Daenerys’ child, but he was his rider. “We were at Hardhome, rescuing the Free Folk when they attacked. The dead swarmed the wall, charged off the cliffs hemming us in.” Flashes of the bloodthirsty mob filled his mind. “We killed hundreds but they just kept coming. Nothing stopped them - no pain, no fear. They would never stop, never halt until every living thing in their path was dead.”

The chill deepened within Daenerys. ‘How could anyone survive that?’ She thanked the gods that her Jon had.

“I called to Rhaegal, and he came.” Dany squeezed his hand - Jon understood the dragon’s bond even then. “He saved me, but the Night King…” Jon remembered the horror of that moment as if it were mere minutes before. “He took a spear, made of enchanted ice, and tossed it. Rhaegal was sliced through his shoulder. One inch to the left and…” He didn’t go on, sensing Dany’s soft sobs. “It’s alright, Dany.” He kissed her. “Mag and Wun helped me get him out, and I destroyed another ice spear. Valyrian steel, that stops them.” His hands softly caressed her. “I would never let anything happen to our family. Ever.”

“I know,” Daenerys murmured into his neck. Pulling back, she kissed him, slow and loving. “We will stop them all, Jon. We are dragons. We make the impossible happen.”

In that moment, Jon believed her.
Bright red adorning his youthful cheeks, Daenerys used all her control to maintain a regal air - the amused giggle threatened to bubble up at the sight of Jon’s young squire. She figured that Ollie had only dealt with other men while up at the wall. Now though, his face was ripe red and eyes straining not to look at the nude Dragon Queen resting on the bed, thankfully covered by the furs. Dany imagined that the boy would have fainted had the furs not been there. Seeing Dany in the aftermath of the passionate lovemaking filling the room with moans and grunts not a quarter of an hour before. ‘Was Jon this way at his age?’ Then she remembered how he had been in Pentos at first. It was adorable, Jon’s modesty and gentlemanliness.

Tightening the buckle of his scabbard around his waist, Jon felt Ollie fastening the last of the straps of his leather tunic. “Thank you, Ollie. Why don’t you get some breakfast now.”

Relief flooding his face, the squire to the soon to be Emperor bowed. “Thank you, my Lord. Your Grace.”

As soon as the door closed the two shared simultaneous laughter. “Did you have to do that to the poor boy?” Jon asked his betrothed. Unlike Ollie, he didn’t suppress his lustful glances directed to the Dragon Queen.

‘Jon should laugh more.’ Her Dragonwolf changed into a serene, joyous individual when he laughed or smiled. It wasn’t something Jon shared with many, only his siblings… and her. Dany felt honored. “Oh come now, Jon Snow. Missandei has seen me naked plenty of times.” The Dothraki didn’t care for modesty, and it rubbed off on Dany. “You Northerners and your modesty.”

“And yet the Dragon Queen’s heart was captured by a northerner.” Jon enjoyed the beaming smile on her face. Daenerys was something else - the indomitable Dragon Queen among her subjects or small councils, a loving and sweet woman when with their family, and a confident seductress when alone with him. Moving to take Longclaw, he noticed the glinting Valyrian steel of her blade resting next to it. “Ser Jorah told me that you’ve greatly improved since we last trained in Pentos.”

“I should hope so,” Dany replied, smiling at Jon. No one could deny he was handsome in the garb of a Northern warrior. ‘And he’s mine,’ roared her inner dragone. “I could use some more practice though. My enemies are strong so I will need to hone my flexibility and speed.”

Jon nodded. “I know just the teacher.” Another rare smile was cast her way. “Perhaps I should have the smiths fashion you a set of armor. One befitting a proper Valyrian warrior Queen.”

“Not bad of an idea, my love.” The image of Ramsay Bolton’s men pissing themselves in terror of her atop Balerion came to mind. “I dare any of our enemies not to be intimidated by the Royal Pair atop their dragons.”

“Quite true, though I was thinking of something else.” Sitting on the bed, Jon leaned down until his breath was hot on her ear. “Imagining you dressed as Visenya of old does things to me.”

Daenerys couldn’t help her moan, arousal coursing through her body despite the ravishing Jon had given her not long before. “And what would that do to you?” She loved when he was sensual like this. The husky northern brogue made her quiver with delight.

He dropped his voice even lower, a veritable wolf growl into the ear of the dragon. “To take my Dragon Queen until she roars my name.” Licking the shell of her ear, Jon’s hands pulled the furs
away to ghost down her perfect, naked body to where he loved the most…

The knocking at the door echoed loudly through the room. “Should I have my bloodriders get rid of them?” One look in her eyes told him that Dany was seriously considering it.

“Khaleesi?”

Missandei’s soft voice through the door made Jon chuckle. Though he wished to make Dany shatter under him once more, duty called. “Later, my Queen, I have a surprise for the twins planned for this morning.” Dany’s gaze softening, Jon hitched Longclaw to his belt and opened the door, coming face to face with his Queen’s handmaid. “Lady Missandei.”

Jumping slightly, the translator was shocked at the presence of the future King - normally he had gotten dressed and left before she arrived. Missandei glanced at the flushed form of her Queen, and then back at Jon. “My Lord.” Her tone was neutral and respectful, but her eyes twinkled with mirth. Stepping aside to allow him leave, she strode to prepare Daenerys’ wardrobe. Observant looks picked out several fresh bite splotches marring the Dragon Queen’s milky skin. “New ones, your Grace?”

Dany felt no shame, grinning. “Absolutely.” A content, faraway look crossed her face, remembering how each and every one happened.

“It doesn’t surprise me, your Grace.” Grabbing a woolen northern dress, vibrant in a light, sky blue. It added color to the drab greys and blacks common in the north, while making Dany look less intimidating - the dragons and giants were intimidating enough. “From what I’ve seen, it is the quiet, brooding types that make the most passionate, skilled lovers.”

Chuckling, Dany donned her undergarments just as Missandei sheathed the dress from top. “Mmmm, you are right about that.” The northern garment was warm and thick, but fit her like a glove. “Is that how it is with Grey Worm? He’s quiet and rather brooding.” The translator simply blushed.

All around him, Jon could see the life returning to Winterfell. Whatever traces of Bolton rule was gone, thank the Gods - the surviving trinkets and decorations that hung here during his childhood were back. In a way, things were happier now with the Starks back in control. ‘Dany is here, and I know my destiny.’ He was no bastard anymore, but a King.

The small solar that belonged to the Lady of Winterfell boasted a loving sight to Jon. “Poppa!” Dashing over in a blur, two sets of arms encircling his waist. Laughing merrily, Jon ruffled their hair. “Poppa, come join us,” Arya said, looking up at him. “Aunt Sansa was telling us the story of our ancestor, Bran the Builder.”

Jon found Sansa, one eyebrow raised in questioning. She smiled at him. “They wanted to know about where their father served. Who better to tell Old Nan’s stories to them?” The littlest members of the pack were settling in quite nicely, eager to both watch Jon and Robb spar and to hear stories from their aunt. Davos was already making arrangements to find Rhaegar a master at arms to teach him to fight, though if Arya was anything like her namesake, Jon would be hard pressed to stop her from joining in.

“Good,” he finally answered. “The Crown Prince and Princess should know the history of their ancestors.” Outside, the longer night had passed and was replaced by the morning sun - sky still unseasonably cloudless. ‘Perfect riding weather.’ “Sweetlings, you are Wolves of the North as much as you are Dragons of Valyria.”

“Of course, poppa,” they both answered in unison. Unlike himself, each was an equal parts mixture
of Targaryen and Stark. No one could deny their resemblance to either Jon or Dany.

“Your uncles and I are going to survey the fields and Wolfswood. Would you like to join, to see the lands of your Stark ancestors.” To put it mildly, the twins rushed to their rooms for their fur cloaks.

Needles clutched in her hands as they expertly weaved, Sansa shook her head with a grin. “Always in such a rush. Must be the Targaryen dragon in them. Fire and blood, all passion.” Such would temper into steel with growth and experience, as it had with their mother. “Were they like this in Meereen, mother?”

Quiet in the background, perusing raven reports from her uncle at Riverrun, Catelyn Stark’s head shot up. “Yes, they were. Always curious and eager to learn. Ser Barristan said it reminded him of… Jon’s father.” It had been quite awkward for the former Lady of Winterfell, given Robb and Sansa’s frosty demeanor towards her and the latter having essentially taken over as Lady in her stead - Catelyn had been in discussions with Olenna Tyrell for a betrothal between Robb and Margaery, her eldest needing a bride. Last time hadn’t gone well for him at all, but the Rose of Highgarden was the best match possible and they were smitten with each other, Jon’s consent being all that was needed. In the meantime, Catelyn was also preoccupying herself as the representative for her uncle and recently freed brother.

Eyes meeting for the first time in a long while, the soft and guilty look in Catelyn’s was matched with an icy one in Jon’s. “I am glad my children inherited their grandfather’s intelligence, Lady Stark.” He may have forgiven but certainly hadn’t forgotten.

If anything mollified General Theodosius Caryn, it was that the Essosi levies looked to be far more miserable than he. Robbed of a toasty fire, the fur cloak coating his armor couldn’t keep the icy winds from his body. He had never been north of Riverrun, but had traveled to the tundra isle of Ibben years before - at least he had something to compare it to. Swaddled in whatever they could procure, be it fur, wool, cotton, or burlap tarps, his soldiers shivered in utter misery.

“Keep to the banners, that’s it!” Spurring the horse into a gallop, Theodosius rode along the massive throng that had departed White Harbor the previous day. The Unsullied, cold as they were, held formation. Harder to control were the levees - the volunteers procured from the freedmen and lower class masters of Meereen. “Keep going. The quicker you march, the quicker you’ll be at the campfires in the Neck!” Most didn’t care what the Neck was, but they heard ‘campfire.’

“Those boys would be lucky to last a northern winter.” Turning on his horse, Theodosius met the rotund form of Lord Wyman Manderly. “Never send a Ghiscari to do a Northman’s fight.”

“Good thing they won’t be headed to Winterfell.” Unlike himself, the Manderly host that was marching for the grand meetin, and Grey Worm’s personal Unsullied cohort, the majority of the Royal Targaryen Army would be headed to the Neck and then the now open Twins - he felt no sympathy for the Freys, both dishonorable cunts and Lannister allies. “The Riverlands weather will acclimate them well enough.”

Lord Manderly shrugged. “They’ll need it if they want to face the Lannisters.”

Fists clenched the reins tight, undoubtedly squeezed white underneath the thick gloves. “They will defeat the Lannisters. I’ve sworn to that.” Flashes of fire burned in his vision, both warnings of the future and memories of the past.

The northerner furrowed his brows, large mass shifting beneath the mermaid engraved breastplate.
“Wait… Caryn. Now I remember.” He smacked his chubby leg. “Your family fought for the Reynes and Tarbecks at Castamere. No wonder you hate the Lannisters.” Pursing his lips, he glanced back at the hard faced men marching with him. “You’d be in good company with any northman. Queen Daenerys better not let her wee Hand get alone with any of my men, all due warning.” With that, he galloped off.

Such company did not offer solace. Fire and death following even the quickest blink, Theodosius resigned himself to a hellish night ahead of him. ‘Maybe I’ll borrow from the Imp and drink myself to a stupor.’ It had to be a damn Lannister that had all the right ideas.

Many years had past since Jon had last experienced a true northern winter. Arya had just been born, and he and Robb were far too young to truly grasp the majesty of their homeland. Jon was determined to show his children the true majesty of the Stark homeland early on. They were mighty dragons, but they were wolves as well. “There is the Wolfswood, sweetlings.” He pointed to the line of still green trees, contrasting with the snow. “It stretches all the way to the western sea.”

Atop their horses as skillfully as any armored knight - Jon wasn’t surprised, Dothraki training and all that - the Twins gazed in awe at their father’s homeland. “Is that the plain, father? Where you defeated the Usurper Ramsay Bolton?” Rhaegar gestured to the snow-covered flat ground stretching on the northern approach of the castle.

“Aye.” Robb chimed in. Wun Wun’s massive figure crossed his arms, the Dothraki bloodriders assigned to protect the princes attention riveted - they did not understand much of the common tongue, but they did hear ‘Ramsay Bolton’ loud and clear. Young Rickon seemed to shrink away, the conversation touching on a sore subject for him. “Jon charged in on Rhaegal to save your Uncle Rickon, but the Boltons wounded the dragon so Jon stayed to fight.”

“A Usurper wounded Rhaegal?” Rhaegar was shocked. “A dragon is invincible!”

Urging his horse, a stout northern mare from Bear Island, Jon trotted beside his son. “Rhaegar, nothing nor no one is invincible.” He wrapped an arm around the boy’s shoulders, just like Ned used to do with him. “It was true that Rhaegar was wounded and thus vulnerable, but especially in battle, you must be careful and vigilant. A good fighter and King knows this, understood?” Jon gently prodded.

“Yes poppa.”

“But father isn’t vulnerable to anything.” Arya sounded quite like her mother at that moment, standing straight and with a patrician set in her jaw. Supremely confident in her father as Dany was in him.

Before Jon could respond, an as yet silent voice boomed. “Come now, Little Crow, the times I pulled this one out of trouble could fit in a big, fat southern book of yours.” Grinning under his unkempt red beard, Tormund went to Arya and pointed to the center of the field. “That’s where my axe saved the King Crow’s bacon from some southern cu… idiot.” Jon, irritated as he was, had to give the wildling credit for censoring himself for the twins’ benefit.

Furrowing her brows, Arya was puzzled. “What’s ‘King Crow’ mean?”

The wildling chuckled. “Your daddy’s black cloak looks like a crow from far away. Even more so for the King of the Crows, cause he flies now.” Tormund shorted at his own joke, earning a glare from Jon.
Giggles left his daughter’s lips, so Jon figured the embarrassment was worthwhile. “That’s funny, poppa.” Her gaze returned to the landscape around her. “So much snow,” Arya said in awe. Growing up in Essos, Jon doubted she ever experienced even a cool day.

“Much snow?” A dismissive grunt came from the lone giant among them. Wun Wun remained in Winterfell while his family stayed in the Gift, while Mag Mar had journeyed north of the Wall to see if any giants remained among the living. His hand gestured across the wide expanse around them. “Small snow.”

Noticing the puzzled expressions of his kids - hells, on all faces present excluding Tormund - Jon took an amused pity on them. “He means that this snowfall is nothing compared to what is north of the Wall.” Months among the free folk had left him almost fluent in the guttural, broken giantspeak used to communicate. “When you are King, Rhaegar, this whole land will be entrusted to you - and the Warden of the North you seek to appoint. It is vital that you choose your subordinates wisely, persons both strong and fair with a love for the common people as your mother has.”

Rhaegar mulled it over, jaw tense in thought. “Uncle Robb, will you be the loyal Warden of the North during my rule?”

Robb laughed. “It would be an honor to serve you, my Prince…”

He was cut off by Arya. “Silly brother. He’ll be poppa’s Warden of the North. Yours will be his son with Aunt Margaery.” Jon stifled his belly chortle - as did Rickon - at the reddening of his brother’s face. The two of them weren’t subtle in their obvious affection for each other.

Gazing out at the castle, it was only thanks to his ranging instincts that he heard the galloping hooves behind him. “My Lord.” Urging his horse to turn, Jon spotted one of his bannermen - one of the new ones raised from the Bolton prisoners who hadn’t been sent to Meereen.

A growl came from Ghost, instantly suspicious of strangers. “Ghost, heel,” Jon ordered. Whimpering, the direwolf doubled back with his tail between his legs, settling close to Rhaegar. The Crown Prince leaned down from his horse to ruffle Ghost’s fur - he emitted a contented hum. Jon shared a smirk with Robb before turning back to the messenger. “What is this about, then?”

Gulping, the bannerman’s only comfort was that it was the White Wolf’s direwolf and not his dragon - or the Queen’s dragons. Glancing up at Wun’s towering form did him no favors though. “Horses to the west, my Lord. Banners bearing the fist sigil.”

“The fist sigil, House Glover.” Arya’s eyes met her father’s. “Right, poppa?”

Rhaegar, not one to allow his twin sister to show him up, added his own remembered fact. “From Deepwood Motte, poppa.” Arya glared at him with annoyance, while her brother only preened.

Jon couldn’t help the chuckle leaving his lips. ‘Exactly like Bran and Arya.’ “Aye, Good memory my Prince, Princess,” Robb said, praising the each of them. The twins beamed, feeling ten feet tall.

“Shall we go meet them, poppa?” Rhaegar asked.

Glancing west, Jon could just make out the tops of the banners. “I don’t see why not. With me, men.” ‘Best that Robb and I greet them first.’ All wanted to avoid any confrontations with Dany or her dragons before the official banquet.

Lord Robett Glover was just as hard and weathered as when he denied Jon his fealty in facing Ramsay Bolton. “Jon Snow,” he said rather bitingly. The massive giant towering before him joined Tormund in reminding the old Lord why he hadn’t sided with Jon in the Battle of the Bastards.
Pursing his lips, Robb said nothing even as Jon began to simmer. His lack of respect was quite well earned, and he would have to fight harder than ever before to win it back. However, he had a champion. “You will call my father and uncle their proper titles, Lord Glover.” Dozens of pairs of eyeballs darted to young Arya. Like Lyanna Mormont, she possessed a steel beyond her young years.

Silent, Lord Glover blinked. “Who are you?”

Jon trotted his horse till he was mere feet from the northern lord. “Allow me to properly introduce you, Lord Glover. These are Crown Prince Rhaegar and Princess Arya Targaryen of the Seven Kingdoms, children of Queen Daenerys Stormborn and myself.” Jon’s fiery gaze made clear that the dragon would be woken if any in the Glover party tried anything.

Thankfully, the old Lord merely bowed. “Forgive me, princess. It is no way for a guest to behave to his host - we are not Freys.”

Calming down, Jon allowed graciousness for Lord Glover. “Come to the castle. You must need some food and rest.” Swelling with pride at his children, Jon just knew at that moment that he wouldn’t need to worry about the Targaryen madness with them.

There wasn’t much that usually cowed or humbled Daenerys - though she did her best to rein in her more arrogant or hubristic inclinations. The ancient, blood-red visage of the Weirwood tree nevertheless managed to do so. Daenerys couldn’t explain it, but she could feel a mystic energy leaving it. The Weirwood awed her, the Godswood imbuing her with a spiritual penitence never before felt.

Still… “You’re sure that the marriage must be of the old faith?” Much as she wished to marry Jon - every part of her craved it desperately - Dany disliked redundancy. “I would prefer our wedding and coronation to be at the same time.” It went unsaid that she approved of Sam and Sansa’s suggestion of Empire.

“Absolutely sure, Daenerys.” Northern hardiness aside, Sansa nevertheless cupped her nose with her hands, channeling her warm breath upward. Surrounding them were Brienne and the Dothraki bloodriders, protecting the three women from any threat. “Even if the northern lords, accept you as their ruler alongside Jon, an extra dose of humility will go a long way. Show you aren’t a conqueror, but a protector.”

By all accounts, mostly from her long conversations in bed with Jon, Sansa had been a typical romantic teenager with her head in the clouds at the same time Dany was a weak girl being sold to the Dothraki. And now here they were, a Queen and - in all intents and purposes - a Hand to a King. Daenerys was impressed. “I will be their Queen as much as I will be their Empress. They need not be afraid of me.”

Sansa gave her a smile. “It isn’t you they are afraid of, but rather the specter of the Mad King or the Mad Prince.” From his short rule as ‘King of the Seven Kingdoms,’ Viserys made a serious bid for their father’s legacy. “Learning of your… punishment for him would help greatly if it comes from you personally.” The conversation where Dany informed him of his status as a Blackfyre had gone just as badly and just as oddly amusing as one would think.

“Although there is one part that confuses me.” Margaery had learned directly from the most cunning
manipulator in the Seven Kingdoms not named Tywin Lannister. Her life had been hard, but wasn’t a trial by fire nature as was Dany and Sansa’s. “Hypothetically, if Robb and I were to marry…” Based on internal developments, it was an all but certainty. “We would conduct both ceremonies before the old gods and the Seven at once. Why have one at the coronation?”

“If we are to create a whole new crown for each other, we must be married as equals.” Daenerys would not stand for Jon to be considered at a lower station than her. Following their coronation, they would be wed in the eyes of the Seven, cementing their status as equals. To rule and protect their empire together.

The magnitude suddenly hit Daenerys. ‘I’m getting married…’ Political dynamics and the importance of alliances didn’t really faze the Dragon Queen. Daenerys had married before for political reasons, and while her then-husband ultimately did not treat her badly it was still loveless. ‘I’m marrying Jon.’ It was different with Jon - the stars had aligned perfectly. Not only was Jon - as Tyrion put it, “The best damn bachelor in all of the seven Kingdoms” - the upcoming marriage was a love match. No noblewoman could ever hope for half as much. ‘How do I deserve this blessing from the Gods?’ Daenerys had no answers.

A rustle in the grove barely merited a second glance by the party. A second, louder rustle drew attention, Brienne tensing while the Dothraki bloodriders preemptively forming a loose defensive screen around their Queen and her companions. When a branch snapped, a full alert was triggered. “Stay back,” Brienne cautioned Sansa, blade drawn.

Dany felt her heart beating, hand on Saracen. “Raiders?” asked Margeary to no one in particular. There had been scattered reports of Bolton diehards causing havoc closer to the Dreadfort, but nothing this close to Winterfell - everyone here was a Stark loyalist. Sansa quickly drew her dagger, not intending to ever be captured again.

With the snapping twigs growing louder and closer, Daenerys turned to her bloodriders. “Qhoro, flush out the intruder,” she barked in Dothraki.

The words were obvious enough when the long-braided bloodrider snarled and headed to the grove with his Arkh raised. “Come out, Andal,” he said in halting common tongue, picking up some from Ser Jorah. “You cannot hope to… kill Queen Daenerys.” He disappeared through the thick leaves… Only to reappear after a tense silence, a massive grey-white beast growling with teeth bared. It was as big as Ghost - actually, exactly like Ghost except for the color to the shock of all present, Sansa especially. ‘But there are no Direwolves south of the Wall…’ “Oh, if I were seeking to kill you, you’d be dead already.”

Voice hitting Sansa like a charging ox, it was as if a long-dead spirit was facing her. Out of the woods then emerged three figures clothed in warm furs, but only one drew the Lady of Winterfell’s attention. Much older and far too experienced in the realities of life, but there was no denying it. Even still, utter shock still tinged Sansa’s tone. “Arya?!”

Dany’s eyes widened. ‘Jon’s sister?’ There had been a sort of tenderness by which Jon had talked about her, more so than his other siblings. Such had been her driving motive in naming her daughter - after the sister so dear to Jon’s heart. Of a wild, headstrong, yet sensitive girl that burrowed her way into one’s heart and never left. And here was Arya Stark in the flesh. Emotional reunion bringing out all that Jon had said about her, Dany could detect a hardness within her, a stoicism earned as hers and Sansa’s had - the past years had affected them all.

“Sansa…” Both Gendry and Hot Pie stepped back, content to let the reunion play out. Even Nymeria gave the sisters a wide berth. “I’m home.” Eyes flickered to the other women. “Who are
they?”

Initial shock wearing off, Sansa tried to remain composed. “This is Lady Margaery Tyrell, and Queen Daenerys Targaryen, the Dragon Queen and Jon’s betrothed.”

Eyes widening at who she was standing before, Arya bowed. “Your Grace.” She had no love for protocol, but did for those she respected. What followed was clearly her personality. “Do I have to call you Lady Stark, now?”

Amazingly, Sansa kept a straight face. “Yes.” Smiles then broadened on their lips, the two sisters embracing tightly. “Welcome home, sister.”

“Open the gate!” called out the guards as the party arrived at the castle. If they were shocked to see another massive direwolf, they didn’t show it - a castle full of dragons and giants largely took away their capacity to be shocked.

Riveted to the massive direwolf banners strung over the castle, Arya felt every bit of the surreal nature of the moment. “Rickon… Robb… but I saw Greywind’s head on his body.” The memory was still a hard one to swallow.

“Lies,” spat Sansa. “For Walder Frey and Roose Bolton to curry favor with Joffrey.”

Dany nodded. “And your brother Bran is alive as well. He’s safe in Essos under the care of my soldiers.”

And so through all of it, the fighting and the chaos, all of Ned Stark’s brood had lived. “It just seems so good to be true,” the young girl confessed. Arya scowled. “I’m still glad the Freys are dead.” ‘As will the rest on my list.’ Changing the subject, she turned to Dany. “So you’re marrying my brother?”

Feeling it wasn’t the time or place to confess the truth, Daenerys punted. “Yes, we will be married.”

“He couldn’t stop thinking about you, before he left for the Wall. I can tell you love each other, but if you hurt him I will kill you.” The iron set of her jaw belied Arya’s seriousness.

“Your Grace,” Catelyn began, just happening to be walking the grounds upon their arrival. “We must…” She stopped in her tracks, jaw slack. “Arya?”

“Mother.” In no time the young woman was swept in a motherly embrace. The two had driven the other mad, but at that moment there was nothing but love and anguish. “I thought you died at the Twins.” Only soft sobs left Catelyn as she wrapped her arms tightly around her daughter. While she could have stayed buried in her mother’s skirts for hours, Arya was still nervously excited. Her head swivelled around the courtyard, looking for someone specific. “Where is Jon?” All the last years of her life led up to this moment, and the one person she most wanted to see again was nowhere to be found.

Even Daenerys was slightly concerned. “He was supposed to arrive…”

Any worries as to his whereabouts were buried when the gate was opened. “Make way for the Lord!” called one of the bannermen, a large party of horsemen entering. Dany could see the banners of House Glover mixed in with the Stark Direwolf, and at the vanguard was Jon. “Maester Wolkan, have the stewards get our guests settled in. Get the horses in the stables and…” Eyes searching for Daenerys, needing to see her, Jon began to smile at her but noticed the small warrior to her left. He
stared in stunned silence, a look shared by Robb, Rickon, and even Lady Brienne.

“Poppa, who’s that?” Arya’s namesake asked inquisitively, her and her brother confused atop their horses.

Their father didn’t hear them, dismounting with his gaze never leaving Arya. She had changed just as all of them had, in many facets even more so, but there was no denying that it was her. His eyes shone, twinkling with unadulterated joy. It was done, his family confirmed safe and alive. “Is it really you?” Jon finally said.

If her normal stoicism had been sorely tested at the reunion with her mother and siblings, seeing Jon after so long was the emotional equivalent of a blast of dragonfire. Lip quivering, a single tear fell from her cheek. Breaking out into a run, she leapt into his embrace, burying her face into his tunic. There would undoubtedly be emotional reunions with Robb and Rickon - not to mention when she met her niece and nephew - but for now all her attention was reserved for her brother.

Voice a mix of laughter and tears, Jon noticed the narrow point clipped to his sister’s belt. “You kept it?” Disappeared for so long, the same sword he had personally made for her still remained in her possession.

Arya grinned. “You gave it to me. Of course I’d keep it.” Another merry laugh left Jon’s lips as he twirled his sister around. Knowing that Bran was safe in Essos, the Starks were finally together. Winterfell was whole again.
Targaryen Empire

Nothing but the low firelight and a few scattered candles illuminating the room, Jon watched as Ser Barristan Selmy shivered under his cloak. “Cold, Ser Barristan?” he asked with an amused grin - the grin northerners only directed at unacclimated southerners.

Barristan rubbed his hands together. “Too used to the heat of Essos, your Grace.” The two of them were alone in Jon’s quarters, Barristan providing needed company prior to the meeting. Glancing down, he smiled slightly as Jon slowly slid the whetstone down Longclaw’s edge. “Your father always had a saying, take keep of your belongings and your belongings will take keep of you.”

“That is wise.” Jon gently ran his finger down the Valyrian steel edge - sharp and deadly. “When Joffrey was at Winterfell, his sword was always dull and splotched. Bodes well for me, I would think.”

“Yes, your Grace. Baratheon fighting skill did not find its way to him.” Barristan detected the weariness in his King’s voice. “You do not wish to fight, do you?”

Jon sighed. “I detest fighting. It seems such is all I’ve done throughout my life, but nothing fills me with joy more than thinking of peace with Daenerys by my side. I would give up my birthright in a heartbeat for that.”

“Your father thought the same way.” A wistful smile crossed his face. “Oftentimes, he and I would sneak out in disguise to Flea Bottom. He’d play his harp for the smallfolk - I had never seen him so serene, though he did say that it wasn’t complete until he could bring his love to sing with him. Something told me that he didn’t mean Elia Martell.”

“He was a cultured man, my father?” Jon wanted to learn everything about the enigmatic Rhaegar Targaryen.

“Oh yes.” Watching as Jon sheathed his sword, the old knight enjoyed the fond memories. “He would often bring the best painters, sculptors, and architects to the capitol. Wanted to devote his reign to turn a nation of stone into marble, but the Rebellion got in the way.”

“I hope that I could complete his dream.” Closing his eyes, Jon remembered the silver-haired man in the garden of the afterlife. His strength and love shining through. ‘Father…’ “I met him… my father.”

Ser Barristan blinked, confused. “How, your Grace?” After seeing dragons ascend to the skies, giants walk amongst the North, and the long lost son of his beloved Prince, the old knight disbelieved nothing anymore.

“When I… died and was resurrected.” He saw Barristan nod wordlessly - his kingsguard had seen the scars, one of a few that did. “My mother too. All my life I thought he was nothing but some monster, but he was my…” Jon wished he had known him, had grown in the Red Keep not for any trappings of royalty, but simply for his mother and father in his life. ’Dany and I would still be together. I know this.’

Suddenly, he began to chuckle. Barristan raised an eyebrow. “Something humorous, your Grace?”

“Tell me something, Ser Barristan. Did you ever know a man named Alliser Thorne?”

Pursing his lips, the old knight searched his brain. “The name is familiar. I seem to recall a young and
idealistic knight in the ranks, marching to battle at the Trident. Why?"

“He was a brother of the Night’s Watch when I met him, older and bitter - hated me for being Ned Stark’s son. Ended up stabbing me in the heart for bringing the Wildlings south of the Wall.” Another chuckle left his lips, mindlessly patting the scar on his chest. “Ironic, if he had known who I was…”

“I would have killed him myself had I been there, your Grace. Not even hate for the Usurper could condone murdering your own commander.” He patted his old ward’s son on the shoulder. “Your father would have been very proud of you, proud of your honor. He always admired that of the Starks - it doesn’t shock me that he fell for the She-wolf.” A knocking at the door drew his attention, Jon hearing him walk towards the entrance and opening it. “Lady Arya.”

“May I enter, Ser Barristan?” ‘My sister.’ Jon really needed to develop a system to differentiate his daughter and his sister. “May I speak with Jon, alone?”

“Wait outside, Ser Barristan. This won’t be long.”

“Of course, your Grace.” It was just the two of them, now.

Needle still clipped to her side, Arya stood straight as a knight. “Brother.”

Jon hid his smirk. “Wouldn’t ‘cousin’ be more accurate?” He expected the fist that slammed into his shoulder.

“Shut up.” She hadn’t taken the news well at all, but managed to tolerate the change once it became clear no actual status changed. “You’re my brother, and damn nothing will change that no matter how much of an ass you are… my King,” she cheekily added for good measure.

“If you want me to call you ‘sister,’ then no formal shit with me. I’m proud to be ‘Jon’ to you.” Grinning, Jon gave his little sister a once over. ‘Not the same little sister anymore.’ While the same loving and wild Arya shined when alone among the family, everywhere else was replaced with a completely different person. Hardened, haunted, dead - a living White Walker. It chilled him to the core. “You’ve changed since the last time.”

“So have you, Jaehaerys.” She cast her eyes at the lilac dragon rousing from her sleep on Jon’s bed. “Of all that I imagined you doing, riding a grown dragon and raising three infant dragons were not among them.” Walking over to the bed, Arya cautiously reached out to scratch the underside of the dragon’s jaw. Wearily inspecting the offered hand, Rhaella snapped her jaws once before letting out a contented hum as Arya’s fingers stroked her. “She likes me.”

“She is my daughter, and she knows who her family is.” Dragons were very intelligent, and his were raised among wolves to be used to them. Just as Ghost was drawn to Dany, even her dragons were docile to the Starks. They often fell asleep on Ghost’s back or curled up on his siblings’ stomachs to keep warm. “Once you learn caution, they’re like Ghost and Nymeria when they were pups.”

Nuzzling her hand, Rhaella yawned and flapped off to the rafters. “You named her after your grandmother… and the others after Aunt Lyanna and Sansa.” Arya watched as Jon nodded. “And Daenerys named your daughter after me.” She didn’t know which had been more of a surprise, learning Jon had children with the Dragon Queen or learning one of the little dragonwolves that had immediately taken to her like a fish to water was her namesake.

“I can only imagine that Daenerys wanted to have one of our twins to have a northern name, and chose one so near and dear to me.” He couldn’t help but smile at her looking away, lip quivering.
She didn’t seem as hardened as she portrayed herself to be. “Sansa is already training her to be a powerful lady, but I can see her looking at Robb and Rhaegar’s swordsmanship lessons longingly - reminds me of someone.” Jon laughed as Arya curtseyed with a smirk. “Now I wouldn’t want to put my daughter in danger fighting a man…”

“Oh please, I could take you on any time,” she mocked.

“I may have to take you up on that. Would you teach Arya how to… water dance as you call it?” He could just imagine how his daughter’s eyes would sparkle in joy if he delivered her aunt as an instructor.

Smiling, Arya nodded. “It would be my honor.” Something came to her mind. “Jon… about Gendry.”

“You love him, don’t you?” Jon’s jaw set, leaning forward.

“Yes.” She wasn’t sure how he would react to the truth. “He’s the bastard of Robert Baratheon.”

This was not something he expected. “You’re saying he is the son of the Usurper. The man that had my half-siblings murdered and would have personally killed Daenerys and myself had he been given the chance?”

Arya glared at him. “I thought you of all people would understand.”

Hearing her biting words, Jon did understand. His anger at the loss of his Targaryen family and Daenerys’ dangerous childhood did not extend to poor Gendry Waters - he had no control over it. Those that were at fault were either dead or south in Joffrey’s kingdom. “I trust King Robert wasn’t as honorable as father was with his ‘bastard.’”

“Gendry didn’t even know until he heard a goldcloak brag.”

One eyebrow rose. “Do I need to have a conversation with this Gendry? Make sure he knows the fate of those that harm my family… owww!” He felt another twinge of pain in his shoulder.

Hitting him again for good measure, Arya rolled her eyes. “You deserved that, Jon. Don’t you dare do that, I can take care of myself.” She patted Needle for good measure before her gaze softened. “Besides, he would never hurt me.” The ‘Wild wolf’ bit her lip, wondering how all her experiences and training abandoned her and left a nervous and frightened girl in front of her brother. “He wants my hand, but only if you would agree.” It happened the night when they arrived at Winterfell, the moment still surreal to Arya. “I love you brother, and also want your blessing.” He hadn’t said anything, face impassive as ice. “Jon, please say something.”

Pursing his lips, Dany had told him that this was inevitable after one day. “I still can’t help seeing you as that little girl who couldn’t get Nymeria to fetch her gloves.” Chuckling at the memory, he looked up at her. “We will have to legitimize him, for a Stark cannot marry a commoner.” It took a moment, but suddenly Arya’s face lit up. She threw herself into Jon’s arms. For once, girlish speak and mannerisms tumbled from her lips in enthusiastic gratitude. “But, he will have to prove himself to me before I make it official.”

Arya laughed. “Of course, but your sister will always know how soft you are, my King.” At that moment Rhaella fluttered her wings and landed on Arya’s shoulder, chirping. “Isn’t your father a softie?” The dragon chirped once more.
The howling winds had obscured nearly all traces of sunlight. Winter claimed the majestic northern lands underneath its freezing shroud. For Daenerys, it was an inauspicious omen. To a Dragon of Valyria such was inhospitable - the cold seeped to her very bones, Dany lacking the dragonfire of her non-human children to at least keep an ounce of comfort.

‘The north nearly claimed Aegon the Conqueror. Will another dragon fall to it?’

“You forget, my Queen, that Jon Snow withstood the north’s full fury, not only emerging in triumph but also as its leader.”

Shocked slightly at the sudden voice, Dany hadn’t noticed the steps of the Red Witch through the wails of the northern blizzard. ‘Did I speak out loud?’ “Jon isn’t the leader of the northmen yet.” She looked out at the snow-covered fields. “And if the omens indicate anything, he may never be.”

The northern winter was more inhospitable for Melisandre than even Daenerys. Red locks and sharp features pure fire, the priestess of R’hllor nevertheless looked to be in her element. “You should have faith, my Queen. The history of your homeland easily provides a solution, apparent even a political amateur such as myself.”

It was almost divine providence to Dany, for the solution to be found out of her history. Her people. She still remembered as Sam explained it all to her. Centuries before the Doom of Valyria and even the Valyrian Freehold, the King began the expansion of his realm. The first conquests were the Ghiscari, but they rebelled at every opportunity. Finally, the conquering King’s son made a change. He created what he called an ‘Empire,’ where the Ghiscaris were able to rule themselves but with him as their King. All Ghiscari internal affairs were governed by Ghiscaris, but the ‘Emperor’ of Valyria still maintained control to unite all domains of his realm. She hoped, she prayed that the northern Lords would accept this arrangement.

“Do you know,” Melisandre said in the silence, “the prophecy of the Prince that was Promised?” Dany nodded. “The proper High Valyrian word is genderless, but after talking to your translator, I also think that there could have been a mistranslation.” This drew Dany’s attention, the Red Woman blurred by the snow. ‘The prophecy was originally spoken in a far more ancient Valyrian dialect - one where pluralities were often the same as the singular. Not only genderless, but lacking in singularity as well.” She placed her fingers onto the cold stone. “I may not know the future, Daenerys Targaryen, but I do know that you and Jon Snow are not yet to fade into the night.” The words hung, Dany parsing through their deep meaning.

A throat clearing caught her attention, Dany turning to find Missandei waiting for them. “My Queen, they are ready for you.” Even with her official facade, Daenerys noticed the extra sparkle in her eye now that Grey Worm was back.

‘Oh Jon, at least I’ll be by your side this time.’ The many times she wished for his presence during the struggles of her life, merely to lift her spirits, both scared her and filled her with joy that he would always be there from now on. ‘Ice and fire.’ Both different, but at the purest forms, stronger together. “I am as well. Lead the way.”

Pulling the furs tighter around his body, Jon glanced at the roaring fires set by the servants. Unlike the grand castles of the South, Winterfell had the sturdy Northern design meant to keep any heat within its thick walls. Still, it took his entire willpower and experience north of the Wall to keep from shivering.

He sat at the head of the table, occupied by his father during the feast so long before - the place of
honor. To his left sat Sansa while Rickon sat to her left - Brienne and Podrick behind. To his right
the fourth chair between himself and Robb and Arya remained empty, a fact that seemed to go over
the head of most of the bickering lords and knights in the great hall, but one that perceptive eyes such
as Lyanna Mormont and Tyene Martell appeared to notice. By the barely suppressed smirk on
Sansa’s face and the more open ones on Arya and Robb’s, they had an inkling as to who Jon had
reserved it for.

A worried frown formed on his face when the Red Woman slipped through the main door, quietly
finding a dark alcove to settle down in. ‘Where is she?’ was the delay an acceptable one or was there
trouble afoot? “Do I have to worry?” Jon remarked softly, to no one in particular.

“Calm down, brother,” Sansa told him, equally soft but with a stern undercurrent. “Don’t work
yourself into a rage. She’ll be here.” Both siblings turned back to the assembled guests. Even the
massive great hall struggled to fit everyone. Tormund and the chiefs of the free folk clans, joined by
the Knights of Vale and the Vale hill tribes. Each of the northern houses - minus the now extinct
House Bolton - from the mighty Manderlys to the small coastal houses southwest of the Gift. Lady
Catelyn headed the houses of the Riverlands, only a third of them joining the Stark cause. Rounding
out the Westerosi were the Tyrells, Tyene Martell, Theodosius Caryn, and Sam Tarly. The fourth
table hosted the Dothraki screamers, Unsullied captains, and minor Ghiscari nobility that had traveled
with Dany from Meereen. Sitting at the head of that table were Varys and Grey Worm, Tyrion’s
place noticeably empty.

Before the delay grew unbearable, the doors at the far end swung open, two newly-raised Stark
bannermen holding them in place. The entire hall quiet, Jon’s eyes sparkling with happiness at.
Missandei and Tyrion to either side of her and Ser Jorah behind, Daenerys looked radiant. The
chaffron dress and eggshell furs only amplified her pale beauty. She looked every inch a queen, his
queen - but had a sort of subdued quality among the northern lords, regally recognizing that this was
their domain. It warmed Jon’s heart to see how she cared so much.

Whispered murmurings broke out among the lords when Daenerys headed for the Stark table. Tyrion
sat next to Grey Worm, fending off glares from Theodosius and the Northerners. Jorah, finally at
home among his fellow northerners, took a seat with Lady Lyanna - The last of the Mormonts.
Missandei standing behind, Dany approached the empty place to Jon’s right. Catching his siblings
greeting her with warm glances, Jon reached back and pulled out the sturdy wood chair for Dany to
take. As both sat, she shot him a quick smile. The simple glimmer of love in her violet eyes banished
the cold from his body.

They symbolism was evident for all. One that Jon, Robb, Arya, and Sansa all agreed to risk.
Daenerys Targaryen was considered not as a visiting lord, but as family. One of the Starks.

“Now that all are present,” Sansa said, her voice steeled. “We can begin.” She stood, no more an
innocent maiden. “All of you old enough to know the year of my birth, or the years far before
Robert’s Rebellion, remember when the Realm was at peace. Such is lacking now with the threats to
all sides of us. My brother, Jon Snow of House Stark, asks for your audience to face this common
threat together.” It was northern custom, for someone of great respect to present the liege lord. Jon
could think of no one more deserving than Sansa for that role.

Pushing up from his chair, Jon nodded at his sister. “Thank you, Lady Stark.” Daenerys could see
his eyes weary. Humility wasn’t the hallmark of the dragon, but perhaps the Targaryens could have
benefited with a little wolf in them. “I come to all of you with an open mind. To listen to your
concerns - but I stress that in the face of what’s to come, unity is desired above all.”

It was Lord Glover that addressed the mammoth in the room. “Lord Snow, do you know who this
is?” He pointed at Dany, glare hard as stone. “I find it inappropriate that the Mad King’s daughter is allowed in an assembly of the north.”

Restraining his temptation to shout in anger, Jon heard Dany softly sigh next to him. However, it was Sansa that spoke up first. “If there is anyone that belongs here, it is Queen Daenerys.”

“Quite true,” added Robb. “It was thanks to her that Ramsay Bolton and the Mad Prince were defeated. We owe her our thanks.”

“Thanks for what?” demanded Lord Cerwyn. “Her father burning your grandfather and uncle alive? Her brother doing the same thing to those who wouldn’t bend the knee to him?” A low chorus of agreement came from many, causing the three Starks to shoot her an apologetic glance. Daenerys merely sat there, taking the abuse. She was a queen, the Mother of Dragons, Breaker of Chains - she’d been through worse.

To Jon’s left stood Lord Yohn Royce of the Vale. “I must agree with my honorable comrades. We rose against the Mad King for a reason, the Targaryens long the enemies of the North and the Vale. They are not welcome here, nor must I add are another member of this so-called congress.” Royce leveled a haughty finger at the wilding chieftains, beards long and ragged. “I must issue my protest that the Knights of the Vale be included on the same level as Wildling invaders.”

Bracing for a furious reaction that Wildlings were known to exhibit, Jon was mildly surprised when Tormund answered rather calmly. “We didn’t invade. We were invited.”

“Not by me.” The chamber erupted in an uproar of the Lords, Knights, and Maesters arguing amongst themselves. Many targeted Tyrion as the lone Lannister, few arguing in his favor due to the indifference thrown by the Esossi officers, loyal behind their Lannister-hating commander. A few were directed at Tyene Martell for her cousin’s backing of Joffrey, only for the former Sand Snake to give back as good as she got. Sansa pursed her lips while Robb ran a hand down his head. There was an old saying that two northerners couldn’t go five minutes without an argument and fight breaking out, and this seemed to hold true today.

“We would have all died if it wasn’t for them!”

“No friend of ours supports a Lannister!”

“The North has spent centuries fighting the Wildlings!”

“How can we trust someone that brought a slave-trader back to our lands!” That comment brought Lyanna Mormont’s sharp tongue out in defense of her uncle, Ser Jorah merely keeping a stony silence.

“How shut up, all of you,” the Queen of Thorns spat. “I feel like I’m in the damned nursery again.”

Having enough, Jon stood, pounding his palm against the table. “Please, Lords. The Knights of the Vale, the northmen, the Free Folk, the Unsullied, we all fight together to defend the North.” He looked towards Dany, the piercing gaze in his eyes making her heart flutter. “My father, Ned Stark, always said that one’s true friends were found on the battlefield.”

“But the battle is over!” announced Lord Cerwyn. “The Boltons are defeated. The Mad Prince is in chains. Winter has come, and if the Maesters are right it will be the coldest in a thousand years.” He pointed at the Stark table. “You claim to care for us all, but only seem to require our forces to mass together for the Mad King’s daughter. Let her foreign hordes fight for her, while we be with our families to ride out the coming storm.”
Watching him sit, Jon met the eyes of all the assembled Lords. “Aye, this battle is over, but the war has just begun. Joffrey Baratheon,” hisses erupted, drawing rare accord between those present.  “Masses the combined forces of the South to fight us, an army that conquered Dorne in mere months. And the true threat continues to loom to the north. I promise all of you, my Lords, the true enemy will not wait, for he brings the storm.”

A long silence hung over those present, parsing Jon’s words. “Are you talking about the Long Night?” asked Lord Royce. “That’s nothing but a legend. A child’s fairytale.”

“Fairy tales do not threaten the entirety of humanity, my Lord.” Emerging from the shadows, the fiery red hair and cloak of Melisandre gave her a sinister air. “When their kind was banished to the Land of Always Winter, the prophecy foretold that they would return. Men must reclaim the dawn, led into the night by the Prince that was Promised…”

“Stop this drivel, foreign scum,” yelled a knight from the Riverlands. “Don’t peddle your superstitions to us. We know you declared for Joffrey before grafting yourself to the Tyrells.”

Varys stood up - though he had a bias against the faith of R'hllor, he tried to analyze the issue neutrally. “All points to you as an honorable man, Lord Snow. Why you would lie about something of this magnitude does escape me, but you have to admit that it is far-fetched. An army of men emerging from death? We have a confirmed enemy to the south, and as far as I know, Joffrey Baratheon is among the living.” Tyrion snorted. Varys actually cracked a joke? ‘Imagine my shock.’

“There is nothing far-fetched about the Night King,” Robb replied. None among the northmen muttered a word challenging Jon’s contention. They had the greatest connection to the old Westeros, when the First Men fought the Others. They were far more believing. “I have fought his hordes, and if we are not united when they breach the Wall, we are doomed.”

“I have seen them as well,” Margaery added. “They are a threat unlike any other.”

Lord Hornwood stood, weary. “What would you have us do about this threat, Lord Snow? If it is true, how can we stop them with Joffrey Baratheon on our southern border?”

‘Best out with it now.’ Glancing to his left, Sansa nodded, hopeful resignation on her face. Glancing to his right, Dany gave him a soft smile, reading his mind. “Go on, brother,” Arya bluntly stated, drawing muted chuckles from the other Starks.

Breathing deeply, Jon looked straight at ever grouping of Lords and Knights present. ‘Now or never.’ “My Lords, the only hope we can begin to have for when the Night King crosses the Wall is to defeat Joffrey Baratheon and unite the Seven Kingdoms. But his armies are vast, even the combined might of the North, Riverlands, and Vale do not hope to match what Tywin Lannister can bring to bear. Therefore…” He reached for Dany’s hand, tangling their fingers together. Their eyes met, Jon’s lips curling into a ghost of a smile before turning to the Lords. “I have procured an alliance with Daenerys Targaryen, the Dragon Queen. She will provide us with tens of thousands of experienced soldiers bloodied on the battlefields of Essos, a powerful navy of Ironborn, and three adult dragons.” Jon cleared his throat, voice loud and clear. “I also announce my betrothal to Queen Daenerys, to seal this union between all the realms of humanity in the face of the coming storm.”

The only souls in the great hall was the howling of the outside wind. Those that knew about this previously, such as Catelyn or Tyrion, merely shifted in their seats. Aside from hushed translations for the Unsullied and Dothraki, the majority of the Westerosi were stunned dumb. A Stark - even a bastard - marrying a Targaryen? No one denied the Dragon Queen was beautiful, and for two legitimized Targaryen children to be fathered by him was irritating but bearable. But to marry one?
It took nearly a minute for the announcement to sink in. “TRAITOR!” yelled an unnamed northerner. “You spit on your ancestors!”

“Hold your tongue, lest you lose it,” Arya hissed back.

Most were far more circumspect. “Lord Snow,” began Lord Mazin, someone in his corner since the fight against Ramsay but no friend for the Targaryens. “I understand the impulse you have. The Dragon Queen’s armies are impressive, and she is a beautiful woman with whom you have sired… children with…”

“I hope that you will stay respectful, Lord Mazin.” Sansa wasn’t as hardened as Arya, but her voice held the same steel. Arya was impressed. “Your loyalty is greatly appreciated, but do not forget who you are speaking to… or where you are speaking from.”


“Here here!”

“They are mad, all of them!” Lady Dustin, sister-in-law to Roose Bolton, quaked in fury. “Look what her father did. What her brother did!”

Tyrion stood. “Viserys Blackfyre was stripped of his name by Queen Daenerys, under royal decree. He will be brought to trial for his crimes.” His words slowed many of the naysayers, but did not stop them.

“Please don’t marry her, Lord Snow.” Yohn Royce felt no affinity for the northern bastard, but his former Lady’s sister stood behind him and he would - but marrying a Targaryen was too much, still bearing the scars of when he joined Jon Arryn to fight the Mad King. “She bared your children, but do not do so out of that obligation,” he pleaded.

“I will marry Daenerys Targaryen, no other,” Jon replied, ice coating his near wolf-growl.

“Lords and Ladies, please!” Upright, Margaery Tyrell gazed impassionately at the assemblage, silently pleading. “The Long Night is soon upon us. Past grudges and blood feuds serve no one except the Night King.”

“The only storm I see being brought down upon us is that of the Targaryens,” Royce shot back. “None of us has claimed to see these ‘Others’ as you have Jon Snow, but we all know the Targaryens are no friends of the North.” That the Vale stood with the North would normally have been a huge success of the meeting - Sansa and Tyrion shared a wince all the same.

Jon grew visibly angry… only to be stopped by a soft hand. “Let me,” Dany whispered, pleading with him. Unable to resist her urgings, Jon took a seat. “Lords of Westeros,” she began, “There is not a desire in my body to force you to bend the knee, even though it could be done easily.” By the added steel in her voice, Jon knew she meant it. Sansa seemed impressed, Robb let out a soft chuckle, while both Missandei and Ser Jorah offered small smirks. Even in appeasing the lords, the Dragon Queen let them know who held the position of strength.

Breaking the pause was Tyene Martell. “If you do not seek the bended knee of the north, your Grace, what do you want?” Best the query come from an ally, and she was indeed curious - the heated discussion distracted from the unbearable cold.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Dany missed Jon’s touch. “Nearly three hundred years ago, King in the North Torrhen Stark bent the knee to my ancestor, Aegon Targaryen. He swore to him in
perpetuity. My brother…”

‘Oh Dany,’ Jon resisted the urge to wrap her up in his arms. It was still hard for her to bear, to be the
daughter and brother of persons so cruel and evil. ‘Hells, my grandfather and uncle.’ All the Starks
could see it if the others couldn’t - her kind heart overwhelming any traces of madness.

Stronger than she looked, Dany continued. “He sought to enforce that covenant through fire and
blood. But I am not my brother. Targaryen fire and blood will reign down upon those that deserve it,
not those simply in the way toward full conquest. Marrying a child of the North makes me a
northerner, and I will harm myself before I harm my people.” Regal as she was, the passion infusing
her voice spoke to her genuineness. Dany watched as Lord Manderly, having scowled through the
whole meeting, leaned back in rapt attention.

“When we are married,” Jon stated. “Daenerys will hold Northern title alongside her birthright. The
north will maintain its full sovereignty under not a Warden of a monarch, but of a King that
simultaneously holds higher title over the entire Realm.” It was a Valyrian concept - that of Empire -
and innately foreign to any Westerosi, but that was what made it the answer in Jon’s view.

She looked at Jon, gaze tender. “Lord Snow will rule alongside me. I do not seek to conquer you. I
seek to make you equal among all others…”

Even with their familiarity after being briefed earlier by Sam and Sansa personally, prejudice against
House Targaryen proved too hard to summit. “And yet the dragonspawn do seek to continue your
rule, if not as a Queen but as an ‘Empress!’”

Lord Cerwyn’s face was red with anger. “We watched as Viserys Targaryen had my father fed to the
flames for refusing to bend the knee. We saw the body of our beloved She-wolf after Prince Rhaegar
raped and killed her.” Angry growls left the lips of many of the northerners. “This is what the
Dragonspawn does, and frankly I don’t see why her and the other Essos scum are not as great a
threat as Joffrey Baratheon.”

“I know the evil done to you by my father, though I was not yet born at the time. I understand the
pain and suffering done to you by my brother, cruel and uncaring as he was, because he had done
the same to me.” Daenerys allowed a pregnant pause to occur before she continued. “Not even his
own family was free from his perfidy.”

It was Sansa that stood at that point. “Queen Daenerys risked everything coming here. She could
have easily stayed in Dragonstone and then joined forces with her brother, but she flew north and put
her own dragons at risk to do for us what she did for the slaves of Meereen. For this, I pledge my
support to her, as should the entire North. Not as subjects, but as partners.” From the smile she sent,
Dany was grateful, Sansa’s unspoken reply indicating that she wouldn’t have done differently.

“I don’t seek to conquer,” Dany finished. “Instead, I seek to fight alongside Jon Snow.” With that,
she had moved the discussion away from her and on to the coming fight. “For the good of the North,
all the realm, and for humanity itself against those that threaten us.”

“Liar!” shouted one man from House Mallister of the Riverlands.

“We should kill those beasts while we have the chance!” an unknown voice said, drawing a few
ayses. Dany, still standing tall, inwardly flinched at the hate. She wished for Jon’s touch to steady her,
but until the Lords accepted their union it would be unwise. The distance pained her.

Robett Glover, who Catelyn had told Daenerys was one of Lyanna Stark’s most ardent suitors back
in the day, shot up harshly from his seat. “You are the Mad King’s daughter!” His eyes were dark
with the rage held so long at the Targaryens. “You would burn us all if we stood in your way!”

Daenerys was not without her defenders. “Do not speak of Queen Daenerys as if she monster!” Grey Worm’s common tongue was doing much better, but still broken and accented. Amplified his foreign nature. “She could have kept us under the whip, kept Meereen, Yunkai, Astapor in chain…”

Jeers rained on him from many of the Westerosi nobles. “Quiet foreigner!” yelled one of the Vale Knights. “You have no place here.” Over half of the knights began pounding the table in affirmation.

“Queen Daenerys did not enslave Meereen. She will not enslave you…”

“She brought the Dothraki across the Narrow Sea,” Lord Glover shot back. Everyone was worked up with the almost impossible task of putting together such a diverse coalition without the tyrannical control of a Joffrey Baratheon or Tywin Lannister at the helm. The differences and ancient hatreds had pushed all to the breaking point, especially Robett Glover, finally letting out his grief over his long-lost love. “Her army reeks of slave soldiers, bringing foreign ways to our shores. If the Targaryen did not have the protection of the Starks, wouldn’t all of you drive her into the sea where she and her foreign scum belong?!”

His words, once translated, drove the Dothraki into a fury of guttural insults. As some northerners moved to draw their swords the Unsullied guards tightened their hold on their spears. The odd words of peace from Tyrion or Catelyn were drowned out by the enraged squabbling that threatened to descend into open fighting.

“ENOUGH!” A resonating bang echoing with the booming yell, the entire room found themselves staring at Jon Snow. Normally as cool as ice, in his eyes blazed a fury hot as dragonfire. Dany shuddered, as did Arya, Sansa, and Robb. There was no denying he was a dragon. “Then you’ll have to take down the true heir to the Targaryen throne as well.”

Blinking, for the first time Lord Glover looked off balance. “True heir? The Mad Prince?”

“I am speaking of myself, Glover,” Jon growled dismissively. “Not the bastard son of Ned Stark, but Jaehaerys Targaryen, trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark, heir to the entirety of the Seven Kingdoms!” if he were an actual dragon he’d be spitting fire. “And if any of you dare harm a single hair on my betrothed, they’ll have to use a shovel for your blackened remains.”

Hanging in the air, it was as if the voices had been sucked out of the throats of the Lords. Jon certainly played the part of the Targaryen Dragon. For Daenerys, everything now hung in the balance. Fear of Ramsay Bolton had kept the North in line behind Viserys, and yet by going against her father’s legacy it only emboldened them to buck her. To challenge her. Dany wanted her subjects to follow her because they believed in her cause, just as the Unsullied had. Their hate and anger stung, but didn’t come close to the trepidation that his people might turn on Jon as well.

“That…” Glover babbled, suddenly dizzy. “That is impossible.”

“In this you are wrong, Lord Glover.” Catelyn stood. “Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark were married before the Old Gods and the Seven, following a mutual annulment between the Crown Prince and Elia Martell. I have seen the documents signed in both their hands.” Looking at Jon, remorse filled her eyes. “I spent years believing his lie, but such a lie was necessary. Robert Baratheon would have killed young Jon had he known the truth, just as the Mountain killed his half-siblings.”

Lord Royce couldn’t fathom it. “Why would the Mad King kill Rickard and Brandon Stark if Rhaegar had simply married the girl?”
A snort echoed through the hall. “Because he was mad, idiot.” Olenna tapped the floor with her cane. “I knew the Usurper in his glory days, same drunken, whoring oaf as he always was, but he loved Lyanna and thought she loved him. Probably thought the only reason she would leave was kidnapping.” Arya looked for Gendry, hoping he didn’t hate himself for his father’s misdeeds. Seeing him, she realized he was quite nonplussed - Robert Baratheon had been nothing to the blacksmith’s apprentice, and thus tearing him down didn’t affect him.

A nondescript, silent figure made himself known for the first time. Howland Reed, Lord of Greywater Watch and someone generally forgotten by the majority of the north. Never to the Starks. “What the lad says about the She-wolf was as true then as it is now.” The whole north knew the story - the young Lord Ned Stark went to Dorne with a half-dozen men, and returned with his sister’s corpse, his bastard son, and Howland Reed. “I saw Lyanna Targaryen on her deathbed, holding the babe now standing before you. Ned promised that he would protect her babe, and to do so he chose to accept the stain on his honor…”

“...Thus proving himself the most honorable of all of us,” Tyrion finished. ’Ned Stark’s honor strikes again.’ The truth was that no one could dispute Howland Reed’s tale, for if there was anyone as honorable as Ned Stark, it was the crannogman Lord. The one man in the entire North whose reputation had not been damaged in the years of war and betrayal. It settled upon all. The Bastard of Winterfell was really the heir to the Seven Kingdoms. Anger and passion washed away from the Lords, confronted with the root of their decades-old hate being a lie.

Long since known to the north as the ‘Spitfire of Bear Island’ Lyanna Mormont wasted no time in her blunt assault - it fondly reminded Jon of her grandfather. “I am ashamed at all of you.” Her eyes locked on one lord. “Your son was butchered at the Red Wedding, Lord Manderly, and yet you refused the call.” He shifted her gaze to another. “And you Lord Glover, you care so much about Lyanna Stark, yet when her son came to you to fight the Mad Prince, you refused the call. And you, Lord Cerwyn. Your father was burned alive by Viserys Targaryen, yet you refused the call.

“But there was one that answered the call. Daenerys Targaryen, the Dragon Queen. She answered the call, risked her life and the life of her dragons to defend the north from her own family.” Her youthful voice boomed with strength. “You speak of the Mad King’s blood, fellow Lords, but we saw the true heir to his evil in Viserys Targaryen. And where were you, Lord Glover? Did you fight him? Did you say to him what you say to the woman that joined the North in stopping him, who cares for us enough to marry a child of the north and leave us our own Kingdom?” The aged lord fell on his seat, face ashen. Lyanna nearly spat in disgust. “Looking at you cowards, it makes me ashamed to be a Northerner.”

Looking up at Jon, she drew her short sword. “I don’t care if he’s a Targaryen, or a bastard, or whatever he is or may be. He is of the North. The She-wolf’s blood runs through his veins. Stark blood runs in his children’s veins. I chose to pledge my House behind Jon Snow because he is the man to lead the north through the coming winter.” Her eyes met Dany’s, and in them Dany could see the same trust as was given by the freedmen of Meereen. “I chose to trust Daenerys Targaryen because she risked it all to help us in our hour of greatest need, and instead of forcing us to heel with her brother, she seeks bread and mead at our table. If they believe that they must journey to the seven hells together, then I will journey to each hell with them.” Determination burned inside her. “Jaehaerys Targaryen and Daenerys Targaryen are my leaders. My Emperor and Empress. King and Queen in the North.”

Jon met Lady Mormont’s gaze, nodding slightly in thanks. “Lady Mormont is right,” Robb suddenly said, standing for the first time. “All of you present believed that I was the ‘Young Wolf,’ one that would lead the North to its rightful place in the realm. And I believed it.” To Jon’s surprise he left his perch at the table. What he said next surprised him even more. “But I was wrong. I was unable to
upheld my honor and allowed those that trusted me to suffer the indignity of tyranny. As a man, descended from a line of great men, one can only admit his mistake and seek forgiveness."

“There is nothing to forgive, brother,” Jon stated.

Nodding, Robb gestured his hand far and wide. “I may not deserve to be your leader, but Jaehaerys Targaryen and Daenerys Targaryen do. I have known Jon Snow all my life, and he is my brother no matter his blood. He has trusted the Dragon Queen with our honor, and they will bring to the world what they brought to the North and to Meereen.” The former King drew his sword and pointed it at the vaulted ceiling. “They will bring us to victory! King and Queen in the North, and Emperor and Empress!” The sword smacked onto the floor as Robb bent the knee - pledging himself to his brother and sister-in-law in the name of House Stark, and bequeathing on them both titles.

Staring at his brother, Jon looked back at the boy he bade farewell to long before. Gone was the idealistic, confident heir to the Stark name, thrust into a position far beyond his years just as he had. Just as Sansa had. The old Robb, good man though he was, would never have swallowed his pride to admit mistake. Yet here he was, bending the knee to his brother. Suddenly, he felt soft, white fingers clasping his hand underneath the table, squeezing it. He smiled, Dany’s love and support grounded him through this momentous occasion. His love, his bride, his Queen. His Empress.

“If there is anyone who has proven themselves without honor, it is I. Only through doing what is right could I even hope to atone for my mistakes.” Catelyn had no sword, but she proclaimed her stance all the same. “On behalf of my brother and uncle, House Tully pledges its banners to Houses Stark and Targaryen, and proclaims Jaehaerys and Daenerys the true monarchs of the Realm!”

“My son died fighting for Robb Stark, and I didn’t want to risk the lives of more Manderlys for the wrong cause.” The aging lord of White Harbor thrust his corpulent frame off the bench. “But I was wrong.” His sword scraped against the scabbard as he drew it. “Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen avenged the Red Wedding! They are the union of ice and fire, monarchs that I will follow to the ends of the earth. King and Queen in the North, and Emperor and Empress!” He collapsed on his knee, beside Robb.

“I may not command many in the field,” announced Tyene Martell. “But what I offer is the spirit of Dorne. The honor of our people, unbowed and unbroken.” To Dany, it seemed as if House Martell had its new creed. “Jaehaerys and Daenerys Targaryen seek not slaves, but partners in leaving this world a better place than the one we inherited. House Martell, all of true Dorne, stands behind House Targaryen through the Long Night and in the centuries to come!”

Up rose Lord Glover, contrition and shame written on his face. “I didn’t fight beside you in the battle, and I will regret this for the rest of my days.” To Dany’s surprise, he shifted his address to her. “Lyanna… loved her dragon. It was not Rhaegar that caused this tragedy. We don’t condemn those for their father’s crimes. I must offer my sincerest apologies to you, your Grace. Jon Snow has placed his trust in you, then it brings shame that I did not trust his judgement.”

Feeling Jon squeeze her hand, Dany felt a surge of confidence go through her. “There is no need to apologize my Lord. All I ask is that we fight the coming battles together.”

A sense of relief seemed to course over the older man’s face. “Aye. There will be many battles to come, and I vow to all of you. House Glover stands behind Houses Stark and Targaryen, and I stand behind King Jaehaerys and Queen Daenerys. Rulers in the North, and Emperor and Empress.”

“To the Emperor and Empress!” shouted one of the Vale knights.

Soon all of the Lords and knights rose, swords high in the air.
“The Emperor and Empress!”

“The Emperor and Empress!”

“The Emperor and Empress!”

Jon and Dany glanced at each other, eyes meeting for a split second. Here was Jon, basking in his proclamation as King in the North - an equal to Daenerys in every way, standing astride her path to reclaiming her birthright. And she didn’t care. He was the man she loved, the father of her children, the other half of her soul. Her King as she was his Queen. Her Emperor as she was his Empress, the long-dead words sounding natural to her. She knew Jon would have given it up in a heartbeat for her, but Dany would never have asked. They were in it together, equals taking on the world.
Hit with a blast of cold air as the bannerman drew open the door for him, Jon welcomed the jolting gust as he stepped onto the walkway overlooking the inner courtyard. It helped clear his mind, especially after the stressful day he had. ‘Even our unification did not end the squabbles.’ That did not really surprise Jon, but what did was that his newfound title as King in the North didn’t help quell such mundane bickering as he had hoped it would.

“I’m not following why you gave the Umbers and Karstarks their land back.” Sensing the graceful yet determined steps of his Queen fall in beside him, Jon was thankful of one thing. The opposition of the North towards Daenerys had all but disappeared. Once the news of Jon’s parentage seeped into their conscious thoughts, Northern anger shifted from Rhaegar Targaryen to Robert Baratheon. “He had to have known,” argued Olenna Tyrell, many agreeing with her. “They rose up with my brother and that sadistic freak Lord Bolton against you. Why reward them?”

“There’s been enough punishment, enough infighting among us,” Jon replied back. “I’m not going to descend us into a massive cycle of revenge and counter-revenge.”

Behind them walked Missandei, Tyrion, and Sansa. With Robb marching South with the main Northern/Vale/Unsullied army, Davos and Grey Worm in tow - waiting at the Twins was a decent-sized Riverlands army under Edmure Tully, necessitating Catelyn’s presence as well - the three were the King in the North and Dragon Queen’s remaining small council. “The Ghiscari had a saying. ‘An eye for an eye makes the world blind.’” Missandei’s quote may have been foreign, but Jon found it applicable to the situation.

“While putting ten year old Ned Umber and sixteen year old Alys Karstark to death for what their father and elder brother did would be… shall we say a bit over the top,” Tyrion brushed snow off his coat - and his shaggy hair. Criticize as he was apt to do, the dwarf was in a good mood. Since Shae was in the North, it wasn’t surprising. “Why would you give those families back their lands? There are plenty of fine Northern knights who could have established strong familial lines.”

Gritting his teeth, Jon resisted the urge to wake the dragon. But it was greatly irritating - out of all the measures put forward at the ‘Congress of Lords’ from sending Podrick Payne and a detachment of Northern/Vale light cavalry to Meereen to training both men and women smallfolk to fight the Army of the Dead, the granting of the Umber and Karstark lands back to their rightful heirs had been the most controversial. Dany, Tyrion, and Sansa opposed it - Sansa openly.

“I get your opinions, but my decision is final.” He turned to Sansa, openly irritated. “And I did not appreciate you undermining me back there.”

A look of incredulity formed on Sansa’s face. “Undermined you?”

“At least Daenerys and Tyrion whispered their concerns to me. By speaking openly you defied my authority.”

“Joffrey doesn’t allow dissent, and neither did Viserys.”

Stopping, Jon looked at Sansa with pain in his eyes. “Do you think me one of them?”

Placing her hand on his shoulder, Sansa smiled at her brother. “No Jon, you are nothing like Joffrey or Viserys. You wouldn’t be here today if you were anything like them - but…”

Jon snorted. “Father used to say everything after the word ‘but’ is horseshit.” Tyrion guffawed at
that, while the women couldn’t help but smirk.

Sansa smacked Jon on the shoulder lightly. “Don’t interrupt me, my King.” Her eyes twinkled with mirth. “As I was saying, we cannot afford major mistakes. A ruler needs to be open to counsel.”

“She’s right.” Daenerys had been faced with such tyrannical impulses before - most notably the dispute over crucifying the Great Masters of Meereen, for which she wanted to select three hundred randomly but was convinced to simply kill those responsible for the child murders. “Power easily corrupts. There needs to be a check, Jon, no matter how good and honorable you are.”

Opening his mouth to speak, the words died on Jon’s lips. “You’re right. Both of you. I don’t regret my actions here, but I haven’t consulted with my advisors since I arrived in Winterfell and it was a mistake.” He turned to his sister. “That’s why I’m appointing you as my Hand in the North.”

Sansa blinked, initially disbelieving her brother’s words. “What?”

Unable to stop his chuckle, it was Jon’s turn to put his hand on her shoulder. “The war against Joffrey will take Daenerys and I south. While we are gone, I trust no one more than you to prepare for war against the Dead. Do you accept, Sansa of House Stark?”

Trembling with the weight of it all, Sansa’s first inclination was to decline - she had treated Jon like shit her whole life, but her brother not only forgave her but made her his Hand. The only honorable thing to do was reward his trust. She kneeled. “I will honor your trust in me, my King.”

“Rise, Sansa Stark, Hand of the King.” Formalities over, the siblings hugged tightly.

Merry laughs rang out from Tyrion’s throat. “Welcome to the very illustrious guild, Lady Sansa. There are many things I do wish to discuss with you…” The Imp led Sansa away.

Soon it was just him and Dany. Smiling, now that the betrothal had been announced, he had no one stopping him from reaching out and pulling her into an embrace. ‘Monarchs don’t show affection in public,’ said an inner voice sounding remarkably like Tyrion - Jon didn’t care. “I love you,” he whispered into her ear.

Dany smiled against his neck, sighing happily at his warmth. “I love you too.” She pulled back, looking in his eyes. “I’m sorry for doubting you, Jon. I just didn’t want you to reward betrayal.”

“Smalljon Umber and Harald Karstark betrayed my family, and they are both dead. I would be everything that dishonored our family had I taken it out on their innocent heirs.”

Knowing he was right, Dany’s heart hitched at him referring to ‘our family.’ Wordlessly, she kissed him. “Will you make Sansa your full Hand?” Soon Jon was to be Emperor as well as King in the North, and would need an advisor and council for that role as well.

“Like Tyrion would be for you?” he asked her. He chuckled at Dany’s nod. “Someone will need to stay here and make sure the fight against the Dead isn’t neglected. I trust Sansa above all others for that. As for the south… I think Ser Davos is the right man for the job.”

“A good choice.” A bit unorthodox, the Onion Knight had done a fantastic job in rehabilitating the Twins and Moat Cailin for operations against the Lannisters - Robb’s dispatches said as much. Dany’s gaze then flickered to the courtyard, warmth seeping in her heart as she relaxed into Jon’s side.

Blinking, Jon quickly found where his betrothed was looking. He couldn’t help but smile as well. There were his two children, practicing ‘water dancing’ with their Aunt Arya. With Robb at the
Twins with the army, his sister happily agreed to take over their lessons. He felt Dany tense when Arya wheeled around and rapped Rhaegar on the shoulder. “Don’t worry, my dragon. Arya won’t hurt them.”

“Aren’t they too young?” she asked, peering at him.

Jon shook his head. “It’s just the basics. Robb and I started at that age.” Relieved at her tension dissipate, the two gazed happily on the scene below them.

Face set in a scowl, six-year old Rhaegar lashed out with his training sword, only for Arya to jink out of the way at the last minute. “Relax, little dragon,” she cautioned. “Never allow your frustrations to get the better of you.” Regurgitating Syrio Forel’s dancing lessons made a small pang of sadness throb inside her, but it subsided. There was no better honor to his memory than passing his lessons to her niece and nephew. “Now, attack.” Pressing a thrust which Arya easily parried, she shouted, “Left,” but then proceeded to slash right and smack Rhaegar lightly on the shoulder with the training sword.

The Crown Prince stared at her with jaw agape. “You said left!”

“Yes, but I went right,” she grinned. ‘Is that how I looked when he did it to me?’ Syrio had to have found it as amusing as she did.

“You lied, Aunt Arya!”

“Your enemies won’t hesitate to manipulate and deceive you, so you have to be ready, little dragon.” Seeing his face fall, Arya sighed. Her nephew was six, these lessons more designed to give him discipline and basic positions than actual skill. Part of her wanted to be strict, but he was family. “Come here, little dragon.” She hugged him. “If it makes you feel any better, it took me years to learn properly.”

Wide violet eyes looked up at her. “Really?”

Arya smirked. “I didn’t get to be this amazing in a day.” The Wild Wolf was sure that her siblings would have rolled their eyes at her cocky statement. “Just keep working on it.”

Just as Rhaegar attempted to get back into position, he was shoved aside by his sister. “Out of my way. It’s my turn, brother.” Young Arya was dressed in a padded wool shirt and thick trousers, functional and quintessentially northern - despite the unabashed Targaryen silver hair and delicate features, she looked every inch like her grandmother, the She-Wolf. “I’m ready to water dance, Aunt Arya.” Smirking at her namesake, Arya assumed her stance.

“I see you, brat!” Out flew a rock, only barely missing the frightened boy. The grocer hefted the other one in his hand, ready to toss it at the would-be scavenger. “Git out of here before I grab me axe!” Tall and fit despite the three fingers missing from one hand courtesy of a Lannister sword during the War of the Four Kings, there was little doubt he could catch up to and brain the wispy, gaunt little boy had he wanted to.

Hunched over, Eddard Blackledge ducked around the corner of the Wintertown wheelwright. Stomach knotted into an empty ball, his tattered furs hung loose on his skeletal frame as he leaned against the wooden wall. Only seven years since his original nameday, life at home with his momma and older sissy had been tough. Eddard’s father - by now only stories and faint memories of a big bear of a man that could slice a log clean through with an axe - had marched south with Robb Stark
and met his fate at the Red Wedding. Food came only sparingly since then, whatever scraps Lord Bolton threw their way or what little Eddard could scrounge up around Wintertown.

The grocer’s refuse pile usually had decent pickings, but since he got caught, Eddard knew he’d be going home hungry tonight. Stabbing, gnawing pain tore at his stomach. Starvation gripped the North as Winter came, especially in after Lord Bolton took over - not a caring man, nothing like Eddard’s namesake. Lord Snow brought the promise of change, but with armies moving in and out of the castle the struggling residents of the growing town grew weary.

Stumbling into the street, mind on nothing but the hunger pangs, little Eddard smacked into a burly figure. Glancing up, his eyes widened at one of the savage horsemen from far away. Guttural shouts left him, waving a meaty arm to shove Eddard away - the boy too weak and feeble to resist.

A soft voice responded, causing the horseman to step back. At that moment, Eddard felt a gentle hand rest on his cheek and chin. “Are you alright, young one?” The boy then met the most dazzling eyes he had ever seen - a vibrant violet sparkling with compassion. There was no doubt at who this was.

“Ye…. yes, my Queen,” he squeaked out, words largely failing him. Behind the silver-haired queen was another striking angel of a woman, long brown hair framing a friendly, inviting face.

Around them, a small crowd of onlookers were gathered around. “Maester Wolkan?” Margaery asked. “Is enough food being supplied to the Smallfolk?”

An older man sighed. “We’ve been stockpiling food in the process of preparing for war, my Lady. Enough has been distributed for the normal population, but we’ve been getting many refugees from the Gift…”

At the sight of this boy’s visible ribs, flesh close to being wasted away, Daenerys felt her heart clench. All her people, as much as the slaves of Meereen or the soldiers in her army. “Please, Maester, make sure the food distributions match that of the current population.” With the Royal Army marching south to the Riverlands, the granaries could afford it. Smiling at the boy, Dany told her bloodrider to hand him a gold coin. “How many in your family?”

Eddard stared at the coin as if it were a gift from the Old Gods. “Three, your Grace.”

“Well get some food for all of them, alright?” Overwhelmed with a gratitude, a kindness not seen outside his family in his entire life, Eddard lurched forward to hug his queen - taken aback a bit, Dany relaxed and wrapped her arms around the trembling boy.

Around her, for the first time the citizens of the North saw not a Targaryen - something to be feared from the stories of their Lord and Heir traveling south to their deaths - but as their future Queen.

Hearing the knock at her door, Sansa Stark tightened the thick gown around her body, covering her shift. Padding over with a candle in hand from where she had been reviewing compartments, she hesitated upon reaching the door. “Who is it?” Her free hand went to the concealed pocket where rested a knife - there was no chance another Ramsay would ever take her.

“It’s Podrick Payne, my Lady.”

Tension deflating, Sansa unlatched the door and opened it. There was the young knight - newly knighted by Jon as one of his first acts as King in the North - dressed in the full regalia of a Stark banner knight. “Ser Podrick,” she said. “Why are you dressed for battle?” Shouldn’t he have been at
sleep? And why was he here? Sansa was grateful for his saving her life… twice actually, and was generally trusting of him - but that didn’t explain it.

“Pardon, my Lady. I didn’t mean to intrude. But my command is about to ride to White Harbor for our journey to Essos. I intended to inform his Grace, but he was…” Podrick’s face went red. “He was… consulting with Queen Daenerys.”

Eyes widening in understanding, Sansa fought a chuckle. ‘Good for Jon.’ “Thank you for informing me. I will let his Grace know tomorrow.”

“Ummm… that isn’t all, my Lady.” Blushing madly, Podrick’s mouth opened and closed several times trying to find what to say. In truth, Sansa found it somewhat endearing as well as funny. “Would it beg your pardon if I had permission to… write you while on the journey? By raven I mean?”

Sansa blinked. “Write me?”

He fidgeted with the hilt of his sword. “Yes. I don’t… yet know who to trust within Meereen without being there and wish to make my own reports to you. And… with my family in Lannister-controlled lands… it would be… welcome for someone to converse with… if the Lady doesn’t find offense, of course.”

Standing there, Sansa knew not what to say. ‘It would be good to get verifiable intelligence on the ground in Meereen.’ The Hand of the King in her said to agree, but… ‘Oh hells with it.’ Podrick was as threatening as a hedgehog. “You have permission.”

Startled at her words, Podrick bowed. “Good night, my Lady.” With that, he turned to leave. Sansa’s eyes were trained on him until he turned the corner, a ghost of a smile curling on her face.

“Lady Reed!”

Water sloshing within the ceramic amphorae as she lifted it away from the fountain, Meera looked up to find a rail-thin, bald youth running to her. While normally the sight of a warlock drew her apprehension, she couldn’t help but smile. “Good morning, Ply.”

Coming to a stop right in front of her, Ply Qyree smiled weakly as he caught his breath. Barely Bran’s age and with the blue-tinged lips of a warlock, the lack of any body decorations or any visible mutilation indicated him as a junior apprentice. Thus, he lacked the enigmatic arrogance and muted malevolence that so biased Meera against the fully-trained members of the Warlock Guild. “Do you know where Lord Stark is?” The lad seemed to want to be as close to Bran as possible, almost as if he wanted the crippled highborn to be his mentor.

Meera chuckled. “He’s… studying in his room.” She had no way of knowing if he was having his visions again, so went with the best answer she could think of. “Why do you ask?”

“The Brothers want to train his skills of self-projection. I was asked to bring him over.”

“No need, I’ll wheel him…” Loud, passionate voices from the hallway to her front caught Meera’s attention. Before Ply could react, both of them were flattened tightly against the wall of a dark alcove.

“What’s going…?”
A hand found itself clamped over the apprentice warlock. “Shhhhh.” Meera did not know why she flattened herself and Ply against the wall - simply on instinct if she was pressed hard enough. Her father had always said that a Crannogman had such an innate sixth sense when danger was approaching, and the hushed voices coming from the shadows ahead were setting off her internal alarms in droves. Just something about them…

“Qarth never became the greatest city that ever was and ever will be by intervening in foreign affairs.” The deep, projecting voice was unmistakable. Xaro Xhoan Daxos, the King of Qarth. “What you could be proposing is quite risky.”

“There is no risk, great King. The Dragon Queen has left Slaver’s Bay, and a large component of her remaining garrison has gotten on their ships as we speak.” Peeking around the corner for a split second, Meera spotted a man with a beak of a nose and dark black curls. He wore flowing blue-white robes and a Harpy pendant. ‘A Master… Yunkai or Astapor?’ She hadn’t learned how to tell the difference. “Her armies here can barely hold Meereen.”

The shrill voice that followed was none other than Pyat Pree. “But what of the Westerosi men-at-arms that arrived?”

“Defeated fools,” dismissed the master. “I wouldn’t worry about them. We can take them on easily, but with Qarth on our side we’d be unstoppable. King Joffrey has already ceded to us all lands that once belonged to the Valyrian Freehold, plus new markets for fresh produce.” When one of the ‘Kind,’ ‘Wise,’ or ‘Great’ masters used the word ‘Produce,’ Meera had learned they meant ‘slave.’ The Dragon Queen was famous - or infamous - for trying to better conditions in Essos. In contrast, it seemed as Joffrey was trying to tear down conditions back home to match those here. “For mere military aid and the delivery of the Stark boy…” Meera’s eyes widened.

“Brandon Stark is under the protection of the Warlock Guild of Qarth,” Pyat Pree responded. “He will not be touched.”

“You heard him.” Xhoan Daxos was firm, voice steeled. “I will not harm anyone within the protection of the greatest city that ever was or ever will be. Now about the military assistance, I’m afraid I still have major reservations about involving Qarth in world affairs…” Their voices grew fainter, the King’s party rounding the corner into a deeper part of the garden.

After a minute passed with the only sounds being the splashes of the fountain, Meera released her grip on Ply and gingerly stepped out of the alcove. ‘The coast is clear.’ Her mind was still racing to process what she heard. “Umm, Lady Reed?” Ply was shaking, almost - the kid was sweet like her brother. Couldn’t hurt a fly. “May I go tell the brothers that Junior Brother Stark will join them at sunset?”

Peering at the garden path that the King of Qarth had just trodden, Meera nodded hesitantly. ”Yes, go ahead.” Hearing Ply scamper away, a deep breath left her lungs. Bran was safe at the moment if the warlocks and Xhoan Daxos were to be believed, but that could easily change in the time it took for her charge to complete his training. ‘Why doesn’t he just leave?’

“Bran must learn. He is to be the one, the raven. He must go south and then north.”

Jojen’s words from long before still rang loudly. Though she was a realist, the magic Bran had displayed so far made her believe. “I must make sure we are ready to leave as soon as it becomes dangerous.” Magic may have kept them in Qarth, but good planning and smarts would get them out if need be.
With a sharp thwong, the drawstring snapped forward and the arrow flew towards its target. “Good show, all Highest,” commented Dolgren Hill, clapping. Joffrey, smirking underneath his lace cowl, was sufficiently distracted enough for Meryn Trant to quickly stab an arrow into the bullseye - the arrow fired clattered somewhere far to the right of the target. “No one on this earth can compare to the great Chimera.”

“Well obviously not,” Joffrey replied. “I already deflowered Hearteater with the blood of Loras Tyrell. Soon it will be the Stark bastard whose blood my sword will taste next.”

“I have no doubt that you haunt his nightmares at this very moment.” Eyes lowered to the floor, Cersei wished she could spit in disgust. Joffrey was in a good mood these days, and thus the strict formality of court procedure had been loosened - at least among the inner circle. And a new member of said circle was Dolgren Hill, bastard son of some minor noble in the Westerlands. Just as sadistic as Joffrey but with a decently cunning mind, he had already wrapped her easily manipulatable son around his finger, no one but her willing to get rid of him.

‘I wish Jamie were here,’ she thought sadly. But he wasn’t, instead camped at Harrenhal - and from what she learned, it was Hill that gave Joffrey the idea. “All Highest,” she said, clearing her throat. “Shall we discuss the matter at hand?”

Dropping the bow to the ground, Joffrey motioned for Dontos Hollard. “Pick it up, fool.” Kicking the former knight in the side, the King looked out at the assembled ministers and highborn. “What pressing matters? Uncle Jamie will march for Winterfell and bring me the Northern bastard and his dragon bitch.

Several struggled to contain their grimaces. “Our armies aren’t fully prepared, all Highest,” Qyburn answered. “Perhaps it is best to wait for Lord Tywin to bring in his forces from Dorne.”

“Nonsense,” babbled Grand Maester Pycelle. “I didn’t take you for a defeatist.” The charge was an incendiary one, Qyburn visibly bristling. Such accusations - depending on the King’s mood - could end with one being executed.

“There is no doubt that his Highest will be victorious in the end,” Qyburn offered. “But the victory will be quicker if we wait for Tywin’s army to reinforce Ser Jamie’s…”

“Tell me, false Maester,” sneered Hill, who possessed all of the arrogance of a great Westerlands lord but none of the sense. “Is Ser Jamie’s army equipped with the dragonslayers you had commissioned?”

Qyburn blinked. “Why yes, Lord Hill.”

“Then there doesn’t seem to be a problem. Order a full attack, all Highest. They will be dining in Winterfell by month’s end.” His flattering words visibly puffed up Joffrey under his veil, moronic the military strategy was - from the sparkle in the bastard’s eyes, even he knew it.

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” flatly stated Euron Greyjoy.

Joffrey turned his shrouded face to glare at the Ironborn King. He had only recently been placed on the Small Council, being the Master of Ships appointed by Lord Tywin. “Do you dare speak such words to me, after you so failed to obtain the dragonspawn?”

Euron, much as many detested the man, had the endearing quality of not being afraid of the King’s temper. ‘What is dead may never die.’ ‘I didn’t mean it like that, you misheard me. I meant anyone advising you to go on a full attack now is a fucking idiot. My mistake.”
Littlefinger, quiet and observant as ever, slipped in to thrust his dagger. “All Highest, may I suggest launching an attack on Riverrun? It was just recently occupied by the great uncle to Sansa Stark. Capturing the uncle to the bastard’s sister, your former betrothed, would send a great message to the North that you will defeat them in the end.”

Silence rang through the room as the King assessed his options. “I like that,” he finally exclaimed. “Have him do that.”

“All Highest… perhaps it is wise to listen…” Qyburn was cut off as a bony hand clasped around his neck.

From beneath the veil, Joffrey’s sunken eyes blazed. “Send the raven out.” As riveted as all in the room were to what was occurring, even Hill kept his eyes on the floor with the others. “Tell Uncle Jamie that he is to find Sansa’s uncle, rip off his head, and send it to her in a basket. Understood?”

Wheezened breaths left Qyburn, his frame slight enough to be threatened by the short King. “Long may the Chimera reign.” He collapsed to the ground with a smack as the King departed.
Wedding in the Godswood

Resting the torch on the mount built into the wall, Jon stared ahead at the stone likeness keeping vigil over the sarcophagus. It was quite stylized - nowhere near resembling the beautiful, wild, loving woman that Jon knew was his mother. Everytime he blinked her kind face flashed in front of him. The warmth of her touch seeping into his body. The mother he never had. The mother who had indeed always been with him while growing up. Quite the irony if Jon thought about it long enough.

Pulling off his glove, breath visible in a milky-white cloud in front of him, Jon rested his hand on the smooth stone. “Mother…” His voice cracked with emotion. “I love you so…” A sudden flash of shame crossed him, for today was the day he was marrying Daenerys - her sister in law - but it faded. She had told him to find her. Ducking out of the preparations had led him here. “I’m marrying Dany,” he confessed to Lyanna. “My dragon, like father was yours. I know she would have loved you, and so would our twins. We have twins together, mother. Can you believe it?” The stone carving was silent, provoking him to tears. “I need you, mother. I always did. Why couldn’t you be here?”

“She is here, watching you.” Jon turned his head slowly to see Lord Howland Reed, his aging face crossed into a small, sad smile. “I knew you were here, Ser Barristan standing guard at the entrance.” Striding up beside him, he joined his king in gazing upon the statue. “We all pass into the gods’ domain when we die, the good into eternal warmth and the wicked into eternal winter.”

Memory flashing back to the endless plain of vibrant green, Jon understood. “Fitting.” Lord Reed looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Fitting that the realm of the wicked is eternal winter - given that is the Night King’s objective for all humanity.”

Lord Reed snorted. “Aye. Quite fitting, your Grace.” The two continued to stand side to side in silence, torch flickering as they seemed to wait for the statue to say something… anything. But only silence. “It’s an abomination, the way they carved her. Her beauty and kindness deserved far better.”

It was welcome to Jon, to know others felt the same. “Ser Barristan told me that my father - Rhaegar,” he clarified. Jon felt that he had two true fathers, the one who loved and raised him and the one that loved and watched over him from above. “Wanted to expand the arts. To leave the realm marble when he inherited brick.”

“I did not know that about him.” Reed shifted his feet. “What I did know is that your mom loved him… and you. Loved the both of you desperately.” He continued to gaze ahead as his King turned to stare at him, eyes soft with the subject on memories of his long lost mother - so close yet also so far. “Before she died… in the Tower of Joy.” ‘More like the Tower of Grief.’ The memory was hard for Howland, Lyanna Stark being so beloved. “She told Ned how much she loved both of her dragons. How she hoped that at least one person in Robert’s Westeros would know the truth about your father.”

Jon fought the tears in his eyes. He did not know why Lord Reed was telling him this, but valued it nonetheless. He craved knowledge of his parents. Needed whatever information he could find to find that special connection he knew he should feel for them. “He hated him… Ned Stark hated Rhaegar, I mean?” Jon’s story was that of loss and pain. His father made a monster, mother dying giving birth to him, one grandfather burning the other alive, and uncle/father lying to everyone to keep him from being put to death. It weighed on him every day.

Howland continued, the lines deepening on his weathered face. “At first yes, but then Lyanna proved to him the depths of Robert’s lies - he thought it was just hubris and arrogance, though I still
think that Robert knew Lyanna had run off with your father and let it play out anyway.” Jon’s hand tightened around the hilt of his sword, wishing he could slice through the Usurper and watch his blood soak the ground. “In any event, with you in his arms and your mother’s casket in the cart… his honor couldn’t let it go.”

An eyebrow was raised in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Pointing to the unmarked grave beside his mother’s, Howland placed his other hand over his King’s shoulder and guided him to it. “Did your father ever say who was buried here?”

“One of the Stark ancestors several generations back. The statue broke apart in an accident.” What did this have to do with anything?

Shaking his head, Howland looked upon the rough stone. “It was just Ned and I, all our comrades having died in Dorne. Traveling north with you and your mother… I told him it would be next to impossible, but his honor wouldn’t stop torturing him until it was done.” A moment of silence hung in the icy air before he continued. “He knew Robert, what he would do with the body. We found it in the river, left in the muck to be eaten by the fish.”

All of a sudden it hit Jon, staggering him. Shaking, he slowly reached out to touch the tomb. “Who… who is buried here?” He knew the answer, but knowing was different than having your knowledge confirmed.

“Ned buried your father next to his sister in an unmarked grave. At least in death, they could continue together.”

‘Father…’ Flashing to the image of the strong man, tough yet with a loving expression for those whom he loved, Jon couldn’t help the emotion threatening to consume him. ‘Rhaegar Targaryen.’ Slowly, cautiously, he lowered his spinning head until it rested atop the dusty stone. Where his father had been resting, ever close to him as his mother.

“Your father, my friend Ned Stark, he couldn’t be here on this day. I just know, my King, that he wanted to tell you the truth of it all.” The King said nothing, though Howland could see he was fighting to keep control of his emotions as he rested his brow on the tomb. “All that I owe him, I believe this is the biggest. Just know that your entire family is here with you.” Beginning to walk away, Lord Reed heard the faint sobs and quickened his steps. No man should have such a moment intruded upon.

The magnitude of it all shook Jon to his very core, crying softly in the presence of his father. Tear droplets ran down the dusty stone. “Father…” he ground out, whisper hoarse. “You’ve been here this whole time… with mother.” Wiping away his tears, Jon stood up, visualizing the man that had sired him. “I’m marrying Daenerys, making you proud, father. I will be the King you wanted me to be.” Running his hand once more on the stone, Jon sighed and made his way towards the entrance to the crypts.

The last of the Dragons, all together once more.

A wince left Dany’s lips as she jerked her hair to the side. “Please, your Grace,” Missandei offered, gently guiding her head back into place. “Stay still. You want your hair perfect for the ceremony, no?” Not waiting for the answer, she reapplied the comb to the silver locks.

Much as her handmaiden tried to be as gentle as possible, yet again did Daenerys feel a jolt of pain at
the persistent tugging on her silver locks. “Gods, is there any way you could just finish this?”

“If you want this to be finished in haste, my Queen,” Shae replied, bemused - no one present knew whether Tyrion rubbed off on her or he on him, or if their personalities were like this from the beginning. “Then it will require us to continue tugging on your hair.” Dany simmered but quieted down, gritting her teeth as the two women continued to yank at her hair. Whimpering beside her, a furry head leaned up to lick her palm. Exhaling, Dany slowly stroked Ghost’s fur, calmed a bit by the direwolf’s affection. When not with the twins he was at her side for the most part. Jon wasn’t jealous, no more than she was jealous of Rhaegal’s bond with her King.

In the corner, Sansa tried - and failed - to suppress an amused chuckle. The Dragon Queen’s resulting glare only intensified her humor. “Don’t worry, Daenerys. Everyone will appreciate the Northern style to your hair.”

“Remind me again why the usual riding braid isn’t an option?” Another yank saw a withering dragon glare sent to Shae - the whore turned consort to the Hand of the Queen merely blew a kiss at her, continuing. “It was fine enough for the people of Meereen.”

“You were at the head of a conquering army set to free the vast majority of them,” remarked the Rose of Highgarden. “You could have worn a straw sack and still have awed them.”

Dany eyed Margaery curiously. “Channeling your grandmother, I see?” Her violet eyes danced with mirth. The other women around her laughed. Much as the preparations irritated Daenerys - she never one for such formalities, and the thick northern dress made her feel buried in wool - looking around her, this was what she wanted in her life. Joyful, lighthearted times. A family, one that cared for and loved her in all the ways that Viserys didn’t. Jon had given her one in the Starks and she would love him forever for it.

“...aaand there!” Shae backed away, bowing with a flourish. “All done.” As Missandei placed a mirror in front of Daenerys, Tyrion’s paramour clucked at her latest creation. “Radiant for the wedding party yet positively scrumptious for the groom. He will be made mad with lust at the mere sight of you.”

Sansa rolled her eyes. “She was just like this with me, so it isn’t just you that makes her uncomfortably blunt.” Picturing her brother in the throes of lust with his wife - her new sister - was not something she would prefer to imagine.

Daenerys didn’t hear them, staring at the reflection in the mirror. She had always knew of her beauty, but Shae was right - there was a radiance sparkling from her. It wasn’t overpowering, as many had commented of the effect of Cersei Lannister, but rather understated. Hair tied up in a simple Northern bun, dress one common to weddings but quite plain, and only a touch of rouge to color her cheeks. The effect did much to temper the dragon within her, but the queen still shone. Gazing in the mirror did bring forth the gravity of such a moment. ‘I’m marrying Jon.’

“He will be impressed, your Grace,” commented Missandei, smiling at her queen’s expression. Being by her side for so long, her long-lost love had been unattainable for so long - it was only natural for there to be a moment to think this too good to be true. As if sensing her thoughts, Ghost leaned his head up to squeeze his snout into Dany’s lap, nuzzling it with a whimper.

Broken from her reverie, Dany smiled down at the direwolf - as large as a pony but still like a puppy in so many ways, like her dragons. “It’s alright, boy. I’m not going anywhere.” Ghost licked her hand and drew back, content.

“Now, I know this is the time your mother would inform you of what happens with the bedding,”
Shae interrupted, quite bluntly once again. “But judging the sounds from your chambers, I doubt you need any further knowledge on what occurs then.” Sansa groaned, Missandei smiled sheepishly, Margaery chuckled softly, while Dany just blushed red with mortification. Normally she wasn’t a prude thanks to her time with the Dothraki, but it was different with family.

“Must you?” Mortification was written on Sansa’s face. “He is my brother you know.”

“And quite the handsome man.” Shae licked her lips, none of the three women knowing where the teasing stopped and the female appreciation began. “It is my experience that, Lord Tyrion being the exception, it’s the quiet ones that make the most fantastic lovers…”

“Please stop.” Sansa covered her ears, grimacing. “Not something I want to know.” That did coax a laugh out of Dany. The queen shot Shae a look, one that confirmed her statement in Jon’s case. All three of the highborn ladies in the room had been married, all to bad or indifferent men. They knew the ins and outs, and terrible as they had been it was different now. Daenerys was marrying her true sun and stars, Margaery was practically betrothed already, and Dany was confident someone as kind as Sansa would find someone.

Fortunately for Sansa, a knock at the door ended that particular conversation. “May I enter, your Grace.” It was Jorah.

“You may, Ser Jorah.”

As soon as the door opened two small figures raced in. “Mother!”

A bright smile curled on her face. Dany hadn’t seen her children all day, and welcomed their loving hugs. “My sweetlings.” Kissing the tops of their heads, she noticed all present were relaxed and smiling at the Prince and Princess - even Shae, her normal sarcastic regard for everything unable to resist the innocent charm of the twins. Ghost was the most enthusiastic, mouth open in excitement.

“You look pretty, momma,” Rhaegar offered, kissing her cheek.

“Is today yours and poppa’s wedding?” Arya asked, grey eyes twinkling. While reserved with experience and hardship, Dany recognized that same twinkle in Jon’s eyes when he was happy and excited. Gods, she loved them all.

“Yes it is,” she told them.

A pout then formed on her daughter’s face. “Why can’t we come?” Northern weddings always occurred at night, under the stars if possible - a tradition as old as the First Men.

Dany kissed Arya’s forehead. “You need your sleep, my sweetlings. If you want to be mighty royals, you have to grow and strengthen yourselves.”

“But… I’m not tired.” The yawn that interrupted Rhaegar’s comment drew suppressed chuckles from the women.

Sansa ruffled her nephew’s hair. “Don’t be too sad, little dragon.” Arya’s nicknames caught on. “You aren’t missing much. Mostly boring adult talk and Northern Lords acting like stuffy idiots.”

Half true - weddings and feasts often had the most powerful people beyond the neck getting drunk and boisterous, hence being idiots. “Ghost’ll keep you company.” That perked the twins up, who immediately went to the fluffy white direwolf. Ghost reveled in the attention, licking their cheeks and rolling on his sides as they tickled his belly. It would be a cute sight for any canine, but for the massive direwolf it was amusing as well.
“Your Grace… Maester Aemon sent me.” Dany looked up at Ser Jorah, who looked quite emotional - and trying to hide it. There was no other person than Aemon - the patriarch of House Targaryen - to officiate the ceremony on behalf of the Old Gods. And Dany knew how touched Jorah was when she asked him to give her away. With Aemon officiating and Ned Stark dead, who better? “The King is waiting for you.”

“I’ll head over and make sure he’s ready,” Sansa offered, slipping out of the room.

Lips curling until she was beaming, Dany kissed her children’s heads and stood. “Behave yourselves until the nursemaid arrives, my sweetlings.” Confident that Ghost would look after them - now letting the twins climb on his back one at a time - she stood and took Jorah’s offered hand. “Shall we?”

“Nervous, King Jaehaerys?”

Balancing himself on the balls of his feet, soles coming down to crunch on the snow below, Jon glared at Sansa. “I thought we agreed for you to call me ‘Jon,’ Sansa. You may be my Hand but you’re also my family.” Normally not bothered by the cold of the North, he rubbed his hands together. “And no, I’m not nervous.” It was an obvious deflection. The composure following his moment in the crypts evaporated as the moment of decision grew closer and closer. Had it not been winter, Jon’s brow and palms would have been drenched in sweat.

“Please,” Arya scoffed beside him, Sansa to her right. “If you were any more jittery, you’d be bouncing.” Watching him nibble on his lips, the old unsure Jon she had grown up with returning, she punched him in the arm. “Stop it.”

Wincing, Jon rubbed his arm. “What was that for?”

“Stop worrying, brother. She’s not backing out.”

“Dany can’t stop looking at you,” Rickon pointed out, rounding off the Starks. “It’s quite gross if you think about it.” Arya chortled, drawing curious glances from the older lords and ladies.

He pursed his lips, that same bastard insecurity written on his face. Sansa reached out and clasped his shoulder. “She’s not going to back out, Jon.” A smile formed on her face, attempting to absolve Jon of his remaining fear. “You’re the perfect match for a Queen, and the perfect match for her.” The redhead then turned to Arya, motioning with her eyes for the younger girl to say something.

Shaking her head, a glowering look from Sansa made her groan. “Fine.” Turning to Jon, she gulped. “I’m only gonna say this once. You are… quite good looking. Any lady would… be lucky to scoop you up.” His sister blanched, not one for the flowery oratory nor thinking of Jon in terms of attractiveness. It was then that Sansenya, Rhaella, and Lyanarys swooped down out of the sky. Growing rapidly, they just barely fit onto their normal perches on Jon, their father feeling their heavy weight. They nuzzled him, chirping their love before taking off again.

A chuckle left Jon. All he had to do was look around and he had the love and affection he had always missed as a child. He tugged his sisters close, glad they were here. “Thanks.”

At that point Sam hurried into the Godswood. Setting Gilly and Little Sam among the other guests, he took up his place with Jon. “She’s coming.” Jon managed to look out and that was when he saw her. The breath was knocked out of him at the sight.

Jorah holding her arm, Daenerys’ breathing quickened as her eyes settled on Jon. Through her veil,
she could pick out his fur cloak and leather direwolf tunic without a moment’s notice. ‘He’s so handsome.’ She fought to keep her composure thought - for the sake of the formality. Clad in a dress of the purest eggshell white, the Northern custom was hewed quite closely. Dany noticed the various northern lords and ladies that would remain behind in Winterfell. Lyanna Mormont, Alys Karstark, young Ned Umber… all for whom the ceremony was hoped to appease. She looked back at Jon as her steps drew her to right across from him, his warm grey eyes that she loved so coming into view. ‘We’ll have plenty of time to be ourselves tonight.’

In the soft glow of the many lanterns, light dancing along the blood-red leaves of the weirwood tree, Maester Aemon looked over his family. It was a beautiful sight around them, the simple rugged beauty that the North possessed in abundance. Pure white snow covering the earth. Intricate snowflakes - glittering like diamonds - fluttering to the ground all around them. The Northern lights dancing in the dark, clear, moonless night sky, ribbons of color heralding the most auspicious of omens. For the lights to appear at a wedding was a sign of greatness in all faiths. But the couple only had eyes for each other. “Well,” he cleared his throat. “Who comes before the Old Gods this night?”

Smiling at Jon, heart filled with love, Dany nodded. “I, Daenerys of House Targaryen, a woman grown and true of birth. I come to be wed in the presence of the Gods.” A Queen, she spoke for herself. A woman in love, she shore all her titles. For Jon, she only needed to be Dany - her heart caught slightly, knowing that it was her that Jon loved and was marrying, not her title.

“And who comes to give her?”

“I, Jorah of House Mormont,” the young bear said proudly, removing his hand from the crook of her arm. “Sworn Sword to Her Grace.”

“And who comes to wed her in the sight of the Gods?”

Fighting tears in his eyes, a rare emotional moment for him, Jon reached out and took Daenerys’ hands in his. Symbolizing their new union. “I, Jon of House Stark, King in the North.” Being a Northern ceremony, he was using his Northern name. It didn’t really matter to him, for Dany loved all of him. “I take her to wed.” Slightly breaking protocol, he raised one of her hands to his lips and kissed it softly. Through her veil, Jon could just make out the twinkling pools of violet. The love radiating in them.

Aemon felt his breath hitch, gazing upon his beloved niece. ‘She looks so much like her mother.’ Rhaella would have been proud, bursting with happiness for this moment. “Daenerys of House Targaryen, do you take this man?”

Her smile widened. “I take this man.” She almost laughed at the visible relief on Jon’s face. ‘As if I’d say anything else.’ From the moment she saw him - though she didn’t realize it until later - she had become bound to Jon Snow. Preordained. Destiny. Her destiny.

“Jon of House Stark, do you take this woman?” He reminded Aemon of his brother Aegon V, the same slender looks and deep compassion for the common man.

Jon resisted the urge to close the distance and kiss Daenerys passionately. That time would come. “I take this woman,” he breathed softly, never taking his eyes away from her. A small blush adorned Dany’s pale cheeks at the intense gaze. Dropping his right hand, he kept his left out, Dany’s right resting atop it. ‘I love you,’ he willed for her to understand, the depths of his feeling. She saved him, brought him to where he was - even from halfway around the world.

Gingerly, Sansa handed Maester Aemon the special strip of silk. She had sewn it herself, two Targaryen three-headed dragons mixed with Stark direwolves. The union of ice and fire. As was
Northern custom, Aemon loosely wrapped the cloth around their joined hands. Binding them. Symbolically and literally. “In the sight of Gods and men, I hereby bind these two souls together for eternity.” And it was done. The marriage completed. Ice and fire united.

Peeling her veil back with his free hand, Jon cupped Dany’s cheek. Nuzzling it softly, Dany stepped forward, standing on her tiptoes and bringing their mouths together. A cheer rang out from the Northerners present. “Queen in the North! Queen in the North! Queen in the North!” A trio of roars filled the din - Balerion, Rhaegal, and Edderon chiming in with their approval,

Breaking their kiss, Jon stared into the deep amethyst of her eyes. “I love you, wife.”

Dany melted into his stormy grey orbs. “I love you too, husband.” All else meaningless to them at that moment, they kissed again.
It was true, Daenerys had never seen a Northern wedding - never had stepped foot in the North until flying to save Jon... her husband. ‘Mmm, my husband,’ she thought with a smile as they sat side by side at the Lord’s table. The chandeliers were packed to the brim with candles, bathing the normally shrouded room in an all-encompassing yellow light. Tables were packed with revelers and drunken guests, filling on the platters of food that the servants brought in. It was sparse compared to what Sansa had told her normally graced the great hall during summer months, but even in such scarcity everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. Warm ale filling the mugs in front of them, Dany chuckled at how alcohol never seemed to run out at the feast.

“Enjoying yourself, your Grace?” Hot breath filled her ear, Daenerys closing her eyes and fighting back a purr. Her body filled with warmth nonetheless. “I do hope my bride is enjoying herself.”

Jon quite enjoyed the look of suppressed ecstasy crossing over Daenerys. It wasn’t noticeable to the layman, the Dragon Queen wearing the mask of a generically happy highborn woman, but Jon wasn’t a layman. He knew every twitch in his wife’s face. The subtle hitch in her breath, tightening of her chest, and faint red in her cheek all belied someone aroused. Something he was quite happy to see.

“I am, my King,” the silver-haired woman replied, looking up at Jon. She smiled, leaning in to kiss his chin. She couldn’t wait to take him to their chamber and consummate their hours-old marriage, but Dany really was enjoying the feast. A moment of peace and merriment before the coming storm.

Bannermen that could play an instrument had volunteered for their beloved king, mounted on a raised platform to play various tunes to entertain guests and allow for a lively dance scene. Many had taken to the floor in the middle of bouts of drinking and feasting. Arya and Gendry were having a boisterous, merry time twirling around, the former quite rusty and the latter sporting two left feet. Rickon, reserved and quiet for most of the night, had managed to muster up the courage to ask Lyanna Mormont to a single dance, and both overcame initial hesitance to have a fun time.

Off the dance floor, Sansa was immersed in conversation with Missandei while Greyworm occasionally joined in. Tyron was where one would expect him, engaged in a drinking contest with Tormund and Wyman Manderly, Shae acting as referee. To little surprise on her part, her hand seemed to be ahead - especially after the redheaded wildling tossed his mug away and pulled Lady Brienne, who’s back had been turned to him, into a kiss. That brought a fist into his face, knocking him down. Dany stifled a giggle as Tormund hauled himself up and poured another mug of ale for himself with a dopey grin.

Daenerys couldn’t help but notice that Jon couldn’t take his eyes - not the loving, tender look of her caring Jon but the hard, protective look of the King in the North - off his sister and her… lover. She shook her head, stifling a laugh at his behavior. “Jon.” She placed a hand on his cheek, pulling him to look at her. “Stop trying to will Rhaegal to burn him alive.”

“I’m not.” Jon watched her give him a knowing look. “Not that far at least, but...” He looked back, seeing them be all handsy. “I don’t like him touching her like that.”

“She seems to be enjoying it.” Joyous laughter written all over her face, Arya looked just like Daenerys did when sharing a moment alone with Jon.

“She’s my baby sister.”
“She’s a grown woman.” Staring her down, Dany smiled as Jon’s gaze softened. “Don’t fret, my love. You still have another Arya to be protective over.”

The ragtag band finishing their tune, the various couples on the cleared dance floor split apart. Closest to the royal couple was Arya and her dancing partner, Gendry the smith. He bowed, and despite wearing her normal breeches she reluctantly curtseyed. Jon noticed Gendry’s mouth moving - words lost over the cacophony in the hall - resulting in a punch to the shoulder from Arya. She was laughing however, so all was good.

“A toast!” Arya called out, hoisting a mug of ale into the air. “To the King and Queen!” Cheers rang through the hall as none turned down the opportunity to get drunker. Dany felt Jon pull her head to him to kiss her hair, modest as always in the face of recognition. The kiss felt warm and supremely comforting - much as the Dragon Queen wished for him to kiss elsewhere. “What time do we think the bedding ceremony will be!” Her eyes twinkled, teasing lilt in her voice as the drunk guests began laughing and whooping. Such was often the best part of the wedding.

“How about now?” Jon turned to Sansa, eyebrow raised. ‘You too?’ She smirked at him.

“Don’t know how easy it would be ‘ith a pecker like that!” Tying Tyrion for the drunkest person at the wedding, Tormund led his wildlings in a cheer.

Dany blushed, knowing exactly what that particular ritual entailed. While it would be fun to see Jon squirm, her lack of modesty gave way to Jon’s own strong modest traits - plus it was Jon. He was special, and she wanted this night to be special. Sensing her reluctance along with his, Jon stood. “There will be no bedding ceremony tonight, Lady Stark.” His sisters - and Tyrion - laughed while good-natured jeers rained down on him. “However, I shall retire with my wife after this next dance.” He stood, hands out. “My Queen, may I have this dance?”

Blinking, she stared at him. ‘Dance? Jon?’ She didn’t realize he wanted to. “Of course, my King.” Why would she turn down such a public offer? Taking his hand, the two slowly walked onto the floor below, a crowd of guests clearing a circle for them. Positioned closely, Dany dropped her voice till only he could hear. “I didn’t know you could dance, my love.”

“Just follow my lead, Dany. It’ll be fine.” He kissed her brow and motioned to the fiddler, who began the tune - a popular jaunty tune that started slow but picked up by the end. “I love you.”

They taught Robb, and Robb taught me,” he replied, smiling softly at his bride. “I couldn’t deny you one dance at our wedding.”

“But I don’t know northern dances.” A sudden bout of shyness fell over her, not wanting to humiliate herself in front of the northern lords - her people.

Jon laughed merrily, leaning into her ear. “Just follow my lead, Dany. It’ll be fine.” He kissed her brow and motioned to the fiddler, who began the tune - a popular jaunty tune that started slow but picked up by the end. “I love you.”

She gazed upon him with adoration. “I love you too.”

The tune started up and Dany found herself guided around the floor by her dragonwolf. She fought back the squeak bubbling up in her mouth, nearly stumbling several times at the unfamiliar movements, only to be held up by Jon’s strong arms that were so amazing wrapped around her...

‘No, concentrate.’ Willing herself, Daenerys focused her mind until she had a general knowledge of the steps - enough not to trip like a clumsy child. This was welcome, since it was then the dance began to pick up.

Both zoomed along the dance floor, boots barely making contact with the ground as Jon guided them to the fast pace of the tune. He could feel Dany’s soft arms and trim waist flexing, muscles toned
underneath from years of training and dragon riding. Her body was a furnace, fire made flesh searing anything that it came into contact with even through the thick dress - but so was Jon, his own fire meeting it in kind and ice cooling it down. Watching her breaths quicken, he dipped her, his own breath hitching as she leaned back and exposed her graceful neck. She bounced back into his arms, eyes bright with excitement. Twirling her, Jon misjudged the force of his jerk at the end. Instead of a graceful glide, Dany ended up still gracefully thudding directly into his chest as the song ended.

Applause roared from the onlookers, but Dany only had eyes for Jon. It may have been the dead of winter, but at this point the Dragon Queen could only feel heat radiating from her husband. ‘Blood of the Dragon.’ They were mere inches apart, quick breaths hot on each other’s skin. Panting, hands pressed to his chest, Dany smiled and kissed him - a kiss returned with enthusiasm. Only good-natured jeering and a smart-ass comment from Arya brought them out of it, a blush forming on Daenerys’ cheek.

Taking Dany’s hand in his, Jon turned to wave to the crowd. “Alright, we are turning in for the night. Feel free to continue to enjoy yourselves.” He spotted Tyrion refilling his cup, stumbling a bit and causing the wine to spill. This feast was not going to end soon.

“King in the North!” cheered some, and the chant grew as said King led his Queen out of the Great Hall.

The scuffing of their boots echoing through the empty halls, Daenerys couldn’t bring herself to look up at her… husband walking alongside her. Not that she was regretting a single thing that had happened between them - the hand wrapped around his forearm sparked with electric delight, Dany’s heart filling with warmth - but that if she looked, perhaps this was nothing but a dream. That she would wake back in Meereen, or worse, in Ilyro’s house in Pentos where Jon Snow was a mere figment of her imagination. The thought brought dread into her.

“Is all alright, wife?” ‘My wife.’ Jon, stopping in the middle of the hall, felt deliriously happy - a feeling not often felt. Sensing his bride was feeling differently, he turned towards her and gently guided her head to look at him. “Dany.”

Hearing him say her name, voice loaded with emotion and love… Dany bit her lower lip. “This is real, right?” She looked away, to the side. “Are we really here? Together?”

Hand guiding back her head to meet his, Jon cupped her cheek and softly kissed each of her closed eyelids. “Yes.”

Eyes opening, gazing into his grey orbs, Dany finally smiled - widely and happily. “I love you, husband.”

Leaning down to kiss her, Jon suddenly had a wicked thought. A small grin curled on his lips as they proceeded down the empty, torchlit hallway. “Did you know that the Free Folk have a special tradition?” Having rejected the bedding ceremony outright earlier in the week, perhaps this was the alcohol talking - or perhaps it was some part of him finally wanting to let go and have a little fun. Daenerys looked up at him with a raised eyebrow. “While it doesn’t doubt me,” she said suspiciously. Jon rarely smiled mischievously like that unless they were in the throes of passion. “I’m unaware of any Free Folk traditions.”

“Well,” Jon’s grin was unchanged. “Once the warrior has emerged as the sole claimant, he ‘steals’ her to his chambers.”
“I’m not surprised,” she chuckled. “I could definitely see Tormund or his fellow warriors doing…” Clicking in her mind, Dany’s eyes widened. “Jon, don’t you…” But it was too late. Without more than a low grunt, the King in the North had grabbed his bride and pulled her over his shoulder. “JON!” she shrieked, interspersed with laughter. “Put me down this instant.”

“No.” He marched towards their chamber with a determined swagger.

His bride huffed, strung about his shoulder. “Your Queen commands it.” Dany tried to sound regal, but it wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Still no. By command of the King.”

“The King is being silly,” Dany shot back, trying hard to contain her smile. So long forced to accept the mantle of leadership despite their age, at this point they were simply a young couple on their wedding night. With what was facing them, such nights were priceless. Watching as they made it into their room, Dany squealed as Jon tossed her onto the plush bed. “Truly alone at last... my King.”

Catching her saucy smile, where they were - and why they were here - suddenly became clear to Jon. They were married... and tonight was their wedding night. Drawing in a deep breath, his eyes settled on a flagon of fine arbor gold resting atop a table. The servants had gone all out, preparing a roaring fire, refreshments, and clean sheets for the royal couple tonight. Cold banished away, Jon filled two glasses and handed one to Dany. “Wine, wife?”

‘Mmmmmm, wife.’ The word brought joy to her. “Please.” Sipping the fine liquid, she eyed Jon up and down, really studying him. “So handsome, my King.” Cloak off, Daenerys could fully appreciate her new husband’s fine form. Leather tunic - marked with both the Targaryen dragon and Stark direwolf much to her delight - stretched tightly over his muscles, rippling underneath. She had truly married the finest man in the world.

“See something you like, your Grace?” Catching the Dragon Queen’s hungry gaze, desire welled up in him as well. Jon’s breeches felt increasingly tight.

“Oh yes.” Setting the half-empty glass on the bedside table, Dany stood and walked into Jon’s chest. Without delay, she gently wrapped an arm around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. Her tongue swiped along his lips, seeking entrance that was gladly given. They dueled sensually, coaxing twin moans. Dany pulled back breathlessly. “Jon.” She looked upon him as if seeing him for the first time. Hands trembling, fingers expertly moved to unhook the straps of his leather cuirass and woolen tunic. Seeing his bare skin come into view, her breath hitched.

Torso bare, Jon noticed the split-second flash of horror that crossed Dany’s face whenever she laid eyes on his scars. “Daenerys…” he began, but was silenced by a finger to his lips. Closing the distance between them, he felt her soft lips press against the scar over his heart. He fought back the emotion threatening to surge forth. “I… I came back to you.” Jon hissed her head, holding her.

Offering him a smile, Dany turned around, offering her back to her husband. “Undress me, husband.”

Jon wanted to just rip the dress in two, immense lust and desire to take this gorgeous dragon in front of him returning like a stampeding mammoth, but he controlled himself. Even still, one or two of the laces nearly tore as he hurriedly exposed her bare back to him. A delicious gasp left her lips as Jon gently sucked on the pale skin on the back of her neck, licking down her exposed spine. “This dragon is mine,” he whispered, yanking down the dress till it pooled at his wife’s feet.

Suddenly bare to the world, Dany turned to meet his intense look - one of equal intensity burning in
her violet eyes. “Yes.” She unfastened his breeches and shoved them down, freeing the part of him she lusted for the most. “I am your dragon.”

Neither knew who moved first, but their lips were slammed together in a tangle of teeth and tongues. Passion burned a hot dragonfire, Jon pushing Daenerys on the bed - himself atop her. A wolf growl on his part found her arms pinned above her. “You are so beautiful.” Jon savaged the milky skin of her neck, sucking hard at her pulse.

“Fuck, Jon. Yes.” She wriggled under his grasp, wanting to be free to touch him all over. “I need you in me… Gods!” The electric sensations shot to her core as Jon latched onto a nipple, working the peak raw before switching to the other. ‘How is this man such an amazing lover?’ Every night felt like the first time with him. “Please…” Her pleas were silenced by his mouth, tongue seeking out hers in a raw, hungry kiss. Hands free as he moved to hold himself over her, Dany wrapped them around his shoulders and inwardly smirked deviously.

Before Jon knew it the positions were reversed. He rested on his back, Dany’s delicious form straddling his hips - pinning him to the bed. “Dany…” He would have had some witty retort had her glorious beauty not effectively rendered him mute.

“You didn’t listen to me, my King.” The last two words dripped seductively from her mouth, Dany grinning as they made Jon groan in delight. She leaned down till her mouth was hot in his ear. “Time to ride my dragon.” Her tongue darted out to lick his shell just as her hand guided his cock to her entrance. Much as she wanted to tease him till he was a squirming mess, Gods, Daenerys needed him so badly.

“Fuck,” Jon gasped as Dany impaled herself on him. He loved that moment when they first joined - now as man and wife. Her warmth was a tight vise on his length, and the expressions on her face almost made him climax. Dany’s eyes were closed tightly, the Dragon Queen biting her lower lip as she tried to control her scream at how deliciously snug she felt. “You’re so tight, Dany.”

Heat passed through her like a wave. “Only for you, my King.” Opening her eyes to meet his, Dany began rocking up and down on his cock. Moans and purrs tumbled from her lips as his delicious length went in and out of her, hitting spots inside that she didn’t even know existed. “Seven. Hells.” She gritted her teeth at the intense pleasure.

Jon reached up to cup her breasts, loving the mewls that left his wife as he kneaded them. The wet slaps of skin on skin, mutual moans, and the creaking of the bed soon filled the Lord’s chamber, newlyweds lost in the love of each other’s bodies. What felt like hours, more realistically several minutes or so, had passed and Jon could feel him approaching the edge. Before he hurtled over it, he was damned if he didn’t bring Dany along with him. Angling his hips, Jon pistoned upward. Dany’s eyes widened, clasping her mouth as she screamed into her hand. ‘This will not do.’ Jon hit upward into his wife harder. “Scream for me Dany. Roar like a dragon.”

Unable to hold herself back, Dany screamed for the entire world. “Joooonnnnn!” The roar reverberated through the room, and undoubtedly could be heard through the castle. Her climax pounded within her, inner walls undulating around Jon’s length. Dany felt him erupt inside her with a gasp, only triggering further waves of pure pleasure from her. Feeling him thrusting up in a doubled pace to prolong their climax, finally Dany collapsed upon her husband in a boneless heap. She purred contentedly, snuggling into his chest as her silver hair fanned over his thick muscles. A lazy smile stretched out on her face when he kissed the crown of her head, arms wrapped around her tightly. “Mmmmmmm.” Minutes passed before she had the strength to lean up to look at him.

Staring into each other’s eyes, Jon reached up to cup her cheek. Running his thumb along the soft cheek, Dany smiled and leaned down for another kiss - no words were needed to convey how they
The kiss deepened, passion returning. Now it was Dany that found herself flipped onto her back. “Hus-bannnnnd?” She moaned mid-word, feeling his length harden inside her.

Jon’s grin was quite wolfish above her, but his voice was a veritable dragon’s roar. Forcing a gush of wetness to flood her core. “My turn now, wife.” And he lunged forth into their shared bliss.

Morning brought a wonderful feeling to the King in the North. Shaking off the sandbags holding down his lids, he was met with two sparkling orbs of pure amethyst. “It’s not polite to stare, your Grace.”

Dany cocked her head at him, smiling. “I am the rightful Empress. I have the divine right to stare and appreciate my husband all I want.”

‘The Dragon Queen is so sexy.’ Grinning back, Jon eased her on her back, moving to lick and kiss her long, creamy neck. “By that logic, an Emperor may ravish his new bride.”

Giggling at the feel of his beard and whiskers tickling her skin, it changed to a moan as Jon began lavishing her nipples with attention. She loved his dragonwolf desire to plunder her body, marking her over - plenty such reminders marred her skin from the night before - but Daenerys equally loved when he worshipped her body. “Get inside me, now,” Dany moaned. She burned hot between her legs and needed his length.

Husky chuckles left Jon’s throat. That look returned, the mischievous glint in his grey eyes. “Be patient, my Queen. I need to bend the knee for you.” Smirking at her confused look, he began kissing down her pale body to his favorite place.

As he sucked the skin of her stomach, Dany understood and weaved her fingers in his mop of curls. “Please. Please, Jon.” She forcefully urged him down to where she needed him. ‘I love his tongue on me.’ Jon sought to pleasure her, getting pleasure from seeing that she shattered into bliss. ‘I love him so much. I love this man so much.’ Feeling his hot breath against her core, a whimper left her as he did nothing but nuzzle her inner thighs. “Stop teasing me.”

Jon blew on her sopping core, making his dragon squirm. “As you wish, your Grace.” With that, he placed her legs atop his shoulders and dove in.

“Ahhhh.” Daenerys gasped, tightening her hold on his hair as pleasure coursed through her. “Gods, my love, don’t stop.” His tongue felt amazing, swiping through her copious wetness and coaxing more out of her. “Don’t ever stop.” Such skill poured out as he pressed his tongue deep within her, lapping at her inner walls and making her bite the inside of her mouth to hold in the screams. This man was so amazing, such an amazing lover. All hers. “You’re mine, husband. Mine!”

“All yours,” Jon whispered, plunging back into her sweet warmth. Her body was trembling all over and he saw the signs. “Don’t hold back. Let go, my dragon.” Licking up her slit, Jon started lashing his wet muscle against his wife’s little nub.

Mouth open in a silent scream, stars danced before her as Dany shattered into pure pleasure. Soaking Jon’s mouth with her juices, the Dragon Queen only felt her burning need stoke higher. Growling, she urged him up till they were eye to eye. “Inside me. Now.” Her legs wrapped around him and hips pressed against his length. “Now, Jon.”

Achingly hard, bordering on pain, Jon instinctively slid till he was sheathed by her warmth. “Oh
fuck, Dany.” He began pumping in and out. “You feel so good.”

“Yes. Yes. Yes.” Eyes boring into one another, Dany watched the stormy tempest in his grey irises. She met his thrusts, finding a passionate rhythm with the man atop her. Her husband. Her soulmate. A climax - as intense as all the others - found itself building.

Jon knew as soon as he entered her that he wasn’t going to last long. Gritting his teeth, he picked up the pace. “My Queen. My wife. My dragon. Mine. Mine!” The words tumbled from him in a growling roar - a dragonwolf. “Say it.” He slammed harder into her, gasping as he spilled his seed.

“I’m yours! Oh fuck, Jon!” The sensation of him climaxing inside her triggered her release, and soon both of them were limp against each other, panting. Dany, languid and happy, started pressing soft kisses on his neck and shoulder. This was so perfect. ‘I’m going to get used to this.’


A long hiss left the Dragon Queen, someone daring to interrupt her private time with her King. Dany refused to let go of Jon’s embrace. “Get the fuck away before I feed you to my dragons!” she roared, causing Jon to chuckle. Dragonfire Daenerys was quite amusing to him - and quite sexy.

“Your Graces…” It was Missandei, voice wavering but audible through the door. “The Lannister Army is attacking Riverrun.”

Any hope of continuing the sensual morning was lost. Jon and Dany quickly transformed into King and Queen, the King quickly throwing on his breeches and heading to the door. The sudden and abrupt way he yanked it open caused Missandei to involuntarily flinch. “Give me the report.” Jon’s tone left no room for argument.

Eyes widening at the scars littering the King’s chest - the translator having never seen them before, Jon always at least having a tunic on when they encountered each other in the mornings - Missandei nevertheless handed him the scroll, entering the chambers to attend to the Queen.

Jon, much as he did enjoy such sights, was engrossed in the report. Pacing back and forth, his jaw was set in a determined scowl, eyes shifting from confused to resolved to pure rage. “Seven Hells. Nearly forty thousand Lannister forces laying siege to Riverrun! The Blackfish holed up inside with five hundred men - they can storm the fucking castle if they want to!” Dress being laced up, Dany was shocked at the level of fury erupting from his eyes. The dragon had awoken. “Seven fucking hells!” If Riverrun fell then the land connection to the Vale was in danger of being severed. Jon slammed his hand onto one of the tables, the resulting slam echoing through the room.

Quickly crossing the distance, Dany cupped his cheek. “Calm yourself, my love,” she whispered, following with a soft kiss. Afterwards he still seethed, but wasn’t on the precipice of erupting anymore. Ghosting her hand comfortably across his chest, Dany took the nearly crumpled parchment from his hand. Reading it, now it was her turn to anger. “The Kingslayer.” Jaime Lannister. Daenerys may have known about her father. May have agreed that he needed to be put down like a mad dog, but this was an affront. As if Joffrey was personally taunting her. “Where is Robb with the main army?” she asked Jon, voice hard.

“At the Twins. Missandei,” Jon barked, catching the attention of the translator. Both looked the epitome of a warrior King and Queen. “Have a raven sent there and to Moat Cailin. Quick march to Fairmarket.”

“And have the dragons readied. We’re flying tonight.” Daenerys met her husband’s eyes. No observations needed to be made verbal. At least they had one night of bliss, one night to forget the
hell around them before they had to journey into the freezing winds and scorching fires. Without words, Jon pulled his wife into a fierce hug - one of powerful promise. Whatever hell they would enter, they would emerge victorious.
Unseasonable warmth had come to the Riverlands. It was unexpected to Jon - while he realized that the land to the south of the Neck was much warmer and more hospitable to life than the North, they were in the beginnings of the coldest winter in a thousand years. ‘The Long Night.’ It shouldn’t be as warm as it was, straddling the melting point with the sun swaddling all of them in its rays. This would have been largely fine for Jon, for the less unforgiving cold would spare the Unsullied and Essosi regulars inhospitable fighting conditions. All except for the mud.

Gods, the mud. Not a rain cloud in sight, the intermittent days and nights above freezing turned the ground beneath them into slush. A wet, gooey sludge that made marching take three times as long and any type of wheeled vehicle impassible through it. Try as they might, every one of the men in the Stark-Targaryen combined army was splotched in brown - even Daenerys, her leather battle dress defiled. Jon had insisted she stay on the stone-floored manor house where they were encamped around, but she refused to not be amongst her army. Part of the reason why he loved his wife so.

Inconvenient though it was, the worst problem the mud presented was the blocking of all reinforcement. The bulk of the Northmen and Unsullied at the Neck, the Dothraki cavalry and heavy siege pieces moving from Gulltown in the Vale, blocked by the snowmelt turning the ground to mush. All they had against the Lannister host was the Army that had garrisoned the neck…

“Have our scouts returned yet?” The soft Dany from their intimate moments was nowhere to be found, replaced by the imperial, hardened Dragon Queen. General Theodosius Caryn nodded. “Well?”

He pursed his lips, trying best to spin what was clearly bad news. The withering look from both his King and Queen killed that idea. They weren’t Joffrey, or Robert Baratheon - Jon and Dany wanted the truth, however unpleasant. “Forty thousand total, give or take a few thousand.” Accurate headcounts were rare. “Thirty thousand infantry, mostly Lannister but with sizable portions from the Stormlands under Lord Selwyn Tarth.” Lady Brienne, who had ridden south ahead of the main party that departed Winterfell, chafed at that - fighting her father was not something she was looking forward to. “Nine thousand horse, of which seven thousand of that number are Westerlands, Crownlands, or Reach knights under the command of Randyll Tarly of Horn Hill.”

Dany guped, seeking out Jon with her gaze. The dour wolf had returned as well, face unreadable as he stared at the map stretched over the table. They were meeting in the open, a beautiful Riverlands day despite the mud. Splashing filled the still air from the River Trident, as beautiful as it was ominous. ‘Where my brother died.’ “And our forces?” Daenerys knew how many troops Robb had taken to the Twins, but perhaps they had been reinforced?

The defeated sigh from Robb put that hope to bed. “Twenty-four thousand, your Grace. Five thousand northerners and loyal Tully bannermen, seven thousand Unsullied, and ten thousand Essosi regulars. Five hundred wildlings and a thousand Vale knights - we are strong but outnumbered.” An aura of futility and self-loathing filled Robb Stark. Missing his brother’s wedding to coordinate the initial positions against Joffrey, Jaime Lannister outmaneuvered him to take the lynchpin of their southern defenses He had failed the North at the Red Wedding and was failing everyone all over again now. “I received a raven from mother in the castle. She and the Blackfish have five hundred men, enough for a sally with support but nowhere near enough to hold if the Lannisters try to swarm them.”

“Where are our reinforcements?” Lord Cerwyn seemed frustrated - hells, they all were.
“Stuck in the mud, no doubt.” With Tyrion gone, Theodosius had taken over as the sarcastic pessimist of the council.

A loud roar filled the din. “And what of my dragons?” Dany allowed a small bit of hope. “Three of them would equalize the battle.”

Jon then spoke for the first time. “I will not risk them to Lannister Scorpions. Ramsay Bolton had but a few and they nearly captured Rhaegal.” The memory left a bitter feeling within Dany. “How many do they have here?”

“Our scouts counted twenty, perhaps twenty-five.”

Gritting his teeth, Jon felt a persistent throbbing headache beginning to take refuge in his mind. ‘We’re not ready… not ready.’ What was obviously a mad decision to attack without the main body of troops in Tywin’s army - which were still either in Dorne or being offloaded in the Crownlands - ended up a non-intended stroke of genius for Joffrey. Forty thousand elite forces with a strong mix of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, while their forces were outnumbered and lacking in the latter two categories. Glancing at Daenerys, Jon realized her eyes hadn’t broken their gaze at the sketch model of the scorpions and larger ballistae. Likely able to break through the walls of Riverrun in a full assault, the lessons learned against Ramsay brought the dragons’ use into question.

‘Damn it!’ He stared helplessly at the sky, feeling not the mighty heir to the Targaryen line but the insignificant bastard of Winterfell at that moment. ‘Damn it all to hells. Please father, send me a sign.’

The flutter of a bird’s wing, barely audible over the bickering and gnashing of teeth, reached Jon’s ears. He looked up, finding the greyish black form of a mockingbird. Jon stared at it - it started right back at him, eyes lining up. A mockingbird, as auspicious an omen as one could find, at least according to northern lore. Chirping, it leaped off the branch and began to fly through the trees.

‘Trees.’ Suddenly it came to him.

“Robb.” All his commanders and advisors fell silent at the single statement. Jon brushed aside the puzzled looks and met his brother’s eyes. “How far out is the diplomatic party from Winterfell?”

His brother blinked, unsure of where Jon was going with this. “Um, we received a raven of their progress this morning. They’ve passed Moat Cailin and will be here in two days. Why?”

“Is Tormund with them?”

“That’s what the message said.”

He felt a soft hand on his arm. “Jon?” Dany’s indigo orbs bored into him. “What are you thinking?”

The King allowed himself a knowing smirk for the first time since their wedding. “At the Wall, Sam told me stories about his father. Mostly they revolved on how… abrasive and cruel he was…”

“I’m sure such stories are interesting, your Grace,” remarked Edmure Tully, as stressed and emasculated as any of his commanders - even more so due to Riverrun being his castle and his ancestral seat, taken away from him once by the Lannisters. “But how does this help us in retaking my home from the enemy?” His tone was biting. Edmure had every reason to be enraged, given the hell put upon him by Tywin and the Freys, though he still loved his wife and boy despite the former’s heritage.

“Quiet.” The heavy Ghiscari accent only made Grey Worm’s command more booming and authoritative. “Let the King finish.”
Jon nodded gratefully at the Unsullied commander, while Daenerys sent him a smile. “However, one story he told me was one he overheard his father speak of - something that happened when Randyll Tarly commanded the mounted forces of my father’s army at the Trident.” Such was a horrible day to think of for Jon, knowing what he now knew - but here he would be avenging his father. For both his and Dany’s sake and for the Realm’s. “Lord Tarly planned to try something new instead of the classic mounted charge, what he called a hammer and anvil charge.” Dany, Robb, and the other Lords listened to him as he explained it. “Lord Royce,” he addressed the aging Lord of Runestone.

“Yes, your Grace?” As cavalry commander, Yohn Royce paid close attention to the discussion.

“It is come to my attention that there are rumors concerning your loyalty.” A mirthful smile danced upon his lips. “It would be a shame if you deserted us with the Vale cavalry at the moment the battle is joined.”

Royce flustered. “But… I assure you… your Grace. I am fully behind you.” Looking from Royce to Jon, Dany was starting to worry. Her husband was an excellent leader with good instincts, but where was this going?

“What does any of this have to do with the wildlings, Jon?” asked Robb, still confused.

Following his King’s line of vision back to the trees around them, Theodosius’ eyes widened in understanding. ‘You magnificent bastard,’ he thought, thoroughly impressed. “And should Lord Royce flee the field, your Grace, what would you expect the Lannisters to do?” The King and his General shared a grin to the bewilderment of even the Queen.

Leaning forward, Jon splayed his arms on the map table. “If Jamie Lannister wants to fight a cavalry battle, then why don’t we let him?”

“You will bend the knee, Torrhen Stark!” Wooden stick in hand, little Arya ducked around the smithy and waved it at her brother. “Surrender now or face the fire of Maraxes!” Above swept in Rhaella, screeching with enjoyment.

Rhaegar, with his dark curls and dour determination, looked every inch an heir to the North. “Winter always comes, vile Rhaenys!” Giggles threatened to leave both twins at their playacting. They tried to be great Kings and Queens but it was just so ridiculous and fun. “A dragon is no match for the direwolf.” Whistling - aunt Sansa taught him, a smug satisfaction filling Rhaegar everytime he watched Arya try and fail - the massive direwolves bounded over from where they had been resting. The size of small ponies and terrifying to behold, with the twins they were like the gentlest of dogs. Ghost nuzzled Rhaegar’s hair, but in the middle of a game of battle it did not go over well. “No Ghost, Nymeria, attack Rhaenys.”

“Ahhhh!” Knocked into the soft snow, giggles and weak protests left Arya as the direwolves began licking her face. Quite adorable and joyous, it was a shame that the courtyard was deserted. “Stop! Ghost! Nymeria! He he. Brother, sister, help me!”

Sensing ‘Rhaenys’ in danger, Rhaella hooted to her sisters from her perch on Ghost’s back - where he could once carry all of them, now only one could comfortably fit. Down dove Sansenya and Lyanarys, joining with their sister to mob Rhaegar. Bite strong and claws sharp, combined with their dragonfire they could do considerable damage if they wanted to. But to the little dragonwolf they were gentle, affectionate even. “Noooo!” he laughed at the attention. “Direwolves, Aegon and Visenya have come! We must fall back!” Barking, Ghost left Arya and helped nudge the hooting dragons away while Nymeria barked, guiding her little lord to a safe place.
Laughing as well, Arya pointed to where her brother was running. “Meraxes, Vhagar, Balerion, to the cave!” Hooting delight, the dragons followed the little dragonwolf - silver hair flowing - to the entrance to the kennels…

Only for a foreboding presence causing them to hover, screeching. There was the smell of dog, as imagined, but the new Winterfell dogs loved the twins as much as the direwolves did. No, it was something else. Their nasal receptors picked up the scent of dragon… but not dragon. It smelled worse than even the most putrid enemy that the girls shrieked again, flapping away.

Smile still on her face, Arya approached the still form of her brother. “I found you, King in the North.” About to grab him, the sudden stillness in her twin suddenly became apparent. “Brother?” she asked hesitantly. At his lack of response, Arya followed Rhaegar’s eyes to where they gazed at - it just now felt colder than the winter temperatures outside.

The cell was empty, or rather seemed empty until something in the corner shifted. “Away with you, bastard,” came a weak, hoarse voice. “Leave me be.”

Feeling the foreboding nature shroud over him, Rhaegar nevertheless steeled himself. ‘I am a Stark and Targaryen. No fear.’ “Who…” He stepped closer to the bars. “Who are you?”

Ears perking up, the person that had once been Prince Viserys Targaryen began to crawl towards the iron bars that kept him from freedom. A soft, childlike voice hadn’t been what he expected. Blinking, his eyes took several moments to adjust to the light. “I am the one true King of Westeros,” he hissed, but the normal anger in his voice was tempered by curiosity. “You have the look of a Stark.”

Rhaegar and Arya stared in equal parts wonder and fear. The person before him was a man, essentially his poppa’s age but far skinnier - almost skeletal. He was filthy and bore a splotched Gold fist where his hand should have been, but the silver hair matted to his skull was distinctive. A Targaryen, just like their muña. “I am Rhaegar, Crown Prince of House Targaryen.”

A thought occurred to Arya, connecting the dots. “Are you our uncle? Muña’s brother?” Their mother rarely talked about him, but he had to be as kind and loving as Sansa, Arya, Robb, and Rickon. ‘Right? They love us. Of course he does.’

Milky violet eyes widened as Viserys understood. Rather than smile as Arya expected, his face curled into an enraged sneer! “I knew it! Dothraki horselord my ass!” His voice dripped venom. “He fucked her didn’t he?”

Aside from panicked shouts when in danger, the twins had never heard yelling - chiding yes, stern discipline yes, but never anything resembling the enraged vitriol thrown their way. Rhaegar stumbled back while Arya started to shake. Ghost and Nymeria, who had been sniffing at each other, tensed and looked at his wards. “Uncle…?”

“Uncle? UNCLE!” Rage, frustration at the loss of his birthright welled up inside him like a volcano. It erupted in the face of the perfect representation of what he had lost: the dragonwolves, clearly Targaryen but clearly Stark as well. “I am no uncle of yours! Dirty half-breed scum!” He hadn’t seen them since they were mere babes, when he had held a blade to their cribs. Now the resemblance was uncanny. They reeked of Stark. Reeked of the bastard. “That horselord savage was bad enough, but to lay with the dog of the Usurper! A bastard!”

Feeling his sister start to sob into his shirt, Rhaegar fought back the tears himself as he felt the urge to protect his father. “He is no bastard. He’s the King! A good king!”

“Your father is scum! The son of a whore!” Viserys pulled on the bars, pressing his face through the
opening. The madness was on full display. “And now he lays with another whore! I should have taken Daenerys when I had the chance! Had proper Targaryens, not half breeds of northern traitors and whores.”

“Little wolves!” Jogging slowly from the steps to the balcony, Arya Stark glanced around the courtyard. “Where did you get off to this time?” she laughed. They were worse than her and Bran, exploring every nook and cranny of the castle. “It’s time for your lessons… Little wolves?” Try as she might, they were nowhere to be found. Arya smirked - she liked a challenge.

However, unlike the other times the twins decided to play predator and prey - and they did it often, Arya always flushing them out to a barrage of tickles from her and licks from Nymeria - this time it was far easier. All she had to do was pick up Ghost and Nymeria’s growling… ‘Growling?’ Now her Faceless Man antennae were picking up danger. Ears pinpointing the sound, she zeroed in on the kennels…

‘The kennels.’ Arya’s eyes widened. ‘Seven hells!’ Eyes flickering towards it, she already saw the forms of the dragons perched above the entrance in obvious distress. Heart thudding, she ran towards the open tunnel.

What she found made her blood boil hotter than dragonfire. Tears cascaded down the twins’ cheeks, trembling in each others arms as they shut their eyes tightly. Ghost’s teeth were bared in a malevolent growl and Nymeria hissed in anger, but such wasn’t the cause of her niece and nephew’s discomfort. Instead it was the rabid shouts and snarls from beyond the iron bars.

“Your mother is a whore and a traitor, polluting the Targaryen bloodline with subhuman scum! I should have taken her when I had the chance, and put a sword to your fucking necks when you brats were but babes!”

Just before the direwolves lunged in a mad frenzy at the bars, Viserys found a sharp tip pricking at the skin of his neck. “One more word out of you, Viserys Blackfyre, and these direwolves will be the least of your problems.” She so wanted to kill him - he was on her list for what he did to the North - but Arya knew that he deserved to answer before the Realm for his crimes. She, reluctantly, sheathed needle. “The North Remembers, and Winter will come for you yet.” Wrapping her arms around the crying twins, she guided them out.

Undaunted and mind likely snapped completely from reality, Viserys lunged his good arm through the bards in a desperate attempt to close around her throat. “I’ll get out of here you Stark cunt! And when I do I’ll find another army and BURN YOU ALL!” Arya ignored his deranged rantings, hustling the twins until they were free of the Mad Prince’s tirade within the main solar.

Sobs still wracked the little ones, snot and tears lining their faces. “Oh little wolves.” Opening her arms, Arya felt them cling to her for dear life. “It’s alright. He can’t hurt you.” Softly stroking their backs, the crying soon dissipated, though their little forms still trembled.

“How much happened?” Arya looked up to see Sansa, concern written all over her face. Seeing the twins’ sobbing forms, she rushed over and knelt behind them. “Sweetlings, what troubles you?”

Still trembling, it was Arya who spoke for them. “Viserys.” Her eyes were burning, mouth set with determination.

Mouthing a curse, Sansa hugged her niece and nephew from behind. “Shhhhh. Don’t tremble sweetlings.”

“Viserys…” mumbled Rhaegar, turning to burrow his face into the crook of Sansa’s neck - he
and his older aunt were as close as Arya was with her namesake. Such was a close family, the
Starks. ‘The Pack survives.’ “He called momma a… whore, and poppa a… bastard.” Words new to
him, he said them haltingly.

“He said he tried to kill us and was going to do it again.” Fresh tears fell from little Arya.

“Listen to me sweetlings.” Sansa looked at both with all the affection in the world. Resigned to never
having children, she could at least satiate her maternal instincts with her beloved niece and nephew.
“That monster will never hurt you. I will not let him.”

“If he even tries, he’ll have to reckon with Needle,” Arya said with grim determination.

At that moment, a bannerman walked in. “Lady Arya?”

“Not now,” she shot back, continuing to console her niece and nephew.

“It’s a dispatch from His Grace, my Lady.” To his credit the bannerman did look apologetic for
intruding on the moment. Wordlessly, he handed it to Arya and left.

Sansa nodded at her. “Go take care of what Jon wants. I’ll get the little ones a hot supper. Come on
sweetlings. Hot Pie is making lamb stew…”

Running her hands through her hair in frustration, the young woman stepped back out into the cold.
Watching as Nymeria fell on the ground next to Ghost, the white direwolf starting to lick her fur,
Arya quickly perused the words in the dispatch. ‘Hmmm, looks like Gendry and I have to get
going.’

“LOOSE!” Clunking, the gears of the trebuchet groaned from the friction before its rope resonated
with a whip-like crack. A load of rocks shot through the air before smashing into the inner walls of
Riverrun castle - soon joined by several more lobs in quick succession that caused damage unseen by
the observers. The defenders did not let the slight go unanswered as a fusillade of arrows began
peppering the muddy ground around the siege artillery. Several screams rang out from hits, the
artillerymen racing for the mobile mantlets.

Setting down his spyglass, Ser Bronn of the Blackwater whistled. “That woke em up! Cease fire!”

“Cease fire!” screamed the battery commander as the protective Scorpions halted their return fire.
Less than a minute passed before the last arrow impacted the ground, the Siege of Riverrun returning
to the anticlimactic, sleepy affair that it had been for the past weeks.

Turning his head away from the men as they moved the trebuchet battery out of longbow range,
Bonn groaned and met the eyes of his commander. “This is fucking pointless. Are we gonna storm
the castle or prepare an actual siege - or do what I fucking suggested and flesh out the damn
Northern cunts before the blizzards come back?”

Jaime rolled his eyes at the classic Bronn-speak. “There’s a Dothraki Horde and three dragons
bearing down on us. I would think someone that fights for a return on his investment would want to
be cautious.” Truth be told, he thought being here was a massive error - to wait for his father’s main
host would swell them to over double their current size. But what Joffrey wanted Joffrey got. ‘My
boy. My son… he is the mad King reborn.’ Clenching his fists in anger at the whole damn scenario,
Jaime glared at Bronn. “If you sent the scouts as you were supposed to, then we’d at least know
where they were.”
“I sent ‘em,” replied Bronn nonchalantly. He spat a swish of spit into the mud. “I’ll bet if it wasn’t this damn muddy, they’d be back know.” Eyes narrowing, he peered into the distance. “Say what you want about my motivations - and you still owe me a fuckin’ castle for joining you in Dorne, twice - but you always attack. Make the cunts react to you.” ‘Sometimes the gold-shittin’ aristocrats don’t fuckin’ get it,’ Bronn thought to himself.

Hooves sloshing in the mud, the sound of the gallops drew Jaime and Bronn to the arriving party. “Lord Tarly,” the commander offered his main general.


Bronn would readily tell anyone around him how many fucks he gave. “My Lord,” he said over politely. “Lord Tarth.” Selwyn Tarth was more humble, and deserved a bit more respect. His gaze flickered to the baby-faced youth on the horse beside him. “And…”

“Rickon Tarly, correct?” Jaime said.

“Dickon,” the boy corrected, causing a belly laugh to chortle from Bronn. “The scouts have returned, my Lord. We’ve found the Northern Army?”

Jaime’s brow furrowed. “How many Dothraki?

“None.” Randyll Tarly flashed a rare smile, though it looked more sinister than joyous. “They have twenty-five thousand at most. Barely any cavalry, and most of their infantry are foreign scum the Dragon Queen brought over. We need to attack as soon as possible, use our cavalry to crush them.”

“Seems too good to be true.” In Bronn’s experience, such moments usually were.

What choice did Jaime have, though? “Prepare for battle. We march on them tomorrow.”

As the entire Lannister camp descended into a madhouse of activity, no one noticed the small boat slipping through a bend in the river. Guided by the directions Edmiure had given them, the two figures inside reached the hidden side dock without much trouble. “We’re here to see Brynden Tully and Catelyn Stark,” Gendry announced, trying his best to sound like a highborn commander.

“Who the fuck are you?” came the response, sentries with their swords drawn.

The second figure dropped her hood. “Arya Stark.”

A short length of time later, Arya found herself in a crushing hug from her mother. “You keep trying to give me an early death, sweetling,” she chuckled, kissing her head.

“I’m fine, mother,” Arya groaned into her shoulder, glancing at the sorry sight around her. A great castle built to withstand anything lesser than a dragon, the Lannisters had stolen a march on the defenders leaving Riverrun without the time to stock itself for a lengthy siege. The Tully garrison had implemented bare bones rations to extend them, and a lot of hungry bellies resulted.

“Lovely family reunions aside, my beloved grand-niece, what is this all about?” Gruff, the Blackfish had seen too much in his life to afford to be sentimental. He saved that for his nephew Edmure - though the pain of being locked in the Frey dungeons may have tempered that considerably. “Is His Grace wishing us to mount a sally attempt out of the castle? He’d better bring a powerful army with him, then.” A glance to the sorry state of the inner defences belied his unsaid point.

Breaking the tight embrace with her mother, Arya allowed herself a small smirk. “Jon is here, with a
Catelyn’s lips pursed in a disenchanted scowl. “We’re doomed then. The Kingslayer can starve us out while he simply waits for his father’s main force.”

“Don’t worry mother. It’s all the numbers we need.” Her elaboration had the two Tullys nodding within minutes.

Growling softly - almost a purr or hum - Rhaegal lowered his head till it essentially hovered at just above chest-height. Chuckling, Jon knew exactly what he wanted. “Easy boy, no need to be scared.” Extending his hand out, he began to rub the dragon’s lower jaw. “You have your flight, and your fire back. No one’s gonna come close to hurting you again.” As Jon began to scratch the soft scales, Rhaegal’s purrs intensified. The dragon’s eyes closed as he enjoyed the attention from his father and rider. He had been restless all day from what Jon noticed, and the King could simply feel the memories of the Battle of the Bastards and nearly being pinned to the ground were weighing on him as the clouds of war sprung anew. “Everything will be fine.” Jon didn’t know if he was comforting Rhaegal or himself.

So entranced in thoughts of the battle soon to be joined and the battle long ago fought, Jon didn’t notice the winged shapes and thuds behind him until he felt a heavy nudge against his back. Had it not been for Rhaegal’s head to push back against, he would have fallen. The green dragon growled and snapped his jaws at both of his brothers. ‘Don’t hurt father,’ was the essential message that Jon managed to figure out. Turning, he saw Balerion hiss while Edderon merely simmered.

“Hey, hey.” Jon tried his damndest to not burst out laughing. The dragons reminded him of how he, Robb, Arya, and Sansa used to bicker and squabble amongst themselves. “Be nice to your brothers,” he chided Rhaegal, giving him one last scratch on the lower jaw. “You can’t hog your father’s time anymore.” Growling softly, Rhaegal hooted at his brothers and nuzzled his snout against Jon’s chest. Jon laughed again. “Just a big softie at heart, like Ghost.” If left to his own devices, Ghost would run off into the woods or roll around in the grass while he rubbed his fur. Turning to Balerion and Edderon, he met their gazes. “Father hasn’t forgotten you.” They may not have been as close as he was to Rhaegal, but they were still his… children as much as the twins or the girls were. Reaching out, he began to rub their snouts, eliciting the same low growls of contented delight.

“There you are.” Glancing over his shoulder, Daenerys could see a smile spread on her husband’s face at the sight of her. Her heart made a little catch. ‘He’s so handsome when he smiles.’ Stepping forward until they were mere inches away, Dany wrapped her arms around his side. “They love you.” It never ceased to amaze her how close the bond was between Jon and her… their dragons. They had no knowledge of him and been raised by her, yet Rhaegal flew halfway across the world to him and even the temperamental Balerion adored him. “So do I.”

Feeling the stress of the week melting away at his wife’s touch, Jon continued the scratch the scales of the two dragons. “I love all of you as well.” Jaws opening in a yawn, Balerion leaned forward to nuzzle his mother before curling up into a nap, joined by his brothers. Jon let out another chuckle at the scene. “I still remember when I first saw Rhaegal. Sweeping out of the stormclouds and burning everything, it was shocking that I wasn’t pissing myself at this ‘beast’ in front of me.”

Kissing his cheek, Dany walked towards the sleeping Rhaegal. “They were never beasts, regardless of what our enemies say in their propaganda.” She sighed, softly running her hand along her sleeping child’s snout. “We almost lost him, Jon.” Sadness clouded her features. “Twice once to the others… and once to Ramsay Bolton.” Daenerys had no doubt that the sadistic freak would have slaughtered Rhaegal had he been acting unilaterally, only capturing him because her brother thought he could
ride him. ‘Fool.’ Let alone the fact that he was no dragon, Rhaegal had already bonded to Jon.

Behind her, Jon wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist. She leaned her head back against his shoulder, sighing at his touch. “We won’t lose them, my love. I promise.”

“I could lose you too.” Dany turned in his arms, cupping his cheek. “You are already a King, Jon. Don’t put yourself in danger.”

It killed him inside to worry Dany so much, but Jon couldn’t allow himself to go down the road to tyranny. “What kind of King would I be if I didn’t fight for my people?” The words said in the parlay with Viserys and Ramsay came to mind.

Trying not to tear up, Dany stroked his soft, raven whiskers with her thumb. “What kind of King would you be if you died?” She didn’t think she could bare it if he did. They were just that important to each other. “Your plan…” If Randyll Tarly and the Lannisters took the bait, then Jon would be putting himself right in the path of a heavy cavalry charge.

She didn’t need to finish. He understood. “I know.” Jon tightened his hold on her, absorbing her warmth. His father - Ned Stark - had always taught him to be humble before the Gods, to eschew arrogance at every opportunity. But with Dany, he felt he could take on the world and be victorious. A powerful feeling, but one he needed to be mindful to not blind him. He pulled back to look in her eyes. “I promise you, Daenerys.” Her eyes sparkled. “We will win.” She said nothing, only pulling him down into a kiss.
Battle of Riverrun

Spyglass peering, Jaime felt a foreboding feeling in his gut. Nothing of a rational sort, for his army greatly outnumbered the Bastard of Winterfell. It was more instinct. A primal sense of danger that giving battle may not have been the best option.

“I don’t fucking like this.” Apparently, Bronn had the same idea. “Where are the fucking dragons?” There was no sight of the great beasts, nor the dragon queen. “That cunt Snow is there on his horse, but his Queen ain’t. Don’t like this one fucking bit.”

“Quit your bellyaching, sellsword scum.” Randyll Tarly was just as blunt as Bronn, if more reserved. He peered on the enemy lines himself, studying them. “Snow is no fool. Unsullied spearmen on his left flank, Vale Knights on the right. He’s protecting his flanks well.”

A snort came from the older man, armor gleaming in the sun and body still as fit as it was decades before. “Bah,” Tygett Lannister spat. “Any of my men are worth five mountain rock-fuckers, or twenty Essosi slaves. Send me at them and I’ll bring the hammer down.” Tarly glared at him. “Oh what now, Lord Stick up His Ass. The dragons? We have scorpions positioned among our forces. That whore would be stupid to even try!”

The Lannister forces were arranged in classic blocks, four in total. Anchoring the right were the elite Westerlands infantry formations - armed to the hilt, equipped with the best of weapons. They had fought Robb Stark in the Riverlands, Renly Baratheon in the Crownlands. Put down revolts from the southern Vale to the Stormlands. Marched through Dorne in an orgy of burning and killing. Some were even old enough to have battled Rhaegar Targaryen in Robert’s Rebellion. Tygett Lannister commanded, wishing he were among the cavalry where the glory would be found.

In the center stood the Stormlands forces, chainmail tight across their bodies and pointed helmets strapped to their heads. Once loyal to Renly Baratheon and many having fought at Blackwater Rush under the stag banner, now they fought for their new Lord Tommen - and by extension King Joffrey, the Almighty Chimera. Loyalty to their commander Selwyn Tarth went far, but their Liege Lord lived ensconced in the Red Keep rather than at Storm’s End. Was the Dragon Queen that the High Sparrow and Faith Militant preached was the greatest demon that could walk the earth truly such, or was the King they now served not deserving of such service? They readied themselves for battle either way.

On the Lannister left were the forces of the Reach and Riverlands, loyal to their new lords out of hate for the Tullys and Tyrells long dominant over them. Now they ruled the roost and had the arrogance to spare. Tinged among them was fear as well - all knew what happened to the Freys, poisoned to the last man by forces yet unknown. If they failed, the same surely awaited them. Randyll Tarly commanded here, ready to win glory against the foreign whore that invaded his beloved land.

And last was the cavalry. Nine thousand strong, the knights of the Realm waited for their part, to sweep all before them.

“Perhaps we should let them come at us.” Selwyn Tarth spoke haltingly, silently praying that his beloved Brienne wasn’t at the frontlines. “We hold the high ground, and will better withstand their arrows while stationary.” Nods came from the war council apart from Tygett, who scoffed in derision.

Nodding finally, Jaime looked at the scowling Reachman. “Uncle, you get the cavalry.” Pounding his chest, Tygett mounted his horse and rode off. The others quickly followed. Looking at Bronn,
who remained with that knowing frown planted on his face, Jamie straightened his back. “I’m taking personal command of the right against the Unsullied. If they’re as good as everyone says they are, then the men will fight best led by their commander.”

“It’s not too late to back out. Make them pursue.” Not having a viable response, between his own commanders and Joffrey he had to attack, Jaime ignored the sellsword and set off for his mount.

Across the field, Jon eased his mount to a slow trot. So the Lannisters were readying themselves. ‘Oh Kingslayer… you were likely goaded into this campaign and goaded into this battle.’ Cocky confidence was not the normal countenance of the wolf, but he could feel the dragon roaring within him. One sated from centuries of martial tradition and victorious campaigns. This was a big one, and the Lannisters would be leading their lambs to the slaughter.

Outnumbered greatly, he had spread his forces thin to match the Lannister front. ‘What I would give for some Dothraki, or more Vale Knights,’ Jon thought, though confident in his plans. Facing against the elite of the Westerlands were his own crack troops - the Unsullied. Formed in a single deep host with thinner wings waiting to sweep around as jaws would around prey, their indefatigable courage in the face of death made them the best he had. Grey Worm would hold their left to the death.

In the center was Jon’s only worry, though Theodosius promised he had no need to worry. Far lighter and less bloodied were the freedmen levies - many armed with ranged weapons such as slings and light bows. As densely packed in tight rows as the Unsullied, they shivered in the cold not known in the Ghiscari lands. Many offered a curse at the faraway lands they now fought in, but all were in high spirits. Their Queen, their Mysa, had given them the gift of their freedom. Till the death, they would fight for her against the knights they now faced.

And anchoring their right were the northerners and Tullys, burning bright for vengeance against their greatest foes. Now was no longer civil war. Now was the true chance to avenge the Red Wedding and finish the War of the Four Kings. Jon saw they were in the highest spirits of all. “Robb!” he called out, finding his brother at the head of the Northern/Tully wing, conversing with Lord Glover and Theodosius Caryn. He urged the horse to join them. “They’re forming up on our right.”

“Aye, they want us to attack.” The Lord of Winterfell gazed at the gleaming rows of Lannister infantry. Such a cowering sight for any soldier, mentally intimidating for those that hadn’t fought it or vanquished it. Robb had, victorious nearly every time but had still lost the war. He couldn’t lose Jon’s war. “Unlike at Winterfell, we want to charge as well.”

“They’ll wear us out,” Lord Glover cautioned - a fear that many within the command structure echoed. “And they’ll use their archers against us.”

“Our archers are Essosi trained,” replied Theodosius. “They can move and fire quickly while keeping pace behind the infantry. If we pause for a moment in the middle of the field, that should keep the exhaustion away.” Other than their contingent of Vale cavalry, their forces were armored lightly. Unlike the Lannister forces, this gave them greater speed and endurance. “Are my weapons in position?”

Jon nodded. “You better hope they work as you reassured me, Lord Caryn.” They had a lot riding on them - just about the only cog in the plan that Jon wasn’t completely confident about.

“We all hope, your Grace.” All knowing their part, the commanders spurred their horses to their respective commands. It was soon only Jon left in front of the men. There was no need for a speech, or something inspiring as was written in the bards or ancient epics. Jon merely nodded at the men, waving his hand at the Northern bannermen. The men knew their duty and would do it honorably, the northern way.
“Give em hells, White Wolf!” shouted one man, a bearded veteran carrying an axe.

“Gods save the White Wolf!”

“White wolf! White wolf! White Wolf!” They cheered him as he rode to his position at the edge of the line. He was one of them, a Northerner despite his Targaryen heritage. His men knew him, they fought for him. They knew those that fought for him. Unlike the others in the Targaryen Combined Army, he had nothing to prove. His life had taught him nothing but humility, but Gods, it felt exhilarating.

‘Be ready, my love. You know what to do.’

Gingerly avoiding the still squelching patches of riverbank, Dany watched as Edderon greedily lapped at the rushing waters of the Trident. “Drink up, my child.” She gently stroked his neck while the white-grey dragon sated his thirst. “You need your strength.” A loud splash startled her as Edderon roared - what fear that they were being attacked was soon dissipated. Balerion emerged from the river with a sturgeon in his jaws, gulping it down. Dany let out a laugh. They bickered just like their brother and sister, just like Jon and his siblings.

Turning her head, she noticed the third unnaturally quiet. “Rheagal,” Dany cooed, approaching him. His eyes looked lethargically at her, still lying flat on the ground. She leaned on his scales, hugging his snout. “I know. I’m worried about him too.” Jon was, arguably, the most skilled warrior in the Seven Kingdoms. But everything that could go wrong would go wrong in battle. Flashes swarmed through her mind - an arrow piercing his skull, a sword slicing his head off, a lance running Jon through the stomach… She hugged Rhaegal tighter. “He’ll be fine. Jon’s a fighter. He will return.”

Growling softly, suddenly Rhaegal’s eyes widened and he hooted. Twin hoots left Balerion and Edderon. Anyone would wonder what they were thinking - anyone but Dany. The message was loud and clear for her. ‘I am. I am ready, husband.’ One hour. In one hour they would fly.

A cold breeze fluttered across the river valley. The rush of the River Trident filling the still air, the sudden cool spell had frozen the mud and firmed up the ground. Good omen or bad… it was all up to the various troops strung around the field. Banners fluttered in the wind, various sigils but the majority being the golden lion of House Lannister reared in a mighty roar or the combined direwolf/dragon of the union of Houses Stark and Targaryen, ready to bring Fire and Ice upon their enemies.

Several horns blew over the landscape and Robb Stark, Theodosius Caryn, and Grey Worm led their men forward in a fast trot. Worried Lannister eyes scanned the cloudless sky above for signs of the infamous dragons, but barely a bird marred the expanse of blue as the Targaryen/Stark host marched. Booted feet crunched over freshly fallen snow and recently froze ice, swords drawn, spears held high, and shields pressed close to their bodies. Jaime watched with bated breath, hoping for a charge. Hoping that the enemy, in their aggressiveness, would overexert itself.

Suddenly, Grey Worm barked an order, repeated in the tongue foreign to the hallowed ground of the Seven Kingdoms. As a single mass the Unsullied halted atop a molehill. The effect was repeated all along the line, each of the three commands halting to catch their breath. The Unsullied stood shock still, while northerners and Essosi alike took swigs from their waterskins or lowered their trousers to relieve themselves. One man of House Glover grinned madly at the troops of House Tarly directly opposing him, shouting a jeer at the top of his lungs while dropping his pants in a gesture of obscenity. It was picked up by his comrades, then all of House Glover, then the entire Combined Army. Northerners wild and frenzied, joined by the revenge seeking Tullys. Ghiscari and Valyrian
profanity tumbling from the lips of the auxiliaries, guttural and fierce. Unsullied proved to be the most intimidating of them all, merely slamming their spearends into the ground in a booming resonance.

It was Randyll Tarly that reacted first. “NOCK!” He snarled angrilly. “LOOSE!” Arrows surged upward in a wide arc.

The sounds heartened Robb’s ears, the Lord of Winterfell drawing his sword. “The North Remembers!”

A roar left the throats of the Northmen. “THE NORTH REMEMBERS!” Covered by the Essosi archers, the Combined Army’s right surged forth to finally join the fray against the forces of the Reach, already moving when the first arrows impacted among them. The undulating mass of humanity in the center and the left surged forth as well. Shields held up, the strangled cries of the fallen resonated out regardless, but far less than expected - few fell on the right or center, and even fewer among the Unsullied as shield tactics and counterfire from the mobile archers joined in. A mere six ranks deep against the Lannister ten ranks, the momentum was powerful enough to shake the entire stationary line.

But Riverrun would not be decided here.

For the thousand men under the banners of House Royce, plate armor clinking as they steadied their mounts, the fear they were to display was only half faked. Seven thousand heavy cavalry, lances pointed skyward as they moved into their tight lines several ranks deep, lined up directly in front of them. Their steel breastplates reflected the sunlight in a shimmering glare. Though it would be others dealing with them at their most dangerous, it still struck terror into the hearts of the knights.

At the first trumpets, Lord Royce cleared his throat - cowardice, even fake cowardice, filled his mouth with bile. He steeled himself nonetheless. “Alright lads! We’re not fighting and dying for some northern bastard!” Hollered at the top of his voice, it resonated across the field as the cluster of cavalry turned as one force, trotting off to the forests to the northwest. Where the sole remaining bridge over the Trident stood.

Tygett Lannister smirked. “Just a stroll through Lannisport, boys,” he remarked to his retinue. Out went his sword. “Send them all in. Full attack!” The hornblowers brought their instruments to their lips, booming sounds echoing through the air. Planning simple - given the lack of agility for a heavy cavalry charge to go anywhere but forward or on a wide turn - the Lannister knights would wheel far to the right of the non-engaging Combined Army third force and bank to hit them from the side and rear. Horses broke out into a fast trot, Lions flying high. They had the Dragon and Wolf just where they wanted them.

Unseen to the Lannister scouts, hidden behind the small molehill where the Northerners rested was Jon’s fourth line. Five hundred Free Folk warriors two lines deep, enjoying the sunny day in the warm south. “Keep calm boys. It shall all be over soon.” Jon stood with them at the front, walking through their ranks and shouting words of encouragement.

“What awfully confident of that, your Grace,” Ser Jorah whispered into his King’s ear. Not holding any personal loyalty to the boy, he held all the loyalty in the world for Queen Daenerys - she had made him promise to protect Jaehaerys Targaryen, and he would do so till his last breath.

Jon nodded. “As confident as I have ever been, Jorah.” A slight tremor rocked his hand but he kept it grasped over Longclaw. ‘Only the most foolish wouldn’t be even slightly apprehensive.’ He raised his eyebrow to the second man by his side. “Nervous, Ser Barristan.”
A wry smile formed on the old knight’s face. “Slightly, your Grace.” He gazed into the distance, sounds of battle joined by the first glimpses of the enemy cavalry. “I am supremely glad that I am by the side of my ward’s son and heir, fighting with him as I should have fought with your father, Rhaegar. But if you fall…”

“I won’t.” Smirking, he looked just like his father. Confident. Passionate. Strong. “In this, I know we’ll win.”

Tormund snorted. “I like this King Crow. Not a brooding cunt like most of the time.” Gazing back at the snow-covered fields, his eyes widened at the sight of the enemy cavalry horde. “Mother cuntfuck. You really are a prick, King Crow.” Even the hardened warrior trembled. It was if the entire Westerlands had mounted a horse and entered the fight.

“And so it begins.” Jon motioned to Ollie, positioned well behind the men with the archers and - special unit. The young squire held a bugle, and at his King’s signal brought it to his lips. One sharp blast pierced the din. The Free Folk adopted a rare discipline and formed a staggered line.

“You’ve got to be shittin’ me!” A bellowing laugh left Tygett Lannister’s lips. Sounds of steel clashing and men crying in pain and terror was drowned by the gallop of his horses. “So this is how the Bastard seeks to stop me. Time to finish this.” Orders were to wheel around the enemy, but Tygett wasn’t about to see his glory delayed just to satisfy his nephew’s need to command. He raised his sword, joining the forest of steel and bronze-tipped wood held high above the horsemen. “Charge! Full attack!”

With a loud war cry, the knights broke into a full charge. Hooves kicked up clouds of dirt and snow as they raced towards the Free Folk.

“They’re too many!” one yelled.

“Tormund! We must fall back!”

“Fuck off,” the ginger wildling shot back.

“We’re fucked! We’re fucked!”

“Hold!” Jon hollered. “Don’t be cowards! Hold!”

In a single fluid motion, the first and second line of horses lowered their lances. Pointed tips, sharp and solid, presented menacingly to the shaking Free Folk, arrogant war whoops and snarls from the knights audible over the deafening gallop of the charging beasts. None among the wildling warriors had withstood a Westerosi heavy cavalry charge, and Jon couldn’t begrudge them their fear. He trembled as well, hand tightening around Longclaw. “Your Grace, we should get you away from the front,” Barristan said, increasingly worried.

Jon cut them off. “Hold steady men!” Their King standing with them - not using them as arrow sponges - filled the men with courage. Barely thirty yards out, He could pick out the whites of their eyes. “NOW!”

“Fuck their asses, boys!” Tormund snarled, dropping his twin axes and picking up one of the many sharpened logs resting in between their tightly packed formation. At once the entire frontline of fur-clad Free Folk kneeled and raised the staves into position, presenting a thick porcupine wall to the enemy. Long out of space to properly halt, or even react to this, the split second for the Lannister horse to notice the change ended mercilessly as man and beast slammed into the Free Folk.

What followed was eerily familiar to Jon from the plains outside Winterfell. Angered shouts of
couraged turned into sheer screams of terror and pain. Bodies flew through the air, shrieks leaving the jaws of horses as their riders slammed them into the staves. Blood gushed over the snow, a streak covering his beard and hair in sticky red. Several knights found the momentum of the charge and the immovable force of the wall of staves launching them into the crowd of Free Folk behind them. Many barely had a chance to push themselves off the ground before axes and hammers crashed down into their backs and faces - wilting ruthlessness in full effect.

One knight - horse impaled through the stave Jon held - tried to stab his lance forward at Tormund. Barristan sliced the infernal weapon clean in half while Jon brought out Longclaw. In one fluid motion he hacked off the knight’s arm while Jorah shoved the stake forward, felling riders and mounts alike with the lifeless horse adorning the front. Wiping the blood off as Tormund embedded one of his axes into a Lannister knight’s skull, Jon noticed a key difference from Winterfell. After barely thirty seconds, it was only one side that found itself a bloodied mess. Behind, the deeper ranks blundered into the savaged front. ‘Right where we want them.’ “LOOSE!”

Hurried hands yanked back burlap tarps, revealing the eight special weapons. Hurried to the Combined Army by Targaryen quartermasters, Theodosius Caryn’s design would prove itself in the middle of battle. “Make ready!” screamed the battery commander in Valyrian. Scrambling crewmen moved in liquid motion, loading the projectiles to the barrels of the crude weapons. The commander, a freedman that a mere four years before toiled in an iron mine on the outskirts of Yunkai, was apprehensive. The sheer weight of enemy cavalry, savaged as it was, could still overcome the line of staves. And the ‘cannon’ had a knack of exploding on the testing grounds. “Fire!”

In quick succession the cannon boomed, lead balls shooting towards the dense cluster of men and horses struggling to push forward. The staves had shocked the elite knights of the Westerlands - nothing could have prepared them for the death hurtling at them. Men by the dozens collapsed as the projectiles lanced through flesh and steel plate, those initially hit simply exploding into gory masses of flesh. Many a Lannister knight felt a massive shove, head turning to witness an entire arm and shoulder hacked clean off before the pain overwhelmed them to point of blackness. One round hacked through over a score of men and horses in a twisted flight of death, soon joined by the arcing arrows of the Essosi bowmen. Blood blanketed the snow as successive volleys turned the horse charge into a slaughter.

At the three sharp blasts of the bugle, the final reserve at the far right of the Combined Army’s line - the Tully loyalists with Lord Edmure at the van - swung a hard oblique angle and charged toward the Lannister cavalry. “REMEMBER THE RED WEDDING!” snarled Edmure, his revenge soon at hand. Fully concentrating at breaking through the wall of thick pikes that held them at bay, Tygett Lannister and his forces did not notice the charging Tullys until their Lord’s sword sliced through the side of a mounted knight. Though on foot, the thousand proud Riverlanders had momentum, surprise, and pure savagery on their side, slamming into the knights massed together in a shocked pile.

Several knights tried to use their horses to simply bull through the bodies of their comrades and the spear wall that left so many dead carpeted on the ground - only for the axes and clubs of the free folk to murder them for trying. Longclaw up, Jon dodged a lance and sliced through the leg of a poor horse, felling it and trapping the Lannister knight under its bulk. Barristan and Jorah finished him off while Jon swung at another, Valyrian steel slicing through armor as if it were paper and spraying bright arterial blood everywhere. “Signal the Vale!!” he bellowed over the shriek of horses, cries of men, and another volley of booming thunderclaps of the cannon behind him, sending further death straight into the charnel house before them. “FREE FOLK! WITH ME!” A guttural cry left them as the wildling berserkers charged wildly into the melee.
horn and a glint of sun reflected from steel plate. Doves over blue, whipping in the wind, unfurled high as the two thousand Knights of the Vale returned to the battlefield. Momentum unchallenged by the bleeding, battered Lannisters, their lances scythed through the enemy. Bronze Yohn and those in the rear ranks hacked away at stragglers with their swords. Armor and tunics were drenched in blood but the knights cared little, proving their earlier cowardice was but a ruse by achieving a mounted warrior’s dream - catching the enemy flank.

Caving the head of a senior knight, elaborate helmet shearing in two as Longclaw splatter blood and brain matter over the ground, Jon watched as the Lannisters broke, rear of the mass of horses, men, and bloody husks began to stampede to the rear in a desperate attempt to escape. Grinning wolfishly, he whistled and waved to the rear before charging forth with his men and horses. The bugler signalled with three long, stucco blasts of music. The cannon halted their fire, deadly task completed. Jon took a mount from Ollie, Longclaw held high. “At the line boys!” A boisterous cheer of bloodlust and vengeance rose as the Knights of the Vale charged forth to the enemy flank, Tullys and Free Folk following on foot.

Sword drenched in the blood of an unknown number of Unsullied, Jaime Lannister galloped towards Bronn, the sellsword’s leather armor quite worse for wear. What had been planned to be a methodical engagement of an outnumbered and exhausted enemy had turned into a slaughterhouse. The North fought with a ferocity unmatched anywhere in the Seven Kingdoms, the skill and bravery in the face of steel and blood brought down upon them by the Reachmen forcing Randyll Tarly to give ground. In the center the demoralized Baratheons were beginning to buckle, the green appearance of the Essosi squashed by an inner courage inside them. And the Unsullied - even his elite Westerlands troops were being forced back by the onrushing and disciplined phalanx that took Bolton tactics and increased the sheer scope of it. They could not be dislodged, spears thrusting forward and carpeting the snowy ground with Lannister bodies. “Send the signal for Tarly to shift to the rear!” They had to prepare to withstand the assault on the right now that the cavalry had broken.

“Are you fuckin’ mad?” Bronn snarled back. “The field is over! Our knights were fucking annihilated! You and I were right, they were wrong, and we got fucked! Both ducked as arrows pelted the ground around them. “You’re the damn commander. Order the retreat!”

“We can still hold them,” Jaime countered, but any further statement were silenced by a trio of bellowing roars that pierced the din.

Shock, for both sides, descended like a pallor over the battlefield as three massive batlike shapes - far too large and close to the ground to be mistaken for anything else - swept from behind the bluffs and hills across the Trident. Fierce fighting stilled as warrior and noncombatant alike stared at the wonder that were the three dragons returned to the land of Westeros. Mounted on the back of the largest, Balerion the Dread reborn, was the Dragon Queen herself. Curved blade in hand, the silver-haired warrior royal surveyed the battlefield like a goddess atop the heavens.

Jaime quickly shook himself out of his reverie. “Scorpions! Get into position, damn it!” The operators, far asleep at the wheel, began firing their bolts. Archers drew and loosed their flimsy raindrops of death upon the beasts, but Dany winged them swiftly away. ‘Where the fuck are they going?’ Jaime thought, watching the bolts zing past them as the beasts avoided the cluster of forces. It suddenly dawned on him. “Fuck me!”

Spurring his horse forward, Longclaw lowered at the host of Reach infantry tangling with his brother - Robb hacking and slashing the enemy with Ice like the fearsome Young Wolf he was - Jon felt Rhaegal roar above him. ‘Make me proud, boy.’ He grinned at the resulting roar.

Not expecting to be attacked and stripped of Scorpions to defend the main force, the mere three
thousand men guarding the Lannister camp were swept into a panic as the dragons approached. Daenerys set her expression into one of pure resolve. “Dracarys!”

With a clatter the drawbridge of Riverrun castle opened and out poured the entire garrison. Brynden Tully and Gendry Waters in the van, war howls left their throats as they charged in a desperate sally. What few Lannister bannermen that hadn’t been scattered to the wind by the mighty dragons had any cohesivity disintegrated when the Tullys slammed into them with sword and spear. One brave knight tried to marshal a defensive line but found his head caved in by Gendry, swinging his massive warhammer like a true Baratheon. Others tried to fire the catapults directly at the attacking forces but were wiped out by a gout of flame from Balerion. One sight of a former street thug from Lannisport turned catapult roustabout with flames licking up his tunic, face burned off and skull leering in a scream... All hope of salvaging the camp was destroyed.

Watching their comrades burn alive within the camp, immense pressure forced the Reachmen on the right further and further back as their northern foes were joined by the onrushing Vale cavalry samming into them from the flank - King Jaehaerys at the van, caked in blood not his own and slicing his great Valyrian sword through flesh and armor alike. Nevertheless, the indomitable courage of Randyll Tarly kept the mass cohesive. Foreign levies surging forward at their ranks, it was rather the center that was first to break. Pressed into the fight for a Lord they knew not on behalf of a King they despised, the Baratheons and other Stormlands houses began to buckle. Many fled, many surrendered, a few joining with Selwyn Tarth to continue honorably to fight, holding back Theodosius and his command, freedmen of Meereen, Astapor, and Yunkai.

All was lost. “Full retreat!” Jaime screamed at his signaller, who blasted the two deep bellows one after the other on the signal horn. On their left the remnants of the heavy cavalry rallied and charged desperately, crashing into the Valemen and Northerners to buy Randyll Tarly a chance to escape. Facing the ever pressing force of the Unsullied phalanx, Lannister commanders threw their greenest troops into a last ditched rearguard as the main force withdrew in good order. “Get to the scorpions!” he ordered Bronn. “Cover us.”

Bronn spat. “I better get a big fucking castle for this!” Finding one Scorpion unmanned, both operators carpeting the ground with arrows littered on them, he was heartened that there was already a bolt lined up. “Alright, come on you big cunts.” Moving the hefty bitch into position, Bronn lined it up with the massive black dragon. “Fuck you.” Bronn let it fly, but not before he caught a flash of white approach. Instinctively diving onto the dusty ground below, the fireball that immolated the Scorpion missed him as Edderon winged by.

Anguish rolled through Dany’s mind as Balerion stilled in the air, a cry of pain resonating from deep in his throat. “Tegon,” she commanded gently. The reborn Black Dread flapped frantically, setting himself upon a stretch of ground near the river. Dismounting quickly, the Dragon Queen cringed at her child’s painful wails as she moved to inspect the bolt protruding from the jagged wood.

Running Oathkeeper into the heart of a Vale Knight that was foolish enough to approach him, Jaime blinked at disbelief at the sight before him. The dainty Targaryen Queen, out in the open with only a wounded dragon to protect her. ‘Might I…’ Acting on instinct, he grabbed a discarded lance protruding from the soil and spurred his horse directly for her.

Shaking the aches from his head, Bronn peered through the dust around the destroyed scorpion. ‘What the fuck…’ Horse galloping at full speed, Jaime lowered his lance as he raced towards the Dragon Queen. “Oh you dumb fucking cunt…” Without knowing quite how the sellsword scrambled to his feet and took off after the moronic highborn.
All sense of time disappeared for Jaime, eyes focusing only on the target in front of him. She didn’t notice the threat coming for her, focusing herself on alleviating the painful cries from her massive beast. He narrowed his eyes into slits, positioning the lance just right. One stroke of luck… Only one and he could turn the tide of the battle and cripple the enemy in a single blow. ‘Hear me roar,’ thundered the motto of House Lannister in his head. ‘HEAR ME ROAR!’

Swing decapitating the head off a Tarly knight, Jon wheeled around to slash across the chest of a remaining knight. Longclaw’s Valyrian steel blade cut through plate steel like knife through butter, spraying yet more blood upon the crimson-stained ground, rider knocked off his mount. “King Crow!” Snarl heard above the din, Jon met eyes with Tormund. Following the wilding’s outstretched arm, the King’s eyes widened in pure fear.

“DANY!” Too concentrated on freeing the bolt from Balerion, the golden-thatched form of who had to be the Kingslayer made a final dash towards her. Intent on killing his Queen. His wife. ‘My wife!’ Jon’s mind searched out his mount. ‘Quickly, save mother!’

Carefully working the barbed spear to avoid shredding Balerion’s flesh, Daenerys remained blissfully unaware of her surroundings until the hoofbeats drew too close to escape. Turning, her eyes widened at the flashing lancepoint.

A loud roar reached Jaime, gusts of air hitting him as a massive green dragon hovered over the landscape. Orange-red flame billowed from his open maw. So close… so damn close. ‘Fuck, forgive me, Cersei.’ He closed his eyes and embraced his impending immolation before the form of Bronn of the Blackwater, profanity on his lips, tackling him into the muddy waters of the river as the air above was engulfed in flame.

An unmistakable pallor hung over the Trident River Valley. Smells wafted to Tyrion’s nostrils, face wrinkling in disgust and sadness. The stench of decay, pallor of death. Grown up sheltered if neglected, he had nevertheless whiffed this particular stench before. “Never gets old, does it?” He looked up to see his King, breathing deeply and wiping the blood off his sword with a torn scrap of cloth.

“No, it does not.” The Imp looked at the various bodies strewn everywhere, for every Unsullied black or northern grey a Tarly maroon or Lannister red/gold. A tattered lion banner fluttered in the weak wind, groups of Free Folk plundering the corpses. ‘My house. My bannermen.’ Tyrion knew why he was fighting for the Dragon Queen and White Wolf, but fighting his own family broke his heart.

Jon noticed it. “Did you know any of these men?”

Tyrion shook his head. “No. Probably all just random smallfolk from Lannisport. But they are still my people.”

“We have no quarrel with them. They are my people too, Tyrion.” Inwardly, the Imp appreciated that from his King. He was a good man, and even in this hell he managed to keep his innate goodness. Their eyes soon flickered to the line of prisoners escorted by grim-faced auxiliaries - Northern bannermen taunting them with jeers and insults the whole way. “We captured your uncle, Tygett I believe his name was.” Jon’s jaw set in resolve. “Your family murdered my father, both of them, but I will spare him if he bends the knee.” Catching Daenerys among a cluster of rocks, the three dragons settling in and stretching on the ground behind her, Jon hurried towards her.

Head hanging sadly, fondly remembering the good times with his once good-natured uncle, Tyrion
sighed. “We both know that he never will.”

Steely glare gazing at the collection of prisoners, the dark violet immediately brightened at the upright figure dismounting his horse. Wanting nothing more than to run into his arms, Daenerys instead stood regally, heart leaping inside her chest as he stormed forward through the milling northerners and Unsullied. The comfort she sought was but delayed, Jon sweeping her into a tight embrace. “My Queen.” Voice low, only audible to her, Dany could pick up the tenderness and relief in his tone. “I almost lost you.”

“You didn’t,” she replied just as quiet but no less firm and comforting of her husband. Pulling back, her smile disappeared at the blood caking his tunic. “Jon…”

His beloved looked so beautiful, black riding leather hugging her slender body, looking every inch a mighty Empress. “Not my blood,” he replied back, a small, wry grin curling in the corner of his mouth. She chuckled softly, squeezing his hand. A wordless understanding passed over them and they both turned to the prisoners - Jon wearing the same menacing aura of a dragon as Daenerys did. King and Queen. Equal rulers. “Ser Davos,” said the King. “What do we have here?”

Gingerly stepping through the smoking ground, dragons having gone to town on their final attack runs, Davos Seaworth approached the royal couple. “About ten thousand, your Graces. Perhaps less. Haven’t gone about an accurate headcount yet.” Too many were busy looting the Lannister camp to do so. It would take hours to reform discipline among the non- Unsullied forces. “ Mostly Stormlanders. A few of the Reach. Fewer Lannister bannermen and knights. My best guess, a similar number dead or wounded on the battlefield - only about a tenth of that for our army. Your victory was complete, your Graces.”

Dany looked up at her husband, grinning at the barely-disguised glint of triumph in his eyes. While such a loss of life - on both sides - was a tragedy, Jon was already proving to be as adept a strategist as his father, her brother. Anticipating the enemy tactics, he had won a decisive victory with far fewer casualties and only a flesh wound for Balerion, who licked his wounds behind them. “And the Kingslayer?”

“Likely escaped,” spat Theodosius, though Tyrion seemed to perk up at the news. “So did the main Lannister force and half the Reach. Randyll Tarly isn’t among the dead, so he had to have escaped as well, bastards.” He kicked at a lump of sod with his boot. “Probably retreating towards Harrenhal, so I sent a raven to the initial Dothraki elements to steal the march, force them deeper into the Crownlands.”

“Good thinking. I commend you.” Watching him bow at the praise, Daenerys turned to the collected prisoners. Jon did not object - both knew she was better at such matters than he. “Soldiers of the Westeros, Reach, Crownlands, and Stormlands. You have fought bravely on this field. In any other lifetime, we likely would have fought side by side to defend our beloved land…”

“As if, foreign whore!” The heckler’s jeer was drowned out by a roar from Edderon, causing the prisoners to collectively flinch. A sharp cry rang out as a northerner smacked the hilt of his sword into the heckler’s face.

Clearing her throat, face still set into an impassive scowl, Daenerys continued. “I am a daughter of this land, born in Dragonstone. My husband is the son of this land, born in Dorne and raised in the North. I know you have heard much from Joffrey Baratheon and his cronies about me, but such are merely projection of what Joffrey himself is upon all that oppose him. All King Jon and I seek are to break the wheel that grinds rich and poor into the dirt at the behest of those like Joffrey. Bend the knee, and you will be part of such a glorious endeavor.”
It was slow at first. Some, who had been trembling the most, fell on their knees almost immediately. The rest hesitated. Lord Selwyn Tarth, nursing several cuts to his arm, met the eyes of his daughter standing farther off. Eyes filling with tears after so long without her, he bent the knee - the entirety of his Stormlands command followed suit. Tarlys, Lannisters, and others remained upright, until a roar from Rhaegal sent all but the most stubborn to their knees.

One of those was Tygett Lannister. He said nothing, merely staring at his nephew. The Imp stood several paces to Jon’s right, and looked away from the death stare. “Look at you,” the fallen horsemans spat. “Betraying your own family.”

Tyrion at last met his uncle in the eye. “Please, uncle. See reason. Bend the knee and save your life.”

“As if I would bend the knee to a whore and a bastard.”

“I would follow your nephew’s plea, Tygett Lannister,” Jon said, stepping towards him. “As of this moment, he is the only one of your rancid House that holds any sense.”

A sneer formed on Tygett’s lips. “And who are you to talk to me, bastard?”

“He is your rightful, legitimate ruler,” Daenerys said darkly. “Show him the respect your family lacks.”

He laughed. “I can smell the wolf on him. It was fun, bastard, planning the destruction of your father’s House with my brothers. Sansa, your slut sister, cried for weeks.” Jon’s fists clenched as the Lannister continued. “I only wish your brother would have died as your father did, and that the King would imitate my brother and hand your sister to the Mountain.”

Something snapping within Jon’s head, it took every ounce of composure not to beat the man to death. Turning, he walked to Dany’s side - but his wife noticed the fire in his eyes. ‘The dragon is awoken.’ “Very well, your decision is made. Tygett Lannister, I, Jaehaerys of Houses Targaryen and Stark, Third of my Name and Daenerys of Houses Targaryen and Stark, First of her Name, sentence you to die.” With a single mental command, Rhaegal curved his neck and bathed Tywin Lannister’s youngest brother in dragonfire. His screams echoed over the whole battlefield.

The sight of their commander nothing but an ashen skeleton and blackened, melted armor broke the remaining holdouts. All fell to their knees, pledging themselves to the King and Queen in the North.

One young lad, a squire by the looks of him, shook with tremors of pure terror as he kneeled. His red/gold tunic was coated in greasy black soot, face ashen with what he had seen. Gently, a hand pressed to his shoulder. He looked up to see the curly gold locks of another Lannister. The family he pledged to serve. “My Lord?” he said haltingly, voice barely a whisper.

“Go,” Tyrion replied, tone that of a loving father. If we wept for his uncle, he hid it well. “Take a horse and go to King’s Landing. And tell Lord Tywin what you have witnessed. What happens when someone crosses Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen. Crosses their armies and dragons.” The squire nodded, knowing nothing else he could do.

The stench of burnt flesh in his nostrils, Amory Lorch felt fear building up inside him. Not the apprehension of fighting. Not the uncertainty of what was to come. No, the wrenching, knife to the stomach fear of impending horrors befalling him. Under Tywin Lannister’s service he had brought much death, dished out unspeakable cruelty upon the enemies of the Crown. Lorch knew a rope awaited his neck if he was caught - or a sword, given the Northern revulsion to hanging.

Feet crunching on soft snow and he crawled and crept through the brambles, Lorch quickly looked
over his shoulder and found no one had yet made it over the lip of ground. Stepping several feet, he did not notice when something slammed into his gut. More like a dull slap, Lorch’s head swiveled to find a thin, needle-like blade run right through his ribcage. More surprised than anything, mere moments passed before Lorch’s eyes widened. He began to wheeze, lungs straining to suck ragged breaths of air. “What…”

Lips curled into a smile, Arya Stark calmly twisted Needle further. Her target cried painfully. ‘Like a coward,’ she thought dismissively. Pulling the blade out, she watched as he fell to his knees. She circled him as a wolf would its prey - which in effect this was. “You’re on my list, you know.” Drawing a short knife from her belt, Arya slammed it in Lorch’s back. He sputtered and spat blood from his mouth. “You killed Yoren, and had Polliver kill Lommy.”

Gurgles built up deep in his throat. Lorch felt this was what it was like to drown. Looking up at his tormentor, his eyes widened in recognition. The tiny, wisp of a girl he had captured long ago near Harrenhal? Her face remained passive - but her eyes sparkled with sublime satisfaction. The true face of a northern demon.

A chuckle left Arya’s lips. “I almost killed you at Harrenhal, but you played stupid and lived. No longer.” She grabbed his hair, exposing his neck. “Winter has come for you, Amory Lorch.” The Faceless Man drew the blade, slicing through the skin of her enemy’s throat. “As it will for House Lannister.”
“TO THE TARGARYEN-STARK DYNASTY!” shouted a random knight, half-empty wine flagon in hand. “May they reign a thousand years.”

“HAH OOH! HAH OOH! HAH OOH!”

“To the death of the… asshole in… King’s Landing…” Already slurring his words and swaying in the gentle breeze, a tipsy smile crossed his face as he fell forward, drink spilling on the ground where he slammed into. A moment’s silence was soon followed by a raucous cheer. A minstrel started up a jaunty tune and the celebration was back in swing.

On the night following the Combined Army’s decisive victory over the forces of House Lannister, no expense was spared from the loot within the captured enemy camp. Far from the spartan fixtures that Robb Stark and Theodosius Caryn allowed for themselves and their men, what the Chimera’s army provided was nothing short of epicurean. The finest Dornish and Arbor wines, fresh meats both local and exotic freshly slaughtered and prepared, ocean fish, shrimp, and octopus carted from the ocean in watertight tanks… the tents of Tygett Lannister and Adam Marband were piled to the ceiling in gold and silver. All of which was distributed by orders of the King and Queen among the men for their own enjoyment following a hard fought victory. Celebration rocked the plains outside the castle and from within Riverrun itself - young and old, male and female, rich and poor sharing in the bounty.

While the exultant shouts and drunken ramblings outside continued unabated, nestled within the walls of the castle the King and Queen celebrated in their own way. “Delicious,” groaned Jon, pulling his bride closer to him.

“Mmmmm…” Dany bit her lip, sensations clouding her in a lust-filled haze. She ground her hips into his, dress stripped down and bunched by her waist while straddling her husband’s lap. “Oh Jon.”

Fatigue from the fighting of the day found her retiring to the guest quarters of the castle, Jon’s lips on her milky skin as they reassured themselves in each other still living on this earth.

Sucking the little strip of skin at the join of her head and neck, Jon was rewarded by a sensual, sexy mewl. “I love you,” he whispered, soothing the flesh with his tongue and causing her to writhe on him. “I nearly lost you today.” Roaming hands reached up to cup her perfect breasts.

Dany couldn’t think clearly with the loving, sensual attention Jon was lavishing on her. “Oh Gods.” Her hands cupped his, urging him to knead the aching mounds. “You didn’t.” A whine left her throat as his lips detached from her skin, but she soon came face to face with his stormy eyes - a tempest of emotion reflected from them. “I’m here, my love.” Dany smiled. “We’re both here.” Closing the distance, she crashed her lips to his in a loving kiss.

Kiss turning heated after a mere few moments, Jon laid her down on the soft furs. Tongues mashed and tangled together in an arousing dance that found Jon rocking his hips into hers. His member strained against the fabric of his breeches. ‘Gods, this woman was incredible.’ A loving wife/mother and powerful queen, and bottled sex to top it off. Her back arching, mashing their chests together, Jon found he couldn’t understand why any man would stray from their wives. Not if they had someone as breathtakingly amazing as Daenerys Targaryen.

Drunk from the electric pleasure flowing through her core, Dany grasped the hem of Jon’s tunic and tugged. “Off,” she growled into his mouth. “I need this off.” Kiss breaking so she could pull the offending fabric from his body, another growl left her throat as she latched her mouth to his chest,
hard muscles rippling under her lashing tongue.

“Dany.” Voice hoarse with lust and emotion, Jon felt the warm, wet muscle glide along his toned front. His scars received the most attention, Dany lavishing them with heated licks and desperate bites of passion and love. He was alive, and she wanted him - their remaining clothes practically melted away. Shifting himself till they were face to face, Jon searched out her mouth and tangled their tongues once more. His fingers found her core soaking. “Gods, wife.” Seeing the mischievous glint in Dany’s violet eyes, Jon smirked against her lips and guided his length to line up with her - seeking his favorite place in the world.

It never got old. Gasping into his mouth, Dany felt her insides stretch to snugly mold to his thick member - the sensation familiar but just as delicious as their first time. “Please, more,” she purred, Jon’s thrusts filling her up so completely. Stars exploded into dragonfire as her eyes shut at the waves of pleasure. Forcing them open, Daenerys gazed into her husband’s eyes and felt the desire only increase at the tender, frantic passion within them. ‘Love comes in at the eyes.’ Oh, how true it was. “Jon, Jon, Jon!” Fingers digging into his back, leaving trails down his skin, they both plummeted off the edge into oblivion.

Eventually, the labored pants began to taper off, a luxuriating calm taking over in the aftershocks. Jon rolled off her, taking her with him until she was nuzzled into his side, one leg and one arm thrown over him. Tightening her hold on his chest, Dany nuzzled his neck as a wave of calm washed over her. “Mmmm, I hope we made a baby tonight, Jon.”

Taken aback for a moment, Jon absentmindedly stroked her back. In the revelations of the twins and the fast pace of both the wedding and the first campaign of the new war for the Iron Throne, the fact that Daenerys might want more children hadn’t been one he considered. Looking back, it was stupid that he hadn’t.

Silence coming from him for several moments, Dany couldn’t help but think the worst. “Jon… you don’t want another?” She bit her lip and shifted her gaze.

Hugging her tighter against his body, Jon placed a kiss on her silver locks - even matted with sweat from their exertions, they still smelled heavenly. “Of course not. I would love to have more children with you.” The line of succession needed to be firm in the event something happened to Rhaegar… gods forbid. “But…”

She looked up at him. “But what?” Dany reached up to cup his cheek. “What is wrong, my love?”

“I almost lost them, Arya and Rhaegar…” It didn’t need to be said, how if it weren’t for Tyene Martell, Euron Greyjoy would have kidnapped their babies. “There are so many threats, Joffrey and the Night King.” Confident in the battle, danger to his own person never fazed him. His honor, his duty… ‘Father always said honor is paramount.’ He fought to live up to it, because in the grand scheme of things his life was expendable. But Dany… his children… Anguish crossed him even thinking about such a loss. “And today, I almost lost you.”

Leaning up, Dany kissed his neck, gently licking the skin. Earning that comforted moan he longed for, a giggle stubbornly escaped as his scrubble tickled her nose. ‘Gods, I love you so.’ “You didn’t lose me, Jon.” He relaxed slightly but not enough to fully free him from the tension of it all. “My love, do you want me to tell you about when I was first with child? With our beautiful children?”

She was rewarded with wonderous grey eyes, sparkling. “I found out when sparring with Ser Jorah. A bout of the early sickness, voiding my stomach into the great grass. He brought me to the healer.”

Jon nodded. “A good man, Jorah. Committed a grave crime, but atoned for it.” After protecting him in battle, protecting Dany for so long, Jon planned to knight him once again. Acknowledge his clean
slate. He knew Lady Mormont would sign off on it - the two had reconciled back at Winterfell.
Feeling Dany turn on her side, back facing him, he shifted on the bed as well. One arm rested below her head while the other wrapped around her, holding his wife close.

Smiling softly as Jon settled behind her, the two of them fitting like a perfect puzzle, Dany continued. “It seemed so surreal. I didn’t feel any different for months. Not while growing larger. It wasn’t until I felt them kick inside me that I truly realized… we had made two children.” She felt him stroke her stomach, feather light kisses pressed against her neck. “I would do anything for them, Jon. Eaven eat the raw heart of a stallion…”

“You actually did that?”

Daenerys heard a tone of half-amusement, half-revulsion from him. It made her chuckle. “The Dothraki believe it brings strength to the child.” She guided his hand closer to her heart. “I may have been a little queasy afterwards, but it turned out fine.”

“Mmmm, I’m glad.” Jon began to play with her nipple, flicking and cupping it.
Swatting his hand, Dany purred when he refused to stop. “I love you, Jon. More than anything.”

“And I you, Dany.” His heart burned for her. “You are the most amazing woman I’ve ever known.”

“I hope so,” she teased, wriggling her ass into him and smirking at his groan. The smirk faltered, something coming to her mind. “Was there ever another? While we were apart?” She wouldn’t fault him if there was.

Silence came from Jon. It was still hard to think about, losing her. “One. Just one.”

From his silence, Dany could tell it didn’t end well… and that he cared for this lost maiden in some way. “Who was she?”

“A wildling woman. I never meant it to happen, she was just someone I bonded with. I wouldn’t call it love, but we cared for each other a great deal. I lost her just when Rhaegal saved me from the dead.” He pulled her closer to him, their skin mashing together. “You? Aside from the Khal?”

Biting her lip, Dany wasn’t as cavalier with her experiences. Only proactive conduct on her part spared what was likely a husband that cared not for her comfort or consent, and the other… “One as well. It was… a mistake.” From what she could remember of that night, too much wine on both their parts led to a reasonably pleasurable evening - Daario pleasing her but more to prove something rather than just to please her as Jon so lovingly did - but one she did not plan on repeating. “He’s in Meereen, so you’ll never have to deal with him.”

Jealous as he was, Jon reminded himself that there was no need to be. “It is fine, Dany. After all…” He turned her in his arms. “I am the one that secured your hand.”

“Oh… you did,” she moaned as Jon kissed her neck. “Until the end of my days.”

He kissed up her jaw and placed one on the corner of her mouth. “Ao ēssī sīr gevie. Nyke giez skori nyke rūsīr ao.” Pulling back, Dany gazed upon him, stunned. Accent still a deep northern brogue, the words were nevertheless firm with command of the language. “Missandei gave me more lessons,” he offered in response.

‘He continues to amaze me.’ She cupped his cheek. “Daor vala iksos hae ao, issa dārys.” And with that she pulled his mouth onto hers.
“What the fuck is wrong with you!” Laughing good-naturedly, Tormund smacked Grey Worm on the back. Stronger than his toned frame suggested, the Unsullied commander didn’t budge much, but his teeth chattered from the cold. “None of you cockless cunts have felt real cold.”

The northerners around the fire laughing, wine and mead spilling onto the ground beneath them, Grey Worm turned to Tormund with a glare. “Colder than this? Not. Possible.” He couldn’t comprehend anything worse than this or Winterfell.

Set off on a further round of chuckles, Tyrion took a swig from his cup. “Get this cockless man some liquid courage. It’ll fortify him!” Gendry, laughing with the rest of them, watched as a mug of mead found itself thrust into Grey Worm’s shaking hands from an unknown person. The liquor was flowing freely, and many a toast to the King and Queen had been raised thanks to such. Sipping at the liquid, Grey Worm blanched. “How can you like taste?” Disgust exacerbated his accent.

“A life without wine is not a proper life,” Tyrion mused. “You’ll get used to the taste, keep drinking.” Shrugging, the Unsullied commander took another swig.

“So fierce on the battlefield and still so much like a fucking virgin,” Tormund chortled at his analogy. “The cold north of the Wall! Now that’s one that’ll freeze your prick off.”

“Been there,” chuckled Robb. “Worse than Winterfell.” He downed the remainder of his mug.

“A southerner with sense.” Several pairs of puzzled eyes stared at Tormund. “Anyone living south of the fucking wall is a southerner to me.” He poured himself another cup, so drunk that half the liquid spilled around him. “Anyway, all the furs in the world couldn’t keep out the cold. Walking helps. Fightin’s better. Fuckin’s the best help.” He grinned, obviously tipsy. “Sometimes…” A hiccup rocked his chest. “Sometimes there’s no woman around to sheath your cock into… or your tongue.” They all laughed when Grey Worm’s eyes flickered to Missandei, enjoying herself talking to Roslin Tully and Shae.

Tyrion nearly fell out of his chair. “Oh, one of the worst problems in the world. Not having a warm cunt nearby. So how did you deal with that?”

“Well, we made due.” Looking over at Gendry, eyes locking, Tormund smirked.

Shuddering, Gendry opened his mouth to speak when the ginger wildling simply collapsed onto the ground. Black out drunk. There was silence. “Been there, done that,” Tyrion said, breaking the ice and leading to another round of laughter. The young blacksmith took that opportunity to sneak off while the others yelled for another keg.

Walking through the crowds of revelers, Gendry couldn’t help but feel the celebration was starting to taper off into its inevitable conclusion. Knocked out soldiers - usually face deep in a puddle of spilt mead or sour wine - were strewn everywhere, as were the pale fools retching their stomachs in corners. Or not in corners, as did the one that Gendry barely dodged before the vomit landed on his tunic. Those lucky enough to pair with a woman were dashing towards whatever privacy they could find, or not at all. Lowborn and highborn alike finding their victory toasts in the arms of warm bodies. ‘Is that Jorah?’ The woman was clearly Lady Stark… ‘Perhaps he’s just helping her inside.’ Rolling his eyes, he stepped around another cluster of passed out drunks.

Only for a pair of small, very persistent hands to pull him into a stairwell. “Do not talk, Gendry.” Lips crashing into his, Arya felt a quite unfamiliar passion inside her. Perhaps it was the wine. Perhaps it was exhilaration from notching another name on her list. Perhaps it was the fact that she
was a grown woman for the first time Gendry got into harm's way. Whatever it was, she wanted him desperately. “I have,” she mumbled in between kisses. “Furs set up at the top of the tower. Take me there.” Arya yelped as her man lifted her, kissing her yet again as her legs wrapped around him.

Afterwords, Arya couldn’t help but stretching languidly under the furs. Freezing around them, underneath the shared body heat made them nice and toasty. “Oh Gods, that was amazing.”

“Now I’m completely sure you are a woman, and a fair maiden at that… ow!” He rubbed his pec, still smarting from where Arya smacked it. “Betrothed and still hitting me?”

Arya scowled at him. “I may be a woman, but I am not a ‘fair lady’ or maiden or whatever. I don’t care if we’re married for thirty years…” Abruptly feeling his lips on hers, Arya stopped talking and melted into the kiss. “You are such a cunt,” she laughed, slightly lightheaded. “But I love you regardless.”

Gendry smiled. “Same.” Sighing, he fell back, staring at the stars. “I only wish I was good enough. A baseborn bastard is no choice for at highborn woman.”

Suppressing the temptation to hit him again, Arya gripped his chin and forced him to look at her. “Firstly, I’d marry you even if you were the bastard son of a manure shoveler. Second…” A smile curled on her face. “Jon is planning on legitimizing you.” Her smile grew wider at the shock on his face.

“Make way for the Hand!” The bell at the inner gate rang twice, signalling Lord Lannister’s return.

Inside the royal solar, Joffrey paced back and forth. “Do not be afraid, all Highest.” Dolgren Hill did his best to comfort his sovereign - item two in the brown-nosing playbook after flattery. “You must stand up to him.”

“Grandfather is not in charge here, I am!” he snarled, but continued to pace. If he ruled over Tywin, then why was he shaking so.

“Your grandfather will know about Riverrun, all Highest,” Cersei pointed out, not even looking at her son. He disgusted her more and more.

Joffrey sneered. “I will bring it under control myself, and I command you to not tell anyone!” He gestured to both Qyburn and the High Sparrow, also present to greet their Lord Hand’s return from Dorne. “No one!”

Quiet descended over the room as the door swung open. Shining plate armor swaddling his red/gold tunic, the still battle-ready form of Tywin Lannister strode into the room. He offered no greetings, spared glances at no one - simply proceeded till he was directly in front of his grandson. “What news of the North?”

Sensing his ruler’s stare boring into his back, Qyburn cleared his throat. “No word has arrived today, Lord Hand. We’ve dispatched ravens to Ser Jaime this morning.” Such was true - nothing had come in that day. So far.

“Interesting,” Lord Tywin remarked, his tone polite to the point of mockery. Cersei, Qyburn, and the High Sparrow, seated by the table in the center and standing to either side of the Hand respectively, made sure to give him a wide berth and slink into the shadows. Tywin, stepping closer to his grandson, ignored them and focused his piercing eyes on the face beneath the shroud. “I heard the word in Dorne, where I was fighting to maintain your Kingdom. Word that over half our Northern
Army has been… annihilated.” And so he knew - a forlorn hope that the man that destroyed Castamere and made Dorne howl would be ignorant of just how massive the defeat at Riverrun had been. “Your uncle missing for a week, thousands of your brother’s bannermen defecting, and Daenerys Targaryen’s dragons all alive and well.” He chuckled darkly. “All while nearly twenty-five thousand men were lost.”

Joffrey, arrogance not leaving his posture at the head of the room, snorted derisively. “Nothing but peasants and street scum, grandfather. I’ve decreed conscriptions to be made. That’ll plump up the ranks against the bastard and his whore.”

Opening his mouth to retort, Tywin stopped as the door burst open. “All Highest,” Meryn Trant stated, face ashen. A basket was propped in the crook of his arm.

“I told you I wasn’t to be disturbed by the likes of you!” snarled Joffrey.

“Urgent dispatch from Lord Tarly at Harrenhal and a… gift from Riverrun, all Highest.” Trant’s face was white as a ghost.

Muttered obscenities barely audible through the gossamer shroud, Joffrey waved him in. “Give it to the woman,” he ordered dismissively, “and put the basket here.” Trant did as ordered, handing the dispatch to Cersei, who stood to take it. “Leave us.”

One could easily see the fearful relief that washed over Trant. “Thank you, sire.” He hurried out, shutting the door.

Cersei parsed through the letter. She was never the best reader, and Randyll Tarly apparently didn’t bother to learn the finer points of penmanship. The message became apparent soon enough, ice filling her veins. “The Dothraki have, um, sacked Harrenhal.”

Tywin blinked. “What?”

“The Dothraki have sacked Harrenhal!” Her father snatching the dispatch from her fingers, Cersei ran her hand through her hair in fear. Absentmindedly flicking open the leather flap that covered the ‘gift,’ bile spewed up to fill her mouth as she collapsed back into the chair with a gasp - blood leaving her face and eyes haunted.

Peering down at the contents of the basket, Tywin reached down and gingerly scooped up the blackened, ash-coated skull within. Balanced on the top was a signet ring. The intricate lion carving only worn by one - Tygett Lannister. Qyburn pursed his lips, the High Sparrow prayed silently, and even Joffrey seemed taken aback from within his veil. Not one vicious, haughty word even murmured from his lips. Dropping the skull, Tywin inspected the single leaf of parchment within.

To the Usurper Joffrey Baratheon and Lord Tywin Lannister, the North Remembers. Winter has come, and it brings fire and blood for House Lannister and the Chimera for their crimes upon the people. Let this be a warning.

Jaehaerys of House Targaryen-Stark, Third of his Name

Daenerys of House Targaryen-Stark, First of her Name

“My Gods. Your own brother.” Dolgren Hill wore an expression of half-disgust, half-incredulity upon his face. His genuineness was quite warm - only the most observant and skilled could tell they were mere crocodile tears. “What beast could do such a thing?”

“A dragon and a wolf, it seems,” Qyburn mused dryly.
Expression grim, feeling every bit of his over six decades upon the earth, Tywin began to pace around the table. “If they can capture Harrenhal, then they can be at King’s Landing within the fortnight.” Divining the meaning of the names and titles - he knew that the Stark bastard was not named ‘Jaehaerys,’ apparently now married to the Targaryen Bitch - could be reserved for another time.

Hill came forward, close to Tywin. “We will stop them. The Whore and her bastard lover won’t stand a chance.”

Closing his eyes, Tywin exhaled in muted fury. “Who is this person who approaches me as though I granted him permission?”

Watching Hill step back with a worried set of the jaw, Cersei shook her head with a barely suppressed smirk. Much as the situation was dire, she knew what was likely to come and took a special schadenfreude in it. “I have made, Dolgren Hill my Chief Military Advisor,” she heard her son say.

“Is he qualified?”

It was Hill’s turn to smirk pridefully. “I am skilled in the arts of war, diplomacy, and battlefield tactics, Lord Hand.”

“Oh are you?” Tywin’s stare now bore down on the highborn bastard. “Tell me.” Wrapping an arm around Hill’s shoulder, the Hand of the King walked with him across the room. “What advice would you offer on the present… SITUATION!”

Before anyone could react, Tywin grabbed Hill by the scruff of his tunic and pitched him out the window. Panicked screams were heard… followed by a sickening crunch of bone. Ducking his head for but a moment out into the open air, the Lord of Casterly Rock clicked felt satisfied at the broken corpse lying on the stone floor of the garden, goldcloaks racing over to inspect the bloody remains.

Those assembled still in shock over what happened, Tywin jerked his steel-gloved hand and slammed his fist into Joffrey’s face. The Chimera himself went sprawling on the ground, crying out in pain. “Joffrey!” Motherly instinct taken over, Cersei made to go to him but was thrown back in her chair by a backhanded slap from her father.

“Get in your chair and stay there, woman,” hissed Tywin, adding a fiery gaze at the two other men within the room. Neither Qyburn or the High Sparrow said anything, much to their advantage. Calmly stepping over to where his grandson lay moaning on the floor, Tywin swung his foot into his stomach, earning another cry and strangled gasp of the air forced out of his lungs. A second kick followed for good measure and Tywin collapsed into his own chair, stare zeroing in on the basket containing his brother’s skull.

“I must offer a truce,” he mused to no one in particular, stifling a cough that threatened to hack up from his lungs. “Par the Stark bastard off, buy some time.” so many pieces were clicking in his mind, but they would take weeks and thanks to Joffrey’s idiocy in military matters they did not have weeks. “But who to send? Not I.” He chortled, sending him back into a fit of coughs. “Seven hells…” Tywin’s hand flew to his mouth, trying to stem the tide. “If I allow myself to fall under the sword of that murderer, it might be my charred skull, in a basket. And not my… impetuous grandson…” He spared a glance to the moaning, crying form of the mighty God-King, blood coating his shroud as Joffrey curled in a fetal position from the pain. “One word out of his mouth and half our allies will be under the Dragon Queen’s banner by the next day…. But who to send?” Another cough felt like his lungs were stoking a fire. “Who…?”
Looking at the ceiling, he ultimately settled on one, golden hair glinting from the light.

“Come on you lazy sack of shit!” None of the Second Sons - individualistic in dress and arrogant in swagger - carried whips, but in every other manner acted the part of the Wise Masters perfectly. “Move your brown asses!” The carts rocked as the crates of weapons and sacks of grain were lifted by the freedmen and hauled to the waiting ships. They all worked for wages now, but the patient observer saw nothing much had changed now that the Queen had sailed across the sea.

Brushing past the observer as if he wasn’t even there, which in all honesty he wasn’t, the bearded man had triple the hubris of any of the other sellswords. It wasn’t long before the observer knew why - the man was a familiar face. “Looking at these people, it’s no wonder the Wise Masters kept them on a short leash.” The words were muttered, but he heard them all the same.

“Useless fucks,” his companion commented. “Faster!” The barking got the roustabouts to move just a bit quicker, if only to avoid more abuse.

Dust kicked up into clouds by the shifting feet, the new figure that approached the others was covered in it. “Naharis, what is the meaning of all of this?”

The sellsword - Naharis - shrugged. “Transfer of my forces to Westeros, Mossador. Our armies there are in need of reinforcements.”

“And how do you possibly know that?” said another man, dressed far more well-off. Every inch a Wise Master, and a wealthy one at that. “The Queen’s orders were for you to stay here. Yunkai and Astapor have already rejected our authority and Volantis is allying with them! We need the Second Sons here!”

“Orders from the Queen herself.” Naharis handed the two men a dispatch with the Targaryen seal. “There was a major setback, zo Loraq. The Stark bastard suffered a large defeat and lost much of his army.”

‘No they haven’t.’ The observer, who had just been at Riverrun and knew better, wanted to shout it - but it was futile. Soldiers continued to embark on the ships, and freedmen continued to load them… the lie and deception unchallenged with the truth thousands of miles away.

Eyes opening, Bran Stark found himself staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. Shadows danced in the orange glow of candlelight. Another secret vision - another unauthorized use of shade of the evening. But one that brought him ever closer to uncovering the web of intrigue that threatened to surround and constrict Jon and Daenerys like a python.

“Bran…” He looked to his right to see the expectant, worried face of Meera. Her eyes flickered with worry - then relief. “Thank Gods you’re fine.”

“Looks like we can safely say that he can manage the correct dosage,” said Ply Qyree, youthful expressions belying his exuberance. “What did you see, Bran?”

He looked back at the shapes imposed on the ceiling. “More and more.” Perhaps they needed to leave Qarth after all.
Coronation

Chapter Summary

Warning, time jump

Eyelids fluttering shut, Jon felt the weight of his entire life pressing on his chest. A lifetime of self-loathing, shame, ostracization… the knowledge that he was but an unwanted stain on a great family. All lies and necessary deception caused by people whose motives were remote and yet dangerously close to him, but a truth to his life nonetheless. Yet here he was, the bastard son of a Northern Lord about to take a mantle not even the great Aegon the Conqueror - his ancestor - managed to take. It was all quite imposing.

“Hey.” A soft hand pressed against his cheek, clean shaven for the ceremony. “Are you alright, my love.”

Breathing deeply, Jon opened his eyes to find their violet counterparts reflecting back at him - glinting with love and a gentle concern. He couldn’t help but smile. “I’ll be fine.” Daenerys had been raised with her status as a royal since birth. Life a constant struggle, at least she possessed such an identity. The daughter of Old Valyria knew her place and was in her element. “Really, I’ll be fine.”

Alone outside the Riverrun great hall, deserted except for the Unsullied guards - still and silent as stone - Dany leaned up on her tiptoes to kiss his smooth cheek. “You need not be worried.” She understood. Reading the enigma that was Jon Snow… Jaehaerys Targaryen was impossible for most, but she could. “You are a born ruler. Your experiences only help in that regard.” Being beaten down, tragic as it was, made him both strong and humble. A pure heart free of madness and hunger for power. “You are the man I want ruling beside me.”

The smile he sent her way made her heart skip a beat. ‘He’s so handsome.’ “I love you.”

“And I you.”

Ahead of them, the door creaked open and Davos poked his head out. “Your Graces, we’re ready.”

Fully armored Tully bannermen throwing open the doors, the bright lights of the setting sun hit the couple square in the eyes. Squinting, Jon took Dany’s hand in his as they began the slow procession to the altar. Falling in behind them, from their positions at the entrance, were the Imperial Council. Lord Hand Tyrion and his counterparts, Lady Hand Sansa and the incoming Imperial Hand Davos. Lord Varys, Lady Missandei, Lord Robb and Lady Margaery. All followed the trail of the special robes trailing behind the figures of the Imperials. Red and Black in the Targaryen colors, emblazoned on the back were an amalgamation of the Stark direwolf and Targaryen three-headed dragon. A dawn of a new era.

Everyone was gathered for the coronation. Dozens of lords both great and minor from across the North, Vale, Riverlands, and even as far as the Reach. Many followed Robb Stark, Olenna Tyrell, young Robin Arryn, and Edmure Tully while further many from the Riverlands and Crownlands defected to join the Targaryen cause. Tormund Giantsbane, Grey Worm, Tyene Martell, and Daenerys’ bloodriders represented the far reaches of their dominions, all bowing low as the
monarchs passed by in regal silence. Soon, all had taken their places among the rows, only the Hands and Melisandre standing before Jon and Daenerys.

“Lords of Westeros and Essos. Humble knights and warriors for humanity, we are gathered under the benevolence of the divine will to usher in a new era for the earth.” Spiritual advisor for the King in the North, she was afforded the chance to lead the coronation on the advice of Lord Davos - “I can’t fathom the worth of her faith, but anything touched by her ends up having the best of luck.” - but the others only acquiesced if she would tone down the special rituals. What she allowed herself to do for the cause of light. “Before us we have Jaehaerys, son of Crown Prince Rhaegar and Princess Lyanna of House Targaryen. Heir to the Iron Throne and the Throne of Winter. And Daenerys, daughter of King Aerys and Queen Rhaella Targaryen. Queen of Meereen. They hold the greatest power of any mortal, but are penitent before the divine.” Both Jon and Dany knelt before the altar, sun beginning to set.

Whispering a silent prayer to the Lord of Light for providence upon the soon to be monarchs, Melisandre picked up the crown from the waiting servant girl, her normal homespun wool discarded for a brilliant white dress. Such a ceremony hadn’t been performed in over a millennia, and the dual nature of it was the first of its kind. Holding the crown steady, the Red Woman’s eyes flickered to it. The silver crown was made for this occasion, a new symbol for a new Emperor. Dark and resolute in the style of the ancient Kings of Winter of House Stark, swords pointed ominously heavenward, the Direwolf adorning the front had been abandoned for a three-headed dragon spewing unseen fire. The sigil of the house of his ancestors. Of his father, undoubtedly looking down on him from the afterlife.

"With this crown of silver comes a promise. Do you so swear to bring our Realm to greatness. To preserve and defend it as the bearer of the divine will, till your dying breath?"

"Till my dying breath,” Jon answered, knowing in his heart that he was prepared for the ultimate sacrifice for duty. For his family. At that moment he felt the soft black and grey felt surrounding the crown rest on his head.

Hands brushing the sapphire and ruby encrusted silver crown, Melisandre felt the power of the Lord of Light well within her. ‘I am doing his work, for his chosen Prince.’ Her search had ended, calling found. “I proclaim Jaehaerys of House Stark and Targaryen, Third of His Name. Emperor of the Targaryen Empire, King in the North, Riverlands, and Vale. Father of Dragons and Prince who was Promised. the Unburnt, the Resurrected. the White Wolf and the Dragonwolf. Friend of the Free Folk and Defender of the Realm. The Union of Ice and Fire. Long may he reign!”

“LONG MAY HE REIGN!” The exultant cheer shook the massive room.

Red locks flowing dragonfire as she shifted to the other kneeling figure, Melisandre’s withering gaze brought the pageboy to her. In the pillow resting on his hands was the second crown - shimmering bright flame where the first was an nightly ice, glowing rubies and emeralds lined the gold of the crown. It mirrored the crown of Aegon the Conqueror, yet with a fierce wolf snarling at an imaginary enemy. The sigil of the Queen’s adopted house. The one she chose. Gingerly, the Red Woman took the crown.

"With this crown of gold comes a promise. Do you so swear to bring our Realm to greatness. To preserve and defend it as the bearer of the divine will, till your dying breath?"

"Till my dying breath,” Daenerys answered back, eyes shut and waiting patiently. Mere seconds passed before the weight of the metal began to strain on her neck. It amused her that her only thought was of how heavy gold and precious stones weighed on her, the red and black rim adding little comfort.
The woman before her may have been the least imposing figure in the history of the Targaryen dynasty - simply on physical appearance, though her beauty did hold a great intimidation - but Melisandre could feel the pure dragonfire that was the Dragon Queen. She was truly meant to bring the Dawn alongside the Prince that was Promised. “I proclaim Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen and Stark, First of her Name. Empress of the Targaryen Empire, Rightful Queen of Westeros. Mother of Dragons. Queen in the North and of Meereen. The Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Unburnt, the Breaker of Chains. Protector of the Realm and Valyria Reborn. Long may she Reign!”

“LONG MAY SHE REIGN!” Any reluctance to celebrate a ‘foreign born Targaryen’ had left the spirits of the lords of Westeros. Their new Empress drew the same intensity as their Emperor.

Letting out a deep breath, keeping her head steady with the crown threatening to tilt it one way or the other - she would have to get used to it - Daenerys turned to face her Emperor. Seeing him with his crown and imperial robes sent a surge of triumph through her at their shared achievement… as well as a shiver of desire. ‘So handsome, my regal dragonwolf.’ The glint of awe she saw in his grey eyes made her smile. He was just as captivated at her.

And next was their official wedding. The same shudder filled her as they stood side by side.

Stepping aside with a graceful nod to the Septon of Riverrun, Melisandre felt no shame or guilt at the potential betrayal of her Lord and her faith at acquiescing to the ceremony under the Seven. Jon followed the Old Gods, the majority of Westeros followed the Seven, and she did not know yet what Daenerys followed - her faith fractured and pliable at this point. This, in addition to their being bound as equal co-rulers of the new entity that was the Targaryen Empire, served as an olive branch to those they wished to rule. Joffrey Baratheon created a divine cult around himself. By marriage under the Seven, Jon and Daenerys rejected any claim to godhead. ‘But you shall see, Golden One,’ thought Melisandre with an inward smirk. ‘They are far closer to divinity than you will ever be.’

“Their Majesties come before the Gods and their subjects,” the Septon began, a quite youthful man having only recently been appointed. “Seeking to be bound. Who presents them?” Being the first of its kind - an Imperial wedding before two equally situated rulers - much was being promulgated at an ad hoc basis.

“I, Jaehaerys of Houses Stark and Targaryen, Third of My Name, present myself before Gods and Realm,” Jon stated, voice the decisive courage of the wolf.

“I, Daenerys of Houses Targaryen and Stark, First of My Name, present myself before Gods and Realm,” Daenerys followed, voice firm as Valyrian Steel. Both presented as true imperial monarchs.

Prayers and invocations to the Gods already pronounced at the beginning of the coronation, the Septon dove right into the meat of the ceremony. “Brought forth before the Seven are Emperor and Empress, both crowned with no superior of mortal flesh, only each other as equals. They seek not to pass under the protection of one or the other, but to be bound as one Imperial pair.” Sam and Aemon had scoured the latter’s texts on Old Valyria and its history, looking for ancient customs and traditions to integrate to a wedding which followed such a quintessential Valyrian coronation. And one had been discovered to replace the traditional cloaking by the groom. “Do their Majesties possess their rings?”

Eyes turning to each other, soft smiles and sparkling eyes filled with love, Jon and Dany’s gazes never left each other as Olly and Missandei stepped forward to present the small rings to them - Dany’s of gold and Jon’s of silver, the former emblazoned with a roaring dragon and the latter bearing the etching of a snarling wolf. A tradition as old as the first dragonriders but lost to history, last conducted by Aegon the Conqueror to his sister-wives. Each took their ring into trembling
hands. Already married under the Old Gods, the shared history of their ancestors nevertheless brought great emotion as they sought to reconnect with such long-lost glory.

“With these rings of precious metal, their Majesties symbolize their fidelity, shared honor, and mutual protection of each other until their last breath and continued in the afterlife. Connected straight to their hearts and soul are these promises.” In his research, Sam had dug up that the Valyrians placed such rings on a finger where a blood vessel connected straight to the heart. No better symbolism, and Dany had wondered many times since why such a tradition had died out.

Gulping, trying desperately to hide his shaking hands - the loving glint in his Empress’ eyes belying how she noticed and thought no less of him for it - Jon gently took Dany’s hand. “With this ring, I vow my eternal fidelity and protection.” Stroking the alabaster skin, he slipped the silver band onto her finger. “So that now, the fortitude of my House lays forever connected to thee.”

It took every ounce of Dany’s inner steel not to grab Jon’s cheeks and kiss him deeply. Instead, her barely disguised trembling hands took hold of Jon’s strong fingers. “I vow my eternal fidelity and protection.” There was no other, no person she knew that could hold a candle to Jon. She was marrying her soulmate, her equal and couldn’t be happier. “So that now, the power of my House lays forever connected to thee.”

"My lords, my ladies, we stand here in the sight of gods and men to witness the union of man and wife. Out of two great monarchs emerge one crown, one flesh, one heart, one soul, now and forever." Stepping forward from her perch on the wings of the front, owing her importance, Sansa presented to the Septon the same strip of cloth that she had knitted for them at their wedding in the Godswood. Smiling at her brother and sister-in-law, she received a non-regal warmth from each of them before she stepped back. "Let it be known," continued the Septon, "that Jaehaerys of Houses Stark and Targaryen, Third of His Name, and Daenerys of Houses Targaryen and Stark, First of Her Name, are one crown, one heart, one flesh, one soul. Cursed be he who would seek to tear them asunder." At that moment Jon and Dany extended their arms, an electric heat tingling down their limbs as they pressed them together. The Septon gently bound them with the cloth. "In the sight of the Seven, I hereby seal these two souls, binding them as one for eternity."

Turning towards the other, Jon took Dany’s hands in his. Heat passed through them, and he smiled as he heard her breath hitch. ‘Gods, she is so beautiful.’ When they met, he was but a bastard, and now he was the Emperor of what was to be much of the known world. He knew that his parents would be proud of him at this moment.

Placing his hands on their shoulders for a moment, the Septon smiled at the couple’s immense love for the other. It was clearly visible to all and quite refreshing. "Look upon each other and say the words."

Jon and Daenerys spoke simultaneously. "Father, Smith, Warrior, Mother, Maiden, Crone, Stranger..."

“I am hers…”

“I am his…”

“And she is mine…” His eyes darkened at the words.

“And he is mine... “ Her heart leapt in her chest.
“This day, until the end of my days,” they finished together, the weight of their crowns vanishing from notice as all they could see and feel were each other. Even in front of hundreds, it seemed as if no other interrupted the moment where their souls became one.

Reaching up to cup her cheek, composure wavering in an emotional display he cared not to cover up, Dany felt his thumb gently stroke the soft skin. She melted, closing her eyes to enjoy the touch. From the moment her brother broke and gave himself to the whispers of madness in his blood, he had taught her that so-called ‘weak’ emotion was vile. That no person of royal blood as ancient and august as the Targaryens should partake in it. Love was weak. Compassion was weak. In this, Daenerys knew her brother’s folly. Her love for Jon made her strong, made their rule stronger - combined with skill and strategy, they had the greatness that Viserys could never grasp.

Dany’s eyes fluttered open as Jon’s voice rang out. "With this kiss, I pledge my love.” Closing the little distance between them, Jon crashed his mouth against his wife, now twice married before the Old Gods and the Seven - the gods of his mother and the gods of his father, with the spirits of his great ancestors watching. And the love of his life in his arms.

“Those that were promised, united into the Long Night!” Resting in the center of the stage, Melisandre stretched out her arms as the flames illuminating the room suddenly burned a blazing heat. “They will bring the Dawn”

Robb drew Ice, pointed to the ceiling. “Bring the Dawn!”

“Bring the Dawn!” shouted Tyene Martell, dagger out.

“BRING THE DAWN!” the assembled shouted, cheers ringing and swords drawn high for the birth of the Targaryen Empire. Neither of their majesties noticed, lost in their passionate embrace.

Slamming the opposing arm down onto the table, Tormund rose in triumph as the Dothraki chief nursed the sore muscles and sorer ego. “Cannot beat the free folk!” With the coronation celebrations devolving through drink and merriment - on top of the battle celebration weeks before, many feasted as if this would be their last feast, which it would likely be for a long time - the wildling’s boasts at his strength led to a Vale knight challenging him to wrestle arms. Five bruised egos later and the ginger hadn’t yet been defeated. “Which one of you cunts is next?!?”

Daenerys laughed merrily as Edmure Tully threw his hat in the ring. “Oh he can’t possibly be serious,” Lady Catelyn remarked at her brother, currently stretching in preparation. The older lady rolled her eyes, but quickly averted them when her gaze fell on Ser Jorah. That puzzled Daenerys, but in her happiness she filed it away for later.

“Now, Lady Catelyn, he fought bravely in the battle.” She carved a small chunk of meat from the roast in front of her, enjoying the taste as the wrestling commenced. Shouts of laughter drew her attention away. A wide smile crossed her face as a slightly inebriated Emperor and his far more inebriated brother raced onto the floor, little Arya thrown over the shoulders of the former and Rhaegar over the shoulders of the latter - both the Crown Prince and Princess the picture of glee. ‘Oh, I love him so.’ Jon was such a good father.

Sansa leaned back, smiles infectious for anyone looking upon the happy scene. “To think that was once my brooding brother.” She chuckled as the twins tried their best to climb off the Emperor and Warden of the North. “I’ll have to say I like this side of him.”

“It’s heartening to see a ruler like this,” Margaery observed. It was true, the dignitas of a monarch did
not extend to openly showing either affection or unadulterated joy outside of private quarters. For Jon however, no one present thought less of him. “His prowess on the battlefield is unchallenged,” said the Rose of Highgarden for explanation.

“Dignitas is overrated,” huffed Sansa. “So many Kings have acted like mad tyrants or fallen down drunkards for it to matter. Jon knows what he’s doing and when a particular act is appropriate for what setting.”

A chorus of cheers rang out as Edmure was finally defeated, the Lord of Riverrun having given a spirited fight for the title. “Nice try, nephew!” shouted the Blackfish, smacking him on the back.

“My brother, Rhaegar,” Daenerys felt the need to clarify, given that one brother had been a good man rehabilitated in recent months while the other needed no introductions in the hall of Targaryen madness. “He allowed his prowess to speak for itself, while his gentle heart found constant exercise.” Given his popularity among the soldiers and ordinary smallfolk, Jon lived up to that standard - as did she if those in Meereen had anything to say. “Jon reminds me so much of him, or at least what I know of him.”

Sansa sighed. “He’s a good man, Daenerys. Kind like his father, and honorable like father… Ned Stark.”

“It’s good he has the Targaryen ruthlessness,” remarked Margaery. “Ned Stark, good man that he was, didn’t have the cunning needed in the game of thrones.”

A wan smile graced the Empress’ lips. “I’m glad he has me by his side. As hard as life has been on me, gives me the cunning to match Jon’s strategic thinking.”

“You two are perfect for each other,” observed Sansa. ‘I am happy for you brother.’

Dany opened her mouth to agree when two little bundles wrapped their arms around her waist. “Hi, muhna,” Rhaegar giggled, snuggling into his mother’s side. “You look pretty.”

She couldn’t help her joyous laugh. “Why thank you, handsome Prince. But isn’t it time to retire for the night?” Twin pouts graced their faces.

“None of that,” remarked the Emperor, containing his own laughter. “Go with your Uncle Robb, who also needs to get to sleep.” Miming the downing of a large flagon, the women laughed as the Warden of the North sent a rather unlordly gesture the Emperor’s way.

Standing, Margaery took the twins’ hands while moving to Robb. “In the interests of everyone, I’ll make sure the heirs and my betrothed both get to their chambers.” The engagement approved by Jon just a few days prior, it was by far the best match that could be had from a strategic standpoint - the obvious infatuation and love only sealed the deal.

Watching them leave, attention soon focused on the impromptu wrestling championship on the floor. “Let me have a try.” Several men hooted as the seductive form of Tyene Martell sauntered forward. Focused and precise, it was only thanks to having seen her that Daenerys knew that she had been drinking. “Or are you too weak to take on a woman.”

Tormund spat on the ground. “Free Folk women would chew and spit you out.” He readied himself.

As the drunkards began cheering, Jon shook his head. “I know Free Folk women, but I think Lady Martell can handle her own.” A small servant girl approached, bearing a tray of wine goblets. Jon took one, Daenerys took the other, while the Blackfish snatched the other, nearly falling over from his own drunkenness. The Emperor thought to recommend him to stop, but thought better of it. ‘Let
them enjoy themselves.

“Poor Tyene,” Tyrion opined, hiccuping.

“Poor Tormund. He loses this one,” Jon replied. As if prophetic, be it from the mead or skill on the part of his opponent, the hulking Wildling found his hand slam onto the oaken tabletop. Pumping her fist in the air to cheers, Tyene celebrated by downing another glass of wine. “I told you,” Jon laughed, catching the self-satisfied smiles of his womenfolk. Picking up his goblet to quench his thirst, he turned as someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Once letting down his walls and enjoying himself outside their private quarters - one of the rare times he ever did so - Dany felt dismay wash over her as a scowl formed on his face. Each moment that passed talking to Davos, Sansa, and the newly looped in Tyrion caused said scowl to harden. Her husband was back to his brooding, contemplative former self. Barking at the three advisors in a low but harsh whisper, he turned and glanced apologetically at her. “Dany…”

“Jon,” she interrupted, quiet for composure’s sake but still concerned. “What’s wrong?”

He sighed. “Nothing disastrous… or even problematic. A dispatch from King’s Landing - bearing the official seal of House Lannister.”

The Emperor’s scowl was soon mirrored on the Empress’ lips. “Not an official royal message, so it’s from Tywin himself. What does that slug want?” Knowing what she knew now, two people deserved her blame and hate for the fate of her family. Robert Baratheon the Usurper, now deceased, and Tywin Lannister.

“I need to read it myself.” Begging forgiveness with sad eyes, Jon reached out and brought Dany’s hand to his lips. The soft kiss shot warmth through the fair skin. Dany bit back a moan. “I must take your leave, my Empress. I’ll tell you everything tonight.” Casting her a longing look, Jon turned and made for the exit. Tyrion, Varys, and Davos followed, while Sansa gave Dany a small smile before joining the men.

Sighing, Daenerys leaned back on the high-backed chair. Despite being used to the stools and cushions that served as the thrones and dining seats in Meereen, she was grateful for the additional back support. “That’s why I never wanted to be a lady.” Almost jumping out of her skin, Dany’s head swiveled to find Jon’s other sister right alongside her. “Too much blither blather. Constrains a person, which was never me.”

“Do you have to do that?” she huffed, unable to resist a self-deprecating chuckle.

Arya grinned back. “Want some pointers? Your daughter is already quite good for her age.” Little Arya was quite the child, half the time looking like a proper lady while the other half was spent in the muck with a training sword. Arya was baffled at the former while the latter exasperated Sansa - Robb, busy training Rhaegar in the arts of chivalry, just found it amusing.

Hand drifting to Saracen on her hip - the one unladylike accessory to the flowing silk and wool of her coronation gown - Dany shrugged. “Perhaps.” Looking at the vaulted ceiling, Dany reached out for the unused goblet resting across from her.

By some stroke of providence, the divine hand of the Lord of Light, Arya’s gaze fell on the small build of the servant girl. The one that had last attended to the Imperial table. Tray gone from her hand, the narrowed Stark eyes fell on the soulless other pair that watched her Grace intently. For the slightest moment, such eyes twinkled a job near done. Closer yet off to the side, a hacking cough left the Blackfish. All others distracted by the celebration and revealing, only Arya noticed the small
droplet of crimson fly from the covered mouth of Brynden Tully.

Another jeweled goblet lay clutched in his hand. From the same tray as that which was brought to the Imperial table by the girl. The same one given to Jon that rested unused on the tabletop. The same that Daenerys was just about to touch to her lips.

Arya’s eyes widened. “NO!” The silver goblet clattered to the floor, having been a mere inch from Daney’s mouth before Arya shoved it to the stone below. Loud cry having resonated through the hall, the noise and merriment suddenly ceased as guests looked upon the sister of their Emperor with horrified and puzzled eyes. She had always been odd, but why erupt in such a flagrant breach of etiquette?

Such mortification and shock morphed into terror as Brynden Tully stumbled directly in front of Arya and the Empress. Bent over, blood poured from his mouth as he violently vomited onto the floor. Edmure and Catelyn rushed forward to their uncle, Tully knights and servants joining him. “I need a maester!” he yelled. The closest thing to one was Sam, who waddled forward in all haste.

Picking up Jon’s unused goblet, Arya brought the lip to her nose and sniffed. She quickly recoiled as if it burned her. “Nightshade.” Daenerys gasped, the knowledge of what Arya had saved her from a diving dragon slamming into her. As Sam tended to the Blackfish, out of the corner of her eye Arya saw the suspicious serving girl duck out through a side exit. “Stop!”

Legs pumping, leaping over tables and turning corners, the spacious hallways and stained glass windows passed by with a blur. The girl shot by, knocking over servant and guard alike in a mad dash. Arya ignored whatever twinge or throb filled the muscles, eyes focusing solely on the figure ahead of her. Her mind raced at the same velocity as she did. No mere servant could be this quick, this focused. A sinking feeling reached her gut.

A small overhang overlooked the rushing river. The splashes and flow of the current resonating through the aperture, it was here that Arya found her quarry. Needle was out before she even ground to a halt. “Stay where you are, and you won’t be hurt.” Anger coursing through her veins at the near loss of her brother and her new sister, Arya forced an impassive line to stretch on her lips. “His Grace will determine your fate.”

Not a word came from the girl - only a hand pulling back what appeared to be… With a turn of the head Arya came face to face with a ghost of her past. “A girl cannot save them,” the Waif teased with a bare shade of a smirk. “The Many-faced God always gets his offering.” Leaping into the void, the last trace of her Arya Stark found were the ripples of the black water below…

For now at least.

Every moment of happiness… every joyous event in Jon’s life had to be ruined by the same actor. Whether directly or through proxies - however tenuous the connection - the meddling hands of Tywin Lannister were involved in all. “When did this message arrive?”

“During the ceremony, your Grace,” replied Davos. I was informed as soon as it concluded, but…”

“Why the hells wasn’t I informed?!” the Emperor snarled back. Gods, he wished he was in his leather tunic. The thick robes were suffocating. Letter clutched in his hand, Jon’s fist crumpled the parchment in anger and frustration.

Jon Snow,
Your attempted usurpation of the throne would normally demand your head and the head of your wife the Dragon Queen. However, for the interests of peace and harmony among the Seven Kingdoms, I am sending my daughter - the Queen Mother Cersei - under a banner of truce to discuss an accord.

Tywin Lannister, Hand to the Divine Chimera

“He wished to elaborate with myself, your Majesty,” said Varys, face nonchalant and ever so guarded. “My Little Birds have generally been quiet, but one did indicate a considerable military force had landed in King’s Landing while another departed Highgarden.”

Jon deflated slightly. “He doesn’t have the might to challenge us, but had we attacked King’s Landing after the battle we could have been surrounded like Renly.” Providence had shone on them, justifying his decision to hold and rest after the victory at Riverrun. He turned to Tyrion. “Your father sending your sister… what does that mean?”

Tyrion, standing by the window for the cold breeze to sober him up, furrowed his brows. “Joffrey would sooner die than allow you to rule one square mile of land in his Kingdom. My father has more tact but shares the same sentiment. Him sending Cersei means these negotiations are a sham… or he wishes to keep his own head safe from harm.” The Imp shrugged. “Either is possible.” Jon felt his already abysmal respect for House Lannister sink even lower. Aside from Jaime - his charge at Riverrun, however stupid, was at least courageous and bold - every member of that family proved themselves a coward.

“Your Majesty!” Out of breath, Ollie skidded to a halt and leaned against the wall. “Something happened in the hall.”

“Well… spill it out, boy!” Tyrion remarked gruffly, alcohol sapping his patience and the squires deep breaths annoying him.

Ollie composed himself, eyes focusing on Jon. “There was a poisoning attempt.”

Eyes widening, Sansa suppressed a gasp. “Joffrey? No, Tywin. Joffrey is too stupid to be this sneaky.” Was this a redux of the damn Red Wedding?

“We don’t know, but the Empress was the target.”

“What?” Jon felt his stomach knott. “Where is she?!”

“Sam took her to your quarters…” He didn’t manage to finish before Jon pushed him aside, rushing down the hallway.
The Lion's Death

Running his eyes along the Empress’ left arm, Sam was mildly surprised that the normally headstrong Daenerys Targaryen didn’t cajole and complain the whole time about what a waste it all was. She merely sat quietly at the edge of her bed with a faraway look on her face. Her hand trembled, and would have been far worse if it weren’t for Sam holding it. “Are you sure you didn’t spill any of it on your skin?” Primarily an irritant - rather destroyer - of the bowels, a mere drop of Nightshade on the flesh could end up causing intense pain at the very least.

“No,” she said in an almost whisper. “It spilled completely on the floor.” Dany’s face was a ghostly pale, the weight of what had happened holding her over like a shroud. Around them, Margaery, Gilly - holding the simple bag of equipment any maester or wannabe maester carried for Sam - and Missandei were equally worried and fearful. Arya, ever the tomboy of the group of women, lounged on a plush chair sharpening Needle. Right at the foot of the bed rested Ghost, while on the bed perched Sansenya, both protecting their mother. The other two hatchlings rested at the foot of each of the twins’ beds while their older brothers flew above the castle. “Is he… Ser Brynden…”

A loud bang caused everyone to flinch. One hand gripping Ice’s hilt, Robb withdrew the other fist from where it slammed into the table. “Yes… motherfucking cunts!” Anger poured over him in waves. Grey Worm, perched quietly near the door, merely simmered in equal but less conspicuous intensity. “Mother and Uncle Edmure were with him when he slipped away. Fucking Lannisters!”

“Are you sure it was them?” asked Margaery. Her eyes flickered to the nursery where the twins slept unaware of the death clouding Riverrun. She worried for her family, and once Robb and she were married they would be her family as well. “There are no share of persons that wish harm to the Starks and Targaryens.”

“None would be this brazen - pulling an assassination at a wedding, that’s Tywin fucking Lannister’s speciality!” Seeing he was ready to murder someone, understandably given the death of Talisa Stark under circumstances partly similar, Margaery stood and gently enveloped him in an embrace. Gradually, the anger began to leech out of him.

Suddenly the door threw open, knob slamming into the stone wall. “DANY!” Eyes wide with pulsing fear, blood cold as ice, Jon ignored all as he searched out his wife. Zeroing in on her, Sam luckily scrambled out of the way before the panicked Emperor could shove him to the side as an obstacle between him and his beloved. “Dany!” He scooped her up in his arms, squeezing tightly as if she would disappear if he ever let go.

The bone-crushing embrace ripped Dany from her fearful haze. Breathing in Jon’s distinct scent and hearing his gravelly, rasping voice, she both melted and broke composure. “Oh Jon.” Daenerys buried her face into his neck, fighting sobs as she reassured herself that he was here and she was safe. Their father returning, Ghost whined, nudging him while Sansenya chirped.

Not letting go, Jon turned to Sam. “Please… is she alright, Sam?”

“Perfectly, your Majesty.” Smiling slightly, Sam was glad that he could unquestioningly tell his friend and ruler such good news. He continued just as Sansa arrived to the chambers. “Thanks to Lady Arya knocking over the cup, none of the poison touched her lips.”

“Arya?” Sansa looked at her with confusion. “You knew it was poison?”

The wild wolf shrugged. “I saw uncle Brynden acting strangely, sickly.” Omitting the fact about the
Waif’s behavior out of instinct, she continued. “Could have been indigestion, but I wasn’t going to take that chance with our Daenerys. She’s part of the pack.” Her face fell. “I pursued the girl but she got away… professional assassin.”


Glancing over Dany’s shoulder, Jon looked at his younger sister with new eyes. ‘Thank you,’ he mouthed. Normally one to shrug off praise, Arya couldn’t help but be perked up by it.

Not letting go of his wife, her face now buried in his chest, Jon looked over at Barristan and Jorah. “I don’t care who it was right now. Double the guards on all the Imperial quarters. Every door, window, and fucking latrine hole needs to be patrolled.”

“I have already seen to it, your Majesty,” Jorah replied.

“Grey Worm. The Unsullied are in charge of manning the battlements. Let no one in unless you search them down to bare skin.” Lips pursed in a determined line, the Unsullied commander nodded. Jon looked to his left. “Sam, are you sure she will be alright?” At the portly semi-maester’s nod, Jon gestured to the others. “Leave us. Now.” Barking authoritatively, the others slowly proceeded out of the room.

Eyes worn and chest threatening to burst as she looked upon the scene of her beloved brother embracing her new sister tightly, the truth of the attacker was at the tip of her tongue. But it died there. Something inside her told Arya to keep it close to her chest. Hanging her head, she turned and left for her quarters.

Ser Barristan closing the door behind him after one saddened glance back at his two wards, it was just Jon and Dany. “Oh, Dany…”

Kissing Jon’s chest through the formal tunic, Dany reached down to tangle her fingers with his. “Jon, don’t. I’m fine.” Leaning up to look in his panicked eyes, she kissed him sweetly, washing away his fear and her shell shock. Lips tingling from his amazing touch, the Targaryen Empress gently removed his coronation cloak and rested it on the table. “Come, sit by me.” Lowering herself to sit at the edge of the bed, Dany patted the place to her left. She rested her head on his shoulder as he sat down. “What did Tywin Lannister say in his message?”

Jon sighed. “He’s sending his daughter Cersei as part of a delegation to parlay with us. To seek an accord to bring ‘harmony’ to Westeros.” His tone left no doubt as to how he judged the Grey Lion’s sincerity.

“Harmony my ass,” Dany spat. “He’s only sending his daughter because he’s too much of a coward to face us himself.”

“That’s what Tyrion said.” He kissed her head, nuzzling the silver locks. “The Spider told us that his birds found troop movements building strength in the south… that confirms what Brienne told me.”

Daenerys looked up at him, puzzled. “Brienne?”

“I sent her and Gendry on a ranging mission to overwatch King’s Landing. The reports have been… disturbing. Joffrey… he’s worse than Ramsay or Viserys. I’m not saying that lightly.”

Fists clenching, Daenerys felt dragonfire coursing through her. “They’re all the same, crushing others under their wheel for their own hunger for power.” She would destroy them all, and together with
Jon rebuild a better world from the broken ruins of the old.

Not wanting to hurt Dany with what he would say next, Jon knew he had to. “I agree, which is why I have to go myself.” Dany’s head whipped at him, mouth open. “You have to trust me on this, my dragon. There’s something going on. Something sinister. Brienne implies that there’s someone on the inside in King’s Landing, and I have to investigate.” Smiling softly, he kissed her head. “I’ll take Rhaegal with me. I’ll come back to you, I promise.”

Deflating with the exhaustion of the day, Dany leaned into him. “Alright.” An Emperor had his duty, as an Empress had hers. If it meant risk, then they had to make the gamble. Wordlessly, he rose and helped her down, draping the furs over her before heading to check on the twins.

Lying there without a word, Dany felt cold. Under the furs, despite the fire, a deep northern chill invaded her bones. She hated it. Hated feeling vulnerable, to feel the same as the scared young girl abused by her brother and dominated by a Dothraki horse lord. Now, the name Daenerys Targaryen was feared worldwide, revered worldwide. Wonders no one ever thought possible were accomplished and erected by her - but something as unremarkable as a cup of wine nearly destroyed the great Dragon Queen.

Mind clouded with her thoughts of death and destruction, Dany did not notice Jon returning from the twins’ room until his hand rested on her shoulder. “Sleep, my Queen. Rest.” He attempted to leave but was stopped by her hand gripping his wrist.

“Please.” Hating the vulnerability that coursed through her, wishing to be the all powerful Dragon Queen that both rained dragonfire upon her enemies and confidently seduced her husband, Daenerys still needed him. “Please hold me, Jon.” Across the entire collection of people that advised her and protected her and served her, only her Emperor and love had the honor of accessing her innermost fears and pain. She needed him, and shockingly didn’t feel any less for it.

Smiling, Jon climbed into bed behind her. Worry and apprehension pitting in his stomach, he closed his eyes and allowed Dany’s soft skin to calm him. Tomorrow would be grueling, but tonight he at least had her by his side.

“This new alliance with Qarth could pay huge dividends, my Lord.” Shifting his eyes from the line of vehicles assembled, Qyburn licked his lips. “Fire when ready,” he ordered calmly.

When the high-pitched shrieks echoed along the still landscape, Tywin Lannister didn’t flinch. He kept his spyglass trained on the distant ridge. “They certainly sound terrifying.” An enemy army would be filled with terror at the noise.

Each of the ten horse-drawn carts contained ten rail launchers, horses neighing and whining from their hitching posts several yards behind in fear as the jets of flame shot into the sky. Arcing across the concrete-grey clouds, the rockets lanced toward the ‘enemy’ positions. One hundred warheads detonated one after the other, a raging inferno consuming the ridge specifically chosen as the test site three hundred yards away. Tywin felt a blast of heat waft against his skin - nothing could survive this.

The blasts began to slack off. “Reload!” screamed the battery commander, the dozens of hastily impressed trebuchet operators and Qarthian engineers scrambling to place the second load of rockets onto the launch rails.

“Theodosius Caryn has his gunpowder firing tubes and his paymaster Daenerys Targaryen has her
dragons, but this will both rule the battlefield and defeat the flying beasts.”

“Hopefully,” Tywin grumbled, bringing the spyglass to his eye. “For your sake.” The words were drowned out by the roars of the second volley.

Some time later, the inferno had died down. Launch carts were silent, horse-tenders hitching the animals to the vehicles to begin the trek back to King’s landing - tarps covering the specialty weapons. Picking through the blacked soil, flickering flames still clinging to clumps of grass and bramble, Tywin shifted his gaze on the test subjects. In the various wooden cages where old and crippled slaves had been chained, their charred bodies laid lifeless in various poses of panic and pain. Some wore metal armor. Some wore leather armor. Some were bare except for bannerman tunics. All but a few were dead.

Qyburn covered his mouth and nose with a cloth, blocking out the stench of overcooked human flesh. “They are potent anti-personnel weapons,” he remarked. Screams and gurgled moans resonated in the background, Lannister guards running swords through the survivors.

“Yes, they are.” Tywin peered into the distance. “But would they hurt dragons?”

“There are the metal caps King Xhoan provided us. Coupled with the scorpions, I have no doubt we have the most potent defenses against her beasts.”

“Good.” As he was about to head to his horse, the Master of Whisperers grabbed him by the wrist. “My Lord, the little birds tell a peculiar rumor about our enemies. About two bastards in particular.”

Tywin raised an eyebrow. “Rumors? About the bastard Snow?” The queer glint in Qyburn’s eyes intrigued him. “Go on.”

Gusts of cold air slamming into him in a constant stream, Jon effortlessly gripped the spines on Rhaegal’s back as the green dragon beat his wings. Heavy cloud cover masked their approach to the outskirts of the capitol - the towering mass of the great pyramid of the Chimera shrouded by the wispy grey towers. A thud shook Rhaegal’s body as he landed in a small clearing, shrouded by trees. Perfect to hide something big from notice.

Jon slid down expertly, quickly walking to where his dragon rested his snout. “Shhhh.” The Emperor gently stroked Rhaegal’s snout. “Relax, boy. You have to stay quiet.” Turning at muttered curses and prayers, he couldn’t help but chuckle at Davos. The Imperial Hand plopped on the ground, legs shaking and face as pale as a ghost. “And here I thought you had steady legs.”

“Steady sea legs, yes. Dragonback legs…” Davos trailed off, falling on his ass on the ground. “Give me a minute.”

Laughing merrily, Jon turned back to Rhaegal. The dragon stared at him with deep eyes, slit-like pupils sparkling with… mirth. “Yes, I know, boy,” he smiled, the dragon showing his affection by nuzzling Jon’s chest with his massive snout. “Stay here and rest. We’ll head back to your mother soon, alright?” Yawning, the dragon curled his neck and plopped on the ground. Jon smiled as he drifted off to sleep. ‘Gods know I want to be doing that with Dany in my arms.’

Two quick flashes of light caught his attention. “Brienne?” As per the prearranged signal, the tall knight emerged from the brambles, blacksmith’s apprentice by her side - to her, he was far less entertaining but a better fighter than Podrick, though she hoped the lad was coming of age out in Essos. “Your Majesty,” she knelt.
“Get up.” Jon rolled his eyes. “I’m just Jon, here. Where is your camp?”

“Deeper in the woods, hidden from cover so that anyone atop the pyramid can’t spot us. Our observation position is just on the edge of the treeline.”

“Any further contact with our men on the inside?” It had been in cipher, but Brienne’s dispatches back to Riverrun had clearly indicated they had unexpected allies inside.

She nodded. “Aye, and she got out to us.”

“She?” Jon’s confusion was short-lived when a young woman emerged from the bushes. Shrinking back slightly, her bearing was noble but peeking out from under long tresses was the distinctive mottled scar - greyscale. The girl had been lucky, or unlucky rather. Jon felt for her.

A gasp came from behind him. “Shireen?” Davos’ eyes were wide.

The girl’s hesitant gave way to a beaming smile. “Ser Davos.” The familiar face welcome after years of loneliness following her father and mother’s death, she ran to him with open arms.

While his Hand reconnected with his former ward and friend, Brienne turned to Jon. “Shireen Baratheon. Stannis’s daughter,” Brienne answered matter-of-factly. “She was the courier between us and the slave pens where our contacts reside.” The Emperor couldn’t help but smile. Davos had talked about her quite a lot. “She was our conduit to the contacts inside. Apparently the remnants of the Brotherhood Without Banners hid in plain sight from the Lannisters.” Fighting them by being spies for the Empire was far more effective than as guerrillas.

“Hold up.” Jon was confused. “Who are the Brotherhood Without Banners?”

“I can fill you in, your Majesty.” Jon shifted his eyes to Gendry, prospective claimant to the Baratheon lordship and Arya’s new betrothed. Jon liked him… somewhat - any intended for his sister was going to get close, taxing scrutiny from him. “I was among them for a while, when Arya and I were fleeing Harrenhal.” Folding his hands, Jon waited for him to start.

“I cannot believe she’s alive,” Davos remarked, still in shock. “With Stannis dead, and Melisandre and I heading to King’s Landing. I thought she and her mother would be safe in Dragonstone with Stannis’ loyal troops. I would have figured Renly would sack the place.” He spat.

“She’s alive,” Jon replied. “That’s what counts. The few innocents we have left.” Hours later, the two of them were perched in Brienne’s hiding place, a small den at the edge of the forest covered with brambles and vines. Across the vast desert of animal and human bones stretched the entire capitol city - the beating heart of Joffrey’s horrid domain. “Damn, how many people has that cunt chained up?” Throngs of people, more than he could count in a lifetime, trudged up the ramp with massive stones attached to the ropes they pulled. Further thousands swarmed the pyramid like ants, cutting and carving, while guards were everywhere. The whole city was as armed camp, both at the walls and among the innards. Attacking it wouldn’t be easy.

“Our people inside say it has to be around three hundred thousand. Dornish, Ghiscari, Volantians, and Andal bondservants.”

“On top of the actual residents of the city.” It just seemed so… nonsensical. “What does Joffrey wish to accomplish?”

Davos shrugged. “He’s a vicious idiot as Tyrion said. Can’t rationally digest a mad mind.”

Nodding at the logic behind the statement, Jon centered the spyglass back on the red keep.
Contrasting from the bustling city, the iconic center of the Seven Kingdoms seemed almost deserted by comparison. The only motion he could spot were the Goldcloaks, spears in hand and manning various scorpion emplacements in the towers - similar to the city gates. “Davos, you were from Flea Bottom, correct?”

“Aye, your Majesty,” said his hand, spyglass pointed towards said part of the city. “Best point of entrance would be there. If the Lady Shireen is correct about the slave pens, we can reach it without crossing any of the main avenues.”

“It would have to be at night, of course.” He looked at his Hand. “Any chance we can avoid the walls?”

Davos grinned at him. “Sire, you don’t grow up in this shithole without knowing every way out of it.” The Emperor couldn’t argue with that.

Lights snuffed out and blinds shut in the windows overlooking one of the side avenues in the darkened and quiet city - it only quieted down at night, but outside of peacetime such rare tranquility in Westeros’ only true metropolis was shattered constantly. Be it the moans of starving smallfolk, the cacophony of food riots, the roaring artillery and clashing of steel as Renly threw his men at the gates… and the clatter of the 3rd Lannisport Landsknechts as they marched up the cobblestone avenues from the port to the military camp north of the city.

“Magnificent aren’t they?” Kevan Lannister said from his mount. “The men that made Dorne howl.”

Staring at the maze of stars in the night sky, Jaime tensed at a flutter of motion to his right. The sudden palpitations in his chest slowed. ‘Just a curtain being drawn.’ Morose filled him. Boyhood dreams of being a dashing knight beloved and renown by all evaporated into a reality of infamy and loathing. The city’s fear of their rulers was the only emotion that outpaced the hate. “So were our men at Riverrun, and Daenerys Targaryen’s dragons and Unsullied cut them to pieces.” A shiver coursed through him, the feel of heat on his back from the green beast. It had been nearly an hour before Bronn felt it safe to haul him to shore, far away from the battlefield. “And now we’ll have to face the Dothraki as well.”

Uncle Kevan waved him off. “Tygett may have been a good knight, but a tactician he was not. We know what the enemy is made of now, and the Dragon Bitch will not have the same advantage, mark my words.” As if punctuating the sentence, the men’s halberds all glinted in the moonlight - Kevan was right. It was magnificent to look at.

On the tactical side, Jaime eyed his uncle warily. Not as one-mindedly ambitious as Tywin or arrogant as Tygett, Kevan was the epitome of a cultured noble. Cousin Ansel’s religious conversion killed much of the Lannister fire within him, but he retained a top notch military mind - if not to the same caliber as Jon Snow, or Jaime’s father. ‘If he’s not worried then they must have something up their sleeve.’ Father was always scheming. ‘And now she’s…’ Jamie calmed himself. Cersei may have been hated in the Stark camp, but Jon Snow was rumored to be as honorable as his father. They wouldn’t disturb a flag of truce.

Another flash of… something, to his left this time caught Jaime’s eye. Seeing nothing, a foreboding and… familiarity drew the former Kingsguard to urge his horse to trot to the piss-stained alleyway. He narrowed his eyes, peering into the darkness.

“What are you doing, nephew? Spot something?”
Hearing nothing over the steady march of the Landsknechts, Jamie ignored his feeling. “Nothing. Probably rats.”

A chuckle left the elder man’s lips. “What did you expect in a narrow alley? Doubt there are Targaryen dragons there.” Rolling his eyes at his uncle’s easing, Jamie cast another look into the darkness before riding back to the column.

Hand clasped over Gendry’s mouth, his brother in law to be’s eyes shut tight, Jon released a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding as the sound of marching feet grew fainter and fainter in the distance. “I thought they’d never leave,” he exhaled in a harsh whisper.

“I’m… I’m sorry, your Majesty…” He was silenced with a gesture of the hand. Jon didn’t begrudge the man who stole his sister’s heart for accidentally tripping on a glass bottle. He would seek to brain him with Longclaw and let him bleed to death if he either dishonored Arya or gave away their position. As Davos put it, they were in the Lion’s Den.

Clutching his warhammer as Jon clutched his sword, the two of them dashed towards Davos and Brienne as they waited two hundred yards down the alley. The climb through the tunnels and the dash through the Flea Bottom slums filled with shit and stale mead had brought them to their destination - feet sliding silently over the dirt, they reached the makeshift wall that divided the slave pens from the rest of the city. “Took you long enough,” Davos hissed.

“We were detained,” the Emperor told his Hand. He pointed at the small tunnel under the wall. It looked fresh. Wordlessly, he scrambled under it.

Brienne was waiting on the other side, flanked by two Westrosi… and hundreds of slaves. Dornish, Westerosi bondservants, imported Essosi of all colors, the collected dregs that built Joffrey’s monuments rested in the giant beast cage on sand floors and scattered cots. “Your Majesty.” A balding man, tufts of wild hair ringing a shiny cranium, extended his hand. “Thoros of Myr at your service. Knight of the Seven Kingdoms and Red Priest.”

“He belongs to the brotherhood without banners,” Brienne offered as an explanation. “Along with Beric Dondarrion here, they have the information about Joffrey’s plans.”

Before Jon could inquire further a large man with a rather large burn scar sidled up to the lady knight - Sandor Clegane. Having only seen him for one short period when Robert Baratheon visited Winterfell, the man’s face was hard to forget. And he looked angry. “You dare show up here, cunt?” Face to face with Brienne, the Hound looked like he could explode in a homicidal rage any moment. “Here to finish the job?”

“Easy there, friend,” Beric interjected. “We’re all comrades here…”

“Shut it. The lady and I have unfinished business.” He grinned toothily.

Brienne narrowed her eyes. “Not particularly, but the future state of your life is up to you.” Her hand rested on her sword, daring the unarmed, unarmored former Kingsguard to try anything.

Snarl on his lips, it morphed into a slick smile as he laughed. “You have a set, lady.” Looking over her shoulder, Sandor’s eyes widened. ‘The fuck? “You’re still alive?”’ Gendry rolled his eyes, shrugging as he glanced over at the Hound. “I thought the little cunt had a fighting chance, but expected you’d be worm chow in a fucking ditch a long time ago.”

A dark scowl crossed the normally placid Gendry. “That’s my betrothed you’re talking about, dog.” To the boy’s surprise the former Kingsguard chortled. “Now that I did fucking expect.”
While the others had their own special reunion, Thoros led Jon and Davos through the throng of slaves and prisoners. Most seemed to be listless and nurse what was obviously intense fatigue - in many cases actual wounds and cuts from the overseers - while others watched over the newly-crowned Emperor with curiosity. “It’s just around here,” the Red Priest motioned to a patch of sand undisturbed by the mingling slaves.

Suddenly a large built-man showed up, skin the color of sun-baked brick. He began barking in Ghiscari, gesturing angrily. Jon only understood the tone as Thoros bantered back with him, the man’s tone growing from angry to fearful. Words like “Chimera” and “Faith Militant” were banded about, Jon gathering the gist.

“Quiet.” The cluster of slaves parted to reveal a lithe woman in red rags. Her skin was a flawless tan, hair black as night. Striding determined to Jon, Thoros bowed as she clasped his cheeks. “You have come,” she said in the common tongue. “The Prince that was Promised has returned to this earth.”

Having heard the same from Melisandre many times, the mystic tone and wild set of her eye discomfited Jon. “Who, who are you?”

“I am Kinvara, Head Priestess of the one true faith and the Lord of Light’s humble servant.” A member of the red clergy, same as Thoros or Melisandre. “And you are Emperor Jaehaerys, once known as Jon Snow of House Stark.” At his disbelief, she smiled. “The Lord of Light shows many things, and in due time he will show you your path.”

Jon narrowed his eyes. “My path is taking the Iron Throne from Joffrey, and Thoros said he had information on him. Information that would be of service to the cause of removing him.” Growing impatient, he cared not for the mystics and their shadowy secrets. “Show me, or I shall leave. I do not have time for games.”

Nodding, Kinvara - clearly in charge as the Essosi and even most of the Dornish deferred to her motioned to several men. They hurried in to scoop away clumps of sand to reveal a trap door. Inside was a reed mat, and a young woman resting on it. She was in terrible shape, obviously abused. “The Chimera uses only certain types of servants. No one but a small few can look at his bare form, or any bit of form at all. He began seeking out young girls several years ago, and had his Grand Maester blind them with special poisons.” Taking a look, Jon saw that she was indeed without working eyes. He felt horrified - it was worse than Ramsay. “Ask your questions. I will translate for you.”

Shifting from Kinvara to the girl and then back to Kinvara, Jon began. “What goes on in the Red Keep?” Even Varys’ little birds had very little information about the inner sanctums of the Lannister kingdom.

Blinking two clouded, unseeing eyes, the crippled bodyservant began speaking in fluid, high-pitched High Valyrian. Faster than Jon could follow with his limited knowledge of the language of his ancestors. Kinvara though, translated without hesitation about Joffrey. His former handmaid confirmed a picture of a mad tyrant that styled himself a god, shot to a plane far more grotesque and psychopathic than even Sansa described from when she had been kept at the Capitol. Of one where his delusions were reinforced by many, and only just barely controlled by Tywin. “But as much as they clash, they share the same goal,” Kinvara finished.

“Goal?” Jon had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“The god-King speaks a lot of the land to the south, across the sea where the dragons once roamed.” Essos. Kinvara stumbled her words a bit. Formerly a slave, memories of her past life flashed through her mind before she composed herself. ‘Not now. The promised needs you.’ “He sees it as a tragedy that the Kings of the past ended human bondage. It is his deepest desire to extend it to all the lower
beings in the Seven Kingdoms.”

A scowl fixed itself to Jon’s mouth. “I shouldn’t be shocked.” He, Dany, and their armies were all that stood in Joffrey’s way of enslaving the whole of Westeros. “How does he intend to accomplish this? The people would never consent to submit themselves.”

“Many already have,” the handmaid replied through the priestess. Pale, gaunt, she looked like a wraith - the scars from mere months in Joffrey’s care covered her body. “Those that are brought to heel will be kept where they are, while he has plans for the others. Such as in the North.”

Ice leached into Jon’s veins. Suddenly, he felt as if the Night King had suddenly entered the room. “The North?” What came next shocked Jon to the very core...

Passing a small skin of water around, Gendry downed half of it in rapid gulps. Only to get a smack on the back of the head from Brienne. “Fuck, what was that for?” Arya always hit him harder, but he expected it from her.

“These people have nothing, don’t take more than you need.”

“Oh how generous of them,” laughed Beric. “We do have enough. Lannisters built this whole thing over a well.”

“We’re sorry for the whippings, forced labor, and human sacrifices. Here’s a well. Cunts.” He drained the skin. Suddenly, he stiffened. “Shhh,” he hissed at the others, cocking his ears. “They’re coming.”

Fighting the urge to collapse on the ground, legs wobbling, Jon steeled himself. “Is there any weakness? Anything that could destroy everything out from under him?” There was no more urgent goal in mind right now, for if Joffrey even began his ambitious monstrosity, then the moment the Night King breached the wall he would be unstoppable.

From the moment Kinvara translated, the handmaid peered into the nothingness that was her vision. “He has only talked once of what he fears. Said to the High Sparrow the details of a vision he has had many times. A vision that predicted his fall.” Furrowing his brows, Jon glanced at Kinvara, who shrugged. Visions in Joffrey’s mind could be madness, or could be the gods tormenting the scourge of the earth.

Kinvara addressed Jon directly “I’ve heard of this. It’s called qrimbrôzagon, a great curse. The Lord of Light was known to do this to the greatest threats to life. To dawn. But it is only a legend.”

“We have to go, the guards are coming for their midnight patrol,” Thoros whispered, gesturing to some of the slaves to move the handmaid back to her chamber.

The men gingerly placing the poor soul back into the hidden chamber in the ground, Jon leaned in close with his final question. He couldn’t let it end without knowing. “And what is this vision he is afraid of?” Anything that brought Joffrey to terror could be of use in the future.

Muffled whispers followed that Kinvara struggled to translate. Her lips pursed. At Jon’s searching look, she sighed. “I’m sorry, great Prince. I did not recognize what she said. Something about the… Mark of the Lightbringer.”

“Mark of the Lightbringer?” Jon registered his confusion.

Before the red priestess could continue, Brienne pulled him back. “You better have gotten what you came for,” she hissed in a low whisper. “Because we have to go.” Hauled back to the exit, sounds of
overseers and guards approaching the main gate to the slave pen, Jon reflected on what he had heard. While it confirmed Joffrey and Tywin were bigger monsters that he had thought, much left more questions than answers.
Parlay

Low candlelight cast a dark orange glow over the inner chamber. Rough stone walls surrounded the large room, adorned with ceremonial crossbows, golden ornaments, and the finest tapestries depicting bloody battles from eons past - directly across from the massive canopy bed was the newest piece in the palace collection. A gory and idealized depiction of the Battle of Blackwater Bay, the King himself the center of the action in his noble quest to destroy his evil uncle. Decoration was lush, but had a dark, dusky hue that invited a foreboding sense to wash over any visitor. However rare one would be.

Truth be told, this windowless cell of a room was not supposed to house the official ruler of the Seven Kingdoms. It had once been a storage facility, housing various arms and weapons during the Targaryen dynasty and thereafter repurposed for Robert Baratheon to be the trophy room - a place where he could marvel at all his victories and gallant actions in his old age and corpulent frame. Those trophies were cleared out, shuttled off to Storm's End for Lord Tommen's use. And it was here that Joffrey moved, parts of his mind not shot with a megalomaniacal lust for power nor a deluded sense of godhead were hopelessly lost in paranoia. Fearing assassination. Fearing demons. Fearing the wrath of the divine if any speck of sunlight touched his bare flesh, he retreated from the airy quarters of the King to here.

A perfect inner sanctum for this particular King.

Standing beside the King, the blind servant kept her head low while holding the gold plate with his Grace's dinner. Thin fingers lifting the greasy drumstick to his lips, Joffrey slowly nibbled on the flesh of the gamehen. Unlike himself a mere fifth of a lifetime ago, the years of self imposed solitude had left only a hunger for power within him. Food didn't interest him much, the potions and concoctions whipped up by Qyburn keeping him steady and mind driven to the end goal.

‘They are all scum,’ Joffrey thought. Closing his eyes, the pale lids exposed the true size of the bags underneath them - a dark black ring not usually seen in persons under fifty years of age. His servants usually covered it up with the face paint of capital nobility, but not in the inner sanctum. ‘All swine, leeching off me to get to the top.’ He had secluded himself since his grandfather arrived, showed him his folly. No more. ‘I am their god. I shall be a proper god.’ A proper god did not show himself to mortals.

Half eaten, he snarled and dumped the remainder on the plate. “I'm finished with this!” Smacking the blind girl upside the head, Joffrey noticed a figure in the corner and smirked. “Here, fool, enjoy your dinner!” With a weak pitch of the arm, he tossed the bone halfway to where his plaything sat.

Scrambling, Dontos Hollard grabbed the scraps in his hands. He was aware of the animal-like degradation he allowed himself to engage in, but at this point only survival mattered. “All thanks, all highest,” he choked, devouring whatever was left.

Laughing weakly, Joffrey watched as someone entered the room. He stood, the gauze shielding him from the outside world only slightly obscuring Tywin Lannister from view. The older man keeled, covering his hands with his face. “All Highest, I grace thee for a word.”

Shroud covering his bare face, Joffrey nodded. “Please, grandfather. Say your piece.” Watching the former knight scavenge like a dog had put the King into a good mood.

“Everything is prepared to expand your domains in Essos, all Highest.” If Tywin bore any anger at having to act like a supplicating hermit, it was being hidden well. He learned quickly how to mask
one’s true feelings - it had to be done in such a manner in the court of the Mad King Aerys.


Tywin ignored the outburst. Muttering a curse from behind his fingers, the Hand to the King suppressed the urge to reach forth and strangle his grandson. “Your Master of Whisperers relayed information that may be of some interest to you, all Highest.” Remembering the events of the first year of Joffrey’s reign, amusement filled him at the future outburst. “Gendry Waters is alive and in the camp of Jon Snow.”

“Gendry Waters? Why would someone with a cunt name as that interest me?”

“He is the bastard son of Robert Baratheon.” Great pleasure coursed through him at seeing the youthful form tense up from behind the curtains. “One that slipped through Janos Slynt’s fingers all those years ago when you ordered his bastards killed.”

Staggering back to his chair, an unseen vice clenching his chest, Joffrey felt the foreboding chill fill the room. ‘The Lord of Light, the previous son.’ The spectral image of Robert Baratheon pulled aside the gauzy fabric, eyes a haunting blue. Blue as ice. ‘His rule will win, his time soon come.’

“No, it’s not true!” Joffrey flailed, tossing goblets and plates - priceless gold inlaid with rubies and emeralds - at the specter. They passed through him like a shroud of smoke. “The son of my predecessor will never take me!” His predecessor as King… Robert Baratheon.

Blood trickled down the ghostly Robert’s mouth. ‘Woman born of storm, fair of eye. The golden face she sees, a realm divide.’ He gripped Joffrey’s hand. It burned from the cold. “I will kill her! She will never come!”

‘The mark of the warrior, branded by one employed. One god she crowns, one god destroyed.’

Exiting the room to the sounds of his grandson’s angry screams - undoubtedly venting his terror and frustration on his servants or that drunkard of his - Tywin sighed. If his existence didn’t serve a purpose, the man that made Dorne howl would have killed the vicious idiot. ‘Useless scum that Tyrfion is, he always had a way with words.’ He felt no guilt about not divulging the entirety of Qyburn’s report. There was no need for him to know that tidbit as of now.

All was a mere means to an end - an end where he would be the actual ruler of the known world.

The sun was bright that day. A cloudless sky unobstructed the warming rays upon the white-blanketed landscape surrounding Riverrun castle. Burnt-out husks of massive siege engines and piles of corpses - wearing the sigils of the Combined Army and Army of the Divine Chimera alike - that marred the flood plains following the great clash here had been removed. Idyllic. Serene. Ominous.

Gently stroking Lyanarys' head, Dany exhaled to steady herself. She wished that Jon were here by her side - as she always longed for her husband whenever they were apart - but the regal nobility that draped over her like a shroud shone for all to see. Clad with crown on her silver locks and in the black leather battledress, emblazoned in front with the combined dragon/direwolf of the Imperial House, the Dragon Empress remained as intimidating as ever. Only on dragonback could the effect be magnified further.

“Remember children,” she heard Sansa tell Arya and Rhaegar. “Do not speak unless addressed, and if you are, do not say anything but the bare minimum. We cannot give the Lannisters any information
in which to hurt us.”

“You can trust me, Aunt Sansa,” replied Arya. Glancing over, Daenerys felt her heart warm at seeing her twins. Rhaegar wore a miniature version of Jon’s leather armor, red-lined black cloak modeled after those worn by the Night’s Watch draped over his shoulders. Next to him, the taller forms of Sansa and her namesake behind to steady them, Arya wore an ice blue northern dress - combined with her fair Valyrian features, she looked like ice manifested. Every inch the future of the Imperial line. Pride surged through Dany at their regal bearing.

“Tyrion?” Rhaegar asked, poking around to catch a glimpse of the Imp on Dany’s other side.

Her Hand met the Crown Prince’s gaze. “Yes, my Prince?” He smiled - the Imperial children couldn’t help but cause joy in the ranks of their parents. Several different regiments among the North, Dothraki, and Free Folk had already ‘adopted’ them among their ranks.

“You are a Lannister, right?”

Tyrion cast a sad smile to Daenerys. “Yes, my Prince. I am of Lion birth, raised in Casterly Rock.”

Looking at each other, the twins pondered it. “Since Cersei is as smart as you, I believe she’d see reason,” Arya finally said.

“I sure hope so, dear Princess.” Tyrion sighed, a feeling shared by Dany and her sisters. “I’m afraid she and I never had as close a relationship as you and the Crown Prince.” Smart as they were, the twins were still quite innocent. Hence why Jon, Robb, and Arya were training them in arms and why she was including them in meetings of state such as these. Childlike innocence was a priceless treasure, but those of high blood such as they tragically could not afford it.

Before either twin could respond, a troop of horsemen galloped along the rutted road - bearing Stark banners. Robb was at the van. Quickly dismounting, he hurried up to the raised platform. “Your Majesty,” he said formally, given the public nature of the event. “The Lannisters are approaching.”

Daenerys nodded. Standing, she turned to the men behind her. “Dovaogēdy, hēnkirī!” At the bellowed command, the entirety of ten thousand Unsullied clicked their heels to attention. Masks on and special winter uniforms giving them an almost beetle-like appearance, the lines and lines of them presented an utterly terrifying aura around the Targaryen Empress. Their Mhysa.

Jolt nearly knocking her out of her seat, Cersei Lannister let out a curse. Part of her reasoned she should be used to the pitfalls of travel overland, but the knowledge of being so close to the destination and an innate curiosity of the Dragon Queen and White Wolf of the North caused her impatience to return. “Damn you father,” she muttered. Of course she didn’t want Daenerys Targaryen to win, but being used as a pawn/bait for her father’s schemes only fueled the bitterness in her.

“Better get ready, Lady Cersei.” Her head turned to see Jaime’s battle companion, the boorish sellsword that Tyrion brought to King’s Landing from the Vale, on his horse outside the window. “We’re here.” He cast an appreciative glance ahead of him. “I think you should come and see this, my Lady.”

Rolling her eyes, Cersei wanted to shoot back an insult, but the earnestness in the sellsword’s voice intrigued her. Shimmying over to the other end of the carriage, she looked out and felt her mouth drop. Cersei had seen massive formations of men before, but never one as maddeningly sinister as the wall of Unsullied before her. Rows and rows of them waited on the plains overlooked by Riverrun castle. Behind them were a line of cavalry, Targaryen and Stark banners fluttering in the
gentle wind, and behind them were further formations of unfamiliar troops that had to be Essosi levies…

A large shadow blanketed them and Cersei almost fell back into the carriage as the black shape shot past with a loud roar. As soon as it was gone a second made a mock attack run, diving down before leveling out and roaring past. ‘The Dragon Queen’s beasts,’’ Cersei thought. ‘Legend and rumor doesn’t do them justice.’ Even the menacing deadliness of the scorpions she saw seared into her brain, what Jamie told her of the sheer destructive power those dragons brought to bare now all made sense to her.

“Giants too, my Lady.” Sure enough, Bronn was right. A massive giant stood right next to the platform that awaited to welcome their opposites for the parlay, ugly face in a permanent snarl. Suppressing the fear welling inside her, Cersei breathed deeply and adopted her normal haughty mask. She was a Lion of Casterly Rock, of the highestborn blood in the Seven Kingdoms. Such was the last thought before the carriage halted.

Sensing her hand discretely fidgeting as the Lannister host approached the dias, Daenerys lightly tapped him on the shoulder. “Nervous?”

Forcing himself to stay still, Tyrion shrugged. “Last time I was with my family, I betrayed them. Let’s just say I am not looking forward to this.” Gazing out at the various soldiers and servants accompanying his sister, he spotted Bronn. At the sellsword’s half smirk, the Imp at least had the satisfaction of knowing at least one of his old comrades didn’t despise him.

Goldcloak hopping down from the carriage, once he opened the door Daenerys caught a glimpse of Cersei Lannister at last. Reputation did not do her justice, as she was greatly beautiful - golden hair glinting in the sun and the top half of her thick dress fitting her body like a sieve. Perhaps a far more insecure woman would have been jealous, but Dany only felt a sort of disgusted pity. A barely disguised arrogance marred her features, a woman cloistered among the highborn for her entire life. Beneath it, there existed a girl left bitter and angry at the world. No reason for her to be jealous, none at all.

“Presenting,” the Lannister bannerman stated, “Lady Cersei Lannister, Queen Mother to His Divine Majesty.”

“Honored diplomats,” Missandei began, voice steady and firm. “You stand in the presence of Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen and Stark, First of her Name.” Daenerys sat upright as her bodyservant and translator recited her titles, still as stone. Her amethyst eyes were hard and piercing upon the golden lion before her. “Empress of the Targaryen Empire, Rightful Queen of Westeros. Mother of Dragons. Queen in the North and of Meereen. The Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, the Unburnt, the Breaker of Chains. Protector of the Realm and Valyria Reborn.”

Nodding, Dany forced a smile on her face. “Lady Cersei. Welcome to Riverrun castle. I trust the weather is not causing you undue discomfort.” She could feel the radiating contempt from the Starks directed at their guest. She had it too, but sacrifices had to be made.

“The weather is bearable, thank you,” Cersei replied, another diplomatic smile on her face. Sansa immediately recognized it - the same smile as worn at the feast at Winterfell so long ago. The same bitter woman as then, humiliated and hurt by her husband the King. ‘Does Joffrey not have her in his inner circle?’ She filed it into her mind for later analysis. Blue eyes fell upon the twins. “Are these the little dragons that the entire Seven Kingdoms have been hearing about?”

Daenerys fought an urge to claw her eyes out, protecting her children. Instead, she nodded. “Yes, this is Crown Prince Rhaegar and Princess Arya.”
“It is nice to meet you two. I shall say that you look like true highborn.”

“We get that from our mother and father,” Arya replied, face as icy as Dany’s was. She felt her Aunt Arya stealthily pat her on the back.

“I have no doubt.” Cersei turned to Tyrion. “Dearest brother, I gather you had a hand in this…” She glanced up at Wun Wun with a raised eyebrow. “Magnificent set up.” Wun Wun sneered, letting out a booming snort.

“There was no need for much involvement of my part, sister. The field commanders know how to form well-disciplined units. And it is nice to see you too, Cersei.” No love was lost between them.

Lips curling into a strained smile that did not reach her eyes, Daenerys gestured to the castle. “You must be tired after your long journey. There are temporary accommodations prepared within the castle, so we will continue this on the morrow.”

Hands far from his sword to avoid any… unfortunate assaults upon his person, Bronn’s eyes discreetly swept the battlements and positions surrounding the Lannister party. Two of those infernal siege pieces - cannon as he had heard them called from scout reports - were pointed directly at them. Archers covered the walls of Riverrun, rows of Unsullied unnerving him. And this was without the ugly-faced giant and two massive dragons flying overhead… two dragons? The sellsword turned knight turned wannabe highborn pondered this. ‘There were supposed to be three grown dragons.’ One was missing, and he had gotten a good look at the one that nearly immolated him and Jaime alive. ‘Where could the green fucker be?’

Shifting his eyes, they suddenly picked up another figure - one he surprisingly hadn’t noticed before. A mottled gold/brown cloak draped over her body, hood wrapped around neck and hair. But he recognized the pretty face. Bronn could have never forgotten that face. As her eyes met his, he formed a ghost of a grin. ‘Well I’ll be damned, the spunky lass made it out after all.’ Didn’t feel bad at all.

As the Lannister host passed towards the gates, Tyene Martell felt a shiver pass through her at the sellsword’s stare. A brute. A lowborn. An enemy fighting for the family that raped her homeland and murdered her father and sisters… A man that saved her life when he hadn’t had any reason to.

His tiny grin sent another shiver through her.

Arms crossed, Daenerys glared at her two advisors. “I do not find it wise to have my husband’s status lowered to that of a legitimized bastard… nor to have him insulted in such a way”

“Nor do I, Daenerys,” Sansa replied, equally stubborn and frustrated at the situation. “But that isn’t something to bring up at this point. If - as unlikely as it would be - Cersei has a legitimate offer, we shouldn’t inform them of anything that could jeopardize it.”

“Lady Sansa is correct. If I know my sister,” Tyrion remarked, walking over to her side. “And I do, she’d simply fly into a rage. She was in love… more like infatuated with your brother, Rhaegar. I remember the breakdowns when he married Elia Martell and gave the crown of beauty to Lyanna Stark.” Lips curling in amusement, Dany shared it with Sansa and Margaery - the third woman already seated. Imagining Cersei Lannister in a rage over the Crown Prince had for Jon’s late mother was quite hilarious. “Better to keep our cards close to the chest, that’s all we’re saying.”

Nodding, figuring they had a point, Dany turned as the door to the solar opened. “My Empress,”
Grey Worm’s face - as minute the expression was - conveyed disgust. “Cersei Lannister is here.”

“Good, let her in.” She had deliberately made her wait half an hour, and enjoyed the level of annoyance on the blonde’s face as she and the man clad in a dirty burlap shift of a monk - Ansel Lannister - enter.

Towering nearly half a head taller than the petite Targaryen, Cersei nevertheless treated her as one would an equal. “Queen Daenerys.” Much as she was an enemy to her, Tywin Lannister had drilled in his children a healthy respect for highborn blood. Pureborn Valyrian, Daenerys held the highest born blood of any in the solar. “You made us wait for quite a while.”

“My apologies.” Her face remained blank, not conceding anything to this woman. “And it is Empress.”

“Perhaps.” Sitting across from the Dragon Empress, Cersei only then acknowledged the others in the room. “Brother.” He hadn’t changed, still cavorting with his whore, Cersei figured to herself - she had seen the woman near him at the welcoming committee.

“Dear sister.” Tyrion tipped his head slightly in greeting. “I trust you rested from your journey.”

Cersei ignored him, eyes falling on the redhead. “Ah, Lady Sansa. It delights me to see you grown into a dignified young woman.” The sarcasm was obvious to the point of lampoon, but diplomatic niceties had to be seen through. “I am so sorry to hear about your marriage troubles.”

Face cold, Sansa kept her voice low and relaxed. “It is quite alright, Lady Lannister. I have moved on from my loss, though I haven’t forgotten the persons and circumstances that brought about such a tragedy.” The message was simple. Sansa Stark was no longer a girl who could be manipulated so easily.

Even the golden lion was slightly impressed, but she hid it well. “Lady Tyrell, Lady Tyrell,” she said with the same overly deferential smile. “It is…”

“Spare the horseshit,” Olenna Tyrell grumbled, having entered just prior to Cersei. “Get on with the actual parlay before I fall asleep.” Corner of her lip twitching in good humor, Daenerys silently thanked the Queen of Thorns for ending this excruciating charade. She now understood why Jon avoided these things like greyscale.

Silence proceeding for a moment, Daenerys seized the initiative by breaking it first. “Your father asked for this meeting between us, yet neither he nor the King you purport to serve dared come. Normally I wouldn’t seek to even grace my presence with them, but for them to refuse a diplomatic audience they requested is rather insulting to someone of my blood. If the Emperor were here, he’d agree.”

Knitting her hands together, Cersei pursed her lips. “No true king would deign to treat with a would-be usurper or her bastard lover, but considering what has happened when a noble comes to treat with those of your House, simple life and limb also are of concern.”

Setting down her goblet, one of simple glass rather than the elaborate jewel-encrusted one in Cersei’s hands, Daenerys clasped her hands together. “My dear Lady Lannister, if we are to talk of the past, then let me tell you a story. After watching his army burn in the Field of Fire alongside that of the Reach, one Loren I Lannister - your ancestor and that of your father and son - bent the knee to Aegon Targaryen. Surrendered the Kingdom of the Rock and pledged his House’s fealty. In Perpetuity.” The last two words received emphasis. Dany followed with a sweet smile. One dripping with silent venom. “Need I have Lady Sansa or your brother instruct you as to what ‘In Perpetuity’
means?"

‘She is quite full of herself,’ Cersei thought. Someone that was no more than a little upstart queen hatched dragons and took a city of Ghiscari foreigners with slave soldiers and expected to act like a ruler experienced by decades or hardship. The prospect made her chuckle inwardly. “You do not. Need I have brother Ansel inform you of the crimes of your family on the Seven Kingdoms? Such would invalidate any oath sworn centuries ago.”

“That is undoubtedly grounded in fact. My father was an evil man” Daenerys fluidly took the goblet off the table to her side back into her hand, sipping the chilled water within. “Also grounded in fact are the crimes committed on my family and on the family of my husband by your father, not to mention the atrocities brought on the people of Westeros by your son.”

A bored look crossed the Queen Mother’s face. “The actions of renegade soldiers doesn’t concern me, and the lives of…” A mocking laugh left her lips. “Peasants shouldn’t concern any highborn. For most of them, steady work and a steady hand manning the whip is an improvement over their idle squalor.”

This same mindset was what drove Daenerys - and Jon, she knew - so strongly to break the wheel of oppression that so crushed the lands of their fathers. “They are the people of this nation, and if the gods grant the Emperor and I the right to rule then they command us to husband all our subjects as shepherds would a flock.” Her lips curled into a telling smile. “And if necessary, to fight off the wolves… or lions.” She could feel her sister and soon to be sister smiling in approval.

“We have armies,” Cersei proclaimed haughtily.

“We have dragons,” Daenerys replied nonchalantly.

Nails digging into the skin of her hands, Cersei willed herself to remain calm and collected. Her son may have had zero control, but she would in his stead. “I see needless threats are not going to get us anywhere. I come bearing a proposal.” Motioning to Ansel, the stoic Faith Militant handed her a scroll. “From my father the Hand,” Cersei said, handing the scroll to Daenerys. “Under authority of His Divine Majesty. We are willing to agree to a large scale truce, followed by a permanent peace along the current lines of control.”

“You talk of this ‘truce,’ if it is something that your son or father has an intention of upholding. What would prevent Tywin Lannister of using it to move troops to attack us at our most vulnerable?” Glancing to either side of her, nods from Tyrion and Sansa each fortified Dany’s resolve. “Nevertheless, I will accede your request for a truce.” It amused her further to see the flicker of shock cross Cersei’s face.

“Do you,” Cersei managed to say once she recovered her faculties. “Do you really?”

“Yes, a temporary freeze of the current situation, nothing more. In exchange, I wish to form a temporary military alliance to combat a greater threat.” Truth be told, she did not have certainty about this, but Jon did. Daenerys trusted him with her life, and if she could get Tywin to agree then the sectarian hate could be extinguished upon sight of the ‘Army of the Dead.’

A laugh escaped Cersei’s lips before she could stop herself. “An alliance against what, exactly.”

“The army of the dead,” replied Sansa. “The Long Night approaches, and we need all the forces we can to stop them.”

“Pish, there’s no such thing.”
“I have seen it for myself,” Margaery said, the carefree beauty making the decisiveness of her words all the more clear. “This is a serious threat, or why else would we bring something this fantastical up?”

“You are right, Lady Tyrell.” Cersei poured herself some more wine. “That is fantastical.” She looked at Daenerys. “Such a bad joke. For a moment there I thought you close to an actual, intelligent queen - yet to now fall victim to myth and superstition. Honestly…” An evil glint formed in her expression while pivoting to Sansa. “This is what you get for cavorting with a Northerner, since they are all addled with superstition. Perhaps that's what drove Rhaegar over the edge.”

Before either Daenerys or Sansa could unleash dragonfire at their guest, the Hand intervened. “Sister,” Tyrion pleaded, hoping against all hope that she had even a speck of filial loyalty in her soul. “Listen to reason. Father and Joffrey can resume their protectorship at the Rock, and Tommen will be allowed to keep Storm’s End. Peace, and life, will be at hand for Joffrey, Tommen, and Myrcella…”

Cersei’s facade broke, face flushing with anger. “Don’t you dare mention her name in my presence!” Watching him wince at knowing exactly why she was furious, the Queen Mother remembered the words she had told him as her daughter’s boat rowed out of King’s Landing all those years ago. Their meaning had not dulled with age. “Thanks to you she almost died in Dorne,” she hissed.

“Considering what Lord Tywin did to Dorne, I would think the debt has been repaid with interest.” Cersei looked behind the Dragon Empress to lock eyes with Sansa, meeting an icy crystal blue. Gone was the scared, immature girl filled with girlish dreams and a blind terror. In that girl’s stead was a woman not unlike… herself?

Taking stock of the tension filling the room, Daenerys broke it. “So, I am to be certain that Joffrey Baratheon will not be giving up the throne of my family?”

Leaning forward, Cersei looked upon the Targaryen usurper with barely disguised loathing. “Go back to Meereen, back to Essos with your foreign hordes. This land belongs to its children, and they will fight to defend it from interlopers and bastards.”

Intimidation wasted on her, Daenerys mimicked Cersei - leaning forward with a fiery glint in her dark violet eyes. “Your son has chosen war, Lady Lannister, not I. It is a war we do not want nor did we start, but rest assured that we will finish it.” Standing, ice-blue dress accentuating a fierce Valyrian beauty, she looked down on Cersei. The Lannister woman saw the same look that Rhaegar had given her the only time they met - contempt.

The old proverb, that when a Targaryen is born the gods flipped a coin. There was no doubt where said coin landed on the day of Daenerys Targaryen’s birth.

“I may not have been raised of the Seven Kingdoms,” Daenerys finally said. “But his Majesty the Emperor has. Believe me when I say that we will turn King’s Landing into your tomb before the year is done.”

Having cordoned off an entire wing of the castle to house the Lannister delegation, Bronn of the Blackwater was glad that the Dragon Queen departed from the demonic monster persona that filled propaganda back in King’s Landing to include a latrine among the quarters. Being escorted by a stone-faced eunuch everytime he needed to take a shit would get someone killed - and he was in no mood to cause an incident.
Halls dark as he walked to the row of stone seats to void the two mugs of mead consumed earlier, the normally alert sellsword was abruptly pulled into an empty storage room. A hand clamped over Bronn’s mouth before he could say anything. “Shhhh.” A flickering candle exposed the slim, powerful form of Tyene Martell. She shut the door, leaving them alone.

“Well this is a surprise.” Looking her over, instead of the barely disguised lust for her sensual body - or sheer terror when finding out what her hidden talent was - Tyene could only sense a puzzled curiosity in the sellsword’s glances. “Why are you here, little lady?”

“Perhaps I came to recruit a spy?” she said back… a little too quickly.

Bronn shook his head. “Nah, too open. If you wanted that you’d seek me out somewhere less… conspicuous.” He cocked his head at her. “While normally I wouldn’t mind a pretty lass alone with me - a Dornish lass at that - why are you here?”

Sighing softly to herself, Tyene propped her back on the wall, crossing her arms. “I’ve seen many men, enjoyed many men both decent and malignant pricks. None would do something so… flippantly selfless for anyone not their family.” Bronn could have killed her that day in Sunspear - as easy as snapping a twig. But he didn’t. “I want to know why.”

“I told ya’ then.” Bronn chuckled, remembering the moment quite vividly even though the rest of the fighting that day had long since turned into a blur. “I have a thing for Dornish girls. Like to fight and fuck… my mottos.”

Normally she’d laugh at such boorish manners - it wasn’t like she and her sisters hadn’t been exactly the same iconoclasts among highborn society. But now Tyene pursed her lips in a serious line. “You obviously have no loyalty to anyone. Not the Lannisters and certainly not the Targaryens. And saving me doesn’t get you your castle, so why?” He owed her nothing, if anything it was the other way around, but Tyene was now Lady Martell and the Martells took what they wanted.

Perching himself on the wall perpendicular to the noble beauty - he hadn’t been lying when he said she was utterly gorgeous - Bronn matched her crossed arms expression. “I don’t really know.” For once the cocky half-smirk faded, something… deep and pensive in its place. Almost like Jaime Lannister after his amputation. “Your tenacity, spirit… wrap it up with the bad pussy as I like to call it,” he laughed as she rolled her eyes, “Fuckin’ reminded me of me back when I was some idealistic cunt ready to ascend to knighthood.”

Her eyes widened slightly. Tyene had not expected that answer, nor that the sarcastic male version of herself could have been anything but a self-interested cynic. He could have been lying, but as someone trained by Oberyn Martell and Ellaria Sand, she could tell he was honest - at least about that. Truth be told she felt slightly uncomfortable.

Marshalling her wits, she smiled sultrilly and shashayed towards the door. “Well, you’re right about one thing.” Leaning back, she craned her neck till her eyes looked into his. “I am bad pussy.” Mirth in her eyes, Tyene leaned forward to place a sizzling kiss on his lips. Her tongue darted inside and she felt him responding before pulling back. With a smile Tyene left.

Legs crossed, absentmindedly stroking her thigh with a single finger, Arya admired the snowflakes as they gently fluttered to the rushing waters of the river below. The full blast of winter arriving in the Riverlands, it reminded her so wonderfully of home. Of her childhood - a time before all the shit of the game of thrones descended upon them. She sighed. ‘We were so innocent then.’
She certainly was. Back then, the greatest worry that had ever crossed her mind was getting scolded by her father for chucking mud on Sansa’s dress. Arya rolled her eyes. If Jon and Robb didn’t nearly fall on the ground in violent laughter, and if Sansa hadn’t thrown a temper tantrum fit to shake the entire palace, there was no reason to do it. A smirk danced on her lips - the Wild Wolf missed those days - until everything changed. ‘The Waif…’ It shouldn’t have shocked Arya that the Faceless Men would come after her, to finish the mission and end the last chance she had with them. Part of her wanted to tell Jon, to tell Daenerys, even if doing so would cast doubt on her loyalty. But there was just… something. A voice telling her to wait. To see where it went.

So here she was, vigilant and redoubled in her quest to protect her family from harm.

“I thought I’d find you here.” Without a peep from her sister, Sansa took a seat next to her, cloak wrapped around her for warmth. “Cersei left.”

“Good riddance.” Arya spat into the water below. “Wish Daenerys had brought the Targaryen Fire and Blood on her.”

“I don’t disagree, but it wouldn’t have been… diplomatic.” In her role as Hand, Sansa had to act with her head. If it meant her revenge would come later, then it would.”

Arya nodded. “For the best. Cersei’s on my list, you know. The list of people I’m going to kill.”

Unsure of what to make of that, Sansa changed the subject. “There’s a brewing problem. A quite serious one that I haven’t told Daenerys yet.” She could feel Arya’s gaze boring into her. “Frankly, only I know.” Handing Arya a scroll, she closed her eyes and let the cold breeze wash over her.

Dearest Sansa,

The culture shock I have felt since arriving here is immense. The great cities of Westeros have nothing on Meereen. Ours is a stagnant culture since the days of Baelor the Blessed, while theirs has great advancement on nearly every level. Meereen is a generally clean and well designed city, nothing like the cesspit that is King’s Landing.

However, there is a tension within the city. Both Astapor and Yunkai are in open revolt, obtaining support from Volantis and Braavos. What forces we have in the region are only enough to prevent Meereen from descending into chaos. It is a close run thing. The free-born are fighting the freedmen, all fighting the Masters. We can’t tell who among the latter owes allegiance to Queen Daenerys or to the Sons of the Harpy. Collapse could be imminent.

Only my oath to His Grace and my devotion to you keep me in the needed spirits.

Podrick Payne

Skimming with wide eyes, it was the last line that piqued Arya’s interest. “Sansa…” She looked up at her sister with a grin. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Sansa blinked, confused. “What are you talking about. I showed you the letter. It has all the intelligence that’s been worrying me.”


Scarlet flared in Sansa’s cheeks. “I… uh… I…” Her mouth opened but the words struggled to form. “No… Nothing is happening. I don’t want… that.” The last word was soft, almost hesitant.
Arya wasn’t fooled. ‘Damn, she has it bad,’ she thought. Her sister may not have been the immature, swooning maiden of before when Joffrey swept her off her feet, but the dignified, cold Sansa still had her tells. Arya had the duty to tease her to wits end over this. “Oh sweet sister of mine, all your life you dreamed of marrying a handsome prince or dashing knight… and you fall for Podrick Payne.”

If looks could kill, Arya would be burned alive. “Arya, I’m serious.”

“I’ll bet you gave him a send off fit for a proper knight. Didn’t think you had it in ya, sister.” With a smack on the back, Arya dissolved into laughs.

Folding her arms, Sansa huffed. “There is nothing humorous about this, Arya.”

“Oh lighten up, Sansa.” Arya smacked her on the shoulder. “After that little Bolton shit, you deserve someone to treat you right. Jon has Daenerys, Robb has Margaery, I - one of the only good things to happen to me since father died - have Gendry. Much as I hate all that sappy stuff… I think he’s good for you.”

The older Stark sibling cracked a ghost of a smile, irritation slightly fading. “Thank you for that, though… nothing actually happened. After saving my life from an accident, he… asked me for permission to write me.” Truth be told, it was so sweet and innocent that there was no worry of him being like Ramsay or Joffrey. Some psychopaths could hide their evil natures well, but it was a safe bet Podrick wasn’t one of them.

Arya let out a whistle. “Better plan the wedding.” This time it was she that got a thump on the arm. “Owww…”

“Can dish it out but can’t take it.” Sansa giggled. Her smile faded. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

Her face fell, cold mask returning. “Things are falling apart in Meereen. Bastards.”

“Not just that. I think Tywin has made alliances with the Masters.” Sansa looked out at the river. “Think about it, they already have connections in the Free Cities. It isn’t quite as far a leap to get to Volantis, and then to Slaver’s Bay. Meanwhile, our attention was to be kept by…” she trailed off.

The smaller girl put it together. “So the entire parlay was bullshit. I figured.” Arya leaned back. “Just fucking figures.”

Remembering Cersei’s words, knowing the duplicity and vicious cunning of the older woman from their close quarters in what felt like a lifetime ago, Sansa let out a sigh - sounding more a hiss than a sigh. “Cersei once told me that a woman’s most powerful weapon is what’s between her legs.” She smiled slightly at Arya’s snort. “She was wrong, the most powerful weapon is being a dupe. A mirage, though the power in that benefits others. I had no doubt Tywin would make simultaneous moves without consulting anyone. He’s in charge, him and Joffrey.”

“I could have told you that... Lady Payne.” Arya couldn’t help but smirk at her elder sister’s glare. Reminded her of the good old days. The pleasant remembrance faded in the current reality. “Did not expect him to have ties to Essos.” ‘Or should I have?’ she thought. The appearance of the Waif turned everything on its head.

“Daenerys is despised by certain elements in Essos, her main forces are here, and Joffrey needs slaves to construct his approximation of the Seventh and deepest Hell. Looking at it, I’d be shocked if Tywin didn’t make alliances with the Masters of Slaver’s Bay. He already has the Iron Bank.”
Arya’s eyes hardened - Tycho Nestoris was on her list. She noticed Sansa’s eyes were just as hard. Pure Ice, like Jon before he was about to behead someone. “Sansa?” The entire demeanor unnerved her.

“Why must this happen?” Her fists clenched, never as angry - as filled with white hot rage - as she was now. “I understand the game of thrones and all, but Jon and Daenerys are good people. They’ve stayed good and honorable through all this… this shit! Both of them deserve happiness and joy. Why must these monsters keep doing this to them?!”

“Doing what, sister? What do you mean?”

“One of them will have to go to Essos, Arya.” Sansa repeated vile curses upon Tywin and Joffrey over and over again in her mind. None of them were enough to end the eventuality. There was no way around it. “One of them will have to leave.”

‘Damn it,’ Arya thought. Jon was exactly like father, a beacon of light in the dark swamp of deceit and treachery, while Daenerys was that rare breed that actually cared about her subjects and didn’t see them as cannon fodder. It would destroy them to be apart after they finally reunited. “Is there any other way?”

The Hand to the King lowered her head in resignation. “If one doesn’t go, then the entire continent of Essos is lost to Joffrey.”
Silently walking the halls, Arya decided she had no real fondness for Riverrun. Granted, this was the ancestral home of her mother’s house, but Arya shared little connection to anywhere but the north. None of her full-siblings did. Sansa had her fair Tully beauty, but such was all. To a man they were all of the North - for Arya, her special training developed a preference for narrow spaces and hidden blind spots common in the northern fortresses but lacking in the airy Riverrun.

A flat affect grafted itself to her face, emotion gone most of the time since the night of the coronation. The coronation feast had affected many. Jon brooded. Daenerys was icy towards those not the family. Sansa and Robb buried themselves in their official tasks. Her mother, Catelyn, was despondent over the loss of her uncle. Most of all, a sense of pallor and gloom had settled over the Targaryen-Stark camp. ‘Our string of uninterrupted victories wasn’t bound to last,’ Arya mused, but in a sense they had all grown cocky and arrogant - even the humble Emperor. Combined between the two of them, only Hardhome had been a setback, and even that was a victory. Daenerys had taken over the Dothraki, captured three major city states, and held them without issue against master pressure. Jon had united the Wildlings, defeated Ramsay Bolton, and won the ground at Riverrun. It seemed against their best instincts, invincibility slowly set in.

Daenerys’ close brush with death hit that sense hard, and that did not extend to the fact only Arya knew. Each minute of each day found the young woman thinking and planning on how to grapple with the new dimension sprouting up. A new enemy that was so familiar at the same time. It was her fight, and so only she wished to know - and Arya couldn’t bear if Jon blamed her if he found out. Call her selfish, but she would go at this alone.

Shaking that thought from her mind, a soft whimper caught her attention. Hand darting to needle’s hilt, Jaqen Hiqar’s training instinctively kicked in. A girl’s feet glided along the stone floor without a sound. A girl stuck to the shadows, unseen by man or god. Observant ears zeroed in on the soft cries… coming from the nursery. Her eyes widened slightly, ever so slightly. Threats to the wolf pack were the only tip that could pierce her impassive armor.

Jon and Daenerys were out - doing what, Arya had no idea - bed rumpled leaving little doubt as to what they were up to last. Fighting the urge to gag, she drew needle and crept silently to the slightly open door to the nursery.

A quick peak deflated the tension from her in a split second. Rhaegar and little Arya were alone, only a single candle casting flickering shadows across the walls. Her relieved smile at the lack of danger morphed to heartbreak as what the whimpers actually were. Little Arya sat cross-legged on the floor, sobs wracking her body. Her brother had pulled her tightly to his chest, stroking her back and whispering that it would be alright - only for tears to stream silently down his cheeks as well. It hurt like a knife to see her beloved niece and nephew in such pain.

It only took mere seconds before Arya couldn’t take it anymore. Sheathing Needle, she slid into the room and rushed to them. “Little wolves.” Two comforting arms wrapped around them as she knelt beside the twins. “Don’t cry, little wolves, she asked softly. “What’s wrong?”

Eyes shutting tightly, Rhaegar shook his head. “Nothing, Aunt Arya.” His sister merely clutched at her namesake, pressing her bloodshot eyes and soaking Arya’s cloak with her tears. She had obviously been crying for a while.

Frowning, Arya glanced down at her nephew. “Rhaegar, don’t lie to me. Why are you crying?” She comforted the princess, letting her cry herself out.
“I am not crying.” The tearstreaks on his rosy cheeks belied the truth. “A prince does not cry,” he choked out defiantly, sniffling.

Oh, boys and their bravado. Memories of Robb, Jon, and Theon punching each other in the stomach to see who could go the longest without crying out or throwing up came to her mind. “You may be right in general, but you are with your Aunt Arya.” She motioned with her free hand not wrapped around the princess. “The Pack comforts it’s own.”

Dam breaking, Rhaegar's sobs flew as he lurched himself into Arya’s embrace. “I’m… sorry…” He could barely speak over the tears.

“Oh little wolves.” Seeing them like this made her heart clench with pain. Part of her wanted to hunt down whoever did this as she did Amory Lorch, but another part of Arya informed her that the Prince and Princess weren’t in such pain. “Please, tell me what is wrong.”

“We just got poppa back,” little Arya said for the first time, voice faltering from the agony. “Why does he leave us?”

“Poppa doesn’t love us anymore. He promised to stay!” Even when trying to deploy the Targaryen fire, when it came to his beloved father Rhaegar couldn’t hate him. Hence the tears.

Arya sighed. Dragons were passionate people. With someone like Jon, only the wolf blood within his veins could keep his anger and temper from burning down entire battlefields to avenge threats to the wolf pack - the wolf in him kept Daenerys in check as well, she being pure dragon. “Your father loves you. He and your mother both.”

“Then why,” little Arya sniffled. “Is he leaving us?”

Their emotions were normal. Arya felt it as well when Gendry left on his scouting mission, the fear at the danger he would be in, the black pit in her chest at being without him - she hated it but welcomed it at the same time, her love for him and love for her family grounding her against the loss of individuality that befall all other faceless men. Having gone through the agony of countless loss, she could process this far better. The twins couldn’t. After being told stories of a great man that was their father, then meeting someone that exceeded such expectations of kindness, love, nobility, and strength. Now he was being ripped away.

“Little wolves, I know that both of your parents would stay with you forever if they could. Their love for you is endless, from here to eternity.” The sobs quieted down slightly, though their small bodies continued to tremble in her embrace. “He would not leave if he had a choice.”

Little Arya looked up, wiping a cake of snot from her flushed nose. “Is it the bad men. The ones under Cersei Lannister?”

The Wild Wolf pressed a kiss to the princess’ forehead. ‘Clever girl.’ “Yes. They are threatening the people of Meereen, where you two grew up.”

Rhaegar wiped away his tears. “A ruler must protect the people.”

His aunt tousled his hair. “You’re just like your father.” Rhaegar smiled weakly at that, as if through the sadness it gave him pride. Arya hugged them both tightly. “Let’s get you both to bed.”

Soon, they were both settled. A gentle kiss to Rhaegar’s head left him fast asleep. Arya repeated it to her namesake. “Aunt Arya, will poppa come home to us?”

“Oh, he will.” Jon was the proverbial cat with nine lives. If anyone could make it alive through
impossible odds, it was him. “He will come back to the pack.” Slowly exiting the room, her fists balled in silent rage. “Joffrey, Cersei, Meryn Trant, Ilyn Payne, Littlefinger, the Mountain, the Waif, Tycho Nestoris, Viserys Targaryen… Joffrey, Cersei…”

Two Tully guards immediately came to attention as Jon turned the corner, spears clanking against their mail armor. “Your Majesty,” they said in unison.

Clad in simple black leather, the Targaryen Emperor was unmistakable among those within Riverrun castle. The image of the great Jaehaerys Targaryen, at the heat of the fight hacking away at their enemies as dragons roared overhead was seared into the minds of anyone that fought in battle alongside him. No King, or even Lord for many of them, ever fought in the heat with his men - nor would a Queen or Lady do so either. And yet Jon Stark and Daenerys Targaryen did.

Walking past with a smile sent their way - the Empress having done the same after passing them the day before - both guards knew exactly why they and their fellow subjects beloved them so.

Entering the library, light streaming from the large glass windows alien from anything Winterfell had, Jon’s gaze quickly found the people he wanted to see at the end of several racks of books. Seated at the long table was Sam, Little Sam perched on his lap playing with wooden figurines. Across from them was Gilly, the Lady Shireen right alongside her.

“Alright, you can do it.” The young girl pointed into the manuscript, tracing the letter with her finger. Jon saw his best friend’s paramour knit her brows in concentration, thinking hard. “Remember, looks like an animal.”

Gilly closed her eyes in deep thought. “Snake…” They snapped open in excitement. “S. It’s S.”

Jon chuckled. He could count on one hand the wildlings he’d seen that were literate, and if Tormund or Ygritte were considered, as a lot they weren’t easy to teach. “Very good, Gilly. You’re getting the hang of it all.”

Smile falling, Gilly and Shireen quickly stood up. “Your Majesty,” the Baratheon noblewoman said in a respectful tone, eyes pointed to the ground. “We didn’t see you come in.”

He waved them off. “Tis alright. Go ahead and sit.” The two visibly relaxed and resumed their previous positions. “So, is this how Davos learned to read? And write?” For the life of him Jon couldn’t fathom how his Hand’s unintelligible scribble counted as proper words, but he kept that to himself. He wasn’t the most studious, but the tutors at Winterfell made sure he learned as a nobleman should.

Shireen laughed. “Oh trust me, he was much worse. Quite hard to teach an old person anything.” ‘Old person.’ Jon found that quite hilarious.

“She’s a good teacher, your Grace. Unlike some people.” Gilly shot Sam a knowing, flat look.

The portly man bristled a bit. “All I tell you is that you’ll learn faster if you practice more.” At that moment Little Sam playfully tugged at his father’s beard, dissolving into giggles as big Sam yelped.

It took several deep breaths for Jon to compose himself once more. “Well, keep up the good work and you’ll be there in no time.” He turned to his friend. “Sam, you sent for me?”

“Yes, come with me.” Sam moved towards the far end of the library, motioning for Jon to follow.
Sending a small smile at the woman who was Sam’s betrothed in every meaningful way, the Emperor moved to where the pseudo Maester waited. “Alright Sam,” Jon said in a low voice. “What do you need?” He made time for his best and longest friend not his brother or sister, but he was still rather busy and wished for this to be quick.

“I’ve been searching Riverrun’s library for the… pressing concern to our north.” Jon knew exactly what he meant. “I didn’t find any information on white walkers themselves…”

“I wouldn’t think you would.” If Winterfell’s library didn’t have it then Riverrun likely wouldn’t.

“That’s just it though. I’ve found dragonglass.”

Jon’s eyes widened. “What?!” he whispered excitedly. The ‘Joffrey First’ strategy did not end or lessen Jon’s fear and focus upon the threat of the Long Night and Night King - Daenerys, much as she professed her belief in him and the Army of the Dead, didn’t seem to share his pressing concern and it worried him - and he, Sansa, Robb, and Sam allowed any unused time here and there to figuring out a solution. “Where is it located?” A sudden sinking feeling filled him. What if it was firmly in Joffrey’s grasp?

Sam noticed his friend’s worry. “Dragonstone, Jon. Apparently it has mountains of it in caves spreading underneath the cliffs.” He watched as the Emperor’s expression brightened, determination crossing his face. “Who do we have in charge of Dragonstone?”

“The Greyjoys.” Jon scowled, still not close to forgiving Theon for his past betrayal. Yara had been part of the rape and pillage of the North, but she didn’t stab them in the back as Theon did. He didn’t like them as allies but had no choice - they needed the ships. “Get to the rookery and send a message there in all haste. I want it mined and sent to White Harbor as fast as possible.” Nodding, just as Sam moved to go, Jon clasped his shoulder. “Sam, not a word of this to anyone.” His voice was so low only he and Sam could register it. “We need to keep this as secretive as possible.”

Knowing that if dragonglass were known to be so desired by them, the Lannisters would be far more likely to threaten the shipments to force the Targaryen armies to attack on ground of their choosing. Sam understood this. “Of course. My lips are sealed.” With that, the portly nobleman dashed off.

Sigh leaving his lips, Jon left the library for the airy halls of Riverrun. He needed to speak to someone - someone who had seen the threat of the dead first hand. Davos and Olly were busy, Margaery wasn’t a military mind, and he had no idea where Tormund was. That left Robb.

Servants bowed and soldiers came to attention, but the Emperor brushed past them - not dismissive but rather brooding and pensive. ‘The Night King has been quiet ever since Hardhome’ Reports had arrived from Edd at Castle Black every two or three weeks, but aside from an errant wight every now and again there had been no sightings. It worried him, for the threat was the destruction of all life on the planet.

Lost in thought, Jon absentmindedly grabbed the knob and threw open the door to his brother’s room sans knocking. “Robb, I need to speak with…” The Emperor hadn’t been observant, too concentrated on pressing matters at hand to glance at his surroundings. Expecting Robb to be at his desk - it so happened that he wasn’t. The sight before Jon caused his train of thought to be broken, eyes widening.

In the middle of the lush bed was Robb, on his back and completely nude. Atop him was an equally nude Margaery Tyrell, straddling him as they were in the throes of wild passion. Color flushed to Jon’s cheeks as he began to turn away, mortified. It was then - coming down from the delicious high the Lord of Winterfell had bestowed upon her with his frantic touches and deep thrusts - that
Margaery noticed that they weren’t alone. Letting out a scream, Robb’s eyes flew open and gasped… both from the embarrassment of having his brother catch him and the intense climax he emptied into the Tyrell beauty.

“Jon!” Quickly draping a fur over his betrothed’s bare back, Robb’s face reddened in anger as he turned to his brother the Emperor. “What the fuck are you doing?! Has fucking knocking ever crossed your mind?!”

Eyes rooted to the flickering lantern mounted on the wall faced away from the couple, Jon’s earlier mortification gave way to a creeping amusement. Private with his own body - in contrast to Daenerys, whatever modesty she had was tempered from living amongst the Dothraki - the lack of any sense of decorum that the communal brothers in black or Free Folk had accustomed him to such displays. The Rose of Highgarden was quite stunning, his brother a lucky man. Just the sheer ridiculousness of it all caused the laugh bubbling inside Jon to spew forth.

Robb was not amused. “What part of this… this… invasion of my private quarters is comical to you?” Blush adorning her cheeks, Margaery wrapped a sheet around her and scurried into the bathroom, door closing behind her. “Do you have to ruin this for me?”

Jon tried to compose himself, to only mixed results. “I’m sorry, brother.” He covered his mouth as his brother scrambled to toss on his breeches. “This just reminds me of when eleven year old Sansa walked in on you and the tanner’s daughter in the stable.”

If looks could kill, Robb’s would have had the fury of dragonfire. “I thought we agreed never to mention that,” he hissed.

Undeterred, Jon once again burst out in laughter at the memory. “The look on father’s face when Sansa ran through the courtyard screaming that you were killing the girl.” He covered his mouth to stifle further chuckles. “To be honest I’m shocked Lady Stark didn’t teach her about lovemaking before that incident.”

Bare chested, Robb crossed his arms with a scowl covering his face. “If you weren’t the Emperor, I would punch you right now.” Jon only grinned further.

The Lord of Winterfell may not have had the gumption to get physical with the sovereign that so brazenly intruded on him, but his betrothed - storming out of the bathroom covered up fully in an elegant dress, hair a bit disheveled - was another matter. Margaery smacked him on the shoulder. “You scoundrel, Jon Stark!” She smacked him again, flush with anger. “Next time, fucking knock like a gentleman would.”

“Allright, my apologies,” he said. No one was supposed to strike the Emperor, but Jon let it go since Margaery was essentially family - family that he rather liked as well. “Now that I know what I might be witnessing, I shall endeavor to knock.”

Huffing but accepting his words as sincere, Margaery strode to Robb’s side and leaned up to kiss his cheek. A smile crossed her face as her husband to be relaxed. “Now, your Majesty, why did you come here?”

Jon didn’t mince words. “We found a source of dragonglass.”

The couple’s eyes widened. The significance was not lost on them. “Where?”

“Ironically, Dragonstone. I’ve had Sam send instructions to the Greyjoys to begin mining, though how much is there I do not know.”
The scowl returned. “Greyjoys,” he spat.

“I don’t trust them either, Robb,” Margaery told him, hand on his chest. “But they are sworn to Daenerys.”

“Fine, but Jon. What does that have to do with us?”

The Emperor sighed. “I’m sending Sansa north to Winterfell with the twins. Keep them safe from Tywin - and prepare the North for when the Night King eventually crosses the Wall.” He looked them both in the eye. “Daenerys believes me about the threat of the others, but I don’t think anyone else apart from the Northern Lords and us who were there at Hardhome even think it possible. They fight against Joffrey, but think the dead are but myths and legends.” Stepping forward, he clasped Robb’s arm. “Brother, I’m making you the commander of the army. Sister, I’m making you chief of court. Make sure the threat of the Night King is taken seriously.”

Sharing a glance with Margaery, images of the mass of corpses rising in one wave on the beaches filling both their minds, he saw his determination reflected in her eyes. “We will.”

“Come on, Ply, hurry!” Bundle heavy on her back, Meera nevertheless moved with a speed and agility honed through years of trudging through cyrus-infested swampland - compared to waist deep bogs, the paved alleys of Qarth were easy to move in. It hadn’t surprised her when Bran, out of nowhere, told them they had to leave with all due haste. The conversation between the King of Qarth and the Ghiscari came to mind, and with the Greatest City that Ever was and Ever Will Be joining forces with the Masters and Joffrey Baratheon, their presence there was completely untenable. Her brother, Hodor, and Bran waited by the water, Meera having stalked out an excellent embankment point hidden between dilapidated shacks and abandoned warehouses. All that was left for her to get there, and they could flee to Meereen aboard a small sailboat.

Behind her, Ply Qyree felt his legs throb from the physical exertion. “Hold up,” he gasped out, breathing rapid. “Wait.”

“Hurry,” she called back, gesturing for the rail-thin boy to pick up the pace. Turning a corner, Meera gasped as she skidded to a halt.

Six soldiers waited for her, a skeletal figure at the van. “Good evening, my dear,” Pyat Pree said, voice calm and friendly. The blue-tinted lips curled into a grin that stretched hideously over his thin face overcame whatever amity his tone projected. His grin widened as Meera involuntarily stepped back. “The College of Warlocks cordially extends an invitation to dine with us tonight.” At that, the men began to advance.

Meera dropped her bundles and drew a short sword - a gift from her father, the truncated blade designed to fight in the brambles and thick flora of the swamps called home by the crannogmen. One Qarthi soldier charged at her but she easily darted out of the way, slashing through his stomach. “Ply!” she cried over the soldier’s pained scream. “Go to Bran!”

Eyes wide in fear, the apprentice warlock hesitated. He had always lived a sheltered life and never experienced true bloodshed, and felt his stomach roil within him.

Steel clanged against steel as Meera parried a blow. “RUN!” she yelled before a fist slammed into her shoulder, knocking her off balance. She managed to glimpse Ply dashing away on quick feet before rough hands began grabbing at her to heft her up in a tight grip.
Kicking, squirming, and lashing out at her captors, Meera felt blood pour into her mouth as she managed to sink her teeth into the arm of one of the men. Another let out a cry when her foot slammed into his jaw. Suddenly the wind was knocked out of her, nothing but a gargling grunt leaving her lips as Meera keeled over from a punch to the stomach. She collapsed in a boneless heap on the dusty ground. Before she could even curl up in a fetal position, the burly arms enclosed around her again and hauled her up.

“That will be enough of that, young lady,” the wraith-like warlock smiled. Pyat Pree’s smile didn’t falter one bit after the northern noblewoman hocked spit into his face. “Do not fret.” He motioned with bony fingers to the soldiers. “You will be reunited with your beloved soon enough. A maiden doesn’t deserve to be away from her beloved.”

Still wriggling, though only half heartedly thanks to the throbbing pain in her abdomen and the tight grip holding her in place, Meera looked up into the heavens. ‘Bran… please. Help me.’ Only the wind answered her plea as their destination loomed above them.

“I adore you, Daenerys.”

A shiver went through Dany’s body as Jon punctuated his declaration of love with a tender kiss to her neck. Resting between his legs atop a smooth stone, his arms wrapped around her lithe frame warmed her in the chilling cold. “And I you, Jon.” For all the crowns and kingdoms in the world, all were pittance to her when measured against this man. He was her world.

A world soon to leave her.

They rested at the top of a large cliff, wind surprisingly weak and gentle this high in the air. Below laid the vast expanse of the Riverlands. A white carpet marred only by barren forests and the banks of the River Trident. There was no better site for the Imperial couple to spend their last moments for quite a while, alone from the rigors of leadership and the headaches of ruling. Away from the grim realization of an impending separation after having at long last found each other again - where they could just be Jon and Dany, newlyweds in love.

Curled up in front of the pair, snowmelt heated by the heavy warmth of her scales, Rhaella enjoyed being in her parents proximity. Sisters off hunting while her older brothers slept, she lazily gazed at where her mother and father rested. She picked up the serenity between them, and it calmed her.

“Sometimes I think about a life without title.” Daenerys turned her head, peering up at her husband. His eyes were off in the distance. “Without the blood of Kings and Lords, where it would be just us, our children, and our family.” He wrapped his arms around her. “All I’d need to concern myself with was protecting and providing for all of you.”

“Mmmm.” She pressed her back to his front, enjoying his warm skin. “I’d be content with that, my dragonwolf.” As long as he was in her life, she’d be content.

Unsullied and Stark guards surrounded their Emperor and Empress, but aside from the ever loyal Ser Barristan and Ser Jorah they formed a skirmish line in a semicircle. Keeping a wide berth, the weary soldiers largely felt that the three adult dragons, three juvenile dragons, and swords their sovereigns had within arms reach would be enough to keep them safe from immediate threats. It was a rather safe assumption to have,

Suddenly screeches and hoots filled the once tranquil air above the Imperial couple. Rhaella’s head picked up, gaze zeroing in on her sisters flapping above the cliffs - a large stag being carried in their
jaws and talons. Rhaella let out a screech of her own. Jon and Dany watched tranquilly while the soldiers witnessed the magical creatures with rapt attention. The adults barely raised their heads at the antics of the youngsters.

As Sansenya and Lyanarys dropped the carcass close by their parents, Rhaella hissed at them. Digging in, her sisters ignored her. The lilac dragon shrieked and moved to barrel her way through the others to get at her prize. Dany furrowed her brows at this behavior. ‘Just like Balerion at that age,’ she thought. Rhaella’s older brother had such a violent temper, and if Rhaegal leaving not tempered him with loneliness, it likely would have been worse. Best to end this before it began.

“Rhaella, be nice to your sisters.” The dragon ignored her, snout poking into the stag and gorging her fill. Scowling, Dany reached out to tap her tail. “Rhaella…”

The stern tone and forceful tap startled the dragon… followed by anger. Rhaella whipped her neck back. A brutal, carnivorous fury filled her eyes, teeth bared as a primal scream left her throat. Jerking back her hand, Dany’s eyes filled with fear, her daughter essentially turning on her. Satisfied that she wouldn’t be bothered, Rhaella turned back to her feast.

Having seen the interaction, Jom bristled. A slow scraping of metal indicated that Jorah and Barristan were close to drawing their swords, so this would have to be settled soon. He squeezed Daenerys’ hand reassuringly, gently extracting himself from his position. “Rhaella,” Jon said in his commanding tone. “Rhaella, don’t turn your back on me.” Annoyed at her lunch being interrupted again, the lilac dragon moved to bare her teeth again when, out of nowhere, a firm hand smacked her snout. “No!” Face set in a dark, angry expression, Jon smacked the dragon again - not enough to truly hurt but enough to catch her attention. “Attacking your mother, disgraceful!” Disappointment and scolding filled his voice. “Have I not taught you to be an honorable dragon? Hmmm?”

Despite being able to rip apart the man before her, Rhaella couldn’t help but shrink back, eyes pointed to the ground in shame. A low whine left her, remorseful and apologetic.

“It isn’t me you need to apologize to.” With that, he pointed at Dany, staring down his daughter.

Crawling slowly, Rhaella reached where Dany was seated. Dragons were quite intelligent, bonding strongly with their riders and those that raised them. Thus, she knew what her father wanted and demanded she do. The whine left her throat again, snout gently poking at her mother’s arm in submission. Daenerys fought a laugh at how utterly uncharacteristic it was - she had seen these gorgeous creatures in every state of savagery and affection, but it was still quite strange to see a mighty dragon so submissive.

Smiling, Dany reached out to stroke Rhaella’s snout. “You are forgiven, my dear.” The dragon’s elation at the contact was felt by both her and Jon. Rhaella pushed into Dany’s lap, resting her head on the soft skin as her mother continued to pet her scales. “Just don’t do that again. A dragon is terrifying but must control itself.” A hoot acknowledged the lesson learned.

Jon grinned, watching Barristan and Jorah softly laughing at the scene along with most of the guards. “Good job, Rhaella.” She seemed to perk up at the praise. “Now go eat. Enjoy yourself.” Rhaella hooted at Jon and raced towards the carcass once more. Watching with satisfaction and not a little pride - the same look as if watching the twins excel at their lessons - he turned to see his wife staring at him in more than a little awe. “What?”

“How did you do that? I could barely keep Balerion, Rhaegal, and Edderon from misbehaving and losing their savage tempers when they were that age.”

Sitting down next to her, Jon pulled the gorgeous woman onto his lap. “Reminded me of Robb and I
when we were starting to become men. Mean and rebellious, whenever we disobeyed any authority, father would cuff us upside the head and sternly tell us to do as we were told.” He leaned in to kiss her. “Always worked to, so why wouldn’t it work on dragons?”

Hands clasping the sides of his head, weaving into the curly locks she so adored, Daenerys pulled him in for a deep kiss. Their mouths melded together lovingly, Jon’s hands resting on her waist and sending tingles through her. Eventually, they broke apart for air. Dany looked into his eyes. “Sometimes you amaze me, Jon Stark.”

“And why is that?” Jon asked, pecking the tip of her nose.

Dany giggled, allowing herself to feel like the young woman she was. “You are a good man, and a great ruler.” She hugged him tightly, burying her face in his neck. “You deserve your family, Jon. You deserve all of this. You may not want all of it, but that only means you are the right one.”

For once, Jon was inclined to believe her on this. “I know.” Her silver locks were scented with lavender, refreshing him every time he smelled it. Granting him a reprieve from the battle cry. “The fighting… I long to know some peace before I die.”

She hugged him tighter. “We will win, Jon. I promise.” Dany pulled back to look at him intensely. “You need to promise that you will come back to me.” Knowing he had to leave, the knowledge threatening to split her heart in two, she couldn’t bear to even speculate that this be the last time to be with Jon. To hold him, kiss him, to whisper sweet nothings to him as they made love. “Promise me, Jon.”

“I promise.” Both rising, he pulled her to him and crashed their lips in a frantic, heated kiss. A kiss communicating their love for the other. A kiss that promised many more to come.

Tears, unbidden but unavoidable, trickled down Dany’s cheeks as Jon broke the embrace and headed for Rhaegal. Barristan, smiling sadly at the Empress, nodded. “I’ll protect him with my life.” It would be him and Ollie going with him to Essos, to defend their far flung Empire. Regrettable, but necessary. Dany barely heard, eyes trained on Jon. About to mount his dragon, he turned and looked her way - face forlorn. She felt the same.

Minutes later, seeing the green and white forms of Rhaegal and Edderon ascending ever skywards, Dany stood quietly. Not a word left her, nor a sound escaping the jaws of any man or dragon present. It felt as if the heart of Westeros had left the land.

‘Come back to me, love.’ Only the ever distant roar of Rhaegal answered her.

From the moment Ply arrived - practically leaping through the concealed entrance to the hidden dock - with the news that Meera had been taken by the College of Warlocks, the normally placid Jojen had been pacing back and forth in panic and anger. “Your people did this!” he yelled at the apprentice. Hodor flinched at the shouts, clearly agitated.

“I didn’t know.” Ply had his hands up, tears in his eyes. “They don’t tell me anything. I’m nothing to them.”

“You should have known!”

“Quiet.” Bran’s voice was quiet but authoritative - opening his mouth to respond, Jojen instead thought better of it. Sinking down to the ground, he wrapped his arms around his midsection and looked completely sullen and dejected. Resting in his chair, the young Stark leaned his chin into his
palm, deep in thought. “Ply, have the Warlocks acted any differently in recent days?” Only the young apprentice had ever visited him recently, and it had been pretty easy to convince him to leave with them rather than stay with the secretive College that shunned and abused him.

Ply shook his head. “No…” His eyes narrowed in thinking. “Well, they’ve spent more and more of their time inside their inner sanctum - much more than usual. They are in shade of the evening trances more than they are of normal continence.” It had happened before, but only once. Several years ago.

Suddenly a flash passed through Bran’s eyes, one of a thin, aristocratic man with a hooked nose and flowing gold robes shaking hands with the King of Qarth. The scene shifted rapidly, image fading and morphing into one of Meera being tied by chains in a dark chamber flanked by a circle of columns, several warlocks surrounding. He blinked, everything vanishing into reality. “She’s in the House of the Undying.”

Jojen drew a knife. “I’m going with you.”

Bran threw up a hand, stopping him. “No, you are the only one among us with sailing experience until we get Meera back.” It wasn’t much, but being marsh-dwellers meant the Crannogmen knew how to man a boat. “You and Ply stay here and wait for us. If I don’t come back by the time the sun is near highest in the sky, leave for Meereen.” Waiting until his fellow northman nodded, Bran looked to Hodor. The gentle giant wordlessly walked to him and scooped him up, chair and all.

“Hodor, hodor.”

Somehow, Bran understood exactly what he was saying. “We’ll get her back.”

“Hooo… dor.”

“Yes, I know she does… I think I do as well.” Hodor seemed mollified, grinning toothily.

Closing his eyes, the son of the North found the old man’s voice ringing in his ears. “Be ready, Brandon Stark. You face the most trying test of your life so far.”

“You know?” The statement was flat, less a question rather than both that and the answer. “You know why they have taken Meera.” If Hodor saw interest in whatever Bran was saying - seemingly to no one - he did not show it, nor stop his steady plodding toward the outskirts of the city.

A sigh filled Bran’s hearing. ‘They want to lure you… to get to me.’

“Why?”

‘You shall find out soon enough Brandon Stark, though I suspect you already have the answer.’ Opening his eyes, gazing at the towering vestige of the House of the Undying bathed in the low light of sunset, Bran found that he did.
The Keeper of the Dawn

A full moon hovered above, resting directly at the center of the dark sky. Its light bearing down atop the House of the Undying - sandstone pylon towering over the rocky, lush landscape of hills and olive trees close to the coastline outside of Qarth - gave it a glow almost mystical. Oddly, not a star was in sight. The sky was a completely bare, inky black.

The observation was not odd to Bran Stark. “The sparkling gods in the heavens flee.”

“The clash of the mystic commences,” stated the voice of the unknown old man. “Not the great battle - not even a battle of the great war - but a clash nonetheless. One that will define history.”

“Such destiny will lay itself out before us how it may,” Bran said to the voice, sounding as if talking to the open air, or to the faint crash of the ocean waves onto the cliffs. “My goal is to get Meera back.”

“Hodor, Hodor, Hodor.” Increasingly agitated, the gentle giant looked frantically for an entrance. Any entrance. “Hodor!” He couldn’t let the kind Lady Meera be stuck here, imprisoned by the wraith-like warlocks.

Eyes closing, Bran searched himself for the answer. Flashes came to him in fits and starts. A crow flapping its wings, diving for the familiar sandstone tower. A cluster of souls, magic pulsing within and a tied up female alongside them. Bony hands pressing against a particular place in the wall. The crow’s beak pointing. Pointing…

‘Brandon Stark. Here. Here…’

A raised hand silenced the ranting fear. “Hodor, there.” He pointed at an unremarkable point on the wall, no different than the others. There were no distinguishing marks or features, but to Bran it was as if a bullseye adorned the spot. A deep inhale, then exhale, stoking the ancient mystic core that existed within him. He slowly reached out with his hands from his position in Hodor’s arms. Warm skin touched the cool stone, magic leaving Bran in an unseen wave as he silently chanted the ancient tongue of the warlock.

Startling Hodor but unseen yet by Bran - too absorbed in his task - finely carved cracks appeared in the sandstone, a large entranceway forming as the rectangular block swung open on nonexistent hinges. “Let’s go, Hodor,” Bran finally said, face flat as Hodor plodded inside.

Aside from the reverse shadow on the floor, cast by the moonlight streaming through the entranceway, the interior was pitch black. What little illumination the moon provided showed a bare antechamber. Stairways lined the walls, leading upward. Grabbing a torch lining the wall, he flicked at it with his hand, magic sparking the front into a flickering flame. “Well, Hodor. Up the stairs.”

“Hodor. Hooooooodor.” Both jumped slightly as the stone block slammed shut in the entranceway, but continued on wordlessly. The stairwell seemed to wrap around the tower, leading on and on. Mindless step after mindless step. Not one feature distinguishing one patch of wall from the other. A slight mystic force tingled Bran’s skin. Ever present but weak, like the sound of a raging river that was a distance away.

Suddenly, a slight gust of wind - more like a soft exhale than an actual gale - passed by. The torch extinguished, casting them into a silent darkness. “Hodor. Hodor. Hodor.” The gentle giant began to panic, struggling to keep his footing on the staircase while Bran willed him to calm down.
The sound may have been low, barely audible in even the laid back atmosphere of a calm meadow - but in the pitched darkness of the House of the Undying it boomed like the greatest explosion. Feeling Hodor tense, Bran swiveled his head around. Nothing. There was no one, despite the sound. Only darkness, pitch black all around. In one area, the darkness seemed to shimmer…

His eyes widened. “Hodor!” Warning in vain, nearly half a dozen spectral images surrounded the gentle giant, clinking of chains and iron shackles mixing with his panicked shouts. Bran found the tight grip on his body slacking, weakening. Bran tried to bring forth the magic from within his core, but a sharp blow to the head from the hilt of a knife disoriented him. A quick yank back buckled Hodor’s knees, and with a pained shout he fell.

He lost his grip on Bran, the young warlock falling upon the ground - barely able to register the pain, the floor disappeared below him into further blackness.

Green stretched out as far as the eye could see, mountains peeking into the cloudless sky with nary a snowcap on them. It was beautiful. A serene sight if there ever was one. Bran stood quietly, a small, childlike smile on his face as he surveyed the landscape. It felt so much like home, the land of his birth. A sense of pleasant nostalgia filled him.

A muffled cry shook him out of his reverie. Turning to his left, Bran saw a small figure race into a grove of rocks. Pointed into the air, arranged in perfect circles, they surrounded a simple weirwood tree. Taking a few steps closer, Bran’s eyes widened at the tiny forms gathered around the tree. Mottled, dark skin framed the bodies of small children - grass and leaves lining their hair. “The children of the forest,” he said to no one in particular. None could hear him anyway.

Tied to the tree was a man, fit and young. He struggled against his restraints, casting hateful looks at the children surrounding him. They clapped their hands together in reverence, while the middle one - their leader by the looks of it - approached the restrained First Man. Snapping his teeth through his gag, squirming with all the power he could muster, the man was nevertheless unable to stop what happened next. With a mere silent chant of ancient magic, the child of the forest plunged a sliver of dragonglass into the man’s heart.

A wave of mystical energy forced Bran to his knees, filling his head with silent yet piercing screams of pain and agony. Struggling, he lifted his head up to gaze at the condemned man. Instead of lifelessness, the man’s gaze grew cold as his eyes formed a brilliant ice blue. Suddenly, the picture vanished. The pain dissipated. Breathing hard, Bran placed his hand over his heart to steady himself as he lifted himself back up. The grass was gone. Greenery gone. Everything around him was dead, shriveled and frosted with angry dark clouds circling overhead. Slowly walking through the death and cold around him, Bran did not think this was the North. Westeros clearly, but it could have been anywhere.

“Clearly he lies!” At the sound of the angry voice, Bran hurried to the top of a small molehill dotted with dead bushes. A party of warriors clustered around a single man of shaggy silver hair. Wounds dotted his body, clearly a great fighter in how he stood tall and strong against impossible odds. Atop a massive litter rested a gaudy figure. Draped in silks and adorned with jewels, the only feature of his visible to Bran was a thick thatch of golden hair. “He wishes us, as our crops fail and livestock die, to journey north to take on ‘monsters?’” The warriors around him erupted into laughter.

“I have seen them with my own eyes, sire,” the silver-haired man said. “And haven’t I shown myself to be a man of integrity in the sight of the gods?”
A hiss left the sovereign’s mouth. “The gods have granted me their blessing to rule over this entire land, and I’ll be damned if some upstart warrior seeks to question their judgement.” He waved him off. “Kill him and be done with it.”

Clubs, and swords raised, the warriors moved forward to finish the man before them. So unlike the others, silver locks alien to the blacks, browns, and reds of the others. ‘Perhaps it is why they worship the gold one,’ thought Bran. He had remembered that gold hair was not found among the First Men - that it was intermarriage with the Andals over the millennia that brought it. The man knelt, back to the ruler as his lips moved in silent prayer.

Just as the warriors were about to swarm him, with a loud cry he leapt up, swung around, and threw his spear directly at the golden god among men. Spearpoint ran right through, bright blood seeping through the gaudy fabric. With a gasp the living god collapsed on the ground. Dead.

Bran knew just as the other warriors did. Staring at the silver man, they gaped in awe. A god could not be killed - he was no god.

Hearing a clang of metal on metal behind him, Bran turned to find himself in a hovel. Sticks and sod connected to a hollowed out scoop of a hillside. The howling of blizzard winds was deafening, but heat and stagnant air engulfed the hovel. Hunched over a blacksmith’s forge was the same man. Whereas despite his wounds at the confrontation, here they were far worse. Bandages covered his body, dirt and scars everywhere as he swung the final blow of the hammer upon his creation. His face was gaunt, eyes deep in their sockets from pain and lack of rest. Only his hair, matted to his forehead, showed any vibrancy - silver shining in the firelight.

Eyes focused on the man, Bran watched as he gingerly lifted the item worked on for a hundred days and a hundred nights while the world collapsed around him. Bran looked in awe. A longsword, glowing with the heat of the fire, etched in red runes of ancient magic. Instead of being proud of his creation, the man’s gaze was that of anguish. “Must I?” he asked, voice forlorn.

“You must, dear husband.” Voice making itself known, Bran looked to the right to find a tall and shapely woman, fair northern beauty evident despite her tattered rags. A tear fell down her cheek, but she remained strong and composed. “Fulfill your destiny.”

“But I cannot kill you. I love you, wife,” he practically wailed.

“I do not want to die, but I shall for the greater good.” She smiled at him, baring her breast. “I shall see you in the afterlife. Come to the most beautiful meadow, and I shall be waiting.” Tears cascading down his cheeks, the man drove forth the sword. In the burst of great flame that followed, engulfing all in bright white light, Bran could almost see the face of the man morph into…

Jon’s.

“Hmmmm-ahhhh... Hmmmm-ahhhh... Hmmmm-ahhhh....”

First thing to penetrate his unconscious mind was the low humming. Pain and soreness filled his body, torso and shoulders aching from his fall. The steady chants resonated in his ears, pounding the inside of his head like rhythmic beats of a drum. Eyes fluttering open, Bran blinked away the blurriness clouding his vision.

A dozen warlocks, thin lips like shriveled blueberries from shade of the evening, stood in a large semicircle. At the center was a large pit of fire, flames a dull red. On a raised platform was Pyat Pree, gnarled fingers sprinkling mixes of frankincense and other mystical powders into the flame. “All knowing one,” he proclaimed. “Emerge from your solitude in the icy blast. Bring forth your
knowledge and your power.” Another flick of the wrist sent a dash of crystals into the fire, flames sputtering into a bluish shimmer. “We have brought your apprentice, and the one he loves.”

Staying quiet, Bran’s heart clenched as he saw Meera, shackled in chains close to Pyat Pree. Only a few feet away from him was Hodor, chained as well. The gentle giant seemed despondent, while Meera sported a mix of withering defiance towards the warlocks and loving concern towards him - likely thinking him hurt. ‘I guess she does love me,’ he thought to himself. The prospect seemed oddly calming.

“Bring her forth.”

Two warlocks picked Meera up by her chained shoulders, dragging her forward to right by the dias. Rage burning within him, Bran’s hands reached out to grip the cracks and edges on the floor, slowly but surely dragging himself forward.

This was not lost on Pyat Pree. “Ah, the great Brandon Stark has awoken.” Reaching into a jeweled box behind him, he pulled out a beating blue heart - free from any body, but in motion nonetheless. Bran could just feel the intense magic contained within. “You have something we need most desperately, young Bran.”

Hauling himself till he sat, Bran glared at him. “What?”

“The one you have been talking to in your visions, the Three Eyed Raven.” Gears clicking in his head, Bran nevertheless remained impassive, looking at Meera. “You do realize, Bran of House Stark, what knowledge the Three Eyed Raven holds within his mind.”

Bran’s eyes never left Meera’s. “I haven’t the faintest idea.”

Pyat Pree smiled wryly, face a grinning skeleton. “Immortality.” He chuckled, stepping down from the dias. “Such is the great mystery, on how to bring eternity from the heavens. There is only one known to have done so - a Red Priestess from Asshai, though her techniques have been lost to the ages. Warlocks for thousands of years have tried and failed to find the answer, but when Daenerys Targaryen’s dragons hatched and brought magic back to this world...” His hands illuminated, pressing the energy on Meera’s cheeks. “The answer came to me in a vision. The same Three Eyed Raven that has graced your visions.”

Anger coursed through Bran at the thought of the sickly wraith touching Meera. “How does the Three Eyed Raven allow immortality.”

“A gift from the Children of the Forest,” a chinless warlock answered.

His scarred colleague nodded. “The original inhabitants of Westeros. Granting a man eternal life through their ancient magic.”

The vision from before flashed in Bran’s mind. ‘The others.’ Through creating White Walkers, the Children granted immortality.

“Of course, the process created nothing but great malevolence,” Pyat Pree conceded. “But a great mystic sign filled all disciples of the art of sorcery. In this age, the Children succeeded where they had once failed. Thanks to none other than the Three Eyed Raven.” Confusion filling his expression, Bran saw the warlock’s smile turn to a scowl. “Bring him to us.”

“I have no idea what you want me to do,” he said, honestly. “The ‘Three Eyed Raven appears to me
at random, and I don’t have a clue as to what the Children of the Forest are.”

“Lies!” hissed an earless warlock.

“A child of the North of Westeros knows the ancient stories,” stated a chinless warlock, annoyance tingling his voice.

Grabbing Meera, Pyat Pree jerked her forward. “My patience is running out, Bran Stark. We have brought you into our home and gave you training, but you spit at our generosity. Bring the Three Eyed Raven here, or watch your love burn.” He held her over the fire, ready to drop her in. “A person deserves to be with their love. Do not destroy such for someone you don’t even know.” Meera shook her head, shaking from fear.

“You know what you must do, Brandon Stark.”

‘You’re right,’ Bran said silently, almost envisioning the old man nodding to him. “I’ll do it.”

“No Bran!” Meera began to shout, only to be thrown roughly to the side.

“It will be alright, Meera. I promise.” He smiled at her. “Do not worry about me. I love you.”

A flicker of joy as he said it turned into sorrow at the circumstances. “I love you too.”

Smile returned to his face, Pyat Pree stepped forward, heart in hand. “Good. You have chosen wisely. For you and your lady love.” He handed the beating heart to him. “With this talisman, the power of the gods rests within you. The Three Eyed Raven shall be in your grasp. Bring him forth to deliver his knowledge.”

“Bring him forth!” chanted the others.

Heart clutched in his hands, Bran closed his eyes, allowing its magic to seep inside him. ‘You know what you must do.’ Realization hit him, all the knowledge and skill taught to him. Laid open to him. Enabled by the mystic power given to him. His hands took on the blue tint of the heart, light covering them. Soon, it covered his whole body. Energy flew into his legs, tingling into burning as sensation returned to them for the first time since that horrible fall so long ago.

Excited, it soon turned into puzzled horror on Pyat Pree’s face as Bran began to rise up - levitating in the air before dropping on his legs. The glow covered him as he stood upright. “What is this?!?” he hissed. Meera watched, jaw agape. “Get the guards!” he shouted.

Eyes glowing a bright blue, the heart dropped from Bran’s hands as the last bit of magic seeped from it. Spectral images shimmered from his body, splitting around as they drew the mirror copies of the knife Bran had kept on his person. “Justice upon the wicket,” each stated, going after the warlocks. Many screamed as the knives ripped through blood and skin.

“Kill the girl!” Pyat Pree hissed. Two of the warlocks grabbed at her, Meera kicking and biting at them. None of his duplicate forms close, Bran’s supercharged mind acted on instinct. Eyes rolling in the back of his head, suddenly the panicked Hodor straightened, purpose filling him. With one jerk of his strong arms, he ripped the chain from it’s hook on the wall and charged. “A warg?” Pyat Pree murmured with shock just as Hodor lifted him up and tossed him screaming into the fire. Similar fate rested for the warlocks assaulting Meera. The girl watched as Hodor broke the chains binding her before turning towards her love.
He had collapsed on the ground, warging sapping his magical energy and leaving his legs crippled once more. “Bran!” she screamed, rushing to his side - just as the scramble of feet were heard from outside the door. “The soldiers! Hodor, hold the door!” Still connected to Bran, he bounded to the door and pressed all his strength upon it as the guards attempted to enter.

“They’ve buttressed it tight!” Muffled shouts of the guards filtered through the thick wood. “Bring the battering ram!”

Grabbing the prone Bran by the shoulders, Meera felt her muscles ache as she pulled him to the open window. “Hodor! Hold the door!” she screamed.

“Heave! Ho!”

Hodor looked in great pain and anguish, body jolting each time the guards outside the door hit it with their ram. Only the ever persistent voice and a deep gut instinct to protect the two children struggling to move to the window kept him firm.

“Hold the door!” They were halfway across the floor.

“Heave! Ho!” The hinges strained.

“Hold the door!” Meera lost her grip and nearly fell, recovering quickly.

“Heave! Ho!” Something splintered, showering his back with stinging cuts.

“Hold the door!” Meera looked behind her to see the window only a few feet away.

“Heave! Ho!” Part of the doorway broke, leaving a hole in which a guard rammed his short sword through. Hodor let out a pained cry as it sliced through his arm.

Below, Meera could see the crystal clear waters, hauntingly still in the pre-dawn darkness. Bran still out of it, they had no choice - they would have to jump. “Hodor!” She couldn’t leave him. “Come on!”

Spotting Meera gesturing madly to him, Hodor broke from his post split seconds before the battering ram crashed into the weak hinges, shearing them off the jam and sending the heavy oak clattering on the floor. Crossbow bolts smacked off stone walls as Hodor ran hunched over. One hit his back with a wet slap. Gritting his teeth, it did not slow him down. Soon he was at the ledge with Meera and Bran, arms out to scoop up the young nobleman.

“JUMP!” Leaping, the three of them fell into the waters below.

Spray drenched all present on the seawall. Ironborn roustabouts and sailors went about their missions without a second glance. For Petyr Baelish, child of the Vale and one who had no experience with the sea until moving from his ancestral home to King’s Landing at two decades and a half from his first name day, misery shrouded him. ‘Tywin must have had a laugh over making me master of ships.’ Soaked to the bone despite the oiled cloak draped about his shoulder, another wave nearly knocked him off his feet. Why they called these lands the Stormlands was no longer lost on him.

His companion wasn’t affected at all. On the other hand, his reaction was the opposite.

“Whooooooo!” whooped Euron Greyjoy, arms extended as another blast of seawater slammed into him. Not even bracing himself, the man wasn’t affected in the slightest. He snarled with tongue out, catching another spray with relish. Hair matted to his skin and eyes were wide with near insanity, but
he didn’t seem to care. “Bring it on! Fuck you ocean! You are my bitch!” Laughs resonated from him, defying the waters that provided him with such power.

“I see where the Ironborn reputation comes from,” Littlefinger muttered. Either tied up at several earthen or solid wooden piers or out bobbing in the strait between Storm’s End and Tarth - occupied since Selwyn Tarth bent the knee to Daenerys Targaryen - were the mass of the Ironborn fleet. Ships massive and fast, surface sharks ready to bring might and terror on the waves for King Joffrey.

“There’s a reason we have been undefeated on the sea. My cunt of a brother never understood that, bogging us down in mindless wars on the land, letting mainland shits land on Pyke.” Euron spat into the dark waters, mouth curled in a menacing snarl illuminated by a lightning bolt. He tapped his skull. “I was the only Ironborn capable of thinking. Need allies on the land, so that we are secure to rule the sea.” He threw his arms wide. “The sea is our bitch!” A cheer rang out from all Ironborn that heard him, but the thunder drowned it out.

Hit with another wave of salty spray, Littlefinger pursed his lips. “Quite. You do have a penchant for plotting and planning.” He smirked slightly. “Goes with the fact you considered an offer to Queen Daenerys similar to your offer to his Divine Majesty.” While not as extensive as Varys or Qyburn, he had his ‘little birds’ as well.

Turning to stare at him, Littlefinger’s smirk disappeared as Euron merely grinned, eyes wide with partial madness. “I have nothing to hide, Baelish. Only people who end up drowning at sea after being around me… accidentally of course.” The grin widened at the other man’s paling face.

Laughing, his entire upper body shaking with mirth, Euron hopped off the pier into the waiting skiff. It bobbed and weaved in the water - motion causing Littlefinger to cover his mouth to keep his last meal from spewing forth - but both the strong Iron Islands wood and the Drowned King stayed firm. “Tell those fuckers in King’s Landing that after I send every single fucking dragon cunt into the depths of the ocean, that I want the pussy promised me!”

“There shall be no doubt about that, Greyjoy,” Littlefinger yelled back over the booming thunder. ‘We shall both have our woman.’

Raising his fist into the air, Euron turned to his men. “Time to claim our birthright boys! We rule the fucking waves! Death stares us in the face but we care not!”

A single archer, dipping his arrow into burning tar, angled the flame ever skywards and let it fly. The projectile arced above, orange-red glow penetrating the blackness of the rain and sky…

And then, in a resounding wave of sound… “WHAT IS DEAD MAY NEVER DIE!” Heralded by the cheering sailors, a wave of rockets shot up from the hundreds of ships. A bright, blindsing glow of orange mesmerized Littlefinger. For a man always hedging, always scheming and stabbing in the back - always forced to deal with people like Renly Baratheon and Euron Greyjoy that would kill him as soon as look at him - that moment was the first time in his life that he felt he had definitively chosen the winning side.

Could even dragons match such power?

“We made it!” Jojen laughed, running his hand through his hair in relief. The five travellers rested in their boat, looking back at the chaos that had begun to engulf Qarth as the realization sunk in that their King was dead. “Thank the Old Gods for that…” Suddenly stopping, his eyes rolled back into his skull as he collapsed on the ground. Violent tremors seized him, the childhood illness rearing its
Meera was the first to notice. “Jojen!” Quickly she knelt beside him, expertly cradling his thrashing head in her arms to prevent him from cracking his skull on the wooden hull. “Ply, grab his legs and keep him steady.” The apprentice warlock did as requested, horror on his face. “This should last several minutes, so hold tight.”

Watching with a distant glint in his eye, a quizzical realization came to Bran. An instinct. “Go, Brandon Stark. Show them your gift.” Voice encouraging, pressing him forward, he closed his eyes and let the mystical energy course through him. Power shot through his legs, draining him but once again bringing movement to the once dead limbs. Slowly, he rose and knelt beside Meera. Brow knit, concentrating on keeping her brother alive and unharmed, she did not realize Bran’s movements till his hand touched Jojen’s forehead. A soft glow of blue light shone where palm met forehead, and then stopped.

Along with Jojen’s tremors.

Where they had once been engulfing his entire form in jerking, painful movements, the boy was as still as a sleeping baby. He rested his head on his sister’s lap, lost in a serene sleep. All three of the others watched with jaws open as Bran stood again, pressing his hand to Hodor’s shoulder. “Hodor?” He winced as the glow engulfed him.

“Thank you, dear Willis,” Bran spoke, slowly lowering himself to the hull before the magic faded away and his legs gave out. “I hope this begins to repay all you’ve done for me.”

The broken man opened his mouth to speak his one word. “You don’t need to do that, I was happy to…” He stopped abruptly, the words out of his mouth the first he had ever spoken since that day in the courtyard long ago. “What… what did you do?” Overwhelmed, he collapsed onto the hull, fainting from shock.

Staring at the one she loved, eyes as wide as saucers, Meera gently raised her hand until it cupped his cheek. “Who are you, Bran?”

A ghost of a smile crossing his lips, Bran gazed at the morning sun just peeking above the horizon - red orb casting beauty into the clear sky. “I am the keeper,” he said, voice cryptic. “The keeper of the Dawn.” Failing to parse what he meant, Meera simply pulled him into a tight embrace.
“We need to attack now!” Arms splayed on the massive map table, Theodosius Caryn stared straight at the Hand of the Empress. “We do nothing sitting around here like toy soldiers waiting for some child’s hand to move us.”

“Now where would you suggest we attack, General?” Tyrion replied, flippance in his voice. At the head of the table, looking out the window at the massive encampment spread out across the snow, the Empress said nothing - not a word had left her since the war council started nearly an hour ago. Daenerys had merely listened while her commanders yelled at each other.

Theodosius pointed directly at King’s Landing. “Have the Empress take her dragon directly at King’s Landing. Hit it hard and fast before the enemy has a chance to react.” Nods of agreement came from across the table.

Tyrion frowned. “If you attack King’s Landing with the dragons, hundreds of thousands will die in the firestorms.”

“As you can see, she only has one dragon now, General,” added Sansa. Hand in the North, so far she had joined Daenerys in keeping removed from the arguments between the military minds. “With His Majesty in Essos with the other two grown dragons, the defenses of King’s Landing could overwhelm even Balerion.”

“Fortune favors the bold, Lady Stark.” Firmly in Theodosius’ camp, Tyene Martell leaned forward. Alluring and seductive in a fearsome way, she looked the part of the sand snake she had once been. “Fortune certainly favored Jaime Lannister when he assaulted Sunspear and killed my father. Your brother, no, Lord Tyrion?” The Imp merely glowered, knowing his family owed hers a great debt. Scowl both dangerous and striking on her Dornish features, she turned back to Sansa. “Let us dispense of the fiction that those we seek to attack are innocent.”

It was Sansa’s turn to scowl. “Not the slaves. Not the people.” She remembered the riot she had been thrust in the middle of prior to Renly’s attack. The desperate starvation endured by the smallfolk and their deep, passionate anger at the nobility that put them through such hell. Much as she hated those that attacked her, Sansa pitied and sympathized with the fate of the larger grouping. “What honor do we have if we kill those innocent of Joffrey’s crimes?”

Tyene was not convinced, thoroughly cynical. “In war, one must seek to win. Honor has no place. Your father should have realized this, as should you after all you’ve been through.”

“Lady Martell.” One could hear a pin drop in the room after the Empress voiced herself for the first time. Turning, her face was set in suppressed annoyance. “Lady Stark is the Hand to my Husband in his capacity as King in the North - and to me in my capacity as Queen in the North. You will treat her with all the respect such title affords.” She narrowed her eyes. “Are we clear?”

Backing up slightly, Tyene shifted her gaze to the floor in supplication. “Yes, your Majesty.”

Nodding, Dany looked at Theodosius. “General. Why do you believe I should risk my dragon and the lives of many innocents?”

“Beg your pardon, your Majesty, but this is not what I am suggesting.” He encircled the capitol with his finger. “The main Lannister army is encamped here. There are other forces in the Reach and Crownlands, along with a garrison at Lannisport, but Tywin’s main host is holding strong in the
capitol or fortress towns around it. A limited strike by Balerion on military installations will push them out into the open ground, where a pincer move - one led by me and one led by Lord Stark - will meet them on the field from both sides and crush them.”

“If that’s the case, why don’t we just wait here,” suggested Lord Royce. “Get behind defenses and have Tywin attack us. If he loses the capitol as a base, he’ll want to attack us to regain the initiative.”

“Or just attack King’s Landing.” Margaery Tyrell’s comment seemed to be well received by the other lords. “Capture it while Tywin is out in the open, then have him attack the walls. It would fail just as Renly’s attack did.”

Rolling his eyes, Theodosius ran his hands through his sandy blonde hair in frustration. “You’re thinking too linearly, my Lords. Geographic goals will only lead us to ruin. It’s the Lannister armies that must be the main target. Search,” he jabbed his finger at the marker representing Tywin’s army. “And destroy them one by one. Without armies, Joffrey could nominally control all the cities in Westeros and it wouldn’t mean fucking anything.”

“And how do you know Tywin would fall for this sort of maneuver?” Edmure Tully asked.

“Because he had fallen for it once before, during the Reyne-Tarbeck Rebellion. An infiltration force burned down the military barracks in Lannisport to force him out to attack us.” His fists clenched. “Problem was we didn’t expect him to go straight for Tarbeck Hall and the rest...” Trailing off, no one from Westeros needed for him to continue. The Rains of Castamere was a tune known by all. “He won’t go out willingly though, no matter how much of our army we parade in front of the city walls. The only way to force Tywin out of King’s Landing is Balerion, your Majesty.”

The room was silent, taking it all in. “I agree with Caryn’s plan.” Heads turned to the Queen of Thorns. “Your Majesty, I know you seek the adoration of the common people. For peacetime, it would be an admirable trait. Your brother Rhaegar sought the same, and he got it. But he ended up embroiled in a war - not his fault, mind you.” With what they all knew it changed the blame completely. “But all his adoration got him nothing in the end. Nobles, smallfolk.” She waved her hand dismissively. “All children. They must fear you before they are to obey you.”

Sighing, Daenerys wished for Jon. He completed her, was the calm to her passion - except in the bedroom, she thought, fighting a grin. But he wasn’t here. The Emperor was flying to Meereen, to defend the Empire she had forged through her own determination. Part of her wanted to follow Caryn’s plan and ride Balerion to bring fire and blood upon her enemies. Part of her also knew that she would be breaking her own pledge to do away with the wheel. Daenerys knew where Jon would stand. “I will not consign innocent people to death, General Caryn. That is the kind of needless savagery that we are fighting to end.”

Crossing his arms, Caryn took the defeat of his plan with stoic silence. “So then how do you plan on taking the Iron Throne then?” Olenna Tyrell, blunt as always. “By asking nicely?”

It was the Hand to the Empress that answered. “It is simple really, and we must start by looking at the very nature of our enemy.” Due to his deformity, Tyrion was unable to well enough reach across the map table, so he stepped down from his stool and moved towards the other side. “There are two different realms in Joffrey’s hands. The first is centered in the capitol itself.” Reaching the side directly facing the Crownlands, he nudged aside Lord Glover and Grey Worm to make room for himself. “Within he is a god, an ultimate sovereign that secures himself through a mystic following among the battered populace. They see him as omnipotent.”

Snorts and scoffs filled the room. “Send in the dragons and that omnipotence will literally go up in smoke,” quipped Tyene Martell, drawing laughs and whoops all around. Only a raised hand from the
Empress quieted the room down.

Tyrion waited for silence. “Quite, but first.” He gestured to the rest of the realm. “Outside the capitol Joffrey isn’t the prime mover. That is rather my father in the beloved King’s stead.” Sarcasm dripped from his voice at the last characterization. “Lord Tywin Lannister is a great commander under any objective measure, but his true greatness comes from the political side. Joffrey only rules the lands he does and counts on the support of the allies he has because of my father’s wheeling and dealing - all enabled by leveraging the assets of House Lannister.”

“All this well and good, Hand Tyrion,” Grey Worm stated, deepness of his accent lessening the more time he spent in Westeros. “But please make your point.”

“I’ve fucking skinned mammoths in less time than this speech,” grumbled Tormund.

Even Tyrion grinned at that. “I’m sure you have, Lord Giantsbane of Hardhome.” Noticing the still impassive Empress slightly amused, he continued. “It is from these lands outside the capitol that my father manages to get the food and resources to keep the millions within it from going hungry - to keep Joffrey’s projects running on schedule. Take those away, and his little fief collapses.

“House Lannister has done this and dominated the political sphere of Westeros by leveraging the riches of the Westerlands. Gold, ore, men, all of it is at the disposal of the crown. And the center of this…” Walking back to where he had been, Tyrion smacked his hand upon a particular spot on the map. “Casterly Rock.”

“Casterly Rock is a fortress. It doesn’t need a massive defending force,” Theodosius shot back. “You’re proposing we sacrifice undoubted numbers of men to defeat… what? Five hundred troops? A thousand?”

“And what troops do you seek to send on this assault, Lord Tyrion?” Having plotted - and lost before it even began - an assault on the Rock during the war of the Four Kings, Robb was equally skeptical of this. “Denying them the gold of the Westerlands is important, yes, but as the general said, their armies and food preserves are concentrated in the Reach and the Crownlands. Sending too large a force there would leave us open to assault.”

Motioning to one of the guards, Tyrion watched as several markers were moved towards the Rock. “I don’t intend to send everyone. Grey Worm and the Unsullied, backed up by Edmure Tully and the Riverlands forces, will march on the Rock and Lannisport. Threatening the Iron Islands and blocking the Westerlands gold will force Tywin to move his forces to retaliate - after which General Caryn attacks into the Reach and Lord Stark attacks into the Crownlands.” Finishing, Tyrion knocked over the icon representing King Joffrey, most of the lords clapping with approval.

“General.” Meeting dismissed, Tyene bounded up to Theodosius outside of the map room. “Lord Tyrion’s plan is… quite interesting though.”

The general muttered an unflattering word under his breath. “I have no doubt he knows his father’s political and personal thinking, but as a military mind the Imp is out of his depth.”

Frowning internally as her suspicions were confirmed, Tyene kept her face impassive. The general was smart and competent but she didn’t trust him - seemed to have the same demons that engulfed her mother and sisters. Blinding them from reason. “How so?”

Glancing around, Theodosius pulled Tyene into an alcove. “You have as little love for the Lannisters as I do, Lady Martell.” This woman was as much of a snake as the family’s history suggested, but he felt she could be of use. “Tywin won’t be stupid enough to act desperately from a predictable move
such as this, but I cannot prove it.”

“And you think I could?” she asked, annoyed.

“Why not? You seemed oftly familiar with that sellsword during the parlay.” He smirked at the flash of shock on her face. “Try double checking when you want to be alone in a dark hallway.”

Crossing her arms, Tyene gave him her best death glare. “What is it that you want, General Caryn?”

Doors shutting behind her by the two Stark bannermen, Daenerys let out an exhausted breath that she had been holding. Quickly finding a chair, she quite unregally plopped into it. “Gods,” breathed Sansa, equally splayed out on her chair adjacent to her. “For just standing around and listening to people argue, this sucks the life out of you.”

Chuckling, Catelyn Stark leaned on the lip of the table. “Oh, the travails of youth. A highborn woman gets used to it, believe me.” Grief from the loss of her uncle fading since they had held his funeral several days before, she thrust herself back into the life she knew best - that of the elder advisor to her Empress. “Casterly Rock will not fall as easily as Lord Tyrion thinks.”

“The Unsullied are the best troops in the world. I have full confidence in Grey Worm to complete his objective.” He and Missandei were likely saying their goodbyes at this point… ‘Good for her.’ A flicker of melancholy crossed her. While happy for the translator as she found the man she was meant to be with, hers was away from her. Away from their family. ‘Love is the death of duty,’ as Uncle Aemon had told her once back at Winterfell. ‘And duty is the death of love,’ she finished in her mind.

But her duty would not take away her love - her family. Even if they had to depart for now. “Sister?” she asked. “Do you leave for the North tomorrow?”

Her sister by marriage glanced at her. “I’m leaving tonight, avoid any unwanted attention.”

Winterfell had to be readied, and she had spoken to Ser Jorah, Lord Glover, and Lady Mormont - the latter of which was traveling with her - about how best to fortify it against the dead. All the southerners but Robb, Margaery, and Davos looked upon their Emperor’s proclamations of the Long Night with incredulity, while she doubted the Dothraki or Ghiscari understood the legends of Westeros’ past. But the Northerners knew they weren’t myths, Wildlings first hand. It was up to them to hold the line. “My offer still stands, Daenerys. The children will be safe in Winterfell…”

“My children stay with me.” Dany’s firm tone left no wiggle room. Sansa’s points were valid - more than valid - but her heart could only take so much. “I’ve had to bid farewell to Jon. I will not let them leave as well.” The love for her family weakened her, but Daenerys couldn’t bother to care. They all came first, their entire wolfpack as Arya called it.

Sharing a look with her daughter, Catelyn interjected. “Daenerys, if the Lannisters decide to march on Riverrun, wouldn’t it be imperative for them to be safe from such harm?”

An excellent point. “The twins are safest with me,” Daenerys replied, half to herself. “They have their guards, my dragons, and Ghost to protect them.” Her eyes darted to the marker for King’s Landing. “If Tywin decides to march, and only then, I will consider it.”

Before either could respond, one of the bannermen standing outside opened the door. “Your Majesty.” He bowed. “The Crown Prince and the Princess wish to see you.”

Her expression immediately brightened. “Send them in.”

Stepping out of the way, soon the twins rushed passed the guard. “Muhna!” Before even a few
seconds passed, their arms were wrapped around the comforting form of their mother.

Few could bring Daenerys the pure joy that her children brought her. “Sweetlings, have you finished your lessons?”

“Yes, Muhna,” Little Arya replied. “The Maester here isn’t as smart or fun as Uncle Aemon.”

Oh how carefree they were, it warmed Daenerys’ heart. Her children - imperials though they were - deserved as much of their childhood as they could. Denied to her and Jon, but she would be damned if Arya and Rhaegar had to suffer. “Now now, your lessons aren’t supposed to be fun. They are to teach you how to be better rulers.”

“Just like their grandmother,” Catelyn observed, grinning softly. “I remember she never liked sitting still one moment.”

“Can’t Aunt Sansa teach us?” Rhaegar asked. “She’s far smarter than the stuffy old Maester.”

Appreciating the vote of confidence, Sansa stood and pulled Rhaegar to her, kissing her nephew on the forehead. “Much as I would love to, little dragon, your aunt is bidding you farewell for a little while. I’m journeying to Winterfell tonight.”

Rhaegar’s face fell. “But I’ll miss you.”

Arya walked over to hug her aunt. “First poppa and now you? We haven’t seen Uncle Bran in ages.” Her face was sad. “I thought the pack had to stick together.”

At that moment, none of the women knew what to tell them. Unless one was mad like Joffrey or vain like Robert Baratheon, the seat of power only brought sorrow.

Over the roar of the winds and currents high above the ground, Jon could hear Ollie’s gasp behind him. The young squire had spent the first eleven years of his life in the same village in the Gift - now he was journeying across the world on dragonback following Jon picking him up. Below stretched the vast expanse of Meereen, a city whose only match in size was King’s Landing and Braavos, Great Pyramid dwarfing all before it. Jon couldn’t blame Ollie’s excitement and awe. The Emperor felt awe over the breadth and majesty of his domain as well.

He could already sense Rhaegal - and Edderon off his right wing - perking up at the sight of his childhood home. It caused a grin to form on Jon’s face. “Alright boy, down we go.” Hooting, Rhaegal beat his wings and angled down through one of the puffy clouds dotting the sky.

Daenerys had often told him while they were intertwined in bed that she often felt the freest in her life while on dragonback - in more ways than one, he had deliciously found out. Impure thoughts aside, the young, carefree dragon within him emerged on those uneventful days astride Rhaegal. Wind whipping through his hair, the majesty of the earth below him, he allowed it to overwhelm the brooding, haggard Emperor. Joyous laughs left him at the exhilaration. “Whooooo!” Raising a fist in the air as he cheered, an excited Rhaegal looped in the - both rider and dragon enjoying immensely.

Arms wrapped tight around a single spine, Ollie had a rather different thought. ‘The Emperor has gone mad.’

After long months of quiet skies, men glanced up from their jobs, citizens darting their heads out of windows, and children in the streets pointing with wonder as dragons returned to Meereen. Rhaegal banked wide, passing the great Targaryen banner. Eyes scanning the city, he found a large group of
soldiers in tight formation in the city square. “Looks like they rolled out the welcoming committee for us,” he shouted back to Ollie. Further laughs left him at seeing the young squire pure white in terror. “Hang in there. Almost landing.” Jon smacked Rhaegal’s side. ‘Boy, land right there.’

Wings spreading wide to break his speed, Rhaegal began beating rapidly as he descended. With a thud, he landed on the hard stone, letting out a loud bellow to herald his return to the great city of Slaver’s Bay. Slipping down his neck - offering a hand to the trembling Ollie as he did the same - Jon then moved to pat his snout. “Welcome back, Rhaegal. Now go enjoy your time with your brother.” Rhaegal hooted and leapt into the air, racing after Edderon towards their favorite hunting and fishing grounds.

A small delegation of dignitaries waited for Jon. The first one to step forward was a familiar face. “Sire,” Podrick Payne said, bowing. Stripped of his Westerosi armor, he still looked alien in Meereen with his red tunic, light brown leather cuirass, and grey trousers. “Welcome to the Great City of Meereen.”

Impassive, Jon nodded. “Podrick.” The thin line soon gave way to a small smile as he wrapped an arm around the young man in a light hug. “It is good to see you again, my friend. The sun has been kind to you.”

“Only burned me the first week or so,” he replied nonchalantly, skin now sporting a muted bronzed hue.

Breaking apart, Jon took in the troops assembled before him. Most sported the pointed helmets and unshielded broadswords of freedman auxiliaries, recruited by Theodosius Caryn and pledged to Dany - the woman that had freed them from bondage. They, as did the tens of thousands of civilians that watched their Emperor arrive from all around the courtyard, knew not what to make of him. However, a smaller group began to cheer for him. “White Wolf! White Wolf!”

“We stand behind you, sire!” shouted the knight commanding them. Five hundred knights of the vale and a thousand of the former Bolton hoplites, flayed men shields painted over by an angry direwolf - mouth agape in a vicious snarl. They showered their northern Emperor with the adoration of a comrade in battle, attitudes picked up by the Ghiscari onlookers.

“They wonder about their Emperor,” a bald man in simple freedman garb stated, stepping forward. “Mhysa is revered by all of us, the woman that brought us our freedom. Any man that won her heart will win the heart of the people.”

Jon nodded. “I hope so.” He extended his hand, to which the other took. “And you might be?”

“Mossador, sire. Member of the grand council of Meereen, representing the freedmen.” His accent was as heavy as Grey Worm’s - if higher pitched - but his common tongue was close to fluent. “These… fine gentlemen,” he said with great reservation that piqued Jon’s interest. “Are Hizdahr zo Loraq the Elder and Hizdahr zo Loraq the Younger.”

Taking in the two men in the full gold/turquoise flowing garb of Meereenese masters, one in the prime of youth while the other was portly and wrinkled with experience, Jon nodded. ‘Masters, of course.’ He didn’t trust them much, but they did back Daenerys. “It is an honor to meet the men of the most ancient family in Meereen. One that kept its honor.” The story of the elder’s unsuccessful fight against crucifying the slave children was one Dany told him before he left.

“Our honor is our pride, your Majesty,” said Hizdahr the Elder. “As it is for what we’ve heard about you and your ancestry.”
Whether it was a compliment or a means to size him up, Jon did not yet know. He’d file it for later - it would be wise for him to meet with all the noble families… as well as the influential freedmen. But for now… “Daenerys told me there would be another man present. The sellsword captain.”
Daenerys had been, rather cryptic about him. Apparently a real piece of work.

Mossador’s brow furrowed in puzzlement. “Didn’t Mhysa tell you? She ordered him to Westeros.”

Now it was Jon’s turn to be puzzled. ‘Why didn’t she tell me?’

A quiet day in the solar - such a rarity bordering on legend in the life of Empress Daenerys Targaryen. In between war councils, going over dispatch after dispatch, and training with her dragons or Saracen, the times where she could sit alone and read were few and far between. Now though, a slight uninterrupted moment gave her that luxury. Along with Margaery Tyrell, soon to be sister in law and her close companion since Sansa had left for Winterfell, Daenerys was determined to enjoy the tranquility as much as possible.

Unfortunately, the reality of the situation before them reared its ugly head. The door swung open as Ser Jorah let in Robb to the room. Taking in the frustrated set of her brother-in-law’s jaw, Daenerys’ brow knit in confusion. “What is it, Robb?”

“What’s wrong?” asked Margaery, standing to go by her betrothed’s side.

“Daenerys, did you request any additional forces be ferried from Meereen?”

If she had been confused before, Robb’s words left her flabbergasted. “Of course not. I brought the bulk of my army with me, but I left enough forces there to keep the masters in check.” Dany searched her mind for anything that this could possibly be. “No, all forces that I didn’t bring with me had explicit orders to stay in Essos.”

Glancing over the dispatch Robb handed to her, Margaery pursed her lips. “Well, either you are mistaken or someone misunderstood your orders.” The news was objectively welcome, but the fact that Dany knew nothing about it left her uneasy. “Seems that several thousand mounted sellswords have landed in Gulltown.”


“Don’t look at me, sister,” he said, as puzzled as she was. “If one of the generals - or even Tyrion or Davos - authorized this then I would have heard about it.” There were several large sellsword companies. Most were used by Tywin Lannister to clean up loose ends - the Iron Bank used the Golden Company to settle debts, and they seemed to have allied with Joffrey. “There aren’t many sellsword groups that would contract with us.”

“Breaking the wheel threatens their business,” Daenerys agreed. “Does it say which group?”

Margaery scanned down the line. “Gerold Grafton is skimpy on most details… Ah.” She smiled as she found the requested tidbit. “He says that they are the Second Sons.” Looking at her soon to be sister, her face fell at the iron stare that had taken over Daenerys’ expression. “Do you know of them?”

“Let me see that,” Dany commanded, Dragon Queen returning to the forefront. Snatching it from Margaery before the other woman could respond, she took in the information, mouthing the words as she read. By the end she was fuming, dragonfire pulsing through her veins. “Daario, damn him.” With a groan she tossed the dispatch into the crackling fire. “I told him explicitly to stay in Meereen.”
Robb felt that there was something he was missing. “Who is Daario?” The name sounded as one from the free cities, so perhaps it was one of his sister’s allies from before her arrival in Westeros. The dark snarl on Ser Jorah’s face belied this theory.

His suspicions proved correct. “Sellsword captain. Took control of the Second Sons by killing his fellow commanders and allied himself to me. They helped me pacify Meereen and Yunkai.”

From the slight quiver in her voice, a flicker of apprehension, Margaery felt there was more to this story than she was saying. While Robb was likely clueless about these female subtleties, she could only guess. “Lord Grafton said that he had dispatches from the Second Sons saying that you gave them the order to sail to the Vale.”

Dany’s fists balled. “I never sent such an order. This has his grandiose glory-seeking all over it.” Banging it on the table in frustration, the options available to her running past her. None of them were good. If Daario disobeyed her direct order, the best case was not something she could afford in wartime. “Is he in Gulltown?”

“No, Daenerys. The dispatch said he was in Dragonstone with Lady Greyjoy. The Second Sons are marching for us as we speak.”

Sighing, she made her decision. “When they arrive, integrate them in the army. They’re good raiders and light cavalry. Jorah, inform Lord Tyrion that I shall be taking Balerion to Dragonstone.”

Eyes widening, he opened his mouth to say something but thought better of it. “Of course, Khaleesi.” He bowed and left.

The other man in the room was far less tactful. “Going to Dragonstone? Are you mad?” Robb stared at her incredulously. “You are needed here, not handling some sellsword that the Greyjoys can deal with.”

“No lecturing me on what I must do, Robb,” she shot back. “I trust you to lead the army. You have my authority to do anything that needs to be done - but I am going to Dragonstone. Are we clear?”

Wishing to argue more, a silencing look from Margaery convinced him not to. With a nod, Robb left the room.

There was silence between the two women, Daenerys gazing out the window at the river while Margaery crossed her arms and gazed at her. “Do not ask,” Dany finally said, breaking the silence.

The Rose of Highgarden was having none of it. “Seems to me that there is much more to this Daario person than you were willing to divulge to Robb. What is it?”

“You’re asking.” Saying it out loud made it real, and without Jon by her side Daenerys felt vulnerable. Just the rumor of impropriety could make it back to him and cause intense headaches - especially since he wasn’t here to see for himself.

“Don’t pull that bullshit with me, sister. Ser Jorah’s anger clearly proves something happened, and with Sansa gone I’m the only one who can understand fully.” Watching Daenerys turn, face full Dragon Queen, Margaery did not back down. “Spill.”

Daenerys felt her facade crumbling. The Tyrell woman was sweet and charismatic, but was built of Valyrian steel underneath. Sort of like a more subtle and less bitter Cersei Lannister. “Daario Naharis turned on his fellow captains because he found me ‘enchanting.’ Likely pledged himself for the rest of the conquest of the Ghiscari lands for that reason as well.”

Arms still crossed, Margaery was worried for Jon’s heart with this development. “Were you lovers?”
“Yes… well no… not as far as that.” Shame covered Dany’s expression. “He pined for me, flirting and the like. Daario can be called an attractive man you wouldn’t kick out of bed, but I loved Jon, pined for him. Do you understand?”

“I do, sister.” Looking back, considering that Renly’s deep preference for men meant he had never managed to actually consummate their marriage, Robb was the only man she ever gave her body to. Or would ever if the Gods were kind. “So you did spend the night together.”

She sighed. “Once. I missed Jon so much that I imbibed too much wine… and I guess I slipped up.” Dany covered her face with her palm. “I don’t even remember it.” Such wasn’t the worst part of it. “He proclaimed his love for me in the lead up to the departure from Meereen, and I then ordered him to stay there. He did not take it well.”

“Think he’s betraying you?” Deliberately breaking Daenerys’ order… it made Margaery uneasy. Sellswords changed allegiances like chameleons changed colors, all for the next bag of gold. The fact this Daario was a rejected suitor only made the situation more apprehensive. “Those troops arriving here leave Meereen less defended.”

Considering it, Daenerys figured it was possible but unlikely. “No, not Daario. He’s slick and manipulative, but seems to have some form of caring for me.”

“Be careful. Jilted lovers are the reason that your family was overthrown, after all.”

“True.” Daenerys slumped in her chair. “I highly doubt it, however. What worries me is that he’s going to make an effort to win me back, which would create a schism between Jon and I.”

“So you have to go to Dragonstone.”

She hung her head. “Yes.”

The Night King had performed wonders. Throughout the entirety of Westeros, even normal winter temperatures had plummeted, record books kept by the Maesters at the Citadel showing record lows across the continent. Snow was recorded as far south as Harrenhal, close to an impossibility by normal standards. And yet, staring up at the ceiling with his chest bare and blanket tossed aside, Jon reasoned that even the Night King couldn’t yet end the fetid heat that hung over the city of Meereen.

Mossador had informed him that the height of the Great Pyramid brought cooling breezes. Perhaps it was the case for the Ghiscari inhabitants, used to the climate and clad in their flowing robes and dresses. Acclimated to the cool summers and harsh winters of the North and absolutely refusing to dress in anything as emasculating as those gauzy abominations - though the thought of Daenerys dressed in one of those dresses he had seen on the women piqued his interest - the leather tunic and black trousers left him in agony. Even stripped bare brought him no relief. Skin covered in a sheen of sweat, sleep did not come for him.

Turning on his side, Jon brought his hand over the bare patch in the large bed, ghosting his palm over the gossamer sheets. He had been given the royal quarters - Dany’s room. The bed in which his wife slept alone all those years. Formerly of small cots that Lady Stark or the Night’s Watch had thrown at him, his time with Daenerys had left him uncomfortable to sleep alone. Without the tight, warm body of his dragon to cuddle into. ‘You’re strength is slipping, Jon,’ he scolded himself, though Jon loved Dany too much to care. Pulling one of the pillows into his arms, he closed his eyes and imagined it was his love.
Suddenly the door was thrown open. Shooting upright, Jon rubbed the fatigue from his eyes to find Ollie against the torchlight of the hallway. “Your Majesty, the city is under attack!”

Any trace of tiredness evaporated as Jon was out of the bed, scrambling for his clothes. “Are the masters are at the walls?” he demanded from his squire as he pulled up his trousers.

Ollie quickly gathered Jon’s leather cuirass, emblazoned with the Targaryen dragon and Stark direwolf. “No, sire. It’s the Sons of the Harpy. They’re burning and raping their way through the streets.” Fastening the back straps with skilled haste, he moved to grab Longclaw from where it rested.

Lips pursed in an angry line, Jon balled his fists as Ollie tied the belt around his waist. Less than two days in the city that it was, this was his city. His realm. His people, and he was damned if a group of goons beant on enslaving everyone not belonging to them would bring death upon them. Looking every inch the warrior Emperor, he stormed out of the room towards the fight.
Who Holds Meereen

Chapter Summary

Please forgive me, but I seemed to have skipped chapter 46 by posting chapter 47 twice. Mea Culpa. I am sorry

A hazy cloud of greasy-black smoke already covered the city. Moon blocked from view, the only illumination came from the various bonfires and infernos spread out through Meereen. Screams, collapsing buildings, and the occasional boom of cannon filled the air. “What the fuck are they burning?!” Jon shouted to Podrick as he arrived at the main courtyard, already filled with soldiers readying for battle.

The lad was dressed in full plate armor, sweat coating his forehead. “Buildings, to force the people into the streets, also garbage and dung as sort of a signal to the other Sons of the Harpy.”

“This how they capture, Yunkai, Emperor,” stated the auxiliary captain in broken common tongue. “Lure us out, then ambush.”

Another nodded. “If we commit our forces, they will swarm us in the streets and alleyways. They’ve done if before, and now they’ll use the smoke to conceal themselves further.” Unlike most of his men, he had the air of a freeborn citizen - an aristocrat even.

“What is your name, Captain?” Jon asked of him.

“Lokar zho Zhoggaz, your Majesty.”

“A noble name. Why don’t you fight with your countrymen?” Blunt, Jon wanted to know. The roar of a canon off one of the courtyard battlements caused all but him to flinch.

Zho Zhoggaz gulped. “There’s been too much bloodshed, sire. Too much suffering of all.”

Jon crossed his arms. “I agree, which is why I won’t let my subjects die under the knife or in the flames. We will stop these murderers.” Face set in a determined scowl, he watched as his commanders began to resign themselves to his plan. “Daenerys appointed local councillors to run Yunkai. I would like to speak to one of them… now.” Perhaps one of them could shed some light on the enemy’s tactics.

“They are all dead,” Mossador stated, cringing from the screams filling the din.

“Forced into the center of the fighting pit and slaughtered,” zo Loraq the Younger added, head hung.

Wheels began turning in Jon’s mind. When he joined his father and Robb in hunting wild dogs and wolves, their goals were to flush them out into an open space to be surrounded - not a good place to be, unless the hunters weren’t prepared to face the vicious beasts. “Mossador, where is the nearest large open space to here. A courtyard, marketplace… anything?”

Blinking, Mossador looked puzzled. “I’m… I’m not sure…”

“Now is not time for this!” Jon yelled. “Spill it out!”
“There’s a marketplace, sire, about half a mile hike through the city from here, overlooking the cliffs but entrances from all side.”

Lips pursed, gazing out at the city awash in flame, Jon stood quietly for a moment. “Podrick, Lokar, ready the men. We’re going on a thunder run.”

“Ahhhhhh…!”

With a flick of the wrist, the bronze knife sliced through the skin and arteries of the neck as if it were a fluffy pastry. The freedwoman fell to the ground in an ever increasing puddle of blood. Raising his knife in the air, the Harpy shouted his battle cry from underneath his golden mask. “Death to the Dragon!”

“DEATH TO THE DRAGON!” screamed the other ten men in his detachment, bodies of freedmen and citizens alike strewn around them. Homes and shops burned behind, coating their loose robes with soot and grease.

Cheers dying down, a low thud began to filter into their hearing. Thudding and drumming growing louder and louder, the leader kicked the corpse aside and peered at the bend in the road - one of the largest ones winding through the city. Sky pitch black, the buildings alight with flame cast flickering shadows upon the street. Shadows of marching men. They appeared in view rather quickly, lines and lines of shield-bearing Northern hoplites, whooping as they marched with all due haste. In the van were two dozen mounted knights, led by a figure in a black tunic and with flowing black locks billowing behind him. Valyrian steel sword raised high in the air, the figure’s sigil upon his leather cuirass caught the Harpies at the last second before his sword and the swords of the other Westerosi sliced through them.

The Emperor. The White Wolf.

Pulling back the reins, Jon glanced behind him at the marching forces. Tight formations of Essosi auxiliaries mixed within, the hoplites looked just as fearsome as they did when he faced them - only now their shields bore the direwolf rather than the flayed man. “Forward men! For the North!” As they passed him, the men whooped and cheered, still racing forward.

The marketplace was largely empty, it being night with over a week before the vendors and merchants would set up for the bimonthly bazaar. Stark and auxiliary troops swarmed in, officers barking orders at the top of their lungs. Well drilled and disciplined, they fell into line quickly - the hoplites in a wide semicircle anchored by the low stone wall along the cliffs overlooking the outer city while the auxiliaries remained inside, ready to assist the hoplites if an assault came.

Dismounting, Jon took a swig from his waterskin as Podrick approached him. “So what now, your Majesty?”

“We wait.”

It did not take long. Via runner and signallers with deep horns, groups of insurgents raced for the marketplace. Thousands of them, charging for the unbelievable opportunity of catching the Emperor and his men outside their fortifications. They had hoped that he would send his men out, but all of them? Him putting himself in danger? Prayers to the great Harpy were said in full as the Sons of the Harpy trickled in - the trickle became a flood, surrounding the Imperials.

“Come out into the open, King bastard!” someone shouted from beneath his mask. A man in a clean
robe, gold shining from the firelight, stepped forward. “Come out and I’ll slit your throat, nice and quick.” Portly belly threatened to spill over the sash tied around his waist. At the time of low harvests, he ate well. His knife was inlaid with silver, hilt jewel-encrusted. “Don’t be a coward! Face your death with dignity!”

A silence hung over, the low cackling of flames from within the city and buzzing of flies swarming the bodies all that disturbed the din. “I died once!” bellowed the Emperor’s reply. “I don’t intend to again!” War cries and laughs left the Stark ranks. They knew of their ruler, the Resurrected.

Snarling under his mask, pure rage filled the noble’s voice. “BASTARD! You and your subjects won’t live to see the morning!!”

Jon’s response came soon after. A flash streaked through the air as the javelin ran through his middle, bright crimson spurting over his immaculate robes. “MASTERS!” Jon drew Longclaw. “Come and get us!”

“HOO! HOO!” cheered the hoplites, joined by the auxiliaries.

A deep boom from a horn resonated, the line of masked insurgents charged as one organism. Golden masks hid their crazed, angry eyes. They made the Harpies even fiercer, inhuman, reminding Jon of the Army of the Dead as they surged.

“Who holds Meereen?” yelled Podrick as loud as he could.

“HOO! HOO!”

“WHO HOLDS MEEREEN?”

“HOO! HOO!”

Hundreds of them, knives and short swords combining with the lack of armor to give them speed and flexibility - two advantages negated as they slammed into the Imperial shield wall. Mimicking the ferocious wildling charge on the plains of Winterfell, they stabbed and hacked at any gap they found, using their sheer mass to push the hoplites back. Auxiliaries inside the shield wall engaged in any gap that formed until another hoplite replaced their fallen comrades. Jon, Barristan by his side, threw himself into the fray as did his subordinates. Fighting with their men, swords tasting enemy blood.

In one show of strength the hoplites surged, pushing their opponents away from them. Line staggering back, bloody corpses left in their wake. An uneasy calm settled between the two sides before the whoops began. “HOO! HOO!” Direwolf shields moved forwards in one single line, pikes darting forward to pierce the unarmored insurgents. Dozens fell with screams and gurgling shouts, the line continuing to advance and pushing the Sons of the Harpy back. However, gaps began appearing in the line as they expanded their semicircle. Insurgents swarmed through the gaps only to be cut down by the auxiliaries within.

Jon wasn’t about to take any risk. “Fall back!” he shouted, slicing off the knife arm of one of the Harpies. The man’s mask was impassive, belying his blood-curdling screams. Jon kicked him to the ground as he and the line retreated back to the tight position, only few of their number lost at the expense of far more of the enemy.

“Keep ranks!” he heard Podrick shout.

“Keep ranks, boys!” Jon hollered himself. The ragged, formless mass of the Harpies hesitated. What they faced were not the hit and runs against lightly armored mercenaries or ambushes against Unsullied forced into narrow alleyways. On open ground against the heavily armored northern
hoplites, their forces were in worse shape than the wildlings at the Battle of the Bastards. Hemmed against the cliff face, the Imperials had nowhere to retreat and stood firm. Jon could see how they began to shrink back, assessing their options.

The piercing roar that resonated through the early-morning air - striking surprise and fear into those on both sides - brought a smirk to Jon’s face. ‘Like lambs to the slaughter,’ he thought, eyes shifting to the two shapes closing in on the horizon. “Sōvegon naejot issa,” he whispered, knowing only the dragons could hear him. “Bellowing shriekes leaving their throats, the green Rhaegal and grey-white Edderon banked over the marketplace, massive shapes casting shadows over all. Fear seemed to paralyze the enemy, while the Imperials stared in wonder. Jon’s smirk widened. “Dracarys!”

A split second passed, stretching out as several minutes. Maws opening, the air rippled around the dragons’ heads before Rhaegal and Edderon unleashed the inferno onto the unsuspecting Harpies. Far from the small juveniles that had entered Meereen with limited dragonfire, their bodies brought forth a near endless supply of flame upon their father’s tormentors. Pitched screams left their throats, many running frantically, not noticing masks falling to the ground or sandals left in the dust in their terror. None helped. Keeping a close eye, Edderon methodically diverted his dragonfire into the streets while Rhaegal finished off the remainder in the marketplace. Cheers leaving the soldiers at the great beasts belonging to their Emperor - his plans working out magnificently once again - the fight was over in less than a quarter of an hour.

Stepping through the charred bodies and strewn weapons, Jon knelt by the jewel-encrusted dagger of the Harpy leader. Lifting it in his hand, testing its weight, he heard something shift inside - the hilt was hollow.

His thoughts on the subject were broken by hushed whispers. Nearly inaudible, when coming out of the lips of thousands of onlooking citizens and freedmen that had appeared out of the homes, streets, and alleyways to crowd the outer perimeter of the marketplace it hit like a roar. Rising to his feet, Jon’s eyes scanned the crowd. Part of him looked for a threat, for flashes of gold masks glinting in the early morning light, but much of it was curiosity. Intrigue and uneasiness as to what the crowd would do.

Finally, one figure stepped through the crowd. It was a young boy, scrawny and bare chested, head cropped short in the Ghiscari style. A threadbare vest and loincloth were draped over his body - all that bothered for clothes. Ser Barristan stepped forward with his hand on his sword out of caution, but was stopped by a raised hand from his Emperor. All could see the boy carried no weapons, nor could even harm Jon in the slightest.

Skidding to a stop mere feet from Jon, the boy’s dark eyes stared at him in wonder. A skinny hand pointed at him. “Vhrysa,” he said, voice rather loud for such a small boy. He looked over at the crowd. “Vhrysa.”

Another citizen, this one a bulking laborer, also pointed at Jon. “Vhrysa.” He was not the last. “Vhrysa.”

“Vhrysa!”

Soon the entire crowd was chanting it, adoration written on the undulating waves of humanity from the marketplace to throughout the city. Confused - barely knowing enough Valyrian to get him by, let alone Ghiscari - Jon turned to his Imperial Guard. “What?”

Barristan chuckled. “They call Empress Daenerys Mhysa, mother. They call you Vhrysa…”
“...Father,” Jon finished for him. Suddenly, all thoughts were swept from him as the crowd surged, lifting him on their hands and carrying him in a single wave. As Dany had with his countrymen, Jon had won the hearts of hers.

Dragonstone. The land of her ancestors, settled by the Targaryens even before the Doom destroyed the Valyrian homeland and plunged Essos into the chaotic secession wars for the next half-century. Settled by the Targaryens before their first Westerosi-born generation - the great Aegon the Conqueror and his sister-wives - began the conquest of Westeros under their banner. Where Daenerys Targaryen made her base of operations before journeying to the North to reunite with the long-lost Jaehaerys Targaryen to begin the reconquest and liberation of their sundered realm.

As such, the sight of the windswept cliffs and grassy fields, the great grey fortress built by Aegon as the home base for the conquest, should have elicited feelings of nostalgia and happiness as Daenerys brought Balerion to a sharp bank downwards. Images of her and Jon taking a sabbatical here, a week or two of quiet and passionate lovemaking away from the stresses of the capital - of Rhaegar arriving as a young man to set up court here with his new bride in preparation for the time he’d rule the vast Empire... None were in her mind this time. No, instead as she stared at the massive Imperial fleet in anchor offshore was anger and frustration welling within her eyes like white hot dragonfire.

‘Damn you Daario.’ There had been no daylight in her order to him. Stay in Meereen with the Second Sons, hold against the Masters. While the extra irregular cavalry would help against the Lannister forces, the chaos back at Riverrun among her small council at her absence was likely beginning to boil over. On top of that the situation in Essos could be catastrophic just as Jon arrived. ‘My Jon.’ Her grip against Balerion’s spines tightened. Dany would get to the bottom of this.

Thudding to a stop with a low bellow, Balerion tiredly stretched out on the soft grass. Dany slowly dismounted, stepping toward her child’s slumped head. “Rest now, my child,” she cooed, gently stroking the bottom of his jaw. “Relax.” Watching his eyes flutter closed into an exhausted sleep, Dany felt someone approaching her. She turned. “Lady Greyjoy.”

Yara offered a tight smile. “Your Majesty.” The hardy Iron Islander bowed slightly. “I would have brought a welcoming committee, but then I realized that you wouldn’t care for such shit at this moment. And...” Her eyes drifted to Saracen sheathed on Dany’s waist. “I trust you can defend yourself.”

“You presume correctly, however inartful your words.” Dany fought a smirk, the situation calling for a more solemn tone - though time with the Northerners and the Wildlings had accustomed her to the saltier vernacular of the common tongue. “Where is Daario Naharis.”

Sighing, Yara gestured to the castle. “Follow me.”

The fortress had transformed itself in the months since she and Jon had moved court to Winterfell - and later Riverrun. What was supposed to be a seat of Targaryen power was now an Ironborn naval outpost. Intricate murals and mosaics had crates of projectiles, sailbags, and newfangled cannon shot propped up against them. Rows and rows of swords and pikes decorated rooms instead of tapestries, and stoic servants were absent, replaced with the vulgar swearing of salty sea dogs. It irritated Dany slightly, but the realities of war were not lost on her.

“We set sail in one week,” Yara explained. “Our scout ships haven’t found a trace of my uncle’s fleet. We’re operating under the belief he’s either near Lannisport or in the southern portion of the Narrow Sea to intercept cargo shipments between us and Slaver’s Bay.”
“Thinking you can lure him out?” One portion of the war that had been very quiet was at sea - no news, no conflict except for random ship to ship actions where no capital ships were involved. It made Dany nervous.

Apparently, Yara felt the same from her expression. “Theon thinks a sea blockade of King’s Landing will lure them out, so we’ll see. Better than sitting here with our fingers up our cunts - though with the Emperor in Essos you’re probably familiar with that.” At Dany’s scowl, the Ironborn pretender laughed. She pointed to the door of the council chambers. “He’s in there. If you decide to execute him, I won’t mind. He’s kind of a prick.”

Fighting a smile of her own, Dany nodded to Yara and pushed open the door. Sure enough, there he was, hunched over the map table with Theon Greyjoy. The Empress hardened her expression. “Admiral Greyjoy,” she said flatly. “Captain Naharis.”

Theon bowed immediately, professional. “Your Majesty.”

Daario’s bow was less formal, almost a chore for him. “Your Majesty.” A satisfied smile marred his face. “It is a pleasure.”

“Indeed. You are dismissed, Admiral.” This wouldn’t take long, and she didn’t need guards present for this. Theon, shooting her a sympathetic look, quickly obeyed. Now, they were alone. “Imagine my shock to find out that the Captain of some of my most elite men is in Westeros.”

His eyes twinkled. “Well, when my Queen… no, Empress calls. I come running.”

“I told you to stay in Meereen.” Her voice was pure ice. She learned well from the Starks. “Was I not clear, or did you selectively hear my commands?”

Daario offered a wry grin, falling back on his charm. “There was a dispatch bearing your seal, Daenerys…”

“No.” Dany cut him off, the casual familiarity regarding her title and name angering her. “It is ‘Your Grace,’ to you, and I sent no such dispatch. If you are so trusting of it, then hand it over so I can inspect this forgery for myself. Perhaps it was a trick by the masters to lure forces away from her - Daenerys couldn’t discount the eventuality, for it sounded like something they would do.

Bowing, Daario lowered his voice, calming his rising impatience. “Forgive me… your Grace. But I destroyed the message after receiving it in Meereen. I did not want any enemy spies taking possession of your orders.”

‘A convenient excuse… or destroying the evidence.’ Her inner voice sounded a lot like Sansa - life in Joffrey’s Court, traveling across Westeros with Littlefinger, and as Ramsay Bolton’s wife had acclimated her to the deceptive and underhanded ways of dishonorable men and women. Nevertheless, Dany shook away the thought. ‘Daario may be sneaky… and stupid sometimes… but he is loyal.’ “Such foolishness and idiocy is unlike you, Captain Naharis.”

“I am sorry that my conduct has offended you, your Majesty.” He averted his gaze to the floor in supplication. “But I only act in the best interests of the one true ruler of Westeros.”

Dany’s frown deepened. “‘One true ruler,’ you say. You discard my husband entirely?”

“No, I do not suggest that.” She could tell he was fighting a grimace at the mention of Jon - horrid but not entirely surprising. “But the claim to rule of an Imperial Consort illegitimately born, of a northern family no less, pales to that of the trueblood Targaryen he married.”
A slight laugh left Daenerys’ lips as she sat at the head of the table. “Aye, I am a trueborn Targaryen, blood of the dragon from both mother and father. Jon, your Emperor, is so much more, however.” Grin widening at Daario’s puzzled expression, sardonically enjoying his discomfort as penance for the intrusion in her life. “He is the blood of the dragon too. Crown Prince Jaehaerys Targaryen, son of my brother Rhaegar.”

Not much could faze Daario Naharis, having seen it all and been through it all - this, however, was flooring. Mouth agape, he couldn’t possibly have conceived of this. “That… that is impossible.”

“And I thought you had more sense than that. Have you not heard of the great Lord Eddard Stark, and his honor? He protected him from the Usurper for over a decade.”

He had heard about Eddard Stark. The man’s name was synonymous with honor even in the most decrepit brothels in Essos. “If he is not the… Emperor’s father, why would he protect him?”

“Because my husband, your sovereign’s mother is Lyanna Stark. Jon is the union of ice and fire, the best of blood on both sides - a worthy co-ruler for me. So, Captain Naharis, I’d advise you to be respectful of him.” At Daario’s silence, Dany took it as acceptance. “Good. While I did not order this, your presence does bring advantages to our strategic situation. Once the fleet sails, you will take a fast ship to shore and join the Second Sons. My brother in law, Robb Stark will be your commander. Are we clear.”

Face a mask, Daario bowed as low as he could. “Yes, my Empress. Your orders will be carried out.” With that, he walked out, leaving Daenerys alone.

Looking at the ceiling, Dany sighed. That went far better than expected.

... to provide the Stark bastard alive, his head is all that is required for Lord Lannister. All that is needed is for the healthy population of Meereen to be left alive and in good condition. The sick, the old, the scrawny children… you may do to them what you may…

Snarling, Jon slammed his fist on the table. “Fuckers. Cuntface barbarians!” One did not live among the thieves and scoundrels of the Night’s Watch without picking up a few choice words - however unregal they were. “They call me a savage northerner and Dany a whore, but then put this shit in motion. Swine.”

“Calm down, your Grace,” Ser Barristan cautioned. “We wouldn’t want your heart to stop from the stress.” Handing Jon a goblet of water, he was relieved when his Emperor downed the whole cup.

In all honesty, the cool liquid sliding down his heated throat did help his mood. “It seems what I found out in King’s Landing has been corroborated.” A sigh left Jon’s lips, the magnitude of it all weighing on him. Only three years before, he had been a simple brother at the Wall, and now the fate of humanity was on his shoulders. ‘Alliser Thorne must be laughing right now, wherever he crawled to.’ ‘The wheel will be destroyed either way, either forever by mine and Dany’s hand, or to be replaced with a more crushing version by Joffrey and his cabal.’

“You’ll find extensive support within Meereen for your goal, your Grace,” Podrick offered, nursing a cup of watered wine. “Among the freedmen, unanimity especially after stopping the Sons of the Harpy. Among the former masters…” He shrugged. “They may have changed their tune, but since I arrived a lot of them were quite open in their opposition to Queen Daenerys.”

Jon’s fists clenched. “I should burn them for their disloyalty.”
Barristan, a worried frown on his face, placed his hand on the Emperor’s shoulder. “Sire, I know it is tempting. But remember what happened to your grandfather.”

Turning to look at the old knight, Jon felt much of the anger deflate from his body. “You’re right.” The blood of the dragon burned hot within him, sometimes overcoming the cooling effect of the wolf. Anger and ferocity were powerful forces - when carefully husbanded. He just had to keep the familial madness at bay, to set the example of his father and grandmother rather than the Mad King. “I will only burn those that actively supported the Harpies, but the detractors must be brought over to us…” He fiddled with a buckle on his cuirass. “But how to do so. How to do so…”

“The bulk of the army has begun the move to our main camp south of Harrenhal, all Highest,” stated Randyll Tarly, eyes planted on the massive map table stretched out before the collection of the Lannister military council. “We have a cavalry screen around the Targaryen forces…”

“The forces of the Dragon Bitch and Stark Bastard, Lord Tarly,” Joffrey snapped from under his veil. “Do best to remember that.”

Tarly bowed. “Forgive me all Highest. The Dragon Bitch’s forces are marching to Harrenhal according to our scouts - Robb Stark leads them.”

Joffrey hissed, tossing a fleck of stone across the table. “Fucking Walder Frey. Couldn’t even kill an unarmed man trapped in his own fucking hall! He deserved to get his throat slit.”

“Agreed, all Highest,” said Littlefinger in his syrupy voice. “Such incompetence deserves death. However, Lord Qyburn and myself have additional information for you.” He bowed as well.

The faceless mask turned to Qyburn. “Well? Speak!”

“Yes, all Highest,” Qyburn sputtered. “My little birds indicated that a large detachment of two thousand sellswords of the Second Sons have departed Gulltown and will be at Harrenhal within week’s end. Apparently veterans from the Dragon Bitch’s campaign in Slaver’s Bay.”

Before another rage assault could occur, Tywin Lannister interjected. “Allow me to speak out of turn, but do not worry about them. My discussions with Chief Banker Nestoris have secured us the services of the Golden Company. They are being offloaded in the harbor as we speak.”

The King’s form was still. “That is good, but I don’t like this.” A bony finger pointed to the cluster of figurines around Harrenhal. “Dothraki. Horse scum rampaging through my domain. Mine! They could swarm us. Swarm us like locusts!”

“It is not them that we need to worry about,” Cersei stated flatly. “A large fleet remains anchored at Dragonstone and an army of Unsullied led by Edmure Tully march for Casterly Rock.”

“All Highest,” spoke a Stormlands Lord. “Perhaps we should continue to press for the negotiations Lady Cersei attempted, see if we can work out some kind of accord rather than spill any more blood before Winter sets in?”

An ominous cloud descended on the council as they waited for the King’s reaction. Surprisingly, he did not blow up - many would rather he had blown up. “Ser Gregor,” Joffrey said with a menacingly low voice. Not a word from his mouth, the Mountain stepped forward, grabbed the Lord from his chair with one hand by the neck, and slammed his head against the stone wall. Many cringed as the skull fractured with a sickening crack. “Anyone else wish to concur?” Joffrey asked as the body dropped bonelessly on the floor.
“We will outnumber them, all Highest,” stated Tywin, ignoring what just happened. “Prince Trystane has mobilized the Dornish levies. They will join our southern legions to reinforce our army to take on Robb Stark.”

Joffrey’s expression was obscured by the gauzy fabric, but there was no doubt at the incredulous grimace. “If what you’re saying is true, grandfather, then it would take weeks to fully ferry the last remaining Westerlands regulars and Dornish levies from Sunspear to meet with the army already here.”

“Yes, that would be true.” Tywin absentmindedly played with his fingers, dragging on the silence around the map table. “If I hadn’t already ordered said forces to march overland for Harrenhal before I sailed for King’s Landing. Based on the last raven dispatch they should be…” Taking out a new marker from his pocket, he dramatically slammed it on the border between the Westerlands and Crownlands. “…at Stoney Sept.”

The generals and advisors all glanced at their feet, waiting for the chimera to answer. Only silence left Joffrey’s mouth, overtaxed mind working overtime to parse the meaning of what his grandfather and Hand was telling him. All were delighted at the news, but given the corpse still bleeding in the corner of the room, the King’s emotions were erratic and unpredictable - at best. No one wanted to be on the wrong side.

Suddenly, the piercing, malevolent laughter of the King echoed through the room. Everyone joined in, most forced - a significant minority genuine. Baelish laughed with a flourish, Pycelle chortled with a cough mixed in, and Kevan Lannister shook his head in mirth. Even the taciturn Randyll Tarly cracked a smirk, arms folded.

“Well well, the lion’s teeth are ready to bite.” Unsheathing Hearteater from his scabbard, he brought it down on the marker representing Daenerys Targaryen. The sword smashed a hole in the table, splinters shattering everywhere. “Fuck you, Dragon Bitch. Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, Fuck, you!” Screaming at the top of his lungs, each word was punctuated by the downward swing of the sword.

Letting out a laugh that didn’t reach his eyes, Bronn fought the urge to cringe at every slam of steel on wood. Bits of coagulated blood dotted his tunic, a drop staining his stubbly cheek. Quick eyes shifting from the King to the Hand to each and every laughing lord and noble at the table… ‘Is a castle worth this?’

‘These aren’t the only cunts that could provide you a castle, fucker.’ Pondering this, Bronn focused completely on his fascade as Joffrey continued to rant. “To a thousand years of the Chimera!” Hoisting his hand high, Bronn cheered with all the others.
Lips curled into a scowl, Jon stared down at his advisor. “You are actually saying that they are angry over this?”

“I would not use the word angry, your Majesty,” Hizdahr zo Loraq replied, voice that of a supplicant. He kept his eyes trained on the floor out of respect, and hope that the Emperor would lean more on his Stark blood and not the Targaryen. They were all in the throne room, Jon seated where Daenerys always did, Barristan and Podrick Payne flanking him on either side - the old knight acting as his interpreter if need be. “They are just upset that their property overlooking the market was damaged by your dragons several nights ago…”

“You mean when they were acting on my orders to defeat the mob of bloodthirsty insurgents raping and murdering their way through the city?!” Jon thundered, dragon awoken.

Loraq tried not to flinch. “That is what I told them, sire, but they feel that the situation could have been dealt with means other than violence.”

Fists clenching, it took all of the self-control and honor that Ned Stark had taught him to prevent the dragon from awakening. “And who are these persons making these complaints to you?” As Loraq rattled off a list of many prominent individuals from some of the most noble families - the same ones that had caused Daenerys trouble in the past. It just never ended, the same people refusing to unite behind the Targaryen banner. “Leave me.”

“Of course, sire,” Loraq responded, scurrying out.

As soon as he was out of sight, Jon let out a deep sigh. He hunched over, pinching the bridge of his nose in pure fatigue. ‘Gods…’ A pulsing headache had taken residence behind his eyes. Much as a soldier or laborer would much rather be sitting on a throne and passing judgement, Jon vastly preferred the active lifestyle of fighting and straining - not the actual act of killing, which he detested, but more the fact that it lied dead center in his talents. ‘Daenerys is a far better ruler than I.’ Much as she told him how competent an Emperor he was, she was raised as a royal while he largely trained to be sent to the Wall all his childhood.

His insecurity would go away with time, he reasoned, but for now Jon would not feel comfortable without Daenerys by his side in matters like these.

“Missing, her Majesty, sire?” Jon looked up to see Podrick glancing at him. A hint of a grin marked the knight’s face - Jon having awarded him the high honor following his performance in the fight.

“Yes.” Stretching his arms, working the kinks out of them, a smile worked its way to his face as he imagined Dany’s arms wrapped around him. “Odd, I spent all but a few weeks of my life alone, never thinking I would marry or sire children. Then, several months of being with her and now I can barely sleep alone unless exhausting myself in combat.” The silver-haired goddess and his beautiful children had hit his life like a stampeding mammoth, submerging him totally. “Oh, how the brothers at the wall would laugh if they saw me now,” he chuckled.

Podrick nodded. “I know what you feel, sire,” he said before he thought. Eyes went wide as he realized what he said - his pining for the Emperor’s sister was not something he felt the Emperor would look kindly upon.

Jon looked up at the knight, brow raised in interest. “Ahhh, so you have a reason back home to keep
you chaste.” Jon leaned on his elbow, this being far more interesting than any current pressing issue. Quite the amusing distraction. “You can consider me a friend, Podrick, and I owe you a debt for bringing my sister back safely from Ramsay Bolton, so it’ll be between us.” Behind him, Barristan smirked. The glint in Jon’s eye was the splitting image of Rhaegar - his beloved friend.

Reddening further - face the color of rare beef - Podrick prayed to the Seven that the Emperor would reason it from his innate shyness rather than the much more troubling truth. “There is one, but I doubt she sees me that way. I haven’t talked to her much.” Technically true, since their letters weren’t ‘talking’ and they barely spoke before he left for Essos.

“What’s she like, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Podrick could not refuse his Emperor. Even if it would be trying to sneak past a sleeping dragon. “Tall as I am, with fiery red hair. Quiet for the most part, quite cold but with the most brilliant smile.” He had fallen hard, harder and faster every moment he had been around Sansa. She won his heart without even trying. “Met her at Winterfell.”

Laughing, Jon smacked the young knight on the back. “Westerlands boy found himself a Northern girl! Looks like he has more sense than his pedigree suggested,” Jon quipped to Barristan. Putting things together in a far more accurate manner than his charge, Barristan only nodded, eyeing Podrick warily. The young knight averted his eyes - a gesture Jon took as shyness. “Don’t beat yourself up for being too shy. Northern girls are… untamed and hard as ice. Very stubborn, but make the best wives once you woo their hearts. Look at Gendry. Arya isn’t the easiest to deal with, but that poor fucking bastard has himself a woman devoted to him till death.” He slapped his thigh at the accurate description of his beloved but strong-willed sister.

“Yes, he does,” Podrick murmured. Sansa wouldn’t hit him, if he were ever so lucky to grace her hearth and her bed, but one of her icy death stares could cripple a man. He’d sooner brave the Sons of the Harpy in a dark alley than an infuriated Sansa Stark.

“I’m sure Ser Podrick doesn’t wish to divulge more of his love life, sire,” Barristan interjected, rushing to the boy’s defense. If there was some relationship between him and one icy northern girl with fiery red hair, his experience indicated that it would be best for all parties if she told his majesty herself. “A man of honor does not kiss and tell.”

Jon, pursing his lips, nodded. “I suppose you are right.” Podrick mouthed a quick ‘thank you,’ to the older man, who just smiled softly. To be young and in love was an amazing thing. Barristan saw it in Rhaegar and saw it in Jon - a love that would last if fate permitted it.

“Your Majesty,” stated one of the northern guards, entering from outside the throne room. “You have another courtier calling on your reception. One from our homeland.”

This was surprising, Jon sitting straight up despite the strain on his back. “A Westerosi? What business does he have? Merchant? Messenger from the Empress?” Why would Dany send a messenger rather than using a raven?

The guard shook his head. “Not just a Westerosi, your Majesty. A Northerner - a noblewoman from House Reed of Greywater Watch.”

Now that was a name he did not expect. ‘Howland Reed is still in the North,’ he thought, musing upon this development. House Reed was a close relation to the Starks, especially when Jon and his heritage was involved. It was a bond beyond mere shared bonds of the homeland. ‘He had two children, a son and a daughter.’ “Please, send her in.”
“Presenting for his Majesty, the Lady Meera of House Reed.”

In walked the young girl, pale skin contrasting with the threadbare Essosi dress more often seen draped on the swarthy locals. She looked slightly uncomfortable in them, which Jon understood. Dany took a while to get used to the thick dresses of the North. Meera bowed low. “Your Majesty, it is an honor to meet you at last.”

“The honor is mine, to meet a lovely member of a house as honorable as House Reed.” He gave Meera a small smile. “I am curious as to why you are in Essos. Your father, Howland, seemed to be in quite a melancholy mood due to his children not being at home.”

A homesick sadness flashed on Meera’s face for a moment, before a stronger determination returned. “I do feel a longing to return home, but someone important needed me in Essos.” Eyes flickering to the entranceway, a slight creaking was heard. On a wheeled chair, pushed by a lone bannerman, was a seated figure. Expression flat, face thin, the form was older but to the shocked Emperor there was no doubt as to his identity.

Jon rose, unable to tear his eyes away from the newcomer. Slowly, he descended the stairs. “Bran? Is it…” He trailed off, unable to speak.

Bran met his brother’s gaze. “Hello Jon. It has been a while.” The younger Stark was suddenly swept into the Emperor’s arms, the last of the Stark’s reunited with the pack.

Scanning the small script upon the dispatch for the third time, Robb’s face was an ashen pale. “So this is it, then?”

Catelyn nodded. “Aye. Tywin’s on the move. The sigils and unit flags prove this to be his most combat-hardened Westerlands and Crownlands battalions.” The ones that captured King’s Landing. That defeated Renly. That made Dorne howl. “Shall I have the Dothraki shift from the west to reinforce you?”

Pondering it, Robb shook his head. “No. We need them to catch Tywin’s relief force for Casterly Rock. I’ll head to Harrenhal and take command personally. I haven’t yet lost to any Lannister on the field of battle,” he boasted, the grin on his face not reaching his eyes however.

Hand reaching out to touch his shoulder, Catelyn’s heart broke for her son. The terror of that fateful night had left him indecisive. Unsure of himself. Fighting alongside Jon at Winterfell and Riverrun had helped, but it was still there at times. “You need to tell your betrothed,” she finally said.

Robb sighed. “Yes, I will.”

As he figured, he found his love was sitting atop her usual chair in the solar, a book propped open in her hands. Robb propped himself on the wall to watch her. Eyes focused on the words in front of her, Margaery’s nose scrunched up ever so slightly every so often. It was a quirk that only happened when her guard was down in solitude, and Robb found it enchanting. Hells, she was always enchanting. ‘When a Stark falls, he falls hard,’ as his father would say.

“It is not polite to stare, Lord Stark.”

Chuckling, Robb pushed himself off the wall and walked to her, kissing her hair. Still smiling, he sat on the table across from her. “I wasn’t staring. Just… admiring the view.”

Her gaze fell on him. “Taking compliment lessons from your brother, are you?” The faint blush on
her cheeks belied her delight at it. However, she must have sensed the well-hidden tension. Her face fell, lowering the book to her lap. “You’re going to Harrenhal.” It wasn’t phrased as a question.

Robb sighed - she could see right through him. “Yes.” Reaching out, he took her hands in his. “Tywin is moving north to challenge us. I need to be with my command.”

Highborn from a prominent, powerful family, Margaery knew the stakes of his duty. However, concern still marred her face. “He’s advancing in the center, not on Casterly Rock?” They hadn’t yet heard back from Grey Worm and Edmure since the raven announcing they had arrived at the walls, but even a siege would lure in a considerable relief force.

“Our scouts only have half the Lannister army advancing from their bases on the southern shore of the God’s Eye, so the rest are either in transit from Dorne or advancing towards the Westerlands.” He half-grinned. “We’ll likely be outnumbered slightly, but our force is strong. Vale Knights, Northern men at arms, free folk, giants, Essosi auxiliaries. Plus two thousand light cavalry from the Second Sons sellswords pledged to Daenerys. Enough to take on Tywin’s best.”

Shaking her head, the mask began to crack as anguish bubbled forth. “That’s what Loras told me before the assault on King’s Landing, and hours later he was dead by Joffrey’s hand.”

Robb softly stroked the silky skin of her betrothed’s hand. “I promise, I will be fine.”

“You must have felt the same with the first Lady Stark.” Tears began to cloud Margaery’s vision - they were sudden, and she hated feeling weak, but she couldn’t lose Robb. With all the loss her family had suffered, he was the only constant of happiness in it. “You almost died then. I couldn’t bear the fates catching up to you this time.”

Hating her sadness, hating Tywin and Joffrey for taking Talisa away and bringing the greatest pain to Margaery - his second chance - Robb closed the distance between them and kissed her. At first she didn’t respond, but his obvious love melted her, melding into the chaste but passionate kiss. Robb could taste the salt of her tears, pulling away to gaze into her eyes. “I will come back, for you.”

Blinking, Margaery looked over the man that had swept her off her feet since they met all those years ago. Without wasting a single moment, her lips met his once more. Tongues battled in a sensual dance. Feeling herself being pulled out of her chair, Margaery yelped against her future husband’s mouth as he turned them around, jerked forward to straddle his now seated lap. “Mmmmm.”

Hands yanked the collar of her dress to the side, exposing a slender neck and shoulder. Gazing upon this gorgeous southern beauty, Robb felt his possessive side come out. “You’re mine Margaery.” He heard the most satisfying gasp as his teeth sank into her shoulder, nibbling his way to her pulse. “All yours,” she gasped. “Don’t stop.”

“Not planning on it.” His tongue laved at her throbbing pulse. “I can’t wait, Marge. Please, I need to be inside you.”

She let out a throaty moan. The dress found itself pulled off her body, revealing her nude form underneath. “I want you inside me.” He looked down to see her hands shimmying his trousers down, exposing his length – Margaery ground her core against him, glistening with her juices. Heart stopping at the glorious sigh, he lined up with her entrance. Robb groaned as he pushed inside her.

“Oh Gods!” Her walls melded around him, Margaery biting his shoulder. “Faster!” She bucked into him, meeting him thrust for thrust. The pain of her teeth drawing blood only spurred him on. Sweat slicked bodies crashed together.
Feeling her drag her nails down his bare back, Robb’s hips kicked into overdrive. “Fuck, I love you!” He could feel the climax coming – so soon.

“I. Lov… Luuuu… Love you too. Fuck me! Ahhh!” She literally shattered around him, her scream filling the air. He was not far behind

Soon, they were both completely spent, the Rose of Highgarden limp atop him. His betrothed heated skin flush against him, hot breath quick as her face buried itself in the crook of his neck, Robb gently swiped a strand of hair matted to her sweaty forehead. “Margaery,” he breathed. “I’m coming back. I promise.”

“Shhhhh…” she murmured, kissing his neck. “Just hold me.” He complied gladly

Dearest Dany,

I now firmly understand the memories of the greatest stress and frustration that you felt from your time in this great city. The beauty is deceptive, for underneath the polished marble is a den of snakes. Gods, it reminds me of how Joffrey or Ramsay would run things. The masters hate the freedmen, the freedmen hate the masters, and all but a small crust live in fear of the forces of Astapor, Yunkai, and Volantis like a deadly plague. Trouble is, the small crust happen to be the wealthiest and most powerful families within the Grand Senate.

Huffing angrily, Daenerys wasn’t surprised that the same Masters so opposed to her rule were giving Jon headaches. ‘Apparently crucifying those behind the murder of those slave children didn’t do the trick.’ She hoped Jon was letting Rhaegal and Edderon loose on them, all the while knowing her husband would never kill those not proven guilty of treason. Disciplined and honorable to a fault - part of why she loved him so. Lifting up the letter, she read on.

There has been a major uprising by the Sons of the Harpy…

A gasp left her lips, irrational fear filling her. ‘Calm down, Dany. Jon wrote this letter. He is alive.’ Gods, he had become the center of her life, a person whom she could not live without. Thinking about it, Dany could not feel ashamed for such weakness. To her, it was a strength.

Through their own hubris and skillful tactics, I lured them into a single location and our children wiped them out. Podrick distinguished himself in battle, and I have knighted him for it. Lady Brienne will probably be miffed at having to deal with him as an equal, though.

Wonderful news. Bran has returned from Qarth. Our family is united once again, every living Stark and Targaryen. It feels like I am complete again, but I know that it won’t be true until you are in my arms again.

Thumb ghosting over the rough parchment, Dany felt the tears form as she smiled in as much joy as she could feel without him and their children beside her. Even in these royal reports his love shone through. He made her so happy, and she was grateful that the final Stark was back in the wolfpack. Her family, after so long without any family but Viserys - no love there, but enough love now to last lifetimes.

A brusque knock on the door jolted her from her thoughts. “Enter,” she replied without looking, assuming Yara or Theon were bringing news about the enemy fleet.
Turns out, she was mistaken. “Empress.” Startled, Daenerys rose from her chair and turned, face to face with Daario Naharis. Beard trimmed, disarming smile on his face, the weathered look from when they met upon her return to Dragonstone had left - she had not seen him in the week since. Aside from the cold-weather cloak and trousers he looked exactly like the dashing sellsword who offered his service outside of Yunkai.

She refused to be affected. “I thought I told you to head to the mainland.” Dealing with the demands of her fleet had consumed her, but he had no excuse.

“The weather, as it turns out,” he stated. “That and Lannister patrols have kept me land bound for the moment. But rest assured, my best lieutenants are commanding the Second Sons as well as I would have. Actually, that is why I am here.” His smile widened, Daario producing a dispatch from his cloak, handing it to her. “My men have fully joined Robb Stark’s army at Harrenhal, just in time for them to join in the coming battle with Tywin Lannister.”

Quickly perusing the note, Dany felt both apprehension and relief. Things were proceeding as they had largely planned with Tywin’s moves, and Daario at the very least had brought the needed manpower for Robb to use. “Good.” Looking up at Daario, she hoped that she had misjudged him after making sure he knew his place. “You have done well, Captain Naharis. I am grateful for your faithful service.”

He bowed. “It is my pleasure to serve you, your Majesty… In any capacity you require.”

Her skin bristled, catching a hint of innuendo that angered her. “Watch yourself, Captain,” she hissed.

“I bear no disrespect, your Majesty. I only seek to serve the rightful Empress of Westeros, and her Emperor according to the traditions of her House and of Westeros.”

“And what traditions do you refer to?” Dany wasn’t stupid. She had an inkling of where he was going and wished to behead him for it. But she couldn’t, not only due to the needed soldiers. He never said it directly, clothing it in riddles. That fact he hadn’t outwardly made any improper requests or demands only angered her more. But she and Jon weren’t going to be Joffrey. Death and punishment awaited only those guilty of actions, not words.

“All I say is that the Emperor is your husband, and I respect him and follow him as many a noblewoman or knight followed the Targaryen Kings and Queens of old.” He bowed once more. “I shall leave you to your thoughts, Empress.”

Watching as the door closed behind him, Daenerys trembled with rage. Targaryen incest and polygamy was infamous, but a less known fact were the strings of affairs and concubines kept by both the sons and daughters of her House, even as recently as her own father. Dragonfire coursed through her veins, fists clenching at Daario’s insolence, as if she would betray her beloved by taking him as a lover. Hissing, she slammed one on the table - flesh of her palm gracing a decorative ornament and slicing an inch-long cut. “Ahhhh.”’ Damn.’ Blood dripping, Dany clutched the throbbing hand with the other. “Seven Hells.”

“Your majesty!” A servant rushed in, pleated skirt fluttering as she dashed over to the Empress. “Here.” She drew a strip of cloth from her pocket and laid it gently over the bloody appendage. “Keep this tight against the cut. The bleeding looks worse than it is, your Majesty, but better safe than sorry.”

Dany looked curiously upon the servant, never having seen her before. Most of the staff brought with her were Essosi, but this girl was a pale white - Vale complexion? Perhaps the Ironborn had…
secured extra help from the mainland. Such a thought abhorred her, but she had much more to worry about. “Thank you.”

The servant girl nodded, suddenly different. “Shall I fetch a Maester?”

Crimson soaked the spot on the cloth pressed directly to the wound. “Yes, please do.”

“At once, your Majesty.” Turning, Arya’s face hardened beneath her mask. Her brother hadn’t gone for a month and already things were falling apart in a maze of internal squabbling. A beast that began with the Faceless men now had a maze of tentacles reaching everywhere, and by the Many Faced God she would get to the bottom of it.

The bushes rustled further, and the Lannister bannerman cringed, waiting for the killer in service of the dragon bitch to emerge. ‘Northern wildman?’ he thought, trembling. ‘Or one of those horse savages.’ When nothing happened after nearly ten seconds, he edged warily closer to the bush. A flash of movement nearly sent his sword lunging at the leaves, until he discovered the intruder. Suppressing a chortle, the soldier yelled, causing the frightened hare to scamper off. Still laughing, he went back on his way to the camp.

Tyene Martell, waiting for the Westerlands street urchin to disappear from view, laid motionless in the brush. Clad in drab browns in the land still free from snow, she was almost indistinguishable from the twigs and dead leaves that littered the floor of the wooded thicket. It was only through divine intervention that the hare had been in the same clump of scrub as her, or she would have certainly been caught - her two daggers would have dispatched him easily, but he had friends. This mission required stealth.

After several minutes, the only sounds resonating in the highland hills just outside Harrenhal were the caw of the crows and rustle of the trees. Movements slow yet focused, Tyene raised her head out of the brush, peering across the landscape. Judging that she was completely alone, she rose and resumed her trek.

The sounds of the camp began to register in her ears for every bramble and thicket she passed - a large one, likely over three hundred if her senses were still sharp. With the hoofbeats of mounted knights approaching on the nearby Kingsroad, Tyene hit the deck. On her belly, she inched her way forward through piles of dead leaves and brown grass winter had left upon the ground. Observing, waiting, planning…

A column of knights roared past only several yards away. A virtual hornet’s nest of enemies for which Tyene was facing alone. ‘Damn Caryn.’ The smug general wanted something to one up the Imp. Tyene figured the whole thing was smart, but petty revenge that brought her into harm’s way annoyed her to no end.

Suddenly, a new noise stunned him out of her reverie. “I’m just gonna take a piss away from you cunts.” Tyene’s eyes widened. Could it have been that easy? Sure enough, there was Ser Bronn, the gruff sellsword with a chip on his shoulder strolling through the trees, separating himself from the encampment. A smile crossed her face - she didn’t even have to infiltrate the camp.

Kicking a rock into a clump of leaves, Bronn found a nice, stout oak tree to his liking. Certainly smelled better than the camp latrines, already overflowing with flies and the stench of nearly a hundred soldiers with diarrhea - while the smell was common on the battlefield, at least then there
was the smell of blood and smoke to mask it. Hands moving to the drawstring of his trousers, they stopped as a sharp blade made ever so slight contact with his neck.

“Keep quiet or I’ll kill you,” Tyene hissed, guiding him behind a grove of thick brambles. Her captor did not seem to resist. “Where is the main Lannister army?”

Bronn smirked at the voice. “Well hello.” If it weren’t for the blade to his throat, Bronn would have found this highly arousing. “And why should I tell you this, lass?”

The knife pressed into his skin, just weak enough not to nick his skin. “I won’t ask again.” Tyene put all her malice in her voice, but the vast majority of her resisted having to kill this man.

“You’re not going to kill me, darlin’,” Bronn chuckled, seeing right through her. A choking gulp left him as she shifted her arm to hold him in a lock. She may not have wanted to kill him, but she was angry.

“I don’t want to kill you, sellsword. I owe you a great debt.” Among other reasons. “But do not hesitate to tell yourself that I will give you great pain.”

Holding his hands up in surrender, Bronn fell onto the ground as Tyene released him. Coughing, he sucked in breaths to his aching lungs. “Damn, you are stronger than you fucking look.” The lithe, sensual Dornishwoman had a power that rivaled some Kingsguards he knew.

Tyene rolled her eyes, but felt inwardly pleased at the complement. “I don’t have all day - and bear in mind I still haven’t decided what to do with you afterwards.”

“Don’t trust me, do ya?”

“About as far as I can through you, Ser Bronn,” she scowled. “But I think you would prove more trustworthy than most think.”

“Oh?” Resting his back against a tree trunk, Bronn folded his arms. “Why is that?”

Smirking, Tyene looked him over. “You don’t cross my mind as the blindly loyal type, or the obsequious fortune hunter. You’re an independent fortune hunter, and in Joffrey’s Kingdom such independence is a liability - am I wrong?”

Damn, her smug smirk was sexy. As she knelt before him, he grabbed her neck and pulled her in for a lustful, short kiss. “Perhaps you’re right.” Bronn grinned at her momentary satisfied look before the haughty derision returned. “Seeing a that I don’t have a choice… they’re not sending any relief force to Casterly Rock despite knowing you cunts are going after it.”

Her suspicions - or rather Caryn’s - were confirmed. “Why? That’s where their gold is.”

Bronn chuckled. “Lass, all the gold is stamped with the seal of the Iron Bank. The Westerlands haven’t shit gold since before this shitshow started.” Getting Jaime Lannister drunk one night months past spilled plenty of secrets.

That surprised her a bit. ‘So the great Tywin Lannister hasn’t an ingot to his name.’ Delightful to her families’ ego, but still provoking more questions than answers. “So where are the additional troops being sent.” Bronn answered by extending his arms wide to the land around him. ‘Oh fuck.’

The shrill ringing of the bell pierced the early morning silence. Lion banners fluttering in the sea
breeze, dozens of archer, crossbowmen, and men at arms scrambled on the cobblestone and wood
floors for their positions. It had rained overnight, a cold, biting rain that left a humid chill in the air
and puddled dampness on the ground. Boots squelched as the men hurried, the barking of officers
the only noise loud enough to match the warning bells.

“Form at the mantlets!” yelled the officers.

“Fucking hells,” one archer said.

“There has to be millions,” murmured another, urine soaking his trousers.

“Gods be with us, gods be with us,” a crossbowman mumbled over and over under his breath.

“Shut your fucking mouths and form up! Hold the tar!” screamed an officer at his trembling men,
holding back his own fear. Before him - assembled across the vast expanse of the Plains of Tytos
nested between the coastal cliffs and forested peaks - were the fifteen thousand men of the Imperial
Army of the West. Tight ranks of Unsullied formations, shock still in their menacing black leather
armor. Glinting steel armor and enraged snarls from the Riverlands men at arms, ready to avenge the
rape and pillage of their land by the Lannisters and their Frey running dogs. Forms of massive
trebuchets, catapults, and the giant belfry wheeling slowly towards them.

The booming of a horn resonated across the landscape. In a mere split second, the Imperial line
surged forward. Unsullied by silent command shifted their shields up in a uniform tortoise formation,
protecting themselves from the inevitable streams of arrows as they clustered around their ladders.
The men at arms by contrast sacrificed formation for speed, charging at a sprint towards the
whitewashed walls of the picturesque Casterly Rock. Catapults and trebuchets let loose, showering
projectiles upon the walls and innards of the castle.

“LOOSE!” A ragged wave rippled into the air, black shapes arcing upward before plummeting
towards their targets below. Many riverlanders fell, screams of the wounded joining with the utter
silence of the dead, blood staining the impossibly green grass. Arrows buried themselves in the
shields of the Unsullied, few falling unless a lucky arrow sailed through the gaps in the impromptu
armor. Still the formation plodded forward.

Crossbowmen began to individually target the onrushing imperials between the longbow volleys,
aimed shots taking down men in screaming flashes of crimson. Ladders heaved up into place,
bannermen and Unsullied using their shields as cover to scramble up. Rocks and metal shards fell
from the mantlets, striking dozens. Dodging one, Edmure Tully urged his men to continue. “Come
on! Don’t stop! Get up there!”

Screams and snarls from atop found several bannermen falling, blood spurting from their broken
bodies. Piercing cries from yards away found an entire detachment of Unsullied doused in boiling
tar, Edmure covering his nose from the stench of cooking flesh. Looking back up, he made up his
mind and the Lord of Riverrun mounted a ladder.

Aching pain stabbing through his limbs, Edmure felt his shield arm jerk down as rocks slammed into
it. A crossbow bolt, followed by another, shallowly pierced the wood - avoiding his arm thanks be to
the gods. Cries from beside him found another Tully bannerman fall, blood gushing from the bolt in
his neck and taking three others on the ladder down with him. “Fuck!” Their own archers suddenly
joined in the fray, several arrows smacking off the walls. A Lannister soldier collapsed to the ground
below as some hit their mark. “Remember the Red Wedding!” he snarled, pushing through the pain
as he scrambled up the rungs faster.

“REMEMBER THE RED WEDDING!” screamed those under his command. The Unsullied were
silent, continuing forward nevertheless.

Reaching the top rung, Edmure bent his knees and leapt onto the top of the mantlet. Legs searing in pain, he slammed his shield into the waiting Lannister bannerman, red cloak and shield both careening into the outer courtyard below. Unsheathing his sword, steel clashed against flesh as he sent a crossbowman to the ground in a bloody mess.

Unsullied poured through the innards of the belfry, protected from the hail of boulders and arrows slamming into the sides. Lannister archers dipped their wicks in flaming pitch and sent them hurling towards the siege tower, but Imperial engineers under the direction of Sam Tarly had planned for this. Rain-soaked hides were nailed to the wooden walls. The heavy fur and skin contained the flaming projectiles, dampening their blow as the hooked ramp slammed onto the mantlets. Dozens of Unsullied, Grey Worm at the van, charged into the Lannister men at arms with spears and short swords - a ferocious melee erupted, troops struggling to gain the advantage in such a narrow space.

Kicking down the door to a tower, Grey Worm rammed his spear into a waiting redcloak, blood oozing from his mouth as his lungs began to shut down. Battle cry resonating in his ears, the commander barely managed to draw his short sword to parry the axe aimed for his head. A diagonal slash sent the second redcloak back in a boneless heap. Racing up the staircase, running through another with his sword, Grey Worm burst into the sunlight with the Targaryen flag removed from the satchel tied to his waist. “NOW!” he yelled, High Valyrian joined by the fluttering banner to signal to Caryn’s trained gunners.

Set up in the heat of the fight, the two cast-iron siege cannon boomed at Grey Worm’s signal. Propelled forward by the explosive force of the black powder, the two hundred pound balls crashed through the thick wooden gate, denting the iron porculus within. Two further vollies sent the entire structure crashing through the ground. Gate open - all Lannister forces redirected to the site of the assault - Unsullied swarmed into Casterly Rock castle, sweeping aside all who opposed them.

Two hours later, the sounds of fighting had all but morphed into an eerie silence. Death hung in the air, prisoners marched around piles of bodies while gleeful bannermen looted everything not nailed down. Grey Worm’s mind was on the next fight. “I wonder how long Iron Islands fleet take to here.”

“Our scouts didn’t see any in Lannisport harbor,” Edmure remarked, wiping the sweat and dried blood from his face with a rag. “Either they’re at sea or in Pyke.” Called over by one of his knights, he dashed off.

“Commander,” said one of the Unsullied lieutenants, running up to Grey Worm. “I inspected the vaults. All of them are empty of the enemy treasury.”

Face a mask, inwardly Grey Worm seemed shocked. “Absolutely none? No bullion prepared for storage in wagons or carts?” The dismay and confusion increased when his lieutenant shook his head. His scouts may have been wrong or been the victim of deception, but the reported haul of precious metals out of the Westerlands couldn’t have been cleared out of Casterly Rock in the time it took for them to march there. It was just impossible.

Grey Worm’s musings were interrupted by Edmure Tully, face contorted in rage. The man looked to be someone normally placid and friendly - Grey Worm knew the type, for Missandei was another once used to being out of bondage. Anger looked out of place on him, but considering what he’d been through, what other emotion could one have felt against House Lannister. “Fucking asshole!” He threw a trembling man to the ground. He wore the dark grey shift and chains of a maester. “Tell me where the gold is!” Sword sheathed, he had his knife out. It was also covered in blood. “There is none in the vaults!”
The maester shook with terror. “Please, my Lord, don’t kill me…” He was cut off when Edmure kicked him in the chest.

Sputtering coughs, he looked up to see Grey Worm kneeling beside him. “Lord Tully was at Red Wedding,” he said in his common tongue, more fluent through every lesson of Missandei’s and interactions with his Westerosi comrades. “Watched as friends and family died. Separated from wife and baby. Tywin Lannister no here, so he have no trouble to kill you. Understand?” The maester of Casterly Rock nodded. “Where is gold?”

“There…” He wheezed. “There is none.”

“Lies,” Grey Worm spat, causing the maester to squirm.

“The famed mines of the Westerlands,” Edmure stated, arms spread wide. “All the fucking gold in Westeros, enriching the Lannisters for centuries.”

“Yes, they did.” The maester shakingly climbed to his feet, legs wobbling. “But the mines ran dry. Have been for nearly a decade. There hasn’t been gold in our vaults for two years.” Flinching as if expecting a sword to his back, all he received were two Tully bannermen dragging him away with the rest of the prisoners.

Words ringing in his head, Grey Worm gazed at the expanse of dead. For every Lannister, there were two or three Unsullied or Tully bannermen, lost to the meatgrinder of fortress assault. “Dear Gods!” screamed Edmure, kicking at a dead redcloak in anger. The realization came upon Grey Worm. ‘No gold. No point.’ Casterly Rock turned out to be nothing but a speck of insignificant land. There would be no relief armies coming after them.

So much death and loss - all for nothing.
Snapping the reins, Tyene urged her mount faster. Puffs of snow and clods of dirt and brown grass underneath the white blanket were kicked up by the hooves of the horse. Jinking and weaving between the small hills and brush that made up the plains of the western Crownlands was taking a toll on the poor animal, but Tyene did not have time to waste. Evading Lannister patrols led her far west of the God’s Eye, Riverrun directly to the north. ‘I have to reach the Queen,’ she thought as the cold air slammed into her face. ‘I must!’

Masked by the snowfall like a concealed punji stick, the gopher hole represented a nightmare for any expert rider. Tyene didn’t know what had hit her. One moment the wind was whipping through her as she kept her eyes trained on the horizon, and the next she was flying through the air, horse letting out a primal scream of pain. Hands moving to block her face, in an act of divine providence she landed in a snowbank - aside from an aching jolt, she was unharmed.

“Fucking… shit,” she spat, shaking the snow out of her hair. Rolling onto her back, Tyene pulled off her scarf as she stared at the clear blue sky. “Mother of fuck, mother of fuck…” The pained baying of her crippled horse filled the air… until they ceased abruptly. ‘Why would… oh fuck…’

Before she could scramble to her feet, Tyene felt herself dragged into the air. A bearded face popped into view, shouting at several figures running up on foot or horseback. Dothraki - Tyene should have known the Horde waited in this part of the Crownlands to catch any relief force for Casterly Rock. A force that would never come. This was a good development - or a disaster, for she spoke none of the language.

Yanked about, laughter among the riders filling her ears, Tyene fought the urge to unsheath her daggers. The Dothraki were nominally allies of Free Dorne, and attempting to fight them would only get her ripped apart. “I am Tyene Martell! Rightful lady of Dorne.”

A well-built man with swirling tattoos dotting his chest stepped forward - his braid was long, indicating a warrior undefeated. He raised his arkh to Tyene’s neck with a snarl within his thick beard. “Dorne… enemy,” he spat in broken Common Tongue, pointing south. “Dorne with… Lannister.” He tossed her to the ground.

Dread filled Tyene. “That is Trystane Martell. I am Tyene, sworn to your Khaleesi.” More laughs rang out, followed by guttural banter that did not sound at all welcoming in the foreign Dothraki dialect. A rider dismounted his horse and made a gesture of frantic fornication. Tyene’s blood simmered. ‘They will not take me alive.’ A hand drifted to where her dagger waited, concealed.

“Lady Tyene?” Eyes going wide at the familiar voice, Tyene saw the lady Missandei stepping off her horse at the edge of the ragged circle of warriors. Barking angry commands in Dothraki, the riders backed away, faces neutral. Missandei, Lord Yohn Royce close behind her, knelt beside Tyene. “Forgive me, Lady Martell. The khalasar is very protective of their Khaleesi - a bit overprotective sometimes.”

Lord Royce reaching out his hand to help her up, Tyene nodded grateful for the assistance. “If it had been one of my cousin’s stooges, I wouldn’t begrudge them if they killed the cunt.” She swatted the powdery snow from her cloak. “But no time for that, I must speak with Empress Daenerys!”

“She is in Dragonstone,” the translator replied. “She left weeks ago.”

“Seven hells,” Tyene muttered. “You must then take me to Robb Stark, or Harrenhal.”
Missandei blinked while Lord Royce bristled. “Whatever for?” he asked, voice haughty with nobility.

“Because I think Tywin Lannister is about to catch him in a trap.” Missandei waited but a split second before summoning a horse.

“You, girl! Fetch me that wine.”

“At once, ser,” stated Arya from underneath her ‘face.’ Resisting the urge to run the man through with Needle for daring to address the sister of the Emperor in that manner - it wasn’t hard, for she was used to it from her travels - she complied with her submissive alter ego and scurried towards the men.

One of the men laughed. “‘Ser,’ as if you could ever be a knight, you fucking cunt.”

“Hey, I could so too be a knight. I’s got chivalry,” the first man replied, grinning a set of half the total number of teeth as he snatched the wine cup from Arya. The others guffawed and began punching him in the arm.

This degradation was not something she enjoyed, but it was for the greater good. Her trace on the Waif had ended close to here on the mainland, but when hearing that Dany had journeyed unexpectedly to Dragonstone Arya knew she had to be here. She couldn’t let Jon’s beloved be harmed, for if the Waif got wind of it, she’d be on a fast boat for here in no time flat.

Suddenly Arya heard a cacophony of bells, rings echoing through the narrow halls. “Ships spotted on the horizon. Not ours!” someone shouted around the corner.

“Get to the docks your lazy cunts!” another yelled. A cloaked figure was shoved towards the end of the hall. “Go!”

“I’m going!” he hollered back. Arya froze, face going pale underneath her ‘face.’ That voice… she would remember it till the day she died. Ducking into a dark alcove, blending into the shadows, she quietly watched him. As he slowly moved to grab a crate while the others raced out, Arya caught a glimpse of his face.

“Meryn Trant,” she whispered, words audible only to her. Arya’s heart hitched - another name to be stricken off her list.

For now though, she watched him. Once alone, he made his way towards the doorway in which she hid. Without making a sound, she hatched a plan.

Shutting the door behind him, Meryn Trant pulled back his hood. “Fucking Dragon Bitch,” he muttered, moving to a loose stone in the wall - mortar chipped away to nearly nothing. “Soon you will be fucked, and maybe I’ll have a turn with you.” He chuckled to himself. She was too old for his tastes, but the novelty of taking a Targaryen royal was too good to pass up. Smiling, he pulled out the stone and withdrew the knife stashed within.

A sharp jolt of pain stabbed through him as a sword ran through his gut. Howling, Trant’s knees buckled as he fell to the ground. Darting to grab the knife, Arya jabbed it into his eyes in quick succession. Howls filling the room, she stuffed his cloak into his mouth, stifling him.

Pained whimpers audible despite the gag, Arya circled around the kneeling Trant like a wolf would its prey. “You’re on my list, you know. For killing Syrio Forel… for abusing my sister.”

Aside from
Joffrey and Walder Frey, the Wild Wolf’s satisfaction would be the highest with this scalp. Stabbing him once more in the back - avoiding the vital organs - she reveled in his anguish. “You deserve to burn... slowly,” Arya whispered in his ear, voice that of a demon. “But I shall give you a mercy you don’t deserve.”

Nothing but a strangled moan left his blocked mouth as Trant nodded vigorously. His gouged eyes were unseeing, so he couldn’t tell if she accepted it.

Suddenly he felt his gag withdrawn. “Why are you here?!” she hissed. Arya kicked him in the chest. “Answer me, coward!”

Trant coughed up blood, hacking the crimson spray all over the stone floor tread by Aegon the Conqueror centuries before. “The, the… Sovereignguard,” he babbled like a child between bouts of gurgling on his blood. “They are here… for the Dragon Queen.”

Another plunge of the knife into abused flesh. “How do they hope to get past the guards?!“ Dany had swarms of ironborn and Ser Jorah with her.

“There’s… a snake in the grass,” Trant choked out before Needle sliced through his neck. Arya watched him fall limply through the floor, twitching and gasping with asphyxia. She had to get to Dany.

Looking up at where the starry blackness of night used to be, Yara Greyjoy slammed her fists against the railing of her flagship. “Damn, fucking fog!” She ran her hand down her face in exasperation. “Can’t see a cock in front of my damn face!” Not that she’d want to.

“Calm down,” stated her captain. “If any damn Lannister ships approach, the pickets will fire off a warning broadside.” Only half of their vessels had been upgraded with the new weapons by the Meereen and Dragonstone smiths, and with it a completely revitalized naval doctrine had to be implemented. To say the various Ironborn captains were like kids in the sweatmeat jar was the understatement of the month.

For Yara however, it had just been another headache on top of greater, more pressing headaches. “It’s not them I worry about. We can sail circles around those cunts.” She splayed her arms out on the railing, looking down at the black waters below. “No, I’m worried about my uncle. Where the fuck is he and his massive fleet?”

The Captain crossed his arms. “Last we’ve heard was that he’s probably somewhere off the coast of Pentos, hunting trade cogs from Meereen. Probably shifted north to protect the homeland from our army at Casterly Rock. Fucking ground pounders get all the fucking fun. Our cannon would blast those hulks out of the water, and they got nothing but slow as shit catapults.”

“Don’t wish for something you’d regret later,” she muttered.

As if preordained by the drowned God, her comment was followed by the distant boom of cannon. “The picket ship,” breathed the Captain, frozen.

Yara’s reflexes were quick. “Sound the alert! Full battle stations, now!” A sailor rang the warning bell, its shrill clang waking up the previously sleepy ship. “Full sail!”

“Full sail, aye!” The ship shuddered as she picked up the winds, lurching her forward. All around the moored fleet came the boom of cannon… followed by yellow-orange streaks of light that cut through the fog.
Eyes transfixed, Yara watched as they streaked ever skywards before peaking and arcing back down to… “GET DOWN!” Her scream tore through the air just as the projectiles slammed into the deck of the fourth rate. Detonating, fire and shards of hot metal flew all over the place, setting people and wood alight with flame.

“My Lady!” Spotting the sails torn a bit but luckily not consumed in the inferno threatening to take hold on deck, Yara followed the pointed finger of the Captain to the open stretch of sea. There barrelled the shape - the prow of a mighty battleship. Such a decorated prow only meant one thing… the enemy flagship. “Hard a starboard!” she commanded. “We need to turn around him!”

Sails aloft, the helmsman pulled at the tiller - but it was too late. The prow slammed into the hull of the fourth rate, a maze of grappling hooks and corvus gangplanks slamming onto the deck. A wave of Ironborn Marines, swords and axes at the ready, charged forth to engage with their Imperial brethren. Nothing more she could do now, Yara leapt down onto the deck and rammed the blade of her knife into an unsuspecting marine. As another raised an ax to charge at her, she felled him with a blade between the eyes.

Leaping onto the deck of the ship, a towering figure with a wide, toothy grin drew his sword. His gaze settled on the Ironborn leader. “Yara!” Euron shouted, almost a snarl. “Come give your uncle a kiss!”

Sword of her own out, Yara screamed a battle cry and charged.

“Jorah, what is going on?”

“Please, Khaleesi. You must not dither,” replied the Lord Commander of the Imperial Guard.

It had been a quiet evening in her chambers, Daenerys writing a dispatch to Jon under the low candlelight. She had been quite happy to inform her beloved that a massive shipment of dragonglass was already on its way to White Harbor, enough to equip twenty thousand men with weaponry. Suddenly Jorah had burst in with Daario and half a dozen other guards surrounding the corridor. With only a muffled apology he had hauled her up, literally frog-marching her down the corridor towards her solar. Through the thick walls she heard explosions begin to shake the brick and stone around her.

Guard throwing open the door, Jorah dragged her inside her solar, others filling in. “Khaleesi, stay away from the windows. The Ironborn fleet have engaged our fleet.”

Dany’s blood went cold. “Euron Greyjoy.” She spat out the person’s name, still remembering how he had nearly taken her children… taken her upon the cold floors of this castle. “I need to mount Balerion, rain dragonfire from above.” A massive blast resonated, punctuating her sentence.

“I can’t let you go, Khaleesi.” Jorah stared her down, not breaking in the face of her regal glare. “The enemy… has a new weapon. Something we haven’t foreseen.”

Blinking, Dany resisted the urge to look out the window - best to stay safe from enemy archers. “What kind of weapon?”

“A rocket,” Daario replied, peeking through a crack in the door. “They use gunpowder, like General Caryn’s cannon, but enough to power a projectile. I’ve seen the Yi Ti use them, but I’ve heard alchemists in Qarth were trying to weaponize it.”

“The masters must have passed it on to Euron and the Lannisters.” Daenerys rolled her eyes. “Of
course this had to happen.” First the scorpions hurt Balerion, and now this. ‘You didn’t expect Tywin to roll over on his belly for you?’ she thought sarcastically.

Catching silent forms begin to bunch up through the crack in the doorway, Daario exhaled softly. It was time. Quietly, while no one was looking - the guards milling about while Daenerys stared into the cracking fire - he pulled a small container from inside his shirt. Whipped up by a discreet alchemist back in Meereen, the sellsword quickly lit a wick of rope with a wall mounted candle. Tossing it on the floor, he ducked out through the door before anyone noticed. Before the flame reached the gunpowder nestled within.

The force of the blast tossed Dany into the air, slamming her against the wall with a thud. Ears ringing, she crumpled to the stone floor, blinking and disoriented. Numbness covered her like a cold blanket, seemingly faint shouts and cries still powerful enough to pierce through the invisible wall of white noise registering to her. A dull ache began to emanate from the back of her head and deep within her torso. Reaching up to touch her scalp, blood dripped from pockmarked cuts and gashes in her right hand. Eyes fluttering, Dany felt coherence begin to return as her vision cleared, hearing improved, and the pain begin to explode as the shock dissipated.

Shakily climbing back to her feet, Dany surveilled the room. Of her guards, many were strewn about with screams and moans of pain - some frighteningly still as the life had left their broken bodies. Blood and bits of charred debris were everywhere. Dany caught sight of a hand, ragged flesh and protruding bone where the wrist should have been. Feeling the blood drain from her face, she felt a bruised Jorah pull her behind him as armed men burst through the door. They quickly finished off the wounded guards, one slamming his blade between one’s ribs. The guard’s eyes went wide as the metal tore through his heart. Muffled grunts ended, slumping dead on the stone.

“Kingsguards, Khaleesi,” Jorah whispered to her. Dany drew Saracen from its scabbard - Joffrey had somehow infiltrated the island, but who had set off the explosion?

Her question was answered quite clearly as the last figure stepped through the doorway. “My Queen,” Daario said, small smile on his face as he bowed. “I am at your service.”

It was Jorah who answered first. “You fucking traitor.”

He drew his arkh and pointed it at the northern knight. “Now now, Jorah. Do not speak of things you do not know the answers to.” Daario shifted his gaze back at Dany, who shuddered in disgust at his look. “Do not believe all appearances, my Queen.”

“Oh, appearances are fairly clear in this instance.” Her glare was pure ice, channelling her northern husband. “Did you plan to betray me all along?”

“You, never. I only fight against those whom I have not sworn to serve - and who harm my Queen.”

“And yet you choose Joffrey over my own husband.”

He scoffed. “A bastard who pollutes your illustrious heritage.”

Her eyes narrowed. “As if you are any better.”

“You have a secure kingdom in Essos, and whereas I would help you rule said kingdom, the bastard would mire you in a war you cannot win. The Lannisters have secured safe passage for you to Essos with me upon the conclusion of this war.”

“Amd you believed them?” Daenerys chuckled without mirth. “And I previously thought you had sense, or has madness taken over you… In any case, I shall not allow you to touch me.” She raised
Saracen, killing any further discussion.

As the kingsguards readied their swords, Jorah raised his as well. “Boros. Preston. Where is Trant?”

Boros Blount shrugged. “Could be dead for all I know. Honestly I give fuck all.”

“Agreed, he was a cunt.” Grim chuckles left the old knights, comrades from the first Greyjoy Rebellion. “Would you really strike me down? For Joffrey?” He knew them, felt them to be honorable men.

Another shrug, this one from Arys Oakheart. “It’s a living. Better than have our families slaughtered.” He looked at his old friend. “Surrender Jorah. We’ll send you back to Essos like the Queen.”

“Can’t break my oath, Arys,” Jorah said simply, lunging forth. Oakheart barely had time to react and only just blocked Jorah’s blow.

As her Lord Commander fended off three of the enemy, Dany saw one advance on her - he hefted a club in hand, blade still in its scabbard. “Come ‘ere Dragon Bitch. Nos need to get ‘urt.” Dany replied by slashing with Saracen, the man snarling as Saracen cut into his arm. He lunged forward for her head with the butt of his club. Acting on pure instinct, Dany pitched onto her back. Club missed connecting with her forehead by the width of a thumb. Hitting the stone hard, she blocked out the pain and thrust upward, sharpened Valyrian steel slicing easily through unprotected flesh. Blood began to spew from the man’s lips, pupils wideness as he collapsed in a heap to the side.

Her relief turned to horror as she watched Daario plunge his arkh into Jorah’s shoulder, kicking him in his gut. Jorah, blood seeping into his shirt, fell beside Daenerys, groaning. ‘My child, come.’ In the distance she heard a loud roar as Balerion flew towards the open window of the solar. She scrambled up, blade ready to parry any assault. “Please, my Queen. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.” Daenerys only glared, fire burning in her eyes.

Suddenly with a flash, Daario was sprawled on the ground, arkh knocked out of his hand. The dark blurr materialized out of nowhere, Daenerys now recognizing the servant girl’s clothes - but with a face she eminently recognized. Her eyes widened. “Arya?!” When did she get here?... or had she always been there?

Knife flying from her hand, Arya watched as Preston Greenfield fell, blade buried to the hilt in his shoulder. “Go!” she yelled at Dany, unsheathing Needle just as Arys Oakheart charged into the fray. “Now!”

Urging Jorah out of the window to Balerion’s back - the wounded Lord Commander of her Imperial Guard moaning from the intense pain - Dany hesitated. She reached out for Arya. “I’m not leaving you!”

Ducking under a wide swing from the Sovereignguard’s broadsword, Arya kicked the legs out from Boros Blount before he could flank her and get Dany. She looked back at her sister for a split second, eyes blazing with an icy rage. “I SAID GO!” Such was followed by a pained grunt as Daario slammed his foot into her stomach. Now it was Arya that crumpled on the floor.

Eyes locked with Daario’s, Daenerys knew there was no way to save Arya. Calculations ran through her mind in little more than an instant. She could survive a blast of Balerion’s dragonfire, but Arya couldn’t. With the Emperor halfway across the world, the realm could not lose their Empress. And so the decision was made - just as Daario lunged for her, Dany pitched herself back through the window. Her hair billowed as she fell, eyes closed. ‘Sōvēs.’ With a jolt, she landed on Balerion’s
back, the massive black dragon whisking her away as the boom of Daario’s rage resonated over the 
sounds of battle.

Coughing, wind knocked out of her, Arya heard above her gasping breath the enraged cry leaving 
the sellsword’s mouth. Weakly, she smiled. ‘Fly home, good sister. Don’t let them get you.’

Feeling a dark shadow enveloping her, a tight hand closed in around her throat and hauled her into 
the air. “You little cunt.” Dario’s face was contorted in rage.

Arya spat onto his face, only for her aching lungs and tight throat to spell another bout of coughing. 
“You’ll never... get her,” she choked out, voice high and breaking.

Fingers tightening around her throat, Daario was about to snap her neck with his bare hand before 
something brushed against his shoulder. He turned with murder in his eye to find Arys Oakheart. 
“Captain, do you know who this girl is?”

“She’s about to be a corpse,” he hissed, vision tinted blood red.

“She’s the Stark bastard’s younger sister.”

Red tinge leaving his vision, Daario loosened his grip. Dropping her to the floor - black bruises 
marring her neck - he looked her over with new eyes. “Looks like I’ll have something to present to 
the King.”

A dark dread filled Arya. Of all the trials and tribulations of her young life, this would be the greatest 
test of fortitude that could be imagined.

“FIRE!” Shout bellowing over the din, the new fifth-rate frigate Sea Bitch shuddered as each of the 
twenty cannon mounted on the starboard side unloaded a fusillade of shot at the enemy carrack. 
Tongues of yellow-orange flame seemed to blanket the hull, Theon grabbing the rail as the ship 
rocked violently to port. “Hard a starboard!”

Tiller pushed as far to the left as it would go, the frigate arced in the opposite direction past the hulk 
of the carrack just blasted to each of the seven hells. Deck awash with flame, rockets detonating, 
Theon could see Ironborn sailors leaping into the ocean - trading certain death aboard for likely death 
in the water. Some were already alight with flames as they took the plunge.

All around them, the normally placid seas around Dragonstone - only the occasional storm marring 
the tranquil island backwater - the wrath of the drowned god had descended upon them. Booms of 
Imperial cannon dwarfed all other sounds as broadside after broadside slammed into enemy ships, 
while rockets lanced out from the vessels of the Royal Ironborn Fleet in a malevolent journey of 
death and mutilation. Flames licked on nearly every ship, many locked together by grappling hook 
and corvus. Marines charged in the dance as old as civilization to add a prize to their fleet. Flame-
awash hulls and burning wreckage served as the only mausoleum the crews of the ships that 
succumbed to the dazzling firepower that technological advancement brought.

“The great Kraken feeds tonight,” Theon heard a sailor mutter. He scanned the men he now 
commanded. No cheers, no chants of glory - not even the profane barbs of the crew of his first ship 
that bore the name of his flagship. Only a dark futility and stubborn determination to survive. ‘This 
war shall destroy the Ironborn.’

“What is dead may never die,” he murmured, watching yet another ship succumb to a furious 
broadside.
“Admiral!” Theon turned to see the ship’s captain, stony-faced. He had never respected Theon, but after being in the thick of the fight, such sentiments had evaporated. “The Pyke’s Glory struck its colors!” Theon paled, the significance sinking in to him.

“Euron boarded it,” he finished, resignation and acceptance in his tone. A cloud of indecision threatening to take ahold of him, he shook it off. He wasn’t Reek, the beaten curr only useful as Ramsay Bolton’s whipping boy. He was an admiral in the Imperial fleet. “I know Yara, and she’d want us to save ourselves rather than die as crab chow.” He looked to the southeast, at the dark shapes of Euron’s picket keeping them surrounded. “Every surviving ship…”

The light glow from the fires and rockets, punctuated by low booms from the few shipborne cannon, erupted into an orange-red light. The gout of flame raced to one of Euron’s ships as it moved to grapple with one of theirs. Theon covered his eyes as the rockets onboard detonated, the vast explosion bathing brightness over the entire stretch of sea around the island. “Fuck me,” breathed the ship captain.

A booming roar resonated through the air, louder than the cacophony of battle. Theon looked up as the black form of Balerion dove for another enemy ship. He quickly deduced the pattern. “Listen up! The Empress is clearing our way to the sea! Get all others to line up in formation for a breakout, and then scatter!” Saving their vessels were a priority, even if fleet cohesion would be broken for the foreseeable future. “We’ll meet up in White Harbor eventually! Move!”

In the light of the sun, each ship used flags to signal to and coordinate with the others, but under the milky darkness of the night sky it had to change. As the Captain barked orders to the crew - open ocean sails rapidly guided into place for the final dash - signallers lit fires on the forecastle and poop deck. Placed in a specific position, every surviving ship knew their orders in a short amount of time.

“Ready the cannon!” Theon shouted as the Sea Bitch took the vanguard at the head of the ragged column of ships - a motley assortment of frigates, carracks, caravals, and sloops that had survived the fight against the massive ships of the line Euron had brought in. Already, two of those were racing from opposite sides to cut off his frigate’s escape route. “When we run alongside, blast them with everything you got!” ‘If we run alongside.’ It they succeeded in blocking them, despite the several burning hulks left in Balerion’s wake, the cork would be in and they’d be surrounded.

Bow slicing through the dark water, white sea spray sprinkled into Theon’s face as he raced to the bow - the Captain had the tiller well manned, and he needed to be with the forward guns. Sails billowed as a gust of icy wind gusted from the north, as if the hand of the Old Gods rescuing them. Their smaller, faster ships had the advantage over the plodding battleships, larger sails but far more tonnage for the winds to haul.

Closer and closer. Theon felt time slow, every second stretching out minutes as he awaited the coming storm.

Then, it came. One after the other each cannon sounded off in quick succession, both atop and below they fired, sending their deadly shot streaking towards the thin wood of the enemy’s bow. A roar joined them, Balerion’s jets of fire filling the darkness with light as the Sea Bitch cleared the line of fire, ships behind him picking up the slack.

After the die was cast, the battle joined, time sped past. Soon, it was all over but the gentle rocking of the open ocean.

Stress unwinding - at least for the moment - Theon collapsed onto the deck as the fatigue hit him. It took all of his energy to drag himself to the railing, propping his torso up. He gazed up at the stars, sounds of battle growing fainter as full sails drew them farther and farther away. Stars winked out of
existence above with the dark form of the Empress’ dragon pointed ominously to the mainland.

Theon chuckled, devoid of mirth. Most of their fleet was destroyed and Euron now controlled Dragonstone, but they were alive. Just.
Battle of the God's Eye

“This is… impressive,” Jon remarked, running his hand along the painted canvas. “The figures, the background, it is as if I am witnessing the scene first hand.”

Beaming from the praise of Vhrysa, the artist shrugged. “I wouldn’t go that far, your Majesty, but thank you.” He spoke the Common Tongue well enough, indicating he had been a master rather than a freedman - but Mossador said he was loyal, or else he would never have gotten a private audience with the Emperor. “It is a style I... and my mentor before me and his mentor before him... have been trying to perfect for decades now. Thus, when Lord Mossador sought to commission a depiction of the freeing of the slaves of Yunkai, who was I to deny Mhysa a chance to express my technique in her honor?”

Barristan had told Jon before of his father. Rhaegar Targaryen, the man of many contradictions. A strong and powerful fighter, he had also been a man of the arts - of culture. One who hoped to use his reign to turn a nation of wood and straw into one of brick and marble. To reclaim the spirit of Old Valyria out of the squalor that centuries of torpid kings, scheming bastards, and narrowly ambitious lords had left on Westeros. Admiring the hidden brush strokes, the throes of emotion in the freedmen brilliantly captured by the artist, the ethereal beauty of his Daenerys that captured her essence in a way the stylized monstrosities of statues back home couldn’t, Jon felt the same passion of his father course through him. “I have not seen such detail since the mosaics at Dragonstone. No form of art in Westeros truly captures it.”

A flash of disgust crossed the artist’s eyes, but he kept a deferential facade. “Don’t think too much of the artists and sculptors in Westeros, sire. They are too traditional for their own good. Every sculpture looks the same, and never looks like the person they are seeking to represent - something members of my guild are trying to correct. We call it ‘Neovalyrian,’ as the Valyrian style of mosaics and frescoes largely died out with the Doom.”

Hearing about sculpture, Jon felt his heart soar. The memory of the highly stylized statue of Ned Stark, his father in all but name, in the crypts of Winterfell came to mind. “When Empress Daenerys and I retake the Red Keep, I will need enough of these paintings to fill the walls. Can I count on you to create more?”

“Oh yes, sire. I am honored.” He bowed low.

“I would also like to commission a specific work of my own. Would it be possible to make an accurate - as can be - sculpture of my father. Both my fathers actually. Rhaegar Targaryen and Eddard Stark?”

The artist pondered it. “Hmmm, both are not among the living… I could draw a sketch based on recollections, and my colleague can work from that if that is up to your satisfaction, sire?”

‘I still remember father, and Barristan remembers Rhaegar.’ Jon nodded. “That can be arranged. Thank you for your gift to the Realm, and I am eager to see what you will show me next.” The artist bowed once more and left the room, guards closing the door behind him.

Looking back at the magnificent work of art, Jon ran his thumb across the painted image of his wife - then his long lost love, building her empire in Essos while he was with the wildlings north of the Wall. Captured just as she was being raised atop the exultant crowd of newly freed slaves, the expression of joy and happiness shown on the canvas made him smile. With all that was going on, the stress of the trials of captured Harpies and sympathizers, not to mention the anger from the nobles
and the counter rage from the freedmen, the image of his love brought warmth to him. “I love you, Daenerys,” he whispered to no one in particular, hoping that she could hear him even from across the globe.

“I knew you had changed the moment you arrived home with father.” Turns out, someone had heard him. Jon turned around to find Bran, the guard that wheeled him in bowing and leaving them be. “Didn’t think it was a girl, though.” A weak and emotionless chuckle left his thin, pale lips. “Once I saw Daenerys in this very place, I knew.”

Jon smirked, crossing his arms. “I wouldn’t expect any less from a warlock.” The carefree, adventurous boy he had watched grow up was gone - on the outside rested a weak, frail cripple, but from demonstrations and the sudden arrival of a fully talking Hodor… or Willis rather, Jon knew there was an immense power underneath the unassuming exterior. “Didn’t expect such a change from my brother,” he mused.

“And I did not expect to find a Targaryen in the family, cousin,” Bran replied, the ghost of a grin on his face. Such was the extent of his emotion these days.

Nodding, Jon reached over and clasped Bran on the back. “Seems we have that in common, then.” He took a seat across from Bran. “Changing into persons we’ve never expected to be. Or with people we never expected to ever know.” He smirked at his younger brother. “At least with the woman who fell for my little brother, it wasn’t a total shock - circumstances… unexpected, but a Stark with a Reed isn’t.”

Bran offered a small smile, remembering the moment he realized his true feelings for Meera. He couldn’t grant her the deep affection he had seen Jon give his love - it brought him satisfaction after his shade of the evening visions to see Jon finally have true happiness after being denied his true heritage for so long - but he did as much as he could in his own way. “No person can help who they fall in love with, Jon. Not you, nor your parents.”

“No… I suppose not.” Jon’s smile fell, as he regarded Bran with different, more searching eyes. “Brother, does your magic give you the ability to greensee?”

Image of the old man - the Three-Eyed Raven - came to Bran’s mind. “Sometimes. I… I get better every day.” If he told Jon what it would take to improve his gift, he’d lock him in the cellar to keep him safe. “Why?”

“Do you… see into my future. Do you see anything about the battles to come?”

Bran closed his eyes. Remembered the vision of the warrior and his wife, of the ultimate sacrifice. “Keep Daenerys close, brother. Keep her close.”

… have found close to fuck all, pardon my Valyrian. Used to be that bands of a dozen wildlings would make it to Castle Black, but since that brood of five giant pups that Marg and Wun found two weeks ago, nothing. Methinks the Night King has taken everything north of the Wall. Not a living soul still exists up there.

Still no sign of the dead. Sea patrols found Hardhome deserted. Raiding it has added to our food stocks, so we’ll be fine, but for the sake of all of us, fucking finish the war so our backs aren’t caught in a fucking vice, my Lady.

Eddison Tollett
Paper falling from her hand to atop the desk, Sansa let out a deep sigh. It was beyond hope that they could find another large cache of Free Folk hiding somewhere north of the Wall. Too many had been sent south, leaving only young boys, old men, women, and the Night’s Watch to guard the north. Not enough men at all.

“We can write Daenerys and mother for more,” Rickon said, hopefully. Despite having essentially run the entire North with Lyanna Mormont - with whom he was growing rather close, Sansa observed - since court had left for Riverrun, he was still rather brash and unrefined. As acting Lady until Margaery was officially part of the pack, Sansa took over much of the Lord’s duties in Robb’s stead once she arrived.

Nevertheless, she included him in many decisions. “The dead aren’t at the Wall yet, and I don’t see them getting through without something… big. There is nothing I can think of yet. Joffrey,” she shuddered in disgust. “Is the pressing threat.”

Rickon eyed her ruefully. “What…” He gulped. “What was he like? Joffrey that is?” Having never left the North, he was curious as to the young King that had caused his entire life and family to be uprooted.

Sansa searched her mind to think of the best way to describe him to her youngest brother. “Take Ramsay Bolton,” she said finally, watching him flinch involuntarily. “Take him and make him an idiot, plus a madness that consumes a person until nothing is left but the savagery and cruelty.” Ramsay’s intelligence made him the greater adversary, but at least he had some impulse control - tortured but let live. With Joffrey, her very life was in the balance to whatever whims he had that day. ‘To think I found him was my golden prince.’

“Oh.” The youngest Stark looked to the floor, shifting his feet.

Images of the young boy struggling to keep up with Bran and Arya coming to mind, Sansa smiled at him. The world was going to hells around all, but children like her niece and nephew and growing men like Rickon needed a sense of normalcy in their lives. Despite their mistakes and allowing Jon to grow up a bastard, Eddard and Catelyn Stark gave their kids such normalcy as long as they could.

“Rickon, why don’t you start your training early. I’m sure Robb and Jon would love to see your skills improve.”

It did the trick, Rickon lightening up from his earlier melancholy. He kissed Sansa’s head and left the study.

Frowning once more, Sansa looked at the stacks of grainery reports that had arrived that day. Months of Bolton mismanagement on top of all the deaths in the wars had left supplies on a knife’s edge. Not having to supply Castle Black and Mole’s Town would help somewhat, but the lack of southern imports meant there would have to be further belt tightening. It didn’t sit well with her, but the lessons of her parents resolved Sansa of the need to make such decisions if need be.

A knock disturbed her thoughts. “Enter,” Sansa stated flatly, knowing the guards wouldn’t let anyone come close that could be a threat.

As expected, Maester Wolkan emerged through the now open doorway. “My Lady, two dispatches have arrived for you. One from the South and one from… farther away.”

Sansa nodded. “Thank you, Maester. Please leave them on the table.” Returning to her furious transcribing, she heard a soft plop and the closing of the door. Transfer orders and ration cutting
became official upon the stroke of a quill pen, as did the orders to send the Manderly fishing and
whaling fleet far out to sea to harvest needed seafood - even if they had to go all the way to Ibben.

Picking up the first dispatch, a warm smile formed on Sansa’s face as she recognized Podrick’s seal.
His communications were far and few between in the last months, but each successive one received
were growing to be a treasure for her. The feeling… was alien, but not unwelcome. Unfurling the
tiny scroll, Sansa began to read.

Dearest Sansa,

Tensions are boiling over within Meereen. His Majesty is set to execute the captured Sons of the
Harpy and many influential nobles are seething at this. The masters gather at Yunkai, and we do not
know when they will strike. The Emperor wishes to get home to the Empress as quickly as possible,
and I am worried he may unleash the dragon unwisely. Brandon, Ser Barristan, and myself seek to
calm him.

“Oh Jon,” Sansa said to herself. Such brash behavior wasn’t just of the dragon. The direwolf had it
in spades, if Arya and Robb were any indication.

If I were honest with myself, and it is easier to write this on paper than to say out loud, I so to wish to
come home… to you. I understand the hardship you have suffered, and am willing to wait if need be,
but I would hope you give me the honor of courting you, Lady Sansa.

Ser Podrick Payne
Knight of the Realm

Staring at the script in front of her until they blurred into unreadable squiddles in the paper, Sansa felt
her heart begin to beat in her chest. Did she read it right? Was he truly expressing interest in her… in
that way? Certainly the innuendo and subtle glances of before were put into perspective - part of her
knew this was logical, but did she truly realize the likelihood of this development?

Perhaps not. She set down the paper, thoughts too jumbled to deal with the situation at the moment.
Hands trembling with apprehension… and delight?… she took the second dispatch. Blood ran cold at
the sigil of House Baelish.

Most beloved Sansa,

Just remember, you have a devoted and committed ally in the Lion’s Den.

Petyr Baelish

Your loving servant.

What happiness Podrick’s letter brought her had froze in the ice that was the north. Try as she might,
Sansa couldn’t get the spark of joy to banish the disgust Lord Baelish brought her. She let her head
fall on the table, balling her fists in frustration. This was not going to be simple for her.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Sun glinting off the vast expanse of the God’s Eye in the distance, light
shimmering on the rippling, placid waves in the light breeze, Jaime and the other Lords and officers
of the Army of the Holy Chimera stared at the formations of their enemy. “Robb Stark hasn’t lost his
dge for tactics,” Tywin remarked with his trademark deadpan tone. No one could tell his emotions -
not even his own son.
Horses shifted underneath the Lords, animals somehow sensing the death and destruction that would befall the as yet placid morning. “Tight formations with their pikemen positioned to deal with our heavy cavalry, bowmen and cavalry ready to counterattack,” observed Randyll Tarly, face even more sour and unapproachable than normal. ‘Still smarting over Riverrun,’ Jaime suspected.

“They have the best position. No need to do anything but let us impale ourselves on them,” added Lord Roland Crakehall, chafing on his saddle. Crafty, but a bit on the portly side.

Jaime nodded. “Overall a tough nut to crack, father.” He thanked the Seven that there were no dragons this time - if their intelligence was to be believed. A campaign veteran as he was, Jaime knew military intelligence was a misnomer, often only worthy to wipe your ass with.

Snorting, Tywin peered at the marching formations of his own army as they formed their assault positions below the small ridgeface on which they themselves stood. “The hardest nut always cracks if enough pressure is applied. Any proper Lannister should know this, my son.” He glanced dismissively at Jaime. No matter how Tywin tried to break him, the kind streak that dwelt within his son wouldn’t go away. What a disappointment. “Are the men ready?”

“The front ranks are, my Lord, but the ground is too wet.” Randyll had the urge to lead a full assault on the ranks of the foreign invaders and traitors - a supporter of Rhaegar Targaryen though he was - but held off. “We scouted the land beforehand, and the only paths through the marsh are a direct, narrow route or a wide flanking move on either side.”

“If I wanted an explanation, I would ask for it, Lord Tarly.” Whereas Joffrey would have demanded a full assault, Tywin seemed… calculating - but equally bullheaded. “Full attack, but do not commit all the men just yet.”

A chorus of nods. “Yes, my Lord.”

Deep bellows of horns resonating across the landscape. In the van were the columns of House Maraband. Many of their fellow countrymen lost to dragonfire and Unsullied spears, they drew their swords gladly at the order to charge. Led by Lord Maraband and backed up by other Westerlands houses and the bulk of the Tarly men, they aimed for the center of the marsh and surged forward.

As the cavalry positioned in a wedge formation to flank around the marsh, Lord Enos Ferren - Kevan Lannister’s second in command - ordered a quick trot to cover the ground but conserve energy before a charge. Allow the archers time to soften up the spear wall and for the infantry attack in the center to engage in significant numbers. But his knights were impatient, anxious to avenge their fallen comrades and launch an immediate attack. After furious arguments he finally gave in, the knights charging towards the edge of the marsh in a disorganised pell-mell of galloping hooves and sharpened lances.

Arranged in a tight semicircle north of the cold marshland, the Imperial forces watched the charge as it grew closer. The ground below was soggy, muddy in certain places but had enough time to mostly dry out from the previous day’s rains. Large pikes embedded in the dirt, the front line of Free Folk and Northerners formed the supposedly impenetrable spear wall used so successfully at Riverrun - a ‘porcupine’ as Olenna Tyrell referred to it, though with profane words attached. Nestled within were the cannon and longbowmen, awaiting their orders.

Peering out, Robb watched as the Lannister footsoldiers entered the patch of dry ground bisecting the marsh. To his left, the heavy cavalry wheeled around the marsh, moving to hit Caryn’s Essosi auxiliaries on his flank. “Archers! Nock!” Reaching down, the bowmen plucked an arrow out of the soil and drew back. Artillerymen brought their torches to position, waiting for the order.
“My Lord, should we send in the cavalry?” Brienne asked, pointing back to where the Second Sons and House Hunter’s knights waited on the hill behind the formation.

Robb shook his head. “Not yet. Take a third of the reserves to General Caryn. He’ll need it against their knights.” Brienne nodded and headed for her horse. “Loose!”

In a wave of black the arrows ascended to the heavens, long seconds passing before they arced downward into the mass of men below. The cannons boomed successively, sailing over the heads of the pikemen and men at arms for a more direct path towards the Lannister formation. Blood spurted as the projectiles hit home. Men shrieked in pain from arrows embedding in their limbs and torsos, some falling into the icy waters of the marsh. Cannon shot barrelled ahead with unstoppable momentum, hacking off arms and legs when they didn’t punch through armor, imploding heads and tearing gory chunks off the bodies of men and horse alike.

But the cannon were slow to reload, and raised shields headed off the arrows for the most part. Bloodied but not stopped, the oncoming forces fanned out as the Lannister archers joined the fray from beyond the marsh. Ferren’s knights lowered their lances and made the final dash toward the awaiting Essosi. The battle began in earnest.

Flinging his bulky form between two spears, the armored redcloak embedded his sword in a Stormlander’s back before Robb Stark hacked his head clean off. To his left, Gendry saved a pikeman by slamming his warhammer into a redcloak’s skull. Blood and sweat soaking his cloak, Robb raised Ice in the air with a wolf howl. “Spears and shields boys! Hold the line!”

“Arrows!” screamed a random bannerman. Seeing the cloud of dark forms rapidly approaching, Robb grabbed the shield of a dead Manderly and covered himself just as the projectiles fell all around him. The boom of a cannon failed to mask the screams of men they did hit. Gritting his teeth, Robb shared a look with Gendry - his future brother in law was forced to improvise, a dead redcloak corpse acting as his shield.

“Creative,” Robb yelled, finding the amusement he felt quite out of place.

Gendry grinned sheepishly. “We make due in Flea Bottom.”

Robb laughed harder, the hiss of arrows and the snap of them hitting his shield all around him. “I’ll make sure the armory makes more next time!”

“You’re talkin’ to ‘im!” came the reply, causing more hysterics.

The latest barrage of archers was only the latest act in the half an hour of carnage. Already the floodplains south of the God’s Eye were soaked with blood and bodies - or twisted, broken pieces of bodies decapitated with swords or blown apart by cannon. Crossbows and the more numerous Tarly longbowmen had made their strength in numbers known, swarms of bolts and arrows dueling heavy counterbattery fire with the Imperials and allowing Lord Maraband to fully commit his forces all along the line with the Reach legions advancing nearly unmolested.

But the Porcupine held firm. On the Imperial right and center where Lord Glover and Robb withstood heavy attack by the Westerlands heavy infantry, and on the left where Theodosius Caryn rallied his auxiliaries under heavy pressure from the mounted forces. The proud knights making little impression on the dense forest of long spears, and a small number of riders being killed under their horses - one of them being Lord Ferren, what organization left nearly disintegrating. Luckily for the Lannisters, General Kevan arrived in time to witness the discomfiture of his cavalry, quickly restored
discipline and ordering a general retreat to regroup.

Ice tasted blood yet again, another flash of crimson joining the darker red hues marring the Valyrian steel, as Robb sliced the sword arm off a bull of a man in Maraband colors. A sharp kick sent the shrieking man away from the line. Grunts and curses to his left found a cluster of Stark men falling. “Reverse!” he yelled. “Line to the rear! Five Paces!” The orders carried out from officer to officer, the formation staggering back several yards, contracting inward to fill in gaps. “Tormund!” he screamed at his final reserve. “Fill the ranks!”

“ Took ya long enough!” Tormund grinned, blood lust high. “With me ya cunts! Dip ya’ peckers in!” With the howling screech that haunted many a Lannister knight from Riverrun, the Free Folk advanced to the main line.

“My Lord!” Robb fell behind the line, finding Brienne returned from the left flank. Her left shoulder plate had been sheared off, a shallow gash running a line along her upper arm. A dark red bruise covered her forehead. “Caryn’s in a bad way. Two cannon lost in the mud, and Tywin’s brought fucking crossbows to hit him from a distance!”

Peeking over the Free Folk reinforcements adding their stubborn hides to the frontal spear wall, Robb could just about spot several Tarly banners joining Houses Maraband and Crakehall - forming up for another assault on the line. They could hold, but it would be a close run thing. Bloody in every conceivable way.

He made his decision. Time to spring the hammer. “Get me the fucking signal!” he yelled at his colorguard. Grabbing the blood red direwolf emblazoned over a checkered black/grey landscape, Robb waved it high atop him. ‘Come on, come on!’

Sunlight glinting off their armor, Lord Hunter spotted the frantic signalling of his commander. The cold bit at his nose, though he barely noticed. Nothing compared to the mountain gales of the Vale, Crownlanders the pompous shits just like their weather - he found this applied to the North and its people as well. Sellswords too, the good nobleman finding treating with the foreign rabble to his left beneath him. And yet, they were formed on the same side in this engagement.

“Shall I give the order, my Lord?” his chief knight asked. “Lord Stark has given the signal.”

Looking out at his men, clutching their lances tight in anticipation. A smirk crossed Lord Hunter’s lips as he looked once more at Robb. The desperation on his face. “Yes.”

“Come on you bastards!” Robb seethed through gritted teeth, eyes shifting between Hunter’s Vale knights and the light cavalry of the Second Sons. “Fucking move!” And move they did… with a jerk of the hand, the mass of horsemen banked around… away from the fight. Gut sinking, Robb watched with wide eyes and tight lips. He could spot the haughty smirk on Lord Hunter’s face, the Lieutenant of the Second Sons laughing as he sent an obscene gesture his way.

It suddenly became clear. They had been betrayed.

Lowering his spyglass, Lord Tarly glanced at Tywin quizzically. “Hunter? Naharis?”

Tywin looked at the waves of cavalry, armored Vale knights and leather-clad sellswords, leaving the field of battle in droves for the Kingsroad. Heading northeast, to the ruins of Harrenhal. His expression was flat as always. “I granted Gilwood Hunter the Eyrie and all the Arryn lands to add to his own, plus matching estates in the northern Riverlands. What use do the Freys have with them, they’re dead. Naharis…” A ghost of a smirk formed on his lips. “Turned for… much less.”
A low laugh left the various lords, squires, and officers clustered around the two commanders. Even Lord Tarly cracked a grin, chuckling. “I wonder what Queen Daenerys will say when she finds out her lover turned on her,” Jaime remarked, sarcasm dripping. Whatever he had been before, the new Jaime Lannister despised such dirty tricks.

“Well, she shall tell him herself - if Euron Greyjoy managed to take Dragonstone as I asked him too.” Tywin didn’t even look at his son, too concentrated on the Imperial line being gradually forced back under the weight of his legions. “With any luck, I shall be able to present her, and the Bastard king and Young Wolf to our King by week’s end.” He shrugged. “Or their heads… just as good.” Several ragged cheers broke out from the Lords, Jaime muttering a curse. “Lord Tarly, is that the first banners of our western army that I see?”

Randyll pointed the spyglass towards the woodland that lined the southern shore. “Aye. The colors of House Dayne, if I recall correctly.” He did.

“Good. Signal them to charge.” Tywin turned to Lord Crakehall. “Fire rockets on the Imperial forward line.”

Lord Crakehall raised an eyebrow. “Wouldn’t that hit our own men, my Lord?”

“Most likely.” Tywin was nonplussed. “We have reserves, plus plenty more conscripts from King’s Landing or Lannisport if we need them.” He laughed. “Smallfolk breed like rabbits.”

It was Jaime who responded, for none of the others seemed to disagree with Tywin. “Are you mad, father?” He closed his fingers in a tight grip of Tywin’s shoulder. “Those are our men! We have a noble’s duty towards them.”

Tywin shrugged off his son’s grip. “Be careful, Jaime. You do not want to have the smiths of the Red Keep to forge another golden hand for you.” He ignored the narrowed eyes from his only son - at least in his eyes - as the hidden batteries behind them opened up one after the other.

Demonic shrieks overpowering his system, Robb felt the Earth shake beneath him. Nearly half a dozen more of the divine fire bolts screamed in, one crashing into the ground not seven yards away. The resulting blast wave threw Robb around like one of Sansa’s childhood rag dolls, chunks of sod tossed around. A stabbing pain perforated from his side as whiteness clouded his vision. The very next thing Robb registered was a loud ringing in his ears. He slowly rose to his feet, swaying slightly as his body throbbed. ‘Fucking hell…’ He focused, the ringing slowly fading.

“Robb…” a voice softly yelled, from a long ways away. Everything was so surreal, the Lord of Winterfell feeling like he was swimming underwater with Gendry’s face appearing right in front of his. “Robb!”

He blinked. “Huh?”

“What the bleedin’ fuck was that!” screamed Brienne, the normally indefatigable warrior near hysterics.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” Tormund bellowed, ruddy face pale. “MOTHERFUCKER!”

Robb continued to blink his eyes as his senses returned. “Shit,” he hissed. The numbness had dissipated and he was suddenly aware of the aches and scrapes perforating his body. ‘What the hell happened…’ Pieces of bodies, burned and twisted into unrecognizable shapes, were strewn everywhere. The smell of burnt flesh permeated the air – harsher than the normal stank of battle.
“They’re charging!” Gendry yelled, pointing at the surging Lannister second line.

Despite redcloaks mixed in with the fallen Imperials, rockets indiscriminately targeting any living being within their target radius, it was the Imperial line that suffered the worst. Any unit cohesion in the Porcupine was rattled at best - nonexistent in places. Readied outside the blast radius were the Tarly levies, Lannister knights, and the arriving Dornish forces of the reinforcement. All were exhausted from the morning’s excursions and fast marches, but they advanced in good spirits anyway. A crashing wave of men and steel upon the broken army of the Young Wolf.

It felt all so satisfying for Tywin, watching scores of Imperial men fall to Dornish blades and the waves of rockets. Battle after battle, fight after fight, only through trickery and treason was the Patriarch of House Lannister ever able to outsmart the Young Wolf. And yet now it had happened. ‘Perhaps I could dine in Winterfell at the end of this campaign?’ he mused.

The resonating roar of hoofbeats growing ever louder put to rest his grandiosity.

“Keep formation!” Robb yanked up a fallen lad - no more than eight and ten - pushing him back into the fight. “For Gods’ sake, men. Hold!” A furious slash of his sword sent a mounted cavalryman flying to the ground.” Two separate assaults and the insane barrage of enemy weaponry had seen them hold, but this third push might see them collapse. He could see it firsthand, the haunting strain even in the indefatigable Free Folk. The cannon were helping, but there weren’t nearly enough.

Suddenly, Robb felt someone shove him in the shoulder. He turned to scream at the bastard that did so, only to find nothing… nothing but the shaft of a crossbow bolt sticking out right below the bony bulk of the joint. The pain hadn’t registered yet with his blood up in battle, but Robb knew it would. ‘At least it isn’t my sword arm…’ he began to think.

“My Lord!” Quickly leaping off a horse - a sturdy Essosi mare by the looks of it - Lady Tyene rushed to where the Young Wolf stood. Easing him on the ground, she frowned at the scope of the battle. “Looks like I got here just in time.”

Robb looked at her suspiciously. “Where the fuck did you come from.”

“Doesn’t matter. You need to order a retreat now!”

“And how would I do that without being pursued?” The Dornish Princess smirked as the distant hoofbeats and guttural cries began to overwhelm the floodplain.

The hooting war cries echoed all over the battlefield. “Fucking hells!” Tywin snarled, spyglass trained on the horde as it rapidly reached their lines. “Signal Prince Trystane, holding force on the Young Wolf and engage the Dothraki. Commit all reserves in blocking formation!” He clenched his fists. “Fucking hells.”

“Father, it is still a victory.”

Tywin seethed at his son. “But the Young Wolf still lives to fight another day.”

“It may not be a slaughter, but we have taken the field…” Jaime was silenced by a backhand to the cheek.

“Enough from you boy. We only deal in utter victories here!” Angry as he was, Tywin knew his son
had a point - they did secure a victory, one that was likely to secure the Crownlands and retake the majority of the southern Riverlands. But not the stunning blow he had engineered. The War would go on.

A single raven, passing overhead, witnessed the whole thing. A mass of Dothraki riders slamming into the hastily erected Lannister flank guard. Fresh troops - but so were the horsemen they were up against. Bowmen joining the fray, a breakthrough wasn’t achieved… but Tyene and the Horde had done what they needed to do. Under the cover of their respite, the ravaged Porcupine withdrew into the forest. In relatively good order, all things considered, Gendry Baratheon reinforcing Theodosius Caryn and engaging in a fighting withdrawal with Kevan Lannister’s knights. A defeat. A crushing one, but not total disaster.

Milky white eyes blinking, the warg silently transferred information to the host thousands of miles away.
Lips pursed in a thin line, cheeks reddening with anger beneath the closely-cropped whiskers, Jon mentally heaped every profanity in his vocabulary upon Joffrey and Tywin Lannister. “Arya is in the hands of that monster.”

Podrick looked him over with sad eyes. “It would appear so, sire.” It was just the two of them and Ser Barristan, huddled within an alcove - all others were at the platform for the day’s events.

“What was she doing there?” the old knight asked. “You certainly didn’t give the order.”

A pained sigh left Jon’s lips. He felt as if he could spontaneously burst out in tears or homicidal rage at any moment. “If I know my sister, she felt she had to protect Daenerys… after the assassin from the coronation escaped.” Despite his best efforts, Jon felt a hot tear fall from his eye. “It doesn’t surprise me, Arya saving my Daenerys from that bastard.”

Barristan scowled. “Fucking traitor. I knew there was something self-serving and disloyal about that snake.” He placed a hand on Jon’s shoulder. “Nothing we can do about it, sire. The Empress has her dragons and your brother. She’ll be safe for now - I also doubt Tywin would harm a valuable hostage. He’s a calculating tyrant, but not an idiot.”

Wordlessly nodding, Jon motioned for them to follow him. Barristan was right, there was nothing he could do - getting home to Dany and rescuing Arya meant defeating the masters, and such he would do. Closing his eyes, he stepped into the light.

What had to be the entire city had turned out. Throngs of people packed all public space offered with a view, many crowding on rooftops for an additional view. The winding roads going up the rocky crags of the ancient Ghiscari city saw milling crowds guarded by auxiliary forces, the top sporting the Northern regulars and Vale cavalry resplendent in full armor. Many were boiling inside and guzzling water by the gallon - nearly all dousing themselves with the liquid - but for today, the populace needed to be dazzled.

For today was execution day.

Two raised platforms had been hastily erected for this day. To Jon’s right stood the various dignitaries and officials, guarded by the Phalanx wall of the Bolton turned Stark bannermen. Ollie waited at the bottom of the steps, Longclaw in hand should Jon need it. With a half smile, Jon walked past his squire and to the platform. Freedmen and lower caste freeborn greeted him with great deference and respect - as befitting the husband of Mhysa and Vhrysa in his own right. The collection of Great Master noblemen however, with the exception of the Loraq father and son, greeted him coolly. Outwardly formal, but who's deference did not reach their eyes.

At their head was the richest and most august nobleman in the city, Zhoggaz zo Zartal - descendent of the Ghiscari Kings themselves. From what Dany said of him, he was the only one of the lot that wasn’t a coward. Brains kept him from the Sons of the Harpy or the Slaver’s Alliance, but the man was no friend to the cause. “Your Majesty.” He bowed with the sincerity of a jackal. “On behalf of the Great Masters, I ask you for mercy. The offer from Astapor to trade gold for their lives is still on the table - shouldn’t mercy be the order of the day?” One good thing about him, he never mistreated any slave. It came from a highborn haughtiness rather than any moral fiber, though.

Jon, however, was of better birth than anyone living. “What worth is gold if it is soaked upon the blood of the innocent.” He allowed his voice to boom. “Let it begin!” With that, he took his position
to watch the show.

Glancing up from his wheelchair, Bran gently tapped Jon’s side. Worn grey eyes met their counterpart, ones half-devoid of emotion. “Arya will be alright, brother,” he whispered. “Daenerys too.”

Jon blinked. “Did Podrick tell you… before I?” He would need to have a talk with the young knight. “I just know.” Both left it at that cryptic answer, Jon having a hard time understanding his brother’s new… skills and Bran not wishing to explain.

To the right stood the other platform, a line of ten burly men waiting for what was to come. Rested along ten identical blocks of wood was a sharpened axe. At a nod from Podrick, the Stark Bannermen brought out a line of ten prisoners. Dirty and disheveled, beards caked with blood and grime, they made a sorry sight shambling towards their impending death. Shuffling to the platform, the bannermen and executioners guided them not to the blocks but to the gallows behind them. A Westerosi tradition that Jon had brought to send a message. Roughly, the executioners tightened their ropes around the prisoners’ necks.

All along the line, cries of mercy in Valyrian and heavily-accented common tongue left their throats. “Bloody cowards,” Jon heard Barristan mutter behind him. The Emperor agreed, but kept his stoic silence. Raising his arm, he let it drop - sealing the men to their fate in each of the seven hells.

Trapdoors flung open, the ten condemned men fell through them. Two had the profound mercy of their necks snapping as the rope broke their fall, life cutting short into darkness as if a torch had suddenly snuffed out. The others weren’t so lucky. Necks bruised and cut rather than snapping, they dangled and sputtered in agony as the lack of air slowly suffocated them.

Jon felt no remorse for their deaths. “Bring forth the others,” he commanded, not even waiting for the life to ebb from the writhing criminals. The bannermen shouted at each other as they hauled the next group towards the platform.

“Would you do this yourself?” Zhoggaz said, voice dripping with sarcasm. Murmurs broke out among the other nobles at the challenge, and clenched fists from Mossador and the other freedmen councilors. A flagrant breach of protocol - the Emperor could have Zhoggaz flogged and beheaded for his insolence. Many a slave or lower class citizen had suffered the same fate for a challenge to a Great Master of Meereen.

Looking over his shoulder, quiet grey eyes meeting the hard glare of the challenger, Jon said nothing. Instead, he made his way to the steps off the platform. Knowing the drill, Ollie immediately withdrew Longclaw from its scabbard and handed it to Jon. He gripped the hilt nonthreateningly but tightly. The loud whispers and chattering from the crowd descended into silence as he approached the raised execution platform, shadows dancing from the condemned corpses dangling from their nooses.

The executioners stared at their Emperor with jaws agape. “May I?” Jon asked the first one, who nodded dumbly, stepping aside. Looking at the condemned man below him, Jon saw the stony resolve etched on his face. Evil as this man was, he wasn’t a coward.

His father’s words filled his ears like a soft whisper, guiding him as if the spirit of Eddard Stark were hovering over his shoulder. “He who passes the sentence, swings the sword.” Of the spokes of the wheel - the Tywin Lannisters, Euron Greyjoys, and Razdal mo Erazs of the world - none of them sullied themselves with the dirty work of their barbarity, unless they enjoyed it like Joffrey Baratheon or Ramsay Bolton.
But he wasn’t that. Neither he nor Dany were like those monsters and tyrants. They took their mantle for the people, by consent of the people - and thus they had to take upon the sins of their subjects. Honor demanded it. Face set in a hard line, not a speck of disgust or tinge of glee visible, Jon raised Longclaw high in the air. The Valyrian steel glinted in the sun as he brought it down upon the first of the condemned.

Longclaw swung true, razor sharp edge slicing through flesh and bone as if it was paper. Blood spurt onto the rough wood below as the head fell into the placed basket. Wordlessly, Jon walked to the next man as bannermen removed the beheaded corpse behind him. Again the process continued: raise, swing, remove, Jon going about it with nothing but an iron determination in his face. Nine further times, till the last head plopped into the basket. With that, he handed Longclaw back to Ollie and returned to his platform, the eyes of a Kingdom resting upon him.

An hour later, it was all done. The coppery stink of blood filled the air, one Jon was used to but others weren’t, many nobles looking green. Clearing his throat, Jon peered at the vast expanse of people crowded around the courtyards, roofs, and streets of the city. Staring at their Emperor, a far more foreign face than even their beloved Mhysa. He may have been their Vhrysa, but he was still an enigma. “People of Meereen.”

To his left, Mossador quickly translated into High Valyrian. While Jon was getting better at the language, he didn’t trust himself to speak it conversationally - nor did he want to advertise it. He remembered how Dany secured the Unsullied from Astapor. ‘Never advertise.’ His showboating in training at Castle Black only drew further hate from Thorne.

“I will be brief. One should not expect me to promise cake and tourneys for all. What happened today is just the beginning, a journey of tears and sweat. Out there!” he pointed at the mountains and hills of the coastal road. “There lurk those that seek to enslave all of us… the ones who supported…” Jon shifted his hand to the corpses, swaying slightly on the noose. “These monsters.” Stopping, he surveilled the crowd, allowing the silence to create murmurs of anticipation. “Mhysa fought for you to be liberated from bondage, but today I ask you to fight with me for your continued freedom. So that your babies never need to know bondage. Join me. Fight with me!”

The cheer that followed shook the very ground of the city. Freedman and freeborn alike, chanting their love of their Emperor. Looking back, Jon’s eyes caught those of Zartal, the bejeweled noble at the head of the cluster of Great Masters. Derision in his eyes, nothing seemed more disgusting to him that being lumped in with the rabble cheering for their Emperor. ‘You will see, noble Zhoggaz zo Zartal. You will see what Joffrey thinks of you.’ Nothing but the roar of the crowd filled the air.

A small shockwave resonated through the air around Riverrun castle as the great Balerion the Dread reborn signalled his arrival with a massive roar. Imperial soldiers and noncombatants, dashing about, stilled and gazed upon the impressive sight - the jet-black dragon with wings nearly as wide as a great sailing ship landing upon the snow-covered ground, the silver-haired Empress atop its shoulders like the Targaryen Queens of legend. Only this was the current reality, not legend.

Daenerys gently helped Jorah down. His wound was minor, but in the days she needed to arrive safely in Riverrun it had shown early signs of festering. “I need a Maester!” she yelled. Luckily, someone managed to produce a stretcher, dried bloodstains indicating someone had been using it in the near past. “You’ll be just fine, Jorah,” she told him, the knight’s eyes fluttering into an exhausted sleep. Hooting, Balerion launched himself into the air just as Dany spotted someone familiar.

“Gendry?!”

“Your Majesty.” The legitimized Baratheon bowed, nervous as anything. Not only did he not relish
the idea of telling the woman who made him a trueborn nobleman of the Stormlands, but also the fear of not finding Arya in the Castle gnawed at him since arriving back from the battlefield. “We received word from one of the ships that Dragonstone has fallen.”

“Where are my children, Gendry?” Dany asked, not wanting to tell Gendry in public about Arya’s capture - the poor lad would be crushed. At this point only they could improve her mood.

Gendry rubbed the back of his neck, awkwardly trying to find the right words. “They… have been sent to Winterfell on order of Lady Margaery.”

A pair of amethyst eyes burned brightly. “What?!"

“She determined that they would be safer in the North away from Riverrun. After our defeat at the God’s Eye and the loss of Harrenhal, the Central Riverlands would become a battleground.”

The Empress clenched her fists. “Where is Robb? Is he here?” She wanted to hear the mainland developments from the mouths of those in charge.

As she stormed down the corridors of the castle, one of the persons she was so keen on seeing nearly slammed into her legs. “Your majesty,” Tyrion yelped, composing himself. “We were worried about your safety after…”

“Walk with me, and do keep up,” she snapped back, continuing her rapid walk.

Tyrion was forced to jog to keep up. “When we heard of Dragonstone, I immediately feared the worst.”

“The prime base of operations in the south fallen to the enemy. Our entire fleet sunk, captured, or scattered to the wind. No word of whether the Greyjoys have survived. I would think such is the worst that could happen, no?” She did not mention Arya, not yet. Not until Robb was in her presence.

“But you are still alive, your Majesty. The survival of you and Balerion are worth more than any fleet…”

Dany cut him off. “You do not want to patronize me at this moment, Lord Lannister. So far, it seems as if your master plan has only led to defeat after defeat.”

“We took Casterly Rock.” The Empress halted for a split second, glaring at him before continuing her movements. “Edmure and Greyworm sacked it, but it was discovered that my father hid the fact that the Westerlands mines have been dry for at least the last several years… the army is intact and marching our way just ahead of any move to cut them off.”

“So what you are telling me is that our only victory is a useless one that took crack troops and bannermen away from the main theater of conflict?” The silence from Tyrion answered her own question.

Dashing down the hallway at a brisk pace, Dany could hear grunts and suppressed groans of anguish that could only be that of a proud male wounded. As the guards outside bowed for her, she entered with Gendry and Tyrion right behind. “Be careful, my Lord. The arrow only missed your lung by a hair over an inch… don’t move.” Probe and flagon of wine in hand, Sam Tarly was in the process of ever so gently removing the barbed crossbow bolt from Robb’s torso. Every so often, he would pour some of the wine into the wound, causing Robb to snarl and clench his teeth.

“Shhhh, calm, my love.” Seated by Robb’s head, Margaery gently stroked his hair. “Let Sam do his
work.” It was only then that she noticed that someone knew had just entered the room. “Daenerys.” She stood and hugged her. “Thank the gods you’re alive.”

“What happened? How did my strongest army lose Harrenhal and a third of the Riverlands in one battle?” She was in no mood to dither.

A snort from the far wall found the Queen of Thorns speaking up. “Cause they were betrayed, that’s why.” Olenna rolled her eyes. “Sellsword scum.”

Tensing up, Dany had a bad feeling. “The Second Sons?”

Crying out in pain as Sam finally pulled out the bolt, Robb’s head fell back to the table, sweat drenching his brow and hair. “Aye. Them and our Vale cavalry arm, abandoning us in the field and doubled back to capture Harrenhal.” He gritted his teeth once more as Sam began to clean out the wound. “If it weren’t for Lady Tyene bringing the Dothraki to our aid…” The aforementioned noblewoman dozed in the corner, completely exhausted.

Daenerys decided not to wake her. “Tyrion informed me of what the dispatch from the fleet stated…” She bit her lip. “But there is more…” With her Empire shattered before her, it was almost obscene to shatter it even further. “The Lannisters, they sent Euron Greyjoy and my former Sellsword commander to capture me. They almost succeeded, if it weren’t for… Arya.”

As the natural reaction to the news played out before her in curses and angered shouts, Dany’s eyes flickered to the ceiling. ‘Jon, please. We need you here.’

“What do you mean she wasn’t captured?!” Voice high in anger, Joffrey picked up a cup and tossed it at his fool. The poor former knight fought the urge to cower - or fight back - allowing the golden goblet to strike him in the stomach. It could have been worse. “Grandfather promised me her head!”

Littlefinger kept his eyes trained on the floor, keeling and covering his face as was protocol. “Forgive me, all highest. But you have secured Dragonstone Island back under your proud rule…”

Another snarl left Joffrey’s mouth. “It is all mine! From the freezing icebox to the worthless desert, this entire land is mine, mine, mine!” He sounded like the petulant child that he was. But a child that could have entire cities burned to the ground and thousands murdered on a single snap of his fingers.

“Oh course. Such is the truth.” One had to walk a fine line - the price to pay for having essentially absolute power over an entire realm. “But I, Euron Greyjoy, and the defector Daario Naharis have a gift to present to you. A gift on top of the destruction of the Dragon Bitch’s fleet.” Sensing the king was still seething atop his throne of swords, Littlefinger motioned to Ser Preston, who opened the door to the throne room. He stood, eyes on the floor but motioning with his arms. “Presenting to his Highest, Lady Arya of House Stark.” He smirked as he spotted Joffrey through the corner of his eye immediately straightening on the Iron Throne.

Wrists manacled tightly and chains brusquely jerked by the Goldcloaks, Arya immediately felt the overpowering malevolence that drenched the throne room as a fog would on a northern summer morning. Memories of the Red Keep had been literal nightmares for her since her father had died, but reality at the moment was far worse than they could ever be. All windows had been bricked up, the little light streaming from ornate yet sparse candelabras. Weapons and skulls - interspersed with the banners of Renly and Stannis and Dorne - decorated the walls, clearly of those Joffrey had ordered conquered. Was father’s skull mounted in the room? The thought made Arya want to retch.
But the presence of the wraithlike king atop the Iron Throne boiled her blood hotter than dragonfire. Even hidden under the gossamer veil, Arya could notice the reptile’s manic glee. “Little Arya. We meet again.” Joffrey’s voice was almost simpering from delight at this development. “I am so happy you are here!” He clapped his bony hands together. “Ser Gregor and I will be most delighted to have a new playmate.”

Arya’s skin crawled. Much as she hated the Hound for what she did to Micah, the story of the Mountain’s torture of his brother indicated a psychopathic figure rather than someone callous. Alone among the others, she kept her eyes trained directly on him. “Be careful… Joffrey.” Her voice dripped a fake sugary syrup. “Remember what happened the last time we played together. My wolf is still alive and is so anxious to see you.”

Suddenly, Arya let out a cry as Ser Boros slammed the flat of his sword into her back. “How dare you be insolent to his Highest!”

Stepping off his throne, Joffrey gloated over the prostrate Arya. “This is perfect, little Arya. Your brother Robb will die. Your sister Sansa will be sold and raped by the highest bidder. Your Dragon Bitch will be the whore of my lieutenants. And I shall have your bastard brother’s head for my collection… alongside your father’s.” He cackled, but Arya would not take the bait.

“And… I’ll… bet… you…” She heaved in breaths, trying to block out the pain. “Are too… much of a coward… to do it yourself. You can’t even handle a blade.” Gasping laughs left her.

“You do not speak to a weak, oppressed boy. You speak to a King! A literal god on earth sent to build the vision of the divine…” He was cut off, a sudden fist slammed into his face - blood spurting from his nose.

Gloating lasted for a moment before she felt a hand wrap around her neck. The Mountain holding her by the throat, Arya watched as the doddering Grand Maester interjected himself. “Do you wish to kill her for her insolence, all Highest?”

Blind servants fawning all over him - not by choice - Joffrey hissed. “No, that would be too good for her! Send her to the pyramid as a common slave!” Much as he wanted to, the girl frightened him too much. The one being that had actually been in a position to kill him… if she died then her spirit would likely finish the job.

The next thing Arya knew she had been dropped to the tile floor, abruptly being dragged by her chains out of the throne room. “Winter will come for you, Joffrey!” she called out. “I will be the last face you see before you die!” With that, the heavy metal doors slammed shut behind her.

It was one of Daenerys’ creations. The culmination of years of wrangling and cajoling, of intricate political debates and arcane traditions. In all honesty, the whole concept gave Jon a headache. Raised in the forthright Northern tradition and of age in the brutal meritocracy of the Night’s Watch, he could barely stand Westerosi politics. Combined with the upheavals emancipation brought to Meereen, the Castes General Council was as chaotic as one would seem, even moreso.

‘At least this one lasted,’ he thought bitterly. Not one day into his arrival before the month-old news of Yunkai and Astapor overthrowing their councils and restoring the Wise Masters and Good Masters to control with the help of Qarth and Volantis arrived at his desk. Daario Naharis was supposed to keep such rebellions in line, but… Jon would enjoy feeding Longclaw to that traitor.

For now though, he was stuck trying to herd cats - herd cats spooked by a dragon more like it.
“Honored councilors,” he said, voice resounding in the great hall. Large and airy, it was a beautiful building. “Please listen to me, what we face is a threat unlike any…”

“The only threat we face is the prospect of a long and vicious war of the Empress’ own making,” interrupted Zartal zo Zhoggaz. Seated to the right of the Imperial dias with the other masters, his blue-gold silks rustled as he stood. “She had the chance to make peace, but instead chose war to satiate her greed.”

Jeers and shouts came from the left of the dias, where the commoners and freedmen sat. “Mhysa is the true ruler of Westeros!” Mossador countered, face red with anger. “She and Emperor Jon seek only their birthright…”

“…and the rivers of blood that must be spilt to do so matter not,” a portly master replied. Jon recognized him as a prominent merchant, not one directly involved in the slave trade. Losing ones like them was disastrous in his goal to unite Meereen. ‘Calm yourself, Jon.’

Lone among those on the right in his support for Jon, Hizdar zo Loraq interjected. “It matters not how we got here, councilors. Our enemies threaten us, and to squabble like children would not stop the rivers of blood that will flow through Meereen if they get through.” Agreement arrived from those right of the dias and from a few masters.

Zartal refused to be convinced. “Our countrymen would not stoop to the levels of a dragonrider,” he sneered. “Yezzan zo Qaggaz assured me in correspondence that we had nothing to fear in a peace.”

The outcry was immediate. “TRAITOR!” One young freedman was vicious in his tongue. You dare collaborate with our enemy?!

“Qaggaz is a new man, one low in birth. He has no desire but to make money, and war is bad for business,” Zartal defended. “The point of the matter is to save as many lives as possible.”

“At the cost of what, Zartal?” Jon looked at him. “Our honor? Our freedom? In the North, we would rather die on our feet than live on our knees.”

“And what do you know about freedom, Emperor,” Zartal hissed. He glanced at his colleagues, arms spread out. “Our noble Vhrysa keeps his subjects as slaves with his dragons, which are also slaves to him!” Words in High Valyrian, they drew laughs from the nobles and jeers from the others.

Fists clenching, Jon decided it was time to reveal himself to the hall. “Iā zaldrīzes iksis daor buzdar!” A dragon is no slave.

At looks of shock and wonder directed his way, Jon allowed himself a dark smirk. Rising from the dias, he looked once at Ser Barristan, who offered him a nod. “You ask why I would not consider peace, to spare innocent lives the tragedy of an early death. If I could do so I would. I have no desire to fight, and I long to know a world no longer hearing the battlecry.” Accent still present, and halting over certain words, being able to know the High Valyrian words visibly brought a new respect from many in the council. Dropping back to the common tongue, he resumed. “But there is to be no peace, for our enemies demand only death or slavery.”

“Lies! Qaggaz assures me…”

Jon pulled the scroll out of his trouser pocket. “I have in my hand a message between Razdal mo Eraz and Tywin Lannister to the leader of the Sons of the Harpy, found on his corpse following the battle of the market square!.” Unfurling it, he read it. “‘Peace is something that cannot be allowed. Only total subjugation is what we seek. Total annihilation of our foe’s will to even remain
independent and free of our influence."

“And such is not all, noble councilmen.” Jon’s voice dropped into a snarl, the anger completely genuine - the revulsion and horror building in him since his conversation with the escaped slave in the pens of King’s Landing. “It is at the end of this massif in which the true evil of our foe comes to light. In the words of Razdal mo Eraz, ‘The great Chimera wishes slaves that know servitude, but have no connection to this land as to not foment uprisings.’” Everyone, including Zartal, were hanging on his every word. “I agree, as should you, that this is something we do not want either. So I have proposed and he has accepted that the entire population of the Northern Kingdom and Dornish Kingdom of Westeros be sent here…” He paused for effect, building up the horror and curiosity in the chamber. “And that every man, woman, and child not of the ranks of our alliance or that of the Sons of the Harpy be sent to King’s Landing as slaves for the Chimera!”

Jon’s shout resonating through the hall, sound echoing on the domed marble of the roof, such brought shock… no, more than shock. Literally everyone felt a near electric jolt into profound and utter silence. Silence not even seen in the deepest abyss. Only those that knew beforehand - Podrick and Ser Barristan - did not see their entire worldviews upended. Even the freedmen, for not even they expected the Masters to stoop so low.

It was Zartal, drawing on whatever patrician composure he had, that managed to babble out a response first. “You… you lie…” It was an accusation without vehemence. “That is impossible. They would not enslave their own…” For someone as illustrious as him to be nothing but a common slave, sold as chattel simply for deploring the violence of the Sons of the Harpy… he refused to believe it.

Wanting nothing more to toss the scroll at his most persistent thorn, Jon instead walked to the noble. His manner and demeanor that of the proud Targaryen Kings of old. “Look at the seal, Zhoggaz zo Zartal! Tell me that is not the seal of Eraz and Joffrey Baratheon!”

Hands trembling, the nobleman took the scroll in hand. Zartal - with great difficulty - managed to unfurl it and read the contents. He knew mo Eraz’s handwriting, and that of the Lannisters, having done business with them many times over countless years.

“Well?” asked one fellow noble, verbalizing what the entire council chamber felt. “Is it true?”

All the color drained from Zartal’s face. Mouth agape as a fish, he could only nod. It was true.

Watching the man shake, barely able to stand upright, Jon placed a hand on his shoulder. “Istiti iōragon hēnkiri, se ilon kessa ērinagon.” Zartal looked up at him, and for the first time there existed an emotion other than disgust or displeasure in his dark eyes. “Istiti iōragon hēnkiri, se ilon kessa ērinagon!” Shouted the Emperor, proclaiming it to the heavens.

Mossador leapt from his seat. “War!”

A wealthy former Great Master followed. “War!”

Soon the entire council was on their feet, shouts matching Rhaegal’s roars in intensity. “WAR! WAR! WAR!”

‘If only Dany could be here.’ Jon could feel her pride for him seeping through even in her absence, and for once he allowed the esteem to sink in.

He had done the impossible. All of Meereen was united under the Dragonwolf.
Marching Through Georgia

Even with the cacophony of steel, hoofbeats, and screams, Edmure could still pick up the low whoosh of a volley descending on its mission of death. “SHIELDS UP!” he bellowed, heaving the massive polygon of wood and metal emblazoned with the blue river fish of House Tully in front of his face. All around him, his men did the same as the wave of arrows slammed into the dead winter grass below them.

Clunks filled his ears from the sharp metal points hitting his shield, the occasional scream or wet slap ringing out from a successful hit. To his right the Unsullied moved in fluid formation, silent despite the deadly rain. It both unnerved Edmure and filled him with courage. Many a Tully bannerman fought like a wildcat to keep toe to toe with the indefatigable Unsullied. The Lannisters would face a formidable crack force in future battles - if they escaped the Westerlands, that is.

It was over in what had to be several seconds, though it felt like hours for Edmure. “Back in formation! Move your peckers! Formation!” Once again Grey Worm managed to secure the same without making a sound. ‘Cheeky bastard,’ Edmure thought, shifting his gaze from the hardened Unsullied commander to the enemy. Hoofbeats slamming into the ground, kicking up a massive dust storm, the horse archers were doubling back in a narrow arc. “Damn!” It had been the same for the last day. The Southern Westerlands produced some of the best horsemen in Westeros, and some bright Lannister cunt created an army of thousands of horse archers to complement the men at arms. “Get ready men! Another charge comin!” He drew his sword.

Every time the archers would unload volleys of arrows to soften them up, and every time they bugged out an infantry charge surged forth. Facing losses, needed speed forced the army to abandon all their siege weapons and most of their baggage train closer to the now burnt husk of Casterly Rock. Edmure and Grey Worm - though the nobleman didn’t know what the tight lipped Essosi freedman’s mind thought - didn’t figure they could last much longer.

But fight they would. “Think this is the end, brother?” he asked Grey Worm, who had his spear at the ready.

“No. I think last once, maybe two more.”

Edmure laughed. The Unsullied’s face remained impassive, it common knowledge that only Her Majesty’s striking translator could decipher what one would call emotion from him. “First time I figured you an optimist.” Already, the Lannister infantry formed up. “See you in hells, my friend.”

Trumpets blared from the opposing force, glinting armor and waving banners beginning the steady surge towards the ragged Imperial lines. But the faint screech - clear to all a deafening sound dampered by distance - stilled the lines. Troops on both sides turned their heads skyward, toward the horizon out of puzzlement or curiosity. It dawned on the Imperials first, confusion turning to ragged cheers as the bellows and roars grew ever closer.

Veterans of battles long past - of the fighting long joined by the awesome magic of legend - all in the Imperial army recognized the screech of Her Majesty’s dragons.

But a split second later, the red-black specter of impending fire and blood crested over the hills marring the flat horizon. Bat-like wings beat with the power of a thousand men, propelling the giant beast forward. Three small birds hovered close… only they were not birds. Each colored their distinctive hue, the horror of one massive dragon turned to the terror of four. Further shouts and war cries left the exultant Tullys, while the Lannisters stood stock still from fear and mortal terror.
Gloved hands wrapped tight around Balerion’s spines, Daenerys made sure to look the part of a Targaryen conqueror. Her hair, knotted sparingly, flowed free in silver waves behind her - conjuring memories of the legends of Visenya and Lyanna Stark. A dress of all black leather was topped off with a red sash around her waist. Saracen was clipped to her hip, all joined by the undeniable fierceness of Balerion the Dread reborn upon the earth, joined by his young sisters on their first taste of battle. Slowly, Dany gave the mental orders for her children to bank towards the shocked still Lannister forces.

Swarmed like ants, men and horse grew bigger in her vision. She stared with fire and blood in her eyes. Death came with a single word. “Dracarys!”

Maw opening with a glow, the red-orange tongue of flame erupted from Balerion towards the snow-covered plains of the Westerlands. Screams ended as soon as they were began as the fires engulfed them, Balerion beating his massive wings down a single line. Arrows arced upward but failed to pierce his thickly scaled belly. On the fringes, the horse archers found themselves the targets of Rhealla, Sansenya, and Lyanarys. Small as they were, their bodies contained enough fire to deliver upon the enemy as their big brother did upon the Good Masters of Astapor so many years ago.

It was over within minutes. The fields were filled with the detritus of a defeated army. Some fled on horseback or on foot, stripping off their armor and abandoning their weapons to increase speed. Many others gathered around men holding aloft makeshift white cloth flags, praying to the Seven that the dreaded Unsullied wouldn’t slay them outright - though the intelligent among them would fear the Tully bannermen more. Most, however, laid upon the battlefield. Bodies charred beyond recognition. Armor melted away. Gentle winds turning their bones to pure ash as they disintegrated before the very eyes of the survivors. Dragonfire knew no Houses. No distinctions. Anyone within the range of the dragons’ blast would be wiped off the face of the earth. Such was the legendary Targaryen Fire and Blood, so diluted by the lesser men and women who tarnished the legacy of Aegon the Conqueror.

Glancing behind her, spotting hundreds of enemy soldiers toss down their weapons in surrender, Daenerys felt the surge of energy course through her. A small victory, but one heralded across the land of Westeros with symbolic trumpets. Tywin had the second round victory, recovering his position and dealing a stinging blow right to the Empire’s gut, but the Dragon Empress was not out of the fight. Her dragons were not out of the fight, bringing fire and blood upon her enemies.

The message was clear. She knew it, and Tywin would know it the moment he received the news. Outside of their fortress city and armed camps their forces were nothing but ash. Once the great Dragonwolf returned from Essos, the Chimera would face the fight of its life.

A fight Daenerys intended on winning.

The midday sun beat down on the two entourages gathered outside the city of Meereen. A gentle breeze, cool due to the altitude over the city and the proximity to the sparkling waters of Slaver’s Bay, provided some relief - but not enough. Podrick, Ser Barristan, and the Stark bannermen gathered to protect their sovereign all wished this would end soon. Flowing robes and olive skin protecting from the heat and light, the Masters and their conscripts had no such concerns.

“Well, well.” Arms crossed, a smug, aristocratic grin draped over his face, Razdal mo Eraz of the Wise Masters of Yunkai met Jon’s silent glance. Jon had requested this parlay, but knew before it even begun that any chance at negotiation was pointless. As with the parlay with Viserys and Ramsay Bolton, he was proven correct. “Here we are, at the culmination of years of chaos and despair. I’m not sure if your wife stoops low enough to inform her country bumpkin of a husband
about pressing matters, but she could have left from the gates of Yunkai with a fleet of ships. And yet here we are, where you will flee to her skirts with a single sloop.”

“We are here to discuss terms of surrender,” Podrick stated, jumping in before Jon could. “Not trade insults. He is the Emperor of the Targaryen Empire, and you shall treat him with respect.”

Mo Eraz glanced at his companions, snickering. “Are we to address a whelp like you? Barely old enough to shave?!” Aristocratic protocol broke for a moment as he laughed.

“You will address yourself to me, Razdal mo Eraz,” Jon replied, voice firm but emotionless. “State your terms, for the Essosi sun aggravates my fair, ‘country bumpkin’ skin.”

If the three masters caught his sarcasm. They did not show it. “Our terms are simple,” Yezzan zo Qaggaz stated. Wrapped in a dark cotton cloak and with the drab colors of the simple merchant he was, he made a departure from the patrician arrogance of the other two - and likely from the entirety of the Masters Alliance. He was all business, which Jon noted. “You and your foreign friends will leave the Great Pyramid and the city of Meereen and return to Westeros, as you have no business in Slaver’s Bay. Since the Unsullied your wife stole from Kraznys mo Nakloz are not here, you shall leave your northern bannermen here to be sold to the highest bidder. The two dragons you have with you will be slaughtered so that Slaver’s Bay shall never be threatened again. Be thankful, for that is all we are asking of you.”

Staring straight ahead at them, cocking his head, Jon began to chuckle. “Oh, my friends. I believe you have misunderstood my intentions. No, this parley was to discuss the terms of your surrender to the Empire.”

It was the turn of the Masters to be puzzled and amused. “Our surrender?” mo Eraz asked dismissively. “You must be joking.”

“I only joke to persons I find in esteem,” the Emperor replied. “Here are my terms, and they are a one time offer for the lot of you.” Hands behind his back, Jon began to pace in front of them, eyes darting every ten seconds or so from one Master to the other. Rather average height for a Westerosi, the shorter stature of those on the larger continent let him be far more intimidating. “You will get on a ship, and head for Qarth. There you will live in exile for the remainder of your lives. I will allow you to keep your gold and your riches, but all slaves will be left behind. Yunkai, Astapor, and Volantis will become open cities for my arrival, as they all belong to the Empire as crown domains.”

Looking amongst each other, mere seconds passed before chuckles left their throats. “You jest, correct?” Belicho Paenymion had been silent so far - watching the negotiations with a smirk as mo Eraz and zo Qaggaz did the talking - but this was too ludicrous to pass up. “We are not defenseless prisoners that you may slaughter with impunity, Bastard of House Stark. Adjusting to the new reality seems as hard for you as it was for your wife.”

“At least the Dragon Bitch had blowjob lips and a set of tits pleasant to look at,” mo Eraz said to his comrades, the other two laughing. “This one looks like a boy, and not one of the good ones.”

Jon bit his tongue, trying not to react. “I shudder to think what happens to the boys you consider ‘good ones.’” He replied nonchalantly. Podrick and Ser Barristan hid smirks as slight surprise crossed the faces of the three masters. Underestimate him, they did - just like with Daenerys. “Joffrey and Tywin promise you the moon, but mark my words, they will be your undoing.”

Stepping forward, Jon’s hands were plastered behind his back. Behind him, the northern bannermen tightened their hold on their pikes. “In the North, there is an old saying, ‘He who passes the sentence, swings the sword.’ My father, Ned Stark, would often tell my brothers and I that the true meaning
was that a Lord must sacrifice for his men. Fight alongside his men in whatever battles or struggles arise.” He stared at each of the masters, then turning towards the troops behind them. They clutched at their swords, unsure of what was happening. “I fight alongside my men in battle. Fight for my men in battle.” Accented, Jon’s Valyrian was passable. He couldn’t wait to see Dany’s reaction. “It is always abstract, others dying at your order. Others being sold into bondage on your order. But tell me, when would any of you be willing to die for the men standing behind you?” An awkward silence fell, hushed whispers from some of the Yunkai soldiers filling the void.

The silence was broken by zo Qaggaz, confirming Jon’s hunch. “I need not defend myself to you, bastard.”

It was telling to the Emperor that the self-made ‘New Man’ had answered him, feeling the need for defending himself. The others were nobles, highborn of the most illustrious order. Zo Qaggaz was the son of a slaver and the grandson of an overseer, as low on the rungs of the ladder as any freeborn in Slaver’s Bay - only his wealth brought him to where he was. If there was any weak link who could be broken from the chain and added to Jon’s, it was him.

Stepping directly in front of him, Jon’s grey eyes bored deeply into the hazel of the slaver turned Good Master. “Zhoggaz zo Zartal speaks highly of you, Yezzan zo Qaggaz. Commented on your honor, your scruples, your… benevolence in dealing with your slaves. For someone of such high birth to comment in that manner for the grandson of an overseer is quite high praise indeed.”

Confused, the Good Master blinked. Opening his mouth, no words came out. Mo Eraz and Paenymion watched with interest to the side. No one knew where Jon was going with this, not even Ser Barristan. The Dragonwolf was an enigma to most, his northern features giving away nothing. He had learned from his youth.

A hand reached out to clasp zo Qaggaz’s shoulder. “Do you honestly think there is a place,” Jon whispered, low enough for only the two of them to hear. “A place for you in Joffrey’s New Slavery? That you are one of the lucky few that will keep his freedom.”

“I control Astapor. They wouldn’t dare,” he replied, though there was a slight waver in his attempt to be haughty.

Jon smiled - only those born and raised as highborn could succeed at the imperious arrogance. “Your money secured Astapor for yourself, not your birth. Is it wise to believe that will keep you at the top in the Chimera’s world.” With that he stepped back to his group, nodding. “It is a shame, noble Masters, that I will have to reject your offers. They are not serious, as you have clearly made your mind up on war. We free people will not go gently into the eternal darkness of bondage.”

While zo Qaggaz was quiet, the other two sneered. “You will regret this, Jon Snow.” Any that still used his defunct bastard name - much as Jon still habitually saw himself as such, given it was his identity for so long - showed himself as an enemy. Mo Eraz was close to spitting from disrespect. “The Dragon Bitch must realize that her reign is over.”

Eyes narrowing, Jon met their stares for the final time. “Our reign has just begun.”

“No water for him!”

The crackle of the whip and the cry of agony from the emaciated man sent Arya flinching back - more from instinct than any real fear. ‘A girl has no fear.’ It was wise to give the overseers a wide berth. The rough wooden cup clattered to the ground, life-giving liquid seeping out onto the dusty
With his eloquent command given, the overseer dragged the hapless wraith out of the ragged water line and began thrashing him within an inch of his life. Picking up the cup and dipping it in the water trough, Arya sent an unseen hateful glare at the cruel brute. The poor slave, babbling on in Volantian Valyrian, wouldn’t last the hour. She had seen plenty of others in the same malnourished and broken condition in the mere weeks since arriving to know what would happen.

Arya squinted as the glint of blinding sunlight from the golden statue of the bane of House Stark hit her eyes. ‘Damn Joffrey. Damn him to hells.’ He must have been so smug, preening in that den of scumtitude of his at how the illustrious Arya Stark was laboring as a common water wench in the shadows of the Great Pyramid of the Holy Chimera. Wiping the sweat off her brow as a grateful young laborer greedily sipped at the nourishing liquid, Arya shrugged off the blisters on her soles and burns on her shoulders.

‘Joffrey, Cersei, Ilyn Payne, Littlefinger, the Mountain, the Waif, Tycho Nestoris, Viserys Targaryen, Daario Naharis.’ Again and again she stated the list in her head, contracted by two and expanded by one. Joffrey thought he had broken her, beaten her, but it would be he in the end who would reap the icy whirlwind of the North.

Filling up her serving cup with another offering of water, Arya was too lost in her thoughts of vengeance to notice the identity of who had arrived in front of her. Such ignorance would not last long.

“Well fuck me blind.” Head jerking around, sparkling drops of water spilling from the cup onto the dusty stone below, Arya found herself staring up at the scarred form of her former protector… and former resident on her list. “Whatever god is out there must hate my fuckin’ guts.”

Scowling, she thrust the cup into his hands. “And how the fuck are you still alive?”

Head thrown back, Sandor Clegane laughed uproariously. “Funny, I asked your fuck buddy the same damn thing when I saw him last. Did he finally die?”

Rolling her eyes, Arya snatched the cup back. “Fuck off.” Further laughs leaving the Hound’s throat, he winked at her and strode off.

“Hello there.” Arya looked up to see a Dornishman, eyesundressing her with obvious hunger.

Her alarms immediately began blaring in warning, muscles tensing. “Here,” she grunted, shoving the cup into his hand. Arya hoped he would head out and back to the backbreaking work lines.

The laborer downed the life-giving liquid. “Thank you, beautiful lady,” he drawled. Leaning down to return the cup back, a wandering hand slithered quickly to grope between her legs.

Before Arya could punch the man in the throat - she knew that one quick jab could send someone any size to the ground writhing in seconds flat - a massive hand wrapped around the man’s neck, lifting him up. “Didn’t your momma tell you not to touch a woman’s cunt lest she wants it? Last person I saw that did so, I smashed his fuckin’ head into the wall.”

Suddenly a flogger smacked into Clegane’s back with a wet slap, drawing blood. He hissed, releasing the other man to the ground with a thud. “Back to work!” A seething overseer paled when faced with the massive bear of a man, burn scar on his head only adding to the intimidating scowl that could wither even the strongest of men. “Now… Now!”

“Al’ight,” said the Hound, inwardly satisfied as the overseer fled for easier pastures.
Staring up at him, Arya scowled herself. “I’m not some defenseless damsel. I can defend myself, you know.”

“Never said you couldn’t.” The Hound shrugged, bending over to toss a sack of rocks over his muscled shoulder. “Out of all the pains in my ass I encountered in my miserable life, I knew you’d survive.”

Arya snorted. “I’ll take that as a compliment… I think.” Offering him a crack of a smile, she then turned to begin the process of filling her cup yet again. Perhaps her still formulating strategy would be easier than she realized.

Heated air pushing against his tent, the flaps fluttering fiercely, Jon’s eyes remained closed in thought. In calming thought. The quick fingers of Ollie fastened his cuirass tight around his toned torso. Leather emblazoned with the seal of the dragonwolf, what it lacked in ostentation it made up for in spartan fierceness. There was a reason for such, a reason for the closed eyes and calming thoughts.

The Emperor, Jaehaerys Targaryen, Jon Stark, Jon Snow, was marching to war once more.

“All done, sire,” Ollie replied, bowing.

Jon rolled his eyes. “Enough of that, Ollie. You’ve known me long enough to avoid that shit in private.” The boy gave him a splendid grin. A laugh left Jon, admiring the boy’s exuberance at the cause. Reminded him a lot of himself. “You have grown into a strong lad, Ollie. Which is why you will be marching with me into battle.” If the boy had been happy before, the smile on his face was close to ripping his cheeks in half. “Go choose a sword and get into formation with Podrick. He’ll find a place for you.” The young squire dashed off.

Sighing, the Emperor sheathed Longclaw and tied his hair back into a riding bun, a look Daenerys found quite dashing on him - though she often voiced her preference for the long curls she could run her fingers through and grip as they made love… He chastised his mind, the thoughts taking him places that both warmed and frustrated him in more ways than one. ‘For you, Dany. I am fighting to return to you.’ With that, he brushed back the flaps of the tent and emerged into the world.

“Battalion! Present to your Emperor!” The line of hoplites came to formation, pikes clattering against shields as they stood in a double line surrounding Jon’s path. Nodding, Jon began to walk along the dusty earth. It had been a week since the parley with the Masters, and the day after Jon had moved his army out of Meereen and onto the plains overlooking the city along the coast. Perfect to prepare.

To the right, he saw Hodor… no, Willas, help a certain cripple onto Edderon’s back. The white dragon looked displeased, missing out on the coming action. “Be careful Bran!” he called to his brother. “Make sure he doesn’t dismount anywhere but Winterfell,” Jon added to Meera.

“I’ll make sure of that, sire,” Meera replied, looking at Bran intently. The young Stark said nothing, smiling softly. ‘Fly straight, my child.’ Edderon nodded imperceptibly at his father, then roared once, ascending into the air with the beat of his mighty wings. Jon covered his face as a cloud of dust swirled for several seconds in Edderon’s wake.

“We’re with you, sire!” one bannerman yelled from formation.

“No slaver cur can stop the dragonwolf!” another shouted.

“Victory shall be ours!” Catching a glimpse of where the last comment came from, Jon met the
utterer’s eyes as he strode forward. The young man - no more than a year older than Jon - gulped. “Sire.”

“You a Bolton man?” the Emperor asked simply.

There was no sense in lying, and even if he could the boy was too intimidated by the legendary White Dragonwolf to do so. “Aye.”

An eyebrow went up. “Fought at Winterfell?”

“Aye.”

Nodding, Jon clicked his tongue. “Fought well that day. Give your same all against the masters, you’ll surely win.” The boy gave a relieved, smiling breath as the others hooted around him. “What is your name, lad?”

“Jon, sire. Jon Smith, son of the assistant smith of the Dreadfort.”

“Ah, Jon you say. An auspicious name.” He clasped Jon Smith’s shoulder, looking out at the rest of the hoplites. “There’s a man named Jon I know of, never lost a battle? Heard of him boys?!” Cheers rang out, the men smacking their pikes against their shields in wild applause. “Well make sure he doesn’t break that streak.”

The cheers grew louder. “Dragonwolf! Dragonwolf! Dragonwolf!”

With a thud, Rhaegal landed before his father, lowering his wing so that Jon could limb atop him. ‘It is time, boy. Don’t let me die.’ The dragon let out a growl, as if chiding him for even suggesting it. Settling on dragonback, with a mere mental command Rhaegal ascended into the air. Below, formations in the thousands began the march along the coastal road.

‘Time to end this, once and for all.’
Battle of the Coastroad

Chapter Summary

The battle is based on the Battle of Arsuf during the Third Crusade

Mount trotting forward till its legs sloshed onto the first puddles of the wide river, Podrick beseeched frantically with his hands. “Move, move! Across the river!”

A wave of splashes filled the heated air as blocks of troops quick marched across the water. Despite only coming up to halfway to their knees, the mud and gravel riverbed slowed their pace, threatening to break their formation. Podrick and the other commanders had placed their best crossbowmen and half the northern hoplites in the rear - the most vulnerable part of their formation - and leaving them to the wolves by allowing a gap to form between them and the rest of the army would be a disaster.

Speaking of wolves… “Ser Payne!” The calls of panic were not needed, for Podrick heard it too. The chanting cries and drumbeat of hooves.

“Another raiding party! Form ranks!” He dismounted from his horse, eyes peeled to the first feathered heads of the arriving enemy poking from atop the rolling bluffs overlooking the river from the north. “Nock crossbows and forward!” Drawing his sword, Podrick leapt into the water and raced towards his men.

It had happened at least half a dozen times before. Whatever mercenary generals or slave raiders the Masters had at their disposal weren’t fools. The main freeborn army refused to commit itself against the Imperials. Instead, sellsword horse raiders and Volantian slave soldiers - called Janissaries by the Ghiscari auxiliaries - bushwhacked and assaulted them in ambushes and rapid caracoles meant to draw blood or disrupt the ever steady march towards Yunkai.

Something the Emperor had given strict orders to prevent at all costs.

Bare chested and shouting the vilest obscenities, the irregulars and horse raiders sent a flurry of arrows and javelins from the north bank and the bluffs overlooking it. Men toppled into the water with loud splashes, some dead, many more wounded. Blood began to transform the river with streaks of crimson red, anger building. The jeers increased in intensity, some of the Janissaries flashing their genitals in an obscene taunt. Just daring the northerners to break ranks and fight them.

“Hold the line boys!” yelled Podrick. “Hold the line!”

None took the bait, continuing their plodding backwards march. Hoplites stood firm with their shields and spears pointed outward, doing their best to protect those deeper in the ranks from harm. Karstark longbowmen and the few cannon they had with them returned fire from the south bank. Wading into the river, the Stark crossbowmen hunkered behind the massive phalanx shields. Aimed bolts steadily picked off the enemy, forcing them to either fall further back or charge forth, easy pickings for the hoplite spears. But the flurry of arrows did not slacken, and worry broke out that they would soon take their toll.

It was then that an ear-splitting roar boomed over the landscape. Piercing the din of battle and onrushing water, out of the south flew the broad wings of the great dragon Rhaegal, low over the
scruffy ground. Atop rode the Emperor Jon himself, Valyrian steel sword glinting in the sun. Cheers rang out among the men, but they did not charge. Instead they continued their steady march through the river. “Keep the march!” Podrick would not let his men falter, for the rest of the army would not wait for them.

To the surprise of many, instead of sortieing in devastating attack runs on the hills, Rhaegal slammed into the water in a hard landing. He roared at the enemy while Jon leapt off his back. A screaming Jassinary essentially nude charged him with a large axe, but was quickly cut down by the Emperor. Tongues of flame left Rhaegal’s maw, incinerating clusters of horse archers.

But the sellswords had been ready. Lancing out from the bluffs were several hidden rockets, aimed over open sights at Rhaegal by individual irregulars. “Boy! Retreat!” Jon yelled, parrying a blow before grabbing a sellsword by his belt sash and ramming his head into the other man’s nose, blood gushing. Howling in pain as a rocket hit his shoulder, Rhaegal obeyed and flapped into the air, hurrying out of range of the rockets.

Behind the Emperor roared the collective hooves of a two hundred Vale knights - a sixth of the entire Imperial cavalry contingent. Banners fluttered as they yelled at the top of their lungs. Lances lowering in fluid cohesion, the fresh mounts kicked up a torrent from the river, water churning into an angry white foam. Aiming for the gaps in the blocks of hoplites and crossbowmen, the knights wheeled around and slammed into the irregulars and mounted raiders on the far bank. Sheer momentum forced the horses through the gooey mud unscathed, bodies flying about as lances, blades, and flails ripped chunks from the enemy.

An arrow whizzing by his head, Jon crouched and charged. The dismounted horse archer was struggling to notch another projectile onto his bow. It was too late. Longclaw spilled his intestines into the river with a splash before the man could even feel the pain. A quick whirl found the Valyrian steel decapitating the head off another irregular. “Se zokla ēza ātsio!” he bellowed at the low bluffs to the north - the wolf has fangs.

A deep trumpet blast found the battlefield broken. Vale charge petering out as the mud and exhaustion took their toll on the horses, the knights slowed to a trot as the irregulars pulled back in a jumbled mass. Their dead were left upon the field, either carried away on the current, strewn in the mud, or dissolving into fine ash in the gentle wind or flowing water. Wolf-howls pierced the air, the northerners celebrating yet another raiding party beaten off. Another laurel for the many battles they had fought and won since raising their banners for their Emperor outside Winterfell castle.

Dragging his tired legs to the southern bank, Jon crouched, catching his breath. “Here, sire.” He looked up to see Ollie holding a waterskin, offering a tiny smile. Jon gladly took it, luxuriating in the refreshing liquid on his tongue - he had been only moments from drinking the muddy river water, red with blood. “We sure showed em!” The normally reserved Ollie let out a wolf-howl of his own.

Wiping the droplets and slobber off his mouth after handing the skin back to Ollie, Jon’s attention as drawn to the literal dragon in the room. He strode along the floodplain to where his child rested. “Rhaegal boy, you alright?” His Northern brogue was tinged with concern.

Cruled up on the ground, wings folded, the fatigue and pain of the day’s fight was written in the green beast’s behavior. Rhaegal, letting out the occasional grunt of discomfort, craned his neck to lick the rocket wound on his shoulder. As Jon reached out his arm, he gently nuzzled his father’s palm with his snout. A soft purr left him at the contact.

“You’ll be alright, boy. I promise,” Jon whispered, scratching underneath his jaw - that earned a delighted growl as it always did. “Looks like he’s out of the fight.” Looking at Podrick and Barristan, the Emperor made sure his voice resonated across the floodplain.

A withering glare directed itself toward the young knight. If looks could kill, Podrick would have rosted alive. “Who has the spiritual connection to this dragon?! Not I?! You have no experience to judge my child’s pain!”

“But sire.” Concerned as to the overprotectiveness Jon demonstrated regarding Rhaegal, such not surprising considering how Daenerys doted on Balerion, Barristan remembered how quickly they would heal in their youth. “From what I observed while watching them grow, the dragon’s healing…”

Jon cut him off with a wolf-like snarl. “I WILL NOT LET THEM BE HURT IN BATTLE! DO YOU UNDERSTAND?”

A subtle sparkle in Jon’s eye piqued Barristan’s interest. While they were clearly Stark in color, the mischievous glint was completely that of the Emperor’s father - displayed whenever the dragon-like cunning was being deployed. ‘Oh, you crafty bastard,’ he thought with an inward chuckle. He bowed, looking crestfallen. “Forgive me, sire.”

Already feeling Rheagal’s pain lessening, Jon raised his voice even louder. “We will just have to fight on our own boys! Are you up to it?!?” A chorus of wolf-howls left the hoplites and crossbowmen, apprehensive but filled with bloodlust. Their dander was up and could take anything the slavers sent their way.

Nodding, Jon turned back to his dragon. In the hills overlooking the river, the prying eyes of enemy scouts had heard his angered rant… just as he planned.

Gliding through the hallways of her childhood home, Catelyn Tully Stark could feel the shift in the mood of the inhabitants. Morale was up upon the knowledge of Daenerys and her dragons vanquishing a sizable Lannister force and rescuing the western army in retreat from the ruins of Casterly Rock. Granted, it was only a modest bounce from the absolute nadir of several weeks before, but it was up. Catelyn would take it, grateful that her brother was alive. After losing her uncle to the afterlife and losing her youngest daughter to Joffrey’s dungeons, any good news was welcome.

Ravens had pegged Dany and the army only a day’s march away. The Empress had insisted on shepherding the crack troops personally, and while it made many uneasy, Catelyn saw the logic in it. They needed all the troops they could after the massive defeats. She had seen the reports, largely taking over the managerial duties of the castle and preparations. There really was no one else to do so. Tyrion helped her out occasionally, but had imbibed the bottle too often to atone for his failure, seeking little contact outside of Shae. Varys and Olenna were smart but not tacticians. Sansa was in Winterfell while Robb was recovering from an infected abscess of his wound - Margaery not leaving his side. Davos was busy reconstituting the decimated grand army. No, it was just her for the most part, at least until Jon returned.

Thankfully, as she entered the castle infirmary, Catelyn had some free time to check on her son.

As she expected, there was Margaery by his bedside. The Rose of Highgarden held her betrothed hand, Robb’s chest rising and falling rhythmically in his peaceful sleep. “Is he doing better?” Catelyn asked. Shame coursed through her at not being in constant knowledge of her son’s health.
‘Speaking as if you care about a child’s health,’ a voice within hissed. The shame was only magnified.

Looking up with worn, tired eyes, Margaery smiled - a smile that didn’t reach the rest of her face. “Yes. His fever broke this morning.” The southern beauty looked completely exhausted, dark circles and pale skin. Written all over her, the love and worry she felt for the young man - Catelyn’s eldest boy - was self evident. “The Maester said he would be walking again in a few days.”

“Thank the gods.” Resting her own hand on the younger woman’s shoulder, Catelyn smiled a motherly smile. “You look like you need some sleep, Margaery.” Shaking her head, Margaery nevertheless allowed Catelyn lower her to the bed. Soon, she was out like a lantern, snoring softly. A quiet laugh escaped Catelyn’s mouth. It reminded her of herself next to Bran’s bed all those years before.

Leaving the dozing couple be, the aging matron and dowager Lady of Winterfell heard a groaning from across the infirmary. Curiosity got the better of her. Stepping along the stone floor, she did a slight double take at the occupant of one of the beds.

“My lady,” the wounded knight stated. “I would stand, but I am under maester’s orders not to.”

“Ser Jorah.” Catelyn shifted on her feet awkwardly, looking over the once banished northern noble. She fought the blush that threatened to form on her cheek. Luckily for all parties, the little tryst they shared at the celebration of the victory at Riverrun - largely from contagious joy and significant amounts of wine and mead - had been kept a secret by him. Catelyn wasn’t sure how much he remembered, so kept quiet as well. “Are you healing well?”

Rubbing his shoulder, Jorah shrugged. “I’ll probably be out of the fight for a while. Fucking sellsword traitor…” he growled. Looking up at Catelyn, his face curled into a sheepish glance. “Pardon my language, my Lady.”

“Are you speaking of the sellsword commander? Naharis?” She saw Jorah nod. “I would have likely used far worse language.” The two chuckled, Catelyn enjoying the first airy banter she had had since… well since Ned. Pulling up a chair - a rather spartan one carved from local hardwood - Catelyn sat down beside the injured knight. “Do you mind?”

A wiry smile was sent her way. “Not at all. I could use a little intelligent company. Neither her Grace nor Barristan are here, and Tyrion doesn’t seem to enjoy my company.”

Matching his expression, Catelyn shifted on the hard chair for whatever comfort could be afforded. “My… my husband told me of the pact you made with him. Before the Empress’ first wedding.”

Lips pursing seriously, Jorah exhaled. “I didn’t deserve his conditional pardon. Not after what I’ve done.”

“You saved and protected our sovereign on numerous occasions. You’ve even come close to death, doing so. I feel that you’ve earned your pardon and forgiveness.”

He snorted, chuckling. “My niece thinks the same, though that was only said after she smacked me on the head.” The two shared a merry laugh.

Campfires flickering, the Imperial Army had halted for the night. Thousands of twinkling stars provided what little natural illumination upon the shrouded ground, moon invisible in the lunar cycle. Watered wine filled waterskins as whole hogs were roasted on spits for the troops by the
noncombatants. Soldiers from various units bantered about, mingling in a multinational melting pot. A sense of impending dread filled the army, thousands drowning the oncoming battle as they approached Yunkai with hearty food and cheerful banter.

Within the command tent, such dread was being handled in a far different manner. Arms splayed over the map table, Jon banished back his pulsing headache. “So we’re sure the enemy is gathered in the forests to the north?”

“Aye,” replied Barristan. “Our scouts have estimated around fifteen thousand cavalry, ten thousand infantry.” He sighed. “Double the numbers previously.” They had assaulted their column every day since the fight at the river, although not in such strength. Jon had ordered the army to stay together and had done a masterful job of holding such cohesion.

And yet the sense of foreboding could not go away. “And our numbers?” In the stress of it all, mere statistics had a knack of escaping him.

“Less than twelve thousand, two thousand of that cavalry,” Podrick stated. Him and Barristan were the only ones sharing the Emperor’s tent tonight. The others had their orders, and thus did not need to see their commander’s pensive worry.

“Damn this war.” Jon allowed his head to hang, eyes closing. “Damn it to all hells.” Good at it as he was, Jon prayed that the fighting would cease. “Can our men hold ranks till Yunkai?”

“I believe so, but even with our ships hugging the coast with supplies, we could be overwhelmed.”

Jon nodded. “Very well. This ends tomorrow one way or the other.”

The harsh light of the late morning sun baked the desolate rocky plain. Ground baked in the sizzling heat, the Imperial army marched in steady formation as close to the gentle waves of Slaver’s Bay washing onto the sand in swirls of white foam. Each infantryman - be they an ex-Bolton hoplite sworn to the direwolf, Stark crossbowman, Karstark archer, or freedman auxiliary - had been assembled in the specially designed “flying column.” Stepping ploddingly slow and bristling with spearmen, they lined the outside of the box formation of the Imperial force. Inside rested the entire force of Vale cavalry as well as the army’s baggage train - and the single dragon, wounded in a past day’s skirmish.

Strewn across the entire plain from where the march had begun to where it was currently were the bodies of hundreds of the Slaver’s Alliance army, not bothering to collect their dead as they finally deployed for battle. The front of the army, which had done most of the attacking, was composed of dense swarms of Volantian Jassinary skirmishers armed with javelins and light bows, sellsword horse archers, and a smattering of heavy cavalry. Behind these were the ordered squadrons of armoured heavy cavalry and infantry: the freedman footsoldiers of Yunkai and Astapor, along with the noble armored cataphracts - no noble master would ever walk into battle. Divided into left, right, and center wings, the generals and masters directed the army from the safety of the woods, surrounded by an elite bodyguard and accompanied by trumpet signallers.

For hours the caracoles had pounded the box since bursting out of the woods over a mile inland. Swarms of arrows and javelins streamed in, met by an ever steady counterbattery fire from the Imperial archers and crossbowmen. Inside the box, the Vale knights refused to budge, denying the masters what they wished. The breaking of the Imperial formation. Yunkai was fast approaching, and they needed the knights to charge forth and allow them to bring their numbers to bear.
Nearly stumbling over himself, one crossbowman had to be hauled back up by his comrades. The constant marching sideways and firing was taking its toll, tripping and enemy fire exhausting their morale and hurting their aim. Struggling not to slow down as he pulled back the firing pin and rested the iron-tipped bolt in its place, the young lad from a farm three miles outside the Dreadfort - the third of eight children - aimed and fired at an enemy javelineer. He smiled when the man toppled, but then the man next to him collapsed dead from one of the infernal slaver projectiles. The shields of the auxiliaries, guttural babble sounding completely alien to his ear, only did so much.

A hand on his shoulder nearly caused him to stumble again. Turning to shout an obscenity at the dumbass that broke his concentration, the young lad's jaw - and the jaws of everyone around him - dropped at the sight of the Emperor Jon himself. This close, the White Dragonwolf looked completely normal with a wry grin, close cropped beard, and dark, wavy hair pulled up in a bun. In his hands he held a longbow.

“You call yourselves soldiers of the Imperial Army? Fuck all! We can take this!” Using all the skills Ser Rodrick and Ygritte drilled into him, he notched an arrow. “Come on men! Stay strong!” Breathing slowly and deeply, cutting out all externalities except for his arms, the target, and the steady pace of the march, Jon released the bowstring. With a plunk-whoosh, the arrow flew and slammed into the chest of an enemy javelineer. “Fight with your Emperor!”

“With the White Wolf!” hollered one of the men, and soon a spontaneous wolf-howl broke out among them - joined by the auxiliaires, exultant for Vhrysa to fight alongside them as well.

Laughing and cheering with the men, stepping sideways while sending another arrow at the enemy, Jon’s smile ceased as he pursed his lips. “Cavalry's coming men!” Out came Longclaw. “With me!”

It was to be a two pronged caracole. Both a mix of sellsword horse archers and armored Yunkai cataphracts for protection. With the nobility getting impatient, haranguing them at every available moment as to when victory would be achieved, the various generals and sellsword captains ordered a quarter of their cavalry into the fray. Hopefully with a massive fusillade of arrows and handheld light rockets - more designed for injury and terror value than actual death - they could coax the as yet uncommitted Vale knights to break their tight formation and charge haphazardly. Despite their men tiring in the hot sun, it was worth the risk.

War cries bellowing and banners flowing, the prongs separated. One galloped off to wheel in a u turn and hit the rear of the Imperial flying column while the other moved for the more direct center. Just as the second caracole moved to turn, a sellsword lieutenant that had fought at the river days before spotted the black/grey outline mixed with the northern crossbowmen and swarthy Meereenese freedmen. Dragonwolf emblazoned on the front of the cuirass, he would recognize the Targaryen Emperor anywhere. He may not have been riding his great dragon, but there he was at the front of the line. ‘The Wise Masters would pay me hills of gold for his head,’ thought the lieutenant.

“It’s their Emperor, boys!” he yelled in Valyrian. “Let’s fuck his corpse!” Hooting, those around him broke formation and charged. Cataphracts around them, eager for glory and tired of being out of the fight, joined in. Soon the few became a torrent as the entire caracole shattered into a mass cavalry charge. Spotting it, the more level-headed commanders of the first prong assumed new orders had been given. At the blare of a trumpet they broke out into a charge as well, gunning for the hoplite rear guard.

Jon could not believe his eyes. The caracole had turned into a general charge right at their organized lines - completely against what he had assumed they would do. ‘Perhaps they spotted me?’ In any case, irrelevant. “Hold firm! Lets send those slaver cunts to hell!” Yet another wolf-howl shrieked across the landscape as the crossbowmen filled the air with bolts. Many enemy horsemen fell but
more kept coming. Twenty yards became ten yards. Ten became five.

“LEFT TURN, HALT!” The freedmen had just planted their spears into the dusty soil when the onrushing horde slammed into them.

As men and horse melted together in a blend of bloody carnage, Jon hacked at a cataphract that had been thrown from his mount. The colored, silk finery underneath his armor soaked with blood as Longclaw sliced through flesh and bone. All around the Emperor, flashes of red and screams of terror brought him memories of the Winterfell plain, but unlike then the maelstrom of steel and flesh hadn’t broken his line. He looked up to find a light raider charging towards him with an arkh, only for a volley of bolts from the indefatigable crossbowmen felling him. Snarling, Jon darted forward and literally dragged a man from his horse, the Wise Master becoming a corpse as Valyrian steel struck home.

The charge of the enemy cavalry had caused the entire army to halt, if only temporarily. Milling about, horses chewing on hay and drinking from buckets provided by noncombatants, the brave knights of the Vale had more injuries from the heat and saddle sores than from actual combat. Tempers were flaring. “What the fuck are we doing here?!?” Ser Gilbert Morley yelled, glaring at the great Barristan the Bold. “Our army’s getting fucked up by those bastards!”

Barristan glared at the brash youngster, eyes narrowing. “We will do what our Emperor commands. I know you wish to fight the enemy, but be patient.”

“Patient?!” Ser Garnier de Cloud, master of the Second Order of Arryn, looked as if he was about to blow his top. “We’re just sitting here with our thumbs up our asses!” Further arguments with Barristan devolved into the status quo being upheld, but tension among the inactive cavalry only growing.

Gliding along the gentle seas as close to the coast as their narrow draughts allowed, the Imperial ships leant what little firepower they had into the fight. Old catapults, aimed scorpions, and cannon broadsides let loose on the assaulting caracoles. Aim was shoddy in most cases, but an occasional direct hit turned clusters of cavalry or raiders into gory messes. Heads left bodies, limbs or chunks of torsos ripped off, or the occasional direct hit to the chest decapitating an unarmored raider in a cloud of blood and bone. It wasn’t much, but the ship captains kept their fire steady.

Peering through the spyglass, the generals couldn’t believe their eyes. Instead of wheeling around as planned, both caracoles had charged into the fray. The swirling dust concealed much of what was happening, but all present knew that none would succeed unless supported. “Should we go in?” one asked.

“Our men are getting hot and exhausted,” said another. Water rations were running low, the nobles hogging the lion’s share for themselves. “Perhaps we should.”

“But they haven’t broken…”

Their train of thought was broken by Razdal mo Eraz, stepping underneath the tarp which housed the forward observation post. Behind him were the other senior masters. “What in the name of the Harpy is going on?” He snatched a spyglass from a sellsword captain. “Ahh, there’s some actual action going on. Excellent. Full assault.”

The generals looked amongst each other. “But my Lord, one stammered. “It would be a bloodbath if their formation is holding…”

“Pish,” Belicho Paenymion snorted, waving off any concerns. “They are Westerosi backcountry
savages. The sun alone must be killing them. One mass charge and they’re done.”

“MY LORDS!” A lookout seemed frantic. “I see sails on the horizon!”

Elation filled mo Eraz. “Our fleet has arrived from Astapor.” Finally their trap had been set. “You have your orders. Full charge.”

Sighing, the chief general motioned to the lead trumpeter. “Sound assembly, full charge.”

“AGGGGHHHH!” The primal war cry was cut short into a sputtering gurgle as Jon rammed Longclaw through the stomach. Drawing it back, the sellsword collapsed into a bloody heap of meat and bone. Around him, the charging caracole had descended into a chaotic melee as all the slaver infantry threw itself into the flank columns. A flurry of crossbow bolts and the enraged fighting zeal exhibited by the Imperial lines kept the formation holding - if only just.

A Jassinary’s head imploding from a different blade, Jon watched as Podrick appeared by his side and hauled him through the line. “Emperor to the rear!” chanted the line, exultant at his presence for the heat of the battle but eager to get their beloved Vhrysa out of harm’s way.

“Sire, the enemy fleet has arrived.” Podrick noticed a glint of triumph flash in the Emperor’s eye. “It seems the entire enemy ground force is moving from the woods to commit itself.”

“Excellent.” ‘Ready yourself, boy,’ he called to Rhaegal, hearing the growl leave the dragon’s throat. The enemy fleet would be vulnerable from the air, and it would take precious minutes for the exhausted and thirsty enemy ground forces to cross miles of barren ground into a position to attack. “Hold the cavalry assault until I am airborne.”

Among the Vale knights, the situation was reaching the breaking point. Heat and thirst taking their toll, the repeated provocations and suffering inflicted on their brothers on foot created a tinderbox just waiting to ignite into the wildfire coated waves of Blackwater Bay. With another hail of arrows coming from the immense slaver host as the entire army moved to bear, a number of them wounding the precious horses - imports from the Vale and beloved by their owners - the match had been lit.

“MEN OF THE VALE!” Unable to take it anymore, Master Garnier de Cloud marshalled his standard-bearer and raised his blade high in the air, joined by the fluttering white dove of House Arryn. “For Mountains and Emperor!”

It took only one match to set the entire tinderbox ablaze. “FOR MOUNTAINS AND EMPEROR!” Two hundred strong, the Second Order of Arryn turned in one massive formation and made for the beach. A wide arc found them wheeling around the infantry lines and slam into the remnants of the rear caracole. Lances, maces, and swords swept it aside in a bloody, one sided maelstrom that found the knights galloping forth out into the plain. An unstoppable force meeting vastly movable objects.

The sudden break in ranks wasn’t unseen by the Emperor. As he mounted Rhaegal, Barristan rode up, Ser Gilbert Morley beside him. “Sire, the second order broke formation!”

“Let us ride!” Morley’s eyes blazed with bloodlust. “Now is the perfect time! Our lancers can hit them while they are still getting into formation!”

Jon was not about to let his entire army fall apart at the cusp of victory. While his first reaction to the overzealous knights charging forth was of a profane nature only suitable for the dingiest taverns of Flea Bottom or with the most disgusting vermin atop the Wall, upon seeing the near annihilation of the enemy caracole he realized the entirety of the situation. The initiative was in the balance, and all
restraint needed to be abandoned. With that in his mind, the Emperor swung onto Rhaegal’s back.

“Barristan, Podrick, full attack! Smash them but do not tire the horses. The infantry can mop up the shattered formations!” The two nodded in understanding, while Morley gave a whoop of excitement. A hidden command angled Rhaegal to the heat of the fighting, where he had previously been fighting. “Dracarys!”

World stilling for a mere moment, an imperceptible lull in the fighting, the air rippled around the great maw of the dragon as an almost mystic force superheated all around it. With a near crack the tongue of flame shot out from Rhaegal, incinerating the center and rear of the assaulting caracole. Seen from nearly all engaged or watching from afar, the ruse of the wounded dragon evaporated to wild wolf howls from the northerners. Trumpets blaring, swords and lances held ready, the vast horde of armored knights surged forward. Infantry parted ways upon blared orders, letting the cavalry pass through on their valiant charge, foot following at a quick step to engage whatever detritus remained in their path.

The Emperor surveyed the field of battle, gaze soon drawn to the sparkling waters to his west. “Sövegon.” The single word sent the once thought crippled dragon into the heavens above, wings beating without a single twinge of pain. Higher and higher, Jon felt the winds whipping through his curls. Saw the vast expanse of sea… and where the tiny specks of wood and sail began hurling flaming projectiles at additional specks closer to shore. His lips grinned in a vicious smile, one not dissimilar to that worn by Aegon the Conqueror those many centuries before. Come hells or high water, regardless of how far his spirit would be sapped in the hated fighting, Jon would win this war and return to his family.

Onward rode the knights of the Vale, armor glinting in the sun as they brought the glory and decisiveness of the final charge on the plains of Winterfell to the dusty scrubland of Essos. The right wing of the Masters’ army was in compact formation and too self-absorbed by preparing for the coming assault to even notice the charge before it was too late. Many nobles scoffed at the idea of preparing for an enemy attack, believing them too weak before their great power. As a result, the elite formations slammed into a disorganized, scurrying host with the force of a herd of stampeding mammoth. The knights took a bloody revenge for all they had had to endure earlier in the battle.

Sweating from exertion, the sailors aboard the ships of Yunkai and Astapor - ships once offered to the Empress Daenerys as she had arrived with her unsullied at the gates of the Wise Masters - labored to move projectiles into place. The target was the few galleys and carracks of the Imperial fleet. Their goal, send them to the bottom. Out of nowhere came a tongue of flame, spreading the inferno over the lead ship. Screams left dozens of throats as Jon brought Rhaegal to a close hover, breaking the back of the enemy carrack.

Ship after ship burned, other striking their colors and hoisting the white flag atop their masts. Prayers went to every deity as could be found for the mercy from the Dragonwolf - and they were heeded. Far from the monster propaganda portrayed him as, Jon spared every ship with a white flag fluttering atop them.

All across the field, cries of anguish and terrified screams echoed from the throats of the once grand army of slavers as the onrushing knights swept through their broken ranks. Some of the nobility rallied and charged in, while most fled for their lives. Any that stood firm were overwhelmed.

Trembling hands obscuring the line of sight through the spyglass, Razdal mo Eraz looked the carbon copy of a flopping fish. “It can’t be?” The spyglass dropped to the ground. “They can’t have won.”

“Turns out the army used to crushing slave rebellions and skirmish with Dothraki savages isn’t prepared to fight actual soldiers,” Yezzan zo Qaggaz replied acidly.
The other masters ignored him. “We can get to the walls of Yunkai,” Belicho Paenymion babbled, in the midst of a panic. “We shall be safe there!”

“With all do respect, my Lord.” The general wiped his brow. “Those walls failed to stop the Targaryens from getting in previously, and they did not have a fully grown dragon…” A backhanded slap sent him to the ground.

Clutching his aching hand, mo Eraz locked eyes with Paenymion. “We shall go to Astapor, and find transport to King’s Landing. Joffrey’s forces have defeated the Targaryen navy, and we shall return once the bitch is….” Suddenly a knife sliced through the delicate skin of his throat, severing the neck. Blood poured into his open windpipe, and in mere seconds he collapsed in a lifeless heap on the ground. Paenymion stared at zo Qaggaz, mouth agape before the sellsword captain ran a short sword through the back of his skull.

Wiping the blood off the gold-encrusted knife on a rag, the former slaver turned grand Master of Astapor turned to the general. “Sound the surrender.” A sigh left him. “I shall offer all our territory to the Emperor Jon personally.” Nursing his cheek, the general nodded.

Out of the trumpets blared the unheard of command, only uttered three times in Ghiscari history - twice against the armies of the Empire of Valyria and once outside Yunkai to the Unsullied army of Daenerys Targaryen - but recognizable to all. Once again it would be used for defeat at the hands of one of Valyrian blood. As it resonated across the field of battle, all fighting and movement sputtered out to listen to it’s sweet tone of salvation. All from Essos knew the tune. The Westerosi of the North and the Vale stood confused, but the meaning became apparent as the Slaver Army laid down their arms in surrender.

The general glanced at Yezzan, face pale. Overhead, the terrifying and yet majestic sight of the great dragon flew, roar piercing the sudden silence and joining the cheers from the Imperials. “Well, let us hope he no longer feels the motto of his House.” Not bothering to respond, Yezzan zo Qaggaz could only agree.
“Sire.” The hesitant words prodded him out of his dozing slumber, yet his lids remained stubbornly closed. Willing the intrusion away. “Sire.”

All for naught. Blinking still tired eyes, Jon removed the ignoble homespun straw hat from atop his face. Luckily, the tree he rested both against and underneath provided adequate shade from the afternoon sun. Hence why he picked it, once the exhaustion and fatigue of the battle hit him with more force than the Knight King’s spear. “Yes, Podrick?” He eyed the young knight, making no move to leave his - relatively - comfortable position at the base of the tree.

“Yezzan zo Qaggaz has arrived at the head of the surviving commanders of the Masters’ Army. He wishes to surrender and bend the knee to you personally.”

“Is that so?” Before his sleep, the jubilant knights hadn’t informed him about the leading masters. Jon assumed they had all died. “Bring him to me, then.” Yet, if they had been captured, why was Qaggaz the only one bending the knee? It piqued his curiosity.

Fully-suited Vale knights flanking the captured slaver, Jon didn’t bother to stand. A smug reminder of how the tables had turned - plus he was still tired and simply didn’t want to. ‘Ah, the perks of being the Emperor.’ Grim-faced, eyes sunken in submissiveness, Yezzan zo Qaggaz fell to his knees. “My Lord…”

A knight smacked him on the back of the head. “He is the Emperor! You will address him properly.”

“My apologies,” he babbled out. “Your Majesty… on behalf of the Good Masters of Astapor, Wise Masters of Yunkai, and Good Merchants of Volantis, I surrender our cities to you - and pledge my fealty, if you should have it.” Closing his eyes, he accepted whatever fate was to come. “If you seek to have me executed for rebelling against Her Majesty, I do not offer ill sentiments.”

Crossing his arms, Jon looked at the beggar before him. It wasn’t a complete fall though, for he had started with nothing. Simply back to square one rather than losing it all. “Where are the others of you command tent? Surely they would make it a point of being here.”

“The other masters are dead. I killed them.” Hearing the Emperor snort, he took a chance and looked up at the Lord of Lords. He was once again struck by how unassuming and simple the conqueror of all was. “My generals and the other nobility wished to come as well, but I insisted to speak for them. It should be my humiliation and shame to bear, not theirs.”

‘Looks like I was right about him.’ The man’s lowborn upbringing grounded him from the kind of grandiose monstrosities that Joffrey and the other masters planned, and he didn’t have the sadistic cruel streak of people like Ramsay Bolton. Perhaps there was a place for him, now. “You took my advice to heart, Lord Qaggaz?”

Blinking, Qaggaz nodded. “I believe they would have enslaved me too, once you were defeated. As it stands, they were willing to risk all of Yunkai and Astapor to your dragon’s flames. I could not allow that to happen.”

Jon nodded. He didn’t trust Qaggaz at all, but a level of it could be earned. “I shall spare you and your men, but you are still my prisoner.” The man’s shoulders slumped, both in relief and resignation. “My ships will take you to Astapor. Ensure its surrender and fealty, along with the emancipation of every single slave, and I shall then consider further mercy.”
Qaggaz bowed once more, grateful for the magnanimity from someone who could have easily burned him alive. “Thank you, sire.”

As the brown-cloaked Qaggaz was led away, Jon shifted till he was sitting upright and let out a fatigued sigh. “Podrick, aren’t you tired of this?”

The young knight blinked, unsure of what his sovereign wanted or meant. “Forgive me, sire, but I do not understand the question.” While around King’s Landing with Tyrion, such a response would receive a tongue lashing at best from most in charge. Jon wasn’t that way. For that, Podrick was thankful.

Jon closed his eyes. “Don’t you wish for this all to end? For the fighting to cease?”

A slight hesitation, the question simple but at the same time so very deep. “If I ever possessed romantic notions of battle, your Majesty, the killing and death I have seen in the last several years would have killed it.” Taking a chance, he lowered himself to the ground next to his Emperor. “I pray for peace.”

The weight of all his melancholy fell on Jon. “Wherever I came, wherever I saw, I ended up conquering. A boy raised as a bastard, ruler of all he surveyed - and yet, it took me away from the ones I love the most in the world. I hate it.” The image of his dear siblings, his beloved children, and his breathtaking wife danced in his mind. So far, so so far. “I long to know some peace with them before I die.”

“Aye.” Podrick glanced at the few wispy clouds dotting the sky. Mesmerized by their delicate shapes. “Though I see myself more likely to die before experiencing it than you, sire. You have considerably more to live for.”

“I should give you a direct command to live, Podrick.” The hint of a teasing grin poked on Jon’s face. “You still have to confess your feelings to that northern girl of yours.”

Podrick snorted. “I doubt Sansa would ever accept me as a consort…” His mouth snapped shut, belatedly recognizing his slip. ‘Oh fuck.’ Did he dare to glance over at the Emperor’s expression? For the longest amount of time, Podrick couldn’t summon the courage.

After what seemed like hours but was likely only less than a minute, Podrick slowly turned to look at Jon. The Emperor’s face was unreadable. Eyes a dark, dark grey and lips a thin line. The White Wolf of the North had returned. “My sister, Sansa?” It was more of a question than a statement.

Summoning all his willpower not to cower like a little bitch - for some reason the inner voice steeling him sounded more like Bronn than like Brienne - Podrick nodded. “Yes, sire.” He swallowed.

“Did you touch her.” There was no emotion, but the words nevertheless bore the fire of a thousand dragons.

“No, your Majesty. Nothing like that.” While Sansa - and everyone likely to have known the details - were very tight lipped, Ramsay’s notoriety and the nature of her condition after escaping didn’t leave much to Podrick’s imagination as to what had happened. “I would never… and I still doubt she truly thinks I exist.” Truth be told, his last letter didn’t get a response.

Nodding absentmindedly, Jon bored into Podrick, looking him over. “It doesn’t need saying where Longclaw would end up if you hurt her, correct?” A gulp answered in the affirmative. “You’re an honorable man, and have proven yourself. If she’d have you, then I shan’t stop either of you.” A small amount of amusement was had at the young knight’s expression, that of a gaping fish out of
water, but only a flicker. This was serious. “Sansa has been through things…” he shuddered. “Unimaginable things.”

“I won’t hurt her, sire. You have my word.”

“I’m not worried.” Placing his hat back on his face, he laid down to resume his nap. “If you cross the line, she’ll kill you herself.” A small smirk crossed his face as he drifted off to sleep.

The light was blinding, all encompassing. It was just so white, pure white.

Finding himself in the middle of this whiteness, Brandon Stark rose, completely confused of what was happening. The last memory he had was of Edderon preparing to land near Winterfell, then Meera calling to him as his eyes pulled back. Was this a vision? A Warg? Summer was with him, so with the white surroundings it couldn’t be him. There was no way to tell, just the enveloping whiteness, the light shining from everywhere.

Suddenly, the light grew brighter to his front, so bright that Bran needed to shield his eyes. A small back shadow blocked part of the light, blocking more and more as it approached, the contrast preventing him from making out the shape. When it approached him, a flash of recognition crossed his eyes.

It was the old man… the Three-Eyed Raven. A person he hadn’t seen since that night in Qarth. “Brandon Stark,” the raven said, tone flat yet oddly relieved.

“We meet again.” Stepping closer to the raven, Bran peered into his gaze. “What do you want from me, old man?” Behind him, a tree emerged from the whiteness. A tree with blood red leaves - a weirwood, but one glowing brightly. A Weirwood unlike any Bran had ever seen.

The raven looked at the tree, staring at it. “You know where you must go, Brandon Stark. Where you must go to become who you are destined to be.” A pair of ice blue eyes glowed in the distance before the white aura faded into blackness.

...with Astapor’s submission, all resistance by the masters has been crushed. The slaver power in Essos has drawn to a close, and the avenue for Joffrey and Tywin’s plot in this area of the world has concluded. Due to his new allegiance and work on establishing new government similar to the Grand Senate of Meereen in both Astapor and Yunkai (Volantis will have to wait given its proximity to the Lannister-aligned free cities), I have added Yezzan zo Qaggaz to the small council of the Kingdom of New Valyria - I hope the name is to your satisfaction, my beloved wife…

...Ironically, it seems as if my dear sister has a prospective suitor, the recently distinguished Ser Podrick Payne.
Daenerys’ mouth formed a small O in astonishment. “Podrick fancies Sansa?” Given her sister’s attractiveness, it wasn’t shocking upon deeper thought, but still… quite unexpected.

Though I would never tell him this, for in father’s stead Robb and I are the defenders of Sansa’s honor, especially considering what she has been through I believe Podrick is the best possible match for her.

Clicking her tongue, Dany had the same exact thoughts. Margaery for Robb. Gendry for Arya. Lyanna Mormont for Rickon. Meera Reed for Bran. And now Podrick for Sansa. The Wolf Pack was shaping up quite nicely. She resolved to probe a bit, see if the redhead would be receptive - a grin crossed her face at the almost stereotypically girlish activity in matchmaking.

Once I am done setting the final things to rights here, I shall be returning to Westeros and you. To our children. We will avenge the defeats, rescue my sister, and bring fire and blood to those seeking to plunge our world into death and slavery. Winter is coming, and we will be ready.

And there it was. Jon, her husband the Emperor, was returning home. Sighing, Dany leaned back against the high-backed chair and closed her eyes. A wave of contentment crossed over her. While she could take on the world alone, she didn’t want to nor would she have to. ‘We are a team, Jon and I. A pack, and the pack survives together.’ Her Stark family was right about that.

“Your Highness.” Daenerys looked up and saw a flash of red at the entrance to her solar. The Lady Melisandre bore the ghost smile that gave away nothing but a determination as fiery as her complexion or the flames she used in her ceremonies. “I am heartened to hear His Majesty is returning.”

Dany blinked, but it didn’t surprise her after a second thought. The Red Woman always knew too much - things that she shouldn’t have known by logical means. “As am I.” She sighed. “Jon is a far better strategist than I.”

“Do not sell yourself short, my Empress.” While her interpretations were oftentimes complex and ambiguous, Melisandre was not one to brownnose. “While you may not know the intricacies of war or how to wage it as your husband or his father did, the Promised relies on you for matters of state.”

A smile cracked on her lips. “That he does. Rhaegar had both, while Viserys has neither.” A thought came to her, of something Melisandre had told her long before. “Lady Melisandre, what do the flames tell you?” The defeats at Dragonstone and the God’s Eye, not to mention Arya’s capture, made her apprehensive of the future. Apprehensive as to what was to come. “Do they tell you the future?”

An eerie calm seemed to spread over the Spiritual Advisor, growing deathly quiet in pensive contemplation. “The flames, they offer only glimpses. They may be predictive, or only allegorical…”

“You claim to speak for a god,” the Empress replied, her voice that of the Mother of Dragons. “The god that you say my husband is the reincarnation of. I would like to know what the visions you claim he sent you say.”

Silent once more, the amulet hanging from around her neck glowed a pale green, Melisandre’s eyes closing in thought. They then opened slowly. “I see a man, surrounded by snow and ice, yet at the same time fire. A sword is clutched in his hands, and he is fighting for his life with an unseen enemy.”

Daenerys pondered this. “Either he is fighting in the north, or the snow and fire represent his bloodline?”
“Correct.” Walking softly, purposefully, Melisandre leaned in behind Daenerys. Her breath hot on Dany’s ear, scorching. The dragon in her blood working overtime to protect her skin from the heat. “Look into the fire, what do you see?”

Eyes flickering to the flames, violet eyes sparkling from the orange-red beauty, Dany saw shapes. Almost infinitesimal, but shapes nonetheless. “Pain, suffering, death.” Her heart clenched, for the flames gave no clue as to who would suffer.

“Aye, all will come to fruition for the Promised to achieve total victory. But I promise, they shall be worth it.”

Breathing deeply, Daenerys surely hoped so.

Lunging upright, Tywin’s eyes flew open to a room pitch black from the dark of night. Covers long having been tossed off his slender frame from the restless movements of a troubled sleep, the sheen of sweat covering his skin and drenching his nightshirt enhanced the bite of the icy draft. Teeth chattering, he rose. Tywin grabbed a log from the driftwood pile and tossed it into the fireplace. Weak from lack of fuel, the flame soon roared to health, adding the desired heat to the chilled bedchamber.

He shivered all the same. It had been the same nightmare… a recurring one that had haunted Tywin for decades. Ever since his beloved wife had died. ‘Joanna, my Joanna.’ Tywin shut his eyes tightly, shuddering despite the newfound warmth. The biting ice had dwelled inside him no matter what he did, no matter how high he had ascended or how high a point he dragged his family towards. Half the world laid at the fingertips of House Lannister, and yet he still felt the gaping loss and looming guilt from the loss of his wife.

“When Tyrion took her away from me,” he muttered bitterly. “I should have killed that treacherous scum when I had the chance.” He could have. Declared the dwarf a bastard and killed him at any time in his wretched existence, even if there was no doubt that Tyrion was Tywin’s son, the true heir of his cunning.

‘Do you really believe that, my love?’ the voice stated. The sweet wafts of language that was the voice of the Lady Joanna Lannister. It haunted Tywin, driving a sword into his soul.

Every day gazing upon his twins, who both looked so much like her. The guilt, every time he exerted his primal urges upon some whore, smallfolk maiden of the Westerlands, or slave girl in King’s Landing. No one was the wiser, and Tywin kept it discreet unlike his oaf of a son in law, but he knew. He felt the guilt.

And the woman… the red woman…

Just the thought of her caused the fire to roar - or at least Tywin imagined it did. Since that night only years before, the nightmares had intensified. As if both Joanna and the specter of the bane of his existence were screaming at him. Torturing him. It had started before Stannis had died - before Ned Stark was captured. A letter from Dragonstone, signed by a woman claiming to inquire about an ancient prophecy. One that Tywin felt intrigued by, as it had resulted in a series of correspondence between them. Normally level-headed, the prospect of some insane, mystical advantage strangely appealed to him, and he agreed to the woman who proclaimed his family’s destiny to rule all of humanity.

Tywin hadn’t meant to ravage her body upon the first time they laid eyes on each other. For the life
of him, the encounter was so hazy in memory that there had to be some form of witchcraft involved. The death of Renly in what some rumors indicated as Black Magic - though most pointed to one Brienne of Tarth, the pretender’s bodyguard, as the perpetrator - only enhanced such fear. Tywin had been about to imprison the witch before she escaped, to the north with the Tyrells.

And now the Red Woman haunted his dreams. His very soul.

It was then the fire roared, as if guided by an unseen hand. Tywin was nearly knocked back from the heat and flames. Mouth agape and eyes wide in fear. It was her. It had to be her!

“Unholy demon!” he screamed into the fire. “You shant take me! I am the Lion! The Lion fears none!” Crackling, soon a burst of heat forced him back, the fire roaring high before it collapsed into mere embers. Before it did, however, Tywin saw a glimpse. An image in the flames, framed by the orange-red hue of burning wood and ash. An image far more pedestrian yet also far more terrifying than any of the mystical demons Tywin could have ever imagined.

A woman, clad in armor, thrusting forward with a sword.

Chuckling to himself, Jon pushed hard but the foot - and the young lad it was connected to - wouldn’t budge. “Ollie, for gods’ sake.” The words still came out humorous despite the chiding connotation. “You survived the last time.”

Hands gripping to the short spines on Rhaegal’s shoulder, Ollie refused to budge. “And I would rather not do it again. Can’t I go by sea?”

“A squire goes with his liege Lord,” Jon replied, “Now stop being a coward. Up you go!” With a grunt, he shoved the squire from the perch, Ser Barristan grabbing him from atop the dragon and hauling him into place. From his head, Rhaegal let out a loud snort, yawning - or was he rather bearing his teeth. ‘I know boy,’ Jon thought, patting his shoulder. “No one can be as fearless as you.’ It seemed to mollify him, eager for praise to end up lording over the larger and more fearsome Balerion.

Sunlight spreading out from the red-gold orb barely peeking over the horizon, Jon gazed back at the great city of Meereen, the new center of the Kingdom of New Valyria. The name had come from his thoughts, at the suggestion of Zhoggaz zo Zartal to create a new title for the now united land of Slaver’s Bay. A fitting tribute to the return of the Targaryen dynasty - to Daenerys for forging the empire and to him for defending it, though Jon still felt discomfort at the praise. His subjects felt no such inhibition. At his arrival atop Rhaegal in Yunkai and Astapor, and the grand triumphal parade through Meereen, throngs in the tens of thousands had shouted and screamed their love and gratitude for Vhrysa. The majesty threatened to overwhelm him, and Jon had to remember on several occasions of Ned Stark’s teachings, and of how he and Dany planned to break the wheel.

A red-black carpet, emblazoned with gold trim, draped over the dusty soil of the cliff-face. It had been where Jon had launched the campaign that ended with the Battle of the Coastroad, and now saw off the Emperor as he journeyed back to the land of his birth. Flanking it were the assorted hierarchy of Meereen, obsequious and generous as Jon walked back up the path. Formalities were formalities, and the receiving line of supplicants was one his father similarly detested but endured all the same. Each man bowed to him, a blessing escaping each of their lips.

At the head were Mossador, Zhoggaz zo Zartal, and Yezzan zo Qaggaz. Alone among all members of the Grand Senate, they held the greatest dignitas. “New Valyria is in your hands, gentlemen. I do not wish to return under negative circumstances, so act wisely.”
“We shall defend the Kingdom with our lives, sire,” replied Zartal. After the knowledge of Joffrey’s plot brought him into full reality, Jon found himself impressed with the man’s honor.

“Although, we expect to hear news of your victory over the golden cunt.” Jon grinned at Qaggaz’s comment. The former prisoner and enemy seemed to be genuine in his conversion to the Targaryen cause and had been vital to the bloodless pacification of Yunkai and Astapor in the last few weeks. Still, Jon had instructed Mossador to keep an eye on him. “All blessings upon you, sire.”

Nodding, he turned to Podrick, wrapping an arm around his shoulder and guiding him to the side. “You know what you need to do, Podrick?”

“Aye.” The young, modest knight looked into Jon’s eyes. “It will be unwise to place too much of our forces at sea for too long. Euron Greyjoy owns the waves.”

“Hug the coast, and make sure to move through the inlets of Old Valyria. Volantis is close enough to the Dornish coast, and I need the city to be secured before the Lannister-allied Free Cities make any moves to rally the remaining masters.” He waited until Podrick nodded. “I’ll send you the orders when you make the dash, understood?”

“Crystal clear, sire.” Podrick gulped, stealing himself. An entire army was now placed on his shoulders, an honor only before given in the Imperial army to Yara Greyjoy, Grey Worm, under-Khal Dirgo, Edmure Tully, and the Emperor’s own brother Robb. It was an… awe-inspiring and terrifying responsibility to say the least. “I will not fail you.”

Settling in his usual spot at the midpoint between Rheagal’s powerful shoulder blades minutes later, Jon felt him shake, working out the kinks in his joints. A laugh escaped him. “Easy there boy, relax.” The tension in his child’s muscles began to ease. “We have a long ride ahead of us.”

Rhaegal hooted twice, neck curling back slightly so he could see his father. The golden eyes held a rather anthropomorphic sparkle in them.

“Yep.” Jon grinned. “We’re going home.” He gripped tightly on the large spine. “Sōve...” The massive wings catapulted rider and mount both off the massive cliff before Jon could even finish the command.
The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Atop the snow-capped peak, swirling winds engulfing the ground with a blinding white mist of snow and ice, fifteen silent figures watched their master. Below, thousands of feet at the base of the massive cliff, an army awaited. Tens of thousands completely shock still. All waiting for their mystical leader to emerge from his cave. To lead them to glory, not that they’d ever think of their mission in such terms - or any for that matter.

Seated cross-legged, eyes closed, visions ran through the master’s head. Of a time long past, his soul free from the malevolent prison his new body kept him in. Unseeing, unfeeling, deprived of every emotion other than rage and sheer force of will. Of a time spent with the ones he loved, his sister and wife and son and best friend. Simpler times, before they took it away from him.

Before he broke free and moved to slaughter them all.

And now, he felt a spirit upon the world. A spirit not seen by him in millennia. Since the last great battle where they had clashed. The body that inhabited that spirit was long dead, but it had returned. ‘He is familiar.’

‘That boy, the one from Hardhome.’

‘He is in the south, close to… her homeland.’

Eyes flying open, bright blue casting a shadow upon the walls of the cavern, the Night King stood. Grabbing his ice scepter, he felt the power of winter enter his spirit - bringing his abilities to the intensity of old, if only for now. Striking the tip hard into the rock, he began a chain reaction that would bring about the end of the spirit before it grew powerful once more.

His expression was unchanged, but inwardly the Night King smiled.

Thunder boomed as the beautiful malevolence of the glowing lightning bolt zigzagged into the undulating mass of water below. Rain pelting down from the grey-black clouds of the icy typhoon, Jon could barely see past Rhaegal’s snout. “Fucking storm,” he muttered under his breath. It had come out of nowhere, engulfing them out of what was once pure sunlight just as they passed the coastline of Old Valyria.

“I can barely see!” Arms wrapped around Rhaegal’s spines, Ollie was shaking in fear.

Barristan had more steel in his spine, but concern welled inside him. A huge gust nearly stalling Rhaegals midair, he yelled at Jon. “Perhaps we should turn back to land… wait out the storm?!”

Feeling the rumblings within their connection, Jon could see that Rhaegal was feeling the fear as well. “Perhaps we can turn north and wait it out near Lys!” ‘Storms never appear this time of year,’ came the nagging voice in the back of his head, sounding a lot like Bran. He knew the weather patterns from Mossador’s briefings before he left. Strange. ‘Very strange.’

“Sire,” shouted Ollie over the howling winds, eyes peering as he tried to see through the rain splashing his face. ‘What is that?’ Jon barely had time to register what Ollie said before the world exploded around him.

Lowering the spyglass, the captain turned to his king. “Near direct hit, sire.” Below him, the massive
man-o-war ship Kraken rocked up as a wave slammed into it. The Drowned God was in a foul mood that night. “But the beast is still airborne.”

Euron Greyjoy, hair matted to his forehead and eyes wild with a murderous intensity, stared at the swirling black clouds. “Prepare another volley!” he bellowed, the sky illuminated for a moment by the crackling lightning bolts. “All ships keep firing!” Obeying the order, his men dashed towards their positions, signal lamps blaring orders to the other five ships sailing in ragged formation around the Kraken - likely shot to hell by the storm. Snarling into the din of thunder, Euron would have the Dragonwolf and his beast added to his collection if he had to summon the entirety of the deep blue sea to do so.

The crews of all the ships scrambled into action, following the lead of their flagship. Tar drenched projectiles were loaded onto catapults while the delicate rockets were aimed on deck. The storm caught them unawares, but Ironborn sailors were born to fight in the typhoons and cyclones of open waters. Slowly, the gunnery officers began to triangulate the position of the great Dragon of the North. “FIRE!”

Sharp barbs of water peppered Jon’s face, hair a mess and stinging his eyes. “Boy, bank left!” Feeling Rhaegal lurch, fiery projectiles rocketed through the powerful gales mere yards from Rhaegal’s right wing. Somehow they had stumbled into the middle of a group of Ironborn ships. Their luck had to run out eventually.

“I can’t hold on!” Ollie screamed, while Barristan gritted his teeth as the dragon lurched violently. “Mother of fuck! Mother of fuck!”

Blinking the water out of his eyes, Jon spotted where the catapults had fired from, flashes of yellow-orange lancing up as they fired an ill-aimed rocket volley. Sending the mental command to the dragon, Rhaegal roared and dove straight at the ship. “DRACARYS!” Stalling in the air with the beats of his massive wings, Rhaegal released the unholy inferno of dragonfire at the Ironborn ship. The stout wood of the Iron Island was tough, but dragonfire proved a far more stubborn tool. Screams filled the stormy air as snaps of wood popped into the night.

As the third rate split in two from the dragon’s unrelenting jet of flame, the helmsmen of the other ships spun the wheels as far around as they could go. Hard turns nearly capsized one, two others barely managing to avoid colliding as the churning waves sent them into violent jinks and rolls. Any lesser sailor would have broken, but not the Ironborn. What is dead may never die.

Fire rising within him, Euron jerked his head back at the gunners. “Why aren’t you pricks firing?!” Searching for his useless eunuch of a nephew had brought the prize of a lifetime into his grasp, and he would be damned if it would slip away.

“My King, the beast is in the direction of our other ships,” the officer shouted back. “If we fire and miss…”

He was cut off as Euron stormed to the man and slugged him in the face, blood mixing with water as his nose broke. Heaving him up, the King of the Iron Islands tossed the screaming man overboard. “Any other helpful suggestions?” he asked, voice syrupy sweet. None were forthcoming. “Good. Now you cunts better hit that fucker or I’ll give the crabs more than an appetizer!” Fiery jets lanced off the hull of the ship.

Feeling the heat from Rhaegal’s tongue of flame fight the cold of the rain, a flash caught Jon’s vision as he turned his head. His eyes widened as the twin streaks came closer. “Dīnagon…!”
It was too late. The two rockets detonated on Rhaegal’s side, showering sparks and jets of fire across the scaly skin of the gigantic beast. Soft-skinned variants, the fire alone couldn’t penetrate the fire made flesh, but the shockwave sent Rhaegal in a wild jink. The human passengers struggled to hold onto the spines at the sudden jolt. Ollie and Barristan were successful. Rain making the spines slippery to the touch, it was Jon that failed as his gloved hand refused to gain traction. The jolt sent him tumbling off the beast’s back, a loud roar shaking the very heavens as the Targaryen Emperor hurtled further and further to the churning seas below.

Watching the tiny, dark shape tumble from the dragon’s back in the blue-white light of the gods’ fury, Euron bared his teeth in a terrifying leer. Those around him had long ago realized that there were several screws loose in his head, but the younger brother of the hated Balon Greyjoy was the true Drowned King they all dreamed of following. And now, their King had taken down the White Dragonwolf. “AND THE KRAKEN CLAIMS HIS PRIZE!” he whooped into the fury of the storm itself. “KEEP FIRING!”

Pain. Jon felt the pain first, like a whip slamming into his body parallel to the length of his spine. Water enveloping him as soon as he smashed onto the surface of the rolling sea, the cry of anguish sucked icy cold liquid down his throat, stabbing his insides with a thousand pricks. The saltwater stung at his eyes, and he blindly thrashed about in the pitch black around him. Lessons in the river with Robb and Sansa within the wolfwood as a child prepared him little for the stormy seas, unable to even see through his inflamed eyes for the surface. Gradually, the ocean blackness drew him deeper and deeper.

Suddenly, a flash of lightning sent shining rays of light piercing through the churning, murky depths. It lasted but an instant, but Jon saw the surface… closer than it seemed. Malevolent tendrils of death already beginning to envelop him, the Emperor summoned his fortitude and kicked with all his might. Arms threw him upward through the waves, battering the water aside as he ascended towards the surface. Away from death’s door towards an uncertain future - he could work with those odds.

Erupting out of the water, Jon sucked in a delicious breath of air before the winds and waves dragged him underwater once more. Kicking with all his might, the Emperor fought the hold of the Kraken. His entire reality melted into a swirling pot of water and rain-drenched sky. Arms lashing out at anything, at last they made contact with solid wood. A floating piece of debris from the Ironborn ship, Jon hauled his upper torso on it, gripping the soaked timbers with all his strength.

Above, the lances of flame hurled themselves at Rhaegal, the beast braving them to search for him. His cries were desperate, pained, bellowing for his rider.

Knowing they couldn’t survive this, Jon made one of the hardest decisions of his life… in an instant. ‘Go.’

Dodging a rocket, Rhaegal let out a tragic hoot. ‘No! Never!’

‘GOOO!’ Jon mentally screamed.

Hovering in the air for what seemed like forever, a primal screech left Rhaegal, louder than the rockets. Louder than the churning seas. Louder than the angry heavens above. As it died, the beast’s wings beat heavily as he turned and headed landward, away from the death and chaos.

Fist clenching in rage, Euron stared out at the dark sea - and the receding form of the dragon. “Well boys,” he yelled, deciding to once take the wins he had. “Tonight we killed an Emperor!” Cheers rang out as he basked in the glory of it all.

‘Good boy,’ Jon thought, eyes fluttering shut as he clung to the debris. ‘Good boy.’
“Get in there, fucking cunts!” Groups of men with crossbows offering cover, the overseers and Faith Militants shoved the last remaining slaves into the pens for the night. “You two, bitch. Get in there before I get out me prick!”

Sparing a single glare over her shoulder, Arya complied, losing her petite form in the mass of milling people caged like animals. The threat wasn’t usually idle, but the overseers had already collected nearly two dozen young, pretty girls for their own use overnight. Arya did not want to be one of them - killing the guards would blow her cover, and the hope was that Joffrey simply would forget about her.

There was no chance Littlefinger ever would, though. Just the thought of him made her skin crawl. ‘Joffrey, Cersei, Ilyn Payne, Littlefinger…’

Suddenly, she felt herself lifted up and over a shoulder as the gate shut with a loud clang, sealing them in for the night. “Let’s go, girlie.” Sandor Clegane’s gruff voice was recognizable everywhere.

Arya was not amused. “Put me down!” she huffed, more annoyed than anything.

“Shut up.” At her pounding of his back, the Hound chuckled dryly. “I may not have my armor, sweetheart, but all you’re doin’ is pissin’ me the fuck off.” With an angry sigh, Arya propped her head up by the elbow and went along for the ride.

“Don’t mind him, sweet pea.” Adorned with a cheery smile, Beric Dondarrion was less of a pain than the Hound. Most of the time anyway. “He just hates King’s Landing.”

“I hate everything and everywhere,” came the grumble.

A laugh. “We know, Sandor, we know.” Walking ahead of Arya and Clegane - Beric bringing up the rear - Thoros of Myr found his route rather open. The slaves gave them a wide berth, both respectful and fearful. No one ever ratted them out, but while the guards weren’t looking… “Tell the girl.”

Beric smiled wider, winking. “There’s someone we want you to meet, little Wolf.”

“I’m not included in that ‘we,’ in case you’re wondering.” Clegane was as direct as ever.

“I wasn’t wondering, in case you were wondering,” Arya shot back, amused at his likely reaction.

Apparently the former nobleman was as well. “I liked her before and I still do.” All three shared a laugh at the Hound’s expense.

Jovial attitudes began to fade away as they approached the far corner of the pen, one marked off by crude reed slats likely hand-woven. Arya noticed several burly Esossi guards, each with a dagger tattoo on their temples - Volantian slaves. One didn’t reside in the King’s Landing of today without being able to pick up on such things. Seated in the center, surrounded by candles, was a lone woman in the pose of deep meditation.

Clegane set Arya down and plopped onto the ground, completely disinterested. Arya ignored him. “Who is this?” she asked Beric.

“Someone of the highest importance.” That was self-evident. Even with the segregation into castes as seen amongst the slaves, a private area with guards was unheard of.
Before any of them could say anything to her, the lady’s voice preempted them. “Thoros, you smell like a distillery.” She didn’t even spare them a glance, her back to the Red Priest and former knight.

Thoros grinned weakly. “We all have our ways of worshipping the Lord… and it helps with the aches and pains.”

“Sobriety is good for the soul, dear Thoros.” Cracking her neck with a groan, the woman stood, turning to face them. She was a beauty, noted Arya. Tanned skin, blue eyes, raven hair. Obviously of the Free Cities, a woman sure of herself but without any arrogant flair that a noblewoman would have. “Who is this?”

Bowing, Beric grabbed Arya’s shoulders. “This is the connection we have to the resurrected Lord, priestess.” He patted her arm. “Arya Stark, sister to the White Wolf.”

“Arya Stark?” Stepping closer to her, the lady looked Arya over with peak curiosity and wonder. “Valar morghulis, young Stark.”

“Valar dohaeris,” came the instinctive reply. The look she was getting was… discomforting to Arya. She couldn’t place it. “I’m not sure what is going on, to be honest.”

The lady smiled. “I doubt you would, for I can see you are quite practical even considering the history of your House and your individual experiences.” Reaching out, she ran a finger over her cheek and forehead. “Where are my manners. I am Kinvara, priestess of this particular slice of the earth.”

“A pretty shitty slice,” Clegane spat, scarfing down a piece of stale bread.

“It is pretty shitty,” Arya shrugged. He wasn’t wrong there.

Kinvara giggled slightly. “Perhaps… you have a point there. But if the Lord of Light wills me to be here, then there is a reason - for I and for you.” Eyebrow raised, she could tell the young girl felt her slightly crazy. “Come, Arya of House Stark. All will be explained, but for now sleep.” Kinvara gestured to a collection of cots close by. “Any family of the reborn in fire Jon Snow and Daenerys Targaryen deserves the finest hospitality I may offer.”

The fatigue of the day’s labor - if crippling for her, she shuddered to think how hauling the massive stones up the pyramid day after day was affecting Beric, Thoros, the Hound, or all the others - Arya simply collapsed onto her cot. No one dared touch it, reserved for her and her only thanks to the reputation of the Brotherhood among the slaves. Though, Clegane’s muscles and hard attitude didn’t hurt, she thought with a snort. Before sleep took hold, she looked up at the open air, wall penning her in just low enough to make out the tops of the Red Keep. Where the little bitch that called himself the Chimera slept in pampered luxury.

“Rest up Joffrey,” she murmured softly. Almost a hiss. “A girl always completes her list.”

Gazing down at the city, the throbbing heart of his great empire, Joffrey shuddered. As if some malevolent force tipped off a sixth sense within him. “Enough of this shit!” he yelled to no one in particular. “You’re just making up things.” He was the eternal ruler - the divine Chimera. No one would dare harm him in his crown jewel.

“Did you say something, your Grace?” Petyr Baelish kept his eyes trained on the small stack of parchment in front of him, outwardly the epitome of a respectful supplicant and trusted confidant. Few could grace the Chimera’s inner sanctum, and he was one.

Joffrey waved him off. “Shut up, shut up and let me think!” Head pulsing, he tossed an apple from a
plate of fruit decorating the fine oaken table and threw it at Dontos Hollard - but the eerie feeling from before had not only interrupted his train of thought, but taken away all pleasure from torturing the fallen knight and watching him squirm. Snarling, he stormed to his grooming pedestal.

Clearing his throat, Qyburn interjected. “All Highest, if I may, I believe you were worried about the failure of the corrupted blood slavers to neutralize the Stark Bastard.”

“All Highest, with your Grandfather and Uncle in the field, the High Admiral at sea, and your mother… indisposed, the three of us need your skilled mind to solve the pressing concern.”

Behind a sheer curtain, shape, shadow, and profile visible but all other features muddled by the gossamer fabric, the blind servants began attending to the gaunt, slight form of the Chimera. Freed of his veil and cumbersome silks, Joffrey indulged in the finely prepared meats, fruits, and breads that his sensitive palate could handle. The servants gently removed his clothes and cleaned the pale skin with oil-infused rags. “I want the Stark bastard dead. It does not concern me any longer as to where, only that it is done!”

There was an odd resignation in his voice. A desperation borne for once not out of anger. “My little birds have found a possible contract out on his life,” said Qyburn. “The Faceless Men, all Highest.”

“Blasphemers of the worst sort,” scoffed the High Sparrow. “The Seven wince at their chosen representatives allying with such filth.”

“We can beg for their forgiveness after the fact, High Sparrow,” Littlefinger replied. “In the here and now, all that matters is defeating our mutual enemies. At least Euron Greyjoy is trying.” His last raven had him on the trail of his nephew, his niece already chained in the bilge of his flagship. “Although…” The unctuous aristocrat’s lips curled in a tight smile. “Perhaps we could resort to… alternate means.”

There was silence. “What kind of means?” Joffrey asked. “Spit it out!”

“There is something that would bring the untimely death of Jon Snow, all Highest.” Unlike all but Lord Tywin and possibly Qyburn, Littlefinger knew who Snow was - it… complicated matters. “Something that someone we have once known was proficient in. Means from the occult.”

Mouth agape, the High Sparrow tried to speak but the words found it hard to escape his throat. “That…” he finally stammered. “That is black magic. An affront to the gods themselves!”

“It would not be an affront to them if their chosen representative on this earth oversees it,” Littlefinger shot back. “It would be highly effective, I believe. I have it on good authority that black magic such as this caused the death of the traitor Renly.”

“My traitorous scum of an uncle was killed by his sworn sword.” Joffrey sneered behind the curtains. “Teaches him to trust a woman.”

“A woman did kill him, all Highest. Just not that woman - the red witch.” The King fell silent.

Breaking that silence, Qyburn felt intrigued on top of the on-edge fear that anyone granted access to
Joffrey for even a single meeting or audience. “This might work, but for the type of ceremony to be effective... to take out someone of royal blood…”

“Royal blood?”

“Jon Snow has the blood of the Starks, and therefore the Kings of Winter. And Daenerys is of royal blood as well. It requires a ceremony involving the same type of blood. Targaryen... or Baratheon blood.” Old scrolls in the Citadel told of these types of rituals.

The High Sparrow seemed resigned. “Viserys Targaryen would work... or any of the Starks…”

“No.” Qyburn shook his head. “The power of the ritual leads not with the blood of the victim... but with the blood of the conjuror. That would mean the blood of His Highest - Baratheon blood.”

Wincing, the topic of discussion was unsettling even for him, the man known for such black experiments that had seen him booted out of the Citadel. “You have to realize this is magic of the darkest order that even the Red Woman would be hesitant to...”

“Tell me, and we will do it.” There was no hesitance in Joffrey’s voice.

“You can’t be seriously considering this?” Falling into step beside the wheelchair, she looked at her younger brother incredulously. “It’s madness.”

“I have to do it, Sansa,” came the reply, barely any emotion behind it. They pushed into the courtyard, an oddly cloudless sky above them, stars shining down. It was as if the entirety of the storms and blizzards had left the north for places elsewhere.

Halting on the cobblestones, the redhead couldn’t make heads or tails of what had happened to her normally carefree brother. Joy had filled her and Rickon as Edderon brought Bran back to Winterfell for the first time since Theon betrayed them. With Howland Reed there, it had been happy reunions all around - not to mention meeting the newly healed Hodor, which was quite a shock - but it had all been turned to chaos once Bran announced he was headed for North of the Wall. It was completely out of the blue and no one could talk him out of it.

“Are you sure about this, Meera?” Howland looked resigned to the fact, always a far more spiritual man than even the average northerner. He was taking the impending journey to the hells of the Land of Always Winter better than the more level-headed Sansa, but still worried.

Looking up at her father as Willas and the other servants loaded Bran onto the dragon’s back, Meera nodded. “The same force that helped us out of Qarth is calling him to somewhere in the vast wilderness.” Sansa racing to join the others clustered around Edderon, Meera began climbing onto his back. “I don’t like it but I’m not going to quibble about the meaning of Bran’s visions.”

“But…” Huffing in frustration, Sansa looked at the young Reed. “Meera, talk some sense into him, for gods’ sake! He’ll get himself killed!”

Sighing, Meera met the eyes of the older redhead. “I’m sorry, Lady Stark. I long ago had to accept that Bran has a gift that I cannot truly understand. If he says he must travel north of the Wall, then I must believe him.”

Looking down on his family - nay, all the people of Winterfell gathered around - Bran smiled softly as Edderon readied his wings. “I shall return, do not worry for me.” With a roar, the dragon ascended into the sky, flying ever higher towards the stars of the heavens above.
They stared as the grey-white beast disappeared into the darkness of night. “What are you gonna do, sister?” Rickon asked.

Pursing her lips together, she waved for Maester Wolkan. “Prepare a raven for Riverrun. I need to warn my sister about this.”

Mind a delirious haze, Jon barely registered the rope being wrapped around his weak, parched, and drenched body and hauling him up. His shoulders smacked against something hard several times, the pain registering somewhat but too little to matter much considering what he went through. Grunting, he was hauled over the side of the ship - probably a ship. No, it was a ship.

“Looks like there was a survivor,” a voice said, accent of the Iron Islands. In the back of Jon’s tired mind, it didn’t seem hostile. His hand drifted to his belt, Longclaw still on its scabbard - thank the Gods.

Canteen thrust at him, Jon resisted the urge to gulp it all down like a parched oaf. Remembering boyhood lessons, he gently took the bottle of magical elixir and sipped slowly - savoring the quenching liquid as if it were the nectar of the gods themselves. After draining nearly all of it, taking several minutes to do so, he finally looked up at his rescuers. A familiar face stood out. “Theon,” he croaked, throat still impossibly dry.

The Prince of the Iron Islands, Admiral of the Imperial Navy, and former ward to House Stark nodded back. “Jon,” he said awkwardly. The tension from their first reunion didn’t seem to have dissipated.

Around them, the Ironborn men were taken aback. “Dis the Emperor?” one asked, incredulously. “Ooks ik im,” another remarked.

Theon bowed, settling the matter. “Your Majesty, welcome to the Sea Bitch.” Eyes widening, the crewmen all bowed as well.

Pushing up onto shaky feet, Jon nearly stumbled but was caught by Theon. “What are you doing out here?” he said, confused. “Shouldn’t you be at White Harbor?” That’s what the dispatches had said, plus it was the only remaining defensible port. Gulltown was closer to the action but was a sitting duck for an attack.

Letting his surrogate brother lean on him for support, Theon guided him towards his cabin. “Gave the order to scatter the ships at Dragonstone after Yara was captured and we broke out. Seems Euron is on my tail, so we sailed south to protect the rest of the fleet.”

“Storm saved our asses… your Majesty,” the captain stated. “Cuntface was right on us before the gales threw em all out of whack.”

Digesting this new info, Jon knew they must have been farther out to sea than he hoped - if they had been closer then Rhaegal would have sensed him out. ‘But he sensed me out from all across the world… why can’t he now?’ Something deeper was afoot, one he couldn’t get a bearing on. “Do you know where we are?”

“My, did you get a reading before sunrise?” Theon asked his navigator.

“Aye. About six/seven hundred miles south/southeast of Lys, give or take.” He wasn’t as sure as Jon would have liked, but it would do for now. “The winds are blowing eastward.”
Jon nodded weakly. “Good, set course for old Valyria.”

Blinking, Theon looked at him as they reached the door to the rear cabin. “We need to get you around the enemy screen to Seaguard. You can take a horse to Riverrun…”

He was silenced by an intense glance. The frown on Jon’s face curled into a smirk. “Trust me.”
Damn the Torpedoes

With the good fortune of a night’s recovery and whatever the ship’s steward could supply for a hearty meal - memories of some of the grub at Castle Black taught one not to be picky - Jon found his strength returning in spades. Luckily the sun hadn’t been in the sky for too long to burn his fair skin, and the medic aboard ship said the soreness would go away after a week or so. Such was why he was at the mirror in Theon’s cabin, trimming the wildness out of his hair and beard. A monarch campaigning in the field did not have time for such mundane matters.

The door opened with a creak, ship rocking gently on the waves. It was the young cook’s mate, a petite woman with chestnut hair and carrying a tray. “Your Majesty, breakfast…” She stopped in her tracks, eyes wide.

Turning, bare chested, Jon smiled softly. “Thank you.” He took the tray from the shock still woman’s hands, setting it down on the table. “I’m famished this morning,” he chuckled.

A bright red blush adorned her cheeks, eyes flickering up and down his torso. “You’re welcome, your Majesty.” With that she scampered off, brushing past Theon as she made her exit.

Eyebrow raised, the worn, weary face of Theon Greyjoy sprang slightly to life as he looked at Jon. “First time I’ve ever seen her that way.”

Pulling on his tunic, Jon plopped in the spartan chair. “I’m curious as to how such a tiny little thing is allowed on a ship filled with… salty pricks?”

“Normally she’s as much a fucking arse as the lot of em,” Theon replied, sitting across from his Emperor. “She may look small, but I’ve seen her punch out men twice her size - but to you…” Watching Jon scarf down his salt beef and porridge made him snort. “Daenerys or not, women will throw themselves at you, Jon. Your Targaryen ancestors always kept several mistresses, and many will expect you to carry the tradition.”

Disgust crossed Jon’s lips. “Dany is enough for me.” There was silence between the two, Jon finishing up his breakfast. He had just picked up his steaming cup of coffee when Theon cleared his throat. “Yes?”

Opening his mouth to speak, the words hesitated on Theon’s lips. “Your conduct so far in the war… You’ve kept your honor, Jon. From what I’ve heard you’ve conducted yourself like a true Stark. Lord Stark would have been proud.”

Jon sipped his tea, allowing it to warm his insides. “I hope I have,” he murmured. It crossed his mind every day, whether his parents approved of him. Daenerys, Robb, Sansa, and Arya seemed to think so - at least from what they had last said of the subject. “War does its best to destroy a person’s soul. I try to remember that… and do the right thing. Sometimes there aren’t any easy solutions though.”

“You always knew what was right, even when we were young and stupid.” Theon seemed to be withdrawing into himself, the guilt and pain of the past gnawing at him. “You always knew the right step to take. It’s why you’re the Emperor, why the Queen chose you.”

Shaking his head, Jon closed his eyes. “Not always… I’ve had to do plenty of things that scorch the soul. I can only pray it was for the greater good.”

Fighting his demons, Theon ran his palm down his face. “All my life I tried to do the right thing, be the person that everyone counted on me to be. But sometimes… it felt as if they diverged. My
destiny, be it Greyjoy or Stark.”

“Father was more of a father than yours ever was. Balon was as much scum as Rhaegar was… beyond the living realm. And you betrayed him.” Theon hung his head in shame. What could he deny? Why wouldn’t he? He sure deserved it. “But he’s still a part of you, enough left over to rescue Sansa from Ramsay and to sail to Meereen to help Daenerys.” He sighed deeply, willing all the anger at Theon to leave his body. Vengeance and petty hatreds solved nothing, and Theon had paid quite a lot for his actions. “Sansa has forgiven you as much as she could. I may not be able to match even her, but I can forgive you as much as I can.”

Looking up at him, Theon nodded. “Thank you, Jon.” Pain crossed his eyes. “Yara… while I was with Ramsay, she was the only one who tried to save me. And now she’s captive in Euron’s dungeon or bilge brig somewhere.”

“Well… brother.” Jon’s lips curled into a ghost of a smile, sipping the warm brew. “You have a ship, and men loyal to you with whom you have proven yourself in battle. There’s nothing stopping you from tracking down Euron and getting Yara back.”

Eyes widening at Jon’s cavalier assessment of their familial relationship, he offered a weak smile - one of the few he had ever given since his treatment at Ramsay’s hands. Perhaps he could atone for his betrayal after all.

Abruptly, the Captain of the Sea Bitch threw open the door and strode to Theon. Whispering something to the Admiral, Jon only managed to observe Theon grow ice white. Clearing his throat, Theon stood. “It appears there is no need to track down Euron, Jon.”

“Why?” Jon already felt he wasn’t going to like the answer.

His gut ended up correct. “Because his flagship has been spotted off our starboard side.” Without further words, Theon picked Longclaw up from the table and handed it to Jon. He would be needing it.

“DROP ANCHOR!” With a shudder, the massive Kraken skidded to a halt in clear sight of the smaller ship. Cracking his shoulders, Euron took a look from the spyglass. “So what do we have, Captain?”

“Seems like a small frigate, sire,” answered the wiry officer, a tyro compared to the massive bear that was Euron Greyjoy. “Probably lost from the storm, and it looks like the mizzenmast is damaged. I’ve ordered a skiff to be sent out.”

Euron nodded. Through the spyglass, he could see Ironborn sailors scurrying about with tools and scraps of wood. “Use this time to get some repairs done and contact me when you find out who the fuck they are.”

“Aye, sire.”

Aboard the Sea Bitch, morale had reached the abyss. Even as their countrymen were furling their massive black-gold sails for safekeeping, the first-rate battleship held itself at the greatest intimidation at this minimal distance. All of its menacing glory was before the entire crew. It was… what was dead would never die, but the crew found themselves feeling their own mortality creeping up.

For Jon and Theon - both instantly recognizable to prying eyes - the arrival of the Kraken sent both to the gun deck. Out of sight. “Talk to me,” Theon yelled. “How are the repairs coming?!”
“The mainmast is secure, my Lord,” came the reply. “We should be able to get fifteen knots!”

“That’s not fast enough,” the fleet admiral muttered.

Jon looked to his right at the below-deck gunport, cannon withdrawn inside as to hide it. “Our gun batteries, Theon. With an unexpected salvo…”

“Wouldn’t work.” Theon shook his head, frustration on his face. “That behemoth would take at least ten salvos. We’re too depleted in ammunition to even get two out.” He peered back through his spyglass. “What we need is Rhaegal, who we do not have. Are you sure you cannot summon him?” Though he didn’t see much of Jon since that first day at Dragonstone, he had noticed that Daenerys had a special connection with her dragons. Jon had to have had the same.

Leaning his head on the bulkhead timbers, Jon closed his eyes and tried to will Rhaegal to him - as he had done countless times before. But now there was… something. A mental block, almost on the level of white noise. Everytime he tried to call to Rhaegal, the noise fought back. He pulled back with a wince. “I try, but there’s something blocking it. I… can’t understand…”

The former Stark ward sighed. “Well, in about a few minutes they’ll know we aren’t of their fleet, so it was nice knowing you, Jon.”

A head popped from atop. “My Lord, the sails are stitched up and ready to unfurl at your order.”

“Good, I want to be able to move at the drop of a hat - and have our archers prepare to skewer everyone on that launch!”

“Aye, my Lord!” The sailor disappeared.

“Theon.” Jon squinted through the spyglass, trying to count an estimate of the number of marines on board the Kraken. “You know your uncle better than I. Refresh my memory, what would happen if they board and discover us.”

There was a slight interlude. “Well…” Theon wiped off a sheen of sweat on his brow. “After he beheads my men as deserters and traitors… He likely has Yara in there as his personal trophy, or sex slave, or both.” While nothing much fazed him after what felt like a lifetime with Ramsay Bolton, that did arise a sense of discomfiture. “My guess is, he’ll chain you up for delivery to Joffrey. Me, he’ll probably rape Yara in front of me, then rape me in front of her, and afterwards feed me to the sea while using my skull as a drinking cup.”

“Quite the familial bond there,” Jon remarked sarcastically. “And then?”

“After all of that - or right after we manage to get away and he gives chase - my uncle will send out a series of ravens. One to King’s Landing to deliver the news. The rest will go to any Ironborn ship in the area, telling them he’s found us and demands that they join him.”

Seeing the launch heading their way - it would take a while to arrive by oar-power - Jon set down their spyglass. “So we’ll have an entire fleet swarming our way, likely faster ships among them.”

“If Euron doesn’t catch us first, then yes.”

Standing, Jon walked over to one of the cannon. General Theodosius’ design was quite simple. Rounded bronze emblazoned with the Targaryen three-headed dragon, the tube did not have a menacing aura. Looks were deceiving. Gears began turning within Jon’s head as he ran his hand along the metal. “How accurate are these cannon?” Theon looked back at him in puzzlement. “Can they hit one specific target?”
Thinking back to the battle… and exercises… the Admiral shrugged. “Not usually, though my men could possibly do so on flat water and without much movement… why?”

“What if we take out their rookery?” Jon pointed out at the enemy ship. “Fire an aimed volley to destroy their one means to communicate with the outside world?” Catching Theon at a loss for words, he continued. “Fire immediately and then unfurl the sails landward. Euron will undoubtedly give chase from such a slight…”

He finally understood. “And you call for Rhaegal once we get closer to land.”

Jon grinned. “And I call Rhaegal.”

The skiff drew closer, almost within shouting range. After ordering the gun crews to their stations, Theon moved to arrange the deckhands into their proper positions.

“Look at the enemy. You see that shack right aft of the bow,” Jon briefed the gun crews. “That’s the rookery. At my order, blast it to all Seven Hells.”

“You can count on us, your Majesty,” replied the gunnery commander, half his teeth missing and face covered in scars. He had clearly seen his share of battles. “We’ll smash it to kindling.”

Theon’s head popped in from above. “Jon, they’re here.” Lips forming a determined line, he grabbed the crossbow off its wall mount and pulled himself up through the hatch into the daylight.

Finally, the skiff’s rowers brought them to the side of the unknown frigate. “Somebody toss us lines!”

Suddenly, Jon, Theon, and several other marines emerged, crossbows in hand and pointed at the occupants. “Hands high!” yelled Jon. “Keep them up!” Blinking, beginning to sweat, the skiff commander raised his hands, the others doing the same.

Emerging from his cabin, Euron grabbed his captain by the scruff of his collar on catching him taking a swig of wine. “Instead of taking a trip to the fucking bottle,” he hissed into the poor man’s ear, “maybe you can tell me which cunt of a ship that is?”

“Fuck you, I’m doing it.” Snatching the spyglass from him, the King of the Iron Islands gazed on the scene that was unfolding. “Wait, what the shit?” Two men were leveling crossbows at the crew of the skiff. “Something the fuck is wrong.”

Getting another spyglass, the Captain gulped. “Ummm, sire. Isn’t that your nephew?”


“Get the fuck out of here!” Jon yelled, gesturing with his crossbow. This was getting out of hand. Men iron-faced like the hardy rocks they were born on, finally one grabbed at his oar and began paddling - the rest soon joined him.

One by one the gun ports on the Sea Bitch were flipped open. “Sire!” yelled the gunnery officer from belowdecks. “We’re ready on your order!”
‘Gods, make us fast and accurate.’ Already the first signs of frantic life were forming on the Kraken. “FIRE!”

As close to simultaneously as could be, four gun crews fired upon the massive flagship of the Royal Ironborn Fleet. Shooting across the distance from the explosive force of the black powder, the spherical projectiles slammed through the hardened Pike oak hull and into the rookery. Mere cast-lead balls without explosives or incendiaries, the four nevertheless tore through the small shed housing the entire ship’s flock of ravens. Some perished into puffs of blood and feathers - others found their cages smashed into kindling and escaped into the sky with squawks and shrieks.

Almost immediately, the hue and cry was raised on the Kraken, signallers blaring with trumpets while the boatswain began ringing the general quarters bell. Cacophony heard from across the waters aboard the Sea Bitch, Theon raced into action. “Unfurl sails! Make bearing, ten degrees south-southeast!”

“Ten degrees, south-southeast, aye sir!”

Jon peered one last time through the spyglass as the whipping of wind slamming into the unfurled great sails filled his ears. “Good job, boys. Rookery’s history.” Grinning, he raised his fist in the air. “What is dead may never die!”

The already exultant mood of the crew soared to new heights at their Emperor cheering the Ironborn creed. “WHAT IS DEAD MAY NEVER DIE!”

Aboard the Kraken there was chaos. The sound of cannonade and crashing aboard ship sent sailors scrambling about like headless chickens, unsure of what in Seven Hells was going on. “What the fuck was that?!” a sailor yelled at his commander.

“They fired on us!”

“Who?!”

“The fucking frigate! They fucked up the rookery! Get those fucking sails up, fucking cunt!”

Ready to kill something, Euron took his sword and brought it downward on the captain. Chopping blow after blow after blow, blood and brain spilling everywhere, he continued chopping away until he was drenched in body matter and voice hoarse from yelling. Wide eyes surveilled his officers. “You!” He pointed the bloody sword at someone.

The man gulped. “Yes, sire?”

“You’re the new Captain. Your first order is to chase down my cunt nephew and board his ship - need I remind you of the price of failure!” Without even waiting, he stormed off to his cabin, shoving off anyone who got in his way. Curses muttered under his breath, Euron ripped away the trapdoor at the foot of his bed and hauled out the contents with one pull of the arm. “Guess who’s here, princess,” he grinned, looking Yara right in the eye. “It’s your eunuch of a brother. Time to add his arse to yours in my collection.”

“I cannot believe it…” Rubbing her eyes for what had to be the third time, Meera Reed stared at the glowing aura surrounding the giant Weirwood tree. It had to be over four times the size of any other that she had ever seen, leaves as crimson as blood and roots digging deep into the ice, snow, and rock beneath it. “How could it even survive this far north…” With the coldest winter in millennia hitting Westeros, even the hardest trees and life forms struggled to eek out an existence here.
Edderon leaning as far down as he could to help out his uncle, Bran slowly slid to the snowy ground. Looking up at Meera as she leapt down, he gave her a wry smirk. “After all that has happened, you still don’t trust me?”

Blushing a bit, Meera shrugged. “I’m not the perfect person, I suppose.”

“Perhaps not. However, you’re cute, so I keep you around…”

He received a punch to the shoulder in response, plus the glare of a Northern woman scorned - Meera couldn’t feel too bad for him though. A smile tinged her lips, considering Bran was normally so… emotionless. Even snark was welcome to banish the lifeless pallor away. “So what now?”

Sensing they weren’t alone, Bran closed his eyes. Allowing the mystical energy to enter him, slowly he rose to his feet - it still amazed him that he could. He reached out to rub Edderon’s scales. The dragon growled softly, pushing back against his hand, scales wonderfully warm against the icy winds. “Head back to Castle Black, Edderon. Your father will be home soon.” With a hoot for understanding, the dragon beat his wings and ascended into the grey sky. Soon, he disappeared in the clouds.

“Brandon Stark?” Certainty in his aura, knowing what was to come, Bran turned upon the newcomers - or, rather, were him and Meera the newcomers - without the same astonishment and shock that his companion had. There were five figures, the one at the head smiling upon him. “I am Leaf. Welcome to the Godstree, the place you have sought.”

“You’re… you’re a child of the forest…” Meera stammered. Of all the strange people and places she had encountered, this likely topped the cake. Gazing upon the tiny beings in wonder - height only coming up to that of a boy eight years past his nameday - they were dark in complexion, teeth pointed and with vines and leaves sprouting around their skin. “I thought there were none of you left.”

Leaf lowered her head, sadness covering her face. “We are the last left, and such a fate is…” Lips closing, she thought better of it. “You shall know more of us in time.” Smiling pleasantly at the two human visitors - the first in over a thousand years - Leaf gestured towards the entrance to the cave. “You must be tired from your journey. Meera, why don’t you rest and enjoy hot broth. Brandon…” She bowed her head to the ground. “The old one wishes to speak to you at the center of the cave.”

Sharing one last look with Meera, Bran leaned over and pecked her on the lips. With a smile, she urged him forward, into the maw of the cave.

Each step sending tendrils coursing through his body, and feeling as if he was wading through a pit of mud, Bran delved deeper into the dank and freezing cave. His breath turned to an icy mist with every exhale. How a massive weirwood could grow and thrive with life in such inhospitability was beyond rational thought, yet he could feel it in his bones. The pure mystical energy that swirled around the roots of the tree and the walls of the cavern seeped into him, doubling… tripling his stamina and strength.

Pushing aside a set of hanging vines, Bran came upon a hollowed out chamber, anchored by the base of the great tree. Scraggly roots erupted out of and plunged into the rock beneath his feet. And at the center of the trunk was a face - a very familiar face.

“Brandon Stark,” spoke the old man. The Three Eyed Raven. “We meet at last.”

“Yes, we do.” Taking a seat in the bosom of the greatest of Weirwoods, Bran allowed the spiritual energy to fade within him - legs giving way. There was no rush of fatigue, however. With all that was present, there was no need to husband it anymore.
“Any change?” Ollie asked the older man, cheeks stained with dried tears shed over the space of a day.

Sighing, Barristan cast a wary look. “No, no change.” Both stared at Rhaegal, the green dragon laying upon the ground in near catatonia. Occasionally he’d hoot into the air - tone grim and mournful by any objective measure. It was clear that the dragon was lamenting the loss of a beloved one, as despondent as any grieving widow having lost a beloved husband. ‘Oh, when her Grace finds out…’ Barristan would have to be the one to tell her, but was not looking forward to it in the slightest. ‘I don’t think she’d ever be the same…’

Fighting back tears of his own, something then caught Ollie’s eye. “Look!” he exclaimed, tugging Barristan’s hand. In the most movement the dragon had given since landing upon the desolate cliff somewhere on the southern Essosi coastline, Rhaegal’s head was up. He cocked his head intently, as if listening for something.

A deep bellow filled the air, resonating outward and almost knocking Barristan back. It took little guess as to deduce the cause. “Hurry!” Literally dragging Ollie to the beast, they hurriedly scrambled up as Rhaegal unfurled his wings. “Hold on tight!” The dragon pitched off the cliff, roaring and flapping like his life depended on it.

Ollie blinked, hopeful. “You don’t think…”

Barristan smiled widely. “Aye, I do…”

“FIRE!” With a resonating thwack, the trebuchet flung a load of hard stone drenched in flaming pitch and tar. Euron’s eyes glistened from the flames, a massive grin plastered on his face. Hours on the hunt, playing catch up with the Stark Bastard and his cockless nephew’s ship. Rookery turned into a charnel house of blood and splintered wood, there were no reinforcements but he didn’t care. The Kraken would wipe the tiny frigate off the face of the earth. Glancing at his tied up niece, held at knifepoint, he blew her a kiss. “FIRE!”

Slamming into the surface of the ocean - not twenty feet off the port side - the large catapult projectile fountained water in a massive geyser. Those on the Sea Bitch, including Emperor Jon, were showered with the white spray. It was oddly a relief, cooling from the smoldering heat of the high sun. Peeking over the edge, Jon frowned. The Kraken was far closer than the last time he looked. Even with their head start, the Sea Bitch was still far too slow. Over two hours found Euron closing in.

‘Rhaegal, boy. Where are you?’ he beseeched, unsure of whether his child heard him.

“Jon!” He was soon looking at a grim-faced Theon, sporting full armor. “Be ready for battle. I’m going to double back and ram Euron.”

“Is that wise?” Jon was no naval strategist… at least not yet. “We’re trying to stall for time.”

The smile on the Admiral’s face did not reach his eyes. “At this point, I believe time is something that won’t matter any longer. At least we’ll be making my uncle dance to our jig,” Jon nodded, not knowing what else could work. “HARD STARBOARD! PREPARE FULL BROADSIDE!”

Wheel turned as far as it could go, scrambling deckhands pulling the sails into proper place to take advantage of an intense gust of wind, the Sea Bitch made such a hard turn that it nearly capsized.
Stabilizing, those on the Kraken watched with puzzlement - turned to horror and rage as all guns on the fifth rate fired a devastating broadside. Well aimed shot, though still inaccurate, slammed into the side mast of the great battleship. Wood and sail collapsed into the ocean, slowing the ship and causing it to turn ponderously starboard. The port side was exposed, to which the Sea Bitch took advantage.

Euron was no fool. “Their gonna fucking ram us!” He drew his short sword, teeth bared in a grin as the Sea Bitch drew closer and closer to the slowing Kraken. “Time for a family reunion, boys!” A ragged cheer rang out. Then the ship shuddered, ram on the bow of the frigate piercing the hull. Down dropped the corvus gangplank, downward spikes embedding in the wooden deck.

Out poured the Imperial Ironborn Marines, shouting at the top of their lungs. Arrows and crossbow bolts zinged from behind them, covering their advance as they slammed into the Royal Ironborn forces. Steel flashed in the sun, sinking into flesh and spurring blood everywhere. Euron made sure to be at the head of the fighting, snarling and hacking away at his traitorous comrades. “EURON GREYJOY” Out came Jon, Longclaw in his hand. With a single minded determination he charged at the Drowned King, beheading two men that tried to stop him. The man who nearly killed his wife and took his children - it was time for the piper to be paid.

Steel scraping against steel, Euron bared his teeth, tongue wagging manically. “You fight strongly, bastard, but you learned in a castle.” He pushed forward with his whole body, Jon leaping back as Euron’s knee missed his groin. Just. The bear of a man towered over the Emperor. “I have learned among the dregs of the cities and the scum of the earth!” Snarling, he brought the bloody blade down upon Jon - Longclaw jerked upward, parrying the blow. “You can’t begin to fight!”

Eyes narrowing, Jon suddenly spat into Euron’s eyes. The Drowned King momentarily stunned by the sticky swill, his grip on his sword loosened and Jon slammed a fist into the exposed abdomen of his enemy. “How’s that for castles, Greyjoy!” It was now Jon’s turn to advance upon his foe.

All semblance of order and cohesion had fallen apart. Arrows and bolts killing indiscriminately, the top deck of the kraken had turned into a veritable slaughterhouse as axes, swords, and clubs grew slick with blood and brain matter. Attacks became that of personal grudges, similarities in uniforms making horrifying friendly fire accidents common. Burying his sword in a known comrade of his father that had sworn allegiance to Euron at the coronation ceremony, Theon swiveled around and found his sister. “Yara!”

Taking advantage of the chaos, Yara had sprang to her feet with an axe from a decapitated marine. Using the blade to cut her restraints away, she spotted Theon and raced for him, hacking away.

It was then that a piercing roar resonated over the stretch of ocean. The fighting lulled, noise louder than the clash of steel and cries of the fallen. Suddenly, the archers atop the stern castle of the battleship disappeared in a tongue of flame. Screams disappeared as the winged-green shape of Rhaegal passed over the ship. He bellowed as he banked above, Barristan and Ollie mounted on his back.

Eyes boring on the winged specter with undisguised horror, Euron felt something he had never felt in his entire life. His mortality. It whirred through his system in a split second, the realization that decades of spanning the globe one step ahead of death - only returning to kill his brother and seize the Drowned Throne - was about to end in a hail of dragonfire. The realization only stoked the fire of rage deep within him to white hot intensity. Bellowing a deep roar, he charged at Jon, sword bearing down with the power of Valyrian steel.

Enough to dispatch the ordinary fighter, Jon was no common swordsman. Arguably one of the most skilled in the known world - a reputation emerging along the course of the wars and instabilities since
Robert Baratheon’s death - all the fury of the Drowned King couldn’t overpower him. The strength of dragons and wolves long dead seemed to flow into his swordhand. Dragonfire searing the air around them into unbearable heat, the Unburnt halted Euron’s frenzied charge and began to push him back…

Until Euron rocketed forward and head-butted Jon right in between the eyebrows. Force knocking him off balance, Jon slipped on a crimson-soaked spot of deck and fell to the ground. Rhaegal, sensing his rider’s pain, hooted in anguish and made for a landing at the rear castle - only it would be too late to save Jon.

Pain burning in his skull, Jon tasted blood. He tried to raise Longclaw, but nearly blacked out from the fire wedged between his muscles and bones. Eyes glancing up, he saw the form of Euron - also drenched in blood - limping around him. “If I am to burn to death under the fury of dragonfire, I shall at least end the life of the wretched Bastard of Winterfell.” The Drowned King roared the fury of the great ocean storms, sword high.

Jon strained with the blade, putting forth a parry he hoped would work.

Only to throw open his lids as Euron howled in pain and rage. Behind him, Theon withdrew, dagger buried into his uncle’s shoulder blades. Teeth clenched in pure fury, Euron wheeled around with the agility of someone far smaller and ran his short sword through Theon’s stomach. Hands darting to the wound, Theon seemed stunned, it all feeling as a punch to the gut as he collapsed to the ground.

The delay was enough. Summoning his strength back, Valyrian steel glinted in the smoke-dampened sunlight as it swung true. The blade sliced through the flesh and bone of Euron’s right shin, severing it completely. Euron collapsed himself as blood spurted from his now useless stump. Writhing on the ground, clutching at his wound in panic, he found the shadow of Jon Snow staring down at him - a complete reversal. “Go ahead!” he hissed. “Finish it!”

Face impassive, not granting the scum before him any trace of emotion, Jon abruptly swung Longclaw in a left chop - the head of Euron Greyjoy toppled to the bloodsoaked timbers of the great battleship, heralded from an ear-splitting bellow from Rhaegal.

The Drowned King was no more. Fighting began to die down, slowly at first but tapering off as the shouts broadcasted the news. It was all futile. Yara had won the war of succession, no grudges held between the smallfolk sailors and marines that made up the core of the Ironborn navy.

Surreal daze finally passing, Jon’s mind clicked. “Theon!” Kneeling by the prone Admiral, flat on his back and blood pouring from his gut, Jon pressed his hand to the wound. “Find the ship surgeon!” He put pressure on it, Sam having told him this was the only way to bind a wound without bandages. “You’re going to be fine, Theon.”

“Jon… Jon…” His voice was weak, the life seeping from it. “We both know I’m done.” The Emperor opened his mouth to speak, but didn’t. Theon was right, there was no surviving a through and through gut wound. “Where is… Yara?”

Another knelt beside Theon, opposite to Jon. “I’m here, brother.” She took his hand in hers, providing what little comfort she could.

Theon’s fading eyes bored in on her. “Do not… let Euron’s actions fracture our people. Promise you will unite them again. Unite them under the dragon and wolf.”

“I promise, brother.” Normally proud and firm, even the indefatigable Yara Greyjoy found tears pricking her lids.
Trembling, barely able to hold open his lids to keep the coming spectre of death away, Theon weakly turned to Jon. “Jon… win. Win… for all of us.”

Jon clasped his hand. “I will, Theon. We will.”

Serenity covering his face, Theon stared up at the cloudless sky. “Let us sleep on… the gentle… sea breeze.” Fluttering, the eyes of Theon Greyjoy closed for the last time, watched over by his sister in blood, brother in life, and soldiers of war. Squeezing his hand tighter, feeling the pain of so many souls lost, Jon found the comforting hand of Barristan Selmy squeeze his shoulder - just as he had comforted his father as the wails of Queen Rhaella echoed through the Red Keep long ago.

Sighing, Jon stood and picked up the fallen Admiral’s - his brother’s - sword from the deck and placed it upon his breast. The honor of a true northern warrior. “Rest easy, Theon of House Greyjoy. Rest easy in the bosom of death, for your honor has been restored, and your watch truly ended.” For the first time aboard the Kraken and Sea Bitch, but for the whistling of the gentle sea breeze, there was not a single sound.
Mournful tunes playing from the bagpipers, joined by the rhythmic flapping of Kraken banners in the wind, Jon looked at the evening sky. The purples and reds of sunset, kept lighted by the massive red orb disappearing underneath the western horizon. Such beauty, marred by such sorrow. Those he had valued even somewhat in his life - Jeor Mormont, Rhaegar, Ned Stark - none had gotten even a proper funeral. Ygritte… only he had been there to witness her send off into the great eternity. At least now he could see to it that Theon received his due.

Face hardened, fighting back her emotions, Yara gently placed the strip of seaweed onto Theon’s pale, lifeless face. While tradition dictated the pallbearers wade into the shallows with the corpse, burial at sea prevented that. Crew gathered on the deck of the Sea Bitch in solemn formation, they would make due. “Lord,” Yara began. “Please take your faithful servant, Theon, back beneath the waves.”

Her voice faltered, despite her will to stay strong. Jon understood, for she was now the last of House Greyjoy and therefore undisputed ruler of the Iron Islands - as a girl, there could be no signs of weakness. And still… Theon was her brother. Despite not being close, as Sansa was to him, Jon knew Yara still loved her brother. She wouldn’t have tried to rescue him if not.

The ceremony continued. “Feed the creatures of your kingdom with his flesh.” Pallbearers - the officers of the Sea Bitch and Kraken - inched the casket towards the edge of the ship. “Drag his bones into the depths to rest beside that of his ancestors.” A single tear escaped her eye. “To rest beside the other heroes of the Iron Islands.”

“What is dead, may never die!” Roared the sailors and marines.

To a mournful blast from the bagpipes, sad yet with a hopeful beauty in stark contrast to the normally scraggly character of the Ironborn, the pallbearers pitched the casket overboard. A young girl - the same one Jon had encountered in the morning before the battle two days ago - stood at center deck beside Yara. Out of her open mouth streamed a song of pure serenity. It was an old tongue, one that Jon was not familiar with. Such did not distract from the wondrous magic of it. Of honoring the dearly departed Theon Greyjoy. A man that had fallen so far… only to climb back up to the halls of honor and duty.

Wordlessly, as the song slowed into eventual silence, Jon stepped forward till he reached the railing of the ship. Bobbing upon the turquoise sea, the seaweed covered corpse slowly sank with the open casket beneath the waves. Soon there was nothing left of the young man he had grown up with but a trail of bubbles. Surreal.

“Though he was no king,” Jon heard Yara say beside him - truthfully, he hadn’t heard her come up. ‘Euron sneaks one past you and now your senses are dulling? Shape up, Jon.’ Perhaps he had grown too smug about his skills. “My brother sure left his mark upon the world. As befitting a true Greyjoy.”

Jon leaned his hands against the railing, inhaling the fresh sea air. “He saved my life.”

A snort came from Yara. “Oh please. My uncle may be… have been a cunning bastard and built like an ox, but he was no sword prodigy. You could’ve taken him on. Theon just made it… certain.”

“Perhaps…” No one would ever know if the blow to the head had weakened his counter enough for Euron to dispatch him. Jon liked to think it didn’t, but also to be humble before the face of death.
“I should hope so.” The Queen of the Iron Islands cuffed him on the back. “No fighter should ever have ‘I would have been fucking decapitated if it weren’t for Theon Greyjoy’ as an epitaph.” Despite - or more likely because of - the rather grim ceremony just concluded, Yara burst into a cackle.

Allowing mirth to tumble from her lips to escape the fact her brother had died. If only for a little while.

Chuckling a bit himself, Jon looked back at his own childhood. “He always was the most arrogant of him, Robb, and I. Thought he fought and fucked the best - turns out Arya beat him at archery over half the time.”

“Your little sister? The one with the red hair and delectable tits?” Yara found that even more amusing.

Attempting a glare that lasted about a second, Jon let the slight go. “No. Sansa wouldn’t be caught dead with a bow and arrow. Arya is younger than her.”

“A fucking kid. That’s even more hilarious.” She laughed till her stomach hurt, willing to stop.

Grinning at the humor of it all, Jon suddenly gre serious. “Lady Greyjoy.” At his tone, she matched his look of business. “How soon can you organize all the Ironborn ships in the area?”

She shrugged. “Most of ours are in White Harbor, while Euron’s are scattered all over the fucking sea. The rookery on the Sea Bitch isn’t large, but we could probably spread the word of his death in the coming weeks. Why?” If Jon wanted to destroy the Lannister or Free Cities’ fleets, it would be tough even for Ironborn to attack such fortified harbors.

“I need you to head to Meereen and oversee the transportation of the army there to Volantis. There you are to wait for my orders.”

“Landin’ on Westeros?” Her grin returned.

Looking at the cliffs of the Essosi mainland, Jon could see a flap of green wings at his silent command. “Aye.”

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It was familiar, yet also different. In more ways than one, noted Bran Stark. The Three Eyed Raven - Brynden Rivers, as he was called as a human - stood beside him. Whereas before the connection was weak, shrouded in mystery, now he was firmly here. The magic of the Godstree was powerful indeed.

And yet, the area around him was familiar as well. Bran couldn’t put his finger on it, however. “Where are we?” he asked.

“You are perfectly capable of answering your own question, young Stark,” replied the Three Eyed Raven. He may have been firmly in his visions, but the old man hadn’t ceased with the riddles.

Squinting, peering at the rolling hills and shape of the forest, his eyes widened as realization dawned. “Winterfell...” Bran looked at his companion. “We are in Winterfell.”

A slight nod. “Correct, yet incorrect.” He began to walk forward, Bran following. “This is the ground where what you know as Winterfell Castle will rest, but such is far in the future from this
point of view.” Instead of the looming walls and rounded battlements that Bran once had called home, there was nothing but a small collection of huts and tents, dwarfed by the green fields and lush forest all around them.

The ‘village’ was rather spaced out, each hut sporting a small garden and livestock pen. Homespun-dressed smallfolk - any of noble birth could identify a peasant servant, it was a special look that they had - were spilling out of the huts towards the far end, passing by Bran and the Raven as if they weren’t there. Which they technically weren’t.

A young couple caught his eye, man with curly blonde hair leading a silver-blond woman in the same direction as the rest of the crowd. In the woman’s arms was a wriggling baby. He was crying his eyes out. “Calm him down, Daenerys,” the man said. “The lad can’t be wailing at the ceremony.”

Eyebrow raised at the name, Bran turned to the Raven. “Daenerys?” He looked at the harried young wife. She did have a distinctly Valyrian look about her. The Raven only crossed his arms, watching the scene wryly.

“If you weren’t always so tardy, you wouldn’t have had to rush us to your sister’s wedding, Marden,” ‘Daenerys’ stated. Glancing down at the baby, she cooed. “Relax little Brandon. Calm down, my little lad.” Eventually, she coaxed him to a serene sleep. Bran was only further confused.

All the inhabitants of the hamlet on which Winterfell would eventually stand were gathered by a weirwood tree. The same weirwood tree that Bran so fondly remembered. “A wedding?” Not present at either of Jon’s ceremonies, or that of Sansa’s ill-fated marriage to Ramsay Bolton, he nevertheless knew what a ceremony in the shadow of the Old Gods looked like.

“Hurry! Hurry to the front!” beckoned ‘Daenerys’ to Marden, the young man racing to the front where his sister stood. Clearly a wild Northern beauty, the girl stood in the company of a well-dressed man… with silver hair. Bran had seen him before. Seen him in the visions of the past. “The Lord of Light.” He wouldn’t forget the face of the man, wracked with grief as he thrust his sword into his wife. “They look so happy here.”

“It was before the Long Night, young Stark.” The Raven was solemn. “Before the great sorrow it brought upon this land.”

The bride was not amused at her brother. “Why? Why do you have to be late for today?” The groom only laughed as Marden shrugged and cocked a grin. The bride rolled her eyes.

“If my sister could forgive you for being tardy on your wedding, I’ll take this with good humor,” stated the groom. Bran’s eyes widened. ‘He’s Valyrian too?’ The silver hair should have given it off, but somehow he didn’t make the connection…

Beginning the ceremony, Marden soon put his tardiness on the backburner. “And who comes before the Gods this day?”

“I,” stated the woman, loud and true. “Serena of House Stark, do come before the Gods to be wed.”

“House Stark…” It began to click in Bran’s mind. “If she’s a Stark, and her brother is Marden Stark… the baby is Bran the Builder!” The famous figure, near legend. It was surreal to see him only a babe in his mother’s arms.

In his thoughts, Bran didn’t hear Marden Stark until he was halfway through another rote. “...to
“Wed her in the sight of the Gods?”

“I,” began the groom, love in his eyes for the wild Northern woman. “Soryn of House Targaryen, take her to wed.”

Watching the rest of the ceremony in a surreal fog, the revelations pounded themselves into Bran’s psyche. Unlocking the long dead truth out of a time long passed into legend. Soryn Targaryen, Azor Ahai, Marden Stark, Serena Stark, Bran the Builder, Daenerys Targaryen... all intertwined in the small settlement that would one day be Winterfell - before the Long Night even begun.

“It is time to go,” announced the Raven.

Above them, a bat-like shape soared high in the sky. Bran could just pick up a booming roar as the scene disappeared into a black haze...

Eyes flipping open in the familiar refrain, Bran took a moment to adjust to reality. When coherence returned, he turned to the tree. “My ancestors... my long-lived namesake...” He had absolutely no idea that any Valyrian, let alone House Targaryen, ever ventured into the land of the First Men.

The wrinkled face regarded Bran with amusement, seeming to find his confusion the most interesting thing he had seen with his own eyes in centuries. “Your families are intertwined far more than meets the eye, young Stark. It is only through understanding this shared history that the events of the future can be guarded against.” Before Bran could ask another question, white lids clouded his eyes as he withdrew into the other realm.

“Creates more questions than he answers,” Bran muttered, curling against his bed of furs to catch some shuteye.

Shooting to their feet at the flash of silver hair, the assembled Imperial small council knew it was going to be a tense discussion at the look on the Empress’ face. Frowning, eyes burning with silent fury, Daenerys was not in the mood to deal with excuses or bullshit at the present time. Taking her seat with nary a word, Missandei and Grey Worm behind her, the assembled advisors and generals followed with guarded expressions.

Slowly eying everyone in the room, satisfaction filling her as they squirmed in their seats, Dany began the meeting. “Where is Ser Davos?” Robb was still recovering and Jon and Sansa were away, but the Hand of the Emperor was still part of the small council.

“With the children, your Highness,” replied Margaery Tyrell in a soft voice. “They normally play with Robb or Arya, but he needs his rest and she’s... indisposed. Davos kindly offered to watch them.”

Accepting that as a reasonable excuse, Dany continued. “I have read all the dispatches and reconnaissance reports,” she stated. “So there’s no sense in anyone trying to patronize me with rose colored glasses.”

There was silence. “Your Highness,” Tyrion finally piped. “May I be blunt?”

“I would be most displeased if you weren’t, Lord Hand.”
“Alright then.” Downing a swig of wine from a jeweled cup, Tyrion slammed it down with a resounding clatter. “Truth is, we are in deep shit.”

“It is not as dire as you make it out to be,” stated Varys, calm and collected as always.

A snort left General Theodosius Caryn’s lips. “You are wrong, my bald friend. It is exactly as dire as the Lannister dwarf makes it out to be.” He sent a withering death glare Tyrion’s way. “What he fails to inform us all,” Caryn spat, “Is that it was his own fucking strategy that got us into this fucking mess!”

“Don’t you think I know that, dear Caryn?” came the syrupy sweet reply. “Turns out, my father was most clever in hiding the fact that the gold of the Westerlands is no more.”

“I highly doubt you didn’t know about it, Lord Hand,” accused Edmure Tully. He was less vicious towards Tyrion than Caryn, but not by much. “You are the only one of his children worth Tywin’s bootlace in terms of cunning.”

Tyrion clutched his heart. “While I do appreciate the compliment, the simple fact that my father hates my fucking guts does present a problem to your theory.”

“While this type dick measuring shit is good on the jousting field or by a flock of peacocks, perhaps you cunts should consider solving the problem rather than placing blame?” Arms crossed and feet perched on the table, Tyene Martell cut straight through the maze. “There’s still a fucking army and still a fucking monarch. Two monarchs once the Emperor returns victorious.”

“We must go on the offensive at once with everything we have!” Caryn was adamant, out of his seat and pounding on the table. “Tywin expects us to go after Harrenhal, but if we feint to King’s Landing, we make him think he’s rushing to defend it when in reality it’s his army that’s the target!”

Rolling her eyes, Olenna Tyrell tapped her cane on the floor. “With what forces? Tywin outnumbers us, and we only have one dragon.”

“Incorrect, we have four dragons.”

This caught Dany’s notice. “Excuse me, General Caryn? It seems as if you count the Emperor’s three hatchlings - my children - as fodder to use in battle?” Her tone was low… dangerous. A soft whimpering beside her drew Daenerys’ attention - and providing Caryn a reprieve. Ghost, his sweet look belying a massive bulk, nuzzled at her hand. Dany calmed, gently ruffling his fur before looking back at the small council. “Well?”

Adjusting his collar, suddenly nervous for the first time, Caryn cleared his throat. “Your… three young dragons performed admirably in the rescue of Lord Edmure and the Unsullied. They are larger than Balerion was when he secured the subjugation of Astapor years ago.”

“Both battles had unprepared enemy,” Grey Worm stated, talking for the first time. “Young dragons against prepared enemy creates slaughter.”

“I will not risk them until they are larger and properly trained for combat,” Daenerys added. “My children will not be allowed into combat before they are ready, nor until their father returns from Essos.”

Shifting in his seat, Varys decided to interject. “Your Highness, while I think General Caryn is a bit too eager for decisive action, I must make a point. My little birds tell me that Brandon Stark has returned to Westeros with the dragon Edderon.” The Empress did not reply. “If you do desire some sort of attack, wouldn’t two fully grown dragons give you an advantage over Tywin?”
“That would be sufficient…” mused Margaery, glancing at her soon to be sister.

“Yes, Edderson is here. However, there is a problem.” Looking back at Grey Worm, the officer handed her a dispatch he had been holding for her. Handing it herself to Margaery - the closest person to her - Daenerys waited patiently for it to be passed around to all of them. “I presume you all understand the meaning of this.”

A sigh left Tyrion. “I know you are considering going to the Wall to rescue Brandon Stark… but please don’t, your Highness.”

“He is my brother by marriage. Why shouldn’t I?”

“Risking your life to the Night King? Please don’t do it, sister,” begged Margaery.

“There’s no need to invoke superstition to make our case, Lady Tyrell,” Tyrion countered. “Sending her on a wild goose chase in the North while leaving her army leaderless is a problem enough.”

The Rose of Highgarden glared at the Imp. “It is not superstition, it is fact.”

“To be honest, I find it hard to believe,” stated Tyene Martell. The discussion went downhill from there, mixed into a chaotic flurry of arguments for and against the existence of the Army of the Dead.

It caused Dany’s head to ache. “Enough!” The room fell silent. “Leave me!” Looking too each other, the councillors began to shuffle out, leaving the Empress to an empty room - only her and Ghost. The white direwolf had been scarcer than usual, spending most of his time with either the twins or with Nymeria, who had been sluggish since Arya had left. It worried Dany, one of the things anyway. Hand stroking the fine white fur, she sighed. “Oh, Ghost. When will Jon come back to us. I need him with me.” The direwolf simply whined.

Blizzard swirling upon Riverrun in the dark early nightfall, a sentry huddling by a warm brazier heard the side door he had been guarding swing open. He immediately grabbed at the hilt of his sword. Warm fingers latched onto cold leather, causing him to wince. But the hooded figure sliding in from the bracing cold demanded all his attention.

“Halt,” the sentry demanded, sword raising. “In the name of the Targaryen Empire.” When the intruder pulled back his hood, exposing his face, the sentry found himself gaping. “Your Majesty…” The sword dropped, revealing the Emperor Jon himself.

Grateful for the swirling winds masking Rhaegal’s descent into the Riverlands, Jon motioned for the sentry to huddle by the brazier. “What is your name, son?”

“Edd… Eddy Rivers… your Majesty,” stuttered the soldier. The closest he had came to royalty was when the gorgeous Lady Sansa Stark passed by him when he was on duty in the courtyard months back. But here was the Emperor… at his station!

Jon patted the lowly soldier’s shoulder. A bastard, just as he thought he had been for the majority of his life. “You’re doing a good job, soldier. Just keep your sword closer to you - harder for an enemy to bat away.” Eddy Rivers nodded. “Oh, and keep this to ourselves. I don’t want anyone to know I’m here yet, understood?” He put his finger to his lips.

Nodding once more, the sentry mimed his mouth being shut. And like that, the Emperor slipped into the depths of the castle.
At this late hour, harsh winds chilling the castle to sub-zero in many places, the halls were deserted. Jon was glad for that - tired and exhausted from the long flight, the various formalities of a returning monarch did not appeal to him. All he wanted was to find Daenerys, sweep her into his arms, and fuck her till they passed out from exhaustion. He could almost feel her naked body pressed against him.

Fate, however, had a way of crapping all over best laid plans. “Poppa!” Before he could properly turn, two bundles slammed into his side.

While intent on finding Daenerys, Jon wasn’t cold-hearted. The sight of his children after so long warmed his heart more than even dragonfire. He kneeled and hugged them tightly, kissing the crowns of their heads. “Sweetlings.” Pulling back, he looked them both over. “Gods, you’ve grown like weeds.”

“I’m so happy you’re back.” Arya, tears in her eyes, burrowed her cheek in the plush fur of his cloak. “Missed you, poppa.”

“Well, well. Yer took your sweet time getting back, sire.” Looking up, Jon saw Davos, a small grin on his face. “Her Highness was gettin’ worried.”

The thought of Dany worrying over him pained Jon. “Was dealing with a Kraken problem, Davos.” The old sea dog nodded, understanding.

“Come with us, poppa,” Rhaegar urged. “I practiced my stances.” The young Crown Prince began tugging his father’s arm, pulling him towards the nursery.

Noticing the Emperor’s torn expression, Davos quickly put two and two together. “Young ones, his Majesty is tired. I promise he’ll have plenty of time for you two tomorrow.”

Twin pairs of eyes - one grey, one violet - trained themselves on Jon. He bit back a chuckle, them being so adorable. “I promise.” Smiling tiredly, the twins allowed Ser Davos to guide them back to their rooms. “Thank you,” he whispered to his Lord Hand.

Davos winked. “Don’t mention it, just try not to be too loud.” Watching his monarch turn the corner, Davos chuckled to himself. “Oh to be young again.” Jon was the ruler of a great Empire, but he was still a lad - a lad who deserved more than his duty would allow.

“Ser Davos.” He looked down to see young Arya tugging his hand. “Why is poppa in a hurry?”

“He wants to see your mother, Princess,” came the reply.

“To protect her from her nightmares?”

“Nightmares?”

Little Arya looked at him with wide, innocent eyes “When they are together, momma screams all night.” She was confused when Davos only laughed in response.

“You are too tense, your Grace,” Missandei stated, slipping the nightgown over Daenerys’ head. It soon fell to cover her nude form. Not much protection from the cold, but that was what the thick furs and goose down blankets were for.

Rolling her eyes, Daenerys snorted. “What gave you that idea?” she bit, dripping with sarcasm.
Finding the quiet look but firm set of her handmaiden’s jaw, the Targaryen Empress sighed. “Forgive me, Missandei. Perhaps the tension is getting to me.”

The translator allowed the slight to vanish. She knew what Dany was going through, having gone through it herself when Grey Worm was trapped at Casterly Rock. “His Majesty will return,” she offered comfortingly.

“But he hasn’t yet.” From his last raven, he should have returned by now. It was beginning to eat away at Daenerys just as further crises were piling up.

“He will.” Missandei buried her fears, needing to be strong for her Empress and friend. “I know he will.” Squeezing Daenerys’ hand for support, she quietly made her exit. Seeing the Empress’ condition made her appreciate having Grey Worm in her bed more and more.

Alone in her chambers - without even the children or Ghost and Nymeria for company - Daenerys headed to bed. Feet gliding on the tiled floor, she silently pulled back the thick covers and eased herself into the warm cocoon. However, sleep did not come. She tossed and turned, mind restless and deep in thought. Dany had a duty to her realm, as Tyrion had said, but her family and adopted House battled that in conflict. If what Jon and Robb and Margaery had said was true, then Bran was in grave danger… Edderon was in grave danger. Losing both a greenseer and a dragon would be disastrous…

But if both Jon and her were gone from direct command and Tywin decided to move from his base at Harrenhal… it could result in disaster. Daenerys clutched at her pillow, shutting her eyes tight and trying to pretend it was Jon - such was too far a leap. She ached for her dragonwolf, felt the perpetual fire within her dim to near extinction without him close to her. It filled her with dread, not having him here. Not knowing why he hadn’t returned.

‘What if something happened to him?’ Honestly, she didn’t know if she could bear the thought. Their family needed him. She needed him.


Groaning into her pillow, Daenerys swung her legs off the bed and rose, smoothing out her nightgown. “Seven hells, Tyrion…” she muttered. The Empress realized that he was distraught over her attention on Bran’s disappearance, but couldn’t any further attempts to sway her judgement be saved for the morning? Exasperation and annoyance written on her face, Dany threw open to door… only for her irritation to melt into shock.

There was her husband, hand poised to knock again. ‘Jon?’ She was too stunned to even say his name aloud.

Jon was struck speechless as well, gazing upon his wife after so many months. After braving riots, battles, and the deep blue sea. She looked even more beautiful than he remembered. Having wondered whether to remove his black coat, boots, and battle cuirass, seeing her again reminded him that wasting no time was the right call.

The seconds ticked by, both staring at the other - wondering if it was only a dream. Suddenly, something snapped. It wasn’t clear who made the first move, but in an instant the two monarchs found their lips colliding in a passionate kiss.

Pushing his wife away from the entrance, Jon blindly kicked at the door until it shut with a loud crack. He refused to break the kiss, tongue dueling with hers in a battle he ended up winning. One a hand tangled into silky silver locks while the other trailed down her body. Fingertips danced on soft
skin, touches and gropes coaxing delicious moans out of the sensual woman before him.

Daenerys sighed into Jon’s kiss, letting him push her towards the bed. She gripped the edges of his cloak, shoving the black fur off his shoulders. Fingers - her skin tingling pleasurably from his touches - reached behind to work at the straps of his cuirass while he plundered her mouth. While she let him. As Dany twisted off the last strap, she gasped as Jon shoved her onto the bed, grey eyes dark and stormy with lust.

The two of them stared at each other, Jon eying her as a predator would prey while Dany bit her lip, shifting uncomfortably as wetness pooled between her legs. When the Emperor began to doff his clothes, she saw the new scars on his chest - became aware of the bruises dotting his face and shoulders. It concerned Daenerys greatly, but her lust at his now naked form won out. ‘He is alive,’ she kept whispering to herself. Pulling off her nightgown till she was bare to his gaze and touch, Dany would reassure her fear and desire by enjoying him. All of him.

Jon crawled atop her, fire in his belly as their lips reconnected. Despite the passion, it was slow and sweet. “I love you,” he breathed, moving his lips to her neck. The first words he had spoken to her in a long while.

Trembling, Dany closed her eyes as his lips and tongue worked against her hot skin. “I love you too…” She gasped again, Jon latching onto a nipple. Her fingers gripped his curls, pulling him harder against her breasts. “Don’t make me wait, Jon.”

Grinning against her nipple, Jon knew he was going to oblige her. After so long he couldn’t stop himself from ravishing her completely. As such, he pulled himself back up her body with several red love bites left dotting her neck and chest. Jon gazed into the dark amethyst of her eyes with rapture. Leaning down to kiss them gently, he felt her hand wrap frantically around his length and line it up with her slit. Just one jerk of his hips…

Muffled by his mouth, Dany screamed in pleasure as he finally pushed inside her. Gods, she missed this. Her fingers dug into his back, no care in the world if she added to her husband’s collection of scars - not that he’d mind this variety. She rippled around him, his hardness spearing forward with the same power that wielded Longclaw on the field of battle. Stars exploded behind her eyes. Jon was taking her fast and deep, tongue subjugating her mouth, and Daenerys loved it.

Unable to speak from the vice grip she had on his length, Jon growled into her mouth as he continued. Every tightening of her velvet walls, every swipe of her tongue against his, every pained prick of her nails on his back made him continue even harder. Exerting the stress and rage from the campaign in Essos on his wife. Part of him worried that he was hurting her - then the writhing and soft pants from their melded lips like a wanton whore reminded him that she was enjoying every minute.

Soon, they pulled back, gasping for air. Jon collapsed in the crook of Dany’s neck, fucking her even harder. Nails raking his rippling shoulder muscles without any care left, little coherent thought was left to Dany. “Gaahhh… fuuuu…” Charging towards the edge, words died unfinished on her lips.

Jon was close, he could feel an explosion building that dwarfed the largest cannon. “My home,” he groaned against her neck. Wherever she was… he was home. “My home… fuck… my home…” His world detonated from his climax.

Dany was not long following him. Scream bubbling from within her throat as his fluids coated her walls, she bit down hard on his shoulder. His flesh absorbed her ear splitting scream, eyelids fluttering from the complete orgasmic bliss her husband gave her. Frantic pumps from Jon - erratic but utterly brutal - drove her utterly insane. Unable to hold back she tilted her head back and
screamed, likely echoing throughout the great citadel with the truth of the Imperial pair’s marital compatibility.

Over half a minute later, they had collapsed. Jon had flipped them, holding his panting, trembling wife in a crushing embrace. Dany sucked in air through her nose, lazily soothing the shoulder bite with her tongue. “A welcome homecoming… for an Emperor,” he gasped out, chuckling as best he could.

Smiling down at him, Dany felt tears glisten in her eyes. “You deserve it, husband. The returning conqueror.” Kissing him on the lips, she rested her head on his chest - listening to his beating heart. “Mmmmm, I missed this. I missed you.”

Jon gently stroked her back, nuzzling the crown of her head. “I missed all of you.” He smiled at her.

Daenerys could lose herself in his smiles. “I thought something had happened to you.” Dany raised her head, looking at him intently. At his new scars and bruises. “Something did happen, didn’t it?”

Rubbing her sides tenderly, Jon eased her down till she was curled into his side, head on his chest. He pulled the covers up until they were draped over their bodies. He smiled when she purred and snuggled into him. “It’s a long story, but in short I ran into Euron Greyjoy. This...” He gestured to his bruised forehead. “Was his doing.”

Limp from their earlier reunion tryst, Daenerys tensed. And not in the good way. “Please tell me that he met his proper fate.” Her voice was the cross between the Dragon Queen and the… well, dragon.

He pulled her closer to him. “Head from body.”

That seemed to mollify her. “Good.” Anger changed to satisfaction… and satisfaction to playfulness, Dany leaned into his neck and ran her tongue down the salty skin. She reveled in his groan. “You will tell me the rest tomorrow. For now, I think the Emperor deserves more of a welcoming from his loyal dragon.”

Jon groaned once more as he felt Dany slip further underneath the covers. “Ah,” he breathed, feeling a warm, wet tongue lick up his length. “The Emperor does.”

Though exhausted, the Imperial couple wouldn’t get much sleep that night.
Eyes fluttering, Jon yawned with his mind still fogged up with sleep. He stretched automatically, working out the kinks in his back and legs. Tendrils of his amazing dream were still in his mind. Images of a sultry night with Dany, their mouths crashed together and his length deep inside her… Only such wasn’t a dream. A smile crossed his lips as the Emperor realized it had happened all night. He had arrived back in Westeros and into his wife’s arms. The smile widened as he reached out to pull her to him…

Only to meet a warm yet empty patch of bed. Opening his eyes, Jon furrowed his brows in confusion. “Daenerys?” Where was she?

“Good morning, your Majesty.” He suddenly sat up to find Missandei at the foot of the bed with a small smile on her lips. Clearing his throat, Jon pulled up the thick down blanket to fully cover his legs and hips. Unlike his unabashed Khaleesi, Jon kept the northern modesty. The Naathi found it amusing. “Relax, your Majesty. Such isn’t anything I haven’t seen before.” Her close friendship with the Imperial family gave her considerable leeway.

“Quite.” Hearing the winds howl from the outside, he was grateful to the braziers keeping the chambers warm. “Where is my wife?” Jon was so aroused he was pained, and wanted Dany again after so long being alone.

Missandei was adept at reading her Queen. In matters of the heart, there was no denying her moods - it was the same with her Emperor. “She woke early in the morning, your Majesty. You were fast asleep, probably from your long journey. Her Majesty didn’t wish for you to be woken just yet.” A tiny smirk played at her lips. “She is in her bath, in the next room. I shall allow you your privacy, sire.”

Watching the translator swiftly exit the room, Jon chuckled. So his wife was taking a bath? That intrigued him to the point of delight. Without a second’s delay he flung the covers off him and strode towards the next room.

A large castle, Riverrun sported two large suites of rooms. One occupied the Lord, now held by Edmure Tully who graciously allowed his sister Catelyn Stark to share it with him. The other was designed for a visiting monarch. Rhaegar Targaryen resided there after capturing the castle, two weeks prior to the fateful Battle of the Trident. Robert Baratheon called it home for several days on his way to Winterfell, the months prior to the start of the current instability. And now, head leaning back as she enjoyed the superheated, scalding water of her bath, Daenerys Targaryen shared the royal guest quarters with her children and her beloved husband. A contented sigh left her lips, allowing the water to work out all the stress she had been feeling.

The hot pair of lips softly sucking on her neck coaxed out another, happier sigh. “Mmmm…” Dany knew exactly who those lips belonged too. “Awake at last, my Emperor?” The sigh turned to a gasp as he bite her soft skin.

“You should have woken me up,” Jon growled, marking the creamy flesh. “I need you, Daenerys.” His tongue slid up to her ear, sucking on her lobe.

Wordlessly and humming with desire, the Empress pulled forward, inviting her husband to join her in the tub. It may have not been the large one she had known in Pentos or Meereen, but it was big enough to hold She quickly felt his skin sliding against hers, his weight settling behind her. Suddenly, his arms gripped her waist and flipped her around. Dany let out a yelp at his effortless
manhandling of her - and then a moan as he pulled her flush against him, rock hard length grinding against her hip. “Good morning, husband,” she said, leaning down to kiss him.

Jon deepened the kiss, causing her hips to gyrate into him. “Morning, wife,” he husked, nuzzling her neck. “The water feels good, especially with the cold outside.”

Dany felt a wave of joy. “Mmmm, ānogar ānograro.” Blood of my blood. They were meant to be.

“Jorrāelagon hen ſuha ābrar,” he replied. Love of my life. His Valyrian still retained Jon’s northern brogue, but was improving greatly.

Watching him, rapture in her eyes, Dany lunged forward and resumed the kiss. While before was slow and loving, this was frantic and hungry. Water splashed around in the bath as their hands wandered over desired skin. She mewled in his mouth when Jon grabbed her breast in one hand, the other digging into her asscheek. Legs widened automatically at his touches. Even in the scalding water, Daenerys could feel the heat burning between her legs. Breaking their kiss and biting his ear, she reached down and took his length. She smirked when her squeeze caused Jon to groan. Lining them up, Dany impaled herself.

Jon felt her hiss in his ear, tight heat stretching to accommodate him. Bucking up, he went slowly at first. Drawing out their pleasure. Committing the sounds and sensations to memory for if they were to be apart once more - gods forbid.

He was torturing her. The slow, languid strokes were oh so wonderful, but only teased the fire inside her. Dany increased her movements, splashes forming all around their intertwined forms. She kissed across his cheek until their mouths were fused together, swallowing their joint moans as they lost themselves in electric ecstasy.

Flush against each other, water spilling over the lip of the bath onto the stone floor, they rode out their shared bliss - not a care in the world. It wouldn’t last. Reality had a way of butting in, but for now… gods, it felt so good.

The low hum of whispers and hushed conversations resonating through the room - Lords and advisers clustered into groups based on faction and mutual interest - the door swinging open to reveal Missandei and Grey Worm forced them to their seats. Standing respectfully for the arrival of the Empress. And arrive she did, proud and confident as usual. But a smile graced her face. One of joy and completeness. Something that had not been seen for a long time. Any doubt as to why was dissipated as when the Emperor walked in not far behind. More dour and brooding than the Empress, he nevertheless sported a small smile and determined set in his shoulders. Lord Stark, his brother, was up first. “Brother!” The two enveloped each other in a manly hug. “I knew no fuckers in the south could take you down.”

“I’m glad to see you healed, brother,” Jon replied, looking his brother over. Aside from a small scar on his forehead, he seemed recovered from the Battle of the God’s Eye. Regarding his future sister, who had joined Robb to greet him, Jon smiled warmly. “Thank you for taking care of him, sister.”

The young Tyrell hugged him as well. “It was my pleasure, sire.”

After hugging Sam, it was Tyrion’s turn. “Well well. It appears not only cats have multiple lives,
your Majesty.” He chuckled. “You truly are fortune’s favorite.”

Jon was never one to take compliments, but he accepted it. “Perhaps. Motioning for everyone to take their seats, Jon pulled his chair right next to Daenerys - close enough to brush his hand against hers. “I’m sure that you’ve read my dispatches, so allow me to be brief. The Master’s Alliance has been defeated, with Yezzan zo Qaggaz of Astapor surrendering and switching sides. I have reorganized the cities of Slaver’s Bay into the Kingdom of New Valyria with Daenerys as Queen. Among her other titles.”

The Empress beamed. “As my seat is here, not to mention at King’s Landing when we wrest it from Joffrey’s hands, New Valyria will be governed by a Grand Senate of both highborn and lowborn. His Majesty has established such a government in my stead.” Unseen by all except those closest to the couple, she squeezed Jon’s hand. “Peace has returned to the region and the Targaryen army in the region has been moved to Volantis.”

“I have put Ser Podrick Payne in charge of the Army of the South.” Jon was interrupted by Tyrion’s laughter.

All eyes were on the Imp. “Forgive me, sire. It’s just…” He giggled. “Knowing Podrick from his youth, such is hard to imagine him a military mind.”

To some surprise, Jon chuckled as well. “True, as it was hard to imagine myself as the heir to the Targaryen line, or you being one of the most powerful men in the Empire. Dwarves and Bastards.”

“Dwarves and Bastards,” the Imp grinned.

“May I interject, sire?” asked Catelyn Stark. “We were expecting your arrival from Meereen several days before. The blizzard would explain a delay, but not one of such a length.”

Narrowing his eyes, Jon examined the woman for signs of resentment or hate - just knowing that Dany was doing the same. But, he could find none. Only a sense of curiosity and… concern? Not having quite forgiven or forgotten, his guardedness deflated slightly. “We encountered a storm, stalling our progress. And we were then ambushed by a squadron of ships under the command of Euron Greyjoy. In the course of it, I was knocked off Rhaegal and into the sea.” A series of gasps left many of those present. Not having heard about this, Dany gripped his hand tightly, willing herself the knowledge that he was alive. “I was rescued by Theon Greyjoy and his lone ship.”

“He was that far south?” Tyene Martell asked.

“Aye. Euron set upon us, but we defeated his lone ship, freed Yara Greyjoy, and I killed Euron myself. Theon perished.”

The council digested this. “So we rule the high seas,” Theodosius Caryn mused. “But not completely. The shipping lanes between Braavos and King’s Landing are still open, and it does not do shit for us on land. We’re still in the same situation.”

“And what might that be, General?” Jon asked. “Forgive me, but I was too busy winning victories in Essos to pay attention.” Robb and Margaery snickered, while Tyene, Davos, and Dany smirked.

Sighing, the general redid his briefing from the day before - which only led to the same argument. With the expanded council, it roped in more of the advisors into the various camps regarding attack or defend, causing Jon to sigh and lean back in his chair. His head was pounding, good mood from earlier gone.

“Robb,” he interrupted, not standing the bickering for any longer. “Since all our plans involve
dealing with Joffrey, we need to know of the other threat. What news from the North?"

Robb held up a dispatch. “I have a report from Castle Black here. Edd says it’s quiet. The giants have come back to Castle Black from their expedition,” Robb stated, sliding it to his brother. “Found a few others. Many children. Not enough to make a difference, given the lessons from Winterfell. Our spotters found no trace of the Army of the Dead, but Wun Wun claims he saw a massive host of them halfway between Hardhome and Eastwatch by the Sea.”

Jon clenched his fists, parchment crumpling between his fingers. This was just perfect. Being caught in a vice between the Insane One and the Night King. “Sam,” he said, looking at his friend and de facto Grand Maester. “You’ve looked at every scrap of paper between here and the Wall. Is there any information in ancient texts on whether the Night King can break through or climb over the Wall?”

“The reference texts are sparse, Jo… sire.” It was hard for the man to refer to his longtime friend by his honorific. “I would need to access the library at the Citadel to make any firm guess…”

“Impossible,” stated General Caryn. “Too deep within the Reach. Tarly controls it these days, and I highly doubt the second in command to Tywin Lannister would want anything to do with you… young Tarly.”

It was not lost on Sam that his father despised him. He did not need to be reminded of it. “The Wall is a combination of ice, rock, and magic according to legend. Based on what I have found, all the ancient epics refer to something called the ‘Great Fall.’ There isn’t much said about it, but it seems to me that the Long Night cannot start without it.”

“Well in that case, we should concentrate on the Baratheon brute,” drolled Olenna Tyrell, sounding bored with all of this.

Knowing the Night King was the true enemy, Jon nevertheless knew he could not be defeated unless humanity was united. A gamble was in order. He closed his eyes. “We face annihilation from the Land Beyond the Wall. And yet, we face annihilation anyway since Joffrey will refuse a united front.” ‘Let the dice fly high. Father, Mother, let this succeed.’

Daenerys knew where he was going. Once he trailed off into his thoughts, she continued. “The war against Joffrey is our main focus then. General Caryn, how long would it take for us to amass an army that can challenge Tywin?”

“Assuming he doesn't call upon the forces in Dorne or the majority of the Sellsword armies concentrated in Essos, a month. Perhaps two. All we can afford to leave in the North are the forces of the Night’s Watch.”

“They are independent of all Kingdoms and governments,” Tyrion mused. “While that is of dubious legality it would be wise to respect that. And unfortunately they are too small to make any difference.” News of the ‘Great Ranging’ that was wiped out so thoroughly had been sparse in King’s Landing. Jon and Sam claimed it was the White Walkers. Official reports cited the wildlings. Tyrion leaned towards the latter… at least until proof of the living dead could be gleamed.

The Empress chafed at such a delay, but it would give her time with her husband and children. Frankly, all present could use such time before the coming campaign would take everything out of them. “It is settled then. Draft the orders and send them out. Cyphered, in case the enemy captures a dispatch.”

“Should we create an additional army out of the transferred forces?” asked Caryn. “Or should we fill
in the three current ones to bring them back to strength?”

There were good arguments for both sides. An additional army would give more mobility, but weaker ones could be less protected if running into a Lannister force. At that point, Jon snapped out of his reverie. “Reinforce the current armies.” There was no room for discussion in the order. “Dismissed.”

As everyone began to file out, Jon turned to two of them. “Robb. Tormund, please stay.” The ginger wildling looked bored and sat back down, while Robb kissed Margery on the cheek and whispered something to her. Feeling a soft hand on his arm, the Emperor met the concerned eyes of his wife. “Don’t worry, my love. It won’t take long.” He tried to give her a reassuring smile.

Dany didn’t seem to believe him, but she nodded all the same. “I shall be with the children.” She stood on tiptoes to kiss his lips, then walked out.

“Alright, King Crow, what’s this about?” Jon realized how much he missed Tormund’s bluntness - gods, he was a glutton for punishment.

“You’ve both heard about Bran.” It was a statement, not a question.

Robb’s brows furrowed in worry. “Aye. He’s got the Stark stubbornness in him - only now it’s gonna get him killed if someone doesn’t rescue him.”

“Good luck with that.” Tormund laughed grimly. “Only fuckin’ pricks with half a brain would go north of the wall now. I mean, when I lived there it was fuckin’ giant shit, but with those icefucks marchin around…” He trailed off, looking at Jon. “Oh fuck me, you’re not considerin’ it?”

Jon looked them both in the eye. “I can’t let him die. A small team can go in, get him out, and come back with no one else the wiser.”

“That could work,” Robb stated. “Have Wun or Mag stay at Castle Black while we send some others North by boat. Gendry, Ser Barristan perhaps?”

“Tyene Martell.” Jon seemed serious. “She’s good with a blade and saved my children from Euron. Also Grey Worm.” Both were vital to the war effort, but their skills made it likely that all would survive the mission.

“You’re all fools.” Tormund snorted. “I guess I am too. Where do I sign up?”

It was a sunny day, only a smattering of clouds in the sky. Bran felt the warmth upon him - and yet, the area seemed familiar. In front of him was a tall weirwood tree… He looked at it as if regarding a miracle of nature. Before him was the same tree resided in by the Three Eyed Raven. Only the icy wasteland was a beautiful, grassy plain filled with flowers and fauna.

Animals were not the only scampering creatures. Arranged in a semicircle around the base of the tree were a cluster of children of the forest, each holding a glowing gem. A single child stood in the middle of the semicircle, facing the tree.

And tied to the tree, fighting against his restraints and the gag tied around his mouth, was Marden Stark.
He was older than the previous vision, Bran noticed. The coiffed brown hair was thinning, skin marked with the scars of a hard life. But why was he here? Why did the children tie him to the sacred tree? It was confusing to the young man from Winterfell.

Soon, it became apparent. Stepping forward, face hardened with the task before him, the child of the forest removed a shard of dragonglass from his belt, resting the tip against Marden Stark’s chest. Muffled by the gag, Bran could still hear the blood-curdling cry erupting from Marden Stark as the child of the forest drove the dragonglass shard into his heart. And yet there was little blood, only a small pooling around the wound. A sudden chill draped over the landscape. The pained screams died down as the bound Marden stilled - eyes turning a malevolent ice blue...

Eyed flying open, Bran felt a coughing fit overcoming him. His heart was pounding from the vision. “Here, drink this.” He looked up to see Leaf putting a cup of water in his hand. He downed it, calming his throat. “It’s not common for the great one to come across a vision this unpleasant.”

Bran stared at Leaf as if she sprouted three heads and belched wildfire. “You did it…” Anger boiled inside him. “You turned Marden Stark into the Night King!” His ancestor, the first Stark - he was the demon commanding the armies of the dead. It was… rather sobering.

Back turned to the crippled Stark, Leaf refused to face him. She couldn’t. “The first men were wiping us out. Cutting down our forests, turning them into fields for farming, hunting us down when we, hungry, tried to eat their corn and grain. We weren’t a warlike people, and it cost us.” Shame crossed her face, as strong now as it was all those millennia ago. “Our spiritual leader found a way to create a weapon. A protector that would beat back the invaders.”

“And yet you created an uncontrollable monster.”

“It wasn’t my call!” she yelled back. Quickly, the defensiveness withdrew. “But it doesn’t matter. It happened, and we were all culpable.”

Silence descended over the cave for what seemed like an hour. “If you created him under your control and direction, why did he turn on all life?”

The memories of that dark time were still fresh in her mind. “He was… strong willed. Missed his wife and child - believed them to be dead from our actions. They weren’t, but his belief drove out the last bit of his sanity. He broke from our control, and sought his vengeance upon the living world.” She closed her eyes, tears in them. “I can still hear the cries of my brothers and sisters…”

Not able to do anything but watch as the ancient being broke down quietly, Bran felt the cold creep up on him. The Night King was a Stark, the first Stark. Torn away from his Targaryen wife and halfblood son. Driven insane from the ultimate evil, the ultimate power, and the ultimate loss. From the mistakes of those not on this earth anymore - having departed long ago - Bran knew that there would be many more screams before this nightmare would end.

Something different was going on. And different, Arya knew, was not good. In King’s Landing - where the routine hewed to day in and day out resulted in death and suffering - any shift in the routine only meant greater death and suffering. When the guards corralled the slaves to the center of the city following their backbreaking day of work, overlooked by the Red Keep itself, there was no doubt in her mind that something malevolent was in the offering.

She could see it in the faces of her companions. Kinvara was silent, hands clasped together in silent prayer. The Hound, though still sarcastic and flippant, had a slight tremor in his fingers. Arya had
been around him enough to know his tells.

It was at that point the giant horns boomed across the entire city. Like a trained bear, the mass of slaves and smallfolk all fell to their bellies. Arya, a split second behind the rest, quickly joined - her instincts would be honed over the next weeks or months as everyone else’s were. One must lay prostrate in the presence of the Chimera. Not doing so risked death and sacrifice to his name by the guards. In less than a minute, all in King’s Landing but a dozen or so were collapsed on their fronts facing the Red Keep.

“For fuck’s sake… what is this about?” the Hound hissed.

“Looks like every fucker in the Red Keep is up there.” She turned to Kinvara in spite of Clegane mumbling about her stating every obvious thing on the planet. “Has this ever happened before?”

“Once,” Kinvara whispered. “When he announced Robb Stark’s death after the Red Wedding, or so we thought at the time.” Alright, not good at all.

Bent over by Joffrey, the little shit whispering something as if he would combust into a million pieces if he had to speak to the crowd, Arya watched as the High Sparrow trotted towards the front of the dias. “Citizens! Servants! Children of the Seven! Blessed be to the Gods for their bounty upon this great land.”

“Well this is a fucking waste of my time,” muttered the Hound, snorting at Arya. “They dragged me from my shit-ass bed to listen to this?”

“Shut up,” hissed Arya. She did not want a whipping from the guards.

“…that our great leader, the Mighty Chimera, asks as your disciple upon this earth for your assistance. For a fraction of your power to strike down the demon to the north.”

This piqued Arya’s interest. ‘Jon must have fucked their asses…” While the victories of Tywin and Euron were trumpeted by propaganda organs over and over in an endless loop, any talk of defeat ended in death. But nothing this blatantly mystical and ridiculous would be attempted if everything was sunny for the Lannisters. Arya couldn’t help but smirk.

Her smirk soon disappeared. “For this, we offer you flesh…” The High Sparrow gulped, looking over at Qyburn. “And blood.”

Muffled shouts and cries of struggle drew the attention of the officials on the dias - even Joffrey, lace veil swishing against his skin as he turned his head to look behind him. “No! Let me go!” Ser Preston and Ser Boros emerged from the black interior of the Red Keep, each holding one arm of the Princess Myrcella. “Don’t you know who I am?!”

Those among the massive crowd of prostate citizens and slaves before the palace were stunned and confused. “What the?” Arya had no idea what was going on anymore.

Myrcella, Arya remembering her as a sweet, gentle girl, was not making it easy on the two knights to hold her steady. “You are making a big mistake! Mama? Brother? Brother!” Whatever decorum that had been drilled into her abandoned out of fear and confusion, she managed to break free and lurch toward her brother. “Brother, please, tell them to leave me alone…” Clutching at Joffrey’s robes, a swift backhand from the King sent her sprawling.

Qyburn was sprinting as the knights picked her up. “She cannot be harmed prior to the ceremony, All Highest. It won’t work otherwise.” Joffrey, silent, merely waved him off.
Just as confused as the others, Cersei began to push herself forward. “Stop! Leave her be!” She shoved aside Pycelle and nearly forced her way to her son. Only she was blocked by Daario Naharis, the sellsword grabbing both wrists.

“Restrain her,” ordered Littlefinger. If his brainchild fucked up, it would be his head. He was still figuring out how to keep Tywin or Jaime - more likely Jaime - from slicing his head off anyway.

Preston and Boros pulling Myrcella, her pretty white dress ripping slightly from her jerks, they managed to bring her to the stake and tie her to it - the rough rope bit at her wrists, and her struggles began to die. Daario shoved Cersei into the arms of the Mountain, who wrapped them around her in a tight, effortless hold. “Sorry, my Queen,” remarked the sellsword, sarcastically.

“Let me go!” the Queen mother hissed. “Myrcella! Untie her now!”

The High Sparrow gently marked the quiet, trembling girl with a seven-pointed star - the sign of the Seven in red ink. “Oh holy gods above, hear us now. Tonight, we bring forth this young girl. Pure of heart, blood of kings in her veins. Blood of your great disciple on this earth. We ask that through your gift of fire to your people, that this humble sacrifice be honored with your joy.”

“What?!” Myrcella’s eyes widened in terror.

“Noooo!” Cersei fought against her captor.

“Are you sure about this?” mumbled the doddering old Pycelle, leaning to Littlefinger’s ear.

He shrugged. “If there is magic in this world, this ceremony should work.”

“There is magic in this world,” interjected Daario, taking his place on Littlefinger’s other side. “I have seen it.” It would be a shame if Jon Snow died by this and not by his own hand, but Daario wouldn’t be hard pressed to overcome such disappointment.

“Don’t do this!” Myrcella fought her binds, watching her mother cry out. “Brother! Please don’t do this!”

“Accept this token of our devotion to His Divine Highest, and allow him to show us all the way.”

Gasping beside her, Arya slowly turned her head to see Kinvara with her eyes wide. “What the fuck is going on?”

She was taken aback by the anguish in Kinvara’s eyes. “They’re…” she whispered, voice faltering. “They’re preparing a sacrifice… by fire. It is… very old, very dark magic.” She cursed, whispering a prayer to her Lord. “In the ancient days, priests used volunteers to take down enemies… a thousand years ago we changed to blood…”

“Seven Hells. They’re using Myrcella…?” Arya wanted to throw up. The young girl - despite her mother being Cersei the bitch - was a sweet person. She didn’t deserve this. So many didn’t deserve their horrible fates in this war.

“Fucking King’s Landing. Fuck the King.” No one could disagree with the Hound at that moment.

Arms lowering, the High Sparrow motioned to his slender comrade. “Brother Ansel. Please.”

Having purged all ties of blood, the form that was once Ansel Lannister only held loyalty to his faith and his King. Face set in stone, awed in the glorious sacrifice the woman once his cousin, he
lowered the torch in his hands to a flaming brazier

As the flames licked up the pyre, Myrcella’s screams could be heard across the city. “MAMA! MAMA, IT HURTS!” Arya cringed, tears streaming down her cheeks regardless of her inner strength. To her right, the Hound shook, his face ashen at the sight.

Arya felt herself pulled towards her left. “Shhh, don’t speak. Don’t look at it, child.” Kinvara let the young woman bury her eyes in her shoulder, arm looping to cover Arya’s ears. She shouldn’t witness this… no person should.

“Father, Smith, Warrior, Maiden, Crone, Stranger, Mother,” recited the High Sparrow, fighting to keep his voice steady in the face of the brutality before him. Only undying faith in the Chimera kept his spirit high. “Your Chosen humbly offers this sacrifice to you, of royal blood and flesh untouched by man…”

“BROTHER, PLEASE! AHHHHH!” The flames were engulfing Myrcella’s dress, beginning to fully drape over her. To the side, still restrained by the Sovreignguards, Cersei wept in strangled sobs. So close to her beloved girl, yet also so far. Many of the highborn, the nobles clustered around the dias tried to look anywhere but the spectacle before them - others watching it intently, smug grins on their lips. The King, staring at the stake from beneath his veil, remained a deathly quiet. Normally he’d be elated as such a display, but of his younger sister… emotion had left him. He regarded it as one would a rock.

Taking the small jar from another Faith Militant, the High Sparrow resumed his chant. “By your strength and power in these dangerous times, we ask you to purify your chosen land. To imbue in His Highest Joffrey, Holy Chimera of Westeros, the highest strength and wisdom. To bring death to the false ruler, the Bastard Jon Snow.”

Screams piercing through the night air, whiffs of acrid smoke and searing flesh accompanying them, all that was left of the once gorgeous princess was the manifestation of pain itself. Even the most hardened slave or citizen was openly weeping now. Someone so innocent fed to the literal hellfire for something no one could fully understand.

Eyes flickering to the fellow souls of the King’s inner circle, seeing nothing but indifference or disgust on their faces, the High Sparrow lifted the jar. “We are your children, and for this request we are unworthy of, please accept in payment, youth… and blood!” With that he hurled the jar into the flames, nearly rocked back as the wildfire within detonated in a tongue of green flame. It exploded high into the heavens, mercifully incinerating the poor princess. Sparing her further agony.

As the flames died down, not a single sound could be heard over the city but the sobs of Queen Cersei - joined by those of the hundreds of thousands of others, feeling her pain. Finally risking a glance at the Red Keep, Arya just knew that under that veil there was a smile of triumph on Joffrey’s face.
No force on earth could keep the parchment - the hands belonging to Jaime Lannister trembled violently, eyes staring at the words as if they were a curse.

They might have well as been a curse. Jaime would have actually preferred that.

Uncle,

Myrcella is dead. Set aflame in a ritual by His Highest to destroy the Stark Bastard. Mother is inconsolable. The city is gripped in fear. Lord Baelish and Commander Naharis, His Highest’s newest favorite enforcer, are preventing any noble from leaving the city - including me.

Please come back. Mother needs you. I need you.

Tommen, Lord of Storm’s End, Warden of the Stormlands

A tear slipped from his eyes. Little Myrcella. Beautiful Myrcella. The kind, sweet girl that had inherited none of the Lannister cunning but all of his mother’s golden heart, burned alive by her own brother. ‘Baelish, Qyburn!’ They had to have had a hand in it - but Jaime knew it was ultimately Joffrey that caused it. Cersei’s baby boy…

‘My son.’

Only he and Cersei knew the truth. The horrible truth that ended up starting the War of the Four Kings, that plunged the entire known world into chaos. There had been others, over the years… Jon Arryn was dead, as were Ned Stark and Stannis. Little Bran Stark had to be dead. Jaime suspected Tyrion knew, while their father would likely willingly blind himself to the truth.

But it was the truth, a truth that ate away at Jaime more and more - his sister, the woman he loved, was growing more and more callous as her influence waned. His eldest son, once the apple of his eye, was a monster. A monster that had burned his own sister, Jaime’s beloved daughter, alive.

With Tommen trapped in King’s Landing, it didn’t take long for Jaime to make up his mind. Come hells or high water, he would head back to the capital. Myrcella was dead and Joffrey was lost, but he could still save his youngest.

The army hadn’t budged from its quarters at Harrenhal in months - hardened veterans of the War of the Four Kings reminisced at how it was just like then, even at the same decrepit and ancient fortification. Aside from raiding missions by the Second Sons and small detachments sent by Tywin to recapture and fortify strategic locations in the Vale, Westerlands, or southern Riverlands, the army remained at the same location since it had been recaptured after the Battle of the God’s Eye. A sense of boredom had fallen over the troops like a shroud, interrupted by series of heavy drilling ordered by Lord Tarly. Any idiot could conduct that. The army wouldn’t miss Jaime, and he had no pull keeping him here.

Snatching up his saddlebag, Jaime moved towards the entrance of the tent but was blocked by Bronn. “Get out of my way,” he growled, but the sellsword didn’t move his palm from the golden nobleman’s breastplate. “You aren’t stopping me, Bronn.”

“Think about this. Now, your gold-shittin’ daddy is not likely gonna execute you for desertion. He has a soft spot for you… about as much as the puckered asshole can. But you’d be going to King’s Landing.” Bronn lowered his voice so only Jaime could hear him. “A pit of vipers, where the fuckin’
King just burned alive his own fuckin’ sister just to take out the Northern bastard. Do you really want to get neck deep in that shit?”

Jaime didn’t hesitate. “Yes.” Pushing past the sellsword, he untied the mount bound to a hitching post by the tent. He tossed the saddlebag behind the saddle and secured it. As he was about to mount, he heard the sound of the horse beside his being readied for travel. “I thought you didn’t want to deal with the vipers?”

“Vipers are everywhere in this sorry realm,” muttered Bron, hauling himself onto the horse. “Gotta keep you safe, or else I ain’t getting my castle.” His scowl deepened, the normal banter the proud lion would shoot back to him quite absent. ‘Lands ravaged, little girls getting burned alive. This ain’t war, it’s madness’ As they broke their horses into a trot for the Kingsroad, Bronn figured at least he would at least have an actually good lay at Baelish’s brothel in the Capitol. It was the small things that mattered.

Thighs half buried in the snow, Bran nevertheless did not feel the cold. The spiritual would manifest as touch, malevolent magic of the Night King leaving his body chilled to the bone during his visions, but natural weather did not register to him. Above, the dark grey clouds depositing the frozen water all over the land blocked out every bit of light - near black. Next to him, he could feel the presence of the Raven. “Why are we here at midnight… wherever this is?”

The Raven glanced at him, face devoid of emotion. “It is midday.” The implication was obvious, even before Bran had begun greenseeing. Old Nan had told him the stories of the Long Night. Here it was. “In the darkest of times, the secret of House Stark laid bare before all.”

“Aunt Serena, what’s wrong?” Bran and the Raven turned their heads, seeing a young man no more than twenty past his nameday. He looked so much like Eddard Stark - the same flowing blonde locks, strong jaw, strong shoulders.

“Bran the builder.” Bran didn’t need to frame it as a question. Instinctively he knew.

The Raven nodded anyway. “Aye, the second of the unfrozen.”

Bran furrowed his brows in confusion. “Second? Unfrozen?”

“You shall see,” he replied cryptically. The Raven often answered such.

Serena Stark Targaryen - wife of the Lord of Light and sister of the man who was now the Night King - looked away, avoiding eye contact with her beloved nephew. “I cannot tell you, dear Bran.” With her children safe in Valyria with her husband’s family, the boy was the closest thing she had to a son right now. She didn’t want him to know her pain.

But Starks were stubborn. “Stop it! I’m not a child. I’ve fought the others. I am a warrior of our people! Please, don’t shelter me.”

Sighing, the northern beauty felt a tear fall down her cheeks. Daenerys wasn’t there - she needed someone to confide in. “I will have to die soon, nephew.”

The one who would soon become Bran the Builder blinked. “What? Why?” The last sighting of the dead was nowhere near their camp.

“I will need to sacrifice myself for your uncle…” The tears fell upon the snow. “So that he may complete his weapon…”
“No! No one needs to die!” Bran knelt by his aunt while his namesake watched in rapt attention. “The prophecy says he’ll defeat him.”

Serena shook her head. “Not without his sword. And his sword cannot be properly cooled without the heart of an unfrozen.” As the image began to envelop in whiteness, words fading away, Bran finally noticed that Serena Stark wore no cloak…

The next landscape appeared suddenly. One minute the Long Night of millennia past was fading away, and now Bran was in the present. He had no reason why he knew, just instinct. Looking behind him, a vast army of corpses stood in the snow. Motionless. Waiting for a command. But in front of him…

Staring up at the mounted monarch, the malevolent face of the man that used to be Marden Stark, it suddenly turned and bore its ice blue eyes directly at Bran’s. Before he could back away, an icy hand clamped itself onto his forearm. Bran screamed. “Ahhhhhhhh…!”

Eyes opening, Bran found himself eye to eye with Meera. The young noblewoman looked concerned. “Bran, you were screaming and thrashing in your trance. What happened?”

Sitting up, he looked at Meera, then to the Raven, then back to Meera. Raising his hand, he found the mark of the dead upon it. Burned into his skin. While it did not hurt, the flesh was ice cold. “The Night King… he knows I’m here. He’s on his way.”

Nearly halfway across the continent, in quarters almost the polar opposite of the cave of the Three Eyed Raven, another Stark found himself in the middle of a restless sleep. Tossing and turning, his face was drenched in sweat. The images formed in his unconscious mind tormented his sanity, driving him to the point of madness. It tugged at his duty. Filled him with a tragedy and perfidy only he could prevent.

It was then that Jon erupted into consciousness. He sat up suddenly, breaths ragged. The fire had died, leaving the bedchamber in a shroud of cold. The Emperor did not notice, memories of his nightmare still vivid in his mind - or was it a vision? It seemed so real to him.

Shivering in her sleep, Daenerys woke to find the warmth of her husband absent. She looked up and found him in that state. “Jon? Jon, my love. What’s wrong?” Sitting up herself, Dany wrapped her arms around him.

Decisively, without another thought, Jon knew what his duty was. ‘I must go now. He is in danger.’ Looking down on Daenerys, he saw the love reflected in her amethyst eyes. Maester Aemon’s words were reflected back. ‘Love is the death of duty.’ This would not go over well with her.

“We’ve positioned these forces at Darry, sire,” General Theodosius Caryn rattled off, placing several markers on the large map table. “The Dothraki Horde has been split in two. A smaller force of about five thousand is resting in the still fertile - if snowed in - grazing lands between the Red Fork and Blue Fork of the Trident.” He moved his finger to the other cluster of Dothraki screamer figurines. “The rest are south of here at Wayfarer’s Rest. Lord Edmure’s Riverlanders surround them, making sure they’re hidden so Tywin doesn’t suspect we can put twenty-two thousand screaming banshees behind him.”

Jon nodded, impressed at the effort. “And the fourth force?”

“I’ve sent Lord Manderly with his men and that of Lord Cerwyn to Pinkmaiden, along with half the
Essosi regulars,” Robb interjected, moving several other figurines. “A raven from there indicates the last two battalions arrived this morning.”

“Could Tywin think we would try another go at Lannisport?” Daenerys asked, sizing up the lay of the land. “Or march for Stoney Sept and take the Goldroad around his flank to the capitol?”

A rather loud belch echoed in the war room. All eyes turned to Tyrion. “Forgive me, your Highness. Your Majesty.” He cleared his throat. “Lannisport is worthless to him. There’s no gold left, and all possible reinforcements will come from either the south or the free cities. Dragonstone is still his, as is Sunspear, so there is no reason to worry about the Westerlands.”

Davos piped up. “Unless we cut the sea routes - and that would be bloody and crippling to us if we try - he’s sitting pretty with reinforcement.” Having experience with naval action as a smuggler, the generals deferred to him.

“And he can very easily march astride the Goldroad if he wants, your Highness,” Caryn added. “He’s also kept his brother Kevan and a force of ten thousand at Hayford Castle outside the capitol. Dornish light cavalry, sellsword companies, and newly raised men from the Reach and Stormlands according to my scouts and Varys’ little birds. Not enough to beat us, but enough to hold us back until he can march his army back to the capitol.” He pursed his lips. “Tywin knows we can’t dislodge him without a fight, so he doesn’t need to worry about what he knows of our positioning.”

Eyes falling on Riverrun, the largest cluster laid exposed to the Emperor. “And we are here. Reinforced by more northerners, Vale infantry, the Baratheon levies secured from defecting captives, and four giants.” Still not enough. The largest force that could tip the scale was still in Volantis with Podrick and Yara. All the while the Golden Company was rumored to be departing Pentos for Sunspear. Not good, not good at all.

All while Jon was depleting what meagre forces were left in the North to ward off the greatest threat of them all.

“We should strike soon, while we still have some element of surprise.’ Daenerys seemed confident. Why shouldn’t she? Jon was back and all dragons but Edderon were together again. One call and the grey dragon would head back as well.

A sigh left Jon’s lips. “Leave us.”

Whispered murmurs broke out, confused at the Emperor’s decision. “Your Majesty?” Caryn inquired.

“I said, leave us.” Voice firm, the war council quickly departed. Robb lingered for a moment, a raised eyebrow directed at Jon - was he going to do it. A slight nod from his brother answered that question. ‘Gods be with him,’ thought the Lord of Winterfell, guards closing the door behind him.

Now the room was left to Jon and Daenerys, cavernous halls rather empty and haunting. Studying her husband, gauging his mood with expert eyes, Dany found him hunched over the table. Eyes heavy, staring at the figurines clustered around the Riverlands and Crownlands with a sort of brooding fatigue. “Oh Jon.” She stepped next to him, wrapping her arms around his back. “What bothers you so, my Dragonwolf?”

Muscles tense, the impotence of his position and the inability to improve it filling him, Jon slammed his fist on the stone table. “Fuck!” The tension dissipated somewhat as Dany hugged him tighter, kissing the back of his neck. It felt amazing, but he was still too frustrated. “It’s not enough. Not near enough. Tywin has us outnumbered and holds better ground.”
Dany frowned. “We have better soldiers, Jon. And dragons. Half his forces are sellswords and impressed conscripts.” She was confused as to how Jon couldn’t see it. “Staying on the defensive means we control the initiative.”

“Sellswords who know that Joffrey winning means continued payment from the complete chaos that follows. Tywin’s Army knows they are the lords of the world over everyone else, while we promise no loot and no chaos for profiteers to exploit.” Running a hand through his hair, he motioned to the formations of Lannisters and their allies all over the Crownlands. “And he is the one who has the initiative. All avenues he has covered, and no matter where we attack it was all pre-planned by him. We’d just be dancing to his fucking jig! All while the real threat…” He trailed off.

Eyebrow raised, Dany crossed her arms. “What ‘real threat?’” They were so close, so close to finishing off the Insane King and ending his reign of terror, so close to finally restoring their family to their true place in the sun. To break the wheel and bring true peace to the entire realm. And Jon was allowing himself to become distracted. It had been happening a lot over the past weeks, and it had been starting to grate on her.

Eying her suspiciously, Jon answered in a guarded tone. “You know what threat.”

An exasperated groan left Dany’s throat. “Jon, look what you’re doing to yourself. You’re distracted from your responsibilities. You barely sleep, all you do is train by yourself or with the children. I haven’t seen you smile in ages, all because of some legend and superstition you claim as a threat!”

Dany didn’t mean to add the last part, but it slipped out.

Jon’s eyes widened. “Is that what you think? After all we mean to each other, you still don’t trust me?!” He couldn’t believe it. It was as if Dany had stabbed him in the heart all over again.

In all honesty, part of Daenerys never grasped the idea that there was an army of dead men north of the Wall. “Joffrey is our enemy, Jon. He is enslaving the world. He sent Euron after our children. He paid an assassin to murder me. All the suffering currently affecting the world is on his and his cronies. When we have a chance to end him permanently, you choose to face a myth! A scary story Northern mothers tell their children!”

“It is not a story! Or a myth!” Jon thundered, angrier than he had ever been before. “You don’t know any better, Daenerys! You didn’t fight the fight I’ve had to.”

“You’re right, Jon, I spent my life fighting for our family, for our birthright!” She was not backing down. Two dragons in a furious game of chicken, neither relenting. “And do you know what faith kept me going. Not faith in gods, or myths, or legends - imaginary things fools delude themselves into believing?! Faith in myself! Faith in us! The faith that we can hatch dragons and unite peoples from Last Hearth to Astapor! That is what we need, not some childish boogeyman!” Breathing heavily, she glared at Jon, watching as something dark and emotionless settle into his eyes.

Lips ironing into a flat line, Jon took a step back. “If that’s what you feel, then I have nothing more to say. I must journey back to Winterfell.” Turning, he made his way to the door.

“Don’t you dare leave!” Daenerys was seething, rage burning in her eyes. Outside a dragon roared, the deep bellow of Balerion the Dread reborn. “Your Empress demands it!”

Stilling just by the doorway, Jon’s back remained turned, unmoving. In the distance came an even louder shriek. A higher, enraged roar that shook the windows - Rhaegal channeling the pure anger of his rider. It was then that Jon turned, blazing fury. Daenerys had never seen him so enraged, except when Euron threatened their children. Instinctively, she stepped back. But he didn’t move, didn’t give into his anger. He was too good and honorable a man.
All he did was speak one line. “Then the Empress will have to kill me.” Cloak unfurling, he turned and stepped out the doorway - towards the North. Biting her cheek, Daenerys screamed her frustration in his wake.

“I still think this is a stupid fucking idea.”

“I’d have to agree with the… ginger on this one,” stated Brienne, earning a huge grin from the wildling - much to her annoyance. A loud howling bled through even the thick ice of the Wall, tendrils of the blizzard visible from the top of the battlements. “Rescuing your brother can be done via dragonback, if you know where he is…”

“I know.” Tightening the cloak over his frame, Jon couldn’t help but appreciate the irony. He had lived here at the Wall for much of his life, enduring day by day of cold so bitter it could freeze a person’s balls off. Now, after nearly a year in the south - months in the raging heat of Essos - he had nearly forgotten what real cold was like. Winter in the Riverlands didn’t come close. “Don’t ask me how, but I know.”

Groaning, Tormund turned to Davos and Robb. “Please try to talk him out of this. I can gather getting his brother the cripple, but finding one of those fucking things?” All present had been stunned when Jon announced the addition to the plan, finding it one step above insanity. Even as they were preparing themselves to leave, Tormund, Brienne, and Tyene were still trying to steer him to reason.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried?” Davos shrugged. “The Emperor is not one to deviate from something he considers vital.”

Tyene persisted, hoping he’d see reason. “If you think seeing one of these things would convince Joffrey or Tywin not to make war with us - even for a single campaign season…”

“It isn’t for them,” Jon replied, remembering the harsh words. They were said in the heat of the moment, but he had no qualms as to how real they were. “We’re all on the same side, we’re all breathin’ - but I know he won’t see it that way.” There was no persuading Joffrey, but in a victory with him dead, unity would be a must. “It’s for another.”

“Hold on… let me get this shit straight.” Tormund stared at Jon. “Your with the huge tits no longer believes in the Army of the Dead, so you want to go into the fucking icehouse to get a dead fucker to prove her wrong?” He shook his head. “Wouldn’t it be easier just to fuck her brains out?”

Lips pursed, fists clenching, Jon looked off into the distance. The rage and anguish at his wife’s lack of trust in him still was a raw, gaping wound. “Believe me, it’s necessary.”

“You could still do it off dragonback…”

“Lady Martell,” Robb interjected. “You weren’t with us at Hardhome. The Night King easily took Rhaegal down with one spear - if Wun Wun hadn’t been there… we’re not risking our greatest assets for this.” Jon couldn’t have said it better himself.

“Aye. With luck, we’ll avoid the main host. Last sighting of those fuckers that Marg gave me was that they were still near Hardhome.”

Listening to Tormund, a thought came to Jon. “Wait.” While he and Robb could rely on their Valyrian steel blades and Wun Wun on pure strength, the others were at a disadvantage if walkers or wights attacked them. “We need dragonglass weapons, now!”
“I have that covered, sire.” Gendry dropped a sack on a table, reaching in to hand out forged dragonglass weapons. “Worked on them myself over the last week. Guaranteed to take down any fuckin’ dead man in its tracks.” Each man now sported a sword and a dagger, except for himself and Tormund, who got axes. Grey Worm got a short sword, but an additional spearhead for his main weapon.

Wun Wun, however, didn’t need one. His arms and legs were good enough.

“I shall wait here until you return,” Sansa told the men, flanked by bannermen of House Stark. “If two weeks pass, I shall have Edd destroy the gate to block any entrance to the realms of men.” She knew the stakes, much as it pained her to potentially leave her beloved brothers in the icy wilderness. Eastwatch by the Sea would still have a means of exit, but it would be a treacherous trek of nearly a hundred miles. Not a viable option.

Breaking a sensual and passionate kiss with his beloved, Robb made his way to Sansa and hugged her. “Keep Margaery safe for me, sister.”

“I will, brother.” As the Lord of Winterfell made his way back to the group, Sansa found the Emperor standing before her. “Jon.” The redhead bit her lip, eyes darting to the ground. “I don’t like this. It’s too risky - the Empire cannot afford losing you. The family cannot. I…” Her eyes closed tightly, feeling another flashback coming. Jon saved her from Ramsay, took her in and provided the safety and comfort needed to pull out of the worst of the pain - it still affected her sometimes, and facing Jon’s possible death at the hands of the white walkers caused one of these times.

The Emperor pulled his sister into a hug. “Hey… don’t worry about me.” Jon had never been close to Sansa in childhood, overjoyed now that they had the same relationship as he had with the other siblings. “I will return.”

Sansa, enjoying the brotherly embrace, nevertheless pulled back. “That’s what father said. I would imagine Rhaegar Targaryen told Aunt Lyanna the same.”

Memories came back, of three smiling, loving faces in the wide expanse of the afterlife. They stabbed at Jon’s heart, but he pushed it back. “I won’t make their mistakes.” A gnawing feeling overtook him, however. One of sensing some kind of threat… “Sansa, if something happens…”

“Don’t say it, Jon.”

“If something happens, make sure Daenerys stays vigilant on the threat to the North. Promise me, Sansa.”

“I promise, brother.”

Smiling, Jon kissed the crown of her head. “Oh, and please speak with Ser Podrick Payne when he returns to Westeros. He’s anxious to speak with you.” Turning, he walked back towards his men with a small smirk on his face, not seeing but certain of the red blush on his sister’s cheeks - one not due to the blistering cold.

Torchlight covered the tunnel, shadows flickering over the walls. Not a single sound penetrated the cavern, each man and woman withdrawn into their own thoughts. “I wish I could spare more men, Jon,” whispered Edd, breaking it. “We don’t have enough for even skeleton crews, even with what you sent us.” Some of the most recalcitrant Bolton supporters or Lannister prisoners had been gifts to the Night’s Watch. They were sorely needed.

“It’s fine, Edd.” Jon looked behind him. “Pyp and the others will be enough.” At that point the
massive iron gate rose, slowly and with loud creaks as metal groaned against metal. ‘Five inches of
cold, wrought steel,’ Jon thought. ‘Undead giants riding undead mammoths… they could break
through.’ He looked once more at Edd. The new Lord Commander nodded. He and Sansa would
carry out what had to be done if it came to that. “Alright men,” he announced as the gate opened
fully. “Let’s get it done.”

And the party began their long trek into the blizzard. Jon, Robb, Gendry, Ser Barristan, Ser Jorah,
Tyene, Brienne, Tormund, Wun Wun, Pyp, and half a dozen other men of the Night’s Watch. All
ready to face the greatest evil in the known world.

Just as the swirling snow enveloped them, blocking out the sight of the towering behemoth of ice and
rock behind them, Jon heard his children roar. It boomed loud enough over the howling winds.
Defiant, but also mournful - tinged with pain and fear. ‘I’ll be back, my children,’ he called out to
their minds. The mournful cries melted into the wind as he turned and disappeared into the blizzard.

Fire roaring in the fireplace, a rhythmic - almost automatic - display played out before it. Rage
boiling within her, Daenerys stared intensely at the fire, paced back and forth several times, gripped
her head in a silent scream, paced again, and then faced the fire once more. It happened in those
same exact steps over and over again, beginning to make those few present nervous.

It was Missandei who spoke up first. “Your Highness, please calm down.” She flinched slightly at
her murderous glare, but kept her composure. “At least take a seat.”

“Who does he fucking think he is!” If the silver hair and violet eyes didn’t show off a Targaryen, the
metaphorical dragonfire spewing from her would have made it crystal clear. “How dare he do this? I
gave him everything in my power, and now he abandons our cause to protect from some myth!”

“I admit, your Highness…” Missandei was her longest friend after Ser Jorah. She instinctively sided
with her over all else - with the woman that had freed her and all her fellow slaves from bondage.
But the translator had also gotten to know the man formerly known as Jon Snow. A man that
matched and contemplated Daenerys as if in some divine plan. Her loyalty to her Empress extended
to her Emperor as well. “… It is far-fetched… But would you know your husband to lie to you? For
Robb Stark, Margaery Tyrell, or Ser Davos to lie? Lady Martell has gone with him as well, as has
Lady Brienne. Lady Sansa believes him - are all of them foolish too?” She realized what a ledge she
was putting herself on for something she found skeptical, but some part of Missandei knew that
Emperor Jon would never believe something that wasn’t true. It was just not his way.

Nursing a drink - not his first of the night, despite Shae’s prodding - Tyrion pushed himself off his
chair. “I don’t doubt he believes it, Lady Missandei. But the northerners are superstitious folks.
More so than any… aside from Dothraki,” he ended up adding. “I saw it at Castle Black with His
Majesty’s uncle. Never saw anything, but relied on his superstitions.”

The Naathi wanted to roll her eyes. “No one thought dragons could return from extinction, nor that a
man could be resurrected from the dead. But they did happen. Is it too much of a stretch for there to
be an army of dead men? Especially if so many level-headed friends and loved ones claim to have
seen them with their own eyes?”

Pausing mid-pace, Dany turned to look at her friend and handmaiden. “Dragons have existed in
recorded history, Missandei. And I don’t know what…” She pointed at Melisandre, quietly
observing from her chair in the corner of the solar. “She did to bring Jon back from death. But there
had to be some natural reason for it all. The ‘Long Night,’ the ‘White Walkers.’ They’re all legends!
If we cannot reason what force brought such about, then the only conclusion is that all the legends
are apocryphal. Lies! Fantasy! And my Jon…” Another groan of frustration left her.

An ancient voice, low and hobbled with a lifetime of experience and pain, spoke up. “It is not wise to confine oneself to that which can be seen.” Pushing himself out of his chair, Aemon Targaryen’s back was bowed, his legs were wobbly, and he leaned his entire form upon his cane. But the old man’s unseeing eyes still sparkled a pure amethyst of a sharp, Targaryen mind. “I have lived through much. Lived to see my family disgrace itself, die all around me, and be reborn. I have seen monsters, giants, dragons… every creature known to man.” Nearly collapsing, Daenerys rushed to her great-uncle and helped him into a seat next to hers.

“Please, uncle. Don’t exert yourself,” she cautioned.

Aemon waved her off. “I understand what you think. I myself have contemplated it. But the majesty of existence… it cannot be explained by reason alone. We humans are too frail, too weak to accept the hubris of supreme thought.” Daenerys found herself unable to respond. What could one say to that?

The door to the solar flung open, slamming against the wall with a loud thud. Through the doorway came Catelyn Stark. “Your Highness…” Her appearance was that of a corpse, drained of blood as if exposed to the most frightening sight imaginable. Beside her was Lord Varys, his ruddy face similarly white as snow.

Daenerys stood, fearing the worst. “What is it?” There was silence. “Tell me!”

There wasn’t much to shock the Spider, but this did. “One of… my Little Birds in the capitol, your Highness. Joffrey has done something. Something monstrous.”

Tyrion rolled his eyes - a move he would soon regret. “What is it this time? Did he use a crossbow on his whores, because he already did that.”

Wordlessly, Catelyn handed a dispatch to Tyrion. “There was a ceremony in King’s Landing. A ceremony of fire and blood to bring death upon an enemy. In this case Jon.” Dany’s eyes widened.

It was the red woman’s turn to stand. “A ritual of full blood sacrifice?” Such was common among early followers of R’hllor, but abandoned largely and replaced with that of leeches. “That is impossible, not to mention blasphemous. And to take down a monarch it requires one of royal blood. Not a normal…”

“They found someone.” Tyrion stumbled, falling on his ass. The pain didn’t seem to register, his body numb. “Myrcella.”

“His sister?” asked Daenerys, wishing it weren’t true. She had heard many things.

Nodding, Tyrion fought the urge to vomit. ‘Sweet, innocent Myrcella.’ His favorite. ‘No more. Killed by the vicious idiot.’ The battle failed, but he managed to make it to the chamber pot before puking his guts out.

A sinking pit of ice formed in Dany’s gut. “Robert Baratheon’s grandmother was a Targaryen. His children have the blood of Kings… oh Gods…” The sheer scale of it all hit Dany like a stampeding mammoth. Joffrey burned his own sister alive so that her royal blood could kill Jon. “Lady Melisandre,” she said, whipping around to face the red priestess. “If this curse works…”

“The Emperor is in danger, your Highness. Danger of imminent death.” Her mind was already filling of incantations on how to block the dark magic before it destroyed the Prince that was Promised.
‘What have I done?’ Swallowing her bile and pain, she raced out of the solar. Not a contrary thought in the world. Footsteps followed, the unmistakable ones of her Hand. ‘Do not try to stop me.’ ‘I need to save him.’

“I would say this is foolish, your Highness,” Tyrion began, struggling to keep up with her furious strides. His short legs annoyed him sometimes. “But I know when it comes to your husband you’ll do it anyway.”

‘My fault.’ Dany blinked away the tears, painful images flashing before her eyes. Images of Jon, of death. ‘All my fault.’ “Balerion, come!” she called out, hearing his roar a split second later. She had made it in the nick of time before at the Battle of the Bastards. Hopefully lightning would strike twice.

Climbing onto Balerion, Daenerys did something she never thought she’d do. She prayed. “Gods, whichever ones exist in the heavens. Please let me save my beloved…”
They marched single file down the gorge. Peeking slightly over the lip of the rock-face currently shielding him, Jon ducked back down after a split second. A walker led them from the van, likely explaining their seemingly organized nature - normally, wights had the characteristics of an insect swarm. That is none at all.

“How many?” mouthed Barristan, paired with him. At the first sight of the others, the group had dispersed into groups of two or three among the crags.

“Thirty,” Jon mouthed in return. Looking at Robb to his left and Jorah to his right, he held up all his splayed fingers thrice over. The message was received.

There was simply no way to coordinate an attack upon them all, but Jon knew his men would charge when he did - a good commander led from example. He feared his death, any rational person would, but it was never about him. Looking at Barristan, the old knight nodded, hand tightening on his sword. Jon gripped Longclaw. “Now!” He leapt up, scrambling over the rock.

Stunning the enemy for a split second as the ranging party burst in one staggered swoop from all around, the walker’s surprise didn’t last long. Ice blue jaw opening in a primal scream, the undead drones under his command snarled and charged all around. Programmed by instinct and magic to kill anything that moved.

What the wights lacked in skill they made up for in ferocity. The rangers were outnumbered two to one, making for an even fight as pairs or clusters of wights were engaged with single fighters or pairs respectively. It soon became a melee of steel on steel.

Robb and Jon found themselves face to face with the walker - fitting, since both were the only ones armed with Valyrian steel. Furious lunges were parried by ice spear, the walker a skilled fighter operating on tactics rather than sheer instinct. Robb, the tip of Ice narrowly missing the walker’s midsection, left his upper torso open. A punch to the chest sent him sprawling. Now it was the walker and Jon, one on one.

Shrieking, the haunting blue of its eyes dark with anger, thrust his spear forward at Jon with all its might. Jon was quicker, however. Swinging Longclaw left and down, he parried the blow and sent the tip of the spear into the snow - opening the monster’s arm for Ice, Robb now scrambled to his feet, to slice off the appendage. Still gripping the spear, the hand shattered into countless ice crystals. The walker’s eyes bulged open in stunned surprise before Grey Worm rammed his dragonglass spear into its torso. Soon the flecks of ice were joined by millions of others.

In one fell swoop, all the snarling wights disintegrated before everyone’s eyes, falling upon the ground in heaps of bone and rotting flesh.

The group looked upon each other in confusion. “What the hell happened?” Robb exclaimed.

“They all just… fell apart,” Jorah mused, puzzlement in his tone.

Jon glanced at the flecks of ice beginning to blow away in the wind. “It… this walker must have been the one that turned them.”

Expression numb, Tyene collapsed onto the snow. “You’re told about this… but you don’t think it’s real until… until… fuck me.” To the Northerners, growing up close to the Wall with a sense of the ancient horrors close by, it wasn’t a hard leap to believe in the dead. But for someone from the south
such was why Jon planned to capture one. To lay rest any and all doubts.

“Your Majesty!” Catching Barristan’s voice, Jon raced over to find his Emperorsguard knelt over Pyp, a soft groaning leaving his mouth. Crimson stained his black cuirass from where a wight’s sword has slashed across. Kneeling as well, Jon looked at the wound and into Barristan’s eyes. The old knight wore a grave expression. “I’ve seen wounds like this, sire. He doesn’t have long with us.”

Gripping the hand of his friend, one of his oldest friends, Jon tried to comfort him as best he can. “Pyp, rest easy.” A weary smile crossed his face. “You’ll be safe soon, brother. Safe and warm.” The afterlife was like that, from what he remembered.

Weak, Pyp nevertheless managed to squeeze Jon’s hand. “Burn… my body. Don’t let me be one of them, Jon.” His voice wheezed, but was firm.

“I shall, Pyp.”

“Good.” A faraway look formed in his eyes. “I’ll see my family again, Jon. We’ll rest and play in the shade of the trees…” Smiling, his lids slid shut for the last time - yet another brother of the Night’s Watch, passing into the great beyond.

Squeezing Pyp’s hand once more, Jon stood, fighting back the grief. Robb stepped beside him, arm wrapping around his shoulder comfortingly. “Farewell, Pypar. Now your watch has ended.” The others gathered around the body as Ser Jorah lit a torch and set the body ablaze, denying the Night King more meat for his army.

“Go!” Leaf yelled, tossing a dragonglass spear at a Walker. It slammed into its midsection, collapsing it into a million flecks of ice. Cries from afar marked the heralds for the second to last child of the forest, killed by the beings they had a hand in creating. Spotting Meera pulling Bran towards the exit, Leaf followed. “Summer! Summer come on!” But the direwolf only growled at the onrushing wights, leaping into the fray - sacrificing itself to save Bran and the others. Shedding a single tear for the beautiful creature, Leaf raced around the corner into the tunnel.

Tugging hard, arms burning from the inside out, Meera was so focused on dragging Bran to the rear exit that she didn’t notice the dirt and rocks above her hollow out. Snarling finally catching her attention, she spotted the rotting corpse as it dropped down onto her. Meera was knocked on her back with the wind kicked out of her. She lost her grip on the dragonglass knife, just out of reach. Half rotted teeth and rusted Night’s Watch sword raised high, the wight was about to hack her to bits before a spear ran through its head. It fell silent.

Eyes flickering to two figures, Meera’s jaw dropped in shock. “Sire?” Standing above her, Grey Worm by his side - pulling his spear out from the wight’s skull - was the Emperor Jon himself.

“Get up, Lady Reed!” he yelled, hacking at another wight - a walking skeleton trying to claw at Leaf’s face. Tormund and Ser Barristan took Jon’s place holding off the trickle of dead as he looked at Bran in panic. “Is he…?”

“He’s greenseeing,” Meera shot back. “Help me!”

Jon didn’t hesitate, grabbing Bran’s torso while Meera grabbed his legs. “Men! With me!”

The faint and distant snarls had turned into a cacophony of terror. “Your Majesty, no look!” Grey Worm hollered. Looking up despite the warning, Jon felt his heart smashing against his ribs. A pure funnel of wights carpeting the walls of the cave like a swarm of ants. Growing closer and closer.
“FUCKING RUN!” Tormund was booking it, as was Barristan.

At the exit, swirling clouds of the blizzard trying their best to drown the snarls of the wight swarm, Robb and Brienne were gesturing frantically. “Come on! Go! Go!” Behind, Leaf tossed the last of the explosives - enough to shred the van of the swarm, but dozens more filled their place. Breathing hard and heart pumping, Robb dashed in and took Meera’s place, racing faster with Jon out into the icy blast.

Leaping across the threshold, Barristan had just cleared the cave when a wight leapt onto his back, rasping and teeth snapping shut. “Tie it up!” screamed Robb, Tormund and Grey Worm pulling the writhing beast off of Barristan while he dashed in with the rope. Brienne, Tyene, Jorah, and Gendry slammed the thick but brittle wood door closed.

A split second later, the snarling corpses slammed into it from the other side.

The door rattled and groaned on its hinges at the indefatigable force pounding against it. “This won’t hold them for long,” Tyene cautioned, only to be pulled out of the way by Grey Worm. Bellowing an archaic war cry in a language long dead, Wun Wun heaved a massive boulder onto the patch of snow adjacent to the door. Effectively sealing off the exit from the screeching swarm. “I guess that works.”

“That won’t hold them forever,” growled Tormund, breathing heavily as he knotted the rope around the monster. A fresh one, flesh not rotting yet - probably felled at Hardhome. The writhing wight’s motions lessened as Grey Worm draped a burlap hood over his head. “Gotta get back to Castle Crow.” It took several seconds for all but Jon to figure out he meant Castle Black.

The Emperor made the calculation in an instant. “We’d never make it. Not in this snow.” Distant, faint growling belied the massive army charging towards them.

“Two miles north,” pointed out Leaf. “There’s a large lake with an island at the center. The waters would stop them.”

Many looked at the Child of the Forest - the last remaining - as if she was mad. “Yeah, and we’d be fucking trapped,” exclaimed Tyene.

Knowledge of the geography sent Jon’s mind whirring. “Wun Wun.” The giant turned to him, Jon peering up at one of his most faithful fighters. “Get Bran and Meera to Castle Black as fast as you can.” He looked at Meera. “Tell Edd and Sansa to set Rhaegal over here with all haste.”

“Your Majesty…”

“GO!” Barely able to open her mouth to speak further, Meera found her and Bran scooped up in Wun Wun’s large hands, the giant almost immediately breaking out into a run. “Men, with me! To the lake!”

None among them even hesitated, legs pumping as fast as they could. It was a race against death itself.

Hot liquid flowing down her throat and warming her core, Sansa slowly set the cup of hot tea on the surface of the wooden table. Her hand was trembling out of sheer anxiety. Her other rested on the wood, fingers drumming the surface absentmindedly.

“Please, sister. Stop.” Far away eyes drawn back to reality by the words of the Rose of Highgarden -
though Highgarden was currently a royal grainery under the supervision of House Tarly - Sansa looked over at her brother’s betrothed. What she found was something… disconcerting.

“Margaery, dear. You look unwell.” Margaery was pale, far paler than the freezing temperatures could account for - the stewards of the Night’s Watch kept the fire roaring, warming the hall. Dark circles covered her eyes, and her hand pressed against her stomach. The redhead reached out and comfortingly placed her hand over her sister’s. “I’m sure Robb is alright.” Inwardly, she was telling it both for Margaery and for herself.

Closing her eyes, Margaery looked like she was fighting tears. “I hope so.” Taught by her grandmother to be cunning and manipulative using her beauty and sweet nature, it had surprised her how she had fallen for the once fallen now risen again Young Wolf. But she had, a political match rapidly becoming one of love as well. “At least your dashing knight is safe in Volantis.”

Eyes widening, Sansa pursed her lips. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Through her churning stomach, Margaery chuckled. “Oh come now. Don’t lie to your family. Jon’s brand new commander in the New Valyria campaign… Podrick Payne.”

Sansa’s blush turned her cheeks a rosy crimson. With all that was going on, she nearly forgot the awkward young knight and his last letter to her. Nearly. He was a common thought during her restless nights - calming her. She narrowed her eyes at Margaery. “Arya?”

Her laugh brought a little color back to her face. “She is to be my sister as well. Had to chat about something.” Suddenly the levity left her. Turning green, Margaery scrambled off her bench and towards an empty chamber pot in the corner. Out flung the meagre contents of her stomach, dry heaves wracking her even as her system emptied.

Kneeling by her side, Sansa rubbed her upper back like her mother had done to her so long ago. “What’s going on, sister?” It couldn’t be just worry for Robb. It almost seemed like… “Forgive me if this is off base, but when was your last moonblood?”

Margaery shook her head, tears falling from her pale face. “No need.” She wiped the last bits of bile from her mouth. “I’m with child… Robb’s child. Maester Aemon confirmed it before we left for here. I… I wanted to tell him, but…” Her face trembled, trying her best not to cry. To remain stoic as a highborn noblewoman should. Without words, Sansa hugged her. ‘I’m going to be an aunt… again.”

Booming across the landscape, even through the thickened stone of the Castle Black central mess, Sansa could hear the deep horn-blow. A relieved smile crossed her face, glancing down at Margaery. “They’re back.” Her soon to be sister smiled weakly in return. Both smiles fell as another blast resonated through the air around them. “No… dear Gods, no…” One blast was for returning Rangers, two blasts for Wildlings, three blasts…

“We’re not ready,” choked out Margaery. All the troops were in the Riverlands. The Night’s Watch was far too small - even with the extra three hundred irredeemable prisoners sent after the Battle of Riverrun.

Sansa’s rapid prayers were quickly answered, for the two blasts of the horn atop the wall were followed by nothing else. “Thank the gods,” she sighed. The relief turned to confusion. “The last wildlings were Mag and Wun Wun bringing in the orphaned giant babes.” All others were presumed to have either died or living in the free folk settlements in the gift.

The door opened and Lord Commander Eddison Tollett burst in. “My ladies. It’s the giant! Wun
Wun. He’s carrying something.”

Both of them looked at each other. Someone must have been wounded. Why else would Wun Wun be carrying them. And where were the rest. Without a word, they followed Edd out to the courtyard.

Gingerly holding something in his outstretched palms, Wun Wun had just ducked underneath the lip of the tunnel exit. The two ladies scrambled down the stairs as the giant set down a quiet Meera and an unconscious Bran - still trapped in whatever vision he had. “Meera!” Sansa knelt beside Bran, feeling for his pulse. Once she found one, he looked at her. “What happened? Where are the others?” She dreaded her answer. Hoping against all hope it wasn’t what she dreaded.

“They…” she was shaking. “They saved us from the Others… but we were going to get overrun. Jon told Wun Wun to take us back here while they headed for someplace to hole up.” Meera began to break out in frantic begging. “We need to get Edderon! Get the dragons to Jon!”

Suddenly, twin roars bellowed from the top of the Wall. All looked up, seeing Rhaegal and Edderon spread their massive wings and leap off the top. Far above, a winged black shape and several smaller shadows soared below the grey clouds. “Daenerys,” Sansa murmured, watching the two others joining the convoy of dragons in their relief force. She bowed her head in silent prayer.

Chilling them to the bone, the polyglot ranging force pulled their furs tighter over their frames at the harsh northern wind. For some - Jon, Tormund, and the others from north of Moat Cailin - it was just a minor nuisance. For others - Grey Worm, Gendry, and those from the warmer southern regions - the gusts stabbed at them worse than any spear or sword. And the wind was the only sound of note at the present time, mournful howling piercing the din of discomforting silence.

“Seven fucking hells!” Tyene Martell, having never known the North outside the warmth of Winterfell - definitely not the icebox of the Land of Always Winter - was starting to go mad. Grabbing a rock from the ground, she threw it at the wall of dead men surrounding them on all sides. It hit the skull of a skeleton wight, causing the weakly attached head to fly off and the body to collapse into a pile of bones. The others around it just stood there in formation, tighter than any Bolton or Unsullied phalanx. After hundreds plunged through the weak ice into the frozen lake below, none had followed. Thus beginning the tense standoff.

Rolling his shoulders, Robb sat next to Jon and Gendry. “Think Wun Wun made it?”

Jon peered out, finding the Night King and a cluster of white walkers overlooking them. “Wun Wun is large enough to take down all but a large swarm. All are here, so I’m optimistic.” He adjusted his black Night’s Watch cloak. Despite his watch having ended, Jon kept it - a reminder of his humble origins so as not to let the power go to his head. “Edderon and Rhaegal… if they’re coming, Rhaegal knows to be cautious. He barely survived the last time.”

Robb nodded, remembering that terrifying moment. “Brother… if we make it out of this, I’m marrying Margaery. We agreed to wait until after Joffrey was defeated, but life is too short.” His time with Talisa was far too short. Looking up, Robb was certain that wherever she was, his first love would want him to find happiness.

Clasping his hand, Jon smiled at his brother. “Tell you what, we’ll do it at the Godswood in Winterfell. I’ll even officiate as your Emperor. Fitting for my Warden of the North.” Reminding himself that Gendry was there - the former smith sitting quietly - Jon turned to him. “And what about you, Gendry? You planning to do right by our sister?” Talking about marriage plans was quite out of place with death staring them in the face, but what else were they to do?
Blinking, Gendry’s mouth opened and closed several times before he could speak. “Um… I would marry Arya tomorrow if we can free her from King’s Landing. But I am just a simple Waters. Not fit for a highborn.”

Frown on his face, Jon remembered the same thoughts between him and Daenerys. Well, it had taken years to rectify that for him - Jon could rectify this now. “Well, how would you like to be legitimized?” He and Robb shared a laugh at Gendry’s wide eyes.

“Why not? Renly and Stannis are dead, and you have just as strong a claim to the Stormlands as Tommen.” Robb couldn’t think of a better choice.

Before Gendry could even respond, Jon finished it. “It’s settled. You’re now Gendry Baratheon, rightful Lord Paramount of the Stormlands.” The new Lord Baratheon - in name for now - smiled sheepishly, not feeling much different now that he had a name and highborn title.

At that moment, Tyene reminded them of the present situation. “Damn it! Why can’t this fucking end!” She spied a target. “Fucking cunts!” Arm pulled back, she let another rock fly. Despite her unassuming exterior, the throw was powerful. Her aim was true. It smacked the walking skeleton in the lower jaw, breaking it off. The bone clattered on the ice, the wight it belonged to standing as ramrod straight as before. “These things have no fucking brains.”

“Don’t do that,” Tormund grumbled, sharpening one of his dragonglass axes with a whetstone. They were all on edge - straddling a fine line between utter boredom and sheer terror - but provoking the dead shits was simply not productive.

Too angry and frustrated, Tyene didn’t even hear Tormund. Venting her tension out on the wights, the Dornish pretender chucked another rock at the same wight. Only in her rage the aim was off - was short. The rock hit the ice, skidding along the surface till it smacked into the rotting leather boot of the skeleton. The beast’s sightless skull lowered, contemplating the situation before it.

Jon stood, sensing the shift in the tenor of the air. The others sensed it too. “Seven Hells,” mumbled Robb, unsheathing Ice. Tyene, scrambling back, brought out her dual blades.

“I told you not to fucking do that!” Tormund drew his axes.

Drawing his weapon, Jon closed his eyes and took a deep breath as the wight took its first steps onto the newly hardened ice.
The Unfrozen

At first it was just the skeleton, jaw missing from Tyene’s earlier projectiles. But soon several other wights proved themselves not completely mindless and began to step across the ice. Some gripped swords, some spears, others even with bare hands. One slipped on the slippery ice, and went to crawling on its rotted belly without hesitation.

On the snow-capped island, the rangers of the living readied their weapons. “You fucking idiot!” Tormund snapped at Tyene. “You just had to fuckin’ do it!”

“They would have advanced eventually, cunt,” the Dornish pretender shot back, twirling her dragonglass daggers into position.

Jorah planted himself next to Jon, vowing to keep him alive for the Empress. “Kill the Walkers. We can fell half the army that way and make our escape.”

Shaking his head, Jon glanced at the still writhing wight, tied up and with a burlap sack covering him. “Do that and we may lose our specimen.” Daenerys needed to see it. He needed to prove to her the threat was real.

Pointing at the cluster of walkers, Barristan interjected. “Kill him.” Jon followed the line of sight directly to the Night King. “He turned them all.”

Eyes meeting across the vast distance, Jon’s anger rose at the same monster that had nearly killed Rhaegal and killed thousands at Hardhome. Gripping Longclaw tightly in his grip, Jon’s gaze never left the Night King’s as he stepped forward and swung the blade into the skeleton wight.

Trickling turned into an onrushing torrent.

For some reason the assault was staggered, but it worked into their advantage. They spread out, striking out at their undead foes with dragonglass and Valyrian steel. Some - like Tyene - used agility and speed to lash out at their foes, dodging parries or bites and running them through with dragonglass before the corpses even noticed she was there. Others - like Tormund or Brienne - used brute force with their broadswords or battleaxes to bat away rusting weapons and cave in skulls and ribcages. Swinging his warhammer mightily, the newly proclaimed Lord Gendry Baratheon looked like his father in his prime, smashing aside half a dozen wights from Robb Stark as the latter ran Ice through another’s stomach.

Jon fought like a man possessed. Anyone watching could tell how he acquired his reputation as the greatest swordsman since Ser Arthur Dayne. Barristan and Jorah guarding his flanks, he weaved fluidly, the sharp Valyrian steel effortlessly decapitating wight after wight. As one got past Ser Barristan and grabbed at Jon’s arm, the Emperor punched it in the chest. It stumbled back and ran forward, only to be greeted by Longclaw’s extended blade.

Her war cries slacking off, Brienne jabbed up with her mailed fist into a wight, smashing its skull. The grip on her other arm was gone, but her blade remained out of reach. Kicking with her legs, the two corpses dragging her closer and closer towards the icy depths refused to relinquish their holds. “Fuck you!” she screamed, but as another wight popped into view charging for her head, she closed her eyes. The end was nigh. ‘Forgive me Renly,’ she thought, unable to carry out her oath to avenge him.

Suddenly the grip on her legs disappeared. “Get up!” Her eyes opened to find the ginger beard of
Tormund Giantsbane, dragonglass axes chopping through flesh and bone alike. Brienne did not hesitate before rolling onto her stomach, grabbing oathkeeper, and leaping to her feet. Dispatching a wight with her Valyrian steel, she grabbed Tormund by the scruff of his furs and dragged him towards the rocks just ahead of a coming swarm.

“Fall back!” Jon screamed. More and more were coming, enveloping two brothers of the Night’s Watch and threatening to overwhelm them as well in a massive swarm. Leaf, using her tiny frame to evade sharp blades and grasping claws, used the last of her fire bombs to cover their escape to the rock island - where the high ground could at least offer some advantage.

Such advantage mattered not when tens of thousands snarled forward in one massive charge…

Only to be immolated in a massive burst of flame. Feeling the heat on his face - a gentle warmth to his unburnt dragon blood - Jon looked up to see the green wings of Rhaegal clear away the swarm with his dragonfire. Up above were Edderon and the smaller bat shapes of Lyanarys and Rhealla, darting off to hit other targets. A black shadow came into view, spurring Jon into action. “Get back!” Balerion landed, Dany on his back. Her eyes were transfixed at the sight before her. At the vast mass of dead and the walkers controlling them. At that moment, both she and Jon sent out commands to their children. Stay fast and move with agility through the air.

A pair of dark, icy blue eyes stared malevolently at the dragons as they dove, tongues of fire shooting out in large jets at the thousands of dead footsoldiers surrounding the trapped men. Mere rotted meat and fodder, tens of thousands more where they came from. Wordlessly - not that he had spoken a single syllable in thousands of years - the unearthly demon once known as Marden Stark swung off his undead horse. Monarch of the dead, he had his pick of the freshest and most intact mount. A telepathic command brought forth one of his subordinates, moving to the quiver to bring him an ice spear. He had missed the smaller dragon long ago at Hardhome. He would not miss again…

Suddenly he spotted the silver hair blowing in the wind - blizzard gales having whipped it out of its braid. Icy blue eyes widened in complete shock and wonder. It was as if the Night King saw a ghost. A specter of the past long since disappeared. Long since torn away from him.

’Sire.’ The subordinate was puzzled by his sovereign's hesitation. ‘What troubles you.’

‘It’s her.’ That face… after so long it couldn’t be. But it was the closest the Night King could ever find himself after thousands of years. ‘She is reborn.’ The Others knew not of what he spoke, but their King refused. Instead he stared at her, something akin to longing in his eyes.

Jon remained below, helping his comrades up Balerion’s spines. “Get on, brother!” Robb shouted.

“Not until you’re all on, go!” Looking back, he was stunned as the Night King just stood there. The memory of Rhaegal at Hardhome filled him with dread - there was no Wun Wun and Mag to save the dragons here.

At long last, the Night King snapped out of his torpor. Reaching back for the ice spear his subordinate held, out of nowhere cameSansenya, screeching at the top of her lungs and lashing out with her teeth and claws. She stayed as long as she could distract the Night King, and fled when she sensed threat, but added critical time.

Jon saw this go on, and knew the young dragon could only delay the inevitable. Managing to get Gendry up, without warning he dove into the fray at several charging wights. Valyrian steel sliced through dead flesh, the special alloy within Longclaw poison to the wights. “Go!” A growling monster found its skull caved in, Jon swinging from the falling corpse to parry a blow from a rusting sword.
“Jon!” Dany yelled, heart thumping in her chest. “I’m not leaving you!”

With a scream, Jon brought his blade through the wood of the wight’s raised shield and sliced through the monster’s shoulder, felling it. “Go now!” Running, waving his arm in the air, Out of nowhere a cluster of four wights slammed into him and sent them tumbling into a gap in the ice. Jon had only time to draw in a gasp of air before the icy cold water enveloped him.

Daenerys felt the life being sucked out of her. “NO!” The scream was joined by each of the dragons, bellowing deeply in terror.

“Khaleesi!” Jorah shouted. “We need to go!”

“I’m not leaving him!”

Sensing the pain, the anguish, Jon reached out for Balerion. Not his rider, the Father of Dragons nevertheless had a connection with all. ‘Leave. Get your mother out of here.’ Indecision filled the bond. ‘Now, Balerion! Save your mother!’

Roaring, the Dread Reborn stretched out his wings and pushed back with his legs as powerfully as he could. Dany panicked. “No! Go back! Save your father!” Agonizing over the decision to leave him behind - and how he would need to face Rhaegal afterwards - Balerion nevertheless followed his father’s order. His belly and legs smacked into rock and ice, trying to force himself into the sky. Those on his back gripped onto spines or each other, Gendry nearly slipping off if not for Robb quickly grabbing his hand and hauling him back.

All Others watched their leader, ice spear in hand as the large dragon’s wings struggled to ascend into the air. Gusts from the flapping sent hundreds of their army to the ground. But he refused to move, instead shock still as he stared at the rider atop it. ‘The beasts, my King,’ one white walker urged. It was not too late to acquire one for their army.

‘Quiet, general.’ A single raised hand silenced him. The Night King’s gaze rested on the large, black dragon - her riding on its back - as it finally became airborne. ‘We do not need her beasts.’ Her eyes met his, time standing still. ‘There is another.’

Balerion’s wings beating through the freezing air, Dany felt a sinister chill pierce down to her very core. The dragon’s flight path brought her into line of sight with the otherworldly demon, the Dragon Empress eye to eye with the Night King. The final proof in what she had hoped to the very heavens above was a lie. Was a myth. But Jon had been right. Tears fell from her cheeks. ‘Jon. Whatever gods are listening, please protect him.’

Just as Daenerys and the others left the battlefield, she heard it. The Night King opened his mouth and out came a piercing scream. A high pitched roar, one that even caused the mighty dragons to flinch. A scream that would haunt Daenerys till her dying day.

The heavens cried in agony. Rain and wind battered lands as far apart as Pyke and the Great Grass Sea, raging storms voicing the anger of the divine upon the realm of humanity. The fragile equilibrium that had kept strong since the end of the first Long Night - punctured only infrequently by ripples such as the decadence of the Valyrian Freehold leading to its Doom or the sheer might of Aegon’s Conquest of Westeros - had already been shattered with the return of the Night King. Such a throbbing, chronic pain couldn’t compare at the moment to the sheer agony caused by yet another disturbance.
A ceremony. An offering. One of purported Royal Blood, of the line of Kings recognized by divine will. The scions of House Baratheon, since the offspring of Ormund Baratheon and his wife, Rhælle Targaryen - sister of Maester Aemon - had such blood. Passed on to the usurper King, Robert Baratheon. An affront to the divine, given his sins, but stomached through his connection to the true royalty. His blood though, died without legitimate issue. A fact unknown to most. A fact that led to a great war consuming Westeros.

In such ceremony, the offering was of royal blood. The blood of the sister of the current usurper of the throne, Joffrey Baratheon. A sacrifice of his own blood through that of another. An act of filicide anathema already, but the lack of the true blood of an ordained King drove the divine will towards madness. For weeks the storms raged and earth shook… unholy command to strike down the one tasked with saving mankind ripping existence apart from the seams.

Reaching down at this very moment, as the one promised collapses into the icy depths in utter solitude, the heavens found the antidote to their anguish. A secret passed down from Stark to Stark - one half-dormant since the days of the Kings of Winter. In the blink of an eye, the one known for the longest time as Jon Snow found the gift passed to him by his mother returned in full.

Jon kicked and kicked at the blackness below, forcing away the tendrils of death as he struggled towards the light of the surface. He would not die in this forsaken icebox, not while his wife and children remained in need of him. All around the shards of cold stabbed at him, but it only felt numb. A twist of fate - or providence - in which he could barely feel the freezing temperatures soaking his clothes and surrounding his body. Was it overwhelming his senses? Jon had no idea, but charged for the surface nonetheless.

Above him, the icy water scalding his eyes, Jon could make out the faint flashes of red-orange flame. The flat surface broke as a stilled corpse - head caved in - was engulfed by the depths. Another joined it, and then another. Jets of red-orange soon joined the flashes. Like Rhaegal’s, only smaller. Confusion only amplified as a gloved hand was thrust beneath the tantalizing surface, open and offered to him. Jon took it, feeling a strength and warmth not of the outworldly malevolence of the others. With a heaving strength it pulled him up and out of the water.

All around the swirling snow obscured much. Columns of wights charged forth, dragonfire from young Sansenya keeping them back as much as her tiring breaths could. Gasping, sucking in the cold air to his numbing lungs, Jon looked up to find a face lost to memory. A familiar face that shocked him to his core. “Got your sword, boy!” the face yelled over the howls of wind and wight.

“Uncle Benjen?” The Emperor’s voice was weak, but from exhaustion rather than the cold.

“There’s no time to argue!” The last surviving child of Rickard Stark hauled his nephew to the waiting horse as he spoke. “Your girl’s blasts are dying, come on!”

Sansenya spat another blast of dragonfire at the screaming corpses, wings beating hard to stay level. Unlike her brothers, her young throat and fireglands tapped out quickly. Her throat grew tired, flame slacking. With a regretful hoot, she fell back, plopping to the ground near her father and hissing. Teeth bared to fight off whatever came her way.

Eyeing the dragon’s instincts, Benjen mounted his horse, Jon barely conscious alongside him. “Hold on, nephew. This is gonna be bumpy.” Readying his chain, Benjen aimed for the safest pathway out of the frozen hell - one only a quarter covered in blue-eyed corpses. With lantern aflame he charged into the fray. Wight after wight found their heads or ribcages caved in by the force of the spinning mace, lifeless bodies set alight in brilliant pyres. Benjen’s steed smashed through others with sheer momentum, Sansenya joining the fray with the remnants of her dragonfire. A pathway was cleared.
Handing a spear to his king, the Other commander registered what would have been surprise - if he was capable of genuine emotion - when the silent monarch refused. He and his comrades stared at him in confusion.

The Night King turned, his mind communicating to his commanders. ‘It is not his time.’ Looking back at the retreating figure, he narrowed his eyes. ‘He shall protect her, until the right time.’ Long silver hair, angelic face. The woman reminded him of a time long past, a time stolen away from him. He would have it back, even if he had to create mountains of corpses across the entire world to get it.

The snows swirling round the Army of the Dead only grew into a maelstrom in his wake.

Shrieks of the Army of the Dead disappearing behind them, growing fainter and fainter as the Night King ordered them back, Benjen allowed himself to look down on his nephew. The years had been both kind and painful to him, leaving a strong but scarred man from the quiet yet idealistic youth he had last seen. A man that had finally found his destiny. Hearing about him and his exploits from the Three-Eyed Raven - the late Three-Eyed Raven - kept Benjen’s spirits high in his desolate isolation from it all. “You’re not shivering, Jon.” It just hit him.

Mind still clouding from the fatigue, Jon suddenly became aware of the fact as well. “I…” He really couldn’t find anything to say. A northerner got used to the chill, to the biting snow and ice with the sharpness of the finest blade, and he had never felt out of place even in the worst snowstorms. But he had always shivered in the cold.

Benjen eyed him with wonderment. As if he was staring at the gods themselves. “The Unfrozen…” It was present from birth in the descendents of the first Starks, but partially dormant for centuries. He barely noticed the screeches from Sansenya as she set into a low flying path alongside the horse, Benjen’s heart thumping in his chest.

The boy had seen enough tragedy in his life. Coldhands thanked the old gods above that he would be spared the greatest sorrow his ancestor had endured long before.

Spyglass lowering, with a heavy heart Robb stepped back from the parapet. His eyes were filled with grief and worry. “Still no sign of him, or Sansenya.” Mournful hoots rained from above, the dragons still circling the fortress of Eastwatch. They had been at it since arriving back, standing vigil for their father and sister.

Arms wrapped around her chest protectively, Daenerys fought back her tears. Fought back the anguish. “It… it’s been days.” Given the close calls with the Night King, all had talked Dany out from taking the dragons and searching for him. Jon was resourceful, they had said in so many words. He would have found a way… but after this long? Droplets slipped down her face, the possibility destroying whatever was left of her composure.

“If he… we can find his body.” Margaery pushed hope even in the face of the worst. Though even to her it seemed far-fetched. She was on the verge of a breakdown as well, the pregnancy driving her emotions mad. “Melisandre revived him once…”

Face drawn in a mask of steel, drawing on all the strength obtained from her time in Ramsay’s clutches, Sansa shook her head. “His body is likely unreachable.” It affected her greatly, but someone needed to be strong.

“Or worse.” All understood what Robb was saying. Margaery fell into her betrothed’s embrace, holding tight. Sansa closed her eyes, fighting to remain steady at the idea of her beloved brother as
meat in the Night King’s army. The image proved the breaking point for Daenerys, body shaking as she descended into unrestrained sobs.

Heart breaking to see his Empress cry, Jorah averted his gaze. It reminded him of the terrible days early in her marriage to Khal Drogo, where Viserys would accost and threaten to abuse her. Where she mourned the loss of Jon back to the North, likely never to be seen again. Her pain brought him agony. Looking out over the vast snows of the land beyond the Wall, the land his father had died trying to protect against, Jorah felt an intense anger at the malevolence hidden within that took his Empress’ love away…

A galloping speck below, bat-like shape alongside as they both raced for the Eastwatch gate, suddenly caught Jorah’s eye. “Khaleesi…” Tears welling in her eyes, Dany glanced up at her Queensguard. “Look.” Just as he said it, the twin blasts of the horn heralded the return of two brothers of the Night’s Watch. Old brother, their watches long ended.

Sansa and Margaery hot on her heels, Daenerys pushed her way to the edge of the battlements, staring down at the figure as it approached. There was Sansenya, flying and screeching up towards her brothers and sisters. Astride the horse were one man riding upright, and a second man lying horizontally on the mount. His wavy, raven locks were instantly recognizable. “Jon!” Tears still flowing, Daenerys dashed for the stairs as their dragons roared towards the heavens.

Below, Benjen urged the horse to a gradual halt in front of the steel gate. Leaping off, he gingerly helped Jon onto the ground, Sansenya landing her hot body on the ground for her father to lean on. She hooted, happy to have him safe. “Easy does it, nephew. You are the one that was promised. Like me, the cold can’t kill you. Not anymore, but shock and fatigue can.”

“Cold… but how…”

“That will all be discussed, nephew. Discussed at the proper time. Leave this land, win the war. Only a united mankind can hope to defeat him.” Knowing Robert as Ned had, Benjen was certain that even he would never have believed this, let alone the mad idiot Joffrey.

“Uncle…” Jon felt unconsciousness starting to overcome him, the numbness masking an overpowering fatigue. “Why didn’t you… come back?” He remembered the riderless horse returning to Castle Black. The scramble among the Watch after First Ranger Benjen Stark’s disappearance.

“I can’t.” He opened his tunic, revealing a small wound over his heart, skin there the color of ice. Same as the Night King. “He got me, that day long ago. Children of the Forest found me before I died, saved me with a shard of dragonglass through the heart. Still… I’m not quite living, though I fight for them.” He pointed to the Wall. “I can’t cross until the Night King does, though he can now. Bran has his mark, and Bran crossed. He may now follow, and the Great Fall will allow him to.”

“Great Fall…”

It was barely a murmur, blackness overcoming him. Sansenya cried in worry.

He felt Benjen ruffle his hair. “Stay safe, Jon. Your mother, Lyanna, would be proud of you.” The last thing Jon saw was his uncle remounting and disappearing into the blizzard, voices shouting behind him as the gate finally lifted open.

Not much had changed from several days before. Daenerys found herself pacing in front of the roaring fire, anger burning deep in her belly. But while rage and frustration had been the only
emotion fueling her then, now such were tempered with a generous percentage of agonizing pain and longing. “Gods, when will they let me in?!” Outside the beating of wings only grew louder as all six dragons picked up on her mood.

“Khaleesi, calm yourself,” Jorah pushed, rising from his seat to steady her.

Daenerys turned her head to the ground, stomach churning. She had already thrown up the contents of her stomach twice while waiting for the Maester to finish treating Jon for exposure, shock, and various wounds. The churning emotions within her were threatening to make it three - even though it was empty. “Jorah… don’t.” Dany was in no mood to be mollified. “I almost lost the most important person in the world to me, my Emperor. Now, he’s only ten feet away and they won’t even let me see him!” The last few words were an angered shout.

“In all fairness, your Highness.” At the resultant dragon glare, Davos refused to flinch. He had seen enough of those from Stannis to be used to it, and at least now he didn’t have to worry about losing the rest of his fingers. “Before you can hold ‘im and squeeze ‘im and… well, other things. He’ll have to get the all clear from the Maester.” He couldn’t suppress a chuckle at her put out blush. Age and experience didn’t mean he didn’t like seeing two younguns experiencing true love.

A formally silent figure sitting in the corner of the hall chose that time to speak. “Jon will be fine.” The once vibrant expression and mischievous eyes of Brandon Stark were a placid calm. To the untrained eye he seemed devoid of emotion. Not true. Emotion was there, just watered down. Dany didn’t really know what to make of Bran - the Three-Eyed Raven as he called himself now - since he used his magic to rise to his feet in front of the Eastwatch godswood and claimed his new mantle. “He is the second coming of Azor Ahai.”

Davos cleared his throat. “Well, the Lady Melisandre will be delighted to get confirmation from a greenseer.”

Falling into a chair next to Bran, Dany held her head in her hands. “I want to believe you… but…” She sobbed softly, hating the emotional wreck Jon’s mortality was turning her into.

A comforting hand rested on her shoulder. “He cannot be killed… at least not now. It is not his time.” Truthfully, Bran’s greenseeing was vague on the future. He couldn’t really predict outcomes, but on this he was crystal clear. Jon was special, in a manner the true ramifications of still eluded him.

Leaf, sitting beside him - Meera was sleeping in one of the guest rooms - knew, but was tight lipped. Perhaps it was something that Jon needed to discover for himself… or to wait for the right moment.

The door opening caused all eyes in the room to dart to it. Ser Barristan walked out first, a tired smile forming on his face upon meeting gazes with the Dragon Empress. Behind him was the Maester of Eastwatch. “Your Highness…”

Daenerys was up on her feet before he could continue. “Is he alright?” The moment’s hesitation brought on the Dragon Empress. “Tell me!”

The command of the Empress was a must to comply with. “Of course, your Highness. The Emperor is on the path to a full recovery.” As soon as the words were said, it felt as if a weight was lifted off Dany’s chest. She closed her eyes, sighing in relief. “His Majesty’s wounds have been treated with herb-infused snow and were applied dressings. None are serious, and warm stew and rest should treat his... shock.”

From his halting tone, Davos suspected something unsaid. “And…? There’s something you are not
informing your Empress, Maester.”

Dark purple eyes zeroed in on the old man, causing him to finch. “Well? Tell me what this further piece of information is.”

Clearing his throat, the ancient maester approached the Empress. “I have seen considerable disease and injury in my long life, your Highness. Men suffering from fever, from grayscale… from bones broken and smashed and crushed… and I have seen considerable cases of frostbite and cold sickness. If his Majesty was truly lost in the icy wasteland, wet and clothing tattered, he should have the cold sickness. His skin is freezing, but no cold sickness. I… I can’t explain it.”

Digesting what the maester said, Daenerys couldn’t help but think to the birth of her dragons. Of how she had walked into the fire and emerged unscathed. Of how Jon’s body was raised from the specter of death through fire. ‘A dragon does not burn… could then a wolf not freeze?’ Jon had the blood of the wolf inside him through his mother. Yet another facet of how extraordinary he was.

At this point, it really didn’t matter. “May I see him.” The maester nodded, and she didn’t waste time.

As she stepped into the room, Dany could hear her sister’s angry voice. “You stupid, stupid idiot!” Sansa’s voice was raised in anger as she berated Jon from beside his bed. “Everyone says you have sense, but you don’t! There was no reason for this!” Rage boiling within her, Dany could also hear pain. “Your wife and children could have lost you! I could have… my brother…” Finally, after days, the Hand of the King broke down.

“Sansa.” At the word coming out of her husband, Dany felt all tension leaving her. ‘He is alright.’ She watched with a smile as he hugged his sister, whispering words of comfort. Jon was a good man, a selfless man. It was why she loved him so.

Noticing her enter, Robb nudged the two of them. “Sister, let’s give the lovebirds some privacy.” Nodding at Dany, he wrapped an arm around the still upset Sansa and led her out.

Dany’s heart clenched at the sight of Jon. Bandages all over his bare torso - though many of his glaring scars still showed - he was white. A deathly pale. “Oh Jon.” In an instant she was by his side.

Scooting over slightly, Jon patted the side of his bed. “Come here.” Before she could say no, he frowned. “Do not disobey your Emperor’s command.” At his firm tone, she couldn’t help but chuckle, and slid in beside him. Gingerly, to avoid hurting him. “Gods, you’re cold.”

The warmth of Dany’s dragon blood felt good against his skin. “I’m fine, Daenerys.” He didn’t understand it either, be it the Maester’s examination or what Uncle Benjen had said, but he wasn’t complaining. “I’m sorry, my dragon.”

Despite the cold skin, Dany buried her face in his chest. “No, Jon. I’m sorry. I didn’t believe you…” The very concept, an army of dead men, it challenged everything she knew about the world. But it was real. The memory of the Night King and his entire army haunted her, his gaze at her and her alone, filled Dany with a fear so deep that it was alien. “We will defeat him.” Her blood began to boil, feeling a welcome heat on Jon’s skin. “Remove Joffrey, take back the Kingdom, unite all of mankind to defeat the Night King. We will do it all.”

Wrapping his arms tighter around her, Jon didn’t care about that. At the moment, all he needed was her. One last moment of peace before being plunged into war.
“Keep your feet steady, Rhaegar! If you have to retreat, don’t let your opponent force you down!” Crossing his arms with a smile, Jon watched as his son took his uncle’s advice. The boy was small, and impossibly young, but had the Targaryen fire and the unassuming strength of his great-uncle. Ollie, while growing like a weed, proved an excellent sparring teacher. All the six year old was learning were the basics, and he was a prodigy. Ollie pressing forward, Rhaegar stepped back in a graceful move - no scrambling. “That’s it!”

“A little more… invested than Ser Rodrik, Robb, but otherwise you remembered his lessons well.” The two brothers were leaning back on chairs in the great hall of Winterfell. The twins were having their lessons out of the cold, Arya waiting her turn patiently to the side while her brother sparred with Ollie. Practice sword in hand, she practiced the simple steps that her namesake had taught her. If Arya the elder’s presence was missed, the young princess didn’t show it.

Robb chuckled, grinning at his brother. “It is my contribution to the future of the Empire by training the dragonwolves. Rhaegar will be ruling essentially the whole world with help from his sister. If I had a hand in it, then my work is done.” His good mood grew slightly somber. “Especially since Arya isn’t here.”

Jon frowned as well. “We’ll get her back.” His fist clenched. They would get her back.

All around, servants and laborers scrambled about the great hall. Decorating it for a feast, the first in Winterfell since Jon and Dany had wed. Another wedding would grace the castle the next day, this time for their Lord rather than their King. The Warden of the North would finally gain his wardeness. House Stark would finally get its Lady. Currently, the ladies were all in the Lady of Winterfell’s solar preparing Margeary for her special day - and underneath his facade, Jon could tell that Robb was terrified.

It was understandable. There were always pre-wedding nerves - Jon had them, and he loved Daenerys desperately. But with Robb… Jon knew it was more than that. He hadn’t been around, only witnessing the aftermath, but heard stories about his sister-in-law. The Queen Talisa Stark was disliked as a foreigner by many, but considered a kind, smart Queen by those unbiased that knew her. Her death had left Robb a shell of a man that only the fight against the dead had kept from fully accepting the embrace of death. Margaery brought him out of it and gave him a second chance at not only marriage, but a love match.

And she was pregnant. Same as Talisa had been before Lothar Frey stabbed her in the womb. “It won’t happen… to Margaery. You do know that, right?”

Robb’s face darkened considerably. “You don’t know that.”

“Walder Frey is dead, killed by Arya.” It still both impressed and disturbed Jon at how his sister wiped out the residents of the Twins. Winter definitely came for House Frey. “So are the Boltons.” That was largely his victory. His, Dany’s, and Sansa’s.

“Talisa died because of me. My…” He was fighting the long suppressed grief and guilt. “What if I fuck up and cause Margaery and my child to suffer the same fate.”

Before Jon could respond, he heard his daughter call to him. “Father, watch me! Watch me!” She bounced with excitement, dying to show her beloved father how much she was improving at the basic water dancing.
“Light on your feet, Arya,” he said, laughing at her exuberance. Jon couldn’t fathom the level of joy his children imputed onto him. They washed away the brooding exterior - or any negative emotion - like a veritable tsunami, no matter the stress or rage boiling within him at the time. The pulsing headache that resided beneath his skull took a pause around Arya and Rhaegar, the only other time being when he was inside Daenerys. Looking at the quivering in Robb’s lips, sheen in his eyes, Jon knew his brother would feel the same about his child. “It’s why we do this, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Go all in, despite the fear. Despite the worries. We’re not like those that abandon their families, that isn’t the Stark way.” Reaching out, Jon clasped his brother on the back. “We gotta look to the future. Look towards the wonders of tomorrow that will build a better world on top of what we plan on building - especially now, brother.”

Watching Arya move gracefully, an almost carbon copy at the moment of their sister despite her silver locks and youth, Robb smiled. “Thank you, brother,” he told Jon, feeling lighter than he had been for the past few days.

“Ah, Ser Jaime.” The hairs on the back of the former Kingsguard’s neck stood at attention at the syrupy voice of the Lord Protector of the Vale - almost in complete rebellion. “I didn’t know that Lord Tywin had discharged you from his service…”

Littlefinger’s voice was cut off by Jaime slamming him into the brick wall, hand wrapped around his neck. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t squeeze the life out of you, child killer.”

“Please… I’m all…” Gasping, sputtering, Littlefinger fought unconsciousness. “I’m all protecting Tommen.” At the name of his youngest, Jaime let Littlefinger go, who fell to his knees gasping for breath. “It wasn’t… my idea. His Highest has been… obsessed with the occult since the Red Witch fled.”

Jaime felt he could be lying, but was deathly curious. “And Tommen?”

“Qyburn and the High Sparrow think they can finish the job of dispatching the Dragon Queen with his blood, but I intervened. He’s the Lord of Storm’s End, and I told Joffrey that the Stormlands would desert him if Tommen was harmed. He doesn’t deserve this fate… neither of them do.”

Fists clenching, Jaime was on the hair’s edge of either crying or screaming in rage. “Where is Cersei?” When he left Bronn to storm into the keep, her room had been empty and in his search had found Littlefinger.

“She is in Myrcella’s room. She hasn’t left since…” Baelish couldn’t finish his sentence before Jaime rushed off.

He had found his sister that night. Jaime saw Cersei collapsed face down on Myrcella’s bed, eyes brimming with tears and hair shorn off in grief. She had thrown herself into his arms, Jaime giving her whatever comfort he could. It had been a hard several weeks in the capitol since then - at least for some.

For others, things were going quite swimmingly - including the man sitting across from Jaime in the high-end tavern within the wealthy neighborhood of the city close to the Red Keep. “Food is much blander here, Lannister,” Daario Naharis remarked, biting into the hot meat pie. “Needs spices. An establishment such as this should be able to afford some.”
“Forgive the humble tavern-keeper. Spice imports are hard to come by with the loss of Slaver’s Bay to your former Queen and her husband.” Jaime couldn’t help the snide remark. Daario Naharis had risen high in Joffrey’s, his son’s, esteem after capturing Arya Stark.

It seemed that the small council delighted in assigning Jaime to him for counterintelligence operations against suspected traitors or Brotherhood members within the city. Daario excelled, while it made Jaime restless. “Oh well, it is too bad.” He put his spoon down. “See, traitors are the same in every continent. These ones here are no different from the ones in Meereen with the Sons of the Harpy - idiots those were. At least the Brotherhood has some kind of religious destiny, not keeping down seven out of ten people in their city.”

“Quite. But they are at war with the King.”

“The whole war is an exercise in futility, Lannister.” Daario’s eyes twinkled, downing half his mead. “She wasn’t raised here, she has no concept of what Westeros wants or needs. The Stark Bastard wishes to conquer all and is using her to do it.”

Jaime narrowed his eyes. The sellsword was playing an interesting game, going just far enough to test him but restraining himself enough not to appear disloyal - and it wasn’t like Jaime had enough clout anymore in the eyes of court to disparage Joffrey’s Enforcer. “And what are you trying to say?”

He waved over the barmaid for another portion. “Hunting makes one famished,” Daario laughed as the plate of stew was placed in front of him. “What I’m saying is that the Dragon Queen would make a perfect client queen for His Highest, especially…” He lowered his voice, understanding of his mortality in the capital if he ran off too much. “Especially with the defeat of the Masters, useless cunts that they were. Her ruling Slaver’s Bay for Joffrey would allow it to be integrated into his control.”

Nodding absentmindedly, Jaime figured it made some sense… only if one allowed the assumption that Daenerys Targaryen would ever allow this to transpire. “I presume that she would be ruling with you by her side in some manner?”

Smirking, Daario just sipped at his ale. “I would think I have more sense than the Stark Bastard. From what he told the Dowager Queen, he thinks there’s an army of corpses ready to attack us.”

That thought was insane to Jaime, but the rest of what Daario was saying also seemed mad. “I doubt she’d choose you over him, Naharis. From what we’ve all heard, she is committed to him.” The pair of conquerors - one northern, one southern - fighting from dragonback to conquer Westeros like Aegon and his sister wives. Having witnessed them in person at Riverrun, Jaime knew one underestimated them at their own peril.

Resuming to cut through his pie, Daario shrugged. “There are ways, Lannister. There are ways.”

Winding back the crossbow, the Chimera reached for his fourth gold bolt - personally crafted by the goldsmiths of King’s Landing for their holy ruler. “My aim is getting better, don’t you think, fool?” Joffrey giggled, putting the bolt in place.

Once a noble knight - if not a proud or respected one, due to a maze of personal failings and declining of family fortune - Dontos Hollard sat from his stool in the corner of the King’s chambers just grateful to be alive. “Quite so, your Highest,” he replied. The personal fool of the King was not a hard person to replace, and at any time Joffrey could end the tenure granted to him due to Sansa Stark’s pleadings at a time long past. A debt owed yet not repaid.
“No need to be modest, fool.” Joffrey was in a good mood, or else something harder would join the several rotted fruits thrown in the direction of the last scion of House Hollard. “My aim has gotten better. Soon I shall put a bolt into the heart of the Stark Bastard.” He raised the crossbow to his shoulder. “After all, grandfather has orders to capture him alive.”

At the release of the bolt, Dontos didn’t even cringe as the projectile slammed into the woman’s abdomen - not the worst evil that he had seen in his time as the King’s plaything. She screamed into her gag, tied up to a hook on the wall across from Joffrey’s bed. A former employee of Lord Petyr Baelish, one that was causing him trouble. A hefty sum from the crown allowed Baelish to cater to the King’s… particular taste.

After all, except for Dontos and the blind servants, no one saw the King’s unshrouded visage and lived to tell the tale.

Giggling once more, Joffrey skipped over to the whore, pulling out the bolts slowly and agonizingly. He felt so aroused, delighting in her pain. “After that, perhaps Sansa will be in this bitch’s place. I heard Ramsay Bolton liked to… sample her. Means I’ll have to be creative to get her to scream…” Turning, the room turned to ice as he was face to face with the pale corpse of Robert Baratheon. “No…” Joffrey stammered, dropping the crossbow. “You can’t come back…” Much time had passed since the last time he had been visited by the specter of his father.

Blood seeped from the demon’s mouth and gut. “The winged beast bears down to you, justice delivered, justice due.”

“I am the winged beast,” he cried. “The Chimera sent by the gods to deliver greatness.” Joffrey was soon mortified as his father morphed before him into Ned Stark himself, risen from the dead.

Skin pale, neck bisected in a large cut, Ned’s eyes glowed a malevolent blue. “Plan failed it has, abomination created. All gods have been angered, one man rewarded.”

“No! The Stark bastard will die! I sacrificed King’s blood to do so!”

“Demon brought to this earth, who the chosen must see.” Ned Stark’s neck fountained blood, head slipping off and rolling to just before Joffrey’s feet. The mouth still moved. “That foretold shall pass, gods’ justice will be.”

Dontos Hollard observed his King, his tormentor, collapse onto the bed, weeping and screaming in pure agony.

The few candles lit in the Winterfell war room in a low, orange light - casting a warm yet sinister appearance. For a large council, many would have the squint through the still prevalent darkness, but for the single figure hunched over the center of the Westerosi continent like a dark god observing his domain, the little light from the room’s candelabras and the single lantern placed beside him on the table was sufficient for his purposes. The sounds drifting through the walls found the feast at full swing, ensuring he wouldn’t be disturbed.

Once again, Jon found himself staring at the map table. All pieces were arranged just as they had been since the aftermath of the losses months earlier and his victories in Essos. Static, eating up supplies plentiful for Tywin but slowly depleting for him. Ravens carrying dispatches brought news both bad and good. Good being from Podrick, ready to depart Volantis with significant reinforcements blessed by the Council of New Valyria. Bad in that Yara had failed to force her way through the naval defense lines Guarding the Narrow Sea, protecting King’s Landing from the
Every line of attack he imagined just found three different ways Tywin could shift his forces in order to funnel them onto ground chosen by the Man who Made Dorne Howl. No, he needed to force Tywin onto ground of his choosing - to react to his movements.

Trouble was it was looking impossible, and with the dead approaching he couldn’t risk the dragons against Lannister rockets and scorpions. ‘Gods, help me.’

“Jon?”

If Jon was surprised to hear her being the voice that disturbed his solitude, he didn’t show it. “Lady Stark,” he replied coolly, but politely. A tone he had perfected over his childhood. “I thought you’d remain at the feast.”

Catelyn bit her lip, the Emperor keeping his back turned to her. She took in what she saw - flowing black hair down to the base of his neck, shoulders tense, hands splayed across the table, head bent down in deep thought. Jon may have been Rhaegar’s son, but in this he was all Ned. With a sigh, she stepped alongside him. “Everyone was continuing to have a good time, so I decided to put the twins to bed.”

Jon felt a pang in his heart for his children. He had just seen them hours before, but missed them all the same - same as with Dany. “Are they alright?” he asked tenderly.

“Aye, they are. Arya wanted me to make sure you were fine.” Truthfully, Catelyn would do anything for those precious children. To her, she felt the same way about them as she did Robb’s unborn babe. They were a chance for her to genuinely make right on the promise she made to the gods as Jon laid ill so long ago.

“Tell them I’m fine.” He made no move to even look at her. Much as he desired to forgive and forget, in this moment of great stress he felt the long dormant anger bubbling up.

Catelyn placed a motherly arm on his shoulder. “Are you sure?”

He immediately shook it off, causing her to flinch. “Why do you care?”

In all honesty, Catelyn had expected this. Since Ned informed her of the truth - of the greatest secret in all of Westeros - she had waited for when Jon would confront her. Daenerys had, Sansa had, Robb had… hell, even Arya had before she was captured. There was not one day where she didn’t flay herself for it, for failing her vow to the gods. And yet, Jon had put it aside… until now. “I deserve that, Jon.”

“Yes you do.” He could feel the dragon finally awakening, pressing his ice to the fiery anger enough to turn it into a scalding simmer. A single word. “Why?”

She owed him an explanation, but whatever formed on the tip of her tongue seemed woefully inadequate to her. “I have nothing to say that would justify it, Jon. Part of me thinks it was your threat to Robb’s claim…”

“I never wanted Winterfell!” Head turning to yell at her, he immediately shifted back to the table. “All I wanted was to be a Stark. To be loved and accepted by my family. Your hate robbed any bond I could have had with Sansa, and it took her being married to Ramsay Bolton for that to change!” It still pained him. “Father accepted me, Robb accepted me, Arya and Bran and Rickon accepted me… but it wasn’t the same. I was always something of an outcast even to them. All because I was born.” The last sentence had dropped to a whisper.
It were times like these where Catelyn truly felt the pain of Ned’s death, but it was justice from the gods for her to face this alone. “I hate myself for it. You were just a child, and I let my own insecurity and bitterness fall on someone so blameless in all of this.”

Jon’s voice dropped into a low whisper. “You never made me forget who I am, always made sure I knew that I was not a Stark. Knew that all of Winterfell wished I had died long ago.”

The former Lady of Winterfell - a title now passed to Margaery - was silent for a moment. “Decades ago, when you were just a babe, you contracted the pox from one of the servants. Weak with fever, Maester Luwin informed us you were close to death. For but a moment, I… I hoped it would happen.” Jon was silent, so Catelyn continued, feeling herself the monster she was. “Feeling Sansa move inside me, I realized immediately how evil such thoughts were, but you continued to deteriorate. The curse of a woman’s spite, solely… I lost the man I was supposed to marry, lost him to the Mad King’s fire.”

As she was talking, Jon felt tears in his eyes. His grandfather, murdering his uncle and other grandfather solely due to the love his true parents shared for each other. His birth had created so much pain on the world, the weight falling on his shoulders.

“When Brandon dead, with marrying his stranger of a brother… I hoped that Ned would love me, and I thought we had when he rode off with the Usurper. But he came home with you in his arms, supposedly the babe of the woman he chose. Gods…” The pain of the past feelings and her current shame shook her. “I hated him, but I loved him too… it was easier for me to resent you for all of it, and it hit me at that point. I prayed to the gods to save you, and in return I would take care of you as a mother would. They delivered, but I didn’t.” She felt hot tears running down her cheeks. “I’ve never thought much about gods and fate… not as much as Ned did, but all that our family has been through. All the pain and suffering and death, all of it found itself born in the fact that I couldn’t love a motherless boy.”

The room was silent, for what seemed like an eternity. “When Bran was hurt…” Jon finally said. “Father had told you the truth, since you let me see him without raising a fuss?”

“Yes, he had. I… couldn’t muster any anger toward you after that… nor did I want to.”

Jon sighed. “I’ve met so many, dealt with so many, dispensed justice to so many who erred, but did not ever accept the error of their ways.” His mind drifted to Viserys, to Janos Slynt, to Thorne and the conspirators. All men bullheaded in their wrongthink. “You aren’t one of them. You hurt me greatly, Lady Stark, but… even the good in this world can make mistakes. I won’t forget, but I can forgive.” Someone like Joffrey could never be forgiven their evil, but someone like Catelyn could be forgiven their mistakes. Her contrition was genuine.

“You are a better man than all of us. Just like Ned.” Blinking through the droplets, Catelyn chuckled dryly. “Ironic, everyone assumed that the honorable Ned Stark would never lie.” She sighed, remembering how good her husband was - even when it would hurt him, he remained true to himself. “When really, he was too honorable not to lie for you. In his own way, Ned beat the experts at the game of thrones.”

Jon couldn’t help but smirk at the thought. ‘He really did.’ Even Varys, the master of knowledge, hadn’t even found out. ‘He used his honor and reputation to outflank them all. Outflank them all…” Eyes widening, Jon felt his mind whirr in epiphany. Almost manically flicking his gaze across the map table, he could see vast troop movements, demonstrations to tie down the Lannisters, skirmishes and battles as Tywin frantically tried to rescue himself from the threat… all culminating in one final battle.
All if he could take a page from his father’s playbook. “Lady Stark,” he began. “Do people compare me to my father? My father Ned Stark?” he felt he needed to add.

Blinking, Catelyn furrowed her brows in confusion. “The comparison has been one I’ve heard. That you are as honorable as he is.” She hesitantly placed her hand back on his shoulder. “He was your father, Jon. Rhaegar may also be such, but Ned raised you. He loved you.”

It heartened Jon, but this wasn’t why he asked. “No, it’s something else.” Decisive, shoulders thrown back and a spring in his step for the first time in weeks, Jon threw open the door. “Ser Barristan, find General Caryn and bring him to me.”

Brows furrowing, Barristan nevertheless bowed. “I shall return with him shortly, your Majesty.”

Shutting the door, Jon found himself face to face with Catelyn. The former Lady Stark and current member of the Small Council was worried about the complete change in demeanor of the Emperor. He was planning something, and the fact he both only asked for Theodosius Caryn - not Daenerys, Davos, Tyrion, or Sansa - and did not ask her to leave perplexed her further. “What is going on, Jon?”

Jon regarded the woman that had tormented him for his entire childhood - the woman that had also cared for his children and given them unconditional love. What was about to pass, if it was to work, needed nearly everyone in his inner circle to be unaware of his plans. Even Daenerys. At least until the end. He needed someone to plan it with him, however, and no one would suspect him to confide in Catelyn Stark.

After her confession to him, perhaps he could trust her. Dany did. “No one can know of what I am about to tell you, understood?” She nodded, listening patiently as he recounted the thoughts and inspirations that popped up in his mind.

By the end, her jaw had dropped in a stunned silence. What was said was so intricate, so devious yet unassuming… “You truly are your father’s son.” Somehow, Jon’s plan would keep his honor and deceive them all.

“Daenerys cannot know. Nor can any of the Hands.”

“I agree.” Catelyn did not wish to betray the Empress, or her own daughter, but it was necessary. “Joffrey would easily be fooled, but not Tywin or the others. Their reactions must be genuine to fool those experienced with the game.” Her brow rose. “But why Caryn? Why not Robb, or Grey Worm?”

Jon smiled. “Because this plan is his brainchild, or derived from it at least.” As if by choreography, the door to the map room opened and General Theodosius Caryn entered. Barristan sealing off the room behind him, the general bowed to his sovereign. “Welcome, general. Thank you for arriving promptly.”

“As your Majesty commands, I obey,” he replied, striding up to Jon and Lady Stark - a confusing pair to say the least. “Although, it puzzles me as to why I’m here, if I may be blunt.” It was known that the Emperor visited this room often, but he was always alone.

Motioning to the map table, Jon waited until both Catelyn and General Caryn had their eyes trained on where his was - the center of the Westerosi continent. “General, you have been quite vocal in your proposition for victory since even before I left for Essos. Do you mind repeating said plan?”

Confused - and not to mention worried that this would only lead to his being sacked before he could
avenge his family’s defeat at Castamere - Caryn nevertheless complied. “Sire, for the moment, all geographic objectives can wait. We must force out Tywin’s army and defeat it in detail. Get them to react to us, and destroy his army as he falls in our traps. King Joffrey is powerless without Tywin’s army, and it grows larger by the day as the Golden Company and other sellsword armies arrive in King’s Landing.”

Jon did not know about the Golden Company, and the added complication disconcerted him - but only for a moment. It mattered not, not to his plans. “And how can we accomplish this, given Tywin has essentially fortified the entirety of the Crownlands. He’ll fall back to King’s Landing and get us nowhere.”

“We should turn his flank, send everything down the Goldroad…”

“Only for Kevan Lannister to block us with his reserve force here.” The Emperor pointed to the cluster of Lion banners. “No, what we need is something bolder.”

“Do you have something in mind, your Majesty?” Reaching over, with wide swaths of his hand, Jon pushed all Imperial Army markers - every single one - down the path he wished to execute.

As Catelyn had been before regarding the entirety of Jon’s plan, Caryn found himself in wordless amazement regarding the Emperor’s military mind. Truly Aegon the Conqueror reborn, only with the blood of the North as well. Analyzing the movements and tactics once more in his head, Caryn found them brilliant. “This can work, sire. This will work.” All three then looked back at the table, and the various unit markers clustered around one castle.

Highgarden.
Battleplan

Just as the bruises caused by Jaime Lannister's fingers had healed on his neck, Petyr Baelish felt newer ones undoubtedly being formed as Gregor Clegane hefted him in the air with little effort. His cheeks turned purple, gasping for breath. “Should I kill him, all Highest?” he asked of the King, sitting atop the Iron Throne.

“No,” Littlefinger choked out. “Please… your Highest…”

At the slightest twitch of his fingers, Joffrey ordered Clegane to lower the man to the ground. Baelish sucked in breaths, frantically trying to fill his lungs. “Tell me, Baelish, why have you betrayed me?!”

Head pointed at the ground, Littlefinger knew he could not look upon the Chimera. “I did… not… betray you… all Highest.”

“Nonsense!” Pycelle, aways the shifty little snake, knelt and pointed a gnarled finger Littlefinger’s way. “He converted with the treasonous Sansa Stark. There must be some sort of grand conspiracy between him and the Stark Bastard.”

“While I admire Pycelle’s… zealousness in rooting out treason, perhaps we should reserve judgement, sire?”

Joffrey cast a look to the High Sparrow, close by his side. “Should we take grandfather’s advice?”

Though the look of displeasure at having his fate decided by a religious fanatic in a dirty shift made the High Sparrow shiver, he ignored Tywin Lannister and looked at the King - hands covering his face. “All Highest, the Seven are vengeful but also have mercy. If Lord Baelish truly is innocent, let him bare himself before their chosen representative on this earth.”

Mulling it over, Joffrey turned to his other trusted advisor - one fairly recent. “Sword, what do you think?”

Daario Naharis was in the same posture - he hated debasing himself so, but it was necessary for his advancement. “Let him speak. I’ll kill him myself if I think he’s lying.”

That satisfied the King. “Alright Baelish, proceed.”

Gulping, Baelish adjusted his collar before speaking, face prone on the ground. “All Highest, yesterday I received a dispatch from Lord Hunter.”

“Who the fuck is Lord Hunter?”

It was Tywin that spoke up to answer his grandson. “The Lord Paramount of the Vale, sire. His brave support of us in switching sides against Robb Stark at the Battle of the God’s Eye allowed us to defeat them and capture Harrenhal from the Targaryens.”

“Well of course I knew that, grandfather!” Joffrey shot back. “It was just on the top of my head. Stop making me look foolish.” Tywin bit back his response, bowing slightly. Joffrey may have controlled here, but in the rest of Westeros under their control, he was on top. “Continue, Lord Baelish.”

“Lord Hunter relayed me a diplomatic message from Sansa Stark, your Highest. She wishes to set up a parlay in King’s Landing between yourself and her brother and sister in law.”
This caused murmurs to break out among the assembled councilors. “Hand it here, Lord Baelish,” said Qyburn, rising to take the message in his hand. Unfolding it, he resumed his kneeling position and read the fine penmanship of the Hand in the North. “Joffrey Baratheon, claimant to the Iron Throne…”

“CLAIMENT!” Joffrey roared. Hushed whispers from the High Sparrow managed to calm him down enough to stay silent afterward, but his flushed face was evident from beneath the veil.

Qyburn continued. “His Majesty, the Emperor Jon, requests a parlay within the dragonpit of King’s Landing to discuss a major concern. The Night King and the Army of the Dead bear down on the entire living world, and I wish to form a possible co-belligerency against them…” Qyburn trailed off, the rest being pleasantries.

Ignoring the message for the moment, Joffrey’s advisors focused initially on Littlefinger. “Why would Sansa Stark contact you, being a loyal member of his Highest’s Small Council?” asked the High Sparrow. “Unless you were as Maester Pycelle described?”

“No!” Littlefinger protested. “I assure you, all Highest, I am not. All I can infer is that as her uncle by marriage to her aunt Lysa, she feels that I am the only one who would not toss any correspondence by her into the fireplace - that I would deliver it to yourself immediately as any loyal subject would.”

The King didn’t seem to care. “Night King… Army of the Dead? What the honest fuck are those?” He seemed genuinely perplexed.

Had he cared at all about reading and his lessons as a child, Joffrey would have known the most basic legend of Westerosi antiquity. “Sire,” Tywin began. “The legend of the Long Night dates back thousands of years, to when the First Men battled an army of corpses during a winter blackness lasting many years.”

Riotous giggles left Joffrey’s lips, almost making him choke and spit. “I swear, House Stark only sires idiots! He has a massive army, but instead of seeking the glory of battle he wants this horseshit?” More giggles left him.

“It may not be wise to underestimate your enemies, sire.”

Scoffing, Joffrey turned to Tywin with an amused grin underneath the strips of gossamer fabric veiling him from all others. “Grandfather… do you honestly believe in an army of corpses prancing about like they were actually alive. Sounds more like a retarded joke.”

“Aye, it does.” While his head was bowed at the ground, Tywin stood, lone among all present. Even the High Sparrow was on his knees. “But there is no drawback to parlaying with the Stark Bastard and Dragon Queen. A powerful, divine ruler such as yourself does not shirk from meeting his opponents, but seeks to intimidate them with his majesty. You must do so. Must inspect them and sense their weaknesses first hand.” Or at least have one’s grandfather do them - the thought was left unsaid by Tywin.

“If I may, all Highest,” Daario interjected once the Chimera’s humor died down. “It is telling that it bears only his name, not the Dragon Queen’s. There may be some sort of fracture within their command structure that we could exploit.” The fact that this may have been an intentional omission was lost on all present.

Pursing his lips, Joffrey pondered it for a moment before he offered a weak nod.

“Do you honestly think that there could be some truth to this… army of dead men?” Randyll Tarly
asked of Tywin as they left the audience chamber. “It seems like some balderdash my useless pig of a son would convince a Stark of, but they claim to have a sample of a ‘wight.’”

Walking alongside his chief General, Tywin stroked the prickly stubble on his chin. A frown was chiselled into his face. “A world that allows for black magic also could allow far more.” Chills passed through his core, the words of the Red Witch coming to him once more - “A battle in the snow, fire billowing all around, where the fate of the world is decided” - haunting him. Filling him with dread. “But my inclination is that this is a trick.”

Randyll snorted. “Starks don’t engage in trickery and deceit. As with Ned Stark, they would rather die than stoop low.”

But both knew the truth, a secret only within the capitol itself - a bubble sheltered from the outside world by the cult of personality revolving around Joffrey. Outside, believed on one side but considered a rumor on the other, all had nevertheless heard it. “A Stark would, but a Targaryen wouldn’t.” But would a Targaryen be bizarre enough to conceive of this? Tywin couldn’t answer that question.

Wishing his palm had been grasping an entire bottle of the strongest wine in the Seven Kingdoms, Tyrion Lannister was forced to proceed with the impromptu audience session sober - well, only mostly sober, thank the Gods. “Lords and Ladies, please calm yourselves.”

In spite of his demonstrable loyalty to their monarchs, nearly all the Lords ignored him in favor of his female counterpart - blood being thicker than water in their estimation “Is it true, my Lady?” asked Lord Manderly, sweating despite the winter chill.

Sansa frowned, crossing her arms. “Yes, it is correct.” Two days following Robb and Margaery’s wedding, Jon had announced to all that they were riding for Riverrun on the double, he and Dany taking the dragons along with - of all people - Catelyn Stark and Theodosius Caryn. What Jon indicated what path to follow… even she had been shocked. “We are seeking an audience with the usurper Joffrey Baratheon.” It put a bad taste in her mouth, it was her brother’s orders. Sansa was loyal to the Emperor.

Edmure Tully, her own uncle and Lord Paramount of the Riverlands, spoke for the entire group. “Dearest niece, I realize that a united front in the face of the Long Night is preferable.” Everyone had seen the vicious beast caught north of the Wall. “But the usurper is evil to his core. He would only stab us in the back, just as his allies have done so.” No one, except perhaps Robb, Sansa, ot Catelyn, knew that more intimately than Edmure - imprisoned for years without his beloved wife or son by Walder Frey. “Please don’t tell us that we’re considering treating with him?”

“More than that, my Lords.” Taking a deep breath, the Hand in the North braced for the coming firestorm. "I received a dispatch from Petyr Baelish via the traitor, Lord Hunter. Joffrey has agreed to a parlay in the Dragonpit of King's Landing in two weeks time."

It descended into predictable shouting and outrage. “Do not trust any of them, My Lady!” Lord Royce exclaimed, loudest of them all. “You know how devious Littlefinger is, and there can be no compromise with the Lannisters.”

Davos waded in, attempting to broker a peace. “Now hold on, my Lords. No two people can agree completely on whether a given strategy is the best course to chart, but all of you swore an oath to Jon. He is the Emperor. Protector of the Realm and ruler of all the Seven Kingdoms.”
“If he meets with the ‘Chimera,’” stated Royce, face red with anger, “Then he has betrayed us.”

As if by perfect timing, the door swung open. Ser Jorah held it open for the new arrival. Skirts of the white, woolen northern dress swishing on the stone floor, Empress Daenerys entered with a cold scowl on her face. Behind, just as intimidating a figure through mystery rather than pure fire and blood, was the Red Witch Melisandre, smirk on her face. Tyrion, along with Sansa and Davos, immediately bowed - her arrival was so sudden, it took a moment of hesitation before the others did. “Your Highness,” said the Imp respectfully.

“Lord Tyrion, Lady Stark, Ser Davos,” she replied with respect as well. Turning to the others, respect was replaced with a formal disdain. “My Lords and Ladies. I was informed that as my subjects, you had arrived in Riverrun from your commands in the field to express disapproval with the strategy of the Crown. This is… most disappointing to me.” Her expression was cold, guarded, but her lilac eyes burned a bright dragonfire.

Adjusting his collar, Lord Edmure stepped forward as the tentative leader of the delegation of Lords. “Your Highness, we are concerned as to the latest decision by your husband…”

“He is your Emperor, so you will show him the proper respect.”

Edmure began sweating. “Forgive me… the decision by his Majesty to treat with the usurper Joffrey.”

Lips curling into a small smile, one that did not reach her eyes. “I understand your concern, I do. But I ask, where is Lord Stark? Truly he shares your concerns with your Emperor’s strategy?”

Shifting among each other, it was Lord Glover that spoke up. “He is in the field, your Highness.”

The smile widened, fire growing in her eyes. “Yes. Lord Robb Stark is carrying out the orders of his Emperor, not here squabbling like petulant children. Loyalty is valued, and while I shant find imaginary vapors of treason as my father did, actual betrayal is not something I will tolerate.” The temperature in the room was increasing substantially.

While it cowed many, others still remained defiant. “He refuses to inform us of his plans, thinking us obedient children that must be seen and not heard!” fumed Alys Karstark, tone as fiery as her bright ginger hair. “All he seems to confide in are the shady General Caryn from the Westerlands and Catelyn Stark. Need I forget she was the one who denied my family justice for my poor brother, killed by the Kingslayer.”

Dark eyes, fire and blood personified, found themselves trained on Lady Karstark, who flinched. “Need I remind you, Lady Alys, that your other brother repaid his kin by taking up arms with Ramsay Bolton and Viserys Blackfyre against the Starks. You are only here out of the Emperor’s generosity, but do not test mine.”

When no one answered, not even the three Hands - all hanging back - Daenerys continued. “Go back to your commands, Lords and Ladies, and pray that His Majesty doesn’t find out about this. However, such is not your biggest worry.” The Mother of Dragons that ordered Tygett Lannister burned alive was in full display. “I am far less forgiving than he is.” Several lords visibly gulped as the Dragon Empress brought her own iced fire and blood, leaving it just like that.

Remaining behind, the Red Witch merely stood there with that smirk on her face. “The night is dark and full of terrors, so choose wisely my Lords and Ladies.” She then followed the Empress, leaving the room with fire and blood delivered.
Steam rising from the cup, Missandei set it next to the drumming fingers of her Empress. “Hot tea, your Grace.”

Daenerys took the cup with a grateful nod. “Thank you, Missandei,” she replied, the small smile on her lips not reaching her eyes. The empress was quite distracted, her mind preoccupied with the meeting with the lords earlier - and the actions by her husband that caused it. Truth be told, while her tone had been firm and decisive, inwardly she was anything but at the moment. Jon’s behavior was unexplainable at the moment and it disconcerted her.

“You did well, Daenerys.” Seated across from Daenerys, looking far more comfortable in the winter temperatures than either of the other three women, Sansa pursed her lips. “While I have no clue what Jon is doing either, the Lords needed to be put in their place. Petty squabbling, as if Jon would actually betray us all at the Dragonpit” She scoffed.

‘The dragonpit, how fitting,’ Dany thought. The symbol of the decline of House Targaryen hosting an event of their rise back to glory - or whatever this was. “I don’t understand,” she murmured. “What could Jon possibly think this would serve?”

Setting her hot drink down, Margaery cast a sympathetic look to her new sister. Her demeanor was reviving as the morning sickness had passed, and the slightest bump was visible under Lady Stark’s dress. “With the threat of the Night King, perhaps he wants to try once more to convince at least some within the Lannister ranks to join a united front.”

A groan left Sansa’s lips. “Joffrey will never negotiate. He’ll never see reason. Tyrion once said, ‘We’ve had vicious kings, and we’ve had idiot kings, but never have we had the misfortune of a vicious idiot before.’ Add a sense of grandiose narcissism and that describes Joffrey.” Hate burning in her eyes that would rival a Targaryen, she deflated with an audible sigh. “We can get Lannister defectors without this, so I can’t fathom this…”

“It’s not just the proposed parlay.” Daenerys sipped at her drink, trying to let the searing liquid calm her. “It’s everything Jon is doing. Constantly in the field, sending ravens and directing troop movements. He’s planning something but refuses to tell me. Me!”

“He hasn’t told Robb, either,” Margaery stated, missing her husband who was carrying out many of Jon’s orders in the field. “Has he discussed it with you, sister?” she asked Sansa.

The redhead shook her head. “No. Neither I, Davos, nor Tyrion have gotten any reasoning behind it. Only Caryn, and my mother.” The ladies pondered that piece of knowledge.

It was then that the door swung open. The ladies rose from their chairs as the Emperor strode in, black fur cloak swirling behind him - he had been in a hurry, a hurry to get back to his chambers and find solace in the embrace of his wife, based on the dark circles under his eyes and the haggard set of his jaw. Such was not the only thing the four women noticed. Jon had shaved. The short stubble and neatly trimmed mustache were all gone, dark curls of his hair let down around smooth skin. He looked so much younger - not the grizzled warrior but as the young man he was. Thrust into a position far beyond his years.

Taking in his wife, sister, sister-in-law, and handmaiden, Jon bowed politely. “Ladies.”

Sansa looked at Margaery, catching the new Lady Stark’s imperceptible nod. “Well, I shall leave you two to your rest. We shall return to our chambers.” After Margaery bade Jon goodbye, Sansa leaned into his ear. “Please, get some rest, brother.” A kiss on the cheek followed before the Hand in the
North left the chambers.

“It will be alright, your Grace,” Missandei whispered to Dany, giving her a small smile. Dany smiled back, hoping she could believe her.

After Missandei closed the door behind her, Dany walked into Jon’s arms. Breathing in his spicy northern scent, his heartbeat gave her such contentment. A means to ground her in such turbulent times. She looked up and reached to stroke his now bare cheek. “Why did you shave, my dragonwolf?” The skin felt smooth and soft to the touch, but truth be told, Dany enjoyed the black stubble - how it teased and tickled her as his mouth plundered her body.

Leaning into her loving touch, Jon sighed. “Just... needed a change.” In truth, he knew it would make him look younger - less experienced and powerful. “Do you not like it?”

Dany smiled. “You look handsome no matter what.” Raising on her tiptoes, she brought their mouths together in a warm kiss. Jon returned it, wrapping his arms around her waist. Once it broke, he rested his forehead on hers. “Jon... what are you...”

He shook his head. “Please, Dany. Please just trust me. I need you to trust me on this.” If she didn’t, if he had to tell her... the plan would be ruined. “Please, Dany.”

Taking in his breathless plea, the begging in his eyes, Dany kissed him once more. “Alright.” Though her mind still swirled in confusion as to her husband’s behavior, his company, his very secrecy, he had never proven himself untrustworthy. She took in his exhaustion. “Let’s go to bed, my love.”

Wrapping the warm sheets and goose down blankets atop them, it wasn’t long before Daenerys found their tight embrace turning into something more. Apprehension, confusion, worry... all were banished as they sought each other out. He reached for her. She turned in his arms. Their bodies meshed together front to front, the Emperor rolling atop the Empress - it did not take long for them to lose themselves in their love and lust.

Mouths fused together, dueling the sensual dance as old as humanity itself. Hands roaming over her trim waist and wonderfully smooth skin, Jon knew he could never express in words what he felt for this woman even if he lived fifty lifetimes.

Her lips released his with a pop, red and puffy from desperate kisses. “Oh Gods. More... fuck!” His hot breathing against her ear was driving her wild. “More Jon.” Daenerys gasped her commands, meeting his movements thrust for thrust. “Harder. Please.” The last tore from her throat in a pleading whimper.

Concentration and the sheer pleasure of the act - the warmth and tightness around him, along with his wife’s breathless pants and mewls of pleasure - consumed Jon. All he wanted was to please her, to make her quiver in her release. Shifting angle within her, Jon jerked his hips, pushing deeper inside Daenerys.

The Empress’ eyes rolling in the back of her head. It felt so good inside her, the pleasurable burn and stretching of her walls around his wide length. She bit on her bottom lip to stifle the deep moan building in the back of her throat. “Come on Dany,” she heard Jon husk. “We’re... alone. I want... to hear you.”

“Ahhhh!” Writhing beneath him, Dany screamed, fingers clawing at his back. “Fuck my love! Don’t stop.” Sharp nails dragged a painful pleasure down his thick muscles. “Don’t. Fucking! Stop!”
“I wouldn’t, shit.” Jon seethed at the wonderful things his dragon was doing to him. He cupped her breast, flicking a nipple. “I love... Gods... I love you.”

“I, ahhhh, love you too.” Mouths crashed together, lost in the lusty fog of their marital bed. Sweaty bodies smacked against each other as Dany slowly but surely climbed toward her peak. She could read her husband – read every noise and facial movement. “I’m close,” she murmured against his mouth.

Jon broke the kiss once more, locking eyes with her sparkling amethyst eyes. Growling, he doubled his pace. She bucked and cried out in pleasure. It was music to his ears. “Let go, Dany. Let go.”

“Oh, oh, oh!” Dany panted, spasming around his cock. His thrusts didn’t cease their push into her tightness, trying to draw out the sweetness of her climax as long as possible. Danye bit his shoulder, unable to take the flood of pleasure he inflicted on her. Another scream was muffled by the pale skin as his own release, the feeling of him spilling inside her prolonging the climax. Finally, both spent, he collapsed on top of her.

With whatever energy he had left Jon flipped them over. Dany’s weight settled on top of him, snuggling into his chest as her body grew boneless. He could feel both of their hearts thumping. He wrapped his arms around her, softly stroking her back and kissing the crook of her neck.

“Dany?” he whispered against her ear, kissing it lightly.

“Yeah?” she replied in a quiet murmur, arms wrapped tightly around his middle. Totally spent, Daenerys felt sleep taking ahold of her.

“I love you.” He kissed her neck, feeling exhausted himself. The weight of the world on his shoulders. “Trust me.”

Dany sighed contentedly. “I love you too... and I do.” She would never doubt him again.
“MAKE WAY FOR THE KING!” Heads turned as the royal assemblage - a common sight for those living in the capital - made their way into the dragonpit. At the head was the High Sparrow, arms crossed over his chest, while a cluster of Faith Militant Holy Guardsman marched behind him with their gold truncheons. The royal litter was massive, carried by dozens of slaves and ringed by Goldcloaks. To one side was the towering form of Ser Gregor Clegane, while on the other was Brother Lancel Lannister, two slaves carrying his large horn. At a single command, the slaves dropped the litter and Lancel blew on the horn. All but the Stark and Targaryen parties and the highest Lannister officials fell to various degrees of prone reverence at the blast of the horn, act drilled into them by years of protocol.

Scurrying over at the end of the final blast of the horn, the High Sparrow drew back the gauzy material to allow Joffrey to step off the litter. Watching, Sansa leaned down to whisper to Tyrion, “I had to see it for myself, but he’s actually gotten more insane than when I was last here.”

“We’re pilgrims in an unholy land,” the Imp whispered back, frowning.

Gossamer fabric swishing along the wooden floorboards of the platform, Joffrey gingerly made his way to his seat - placed on a higher dias and inlaid with jewel encrusted gold. His personal throne, mobile in case he had to leave the palace. This was the first time he used it. Sitting, he immediately spotted Tyrion. “Ah, Uncle. Riding high in the world, I see.” He immediately dissolved into giggles.

Tyrion pursed his lips, trying not to laugh out loud at his stupidity. “Ah, I had a wager going with Lady Sansa over which dwarf joke you would use.” He noticed a few among the collection that didn’t laugh with the King. Father and Jaime he understood, but a raised eyebrow followed Cersei’s taciturn expression. ‘Not that Myrcella’s death endeared me to her.’

“His wasn’t even good,” the Hand in the North replied.

Joffrey’s smile widened at the sight of Sansa. “Dearest Sansa, you look as beautiful as ever. I think that I shall enjoy having you by my side again once this war is over.” He undoubtedly was leering at her from behind the veil.

While both Robb and Brienne’s fists clenched, blizzards howled within Sansa’s ice blue eyes. “My late husband said the same thing before the fields of Winterfell. I told him that he would die the next day, and the next day I fed him to his hounds. What animal would you believe hungers for you the most, my King?”

Leering turning to sputtering, Tyrion cut in before Joffrey could respond. “She’s not yours to torment, anymore. Quite the letdown, isn’t it nephew?”

Cheeks flushed red, Joffrey was struggling to compose himself, so Tywin interjected to his son. “Where are they?” The two empty chairs on either side were quite conspicuous.

It was Sansa that answered him. “They will be here shortly.” Firm, quite a voice like his own.

“They didn’t travel with you?”

“Doesn’t seem like it, my Lord.”

A groan left Joffrey’s lips. “How dare they leave their true King waiting like this?” He slouched in his throne, bearing the diplomatic tact of a wight - much to the irritation of his Small Council and to
the amusement of the other. “I really should send Ser Gregor after them if they continue this…”

A loud yet faint roar shook the King out of his rantings. He immediately flinched as Jaime, Daario, and Littlefinger rose with hands upon their swords. Robb, Barristan, and Davos stood and moved towards the center of the dias, joined by Tyrion, Varys, and Jorah opposite them. Two bat-shaped shadows - massive ones - splayed out atop the ruined edifice of the dragonpit, growing larger and larger. Until the majesty once again arrived to the dead ground.

Two massive dragons, four others further up in the air, swooped down upon the dragonpit, Goldcloaks and Faith Militant scurrying out of the way in fear. The King shook in terror as they landed atop the ruins, the green and black beasts filling the air with their piercing roars. And atop them were two figures, crowns gracing their brows. The Targaryen Emperor and Empress making their entrance. One far grander than Joffrey could ever perform.

Rhaegal and Balerion craning their necks to the side to glance at each other with a hoot, slowly they then lowered them to the ground, allowing Jon and Dany to climb down. Descending with the spines for a ladder had become second nature to the two monarchs. It was effortless, neither of them fazed in the slightest - disconcerting to many within the Lannister camp. As soon as the two were out of their immediate zone, the dragons unfurled their wings and leapt into the sky, kicking up a cloud of dust which showered over everyone… including the Chimera himself.

Each were clad in all black, Longclaw and Saracen sheathed on their respective owner’s hip. Jon wore his black cloak over the black leather cuirass bearing the snarling direwolf, the mighty appearance clashing with his face, oddly subdued and preoccupied for the legendary White Wolf that entered atop dragonback. Perhaps it was the shaved face and loose hair, perhaps the faraway look in his eyes. Quite the contrast with the Dragon Empress. Hair braided in the northern style, her black leather battle dress, black gloves, and silver chain along her torso transformed the petite girl of twenty-three into a mighty conquering monarch. Visenya reborn, bearing a cold, expressionless mask. Crowns atop their heads, they walked towards and onto the dais together before separating. Jon sat in his chair, looking skywards. Daenerys settled into hers with hands on her lap, eyes boring directly towards Joffrey.

Watching the mighty beasts sail high into the air - returning to their brother and sisters in a holding pattern circling the dragonpit, home of their long-dead ancestors - Joffrey felt his white terror shift to indignant anger. Catching the cold yet satisfied twinkle in Daenerys’ eyes, he turned to the High Sparrow. “Now, you fool!”

The High Sparrow nodded, hands moving to drape over his face while addressing the Chimera. “At once, sire.” Stepping forward several paces, fully bare and modest before the world in his outfit aside from the gold fingerclaws that betrayed his high title, the former nobleman turned servant of the Seven gestured to the draped monarch with a flourish. “You stand and give tribute to His Highest Joffrey, His most Holy Chimera. Messiah of the Seven, born of the womb of the Maiden. King of the Andals, Rhoynar, and First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. Representative of the Gods upon the Earth.”

Beside him, Jon could hear Sansa softly retch. Across, he could tell his utterly regal wife having the same reaction underneath her cold exterior. It was as he would feel, had he not been confident. ‘Soon, you sadistic idiot. Soon.’

took her seat beside her Empress.

Eyes shifted en masse to the northerners, awaiting the formal introduction of an equal monarch. Mind whirring with various strategies, Jon didn’t notice until Davos - shrugging - decided to handle it. “Oh, um… this is Jon Stark.” Uncomfortable silence. “Uh… he’s the Emperor.” Sansa and Robb bit back smirks while Joffrey looked to be shaking in anger. With barely two sentences, Davos had put Joffrey in his place.

Shifting in his seat, aching bones communicating that he wasn’t in his prime anymore, Tywin’s eyes flickered from Daenerys, to Jon, and then back to Daenerys. ‘Why are they sitting apart?’ “A significant delay in this meeting. If you wish to negotiate in good faith, not a good start.”

“Our apologies,” Daenerys said flatly, hands resting in her lap.

“So,” announced Joffrey, voice loud but scratchy as the veil-covered face turned towards Jon. “Bastard. I remember you. At Winterfell, how you were a whipped dog not allowed near his betters. You don’t look much different, false legitimacy notwithstanding.”

Dark glares directed Joffrey’s way from both northerners and southerners, along with a growl from the resting Ghost. “My King,” whispered Tywin. “Perhaps we should avoid insults at the moment.” Bored already, Joffrey waved him off - implicitly handing the reins of negotiation to his Hand and advisors.

“Lords and Ladies of Westeros.” Littlefinger stood, hands clasped together piously. “Even in this time of war, it warms my heart greatly that we may all gather together as befitting our highborn status before our King, to discuss matters of import. As…”

“There is only one matter of import, today, Lord Baelish,” Daenerys cut him off. “Normally, I would not seek to discuss peace. Your family murdered my family, tried to murder me and my family by marriage, and seek to oppress the entirety of my people under your heel. I very much would like the war to continue until my husband and I are victorious.”

Tywin tilted his head at her. “Ah, so what is the point of all of this? If you wish to rub our noses in the dirt, it seems a bit premature.”

“True, which is why I’m not seeking to do so.” She watched as Tywin raised an eyebrow. “I am under no illusions as to the history between our families. However, for as much as we oppose each other, we share the fact that we are living.”

“Go on.” Tywin didn’t follow, but wouldn’t tell the Dragon Queen that.

“This meeting is not about who should rule, but about whether we as a whole, survive.” Dany motioned for a very specific person, one she and Jon had jointly decided would make their case after Jon ruled himself out. “May I present Samwell Tarly, acting Maester of Castle Black and chief science advisor to His Majesty the Emperor.”

Pushing out of his chair, Sam stepped towards the center of the dias. His eyes locked with the one person he had been dreading to see. “Father.”

Randyll Tarly narrowed his eyes at him. “Still fat as ever, I see.” That sent the King into a fit of giggles, mumbling something about how he was fatter than his own fool, but Lord Tarly was as serious as a corpse. “Heard you had taken up with a Wilding whore. I’m not surprised, you’ve always been a disgrace…”

“Enough, Lord Tarly.” Tywin was losing his patience. “I want to hear what he has to say.”
Fighting back the urge to slink away, Sam stammered to a beginning. “The stories of the Long Night, long thought legend, are true. The Army of the Dead and the Night King are both real, and are both lurking north of the wall for the right moment to strike.”

“In Essos, children are told of a monster that would swat them with a switch and eat them at night if they misbehaved,” Daario scoffed. “But that was just a story, as this seems to be.”

“Make no mistake, it,” Sam gulped. “It is real in this instance.”

“You have to admit,” Tywin replied. “Your story is quite unbelievable.”

“We have proof.” As if by perfect timing, a single figure lumbered in with a crate on his back. Muscles straining, Gendry Baratheon set it down upon the dias with a loud thud.

“I’m sorry, but who is this?” For the first time that day, it was Cersei that spoke. There was an odd look in her eye, one of weariness and spite.

It was Gendry that introduced himself. “Gendry Baratheon, honored stepmother.” Jon couldn’t help the small snort. Arya would have loved this. “Lord paramount of the Stormlands and son of Robert Baratheon.”

There was silence. “One of King Robert’s bastards, I take it.” Tywin broke the silence.

“Legitimized by the Emperor. As his eldest, I have premier claim to Storm’s End.”

The King burst into giggles. “Premier claim? You must be mad. A bastard like you can never be a Lord - even of a pile of rocks and shit like Storm’s End. Just like a bastard cannot rule a Kingdom,” he spat at Jon.

Gendry raised an eyebrow. “From what they say, you look nothing like our father. Perhaps it is instead that you are the bastard of someone else’s loins.” Joffrey was noticeably fuming, but Daenerys didn’t miss the subtle flicker of fear over Cersei and Jaime’s eyes.

“In the name of the gods, just get it done!” Catelyn shouted. Catelyn, not Jon. His family and advisors wanted to look at him with incredulity. What was up with him? Why was he so subdued and… resigned?

Shrugging off those same thoughts himself, Sam watched as Gendry began opening the crate. “Best step back, Lords and Ladies,” he warned, clutching the trusty dragonglass dagger in his hand. The seconds ticked by, Joffrey tapping his boots in annoyance while Jaime leaned forward anxiously.

Surely it couldn’t be…

Out of the crate jumped the wight, sunlight slamming into undead eyes for the first time in months. Quickly it locked onto the first target directly in its line of sight - Joffrey. With a snarl the undead demon charged. Joffrey screamed, scrambling back in his throne as Daario and Gregor Clegane dashed forward to block the monster. The entire Lannister host seemed to flinch back, braver souls going for their swords. Tywin and Randyll Tarly shielded themselves while Jaime pushed Cersei behind him. Jaw bared, the wight’s hands reached out to claw at Joffrey before Gendry yanked it back with the chain clamped around its neck. A thud rang out as it fell to the ground.

Undeterred, it lunged at Gendry, but the former blacksmith was now hefting a large warhammer. With one swing he decapitated the creature. Upper half careening onto the wood, its screams and snarls continued unabated as it crawled towards someone or something. Stepping forward, Sam cut off its hand and handed it to Qyburn, who peered at the still writhing thing delicately.
“Only three things can kill it,” said the portly pseudo-maester. “Dragonglass.” He took the hand from Qyburn and stabbed it with his dagger, stilling it. Everyone was riveted to him. “Fire works best. Valyrian steel, though it is rare.” A Dothraki bloodrider set the legs on fire while Daenerys stood, drew Saracen, and jammed the tip into the wight’s back. Finally, it died. “North of the wall, there are over a hundred thousand of these monsters, just waiting to swarm all over the Seven Kingdoms.”

A hush had fallen over the dragonpit. Those that had never seen the dead were in a stunned silence. Tywin paled, the High Sparrow mumbled prayers, Jaime trembled from the sheer weight of it all. Littlefinger and Pycelle looked like they were about to shit their pants. And Joffrey, beneath his veil, looked as if he had. “What are those things?” mumbled Jaime, first among them to speak.

“Our doom.” Daenerys had actually seen their entire army, and even still her heart beat out of her chest. “There is no real war but the war against the dead.”

Jaime ran a hand down his face, still reeling from the beast. “I can’t believe it.”

“Neither did I, Ser Jaime,” replied Daenerys, using his title rather than the normal ‘Kingslayer.’ “Not until I saw them.”

“Are they all like this?” The voice belonged to Tywin, who had composed himself. “Walking skeletons?”

“Most are human, varying based on how fresh they were,” Sam answered. “The Night King has others in his army. Mammoths, bears, giants…”

Belching out a half-laugh, half-cough, Pycelle sounded like every one of his over eighty years. “Please, young fool. There are no such thing as giants. Stories for the children.”

“Tell that to the northern warriors, who fought with the giants at Winterfell.” Sansa regarded the doddering old idiot as one would an insect. “I bet you would have said the same thing about dragons, had they not flown over you just today.” Despite indignant mutterings from Pycelle, no one could find fault with her logic.

Reeling from terror and humiliation, Joffrey turned angrily to Jon. “You, Stark Bastard! You were the one that warned of this in Sansa’s dispatch! What have you to say?”

Attention drifting back to the parley, Jon spared a short glance in the direction of Catelyn Stark, who gave the slightest nod. Pushing himself up from his chair, Longclaw jostled on his hip as he walked right next to the still corpse of the fallen wight. “Much of what needs to be said has already been said.”

Daenerys blinked. ‘That’s all he has to say?’ This whole thing was his idea.

“You brought us here, Jon Snow,” Randyll Tarly stated coldly. “Surely there is more that you have to say.”

Sighing, the Emperor looked the full fatigue of his throne. “Since I joined the Night’s Watch, I have been fighting the Army of the Dead. Fighting them, fighting the Free Folk, fighting my own men at times. Endless fighting, endless war.” He ran a hand down his face. “I’m sick of it. All I wish for is for a realm at peace… where my children need not hear the battlecry.”

Among the combined imperials, a collective shock fell over them. Robb’s jaw had dropped, as had Sansa’s. Davos and Tyrion shared wide eyes, while Varys tried to make sense of all of this. Missandei, seeking to be the voice of calm, whispered in her Empress’ ear. “He would never do this if he didn’t have a plan.” But Daenerys didn’t hear any of it. Conflicting emotions of anger,
confusion, and betrayal were bubbling inside her. Jon, the strongest man she knew, was basically signalling to the entire Lannister host that he was a weakling.

“I ask for a truce, on both sides, so we can fight the Night King together. Afterwards, we can have a negotiated settlement.”

“Your Majesty,” Sansa spoke up. “Perhaps we should…”

“Truce along the current lines of control, while we secure an equitable peace once the dead are dealt with?” Tywin clarified. “You and the Dragon Queen stay in the north.”

Jon nodded, looking at Joffrey. He understood where the mind of the vicious idiot was taking him. Time for the kill. “It would be acceptable.” Daenerys felt like screaming.

“Hmmm.” Looking at his advisors, and then at the so called White Wolf, Joffrey couldn’t help but smirk. ‘What a fool. A weak, sentimental fool. Just like his father.’ “Tell you what, bastard.” One could almost see the smug, sadistic grin under his veil. “Surrender your entire army to my control. Declare me the rightful ruler of all the lands you claim to be yours. Get on your knees and bow before me. Kiss my feet and proclaim me your god, as I am in truth. Then, and only then, will I offer my divine powers to vanquishing this menace.”

Watching her husband hang his shoulders in near defeat, Daenerys wouldn’t stand for this. “Enough games!” She rocketed out of her seat. “I won’t let you play petty politics with this. The entirety of humanity is in doom, and you want us to swear allegiance to you as the price for all that serve you? Have you no concept of decency?”!

“He is the Messiah of the Seven, Lady Targaryen,” the High Sparrow stated. “If he chooses to fight these monsters, then he has the power of the Seven behind him and shall truly triumph.”

“My Lady…” Jon began, making sure his voice was pleading.

Shooting a withering glare at Jon out of sheer frustration and anger - just as he intended - Daenerys drew her line in the sand. “Either you accept our offer of a truce, or you have chosen war.”

Risen to his feet, Joffrey snarled back at her. “You will bow down before my power or face my wrath, Dragon bitch!”

Jaime moved to plead his son for sense. “All Highest, perhaps we should…”

To no avail. “My father wiped out your family before, and I shall finish the job! Bend the knee or I shall have you, your bastard lover, and all your half-breed children will be drawn and quartered and fed to the crabs!”

Ghost snarling at the King, Daenerys almost drew Saracen and sliced off his head. “My dragons will enjoy your corpse.” Turning, she motioned to a grim-faced Tyrion. “This parlay is over.”

“The night is dark and full of terrors, Lord Joffrey.” Melisandre enjoying his fear, she spared a knowing look upon the Emperor before turning back to Joffrey. “But you will die before the Long Night begins. Enjoy what is left of your life”

Sharing a glance with his brother, the two Lannisters knew that the damned scrap of steel called the Iron Throne would have rivers of blood spilled over it in the near future.
“Get this soiled rag off of me!” screamed the Chimera, back in his private quarters. Safe behind the curtains that shielded his holy form from the world, the blind slaves moved to clean his buttocks of the dried fecal matter that the snarling monster forced out of him. Never had he been so humiliated - not since Arya and her wolf disarmed him years ago - and it morphed into rage. “I want her and her bastard lover killed. All of their armies burned to the ground!”

The four members of the small council kept their heads down, affording him their respect - even if it was false in most cases. “Their armies cannot break through ours, all Highest,” stated Tywin. “Our position is impregnable. If they attack, we will be ready.”

Joffrey nodded, feeling the slaves wipe his asscheeks with wet washcloths. “Sacrifice several slaves to the Maiden, my mother. She will bring us good fortune.”

“At once, all Highest,” bowed the High Sparrow.

Gulping, Jaime still found himself shellshocked from the ordeal. “All Highest. That… thing is the one sight in my entire life of travels and fighting that honestly terrifies me. After seeing it, I cannot unsee it. Hundreds of thousands of those things are waiting to attack us, perhaps we should…”

He didn’t continue, his father slapping him. “Enough, Jaime!” Army of the Dead or not, he needed to learn to keep his mouth shut and stick to strategy and cunning.

“Good, grandfather. I am troubled that you accepted their lies, Lord Lannister. It had to have been some kind of trick.” Jaime shut up, something inside him snapping, but quietly. “Baelish!”

“Yes, all Highest?”

“It’s time the Starks found another one of their precious pack beheaded. Find me Arya!”

Across the city, in the diplomatic train the Lannister soldiers were ordered to leave unmolested, the fire held off from Jon was finally being unleashed. “What in Seven Hells, brother!” Robb yelled.

“Do you have any idea what you just did?” Sansa couldn’t believe her brother. Jon was the strongest man she knew, one who faced enemies ranging from Ramsay Bolton, the Masters of Slaver’s Bay, and even an entire herd of mammoth - only to wither in the face of Joffrey Baratheon of all people? “Joffrey thinks you’re a weakling. And now so does Tywin!”

“I gather you’re an honorable person, your Majesty.” Gears were turning in Tyrion’s head, figuring how he could solve this. “But instead of bearing your soul, couldn’t you have lied or something?”

Jon ignored all the pleas, staring straight ahead. Riding beside him, at least until they could mount their dragons once more, Dany fought between anger and concern. “Jon…” This was not like him. This was not like him at all. “Why did you do that? Tell me,” she commanded firmly.

Suddenly, Jon turned his head. “Davos.” The Onion Knight looked up. “Send a raven to Wayfarer’s Rest. Tell General Caryn to begin the assault at once.” Without waiting for a response from any of them, he spurred his mount forward - likely to where Catelyn Stark was riding.

Daenerys gaped at the back of her husband. ‘What the…’ She did not know what to say - the Dragon Empress could read most people, including the enigmatic Jon Targaryen, but he was utterly alien to her now. “I would say he’s drunk,” remarked Tyrion, “But our Emperor doesn’t drink.” Drinking sure would explain it, though.
The torchlight lit up the slave pen, bathing it in a low, flickering illumination. Most of those within had already passed out from exhaustion - or starvation - being whipped and labored all day in the construction of the monument to Joffrey’s hubris. Four that weren’t asleep rested within the special corner, blocked off by all unwanted trespassers by a semicircle of Brotherhood bruisers and Essosi guards.

“The Lord of Light shines upon your family, young Arya.” Reaching into a chest, Kinvara pulled something out that Arya couldn’t see. “You use deception and agility to attack your enemies with your Needle, a gift from his grace upon the family tasked with setting the world to its proper path.”

“Ugh.” Clegane rolled his eyes, turning over on his cot. “Give me a broadsword any day. I’ll smash any fucker in the face that comes at me.”

“I’m sure the little wolf here can’t just smash any shitheads, Clegane,” retorted Thoros, taking a swig of cheap ale. Whether it tasted like horsepiss or Arbor gold, it didn’t matter. All that mattered in the slave pens was that it got one drunk.

Arya smirked at the Hound’s back. It was just the four of them in Kinvara’s corner, Beric off doing… old gods’ know what somewhere. Any operations by the weak ‘resistance’ within King’s Landing were kept decentralized and need to know. Her eyes flickered back to Kinvara, widening.

“What is that?”

In her hands, Kivara balanced a dangling necklace. The chain was gold, but that wasn’t what drew her eyes. Held by the chain was a pendant, a diamond in the most brilliant shade of yellow, glittering in the low firelight. “A gift from the Lord of Light for the sister of the Promised Prince.”

Unlike her sister, Arya had no love of ‘pretty things,’ such as silks, jewels, or other finery. And yet here was Kinvara, gifting her with one of the most beautiful stones she had ever seen. “So what is that supposed to do?”

Smiling knowingly - as if she understood something that no one else could, Kinvara approached her. “Stealing faces is an art, but only those in service to the Lord of Light can truly assume the skill that every Faceless Man seeks.” Fastening the necklace to her neck, Kinvara tucked it underneath the fabric of Arya’s tunic. Out of sight from the prying hands of overseers or the Faith Militant, both more than happy to loot and then rape a hapless slave.

“Enjoy going to the royal ball and dancin’ with all the handsome princes and lords to be,” grumbled the Hound.

“Shut up,” Arya said back, Causing Thoros and Kinvara to laugh.

The priestess composed herself, normally serious eyes full of mirth. “One strand of hair atop the stone, and whoever wears it shall assume the power of a thousand Faceless Men. Keep it close, and when you see the need, use it wisely.”

“Your holiness.” All turned to see Beric, face contorted in worry, one eye wide. “They’re coming.”

There was no need to define who ‘they’ was. “Who for?” Kinvara asked in return.

The one-eyed lord looked straight at Arya. “The wolf.” In the distance, shouts and scuffles could be heard as the gate to the slave pen swung open and torch bearing men stormed inside.

Kinvara was unflappable, snapping into action without hesitation. “Come with me,” she whispered, grabbing Arya by the wrist. The young Stark followed, instincts to blend in with one of her faces overridden by the insistent priestess. Her eyes widened when Kinvara buried her hand wrist-deep in
the sand and pulled open a hidden trapdoor. Beneath was a shallow tunnel. “Go. Go quickly.”

Arya blinked. “What am I supposed to do?”

“The Lord of Light will bring opportunity upon you, now go.” Kinvara practically shoved Arya in before slamming the trapdoor shut. Soon after, the sand was back in place, as if it was undisturbed.

She had just exited her little hut as Thoros and Beric greeted the guards. A Goldcloak led them, a motley mix of Essosi overseers and Faith Militant thugs. “Are you in charge?”

“Some persons may say so,” Kinvara replied innocently. “As for myself, I consider the term ‘servant’ a better description.”

The Goldcloak seemed to be too puzzled. “I am looking for the bitch, Arya Stark. I was told she was here.” Kinvara’s eyes flickered to Beric, who nodded imperceptibly. One rule of the slave pens, crossing the Lord of Light’s Priests and the Brotherhood network that served it was forbidden. The Goldcloaks must have had an informant, and by the day after tomorrow someone in the pen would be found with his severed head mounted on a pike for all to see. “Well. Where is she?!”

“Small girl, bout ye high? Looks like a boy?” All turned to Clegane, still in bed. “She was my fucktoy. Stole her off some Dornish cunt. She was tight, for a while at least.”

“Where is she, you little buggerous shit,” hissed a Faith Militant, only to back away as Clegane stood tall, towering over him. Even with his truncheon, it wasn’t a fair fight.

“Dead. Wasn’t good for me, so I slit her throat.” And so it was that the message went up the chain of command to Joffrey, that the girl who had tormented him and his dreams for so long was finally dead - much to his glee and the anger of the Small Council.

In the middle of the massive junkyard on the outskirts of the great city, the ground gave way and a lone figure darted out. Without waiting for even the hint of a sound, Arya made a run for it. The ground was soft, uneven to the point where it was easy to lose one’s footing, but years of experience had made the highborn girl agile. Ducking and dodging through the detritus and dilapidated buildings, she avoided the obvious patrol routes until the slave pens were a distant memory.

It wasn’t long before she found an abandoned home. By its size it was likely that of a lowly craftsman, and by the dust covering the broken furniture he must have been one ripped out and impressed into service for the King. Arya sat in the one unbroken chair, catching her breath. Hand reaching up to feel the precious pendant within her clothes, Arya swore she felt it pulse with heat for a split second.
“Archers! With me!” Ser Addam Marbrand fought to regain his saddle, mount neighing in pain from an arrow that grazed its rump. His squire was down, arrow piercing his chest. Pink froth caked his lips, taking in short, gasping breaths as if he were retching. There was no doubt he would soon die.

“You hurt, my Lord?” Addam looked up to find Ser Flement Brax riding up to him, sweat and blood staining his hair - it didn’t seem to be his.

Addam shook his head. “Nock!” he screamed at the archers, dismounted Westerlands riders noted for their skill at firing while on the move. “Loose!” The thwang of nearly four dozen bows filled the air as the Dragon Bitch’s army would taste their own medicine. “What is it?!” Brax was an eager warrior, despising the Starks for the death of his older brother during the War of the Four Kings. But now Addam was preoccupied with a battle that should not be taking place.

“We’re moving more men to the bridge. Last of our reserves,” Brax informed him. “Young Wolf is demonstrating in front of us, reinforcing the Manderlys with Glover men.”

Cursing, Addam took a swig of his canteen, filled with sour wine. It was dry, impossibly dry, dust and chaff blown everywhere by the wind. He looked back towards the Stoney Sept, men at arms rushing towards the bridge over Blackwater Rush. It was one of solid foundation, stone dating since before the Blackfyre Rebellions. Just ten minutes more and the Starks would have taken it, but a fast rush from the castle that broke dozens of mounts had seen the Lannisters get to it first. They had driven off the Manderly’s, but with the loss of nearly a quarter of their number. Men that couldn’t be replaced.

It had just been three nights ago that the raven came from King’s Landing about the Dothraki incursions to the north near Harrenhal. The massive forces the Targaryens were gathering there. That this section of the line was merely a backwater to nourish the new crop of cavalry horses. But then all hells broke out. This wasn’t some raiding or scouting force. This wasn’t just some lone detachment of troops. Nope, this was the Whispering Wood all over again, Robb Stark at the lead of a column of crack Northern bannermen. Behind him likely the entire Targaryen army.

There was no other choice. Marbrand would have to hold here while word was sent out. Perhaps then Kevan Lannister could retake this vital bridge and the Stoney Sept before the Dragon Bitch moved more men south.

“My Lord, they’re coming.” Sure enough, the banners of houses Stark, Manderly, and Glover were bearing down on the bridge. Crossbowmen at the front, they formed a tight wall of shields and spears - enough to smash through the dismounted light cavalry of his force.

Undaunted, he grabbed a young lad. “Get this dispatch to Kevan Lannister at Hayford Castle!” The letter had the quick scrawl of the enemy positions, exactly what Robb Stark had brought up and where Marband thought he was going. “Avoid the roads and don’t stop. Steal a mount if you have to switch. Understood.” The lad nodded, mounting his horse and galloping off.

More shouting rang out. “The Young Wolf is extending the line to the east,” Brax said, voice trembling. “He has Dothraki with him!”

A thousand Dothraki screamers had poured over a ford in Blackwater Rush, unseen by the Lannister scouts too preoccupied with the probing assaults by the northern bannermen. What few light cavalry were in reserve were swept aside by the charging horde, steel cutting through the leather armor of the
unprepared forces. Bannermen filled to the brim with anger at the various atrocities against their lands and countrymen by House Lannister, they assaulted the bridge with ferocity. Crossbows and swords did their best, but when the bridge refused to break, Lord Glover ordered his five cannon into action.

The cannon shell struck a one in a million shot. Inaccurate to the point of prayers being said of hitting within a four yard range, the massive device impacted directly into a supply wagon. The projectile turned the wooden vehicle into kindling, broken and shattered shards of hardy oak flying through the air - many directly into the Lannister command post. Men tumbled from their mounts, blood and flesh sprayed everywhere as the wooden shrapnel sliced through people like the sharpest Valyrian Steel.

Hoofbeats drummed around the former command post, Dothraki screamers combing through the wreckage for anything worth looting as the rest of them charged towards the rest of the cavalry. Dismounting with ease, they kicked bodies or parts of bodies over, blades going for the throats of those still breathing but likely to die - what use were they as prisoners. One of them was Addam Marbrand. A foot-long shard had punched straight through his lungs, blood oozing out.

“We have to hold,” Addam said, voice weak and faint. He struggled to open his eyes, body numb and any movement feeling as if he were drowning in quicksand.

“Rest easy.” The sound was new, tone calm and comforting. “You fought admirably. A true warrior.”

Lord Maraband recognized the voice. That of an old foe. One to respect, but one thought defeated only to rise again. “Robb Stark? Is that you?”

“Aye, Lord Marband. It is.”

Sighing, the last thought in Addam Marband’s mind was a prayer to the Seven to protect his young son from the pain of war.

Watching as a final breath passed the lips of the loyal Lord of the Westerlands, Robb Stark pushed off the ground where he was kneeling. Another noble house finding its members nearly wiped out. Another legacy destroyed by this terrible war. By Joffrey’s hubristic madness. ‘Gods, grant us the strength to finish it here, in this campaign,’ he silently prayed.

“Lord Stark.” Looking up, Robb saw Lord Glover trotting up to him. “We took the bridge. Captured most of their forces too. Having the Dothraki slam into their rear took the fight right out of them.”

“How many battalions did not engage the enemy?” he asked.

“About five, my Lord. The rest are at various states of understrength. It’ll take some time to reform them.”

Robb shook his head in frustration. ‘Too little damn time. Far too little damn time.’ “Get them moving, Lord Glover.” He glared at the Dothraki bloodrider who had escorted him across the ford in the blackwater, who spoke some common tongue. “And form up your men for the advance screen. We have no time to loot and rape!” A glance was sent to the body of Lord Marband. “And find some men to bury him with honor!” Robb hoped that the opposite side would do the same for him.

Pulling back the flap of his tent, Jaime found Bronn sitting in a camp chair. He fiddled with one of his knives, muddy boots perched on the table. “So what happened at the war council?” asked the
former sellsword.

Sighing, Jaime pinched the bridge of his nose. “Messenger came in from Lord Marband at Stoney Sept. Said Robb Stark was attacking with the entirety of Houses Glover and Manderly. Marband thinks that he’s at the head of a large column of men trying to sneak around us and capture Highgarden.”

“Do ya’ believe the poor fucker?”

“Seemed earnest enough, but father and Randyll Tarly feel that the troop movements to our north necessitate that the Dragon Queen is preparing a full assault south.” No one feared Daenerys Targaryen as a military mind - conqueror yes, but her strategic and tactical thinking wasn’t one to write home about. For the man that composed the Reynes of Castamere and made Dorne howl, the true worry was the Emperor Jon Snow. But with Jon Snow a weakling and under the control of an angry wife, Tywin Lannister felt that the only logical choice was to hunker down and beat back the inevitable frontal assault on the capitol.

Only it wasn’t going that way at all.

Only no one seemed to see it, too blinded by Jon Snow’s indecision at the dragonpit.

“Army isn’t moving out, is it?” Bronn saw it too.

Jaime shook his head, going directly for the wine. “He’s sending Uncle Kevan down the Goldroad as a precaution, but is keeping most of us here.” He knocked back the flagon by himself, not caring to pour himself a glass. ‘Perhaps Tyrion has the right idea.’ Spending the day drunk off one’s ass sounded so appealing.

“I’ve been skirmishing with the ‘scouting parties’ the Imperials send ahead of their ‘main forces.’ Nothing but Vale knights of House Royce and/or Dothraki. No other units, which doesn’t sit right with me. The fuckers are all getting around our flank and no one has the fuckin’ brains to see it!” Bronn had quite a lot of tolerance for things - tolerance for stupidity wasn’t one of them.

Not stopping until he had drained half the flagon, Jaime took in a breath and steadied himself on one of the tentpoles. “People have brains… the question is whether fighting for this cause is worth it.”

Bonn’s eyes went wide, head jerking up to look at Jaime in shock. Was the Lannister saying what he thought he was saying? Was it shocking that he didn’t really give a shit?

It had bothered Jaime a lot in recent weeks. Whether to betray his son? Or if the man that had killed his King to save hundreds of thousands of lives had any choice in the matter? Because it felt to Jaime as if history repeated itself - and that to save what he had left, he had to let the dice fly high.

“I will ask you to do something, Bronn. Something that will put you in grave danger, yet also put you in a position to do you great harm. If you wish to decline, leave right now and we shall never speak of it.”

The former sellsword snorted. “I ain’t left you yet, Kingslayer.” He stood, sheathing his knife. “I didn’t much like King’s Landing anyway.”

“Lord Stark. It’s the Emperor.”

Sprawled out over a long chair, so tired the night before that he hadn’t even managed to take off his
cuirass and boots, Robb found a horse blanket draped over him. One of his soldiers must have done it. “How long have I been asleep?” he asked the man. Blinking away the fatigue, he found it to be Daryn Hornwood, his aide.

“Four hours, My Lord,” the young Hornwood replied, suppressing a grin - badly. “You’ve been riding all the last two days, so we figured you needed it.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“You, My Lord, you needed it.”

Embarrassed, he pushed the blanket off and bolted upright just as his brother walked in. He bowed sloppily. “Sire.”

“Get up, jackass,” Jon replied, wrapping his arms around Robb in a brotherly hug. “I see the forced are proceeding across the intact bridge. Good job in capturing it intact, brother.”

Robb smiled faintly at the praise. Despite it all, his prowess in battlefield tactics still retained the sharp edge of the Riverlands campaigns repelling Tywin and Jaime Lannister at the start of the War of the Five Kings - not that it was enough to save his father. “You were the one to give the orders, brother.”

“Stop being modest and accept your Emperor’s praise,” Jon replied, smacking him on the back. “And don’t fret about the sleep. You deserved it.”

Truth be told, the fatigue was still bothering him - along with unanswered questions. “Brother, you still haven’t told anyone about what happened at the Dragonpit. Such widely different personalities… it isn’t the sign of a stable mind.”

Jon wrapped an arm around his shoulder, chuckling. “We’re holding a meeting in the Lady’s solar. You’ll get your answers.” Nodding, Robb let his brother escort him out. He was apprehensive for the revelations.

It was a small war council. Jon, Robb, Daenerys, Theodosius Caryn, and Grey Worm, along with Catelyn and Tyrion of the civilian leadership. The final two generals only being there due to their respective commands passing through the bridge. “I received a report from Riverrun,” Caryn stated. “The last of Lord Tully’s battalions have departed. All that’s left are Qhono’s Dothraki and Lord Royce, demonstrating in front of Tywin’s best. He doesn’t look like he’s moving yet.”

“Tywin won’t move.” All eyes turned to Catelyn. “He thinks her Highness is angered and would want to give fire and blood to the capitol, not flank around to capture Highgarden. He’ll stay until the magnitude of what we have done shows itself.”

“Good,” Grey Worm remarked. “Our force it too…” he pondered what word was to be used. “...stretched out along countryside. Weak to attack.” The Unsullied had just left on the road to Harrenhal behind the main Dothraki force and ten thousand auxiliaries.

“With the snowmelt, the only means of attack to cut our advance in the middle is the Goldroad.” Caryn pointed to scrawls of troop concentrations near the capitol. “Kevan Lannister. He has around fifteen thousand men. Westerlands regulars and sellswords. Not the best, but enough to cut us off until Tywin can reinforce him.”

Jon stroked his chin, contemplating. “If we hold at this collection of farming hamlets where the Blackwater Rush meets the Goldroad, would a force about half that size hold?”
“It should, and would get reinforcement from other units and commands marching south. Could catch Kevan in an envelopment if the defending force doesn’t buckle.”

“Robb.” The Emperor turned to the Warden of the North. “Your forces have been resting since taking the Stoney Sept. How many are fit for combat duty?”

“Around seven thousand, your Majesty.”

“They will have Balerion and myself,” Daenerys stated, tone one not to take no for an answer.

“I can supplant them with two thousand men in a division of auxiliaries currently crossing the bridge, sire,” Caryn interjected. Jon was grateful. Nine thousand elite men could hold back Kevan Lannister from prepared positions. Couple that with a dragon… he didn’t want his beloved to risk herself, but if he was Aegon she was most definitely Visenya.

And now for the final matter of business.

There was silence. “To tell you the truth, we had a few questions about that.” Tyrion, grabbing at the pitcher of watered wine on the table. “I happen to hope that I was drunk for most of the last few weeks, rather than see my ruler basically shift between a conqueror rivalling Aegon into a scared boy wishcasting for peace. But I wasn’t so please let me know.” He poured himself a sizable helping.

Sharing a look with Catelyn, Jon smiled softly. “Everyone told me how my father’s honor was both highly and lowly regarded by my enemies. How Joffrey… and frankly, his cabal, relished how they fooled him using simply the fact that he trusted people at their word.” He looked at Dany, whose eyes had narrowed. “My victory in Essos notwithstanding, if they believed the commander of the Imperial Army was weak as his father was, and only goaded into battle by his wife…”

“…Only to be overconfident in attacking someone who’s heart wasn’t in the war…” Out of nowhere Tyrion began cracking up, deep guffaws causing to wine to clatter to the floor. “Brilliant! I only wish I could see my father’s face…” He couldn’t continue, laughing to the point of tears. Soon, all had joined in at the revelation of their Emperor’s strategic mind… except for the Empress.

Catching the unreadable look from his wife, Jon snapped into action. “I wish to confer with the Empress. Dismissed to your positions.” To smiles from the other Lords, and an inebriated laugh from Tyrion, he watched them all leave. Finally alone with his wife.

Eyes boring in on him, Daenerys’ expression was blank at Jon’s confession. Her silence grated on him. Normally stoic and unflappable, the White Dragonwolf found himself crumbling under his wife’s gaze. Suddenly, his still clean-shaven cheek was knocked to the side, reddening handprint forming from her palm contacting with it. And just as suddenly after that, Jon found his head pulled down and Dany’s lips colliding with his.

The kiss lasted nearly half a minute, hungry and passionate. Daenerys plundered her husband’s mouth with all the pent up emotion of the last few weeks. Breathing deeply, the two broke apart, staring into each other’s eyes. “Dany…”

“Jon…” Brimming with both anger in his deception and pure pride in his masterful strategic brilliance in the situation, Dany had let it both out. “You are brilliant.”

He chuckled softly, kissing the top of her head. “I’m sorry, my love. I wanted to tell you.”

“You should have.” She nuzzled his chest. “I would have played along.”

“Your reactions needed to be genuine. I was worried that Tywin or Baelish would see right through
you. They expected me to be Ned Stark, to copy my father’s honorable nature. They would trust my
naivete as genuine… to their undoing.” He allowed himself a dark grin.

Daenerys grinned as well, hugging him closer. Her mouth opened to tell him another fact that she
had just found out - something that would bring them joy… but held off. Not now. Not while he was
stressed with the attack as it was.

Her hand drifted to her stomach. ‘Soon.’

Mace Smith, named by his father for the late Lord of Highgarden, swatted away the flies from his
ear. A wagon driver in service to the crown - ever since the former dominion of House Tyrell had
been turned into yet another personal dominion of the Baratheon King following the Tyrell alliance
with ‘King’ Renly - the vehicle was loaded to the brim with thirty-pound sacks of grain destined for
the starving mouths of King’s Landing. Well, only a few of them, the rest going into the side dishes
of the favored nobility. The job paid enough to feed his belly.

And he despised it. The money was barely enough to make the fact working for the decrepit
Baratheons and Lannisters anything less than disgusting. Those two houses had destroyed House
Tyrell, robbing it of whatever hope it had. Only the Seven knew whether the beautiful Margaery
wasn’t in an icy grave in the North.

Rumors flew about, of seismic defeats to the north. Tywin dead. King’s Landing burning at the
hands of dragons. Dothraki hordes looting and raping the countryside. Flicking the reins attached to
the mules, Mace had enough. “Fuck this shit!”

“What’s up?” asked one of his friends, driving a different wagon.

“Orders, we’re heading out of here. Dothraki are a comin’!”

It soon spread like wildfire. “Where in seven hells are you going?!” The demand/question was
always the same, nearly always in confusion rather than anger.

And the answer never faltered. “Idiot King’s holed up the army in the capitol! Fuckin’ Dothraki
Horde coming straight for us!”

And with that, the panic began. Any chance to rescue the grain stores in Highgarden before the
Imperial Army arrived was lost.
Battle of Blackwater Rush

Chapter Notes

This battle is based off of a collection of different battles of the American Civil War.

“I am glad I was - mostly - sober for when your husband confessed his strategic deception to us, your Highness.”

Nursing a glass of watered wine, unlike the undiluted Dornish horse piss Tyrion imbibed, Daenerys smirked at her Hand. “And why is that, Lord Tyrion?” She missed Jon something fierce, but it was for the best. While he oversaw the spearhead to Highgarden and Sansa and Davos managed things back North, she and Tyrion stayed at Stoney Sept, close to the all important crossroads at the Blackwater Rush.

He sipped at his goblet. “Ned Stark always seemed as if his honor overwhelmed the most basic political reason. He didn’t live long enough to find anyone discovering the depths of his cunning, concerning Jon’s real parentage. Now, at least I could see his son/nephew demonstrate the cunning of an honorable man for me.”

At that moment the tent-flap flew open and in walked Robb, face stretched in anger. Dany had seen that before. It had been when he notified her of Daario arriving in Dragonstone - only to betray her. “What is it, brother?” she asked him.

“We’ve captured a Lannister scout, Daenerys. And you’ll never guess who it is.” The Dragon Empress’ cocked a single eyebrow.

Hood draped over his head, the prisoner found himself shoved onto his knees. ‘Finally, off my blisterin’ feet.’ He had been moved quickly by the scouts after identifying him as high profile. All within the northern army remembered what happened when the Kingslayer was captured - the rift he created in between the Lords that caused the fall of the Young Wolf. Now, they were not taking any chances with any high profile prisoner. Hood over the head, smuggled into the castle so as the men couldn’t see him. He heard the Stark Bannermen mutter amongst each other… until they fell silent.

“What the fuck’s goin’ on?” Asked Ser Bronn of the Blackwater. “I know we’re at the Stoney Sept, so you cunts can take this fuckin’ thing off.”

“This isn’t about our protection from you, Ser Bronn,” came a placid yet chilled female voice. Bronn found the hood finally ripped away, blinking from the bright torchlight. “It’s more for your protection from our men.” As his eyes adjusted, he saw he was face to face with a petite, silver-haired goddess.

The Dragon Empress in the flesh.

She gave him a small smirk, lips ghosting upwards at some silent humor. “Lannisters and their running dogs aren’t the favorite guests of northern soldiers.”

Blinking, Bronn’s gaze was naturally drawn to the diminutive form of the Empress’ Hand. “With all due respect, my Lady. Then what’s he doin’ here?” Hands bound behind his back, all the former sellsword could do was gesture with a tilt of the head.
“I can see what you always said about him,” chuckled Daenerys.

“He hasn’t changed one bit,” Tyrion remarked, hand drifting to the scar on his cheek. “When Lannister blades mark you up, then the northerners don’t seem to be as violent towards you.” He walked over and slapped Bronn on the back. “It’s good to see you, old friend.”

“Your brother told me that if I ever saw you again, I would cut you in half for betraying your family, but he didn’t do so at the Dragonpit - I guess it’s off.”

Tyrion smiled sheepishly. “Good. Quarter man isn’t near as good a nickname as Half man.”

Clasping her hands together, Daenerys cleared her throat. “As amusing as this reunion is, Ser Bronn, why are you here?” The way she paced - stalked rather - around him, the small-framed Empress looked every inch a dragon. “They wouldn’t send the Hero of Blackwater Bay on a routine scouting mission unless it were scouting something important, or it was something personal for you or your masters. So which is it?”

The Empress wouldn’t accept bullshit, or flowery asskissing - not that Bronn would debase himself so. ‘Best out with it, cunt.’ “I wish to switch sides… not just me, but I won’t name names just in case it gets back to the cuntface King.”

Sharing a glance with Tyrion, Daenerys didn’t give anything away. “And what would you offer to prove your sincerity? My Hand trusts you, but I need more.”

“How about the eleven thousand men that are advancing against the Blackwater Rush as we speak? Would that suffice?”

“Why haven’t you taken the castle, Grey Worm?” Watching the Emperor climb down Rhaegal’s spines, it was obvious to the various Unsullied captains and lieutenants that the quite annoyed Jon was about to explode. Around him, the Dothraki bloodriders grumbled in the same irritation. They had grown accustomed to soft beds, hearty ale, and meaty pies since arriving in Westeros and couldn’t wait for the accommodations of Highgarden.

Stepping forward, Grey Worm bowed to Jon. “Your Majesty, my men needed several hours to rest feet from march. When I began the order for advance, Lady Tyrell order me to halt.”

Jon’s eyes narrowed. “Your orders come from me, and if I am unavailable then from General Caryn.”

“I know, but…” Grey Worm’s lips formed in a slight grimace. “Lady Tyrell… she quite persistent.”

“Show me,” Jon replied, coldly. He did not want to deal with this right now. Grey Worm nodded, leading him to the command tent.

The tent had been erected hastily over a large rock face - one of the few natural structures that marred the beautiful fields of the Reach. Several miles away and as majestic as it would have been to someone at the gates, the beauty of Highgarden castle was obscured by several pyres of smoke that rose into the blue sky like the deepest obscenity. A column of Unsullied stood shock still, waiting for orders. The Dothraki cavalry milled about off the Roseroad in far less discipline, bored out of their minds.

Occasionally a boom of an emplaced cannon roared across the landscape. No one but Jon looked up at it, and only the latter out of curiosity. “Some Lannisters dug in at scattered hamlets. We’re blasting
them out,’ Grey Worm explained.

“Good.”

The subject of their earlier discussion sat in a wood and canvas field chair, cane tapping upon the ground in a bored contemplation. “Greetings, sire. I can recognize your footsteps a mile away. Just like Ned Stark’s.” Saying nothing, Jon took a seat in the camp chair just across from her. “You’re not so dishonorable to make an old woman stand on crippled feet?”

Jon didn’t answer. “Why did you see it fit to halt my army?”

“I’m not having my home looted and burned by a bunch of horselord savages.” She was as blunt as ever.

“It seems to be doing a good job of that already. We need those food stores, Lady Tyrell, and your orders are delaying their capture.”

“The people of Highgarden are loyal to House Tyrell. I can assure you, no Lannister cunt could burn the food stores there without cooperation, and they won’t give it.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Jon felt the frustration threatening to boil over. It had plagued him in this new iteration since that night at Winterfell with Catelyn and Caryn, confessing the truth to Dany only soothing it. She wasn’t here, and the frustration returned. “Lady Tyrell, I appreciate your family’s loyalty, but those people there have not sworn that same loyalty. They are pledged to Joffrey, and thus suspect.”

A snort left the old woman. “They would no more wish to follow Joffrey than they would fellate a Dornish cactus.”

He was just so sick of it all. Sick of the complexities, sick of the squabbling Lords, sick of the constant strain of imagining his impending death around every corner - even though it was his plan, the temptation of shoving it into another’s hands so he would have one less thing to deal with was quite intense. “Then what could you possibly offer me in this situation?”

Cane clinking on the stone, Olenna hobbled over to Jon. Her gait was in shambles, but her piercing eyes belied a sharp mind. “I may be old, but I’m not useless. Send me in there under a banner of truce and you shall have Highgarden free and clear.”

Irritation nearly causing Jon to rebuff her and simply burn away the troublemakers with Rhaegal, the honor in his heart banished it away. “Very well. You have a day, Lady Tyrell. Appeal to their loyalty, or the Dothraki will have to appeal to their fear.” Smug grins broke out amongst the bloodriders at this statement. Looking over his shoulder, Jon’s attention shifted to another matter. “Sam, a word?”

It had been a surprise for Sam when his friend had instructed him to leave the Riverrun library - his home base for research efforts - and trek down with Gilly and Little Sam to the Riverlands following the Dragonpit meeting. He knew how Jon’s mind worked, so figured that he had something big planned during the doubts and tight-lipped periods. But this was unreadable. It heartened the disinherited half-maester to see his ancestral kingdom once more, especially after facing his father, but he hadn’t a clue what Jon wanted.

Soon, the two were walking along the grass. Unlike further north, the weather was perfect - sunny and warm but with a cooling breeze. They both felt out of place in their northern-style leather. “The end of the middle is coming soon, Sam,” Jon said cryptically, staring at the greasy black smoke over
Highgarden. A small troop of horses were already galloping towards it, white flag fluttering. “The true fight awaits after, regardless of who wins.”

“You will win, Jon.” He glanced over at the Emperor, so young yet still so old at the same time. They had both been through more than most men would in multiple lifetimes. “If I’ve learned anything, it’s to never bet on Jon Snow.”

Jon smiled, grateful at Sam’s comment. When before his bastard name brought him only shame and self-loathing, now it grounded him. Reminded him to not let the power and dignitas infect him completely. “I appreciate that, my friend. But we must plan for the worst.” He looked back at the countryside, to the south. “That is why I am ordering you to Oldtown - to be my personal representative to the College of Maesters.”

Sam blinked. “What?”

Clasping Sam’s shoulders, Jon locked eyes with his oldest friend. “I need you to do this, Sam. I need to know that there is a fallback. That there is someone to spread the warning of the Long Night.”

The earnestness evident in Jon’s voice, Sam nodded. “I shall, Jon. Don’t worry.”

“Keep Gilly and my godson safe.” The Emperor allowed himself a small smile. “And if you find the secret to Valyrian Steel and I live, let me know.” The two shared a grin.

“Your Majesty.” Trotting up to them, Ollie handed Jon two leafs of paper. “A raven from Oldtown and from Blackwater Rush.”

Mumbling his thanks, Jon looked each over. The one from Oldtown was simple. Having taken a fast horse, Tyene Martell had raised several thousand Dornish from several houses still loyal to the legacy of Elia and Oberyn Martell. She had met up with Podrick, marching north with the reinforcements from Essos and all the Ironborn marines after landing. ‘All going to plan,’ he thought.

The second was far shorter - from Dany.

-Lannister forces less than a day’s march away. Gendry a day’s march away. Do not come north, we’ll hold them off-

Jon closed his eyes, breathing deeply. In all of this, one feeling he had yet to cope with was helplessness. Being unable to protect his family. The feeling had to be willed away. “Father,” he prayed. “Mother. Uncle, watch over Daenerys.” Only the wind answered him.

“Seven Hells,” muttered Kevan Lannister under his breath. Addam Marbrand had been right, exaggerations correct. Before them stood what had to be the combined forces of all the Northern Houses - and despite the massive losses and divisions they had suffered since Robb Stark called their banners years before, the Young Wolf still commanded an impressive host.

Spyglass dropping, Kevan’s aide was pale. “The Dragon Queen is with them… with her dragon.”

“Just one dragon?” At Riverrun, she had three.

“Aye. There are smaller ones, but the scouts have them still at Riverrun.”

‘At least they get something right.’ Kevan wished he had access to the Little Birds of Varys or Qyburn, but the former was with the enemy and the latter was quite tight lipped.
Officers and Lords riding on horseback in front of their men, guiding the rows of warriors into position, each side maximized their advantage. Kevan had spread his forces out four lines deep across a wide front, hoping to use his superior numbers to overwhelm the Young Wolf in a double envelopment before any reinforcements could envelop him as the Knights of the Vale had at the Battle of the Bastards. Meanwhile, the furious digging and entrenching had paid off for the Imperials. The northerners made up for their deficiency in armor - chainmail and leather comparing to the plate-armor of the Westerlands regulars - with a line of earthworks along the shallow hillside west of the Blackwater Rush. Wooden spikes extended out like spines of a hedgehog, sparing warriors for reserve lines behind in case of any breaches. Designed as a static formation to deal with heavy cavalry, Robb cursed as he found that only the light sellsword cavalry accompanied the enemy regulars.

“They won’t be launching any cavalry assaults,” he explained to his sister by marriage. “Stormcrows by their markings. Light cavalry, probably to hit us on the side.”

“Their infantry will still be halted by the earthworks,” Daenerys responded, clad in a white leather dress. She looked every inch a northern conqueror. “Any advantage to equalize the numerical disparity is welcome for us.”

Robb shook his head. “That’s not what I’m worried about.” He gestured to the enemy flanks. “They’re spreading out. I’ll need to put men out of the reserves to plug our left and right. That leaves only my cavalry in reserve. We need reinforcements.”

“Gendry and the Stormlands forces will arrive shortly,” Dany answered, though she wished she was as confident as she sounded. In any case, they had Belarion. Kevan Lannister undoubtedly had nests of scorpions and rockets just for that eventuality, but it was just a risk she had to take. Patting Saracen, she left the command tent to take her place within her army.

It started in the center. Deliberately ordering his flanks to hold back for the right moment, Kevan Lannister sent in the cream of his Lannisport men at arms directly at the Imperial earthworks. Men that had bled and died at Whispering Wood, Riverrun, and the God’s Eye - men that had never broken - charged forth in good order, covered by the barrage of a quarter hundred rocket batteries. The earthworks afforded decent protection the northerners, Robb Stark and Robett Glover answering back with the three dozen cannon snugly emplaced behind their men. Scores of men fell in bloody heaps as the Lannisters reached the earthworks, beginning the melee.

Smoke from the firing artillery wreathed the battlefield in a haze, the roar of the guns and rockets only joined by the clash of metal and the screams of the fallen. Cohesion among the attackers was weakened yet not eliminated by the staves, organized formations falling upon the less armored northern shield wall in a contest of muscle and grit. Archers and crossbowmen added their payloads to the fray, earlier scores changing to hundreds as each of the minutes ticked past. Whatever tactics had begun the battle now devolved into a pure chaotic brawl.

Present throughout the carnage was the black form of Balerion the Dread Reborn. Flying low, Daenerys guided him on attack run after attack run - lessons learned from the near tragedy at Riverrun almost what seemed like an eternity ago. Fire spewed from his open maw, targeting whatever cluster of forces he could before bolts or rockets forced Daenerys to break off. Nevertheless, many struck home. Every minute or so Balerion bellowed with pain as a bolt slammed into his flesh or a rocket exploded close and peppered him with shrapnel. Hitting closer to the front would have been safer, but Dany refused to put any of her own men at risk of friendly fire.

Viserys would undoubtedly have, as would many Kings, Queens, and conquerors - but not Dany. She wouldn’t crush her own under the wheel.
Flame drying up as a cluster of Lannister forces on the far left of their line immolated in a fiery inferno, Dany had just urged Balerion to gain altitude when a loud explosion detonated just under his abdomen. A pierced cry of pain left the dragon’s maw, Dany holding on tight to his spines at the sudden jolt. She urged him higher, pleaded for him to rise above the threat of the ranged artillery but he refused, stunned wings refusing to flap as the mighty beast slammed into ground muddy from the snowmelt. Dany tumbled off into a soft patch of grass. Her body ached, bruises likely all over her body, but a quick pat down and listening to her child’s grunts and roars indicated all was - relatively - fine.

“It’s the Dragon Cunt!”

Eyes widening in alarm, Dany scrambled to her feet to find at least half a dozen Stormcrows galloping towards her, scimitars gleaming in the sun as they gunned for her. On instinct, she drew Saracen from her hip and waited for the onslaught.

Dragon incapacitated from the sheer pain of his wounds, the raider in the van saw the grounded Empress as an easy target - gross underestimation. Nimbly, Daenerys crouched to her knees, dodging the downward slash. Saracen sliced clean through the horse’s legs, sending it and the rider toppling to the ground in sickening crunches of bone. The one behind pulled on the reins to dodge, only to fall from the horse all the same. Dany brought her blade up to slash across a third’s stomach. The second had then scrambled to his feet, attacking Dany with ferocity. She parried blow after blow, reflexes quicker than her foe. The final blow sent his head clean off with nary a drop of blood marring the fine metal…

...before the fist of a fourth sellsword, this one dismounted, slammed into her gut and sent Dany to the ground.

Coughing dust from her lungs, in a blink of an eye Dany’s sight shifted from the sellsword raising his scimitar to the crimson blood spurting from his chest as a northern knight ran him through with a broadsword. The attacker collapsed on the ground, nothing but a boneless corpse spilling blood upon the ground. “Your Highness,” stated the knight, extending his hand.

Daenerys took it, allowing him to pull her to her feet. All around, laid the still bodies of the remaining sellswords, the detachment of northern cavalry milling about on the very edge of the battle. “All thanks upon you, Ser…”

“Cassel, your Highness. Of Winterfell.” He was a young lad, likely no more than two and twenty passed his name day. He glanced at Balerion, who was coming to from his torpor and pain. “Will he be alright, Empress?”

Willing herself not to sigh and dishearten her men, Dany nodded. “My children are strong. They have survived worse.” The stories Jon had told of how Rhaegal nearly died at Hardhome still haunted her. She moved to Balerion’s side while the night mounted his horse. “May the old gods grant you their blessings, Ser Cassel.” Gently stroking Balerion’s scales as the knight rode away, Daenerys heard the thunder of thousands of hoofbeats over the din of battle. It was the Stormcrows, moving into position to attempt to turn their flank. She cursed, not enough reserves to hold them back for too long.

Where in seven hells was Gendry?

Sitting high in the saddle, Gendry Baratheon felt every inch a true highborn for the first time in his life. His feet dangled in the stirrups as he guided his mount across the front line of tightly packed
troops. Shields packed tightly, swords and spears drawn, six thousand steel helmets glinting in the sun. They stretched five battalions wide, two deep, banners glinting in the cool wind that brought them relief in their sweltering armor - the finest the Stormlands had to offer, bending the knee to Empress Daenerys at Riverrun and fighting for the bastard lord rather than the Lannister lord. Gendry looked upon the closest banner. A mighty stag, antlers high in defiance to the scorching fires surrounding it.

The fires of his forge, only this time to reforge the destiny of House Baratheon from one of treason to one of loyalty. Of honor and fidelity.

“Men of the Stormlands!” he cried, his usually reserved demeanor being swept up in the moment. “This is our time! Too long have we fought and bled for the wrong cause, one that brought nothing but ruin for the world. Today, we reclaim our honor!” He drew out his warhammer, holding it mightily in the air. “Forward for Storm’s End!”

As the men cheered, Gendry was clearly a sight to behold. A true stag, a Lord his uncles would have been proud to see. Preparing the charge across the sunlit field of glory, he looked every inch what Robert Baratheon should have been.

“They’re comin’!” The hue and cry rang out all across the Lannister front - from the reserve forces to the footsoldiers already engaged in the bloody melee with the dug in northerners. Positioned perfectly on the gently sloping hillside to see the roadway to the north. See the gleaming steel and waving banners of the Stormlanders, fully rested and advancing at double quick time to slam into the unprotected flank.

Orders came quickly. All forces on the Lannister left, initially being held back in order to hit the forces of House Manderly currently battling with those men of House Marbrand fighting to avenge their fallen lord, were commanded to swing back and face Gendry Baratheon - who outnumbered them three to one. The Stormcrows had already broke out into a half-charge by the time the order to recall reached them. Sellsword captains rapidly attempting to reel them back, Robb Stark personally led in his reserve of five hundred northern cavalry in a countercharge. Lances and swords sliced through the unarmored sellswords, the Lannister right turning into a slaughterhouse of man and steed that reminded many a northerner of the Battle of the Bastards.

It was a single battalion of troops that held the line. Brave farmers and ranchers hailing from the same collection of villages and hamlets thirty miles southeast of Lannisport. On the orders of Kevan Lannister himself, ashen-faced and with his mount bleeding from several wounds, the three hundred men hunkered down in place with fifty crossbowmen and a rocket battery. They formed into a tight square, spears and shields pointed outward just as the Stormlanders swarmed around them in their mad assault on the hated Lannister Army.

Time stretched out interminably while combining with the duopoly of the rapid motion of savagery racing past each man on each side of the conflict. Shadows danced upon the dead grass, obscured by the grey smoke of power and the greasy-black smoke of smoldering dragonfire. Men stood, men ran, men collapsed in bloody heaps all in one fluid continuum - they hacked away with blades, poured water or wine down thirsty gullets out of leather waterskins, picking up weapons from the fallen once theirs were damaged beyond repair or lost in the melee. Imperial cannon and Lannister rockets fired with wild abandon, archers on both sides just aiming in the direction of the enemy and firing. Anything to increase their fire rate.

Gendry forced his command forward at the Lannister flank and away from the distraction that was the battalion square - but there was no truly escaping it. The presence of hundreds of armed enemy
forces right in the center of their force was a threat unable to ignore, thus minimizing the impact of
their envelopment. The men within the square, surrounded by a snarling mass of humanity bent on
ripping them apart for the actions of their leige lord, burrowed their spears and shields upon the
ground in defiance. They cut up their banners out of honor as the archers and rockets unloaded in
every direction. Standing until overrun, every minute found themselves pulling back as comrade
upon comrade fell and the sheer weight of the Baratheons forced them closer together…

Until the battle stilled with the arrival of the Black Dread.

Blood oozing out of over a dozen wounds marring his red-black scales, Balerion nonetheless stilled
the entire field with his ear-splitting bellow. Bracing for the fiery death by inferno that far stronger
and braver warriors before them that failed to live to tell the tale, the battalion square only found a
shower of slobber drenching them. The dragon kept his fireglands dry for the time being.

Atop him, the majesty of the Dragon Empress - blade gleaming in the sun - gazed down upon them.
Her formally ice blue jacket was marred with blood and greasy soot. Not her blood. “Men of the
Westerlands, I implore that you surrender.” It was a plea, but Daenerys did not lower herself while
giving it.

In the stilled fighting, the battalion commander - a knight of mid-level repute - stepped forward. His
arm hung limply, bleeding from his shoulder. “How much time did we buy?” he asked simply.

honorably. Enough lives have been shed in this war - do not sacrifice your brave men for the savage
brute that sits in King’s Landing.” Blood dripping from Saracen, Balerion hissing once she finished
her plea, it was unsaid on what Daenerys would do if they declined.

Silence, for the first time since the battle had begun, reigned for interminable moments. The standoff
brought a great tension upon both sides as the decisions of one man hung in the balance. Would he
choose a personal humiliation and let his boys live another day, or choose the Fire and Blood offered
by the Targaryen Empress as punishment for defiance.

His choice would be the opposite of the brother of his liege lord outside Riverrun on another fateful
day like this. “Put down your spears and shields boys! Our war is over!” A relieved breath left
Dany’s lungs at the decision. These brave men didn’t deserve a fiery death simply for owing
allegiance to evil men with black intentions.

Although the Lannister force lived to fight another day thanks to the sacrifice of the boys of the
Westerlands - armed with the knowledge that the reports that Addam Marbrand had died to deliver to
the Army of the Divine Chimera - the lion had been beaten off with its tail between its legs. The
dragon placed the laurels upon her head, for she had secured victory that day.

Rows of Unsullied remained completely still out of training and familiarity as the Black Dread
Reborn landed on the ground with a loud thud. He spread his wings, roaring loudly as Daenerys held
her position dragonback with ease. Soon the dragon settled from exhaustion and the fatigue of his
various wounds. Bundled in an all-black coat, Saracen strapped to her hip, Dany climbed down and
found what she was looking for.

Stark and Targaryen banners unfurled in blurs of red/black and grey fluttering in the wind, Jon
stepped from the welcoming party to meet his beloved half way. Behind them, a massive rose banner
graced the highest point of the newly restored seat of House Tyrell - wardens of the Reach by order
of the Empress.
Expression regal, Dany gave a curt nod. “Emperor Jon.”

“Your Highness.” Jon bowed, inwardly enjoying the theatrics of it all. Based on the barely hidden dragonfire smirk on her face, he knew she was enjoying this as well. “May I present as a present for you, Highgarden Castle.”

Smile stretching from ear to ear, Daenerys returned a short curtsey. “You are most appreciated, your Majesty.” And with that, it was done. The Targaryen Emperor had succeeded in his quest. Highgarden was captured along with all the food stores for King’s Landing, a prize that none in the Lannister Army could ignore. Jon had forced Tywin’s hand, and ensured the sight of the next field of battle.

The one that would decide the Emperor’s War.
The Storm Approaches

Stepping to the side, the massive bulk of the fully armored Ser Gregor Clegane stared down at Daario Naharis with a certain blankness - an uncaring suspicion. It made Daario’s skin crawl. The tale of Tywin Lannister’s mad dog was one familiar across the known world, how he butchered the Targaryen children and Stannis Baratheon for his Lannister masters. Now though, it was as if the brutality and bloodlust had been subsumed in favor of an almost unwavering loyalty. As if the Mountains’ free will had been taken away, leaving nothing but a drone. Once the door opened, Daario quickly darted in. No sense in staying longer with the creature.

Most receptions with the Chimera were done in the official throne room or unofficial audience room, a level of formality always present. However, for the most trusted of advisors, Joffrey often preferred the use of his personal quarters. As the King’s new enforcer, Daario had quickly earned this honor. Immediately, the fell to his knees. “All Highest. You have summoned me?”

Joffrey turned from where he stared at a tapestry, one of him slaying the forces of Renly Baratheon during the Battle of Blackwater Bay - the official line, though all rumors pointed to such being a lie. “Captain Naharis, I am glad you are here.”

“I am in his Highest’s noble service.” Just let him say his piece, then leave. To Daario, it was easier carrying out Joffrey’s will than presenting himself before the King. People were known to have their heads crushed by the Mountain who erred in protocol.

“That is most welcome.” A blind servant brought a plate of fruit for the King. Joffrey’s fingerclawed digits took a small apple slice and brought it to his mouth, underneath the veil. “You are familiar with the Imperial Army, are you not?”

Daario blinked, but kept his eyes on the floor. “I have fought among the Dragon Queen’s armies, yes.”

Laughing, the King smacked one of his servants, sending him into a deeper laugh. “It is my destiny to rid the world of those that would pollute the faith of my mother the Maiden, and my fool of a grandfather shouldn’t get the right to do that.” He stared at the sellsword from under his veil. “I have an assignment for you.”

Hands drifting to cup her midsection, Daenerys winced as her fingers ghosted over the dark, purplish bruise on her stomach. While the sellsword’s fist hadn’t been chainmailed as a Westerosi knight’s undoubtedly would have been, that did not comfort her. It still hurt like all seven hells. She stared at the mirror. ‘If it had been several inches lower…’

Dany wrapped her arms around her naked body, the thought wracking her with pain. Early labor with the twins had nearly killed her, Arya, and Rhaegar so long ago. One blow to her lower abdomen would have undoubtedly killed the unborn child now growing inside her. Another dragonwolf, a mix of her and Jon.

“The baby is still there, your Highness?” asked Missandei, seated several feet behind her. Her faithful handmaiden and the ladies of her family were the only ones who knew. The only ones she had told so far.

Eyes closed, Dany swore she could feel the very spirit of the unborn dragon within her. “Yes. There
was no miscarriage.” The maester at the Stoney Sept had examined her almost immediately after the
fight and found nothing but the bruise - after being rescued at Blackwater Rush by the northern
cavalry, the mere throbbing ache in her stomach told Dany that the little one was fine. “But it was
such a close run thing.”

Margaery felt her Empress’ worry and pain. “Perhaps the smiths here at Highgarden can make you a
set of plate armor, like Visenya wore during the conquest?” The stain upon Dany’s alabaster skin
made her cup her own swollen belly, calming herself with her unborn child’s presence. Seeing how
Daenerys was just torturing herself, she locked eyes with Missandei. The handmaiden nodded,
fetching the black battledress resting upon the bed. “Balerion had his scales, and even he felt the pain
of the enemy rockets and scorpions. You need all the protection you can - as does the baby.”

Looking once more at the bruise, Dany allowed and helped Missandei to dress her. “Is there any
chance to avoid the battle?”

“I sent my mother to parley with Tywin, but I doubt it.” Sansa’s tone was cold - she had as personal
a slight with Joffrey as anyone else, moreso even. “Ser Bronn supposedly has an inside source. That
source is adamant that Tywin is going to attack and take Highgarden back by any means necessary.
He is concerned with food riots in the capitol.”

“Do we believe him?”

Sansa shrugged. “Bonn is a sellsword, but Lady Tyene seems to vouch for him - something about
saving her when he didn’t need to while in Dorne. Eh… I don’t think he’s lying. The source is
probably some opportunist in court trying to defect.”

“I think it’s Jaime Lannister.” Three sets of eyes turned to Margaery. “Most in Joffrey’s Council are
shameless toadies, only interested in pushing their own self-interest at the cost of the realm. They
know of your and Jon’s desire to break the wheel, and that would dry up all their efforts to enrich
themselves on the backs of the smallfolk. They’ll stay with Joffrey. Ser Jaime… he’s the only one
who’s self interest, protecting his nephew from being murdered as his niece was, lines up with our
cause.”

Fastening the straps of her dress with help from Missandei, Dany pursed her lips. “Astute
observations, and ones I hope are true. In any case, Ser Bronn is staying in the castle under lock and
key… as a guest, but a guarded one.”

“No sense in trusting him until his information pans out,” Sansa mused. “While I have trust in
Tyrion’s judgement… I trust very few.” All present had learned that lesson the hard way.

Several minutes later, Ser Barristan bowed to her as she entered Jon’s study. He had his back turned
to the door, scribbling various orders for ravens to take to the various commands. Smiling, Dany
crept behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Relax, my dragonwolf, it is I.” She leaned
down and kissed his neck.

Pushing the chair back and rising, Jon wasted no time pulling his wife into an embrace. Dany sighed
happily, resting her face in the crook of his neck. “This is nice.”

“It is,” Jon replied, kissing her forehead.

It seemed like years since Dany had watched Jon look weak at the Dragonpit. Confidence now
exuded both of them, though the stress and strain remained. “Now all we have to do is wait.”

Jon sighed. “Aye, wait.” He pulled her closer, needing to have her warm body flush against him. “Is
Balerion healing?"

“Yes, but not quickly enough.” A sad, mournful quality filled Dany’s voice. A dragon was not a slave, yet they were urging them on into greater and greater danger as the Masters had once done with the Unsullied. It hurt both of them, despite their children doing it willingly. “I will have to ride Edderon into battle when the time comes.” ‘While with child.’ She gulped. “I will need a suit of plate armor.

Pulling back, Jon looked at her with a smirk. “Didn’t you once tell me that you hated armor?”

Time to tell him. “I do, but I have something important that I cannot risk.” Hesitating no longer, she took Jon’s hand and guided it to her abdomen.

Furrowing his brows, it took a few moments for the Emperor to realize what she was saying - or rather, not saying. Dany saw his eyes widen in recognition, then flash in joy… only for the joy to mute slightly in brooding worry.

Wordlessly, he held her even tighter. “They will all be safe, my love,” she whispered - hoping that she could believe it.

The columns of troops stretched out for dozens of miles, a single centipede of marching men, trotting horses, and groaning carts filled to the brim with supplies and munitions on the journey down the Roseroad towards the ancestral home of House Tyrell - once again in the possession of its former masters. A development Lord Tywin Lannister was determined to correct.

Listening to the arguments coming from his son, currently sparring with Trystane Martell and Randyll Tarly over the soundness of their strategy, Tywin’s head felt like a smith was slamming a hammer against his skull from the inside. ‘It is her, it has to be her.’ The Red Witch plagued his thoughts, visions of her dancing in ever fireplace like a malevolent demon attempting to devour him whole. With the food stores captured in the desperate attempt by the Dragon Queen, it was as if her curses upon him were coming to fruition.

He would wipe her and the Targaryens off the face of the earth. He had done so before and would do so again.

“We have to look at it with open eyes!” Jaime yelled, hoping against all hope to stop the coming slaughter. “Capturing the only means to feed the masses of the capitol, and remaining there far away from their base of operations in the North? It has to be a trap…”

“That’s enough!” Slamming his mailed fist on the table, Tywin glared at his son. “I’m relieving you of your command of our Bannermen. Your uncle Kevan will take your place.” Before Jaime could speak up, Tywin silenced him with a raised palm. “I do not want to hear it. Be gone to the capitol at once. Even in defeat, your uncle has more initiative and confidence in his right hand than you do at all. You are dismissed.”

Teeth gritted, Jaime fought not to sock his father in the face at the glaring reference to his lost hand - a hand lost by men who had turned out to be under the command of a man pledged to his father. Without another word, he bowed and left the tent.

Harry Strickland kept silent as Tywin began further discussions on the disposition of his army, the conversation soon being taken over by him, Randyll Tarly, and Gilwood Hunter while the others watched in various states of interest - and disinterest. It just seemed too… perfect. The Dragon
Queen convincing her weakling of a husband to go on some wild flanking attempt leaving the northern lands defenseless, and just happening to capture the breadbasket of the Realm? No, anyone with the battlefield prowess of Jon Snow, which put Aegon the Conqueror to shame, couldn’t make this only a coincidence.

Locking eyes with Alesander Staedmon, the Lord Commander of the Stormlands forces, Strickland saw the same worry. Neither of their commands were fully committed. Despite the Iron Bank’s money in their pockets, being the descendants of Targaryen bastards made the Golden Company less enthusiastic to take on Rhaegar’s son and sister in combat. Pledged to House Baratheon, the Stormlanders felt less kinship to their golden Lord Tommen when a pretender - a bastard son said to be the splitting image of a young Robert or Stannis - existed that had earned the loyalty of their brothers fighting for the Dragon Queen.

Glancing at Trystane Martell, the young Lord - having sworn fealty to Joffrey in perpetuity, ending his Principality - was one of those listening to Tywin’s every word. ‘Fool,’ Strickland thought. Hearing from his men, the Dornish thought Trystane a puppet of the hated Lannisters. Morale among the Sunspear levies was the lowest in the entire army, yet he didn’t seem to care. Seventh hell, morale was low in general.

If he were Tywin, Strickland figured, he better hope for a decisive victory. ‘Anything less could see the entire shitshow unravel.’

“There is no going back, is there?”

“No,” Bronn replied curtly, dispelling any hope for his friend the Imp to not face his father. “Tywin is bullheaded. He’ll be so scared of losing the food stores at the Reach that he’ll throw everything in a single, decisive battle to end all battles.” The entire war council was crowded in the massive map room of Highgarden. Sansa had seen plenty during this war, and this was by far the most ornate - high arches, stained glass windows, whitewashed walls inlaid with gold. Beautiful, but she vastly preferred the spartan accommodations of Winterfell though.

“He said as much to me during our parlay,” Sansa heard her mother say. “In any case, battle it is.”

Nods went around the table. “We have the advantage of choosing the battleground, even if we are outnumbered,” Daenerys stated.

“Are we sure further reinforcement isn’t forthcoming?” asked a worried Yezzan zo Qaggaz, personally leading the united forces of New Valyria. “I mean, the peasants of Dorne rallied to our cause as we marched from Oldtown…”

A very loud clearing of the throat silenced him. Leaning on the table with splayed hands, Tyene Martell scoffed. “We were lucky to get those men. Dore is tapped out, I’m afraid. Many would fight Tywin but do not want to fight other Dornishmen, even puppets.”

“The Lady is right,” Daenerys said. “Unless we can get defections from Joffrey’s army, then we are at the largest we can be.”

“Even if the reinforcements from Essos do not equalize the numbers, our line of defense at Highgarden will prevent Tywin from enveloping us,” Caryn added. “We just have too many men for him to try that. I feel he’ll try to punch through.”

Robb pointed to a position about two miles north of the castle. “This is the most important part of the
battlefield. The Heights of Luthor. Good, bad, or indifferent, the heights will determine who wins and who loses.” He, Caryn, and Jon had detailed their plan for using the heights, and it made many uncomfortable - Sansa included. The Empress was fully in support, and that quelled dissent. Everyone knew their orders.

“Well,” the Emperor cut through all thoughts and chatter. ”It is time for rest. Study this ground carefully, my Lords. It is going to be a battlefield. In the epics and histories of the future, it will be written that you all will have had a part to play upon it." Taking the Empress’ hand in his, the other waved the meeting to a close.

Stepping along the rather expansive corridor, Sansa heard footsteps behind her and immediately tensed up. “My Lady!”

The tension dissipated… for the most part. ‘Podrick.’ A smile danced at Sansa’s lips. “Ser Payne,” she said, turning to see him. While he had returned to Westeros many weeks before, the harried days had left this moment as the first time she could converse with him since that night outside her quarters long before. At his bow, she curtseyed respectfully. “I have yet to commend you for your bravery overseas.”

Podrick smiled bashfully, butterflies fluttering in his stomach. “Than… thank you my Lady,” he said slowly, trying to remain composed. “It was a difficult ordeal, but faith in our cause and your correspondence kept me in high spirits.” It was true, more than most knew.

“I… I am glad.” Sansa felt a blush creeping to her cheeks in spite of herself.

Peeking around the corners, Podrick placed his hand on Sansa’s shoulder and guided her to an alcove. Away from prying eyes and ears. “Lady Sansa, forgive me for being so blunt, but…” He took in a deep breath. Jon had given him his blessing, and he had been steeling his spine ever since. “I presume you can infer what my intentions are. Intentions towards you, specifically.”

“Yes. I believe I can.” While… his intentions hadn’t been completely disguised in their letters, Sansa hadn’t expected him to broach it this quickly. The awkward boy that had rode with Brienne was gone, replaced with a hardened man of war. ‘A handsome man of war…’

“The Emperor informed me that your previous experiences with this sort of thing have been rather… distasteful.” He paused as Sansa shut her eyes. “But I am not one of these swine. It may be soon, and I am not asking for immediacy…”

“…Please, Podrick…” Sansa wanted him to say it. She also didn’t. She also wished he would just go away, while much of her so desired to take him in the passionate embrace of lovers.

“Hear me out. I wish to ask for permission to court you, for hope of a betrothal after this war is over.” He looked at her with a soft expression. One of hope and love. “I can go slowly if you would want, but I want to make this work, my Lady.”

“I’m not sure if I can,” Sansa murmured, biting her lip - hating that she felt this vulnerable, this conflicted between what she wanted and what she felt she could tolerate.

Concealing the swirl of emotions at her likely rejection, Podrick withdrew into his shy nobility. He bowed shallowly. “Whatever you shall decide, my Lady. I shall pressure you not.” As much as he wanted her, desired her greatly, he would never seek to cause her pain. He cared for her, not just because the Emperor would disembowel him if he hurt his sister in any way.

‘Seven Hells.’ Sansa hated feeling like a weak woman. She was the Hand in the North. She was one
of the most powerful women in Westeros. The ghost of a footnote in the historical record did not get to ruin her. “Fuck it,” she breathed, grabbing the straps of Podrick’s Cuirass. Before he even registered it, her lips were on his.

Her forceful passion in the face of her earlier reluctance surprised Podrick. The young knight rapidly recovered, however, hands slinking around her waist as he kissed her back. Chaste, the kiss nevertheless felt wonderful - the northerner’s lips soft and warm against his. While gentle, Podrick took control and tugged her flush against him.

Sansa moaned despite herself. This was not the awkward boy that had taken her to Castle Black after her escape from Winterfell. Fighting in Essos had hardened him, toned the muscles she was now feeling through their clothes so pleasurably. Not the dashing prince she had fantasized about in her youth, but a powerful warrior nonetheless. Pushing herself, Sansa pushed on his lips with her tongue to deepen the kiss.

It was so easy to be lost in the kiss. Sansa Stark had more passion in this one kiss than all the whores Bronn and Tyrion secured for Podrick without payment - kissed by fire, as Tormund had opined once. Tongue dancing with hers, Podrick took a chance and trailed his hand down the pleats of her dress to cup her ass…

Eyes flying open, Sansa was vaulted into a memory. A memory locked deep in the recesses of her mind, shoved there long ago. It played out vividly before her. Highgarden became Winterfell. Tyrell roses became Bolton flayed men. And the sweet, loving Podrick Payne became the cold, sadistic Ramsay Bolton. Clutching his sword and preparing to bring the flat of it down on her bare asscheeks, hands bound tight enough to cut into her skin and powerless to resist…

Her reaction was explosive. “Get off!” Slender arms drew an almost superhuman strength as she shoved Podrick away, nearly causing him to slip onto the floor. “Do not touch me.”

Stunned, after a moment Podrick took in the woman before him. She had changed from the passionate goddess from before. Her eyes were wide in alarm, sheen of sweat covering her forehead. Thoughts of that monster must have been going through her head. “Sansa.”

Breathing rapidly, the memory began to fade, but not completely. Sansa nevertheless saw Podrick, in a moment of clarity between Ramsay’s malevolent grin. “Podrick, please… just leave me.” Half for herself, half to spare him pain.

Undaunted, choosing to do away with his hesitancy, Podrick took her hand in his. “Please, Lady Sansa, I am not him…”

The slap echoed in the empty hallway with a crack. Rubbing at her hand, palm stinging and heart beating ever faster, the image of Ramsay in Sansa’s mind morphed back into Podrick. Two completely different people. Complete opposites, both in their character and in her feelings towards them. Guilt filled her at the red handprint on his cheek, but it was all too overwhelming. Her past, her feelings, her place as Jon’s Hand on the eve of the battle that would decide the throne.

All forced out Sansa’s inevitable response. “Just… just don’t. Leave me in peace.” With that, she turned, leaving the stunned and heartbroken knight to stew by himself.

Rain pounded against the walls of the castle, an endless sheet of water punctuated by flashes of lighting and cracks of thunder that illuminated and shook the foundations of the jewel of the Reach. Jon walked briskly through the empty hallways, lips pursed in a brooding line. Worry clouded him.
Tywin’s army had long passed the former battlefield at Blackwater Rush and was marching double time along the Roseroad. Soon they’d be upon the Imperial Army, but the rain would only serve to disrupt Jon’s finely crafted strategy.

‘Please, end this deluge,’ he thought in silent prayer. Yet… the rain did provide some comfort. Stuck in the embrace of snow and ice for so long, Jon appreciated the comparative warmth of the falling liquid. But it was small comfort as he headed towards the guest quarters.

Upon capture of Highgarden, Margaery and Robb had taken the quarters reserved for the Lord, as befitting her status as the true heir to the Tyrell name. The rest of the Imperial hierarchy - including the Emperor and Empress - took the suite of guest chambers. He was itching to see Daenerys, to kiss his children goodnight, cuddle with the mother of his new child, and then seek comfort in her arms. But first, Jon had one stop to make.

It was naturally yet unsettlingly quiet in his brother’s room. Catelyn and Robb had argued for leaving him in Winterfell, but it had been Daenerys that argued to bring him along with the Red Witch. She had seen his powers in action more than anyone other than Meera, and with the experience of a healthy respect for the mystical, Jon agreed. Bran had mostly kept to himself since then. Saying little and spending most of his time staring at the stars or the fireplace - exactly where he was at the present time.

“Good evening, Jon,” Bran stated. Not even turning.

Jon entered, closing the door behind him. “Good evening.” Did he just greensee? “How did you know it was me?”

His brother looked over his shoulder. “Your footsteps are distinctive.” He kept his eyes on Jon as the Emperor walked closer to the hearth. “The battle will be joined soon. Tywin and his main commanders have fallen for your trap.”

Eying his brother wearily, Jon allowed himself to truly take in what the young boy with a fondness for climbing and riding had become. Bran was cold, emotionless - often lost in a world unfamiliar to the Emperor, one that others could not reach. There was little warmth to him, hard to smile yet also hard to anger or insult. Just a quiet melancholy, pensive for the sake of pensiveness.

If people were right, then he was in possession of a knowledge deeper than any other. “Bran, what do you see?”

The Three-Eyed Raven closed his eyes. “I see all things.”

As they opened, Jon could see a slight twinkle in Bran’s eyes - a single spark grounding the greenseer as Brandon Stark. It heartened him. “Does that include the future?”

Shifting his hands to clasp each other, Bran enjoyed the warmth coming from the hearth. “For what reason do you ask, Jon?”

“Any advice for me, brother? About the coming battle.”

Turning his head away from the fire, Bran’s eyes bored into Jon’s with a detached intensity. “Don’t lose.”

In spite of the seriousness of the topic, Jon laughed. “You’re the second person who’s told me that in this context.” Pulling out a chair, he took a seat next to Bran. The fire warmed the unseasonable chill over the Reach that night, his fingers closer to the flames than all others. ‘Winter is Coming.’ “Do you see the future? Any sign of what is to come?” ‘That my unborn child will be unharmed…’
The twinkle left, Bran retreating to the depths of his new soul. “It doesn’t work quite like that. I don’t presume to be a soothsayer.”

“Anything would do at this moment.” It had all been discussed and planned to death. He, Caryn, and Robb made sure all commanders knew their orders for when the battle was joined. Dany, Tyrion, Sansa, Davos, and Catelyn had all gone over with him whatever political fallout the battle would create either way. Sam was already at Oldtown among the Maesters. All the pieces were in place, but the Fog of War continued to consume him. Deny him the peace that certainty gave. Perhaps Bran could give it to him.

Taking the fireplace poker that had been propped up against his wheelchair, Bran nudged around the charred logs within the hearth. “Lady Melisandre believes that the flames show manifestations of the Lord of Light’s will upon proper showing of faith.” One thin sliver of wood crumbled into a pile of ash as the metal poked it. “The Warlocks of Qarth thought the future could be seen through use of alchemy. For a spiritual person to ingest shade of the evening. Leaf, on the other hand, believes that predicting the future is pointless. We can only look at the past and use it as a lesson for our future conduct.” There was silence for a moment. “I think there is truth and falsity in all of it.”

“Everyone I talk to assumes some sort of prophecy, be it that of the Lord of Light or that which Joffrey’s propagandists drone on about. It is both freeing and painful to know I have no real hand to play in my destiny.”

Bran turned, looking Jon straight in the eye. “There is an intersection between all of us, Jon, whether preordained by fate or by the actions and half-measures of people long dead. We cannot stop it, but were are not merely pawns of some greater being.” Reaching over, he clasped his brother’s hand. “We all have the ability to shape our destiny. Whatever god or gods or spirits out there have given us that blessing and curse.” His eyes shone with the most emotion Jon had seen in Bran since before the fateful accident that had him lose use of his legs. “For better or ill, it is in your hands to take. I cannot predict it but in hindsight, but I do believe you will realize the choice before you when the time comes.”

His own eyes staring at the flickering flames, Jon believed he could see a vision within it. Or perhaps it was his own imagination. Letting out a wary breath, he leaned back in the chair. “Study this land carefully,” the Emperor said to no one in particular, echoing what he said before. Only on a grander scale. “It will quite soon be a battlefield, and we will all have a part to play upon it."
Battle of Highgarden Part I

It was a cool morning. One unnaturally cool for this part of the Reach. It didn’t faze the northerners that she associated with, but Margaery could tell. A chilly day that she hoped did not act as an omen. “Winter is coming,” the new Lady Stark breathed, rubbing her stomach.

“You are certainly a Stark,” Sansa quipped, allowing herself a moment of levity… before the beautiful land around them would become hells on earth. Her smile slowly turned into a frown. “Fog over the Heights of Luthor. Common?”

“No,” replied Margaery. “I’ve never seen fog on the heights in my entire life.” Not a military strategist, she knew naught of whom that would help or hurt. “Our brother and sister are on the battlefield, as well as our men.”

Sansa’s mind shifted to Podrick. Sweet, harmless Podrick. Her heart clenched, a silent prayer for his safety leaving her lips.

“My Ladies.” They turned to find Ser Davos. Sansa knew why he was there - Jon’s orders to keep the women alive in case of defeat. To take them to Sam at Oldtown. “We must move to the cellar. It’s liable to get quite dicey out here.”

Nodding, Sansa placed her hand on Margaery’s shoulder and guided her away from the window. “Sister…” the Tyrell beauty murmured. “The rumors of Cersei Lannister at the Battle of Blackwater Bay, where she was in the throne room. Were they true?”

There was no doubt as to what Margaery was referring to. “Yes.” She prayed it wouldn’t come to that.

“On this field, the fate of our land will be decided.” Hearing Edderon hoot behind her, Daenerys turned her head toward her husband. “Future histories will write of this day as our greatest victory.”

“Or Joffrey’s…” Jon replied grimly, a sudden melancholy befalling him. “If there are histories written in the future.”

He felt hands clasp his own. Grey eyes meeting fiery amethyst ones. “There will be.” A kiss pressing to his lips. The sight of a proper Targaryen warrior queen, hair in a Dothraki war braid, black plate and mail armor draped with a red and black cloak. “And we will win.”

Jon allowed the confidence to return, smiling at his wife. “You know what to do?”

“Of course, husband. As do you.” She kissed him once more. “I shall see you after the battle.” With that, she made her way to Edderon - praying to whatever gods listened that she wouldn’t have to fly Sansa, Margaery, and the others to Riverrun, as she promised Jon the night before. A raven hadn’t been sent there, so the prince and princess wouldn’t be worried. ‘We will win.’

Longing filled Jon as he stared at Edderon ascend to the sky. “Protect her, my son,” he whispered to the air.

“Your Majesty, Lord Stark, Lord Caryn, Ser Payne, and Lord Qaggaz have signalled their readiness,” Ollie stated, handing Jon a stack of dispatches.
Jon didn’t even have to read them. “Let the dice fly high.”

The battlefield stretched five miles in width, arranged west to east, with a further two miles of flood plain separating the far left of the Imperial line from the Mander River - which sparkled in the light of sunrise. There, the mass of Dothraki and Vale knights waited to protect the flanks of General Theodosius Caryn’s Riverlanders, Stormlanders, Essosi auxiliaries, and Ironborn marines holding the farmland and scattered hamlets northwest of Highgarden castle. On the far right flank rested Robb Stark and his elite northerners, coupled with Dornish irregulars. In the center, a dense fog covered the Heights of Luthor, though scouts had clearly seen the Unsullied and hoplites withdraw to the lower ground nearer to the castle.

“Like lambs to the slaughter,” remarked Tywin Lannister from his command post. “I shall enjoy dining in Highgarden again.”

“We must make sure that the Golden Company can keep the Heights secure,” Randyll Tarly said. “Lose them, and our entire force will unravel.”

“Nonsense, they won’t know if we have two hundred or twenty thousand on that hill. We can smash the Unsullied with your cavalry the moment they move to engage my brother’s drive on Highgarden.” Tywin spat on the ground. “Sound the order. Full attack.”

Horns and drums resonated across the tranquil fields and grazing land of the Westerosi breadbasket. “Form up!” yelled the knights leading the battalions. “March!” Armor clinked as the packed lines of the Army of the Divine Chimera marched forward towards the Imperial lines - banners waving in the soft breeze.

Tywin and Randyll Tarly had arranged their lines according to scouting reports of the Imperial dispositions. With the bulk of the enemy cavalry on the Imperial left, it seemed the attack would come from there while the right was deliberately weakened with a likely overreliance on the unsinkable defenses of Highgarden to anchor the flank. This presented an opportunity. Keeping the thousands of elite Westerlands cavalry in reserve, Tywin had the sellswords and more remaining knights on his right, joined with his one hundred-thirty war mammoths to fend off any Dothraki screamer charge. Lord Staedmon’s own force of Stormlanders, the Crownlands bannermen, Reach infantry loyal to Lord Tarly, and Prince Trystane’s Dornish levees formed the opposition to Caryn, while the ten thousand strong Golden company would take the Heights of Luthor and secure it - Tywin considering the center to be quite a sleepy portion of the battlefield.

It was on the Lannister left that the action would occur. Facing against the weakened forces of Robb Stark and a likely attempt to withdraw gradually to the defenses of the castle - as Robb had done once during the War of the Four Kings - Tywin intended to punch through and force a rout before Robb could conduct such a withdrawal. To do this he allocated the entirety of his crack Westerlands men at arms under his brother Kevan. The strategy was ambitious, but he was certain that he’d have Highgarden captured by the end of the day.

As soon as the Lannisters were in range, the cannon, rockets, and archers let loose. The battle was already a slaughter even before the first pair of blades met each other, hundreds falling from the projectiles. Along the Mander River, Dothraki Screamers met their match with armored knights, smashing through their front with lances and allowing the whooping sellsword cavalry and charging war mammoths a clean advantage in momentum to follow up the charge. Already, as the competing shield walls engaged each other along the Imperial left, rivers of blood had already been shed.

“Naejot tegon.” Slower than Balerion, and less powerful, Edderon made up for it with increased agility and reaction time via his slimmer frame. Daenerys felt the wind whip through her braid as her child looped and dove to the ground. Below on the left flank, Edmure Tully and Gendry were giving
ground to the onrushing Dornish, while an entire two battalions of Essosi had been cut off within a small collection of farmhouses and annihilated by Alesander Staedmon’s forces, now trying to turn the flank while Lord Royce was distracted in an all out cavalry showdown with Gilwood Hunter. Only one way to even the odds. “Dracarys!”

Opening his maw as if to roar, the dragon instead let loose a jet of flame. The roaring attack incinerated hundreds of Stormlanders in an instant, Edderon continuing along the edge of the far right of the Divine Army before Daenerys pulled him up. Two rockets and a scorpion bolt shot by, causing her to order Edderon to bank leftward towards the rear of her own forces. ‘Cannot lose another dragon,’ she kept repeating, hoping that her support had succeeded.

The Empress’ hope proved true. Delayed as Staedemon brought up forces to replace those now charred skeletons, it gave enough time for Caryn to bring up several reserve battalions and the giant king Mag Mar Tun Doh Weg to extend the line and prevent being flanked. The western battle was shaping up as a massive stalemate, charges and countercharges only managing to move the frontline fifty yards here and there.

“NOCK!” yelled Robb, horse strained as he rode up and down the line. The Northern shield wall was holding under extreme pressure, but had to give nearly a quarter mile of ground as Kevan Lannister launched attack after attack. Bodies lined the field, Robb being forced to commit the Dornish into the fray to protect the integrity of his northerners. Lady Tyene Martell and Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, both leading from the front, managed to stem the second attack, but exhausting their lightly armed and armored irregulars.

It wouldn’t be enough though, Kevan Lannister readying a third charge almost immediately while bringing up rockets. Robb rallied his archers as the third Lannister charge formed up. “LOOSE!” Five hundred archers let their payloads loose, arcing upwards and raining on the Lannisters, weakening their formations. ‘Jon, I hope you know what you’re doing,’ Robb thought. “RETREAT!”

At once, the Imperial line collapsed - or at least seemed to. The orders had been drilled for weeks now, and battalions stayed bunched up while all semblance of greater formation collapsed in a mad dash for Highgarden. Reeling from the last minute barrage of arrows, the men of the Westerlands saw their enemy fleeing en masse. A battlecry went up. Anger and vengeance for Blackwater Rush boiling within them, they disregarded all orders and charged themselves, only egged on from their officers. The rout began. The assault on Highgarden itself now in full swing as the elite of the Chimera’s Army committed itself fully.

On the top of the Heights of Luthor, Captain Harry Strickland ran a hand through his damp, blonde locks. Normally the Blackfyre helmet of gold and red would adorn his head as it did for all soldiers of the Golden Company, but with the all-encompassing mist that draped the heights, he couldn’t take the suffocating mugginess. ‘I can’t see shit,’ he thought, muttering profanities in several languages as he surveilled his men. Rows and rows comprising ten thousand elite troops - veterans of many a debt collection venture gone bad.

“Captain Strickland!” Turning, Strickland saw Kevan Lannister riding out of the mist. “Why haven’t you gone in?!”

“Lord Tarly wants my men holding the heights, my Lord” They were explicit orders from the Lord of Horn Hill. Stay as an anchor on the strongest position short of Highgarden itself. Tarly had been perplexed that even the coward Jon Snow abandoned it, and was wary of some sort of trick.

Kevan Lannister scoffed. “Those orders are countermanded.” He handed Strickland a written dispatch. One bearing a seal of Lord Hand Tywin himself. “I have two battalions coming to hold this
Blinking, Strickland read the words with bafflement. “My Lord, that would leave the center dangerously unprotected! Lord Tarly said…”

“I don’t give a fuck what Lord Tarly said!” Kevan snarled, pointing in the general direction of the south. “Hear that?!” The boom of cannon and popping of rockets resonated through the mist. “We’ve broken through on the left. Those are our men dying at the fucking earthworks surrounding Highgarden. Where the food is that will fucking feed King’s Landing. Order your men into the fray there or by all Seven Gods I will kill you!”

Head looking at his trumpeter, Strickland sighed. “Yes, my Lord. Sound assembly! Double quick march!” The orders hooting from the bugle, the Golden Company began its ponderous march into the thick of the fighting.

Lowering his spyglass, Jon allowed himself a smug grin. The fog was everywhere in the center around the heights. “Praise be to the gods, father,” he murmured, hoping that both Ned Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen heard him from the afterlife. Jon suspected they did, and it filled him with comfort. “See that, there?”

Podrick and Ser Barristan gazed where the Emperor’s fingers pointed. Sure enough, the first battalions of golden sellswords emerged out of the mist on their quick march towards Highgarden. “The Golden Company is abandoning the heights,” Barristan breathed.

Right on schedule. “How many minutes till the center can reach the heights?” Silently, he called out.

“Around twenty, sire,” Podrick responded.

“Good,” Jon whispered as Rhaegal landed on the ground, wings beating a mighty gust of air that caused a struggle to stay upright, even for those on horses such as Podrick. “Barristan, you’re with me. Podrick, get over there with all haste. Confer with Grey Worm and attack in half an hour. Sweep everything before you and take the heights. Understood?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

Slapping the man he hoped to be his brother by marriage on the back, Jon stepped towards Rhaegal. “Gird your loins Podrick. In half an hour, you know what needs to be done!” Had resting upon Rhaegal’s side, he was rewarded with a low purr of contentment. One by one, he climbed the dragon’s spines. “One sharp blow and the war is over!”

“Aye, your Majesty,” Podrick shouted back, bowing once more before spurring his horse into a gallop. He had no doubt Grey Worm had the men of the center in marching order.

As he and Ser Barristan nestled on dragonback, Jon rubbed Rhaegal’s scales. “This is it, boy. The big one.” A grunt in response. “Sōves.” The dragon roared and leapt into the air.

“FIRE!” Hearing the cannon roar beside him, in spite of the ringing numbness in his ears, Yezzan zo Qaggaz was nevertheless glad to be on the giving rather than the receiving end of these infernal devices. Five others boomed in quick succession, sending a deadly volley careening over the heads of the northerners settling inside the earthworks and houses. They shot straight towards the mass of Lannister infantry charging at Lady Tyene’s Dornish militia. Formation had been broken in the mad dash, and the projectiles created a slaughterhouse of jagged flesh, primal screams, and spurtling blood.
But the thousands kept coming. “The fuckers are gonna break through,” Tormund Giantsbane said matter of factly. At the vantage point of the towering battlements of Highgarden castle, they could see it as plain to the day.

“Hopefully you know what you’re doing, wildling.” Qaggaz may not have been an expert in tactics, but he knew even those that did would have issue with leaving the gates to the castle wide open.

“Fucking A.” Tormund grinned. “Gotta keep them comin!” Air filling with a high pitched scream, they dove for cover as a duo of rockets slammed into a nearby mantlet, showering bits of charred wood and rock every which way. A manic laugh left the wildling chief as he jumped to his feet. “Gonna sit there like a fucking coward? Or are ya gonna join me?!” He drew his axes and raced down the stairs.

Shaking slightly, Qaggaz grabbed his helmet and fastned it tightly on his head - suddenly grateful for the restrictive chainmail underneath his tunic. He made up his mind, vowed to prove himself as someone other than a craven, shady opportunist. “Archers! Nock and fire at will!” he ordered, drawing his scimitar and following Tormund to the courtyard.

Battle-hardened and tightly organized, the northerners crossed the mid-morning fields following their retreat in good order. Imperial quartermasters and the loyal townsfolk had fortified the town as well as possible, stockpiling earthen barriers and barrels of water for fighting fires. However, the Dornish irregulars were in a bad way. So skilled in bushwhacking and raiding, they were inexperienced in battle, only the iron will of Lady Tyene and the tenacity of Ser Bronn keeping them in order. Their retreat was sloppy and only served to heighten the bloodlust of the Westerlands men at arms giving chase.

Plate armor and a ragged shield wall managed to lessen the impact of the dense swarm of arrows and crossbow bolts sailing towards them. Cannon fire deadly but too little, the head of a sixteen thousand strong behemoth slammed into the town just as the Dornish scrambled into the earthworks. A little over twelve thousand - including the wildings and masters inside the castle - faced them.

Booms of cannon and hissing of rockets dwarfed the cacophony of blade and battlecry as the two armies embraced the form of death. The Lannisters were out for blood, and Robb Stark had ensured that they would get plenty - Lannister blood. Though far more heavily armored, as with the Whispering Wood the Lannisters were unable to bring such advantage to bear. Their charge left them unorganized and out of formation, the impact of their steel muted by the urban terrain and stubborn earthworks. “SHEILD WALLS, BOYS!” Robb screamed, driving Ice straight into the gap between a redcloak’s breastplate and shoulderplate.

In a fluid motion, the scattered Northern forces brought their shields into ragged walls wherever they stood - Dornish irregulars filling the gaps. They beat back Lannister storm attempts, shields blocking spears, arrows, and blade, swords stabbing through gaps to kill those foolish to attack individually. Muddy roads became slicker with blood as the Lannisters pulled back and resumed the assault in a ragged formation.

One group of two thousand redcloaks, those under the banners of Houses Marabrand, Crakehall, and Stackspear, rallied under the able leadership of Ser Steffon Stackspear. Copying the Emperor’s plan from the Coastroad, Ser Steffon threw in whatever crossbowmen he could find at the northern shield wall defending the main road to Highgarden castle. The men of House Glover found their shields under sustained fire from hundreds of crossbows, more than they could take as dozens began falling. Redcloaks charged at the earthworks under the covering fire, scrambling up the defenses in a far less bloody assault. Lord Glover realized his men could not hold in the open. “Withdraw to the alleyways!” he ordered, his men breaking up into barely organized companies in their frenzy to flee
the crossbowmen.

“FOR MARABRAND!” With a cry for their beloved fallen leader, the men of the westerlands surged forth onto the open roadway to their target. It soon was joined by a curdling cry. “REYNES OF CASTAMERE!”

Flames sprouting all over the town, through the smoke the commander of the Tyrell garrison still couldn’t miss the head of the massive red-armored host charging towards the gatehouse - a sight the Reynes and Tarbecks undoubtedly saw during the Storming of Castamere. Only he wasn’t going to lose the castle. “Ready men? We are roses, but roses have thorns!” A sharp battlecry rang out just as the head of the Lannister line reached the open gate. “NOW!”

Boiling and steaming, at the order two large cauldrons of scalding tar and oil were overturned over two holes in the gatehouse floor - cut through the wood by the quartermasters. Dozens of men, racing through the open gate into the jewel of the Reach, were enveloped in the searing deluge. Blood-curdling screams left gaping throats as the liquid burned and blistered every inch of skin, boiling the Lannister troops within their plate armor. A Tyrell soldier dropped a torch from above the gatehouse, igniting the oil and tar and turning the entrance into an inferno and immolating further dozens.

Kevan Lannister watched with a trembling rage from the new command post. The Golden Company reinforcements would mean nothing if they were stuck in a charnel house against the walls of the castle. “Hit that gatehouse with every rocket you’ve got!”

“My Lord, we need to suppress the houses…”

“It won’t matter if we can’t get into the fucking castle! Do as I fucking say!”

Minutes later, the mobile batteries launched their payload. Rockets arced towards their target, black-grey smoke trails and brilliant yellow exhaust masking their inaccuracy. Aimed for the guardhouse, all but one slammed randomly within a hundred yard radius, hitting houses, castle walls, or within the courtyard, sowing chaos and wounding many. But no decisive carnage.

The one that met its mark was a stunning success. Gathering more tar and oil to drop on the next charge, the rocket detonated on a weak point in the gatehouse walls that was a mere wood mantlet rather than stone. The resulting sparks set the tar and oil ablaze, soon engulfing the whole battlement and roasting those that hadn’t made a quick escape. Providence kept the fires contained to the gatehouse, but the damage was done. The gate was unprotected.

Cheers left the throats of the boys of the Westerlands as they prepared their next assault. “THE REYNES OF CASTAMERE!”

Behind them, the first of the Golden Company arrived on the field.

Bronn watched as four redcloaks burst through the doorway of a thatch house. One barely had time to react as Tyene dropped from a roofbeam and stabbed her dagger underneath the lip of his helmet. As another hesitated, stunned, Bronn ensured the Redcloak paid the price by kicking the man’s shield and sending him toppling. Easy pickings to blood his sword. He darted back quick enough to escape the swing of the third’s sword… just.

As he parried a blow, an ever growing whistling filled his ears. Observant, Tyene shoved her entire body into a redcloak’s shield. “Run!” Bronn used an opening to slice the third’s arm off and ran with her. They had just reached an open window when the rocket punched through the thatch and detonated.
“Now that is more like it,” commented Tywin Lannister from atop his command post miles away. Already, greasy-black pyres of smoke rose from the castle and the town surrounding it - as if the fires of three weeks before had been magnified tenfold. “We shall have Highgarden wrapped up by nightfall.”

“It’s just that damn fog that worries me.” Randyll Tarly mused, the same dark scowl planted on his face. “We should have kept the Golden Company on the heights.”

Tywin scoffed. “And squander away our moment of triumph? We need to take their spirits and their castle. It ends today, Lord Tarly.” He moved his eyes to their right flank, where the Dornish and Crownlanders were engaged in a bloody melee with the Riverlanders and Essosi auxiliaries. Further west, hemmed in by the width of the Mander River, Gilwood Hunter’s heavy cavalry and the bulk of the sellswords battled with Dothraki and Vale Knights. Already the waters began to run red with blood of man and beast. “Besides, no one is dumb enough to attack high ground in dense fog…”

And yet… “Come on! For gods’ sake, come on!” Podrick shouted, sword high in the air.

“Commander,” yelled one of the senior battalion commanders, a veteran of every campaign of the Emperors War. “We can’t see a damn thing!” The northern phalanx trudged up the still damp ground of the heights. They were in the van of the tight tercios of the Unsullied, but Podrick couldn’t even see a single line behind them in the pea soup fog that still hung all over the heights. Sweat dripped down his brow, even the grittiest under his command tensed as they made one step after the other towards the summit of the hill. If the Lannisters continued to occupy it in force…

Podrick was undeterred. “Do not stop men! Do not stop no matter what!” Wun Wun, bellowing at the top of his lungs, served as far more of a morale booster as he and his father Dongo headed up the van. Wun Wun carried a single large log while Dongo held his massive bow, ready to sweep aside any attacking force - Jon having learned a lesson from the Battle of the Bastards about how to use his giants.

Suddenly, without warning, the fog simply disappeared. One minute it was there. The next brought the shining sun, rays stabbing through the mist, banishing it to each of the Seven Hells. Not a cloud in the sky, the battlefield spread out clear as the sparkling waters of the river Trident.

And what a sight it was. What few forces the Army of the Divine Chimera still kept atop the heights - a rearguard force of about two thousand and another thousand forces in transit towards the battle for the castle - were stunned to see row upon row of gleaming northern hoplites and Unsullied pikemen charging like a herd of mammoth directly for the summit of the heights. The Lannister bannermen were green, troops Tywin was willing to gamble among the heights with the certainty that the fog would mask their weakness… only for it to mask the Imperial strike right for the heart.

The coming Imperials, spears bristling and shouting their war cries, broke the Lannisters. Some commanders managed to fight where they stood, getting cut down by the spearmen or wild swings from Wun Wun. Others withdrew in good order, while many routed. In any case, with minimal casualties, the top of the Heights of Luthor were now claimed for House Targaryen-Stark. Flying low above the battlefield, the green visage of Rhaegal shrieked a roar so loud that it would be said that even King Joffrey could have heard it. Jets of dragonfire finished off the last of the green forces atop the hill, hoplites and Unsullied taking their place.

Stallion rearing on his hind legs, Podrick Payne bellowed as loud as his lungs could take. “Who Holds Westeros?!”

“WE DO!” The boom of the soldiers resonated across the field, broadcasting far and wide the new owners of the Heights of Luthor. Bright rays of sunlight illuminated the whitewashed direwolves
upon the shields as Targaryen-Stark banners fluttered in the late-morning breeze. “HOO! HOO!” The smashed their spears and blades upon their shields, arising such a clatter.

“Who Holds Westeros?!”

“WE DO! HOO! HOO!”

Making another pass above them, all could see their Emperor draw his sword from Dragonback - even airborne, he still fought beside them as he had in battlefields close and far.

“HOO! HOO!”

In the command post of the Army of the Divine Chimera, Tywin gazed through his spyglass with a trembling hand - half-furious, half-terrified. His best troops were embroiled in a furious assault upon the castle, and now they were laid bare to assault from the rear. Assault from elite Unsullied shock troops. “My Lord?” Randyll Tarly asked, true question unsaid.

Tywin snarled in frustration. “Heavy cavalry reserve into the center!”

“We don’t have infantry support…”

“You lead them!”
Battle of Highgarden Part II

Captain Harry Strickland steadied his nerves, swigging from a skin of sour wine. ’Not good, not good at all.’ Highgarden village was a godsdamn slaughterhouse, the lead thousands of his men blundering into a village aflame and a castle secured by wildlings. “Fucking wildlings!” he muttered. Tales of them crossed the narrow sea and made many a boy in Braavos shiver. It was quite fitting for Joffrey’s propaganda organs that the Imperial couple had both them and Dothraki in their army.

The sound of a galloping dispatch rider seemed to be a herald of bad news in this battle. Strickland felt his head pound just upon hearing it. “Captain!” Turning his head, Strickland saw it wasn’t a courier, but a junior knight - armor drenched in blood, obviously not his or he would be long dead. “The Starks took the Heights of Luthor!”

“Fuck me!” At once, Strickland urged his horse into a gallop. “Follow me, ser!” The trampled grass - littered with corpses or pieces of corpses starting to bloat and attract flies - passed by with a blur as he rode with a singular mission. ‘I told that fucking idiot. I fucking told him!’ But just because he was a sellsword fighting for gold, his opinions were worth nothing… or was it his relation to the Blackfyre bastards of House Targaryen? “Fuck gold. The King can have it,” he hissed under his breath. He fought for his men.

A battery of rockets letting loose a deadly payload to the left of a marching column, Strickland pulled back the reins. Two stunned commanders deftly bowed from their horses at their leader. “Captain what is…?”

“Is this the last column of men?!” Strickland demanded.

“Umm… yes Captain. We were waiting for Lord Lannister’s order to send us forward.”

“How many??”

“Four thousand, ser.”

‘Fuck.’ Not nearly enough, though Tywin was undoubtedly sending in the last of the cavalry reserve. “Any Westerlands forces?”

“Two thousand kept in reserve…”

“That will have to do. Full about face, and bring whatever rockets you have. We’re going back to the Heights!”

The commander blinked. “But Lord Lannister’s orders…”

“Went out the window once the fucking Starks took the fucking Heights from under our noses. If we don’t take them back then they can roll up our forces in the town! Don’t fuck with my orders and move!” It didn’t take a moment before the new orders were barked out along the line.

On the hill, Jon watched as Grey Worm raced towards his command. Rhaegal breathed softly underneath his rider, resting his fatigued wings while he had a chance. “Are you sure this will work, Pod?”

“No… but I have a good feeling about this, sire. Especially with the new men Caryn sent us.”

“New men?” Jon looked at a collection of odd soldiers he had never seen before. They appeared to
be a mix of Westerosi and Essosi, sporting pointed helmets and short stubs of wood. They looked to be a mix of spear and cannon, metal barrels sticking out from the front and slivers of rope tied to the base.

A man that appeared to be the leader, a rather decrepit lad with a thick, bushy beard and leather armor, bowed. “Your Majesty, Tomias MacKenzie. Captain of the first hand cannon battalion. General Caryn sends me with his complements.”

“Hand cannon?” Jon shifted atop Rhaegal, wishing to get airborne before a scorpion could zero in on him as had happened outside Winterfell. “Another one of Caryn’s inventions?”

“Aye.” He hefted the device, which looked like a bulky crossbow without the bowstring. “It ain’t much, but it packs a punch. We’ve got foive ‘ounded of us. Where shall we be?”

Jon pondered it. “Podrick, where are the crossbowmen?”

“In the frontlines with the Unsullied, sire. We don’t have enough to cover my Hoplites, so I’m moving our longbowmen there…”


The officer beamed, showing off a mouth of white teeth… odd considering his outward appearance. “You can count on us, sire!”

Smiling back, at one mental command Jon sent Rhaegal leaping into the air.

Narrowing his eyes, Grey Worm watched as over double his number of men - men of the Golden Company predominating - marched forward. This would be no mad charge out of formation, but their commanders kept them within a pre-set shield wall. It was no matter though. The Unsullied had faced worse odds and triumphed. If they could defeat twenty thousand Dothraki screamers at the battle of Qohor in ancient lore with similar numbers, they could defeat only six thousand men at arms.

“Unsullied!” he cried out, voice carrying over the field. “Form phalanx formation!”

Professional, seamless, the ten-line deep Unsullied force glided into their highly drilled battle formation. The first line dropped into a crouch, spears forward. The next three raised their round metal shields in a solid shield wall as tight as any of the Lannisters. The three lines behind dropped their spears forward, coating the shield wall with extra bristles ready to stab forward at any attackers. A line of crossbowmen - an addition insisted by Emperor Jon and Lord Robb Stark - readied their weapons, bolts tipped with the sharpest steel short of Valyrian. Rounding out the formation, two lines of backup spearmen waited, weapons held high.

“CHARGE!” screamed the Lannister commanders at near point blank range. Only fifty feet down the slope of the heights from the Unsullied line, the shield walls surged forward with a mad battlecry. Aside from a bellowing roar from the mighty form of Wun Wun, staff at the ready and chain mail protecting him underneath his furs, the only response from the Unsullied were the whoosh of the firing crossbows as they unleashed their deadly payload. Scores dropped as the barbed bolts punched through shields and armor, but not enough to stop the assault.

Spears and feet firmly embedded in the gradual sloping soil of the heights, the Unsullied line barely buckled as the Golden Company and Redcloaks slammed into them. Blood splattered everywhere as steel stabbed and sliced into flesh, hacking limbs and rupturing organs. The front line dropped their
spear, drawing short swords to duel with the attackers while the rear lines gradually gave ground at the sheer mass of humanity pushing them back. Not too much, however - the Golden Company felt the weight of the Unsullied position on the high ground. It was far more tiring to charge uphill than retreat uphill.

With the bulk of the Redcloaks shifting to flank them, Grey Worm barked orders to send in his reserves of a thousand men to patch the left before charging into the fray himself. To his left, Wun Wun fought off his weight in enemy men, braving fire from arrows and batting aside spears as his log broke dozens of men like ragdolls.

All hopes now rested with the other third of his command and the northern hoplites. Even the Unsullied couldn’t survive heavy cavalry in their rear.

Trumpets stuttered as the lines and lines of heavy cavalry formed up along a shallow hill one mile from the Heights. Five thousand horses, veterans of countless victories and defeats, never from want of fighting spirit or skill in combat. Plate armor of man and steed glinted in the noonday sun, banners of dozens of Westerlands houses fluttering along a sea of lances. They weren’t the sworn bannermen of Lord Randyll Tarly, but he still saw them as his soldiers. He had led them since Tygett Lannister died by dragonfire following the Battle of Riverrun, and the knights loved the taciturn, scowling noblemen of the Reach.

At the front of the line, resting on his horse alongside the personal standard bearer of House Tarly, was Randyll’s son and heir. Strapping in his plate armor, Dickon Tarly was the son Randyll had hoped for - a little timid and green, but a worthy successor to the Lord of Horn Hill. ‘Better than my worthless tub of an elder son,’ “Father, it seems the Golden Company are engaging the Unsullied.”

“Hmmm, at least Captain Strickland has some initiative.” He wiped the sweat off his brow. “And what are we facing?”

“Unsullied along the flanks, with northern hoplites in the center.” Dickon paled. “All rockets have been committed to the flanks. I don’t think we can break through…”

He shut up once Tarly smacked him about the head. “Enough of that, boy. You’re acting like your fat coward of a brother.” Tygett Lannister was an overconfident idiot getting smashed by wildlings at Riverrun. If the Dothraki could break through a shield wall, then the finest heavy cavalry in the world could smash through this line. “Knights of Westeros! We stand as the last defense against a foreign Queen. Our King is born of our land, while the Queen and her bastard lover are of foreign shores, leading an army of savages. Will we let Unsullied slaves pollute the Reach?!”

“NO!” came the cry.

“Will we let Dothraki hordes rape and murder their way through this fair land?!”

“NO!”

Tarly drew his sword. “Then forward! Forward with me boys, until every last eunuch and Northern traitor lies dead upon this field!” Trumpets blaring, thousands of men and horses began their trot forward.

Over half a mile away from the action in the eastern heights, the remaining third of the Unsullied and the northern hoplites stared at the Lannister cavalry lurch south from across the green, grassy plains. They had yet to see action at all since the Battle of the Coastroad months before, and were itching for payback on the same swine that had defeated their countrymen at the God’s Eye. Snarling direwolves on their shields were freshly painted, new steel tips adorning their pikes. All cast a wary
gaze at the new arrivals, MacKenzie’s men cleaning the barrels of their hand cannons and checking their powder to make sure it was dry in the still damp air. All trembled internally - and some externally - at the wall of incoming heavy cavalry.

Line loose, as soon as the enemy knights began to move from their starting position, Podrick gave new orders. “Form squares! On the double!”

Podrick had plenty of time to drill and train his men in the hot sun of Meereen. Studies of the old Valyrian tactics convinced him of a method to destroy the impact of the heavy cavalry charge, and had imprinted in his men the tactics accordingly. With the fluid moves of battles past, the northern hoplites quick-marched halfway down the slope of the hill as the knights were building early momentum. Ranks converged in a four man-deep hollow box-like formation, a wall of shields in front, two spearmen behind, and a fourth line of Ser MacKenzie’s hand-cannon. Nestled within was a single cannon. Over a dozen of these squares now protected the approaches to the hill, Unsullied phalanges guarding either side.

Young Dickon Tarly saw the threat first. “Father!” he called out over the sound of thousands of hoofbeats. But Randyll Tarly didn’t hear it - or simply didn’t care. Drawing his sword, the Lord of Horn Hill raised it high and ordered the most powerful attack short of dragons. The Westerosi heavy cavalry charge. Lances dropping till they pointed straight at the enemy, the knights yelled and whooped as they urged their horses as fast as they could go. General formation was broken as a ragged wave of man and horse trampled over the grassy fields to cover the ground between them and the northerners.

“Hold steady!” yelled Podrick.

“We’ll fuck them up!” many northerners shouted at the same time.

“Make ready!” Captain MacKenzie barked for his men, ready to test a new leap in warfare.

They saw the large masses of cavalry advance - the awful grandeur of the finest knights of the realm charging towards them. Hoofbeats kicking up clumps of dirt and grass, armor rattling as the enemy screamed their battlecries. It glittered like a stormy wave of the sea catching the sunlight. The very ground seemed to vibrate beneath their feet. All wanted to run, but stayed put. Podrick shouted his final command. "Prepare to receive cavalry!" Every man in the front ranks embedded their shields in the dirt, and dropping their spears to form a wall bristling with steel, held together by steady hands as the charge slammed into the squares.

The charge ended suddenly all along the line. Men and horse alike were run through by spears, hand-cannons firing at near point blank range. Knights tumbled to the ground in bloody heaps. Ripples of fire from the new weapons tore through the lines, the highly-trained men having to work to miss at the closeness. Piles of writhing mounts drenched in blood and gore stalled the rear lines as they gave up trying to storm the squares.

Momentum stalled, the knights found themselves without the power to run through the squares. Skittish mounts, nostrils flush with the metallic smell of blood and ears overloaded with the shrieks of their wounded brethren, refused to advance against the wall of spears. Whooping rhythmically, the hoplites stabbed forward with their pikes, catching many a knight off guard but targeting the mounts themselves. Behind, the hand-cannoniers shifted to at-will firing. Their rate was slow and weapons cumbersome, but taken together at point blank range they inflicted countless death. Rounds tore through weakpoints in armor, flat lead shredding flesh in garish wounds the opposite of more clean arrowheads. As quickly as their crews could reload them, the cannon boomed downhill, felling man and horse alike.
In desperation, the Lannisters ordered a withdrawal, only to try again half an hour later but with their scorpions firing directly into the squares. The bolts were deadly, running through two or three at a time and impossible for shields to defend against, but they soon became the targets of the hand cannons. Even at a long range of a hundred yards, the rounds were something to fear. Podrick Payne’s squares refused to break, hoplites continuing to stab forward with their pikes even as many of their comrades fell dead within the protective confines of their shields.

But the distraction of the scorpions opened up the skies. Free of anti-air fire, the Emperor swept onto the battlefield. He had been waiting for the right opportunity, and with no other reserves left he took it. Fire escaped from Rhaegal’s maw in short, deadly bursts that incinerated scores. Whatever formation that Randyll Tarly or his cavalry commanders evaporated into ash, the green form of the Emperor’s mount turning clusters of knights and each scorpion into a blazing inferno. “On boy, to the east!” A roar carrying over the sounds of wind and battle signalled the dragon’s acknowledgement. Soon, Jon saw the many Redcloaks assaulting the Unsullied lines. “Dracarys!” Hundreds of screams added themselves to the piercing cacophony.

Whatever coherence in their foes was destroyed. Simultaneously and exclusively, Podrick and Grey Worm both gave a single order. “Advance!” The hoplite square broke apart as the men charged with drawn swords into the now shattered heavy cavalry. The Unsullied surged forward, breaking the Golden Company in a headlong retreat. Skillful maneuvering by Grey Worm and the one man battalion of Wun Wun, swinging his log cut off all retreat north, forcing Strickland to withdraw towards Highgarden itself, springing the trap Jon had envisioned in his mind upon looking at this very ground days before.

Flames licking at his clothes, Randyll Tarly fought with the reins to ease his panicking mount. All around him, the once beautiful Heights of Luthor had been enveloped in a scene from the hells themselves. The stench of death and burnt flesh was everywhere. He had lost track of his son - hells, he had lost track of everyone. Once a magnificent fighting force, dragonfire and the dogged counterattack by the Imperials had torn the force into a shell of its former self, more knights fleeing or even surrendering than were standing to fight like proper gentlemen.

In the distance, he spotted a massive giant, white beard matted with blood as he swung a massive bow at clusters of dismounted knights. Gritting his teeth, Randyll Tarly would not go down without honor. Ripping a lance out of the ground where it rested next to its dead bearer, he snapped the reins and sent his mount into a charge. “Forward! Forward!” Wind passed through him, followed by a blow to the free shoulder from a hand cannon. He felt nothing. Only the exhilaration of the charge. This was his moment - in defeat, the bards would still sing the tale of the final charge of Randyll Tarly of Horn Hill.

Grabbing at a fleeing knight, Dongo flung him backwards, the man screaming as he hurtled to his certain death. The oldest of the giants, clocking at over two centuries, he tired quicker than Mag or Wun Wun. His reflexes dulled from fatigue, Dongo didn’t notice the mounted threat until it was close. Crying out, he brought his bow in a wide roundhouse… too late…

The lance embedded itself in the giant’s heart, steel tip slicing through mail, flesh, and bone alike, a split second before the bow slammed into Randyll Tarly with the force of a cannonball. He was knocked off his horse by twenty feet, ribcage shattered and organs rupturing. Unable to talk, Randyll could only lift his head slightly to see Dongo fall to his knees.

As the last breath left his body, Randyll heard the old giant let out a great bellow that resonated all across the battlefield - a fitting sound to herald the end of the struggle for the Heights of Luthor.
Meanwhile, the westernmost part of the battlefield was engulfed in the sounds of battle. Lord Royce’s heavy cavalry began to assault the sellswords after eventually arriving at the correct position in the field, charging again and again under heavy cover from Dothraki horse archers. To the east, Caryn relieved pressure upon Gendry’s Stormlanders by ordering his auxiliaries out of their trenches in a furious counterattack as Prince Trystane was licking his wounds.

Edmure Tully's men halted the Lannister assaults further to the east, permitting Gendry to send two battalions commanded by Selwyn Tarth into the fray through a gap between the lines of the Crownlanders and the Dornish. The ensuing mêlée was churning up thousands, years and even decades of hatreds spewing out through blade and shield. Tully then led his bannermen against Alesander Staedmon’s men the furious Riverlands charge shattering the courage of the forces once commanded by Renly Baratheon and forcing them from the field. He wanted to pursue, but Caryn countermanded, ordering him west as a new player arrived on scene.

Watching from above, Daenerys smirked evilly as five thousand Dothraki under Khal Khafo - one of the vassal warlords she had promoted - charged along the floodplains from the north. She had ordered he detach his forces and ford the Mander to the south, only for them to ford again further to the north. It had nearly thinned the cavalry screen to where it became worthless, but the gamble had paid off. “Dracarys,” she ordered, but not for Edderon. She couldn’t help but let out the same wolf howl as her husband’s men were want to do as Sansenya, Rhealla, and Lyanarys dove from the heavens where they had waited, small forms impossible to aim at by the artillery below. Dragonfire glands released their fiery payloads, not enough to destroy whole swaths of men, but enough to destroy the scorpions and rocket batteries. Edderon soon let out a roar of his own as he dove to the battlefield.

General panic now seized the Army of the Divine Chimera as the Dothraki relief force slammed into their rear. Much of the cavalry force - especially the sellswords, commitment to fight for Joffrey only as good as the usefulness of the gold that paid them - abandoned the field in all possible directions. Some tried to flee west via the fording the Mander River. This proved deadly, as Imperial artillery pounded the defenseless men, while the fast current drowned many. Heavy armor of the defected knights of House Hunter proved the doom in the torrent, one of the lost scores being the traitor Lord Gilwood Hunter himself.

Free of the harassing cavalry, Lord Royce rallied the Knights of the Vale to slam into the flank of the Lannister left as they had at Riverrun. In an effective double-pronged assault, they and half of Tully’s men smashed through the enemy. Exhausted from endless assaults and facing the might of the Dragon Empress, the Crownlands forces disintegrated - most surrendering. Prince Trystane, the man responsible for leading the attack in the center, was completely drunk and attempted to flee, only for his own men to rise up against him in a mutiny. Staedemon attempted to cover his withdrawal with whatever archers he could find, gallantly managing to hold back the other half of the Riverlanders before the hoofbeats of Dothraki approached from the side. Beleaguered, he ordered his command to lower their banners and give up their arms, bending the knee to Empress Daenerys and Gendry Baratheon not long after.

After witnessing some of the bloodiest fighting in centuries, the western sector fell quiet.

Within Highgarden castle, the outer courtyard - spanning over two acres - the battle for the jewel of the Reach only grew bogged down within the various barricades and strongpoints Yezzan zo Qaggaz had set up the previous day. They would switch sides frequently, Free Folk or Essosi retaking them, only for Ser Steffon Stackspear’s Redcloaks to capture them at spearpoint minutes later. Arrows and bolts flew about with reckless abandon, many of the Free Folk growing tired and demoralized. Something their commander couldn’t tolerate.
Kissed by fire, the passion within the ginger transformed into a pure fury during battle. Such could be the only explanation driving the ferocity of Tormund Giantsbane. Drenched in the blood of countless enemies, he only leapt further into the fray. Axes smashed through the steel helmets of Redcloaks. An arrow slamming into his chest, Lannister soldiers watched with horror as he merely ripped it off with a snarl, turning to his men. “Come on ya’ worthless cunts! Ye’ wanna live forever?!”

A guttural roar left the throats of thousands of Free Folk. Disorganized and near-feral, they were no less veterans than the Redcloaks they faced. Survivors of countless battles, of thousands of brushes with death against the Night’s Watch, the elements, and the most terrifying forces known to man or gods. Essosi arrows and cannonfire giving them cover, Tormund rallied them into a berserker charge straight for the Lannister footholds within the outer courtyard.

Walls shaking from the constant cannonade outside, Sansa and Margaery huddled with the other noncombatants. The latter clutched her growing belly, whispering reassurances to the baby inside. The former sat stoically, fighting the urge to break down in the uncertainty of her loved ones’ mortality.

Each nearly jumped out of their skin as the door swung open. Davos’ gripping of his sword slackened at the smile on Yezzan zo Qaggaz’s lips. “The castle is secure.” Sansa almost collapsed to the floor as her tension dissipated.

Outside the walls, Ser Bronn found himself being shaken back into consciousness. “Get up, fucker,” Lady Tyene urged, though he could sense a tinge of concern in her tone. Concern which morphed into a relieved glint in her eye as he groaned and pushed to his feet.

“Nice to see you in the world of the living.” Bronn looked up to see Robb Stark on horseback, at the van of a large column of northmen. “Your Lady was beside herself with worry over you.” Expecting an insult, he fought back a grin as the brutal Tyene Martell blushed slightly.

Bonn smirked softly. “Aye, I always said Dornish girls were crazy.” That got him a punch to the arm. “Shit, I just survived a rocket attack, woman!”

“You’d be dead from that rocket if it wasn’t for me,” she hissed back, nevertheless glad he was alive. “The Unsullied are advancing on the town from the heights. We’re readying a counterattack to complete the envelopment. In or out?”

“I ain’t done fightin’ for the fucking day.” Picking his sword up from the ground, the former sellsword fell into step with the other warriors.

News travelled fast over a battlefield. Heralds of victory found their way to troops as rapidly as a sprinting cheetah, while sirens of defeat doubled such speed. With Harry Strickland in full on retreat, the news had infiltrated the ranks of the Redcloaks just as the Young Wolf slammed into them with five hundred fresh troops. Green as they were, the coming flood of thousands bloodied them perfectly. Not even the most elite of Tywin Lannister’s grand force cared to do battle when certain death awaited them if they did. All they cared about was getting out of the accursed town with their lives.

Kevan Lannister watched a group of fleeing men with fury. “GET BACK AND FIGHT!”

Harry Strickland was having none of it. “My men are fleeing to the north. The fucking Unsullied will catch us in a vice! Stackspear’s already surrendered! It’s over!”

“No, we can still turn this around…”
A fist slammed into Kevan’s cheek, toppling him from his horse. “It’s fucking over, do you hear me!” Strickland screamed. A cannonball slamming into an empty rocket-wagon only exemplified his point. Seeing the nobleman cower in the dirt, he summoned his herald. “Sound surrender.” He looked at the marching Unsullied, eunuchs holding the tightly disciplined formation. “And find me a white flag.”

With the single call of the trumpet, the sounds of battle and death upon the walls of Highgarden ceased. Surrounding, rather than fight to the death the Golden Company and the Westerlands Redcloaks laid down their arms. It would be Lord Robb Stark of Winterfell and Lady Tyene Martell of Sunspear that would receive Ser Kevan Lannister and Captain Harry Strickland in surrender. For all intents and purposes, the Battle of Highgarden had ended.

Tywin Lannister could not believe what he was seeing. The finest fighting force in the history of Westeros - one that he had spent years building up. One that he had defeated countless foes with. The army that made Dorne howl. It was disintegrating before his very eyes. Thousands killed, tens of thousands putting down their weapons and surrendering. Whole houses bending the knee to the Targaryens. “It… it cannot be.”

But it was, and the massive shape that slammed into the ground to his left only hammered it home. “Lord Tywin Lannister!” It was a dragon, the great green dragon… and that could only mean one thing.

The figure emerged in view, clad in a leather cuirass - the same as Ned Stark’s, only black as night. “Jon Snow.” Gone was the timid, tired soul on display at the Dragonpit. “Need a dragon to face me?” Instead Tywin saw a conqueror, a mighty warrior so much like his father, Rhaegar. Only now with a fiery anger lacking in either. A controlled madness leveled for him and him alone.

Jon drew Longclaw, not batting an eye as Rhaegal roared and took airborne. “I have no need for a dragon. This is between you and me.” He snarled as he brought Longclaw down, striking Tywin’s hastily drawn blade. “You had my father killed… my siblings murdered.” Another snarl, another clash of steel. “They will be avenged.”

The two highborns dueled, blades clashing as they fought with wild abandon. Tywin fought like his life depended upon it, facing the eyes of the dragonwolf. But his age had caught up to him. Against a far greater swordsman than he had ever been in his prime, the strain and fatigue Jon dealt took their toll…

Only for his guards setting upon the lad. Jon had only but a split second to react as a spear nearly skewered him. But he had fought white walkers - Redcloaks were nothing much to him, one’s head already rolling upon the ground as he engaged with the blade of another. But in his confidence, he failed to see a third sneak behind him.

“Time to die, wolf boy,” one Lannister guard whooped. His charging battlecry morphed into a gasping gurgle as a sword ran its way through his back. Looking to his left - Longclaw pulled out of a Redcloak’s gut - Jon found himself staring at a helmetless Redcloak, blonde hair matted to her forehead. ‘Lady Brienne.’

In the corner of his eye, Jon found Tywin swinging at his side. But he was as agile as he was strong. Nimbly leaping away from the swing, he crouched and swung Longclaw fluidly through the air. Before Tywin knew it, a sharp thud hit his right leg - Jon had severed it clean off, a cleaner wound than the Lion of Casterly Rock deserved. Before the first stabbing pain shot up his spine, Tywin collapsed to the ground.
Standing tall over the prone form of her longtime foe, Brienne of Tarth raised her sword with hardened lips. “You killed him… with blood magic.”

Pain searing up his mutilated leg, Tywin barely notice - barely. “I did.” The Lord of Casterly Rock did not beg or show weakness.

Breathing deeply, Brienne raised her sword. “In the name of Renly of House Baratheon, first of his name. Rightful King of the Andals, Rhoynar, and First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, I sentence thee, Tywin Lannister, to death.” With nary another word, Oathkeeper plunged downward…

Only to be parried by Longclaw. “No, Lady Brienne. He will stand trial.”

Brienne stared at her Emperor, jaw set in annoyance and anger… but she obeyed, sheathing the sword. “At your command, sire. But let me do the final deed when the time comes.” Jon nodded.

Gritting his teeth, biting down the scream of pain that formed in his throat, the mighty Lord Tywin Lannister faced down the blade of Jon Snow of Winterfell - just the reverse of when his House had faced Lord Eddard Stark at the start of the chaos that engulfed the world. “Tywin Lannister. In the name of the people of the Realm, you are now my prisoner.”
“I am sorry,” ‘Brother’ Lancel stated at the entranceway to the King’s private chambers. “His Divine Majesty has requested privacy as he reflects in prayer and meditation before the Seven.” The former heir to the secondary branch of House Lannister had completely disappeared and was replaced by this pious zealot - not that his former self was anything to marvel at. “You may not enter.”

Jaime did his best not to slug Lancel in the jaw - he had been wanting to ever since the boy was out of diapers. The news had arrived the night before and the Small Council had debated without sleep on how to tell Joffrey. No one felt comfortable prepping anything in regards to the city defenses without his authorization. ‘Damn this entire city.’ “We have to speak with His Divine Majesty,” Littlefinger drawled obsequiously, ever the politician. “Matters of import require it.”

A smirk appeared on Lancel’s face. ‘The little bitch is enjoying this,’ Jaime thought. “You know protocol dictates he not be distur…”

“For fuck’s sake!” With a shove of the arm, Jaime shoved Lancel to the ground and stormed into the room while the guards stood shock still - likely enjoying how the fallen highborn fell. Littlefinger behind him, they came upon the shrouded figure of King Joffrey, First of his Name. The servants, Ser Gregor, and Dontos were against the wall, just standing there. He was alone, quiet. It was… disconcerting.

“Your Highest?” Littlefinger and Jaime fell to their knees, eyes to the ground. “We bring news of the battlefield.”

Only now noticing that anyone had entered his room, Joffrey turned. “Ah, uncle. Tell me of our glorious victory.”

“There is no more army.”

Blinking underneath his veil, Joffrey turned to look at his uncle and advisor. “What did you say? Repeat it back to me.” His voice was a deathly calm, missing the sadistic, mocking edge of his normal tone. It made Jaime and Littlefinger nervous, and terrified the shaking Ser Dontos and blind servant girls. Whenever the Chimera was of this manner, then only pain followed.

“The…” Jaime gulped, trying to keep the anguish from his voice. In spite of Tywin’s growing bitterness and paranoia, he was still Jaime’s beloved father. He did not wish pain or humiliation upon him no matter how necessary Jon Snow’s victory was for the survival of the realm. But one must never show emotion in front of the King. It never ended well - only giving Joffrey more of an opportunity to torture. “The Army of the Divine Chimera has been annihilated in front of Highgarden.”

Littlefinger calmed himself, hoping that Joffrey’s anger would be directed at his uncle. “Due to his lack of consultation with your genius, Tywin allowed his army to be defeated and was himself captured. I advise that we prepare the city for siege.”

Silence hung over the King’s chambers, all present waiting for Joffrey’s reaction. When it happened… it stunned them. Throwing back his head, Joffrey dissolved into a malevolent laugh. Cackling towards the ceiling as if in the privy to the world’s greatest secret. One no one else but him was aware of.

Finally, as the giggles died down, he cocked his head at the two. “Do not worry. There will be no
siege. Jon Snow will come crawling to the capitol on his hands and knees. Unarmed and ready to submit to me.”

Confused, Jaime lifted his head, although quickly covering it with his good hand. “Please share your illustrious plan to keep his dragons from burning us to the ground.” The tone was quite patronizing, but he knew his nephew/son well enough. The insult would go over his head.

“Because, dearest uncle.” Under his veil, Joffrey grinned. “Because if he doesn’t, he will lose the ones he cares about the most.” Another set of giggles. “The ones I will soon have in my hands. His bitch sister and the Dragon Cunt.”

Cowering in the corner, a single servant girl’s unseeing eyes flew open in shock… then narrowed in quiet contemplation.

The hissssss-crack of the handcannons pierced the din, instant streaks of yellow-white flame lancing out from the barrels into the night air. After a moment of silence, a raucous cheer rang out in the entire Imperial camp outside Highgarden. Cups of wine and ale smacked together as the fiddles and pipes started up again. Everyone among the Imperial Army not passed out upon the ground in exhaustion were engulfed in an almost manic merriment. Celebrating the most decisive victory seen on the continent of Westeros since Aegon’s Conquest.

Though it had been nearly thirty-six hours since the battle had been fought, and the stench of death and smoke hadn’t dissipated at all. It still lingered, from the burned husks of men, materiel, and buildings to the piles of corpses in the mass graves marring the once beautiful landscape. The stocks of lime needed to douse the stench and rot were not nearly enough, only the chilly wind providing any source of relief - at least the sappers had placed the graves downwind of the castle, town, and central camp.

Highgarden was sure to go down in the histories as a fitting conclusion to the era of tumult that had gripped Westeros since the death of Jon Arryn. Nearly one hundred and fifty thousand had clashed against each other, soldiers of all houses, regions, and nationalities in each of the armies. The Targaryen Empire rallied Northerners, Dornish, Dothraki, and Ghiscari among their banners while the Army of the Divine Chimera included Westerlanders, Reachites, Essosi pirates, and Braavosi within their formations. A veritable melting pot fueled with the blood of tens of thousands, over four thousand Imperial dead with triple that wounded. The Lannisters suffered far greater with eight thousand dead and double that wounded - along with the Emperor Jon and Empress Daenerys capturing the entire remainder along with their equipment.

Certain, they hoped, to serve in the fight against the dead.

But none of this discounted the sheer celebratory mood among the victors. Years of war. Years of famine, setbacks, massacres, tyranny, and occupation all evaporated in an instant. Reunions between the Imperial stalwarts and the mutinying Stormlanders, Sellswords, and Dornish were warm and inviting, many seen getting roaring drunk with those they would have charged at with ferocity only forty-eight hours before. Captured stores of rockets were fired into the air along with the handcannons in joy, joined by booms of cannon heralding the further thousand years of the Targaryen-Stark dynasty. Even the prisoners, housed in pens, got in on the festivities. Tyrion and Davos ensured they would get hearty meals and ale, rations far better than the best given to them under Joffrey’s banner.

Among the command tent, the relief was palpable. Most had worried if they would survive the battle, and being able to meet all of their friends and family alive - if wounded in some cases - was
something to raise to the heavens in joyous celebration. The remaining stores of fine arbor gold were cracked into, wine flowing and toasts raised to the health of the Imperial couple. Eventually, as the inebriation took over, people began to break off towards chambers or rooms. Some drunken to collapse into beds. Others in pairs to fall into bed for… other purposes.

All unaware of a trickle of shadowy figures, melting through the doorways and alleys thanks to the fervor of victory clouding their normal watchfulness. Their targets dwelled within. Unknowing of the Chimera’s final contingency playing out before them.

Torches flickering, shadows dancing against the whitewashed stone walls of the airy hallways, Podrick Payne could feel an awkward tension. Walking side by side with the object of his dreams, he allowed himself to feel the aches and pains from the battle to keep from fidgeting or saying something he regretted.

Unlike Pod, hands clasped behind his back, Sansa couldn't help but fidget. A nervousness had come suddenly about her. The unflappable Hand to His Majesty left tongue-tied by the mere presence of another. How ironic. Much as she hated to admit, it reminded her of how she had been all those years ago, smitten with the ‘dashing’ blonde Prince Joffrey. The man beside her was nothing at all like him - perhaps that was the best thing of all.”

“Thank…” Sansa cleared her throat. “Thank you for walking me to my chambers, Ser Payne.”

Podrick was forced out of his self-created bubble. “It was my pleasure, Lady Stark.”

‘Lady Stark.’ Sansa deflated a bit. While she knew how noble he was and she admired him for it, part of her wished for a bolder familiarity. Soon though, they were at her door. Looking up at him, she opened it to enter. Bowing slightly, Podrick took Sansa’s hand and kissed the back of it. Her hand tingled warmly. But as he moved to leave her, she grabbed at his hand - Sansa made her decision. “Podrick… you may come in.” His eyes widened, eyebrow rising questioningly. She nodded, smiling.

Slipping inside the room behind the Hand to His Majesty, Podrick’s heart pounded in anticipation. He closed the door behind him to give them privacy from any wandering guards or nosy servants… but even he wasn’t prepared for when Sansa pulled his tunic towards her and crashed her lips on his. Their lips melded chastely, Podrick keeping his hands on his sides while Sansa gripped his shoulders. It lasted for what seemed like hours but what was in reality about a minute before Sansa pulled away. This time, she nervously bit her lip, looking at him intently. A positive sign.

“My Lady…”

‘Again with the formality.’ Frankly, now it was quite irritating, but her happy emotions won out. She rushed over to hug him. “I was so relieved that you survived the battle, Podrick.” She released him once more. “That I could ask your forgiveness for what happened the other night.”

“It isn’t a problem, My Lady…”

“It is to me, Podrick…”

“I understand if you are offended by my advances…”

“No!” Surprised herself at the level of emotion in her voice, Sansa took a deep breath and continued. “I was more surprised. No person has ever been intimate with me except…” She didn’t need to finish that sentence. “That’s all I have known, and the memory of it overwhelmed me. I know you would
never hurt me.”

Podrick shook his head. “Of course I wouldn’t. I… I think I am in love with you, Sansa Stark.”

Sansa felt her heart skip a beat. ‘He… he loves me.’ Aside from flowery asides from Joffrey that turned out to be just a sick facade, no man had ever said such words to her. From the earnestness in his eyes, she knew that he meant it. Unable to say the words back - still not knowing what she felt - there was really only one thing she was certain of. Closing the distance, Sansa wrapped her arms around his neck and brought her lips close to his. Hovering close and daring him to close the remaining gap. Which he did.

Their kisses grew passionate, stirring something inside Podrick that he hadn’t felt in a while - and that Sansa had never felt once in her life. Her eyes stayed open the entire time, willing her mind and body to know it was Podrick. Podrick, kind and gentle, not brutal and sadistic Ramsay. As such, when his hands roamed, Sansa only mewled in his mouth. When he began to strip off her dress and underclothes, she reciprocated. When he started to push her back to the bed, she allowed him. When they fell onto it, both naked, she enjoyed every second of the moment.

Sensing the flickering emotions written on her face, Podrick moved to pull away… only for Sansa’s hands to tighten around his neck. “My Lady, if you’re not ready to…”

Cut off by a chaste kiss, Sansa looked Podrick square in the eye. A small smile formed on her lips. “No. I want this.” She bucked her hips up. “Go slow, but please…” It was he that brought their lips together that time, tongue swiping against her lips, seeking access. Which was freely given with their tongues tangling. Sansa moaned, feeling nothing but a welcome warmth spread through her body. His hands gently roamed on her skin. Nothing like the vicious, callous touches of Ramsay. Ones that excited her, not terrified her.

So distracted, she didn’t notice Podrick move his length until it poked at her entrance. Determined, she bucked up once more and felt it slip inside.

Podrick felt Sansa scream into his mouth, so suddenly his eyes flew open - but instead of wide with fear, he saw her eyes fluttering closed in serene pleasure, cheeks flush with desire. Emboldened, his lips moved to the side of her neck as he began rocking his length deeper inside her. Slowly but firmly, trying to heighten her pleasure. It was tough, for she was tighter and wetter than any of the whores that had so enjoyed him since first squiring for Tyrion. The perfect woman...

A strangled gasp echoed from Sansa at the hard length spearing into her. Something that never happened with Ramsay. Then had been only pain - now, aside from an uncomfortable stretching that disappeared quickly - nothing but pleasure. His pace was perfect, tongue on her neck like a livewire to her core. It felt so good, but she needed more. More to quench the sudden dam building inside her. Sansa dug her nails into his muscular back to ground herself, earning a grunt in return. “Please,” she moaned. “A… little… ah… harder.”

Running his tongue up to behind her ear, delighting in the deep moan that left her, Podrick complied. Her moans doubled as Podrick doubled his pace. He kissed his way back to her mouth, Sansa greedily seeking out his lips and plunging inside. They lost themselves, all cares and past trauma forgotten in sensual pleasure - love? Podrick certainly loved her. Her walls clenched around him, pushing him closer and closer to the edge. “My lady… Sansa… fuck…” His voice morphed into a long grunt as he emptied deep into her.

Wildfire burned bright beneath her lids. “Fuck… Pod… fuck… gods!” The flood broke, walls undulating as the greatest pleasure Sansa had ever experienced shattered her completely. Despite his climax inside her, Podrick kept thrusting, drawing out her rapture. ‘Fuck, he’s soooo good.’ Nearly a
minute later, she collapsed bonelessly against the sheets, breathing heavily but quite content.

Able to fight for hours without succumbing to fatigue, Podrick nevertheless felt himself drained by this delectable woman. ‘Kissed by fire.’ Well, Sansa Stark truly was fire, even if it was her brother with the blood of the dragon. Rolling them onto their sides, he grew concerned with her silence. Nuzzling the crown of her head, red locks messy and wild, Podrick tightened his hold on her. “Was it alright for you, Sansa?”

Sansa couldn’t help but grin softly. They had made love completely naked, intertwined so intimately, and she could still hear the modest shyness in his voice. She had seen but never truly understood the joy and passion of a relationship, never truly fathomed what bonded Jon and Daenerys, Robb and Margaery, or Arya and Gendry together… until now. With her brave knight. Not a strapping blonde, but dashing in his own way. Shifting to look at him - really look at him - she cupped his stubbled cheek lovingly. “The best.” His face lighting up in happiness, their lips met in another passionate kiss.

A knock on the door disturbed them mid-kiss. Eyes wide, Sansa quickly covered up her nude body while Podrick rolled off the bed and started hiking up his trousers. “Lady Stark,” came a female voice. It had an Essosi accent.

“Yes?” Sansa asked, a bit confused. Was it one of Daenerys’ Dothraki handmaidens? “What is it?” Normally she’d just send Missandei or Ser Jorah to get her, so Sansa hadn’t learned the various dialects from across the Narrow Sea.

“The Emperor has fallen ill.” Podrick, donning his shirt, wheeled around in shock as Sansa gasped. “Maesters suspect poison.”

“I’ll be right there!” Sansa scrambled out of bed and threw on her underdress. “Open the door, Podrick.”

Nodding, Podrick waited till his new lover was fastening her dress before moving to the door. Unlatching it, he pulled it open only to be greeted to a chainmailed fist to the face - then blackness.

“And what about our guards, Dany.” Jon barely choked out the words, distracted by Daenerys’s tongue running down his neck. Impatient to get her to their chamber - blood boiling with fire and lust - Jon had lifted his wife bridal style and bounded up the stairs. As Tyrion had relayed something Ser Bronn said, the eminent sellsword confirming, ‘Fucking was best after a fight.’ Well, just as Bronn disappeared with Lady Tyene and Tyrion disappeared with Shae, Jon was taking that advice.

“Mmmm.” From how enthusiastic Daenerys was, it seemed as if her blood was up as well. “We don’t need em.” She kissed all across his jaw, lips soon hovering over his. “We have our swords.” A soft peck just as they reached the door to their chamber. Her voice dropped to a husky one - one that drove him wild. “I need my Emperor, now.”

With his foot he kicked open the door, deftly closing it with a rear jerk of his leg as their lips crashed together again. Jon dropped her to her feet, using his now free hands to roam all over her succulent body. Brushing over the curves he had memorized so intimately.

Her husband’s touch was amazing. Jon could make her body hum in ways Daenerys hadn’t even thought possible. However, the little one within her was causing a far different reaction. “Jon…” She pushed herself out of his embrace. “Wait…”
Even drunk, the honorable Stark within him morphed lust to concern. “What’s wrong?” He cupped her cheeks. “Tell me, my love.”

“Nothing that bad, calm down.” She chuckled at his obvious worry for her. “Just that your child is giving me a restless stomach.” ‘Thank the gods it started again after the battle.’ Dany watched as his concern evaporated, for the most part. She kissed him. “I’ll be right back.”

“Wait.” Dany found herself turned around, Jon kneeling and kissing her stomach over the dress. “I can’t wait to meet you, child.”

Sniffling, Dany hurried out of there before the emotions threatened to consume her.

Minutes later, the last of the sweets consumed at the feast were disposed of down the latrine tunnel. She felt a little better, enough that a good swill of water would leave her ready for lovemaking with her husband. Rubbing her abdomen, Dany wistfully pictured the little life inside. A piece of her and Jon - one that he would finally get to experience growing within her body. Once they defeated the dead, one that would grow up into adulthood in peace. Without the tumult and fear that Rhaegar and Arya had gnawing at the edges of their lives for years now. Smile on her lips, Dany tied Saracen back to her waist and opened the door…

The smile morphed into shock… which changed to horror in the blink of an eye. Standing in front of her was Daario, clad in common laborer’s breeches and smirking innocently. “We meet again, Khaleesi.”

Dany reacted quickly, hand darting for the hilt of her sword. Only for Ser Boros Blount to react far quicker with the black hood in his hands.
Meals were a communal affair in the Citadel for the various maesters and those in training. Samwell Tarly, the designated representative of the Emperor and Empress of the Targaryen Empire, was exempt from this requirement. While Gilly - seeking refuge from the insulting prejudice of her being a wildling - took advantage of this, Sam did not. He enjoyed eating with the other maesters, mining them for knowledge of this and that. Today, however, neither curiosity nor hunger had brought him to the mess hall.

Elation over his friend’s victory at Highgarden had morphed into a tense worry over the kidnapping of the Empress. He had been the one to examine Dany to tell her she was pregnant, and now both she and Sansa were in the clutches of the Chimera himself. Even with Gilly and Little Sam to comfort him, he threw himself into his work, cataloguing everything he could on the White Walkers and the Long Night. At this point, the most important factor would be defeating Joffrey, recapturing Dragonstone, and resuming massive dragonglass mining for the war effort. But something had caught his eye. One that had before, but with the sheer volume of texts at his disposal, the curiosity only heightened.

Gingerly squeezing in between the narrow spaces between the various tables and benches, ignoring the mocking stares of many of the younger - and even older - Maesters, Sam finally reached the head table of Archmaester Ebrose. Three rather thick volumes balanced in one hand, he saw that Ebrose was currently halfway through a large trencher of pork stew. As the guardians of knowledge, the Maesters all ate well. “Archmaester, may I have a moment of your time?”

Ebrose, a rather nondescript old man without any of the pompous arrogance of many in the Conclave, smiled up at Sam before returning to his meal. “Not at all, Samwell.” At several scoffs or sniggers from the other men, he silenced them with a look. “Ignore these other old crones,” a chuckle at the self deprecating joke. “Tell me your piece.”

Clearing his throat, Sam placed a volume in front of Ebrose, pushing his trencher to the side. “This is the epic poem of Timon of Braavos - the Ballad of the First Men. It’s one of the only extant texts describing the White Walkers and the Long Night.”

“Fairy tales, Tarly?” Archmaester Sargon looked at him with a cocked eyebrow, smile stretching out over his fleshy face. He was quite obese, fatter than Sam was even before the Night’s Watch.

“A wave of Ebrose’s hand caused him to shake his head and go back to eating. “Go on, Samwell.”

“There’s a passage in here, one that I’ve heard in passing in other ancient texts.” Sam ran along the scrawl with his finger. “And the Demon of Ice brought forth the heavens upon the earth. This great fall shrouded the world in an everlasting darkness, a deluge of ice and snow as if from the coldest of all the hells.’ While I’ve read bits of the Great Fall, this is the only source that hints at some kind of astronomical cause.”

Ebrose pursed his lips. “Very astute Tarly. If you would like, you can access our observatory. Maester Gorgas has made quite the strides in optical design…”

“It isn’t just that.” Sam had made this point before, and was dead set on hounding the stodgy old men until they gave in. “The Long Night is closer to returning as ever before. Emperor Jon needs the assistance of the College of Maesters - and their clout with the population - to properly mobilize the realm into combatting the threat.”
Turning his torso towards Sam, the Archmaester rubbed his beard. “Young Samwell, as the representative of one of the claimants to the throne of Westeros, you have every right to be here and have access to our facilities. However, the Citadel has not stood the test of time since centuries before the Conquest by taking sides in succession disputes.”

“But Archmaester, with the threat facing us…”

“… We survived the Conquest, we survived the Blackfyre Rebellion, and we survived Robert’s Rebellion simply for this fact. If the Emperor Jon and Empress Daenerys defeat King Joffrey and take the Iron Throne, then consider ourselves at their service. But until then, our previous policy stands.” Sighing in defeat, Sam grabbed the three books, tucked them under his arm, and made for the exit to the mess.

At the clunk of the door shutting behind Sam, one maester - droplets of stew dropping from his wooden spoon - looked up. “Is that the Tarly boy?”

“Aye,” said Ebrose, not without some pride. “Smart lad. Has his head in the clouds a bit, plus immense loyalty to the Emperor Jon, but a zest for knowledge. Reminds me of myself at his age.”

“Isn’t he the one who’s father died at the Battle of Highgarden?” Word traveled fast, largely on the quick thinking of the maester of Highgarden. The hope among the Citadel was to interview enough first person accounts to patch together a definitive history of the titanic clash. “Taking on a giant no less.”

“Killing a giant, no less. By his lonesome.” An older archmaester chuckled. “Samwell can’t be too distraught from it. He’s now a Lord in the favor of the Emperor, all with that pretty girl of his. Has everything he could ever want.”

Archmaester Ebrose frowned, sighing. “I haven’t the heart to tell him yet. Lord of Horn Hill or not, I couldn’t break his spirit like that.”

“All Highest.” Joffrey looked down from the perch in his private audience room as his cousin Lancel entered. With Qyburn assisting with siege preparations, the number two among the Faith Militant had taken to acting as the King’s Major Domo. “Captain Daario Naharis seeks your audience.”

A grin spread on the King’s face. “Good, send him in.” As Lancel left, he flopped down in his gilded lesser throne. It would take several minutes before the Enforcer could make it through the various security stops Baelish had ordered to protect the Red Keep from infiltration. He hummed a little ditty. By his mother the Maiden, everything was coming up in his favor.

“Pride goeth before the fall, my King.”

Joffrey’s mouth flopped open like a fish - breathing rapidly but struck mute by the haunting blue eyes. A glowing ice blue, the entirety of the north bearing down upon him in a single gaze. The audience hall chilled to almost frostbite. While all past visions had been of his father or included his father, now only Ned Stark stood in front of him, neck barely resting on his shoulders. “You… I killed you. You’re dead! You can’t be here!”

“Demon brought to this earth, who the chosen will see.” Blood poured from his neck, pooling on the floor. “The foretold shall pass, gods’ justice will be.”

“I am the son of the Maiden!” Joffrey screamed, voice echoing in the cavernous hall. “Hand of the Warrior sent to save this realm!”
‘Ned Stark’ did not heed his demand. “Son of your former, beware his call. The Stormborn sees thy eyes, thy reign will fall.”

‘The mark? Stormborn…?’ It clicked in his head. “Daenerys Stormborn! She must never see me!”


“NO!” His eyes flew open, only for the room to be empty. No blood, no chill. No sign that Ned Stark’s demon had ever been there. All that could be heard was the flicker of torchlight, and the sound of his heavy breaths and thumping heart. Only for him to hear, and the lone servant resting in a dark alcove, unseen as if she were draped with the same blindness in her eyes.

Arya heard the door to the audience hall open, booted feet clicking on the stone floor as someone approached the true demon’s throne. “All Highest.” Her teeth gritted. ‘Naharis.’ He had climbed to second on her list, just after Joffrey. “The capture of Sansa Stark and the Dragon Queen was successful beyond all wildest dreams.” Arya’s eyes widened. The fucker had actually done it! Dany and Sansa were in the Red Keep!

“How did you accomplish it?”

“Everyone was drinking and carousing. After such a defeat, no one expected someone to be so bold.” He reached into his haversack, pulling out Saracen. “Queen Daenerys’ blade. Presented to your Highest as a token of your greatness.” He set it on the stone before him. “I shall see to it that they are brought before you as soon as possible.”

“You will not!” Joffrey screamed. “Get out, Naharis! I may see Sansa at a later date, but never the Dragon Bitch! She stays locked up, do you hear me!”

The rest of the words, and Naharis scurrying out, didn’t register to Arya. All her desires focused on getting to her sisters, but all her instincts said the opposite. She fought the human reactions. They would be fine on their own, Jon and Robb to worry about them.

She had her own agenda to accomplish.

Bastard of Winterfell,

We have your whore and whore sister. They are safe, for now. Bend the knee to me, the divine Chimera, born of the womb of the Mother, or they will die by my enjoyment.

His Highest, Joffrey. First of his name.

“You can tell it’s him,” Tyrion sighed, dropping the letter that he had read to the Imperial War Council. “Can barely write worth a damn.”

“Even Ramsay could scrawl legibly,” said Robb, scowl on his face. “Now, what do we do?”

“We need to besiege King’s Landing now!” General Caryn demanded, pointing at the capitol on the map table. “They have no army, and we can likely double our own active forces with the Lannister banners bending the knee to the Emperor. Without Highgarden’s food stores they’ll riot within a week.”
Yezzan zo Qaggaz rolled his eyes. “We just fought a massive battle. Barely ten thousand of our army are ready to march anywhere, let alone besiege a city of over a million souls.”

“Ironic.” Tyrion laughed. “Our army weak from victory. And through this, we was supposed to bring about Joffrey’s doom.”

“Joffrey caused his own doom.” In strode the Red Woman, lips set in a determined smile, Meera wheeling in Bran behind her. “His desperation belies the hole the unholy demon has excavated for himself.”

Margery looked confused, huge belly confining her to a chair. “I’m confused. How has he destroyed himself?” Despite his anger, Robb hadn’t strayed far from her side.

“Burned his own sister alive,” droled Bronn, scrunching his nose in disgust. “Everyone I talked to fucking wanted to roast him alive for that. Lost all support not obtained by fear… or respect for his grandfather.”

“That is not it.” All attention was directed to Bran. The young Stark barely spoke, often found in the corner of any room or by a window - just… observing. When he did, people paid attention. “The ritual failed because Joffrey is the child of Queen Cersei and her brother, Ser Jaime.”

One could hear a pin drop. “Come again?” said Edmure Tully. Tyrion was silent.

He had firsthand knowledge, but Bran didn’t disclose it for reasons only known to him. “I see everything, and I have recently seen proof. It explains why my father was killed - he and Stannis found that Jon Arryn had discovered Joffrey had to be a Lannister. ‘The seed is strong.’ All Baratheons are black of hair…”

“As he told me when he visited me at the smith all those years ago,” Gendry mused aloud. He turned angrily to Tyrion. “Did you know about this??!”

The Imp held his face in his hands. “I had my suspicions, but I had no idea Joffrey wasn’t Robert’s!”

“Bullshit! At best you were willfully blind,” Robb yelled.

Melisandre smirked. “The ritual needed King’s blood - Targaryen blood. Robert’s grandfather was a Targaryen, so any child of his would have worked. Mrycella wasn’t his, so the ritual upset the Lord of Light enough to grant his Majesty a victory.” She took a seat next to Bran. “It is… rather poetic in a way.”

“Wonderful.” Robb laughed sarcastically. “Just wonderful. My father died, the Seven Kingdoms plunged into war, and that little shit on the Iron Throne instead of my brother - all for fucking nothing.” Muttered profanities indicated the table agreed with him.

Davos weighed different ideas in his head. “We can spread this news. Get the Citadel to confirm and have ravens everywhere by tomorrow. Destroy Joffrey’s legitimacy and spark a revolt…”

“There is no time.” The room shut up as Jon spoke. “General Caryn, what is the fastest heavy unit in our army… one that could fight properly in King’s Landing?”

Blinking, Caryn quickly composed himself. “Um, I would suggest Gendry Baratheon’s forces, and your hoplites. The fastest would likely be the Golden Company - minus mammoth - but their loyalty to their new sovereign is questionable at best…”

“My men are loyal to more than just gold!” Strickland, included for the purpose of this meeting at the
request of the Emperor - he had met with each of the captured enemy commanders to gauge their allegiance to him - was quick to defend his honor. “We bent the knee to his Majesty freely.”

Tyene scoffed. “Since when do you fight for anything but gold?”

“Since an army of dead men will run roughshod over the entire continent without those under the Imperial banner…”

Jon had enough. “Shut it! Start preparations. Gendry, Podrick, and Strickland will march for King’s Landing at all haste but camp out of sight of the walls.” His order was nonnegotiable.

“Forgive me,” Tyrion spoke, attempting to negotiate all the same. “But what is this about, your Majesty? It would take more than a few thousand men to take a fully fortified city.”

“Perhaps we should do what Joffrey wants.” The words of the, quiet until now, Emperor struck the council like Robert Baratheon’s famed warhammer. Men and women alike were stunned, no idea of what Jon was suggesting.

Mouth agape, Tyrion stared at the young Emperor. “Surely you can’t possibly…” Jon had surprised him greatly, and yet there was still so much of Ned Stark. So honorable, a man that would sacrifice himself for the ones he loved… yet Ned Stark had surprised him. “Is this some kind of ambush tactic?”

“Queen Daenerys can not burn,” Grey Worm stated. “Lure Joffrey to Dragonpit to meet Emperor alone, then unleash the dragons. Emperor and Empress cannot burn…”

“But my sister can, you cockless fuck.” Robb hissed. “We are not burning the Hand in the North…”

“We cannot bring the dragons,” Jon set flatly. “The defenses in the capitol would rip them to shreds, I promise you that, at least not yet.” Suddenly, he slammed his fist on the table, face tightened in concealed rage. His lips quivered, a tempest within between the dragonfire threatening to be released and the ice struggling to cool it. “Father,” he began, speaking slowly. “Ned Stark taught me to never champion one’s laurels. That a man lets his deeds speak for him… I hope my deeds speak for me.

Robb stood up, striding to him. “They do, brother.”

Jon raised his hand, stopping him. “Please, brother.” Taking deep breaths, he did his best to control the dragon blood within him. “I was the youngest Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch in generations. I brought the Wildings south of the wall, for the first time in history. I united the North, united all of Westeros behind my banners on the field of battle. I have fought enemies from Yunkai to Hardhome - braved the greatest trials and struggles any man has borne since the Lightbringer himself…” Eyes scrunched shut, they opened in an instant, stormy grey burning with the Targaryen fire. “I will be damned if I let a fucking bastard weakling usurper produced of incest to touch a hair on my family’s head!”

Relief at the fire in the Emperor’s tone morphed back to worried anticipation - Jon hadn’t told anyone his plan after all. “While I’m always in the mood for killing some fuckin’ pricks,” Tormund broke the silence. “But how’re we gonna fuckin’ do it, Emperor Crow?”

“Joffrey will not leave King’s Landing.” Bronn was the last one to be there. “He’d know. “He has no need. All snug in the Red Keep, he can wait us out.”

Nodding, Jon walked to the window. He could see his dragons, resting in the fields. “Dany risked her life… and the life of our children… to save mine. More than once. I would not be worthy of my father’s legacy if I wouldn’t do the same for her.” Jon turned, and the council was greeted by the
ghost of a smirk. One backed up with pure savagery. “Joffrey wants me to go to King’s Landing.” He raised his hands till they were parallel to the ground. “Let’s give him exactly what he wants.”

The Emperor had to be enjoying the awkward silences he was delivering his council.

“Frankly, I expected far worse.” Rubbing her stomach soothingly, Daenerys willed the bland but plentiful food to remain inside. She rested upon a threadbare couch in the dimly lit room, a chamberpot filled with the heaved contents of her breakfast. It was dingy compared to the luxury of places such as Riverrun, Highgarden, or Meereen, but aside from the lack of sufficient light, it passed muster for comfort.

Wetting a rag in a washbasin, Sansa brought it forth to place on her sister’s forehead. “Joffrey needs us. We’re obviously his hostages. He may humiliate and hurt us…” An image of Ser Meryn beating her with the flat of his sword while ripping her dress at the King’s instigation flashed in her mind. Sansa clenched her fists. “But killing us eliminates all his leverage.”

Feeling the gurgle in her stomach, Dany groaned herself. ‘Please little one, calm down.’ Gods, she wished Jon was here. She wished she had her sword and her dragons so she could burn the entire capitol city to the ground - but Jon would keep them away from the massive air defenses, as he should. “Then why hasn’t he even given us an audience?” A wry smile formed on her face. “Too frightened by those that vanquished his army?”

A chuckle left Sansa’s lips. “While that would be satisfying, I can’t possibly be sure.” She ran a hand down her face. “Before, he was quite superficial. His gluttony and bloodlust ruled him. Now… The madness grips him. He is unpredictable.”

“Just like my father.”

Sansa turned to look at her sister. “You are not him, Daenerys. If Joffrey is what madness is, then the word holds no meaning to you.” Nevertheless, Dany turned away - a conqueror, a dragonrider, vanquished by morning sickness. No doubt Arya would have teased her incessantly over it. ‘All one little pack - the pack sticks together. The pack survives.’ “I have a confession to make. When you arrived at Winterfell - even saving our army, I did not trust you. I thought you were a threat.”

Groaning from the discomfort, Dany turned to look at her sister. “Understandable. I am a Targaryen, after all.”

“No… it was wrong. Knowing the truth about Jon’s…” It went unsaid. “And what Robb told me about how in love you two were… Still, the North Remembers. And the long-held memories of the Mad King, and the lies of Rhaegar and Lyanna… they stuck longer than they should have. I know you are not your father, Daenerys.” She chuckled dryly. “You are far prettier.” Sansa watched as Dany’s eyebrow rose. “Part of me hoped Jon’s mind wasn’t clouded, that you weren’t using him.” She smiled. “I am happy that I was proven wrong. That the pack has a new sister.”

As Dany tried to smile, suddenly her face turned green and she grabbed for the chamber pot, causing Sansa to leap up and turn away - giving her privacy.

Gliding along the stone floors, everything felt surreal for Sansa. The nature of the capitol city hadn’t changed since she had last left King’s Landing. There was still the stench of death, the cacophony of backbreaking labor, and the very aura of malevolence. The former two had only amplified - the malevolence still there. Draped over everything. It had started the day Sansa had learned her father was in chains and she suspected that in the years since she left, it remained to this very moment.
As she gazed out the window, a sense of deja vu - gut-wrenching, painful deja vu - washed over her. Lining the entire outer wall of the Red Keep were severed heads, mounted on pikes for the entire city to see. Looking out upon the city, row upon row of punished slaves filled the various courtyards, tied to poles and garrotted. ‘Daario taking care of loose ends upon his return.’ If King’s Landing were to be put under siege, then upon returning the King’s Enforcer needed to cow the populace - not to mention satiating Joffrey’s sadism.

Unlike the last time, shrinking away from Ned Stark’s head mounted on the pike, Sansa stared straight ahead. She was no mere girl, romantic hopes dashed away by an unholy demon made flesh. She was the Hand to the Targaryen Emperor, a survivor. Sansa glanced over at Daenerys, the sounds of her retching filling the room. Come hells or high water, they would survive this.

“You want passage to... Old Town?”

Expression flat, Jaime nodded. “Along with two large crates to be filled with supplies.”

Wet, hacking coughs racked the bowlegged form of Grand Maester Pycelle. “May I ask, why?”

“I have consultations I need to make with the Archmaester, concerning the progress of winter weather upon the city before the siege lines are set up.” Jaime would have realized his story was bullshit if someone else tried to peddle it - Pycelle on the other hand… “A raven could be intercepted by the Targaryens.”

The maester shuffled around his office in the cellar of the Red Keep. “What makes you think I could obtain such a passage?” Pycelle asked, not even looking at Jaime as he rummaged among the various elixirs and poultices that went into the hypochondriac and aching King. ‘If I spent all my time within the walls of this palace covered in a shroud, barely moving, I’d need those fucking potions,’ Jaime thought bitterly. It wasn’t a very paternal thought. ‘The monster killed my child.’ Joffrey lost any paternal feeling Jaime had for him the moment he burned Myrcella alive.

Jaime grabbed the shoulders of the boney old man and turned him around. “Because his divine Highest needs the medicines provided by the maesters of the Citadel, in order for him to be well and carry on the work of the Seven.” He met the maester’s cloudy gaze. “And I know you have a fast caravel that runs through the Targaryen blockades. It leaves in one week.”

Based on the look in Pycelle’s eyes, he seemed both hesitant and nervous. “I’m… I do not know if this is appropriate.”

Having planned for this, Jaime withdrew a purse from his belt and pulled open the drawstring. A clinking filled the room. “House Lannister would greatly appreciate your cooperation, Grand Maester.” He dropped the purse into Pycelle’s hand.

Licking his lips at the gold coins sliding over each other quite deliciously in front of him, Pycelle’s jowls jiggled as he nodded. “Of course… I shall see to your vessel, Ser Jaime. Only the most important among us should consult with the maesters of Oldtown.”

“With all due haste, Grand Maester,” Jaime mused as they walked down the hallway, hand draped over the disgusting old man’s shoulder. “With all due haste.”

Little did both know that even these walls - adorned with the bleached skulls of the dragons of Targaryens past - had ears. Many sets.
“Your meals, your Grace, my Lady.” The large man - not their usual servant - bowed, setting a tray before them. Sansa could see something far more scrumptious than the normal barley gruel and unseasoned bacon. Pork, braised with honey and oat mash. A meal fit for a highborn. “I made sure the cooks improved the lot… as fitting for ladies of your blood and stature.” While the scent was pleasant to her, Sansa stared instead at the man. She had seen him before. The likeness was so uncanny.

Finally smelling a meal that didn’t incite another bout of nausea, Dany smiled at the man. “Thank you.” Her voice was filled with gratitude.

Nodding, the man lowered his voice. “There are many that support the claim of the Dragon Queen and White Wolf. Drink secret toasts to their health.”

At the words, Dany couldn’t help but burst into laughter. “I’m sorry…” The words were exactly what Illyrio told Viserys all those years. Lies then, but the man clearly was completely sincere now. Fitting that she and Jon gained the support of the people, while Viserys languished in pain and muck in the Winterfell dungeon.

Sansa didn’t pay attention, trying to figure out where she saw the man before… And then it hit her. “Ser Dontos?”

“Aye, my Lady.” He beamed, grateful the woman who he thought about every night for years remembered him. “Dontos Hollard, formally a Knight of the Realm.”

“Joffrey made you his fool… at my suggestion.” Sansa felt shame upon her. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I would have died had it not been for your words. No one cared for the last scion of House Hollard, drunk and oafish. But you did, just as the Starks are the ones that care about the people of the Realm.” Shifting on his feet, Dontos moved toward the door. “As evil reaps what it sows, so does good. Remember that, my ladies.” The door closed behind him.

Sweat coated his forehead in a sheen. It soaked the tunic and breeches underneath his armor. The anticipation and nervousness overwhelmed him in a torrent of liquid, but Ser Jaime Lannister was not deterred as he walked quickly down the halls of the - as of now - deserted Red Keep. At this time of night, most had fled to their chambers, or to their mansions within the city behind thick walls of stone and even thicker walls of professional mercenaries. He knew some were still scurrying about, but not in this part. He needed the solitude. He needed the quiet.

For the sounds of treason would reverberate through the chambers that night.

Pain and disgrace had dogged him his entire life. Kingslayer. Oathbreaker. Murderer. Traitor. Veneers of arrogance and self-confidence had brushed off the majority of the taunts, but that shield had died with the loss of his hand. Now he didn’t bother, the stoic exterior of a hardened warrior in the Army of the Divine Chimera accepting every barb, attack, and accusation levied against him.

Everything Jaime had fought for, strived for in his entire life had led to this. A state of slaves and slavemasters, one of black magic and delusions as an undead horde hung over its neck like an executioner’s axe. His own daughter killed by his own son, products of an incestuous union between himself and his increasingly unstable sister. It was as if the shadows, cast unto the walls by the
various torches and lanterns, were a jury condemning him to the deepest hell. For betraying the memory of the man with whom he had so idolized to this very day. The man he had hoped to emulate.

As had his mentor, Ser Barristan Selmy, Jaime Lannister had always hated himself for not being able to protect Rhaegar from the drunken oaf he would later call his brother in law. But he could protect his sister and son. Reaching the specific room, guards standing in front, that was what he planned to do.

“My Lord,” the Goldcloaks stated in unison, clicking their heels.

“You are dismissed,” he said flatly. “I intend to interrogate the prisoners, and I would rather no one hear the screams.” The two bowed and hurried away. Jaime had deliberately assigned two of the greenest guards to watching over the prisoners. It worked like a charm.

Entering, he found the Dragon Empress and Sansa Stark sitting upright. Eyes widened as they recognized who was visiting. “Your Grace,” he offered to Daenerys. “My Lady.”

Initial shock wearing off, Dany crossed her arms. Anger at such an avowed enemy of her family bubbled forth, once it was clear Ser Jaime meant them no harm. “What do you want, Kingslayer?”

“We don’t have much time.” He pulled two cloaks out of a sack draped over his shoulder, threadbare woolen ones used only by smallfolk. “Put these on.”

No one could claim that either of the two women weren’t smart. “You’re helping us…” Sansa’s jaw dropped. “You sent Ser Bronn.” She could have sworn it was Littlefinger. “Why are you doing this?”

“There’s a boat at the dockyards heading to the Citadel…”

“You killed my father to save the city from burning.” Dany relayed what she had heard from Tyrion. “Even though you served my family, you had to do what was right.”

Jaime allowed himself a moment to look at his true King’s sister. “Aye.” The facade dropped, the pain and anguish of over two decades written on his face. But he had a job to do. “Let’s go…”

With a whoosh and clang, torches flickering wildly from the sudden gust of air, the door was thrown open and slammed against the wall. Three Goldcloaks marched in, fully armored and swords in their scabbards. Behind were five Faith Militants, chains draped over their black shifts and truncheons in their hands. All in a foul mood, clearly not here to support Jaime’s efforts. Dany flinched, angling her stomach away from the door out of instinct - protecting her baby, the unborn Prince or Princess.

Jaime, turning towards the door, discreetly put himself in front of the Empress. Something Dany noticed and made note of.

Startled by the sudden entrance, Sansa recovered quickly. Acting in stealth, she gingerly lifted a small dagger from Jaime’s belt while no one was noticing.

At the lead of the guards, Lancel Lannister by his side, Qyburn stared directly at Jaime. “I had to see it to believe it.” While the Goldcloaks kept some semblance of discipline - from the trail of tortured slaves and raped girls, it was only a semblance - the Faith Militant thugs openly leered and hefted their truncheons sadistically.

It infuriated Jaime. “My interrogation of these prisoners is none of your concern!” he shouted indignantly, slapping Sansa across the cheek - and hoping she understood and forgave. “I am the Lord of Casterly Rock while my father is a prisoner of the Bastard of Winterfell…”
“Which only makes such treachery only more horrid,” Lancel spoke, the guards advancing for Jaime with their hands on the hilts of their swords. All noticed Widow’s Wail attached to the great knight’s hip, Valyrian steel forged from the captured sword of House Martell.

He reached for his sword, red with fury. “You have no right, you spineless worm…”

Lancel’s smirk was quite smug and self-satisfying. Unlike the supposedly pious man he made himself out to be. “We have a witness, Ser Jaime. One of complete impeccability.” Jaime’s face started to fall, not expecting such a statement.

“Said witness documented conversations between you and Maester Pycelle. He has already been arrested.” Qyburn shook his head as the Goldcloaks disarmed Jaime of his sword. “The heir to House Lannister and His Highest’s own uncle, committing the blackest treason upon the realm? Greatest of dishonor to your House.” He waved him off dismissively. “Take him to the dungeons.”

Shaking off the hands of the guards from his shoulders, Jaime held his head up high and walked to the door with the dignity of a Lannister and a Knight of the Realm. As he reached it, a wisp of blonde hair caught his gaze. Jaw dropping, he stared at his sister in complete stupefaction. “It was you?” A flicker of shame crossed on Cersei’s face, of grief. But as before - when he arrived home from his journey through the Riverlands - her emotions gave way to a hard gaze. “Why?”

“You plot against my Joffrey,” Cersei replied, voice hard as steel.

“Ou…” Jaime caught himself. “Joffrey is a monster.”

“How dare you.” Cersei hissed. “You could have killed the Stark bastard. Killed the Targaryen whore, yet she stands there, alive and with child.” Everyone present watched the interaction, quite the addicting entertainment.

“He is a monster. He murdered Myrcella. He will kill Tommen. He has enslaved hundreds of thousands and will enslave all of us if he so wills it.”

Fury coursing through her, Cersei wanted to lash out. Claw her brother and lover until his eyes were wrenched from their sockets. But somehow she couldn’t, merely putting the cold facade back together. “One must do what is necessary to save her children, no matter who the threat may be.”

“And if Joffrey threatens us all with death?” Had she gone completely insane. “You saw that undead monster.”

“I intend to stay among the living. My son is the chosen of the Seven. He will vanquish all our enemies, living and dead. You commit treason against our King, the rightful King.”

His question was answered. She had lost what was left of her sanity. “I swore to defend the rightful King, a King worthy of the crown.” He looked down, not willing to see the hate in his sister’s eyes. “Rhaegar was that ruler, and now I fight for his son.” Cersei’s eyes widened, as did the two Imperials. “My conscience is clear.”

Sparing one last glance at him, feeling the decades of love and affection tearing themselves apart, without a word Cersei turned and walked towards her own chambers. “Take him away,” Qyburn commanded softly, the Goldcloaks complying. With Jaime Lannister disposed of, the Master of Whisperers now focused on the two women. “We have been more than generous, but I now feel that both of you shall need more secure accommodations.”

“My husband will burn all of you if one hair on our heads is harmed,” Daenerys stated, voice of fire.
“And yet he hasn’t,” Lancel chuckled, the Faith Militant advancing. “Paper wolf, it would seem.”

Suddenly, Sansa drew the knife, bringing it to her neck to the wide eyes of her sister. “Do not take one step.” She would not be Joffrey’s plaything once again. The Old Gods as her witness, she wouldn’t.

While there were horrified or angered looks on the faces of the Faith Militants, Qyburn was nonplussed. He extended the palm of his arm. “The knife, please.”

Despite the sting as a small patch of skin was nicked by the blade, Sansa kept it where it was. “One more step and I deny Joffrey his trophy.”

“Don’t do it sister!” Dany yelled, the title muffled as a Faith Militant wrapped a gag around her head, shutting her up.

Wagging his finger, Qyburn stepped forward. “Do not be foolish, young lady.” Expression that of a confident old grandfather, he still kept his movements hesitant. “Hand me the dagger.”

“Hand it over, young Stark,” chimed Brother Lancel, several steps behind Qyburn.

“I would rather die.” But Sansa’s voice quivered for an instant, her resolve weakening. The pain didn’t bother her, or the uncertainty of death - but the memory of her family. Those she loved… the one she loved…

The moment’s hesitation brought two simultaneous movements. Just as Qyburn dashed towards Sansa, so too did Daenerys elbow the goldcloak behind her and use his shock to break his hold. Closer to her sister by marriage, she managed to wrest the blade away as Qyburn reached them. “Give it here!” hissed the Master of Whisperers, scrambling with the Dragon Empress. He was taller, but she had all the fire and grit of a Targaryen warrior.

It was Lancel Lannister’s arrival several seconds later - ever the coward, zealous faith notwithstanding - that finally ended the scuffle. “I’ll have it, you insolent…” Grabbing at her hand, he yanked at the knife while exposing the back of her hand for both to see.

Presented with the pockmark of scars upon the pale skin, Qyburn placed it together first. A wrenching gasp flew from his lips, wrinkled face growing white with terror. “No, it can’t be?! The prophecy… his Highest’s visions…

“What?” As his own Faith Militants subdued Sansa Stark, Lancel shoved them aside to grab Daenerys’ palm from beside Qyburn. “By the Maiden…” His eyes widened to saucers, recognizing the pattern of scars as a true believer.

Dany watched it with complete confusion - their behavior not comprehending in her mind. “It is his sigil. The Mark.” Such was even more confusing… before she was thrown into a whirlwind of activity and interest dwarfing that of her initial arrival in the city.

The majority of the small council was hunched over the table, studying the map of the city with hushed voices and pained tones. Defensive positions, left mostly to rot since the vanquishing of Renly Baratheon’s army at the Battle of Blackwater Bay years before, were woefully undermanned. All plans depended on Tywin’s Army of the Divine Chimera proactively defending the city in the outer fields and forests of the Crownlands, but said army had been vanquished and captured at Highgarden. Ten thousand Goldcloaks and mercenaries could barely fight against Renly’s army, hobbled by wildfire. Even adding an additional ten thousand among the Faith Militants and various
slave overseers, against 120,000 soldiers and six dragons of the Imperial Army if all captured bent
the knee, the city would fall.

Only the vaunted scorpions and rockets of the air defenses were viable, plus wildfire stocks, but none
were willing to use the latter and the former would collapse upon a full assault.

Things would be far more grim, however...

“Your Holiness!” Looking up from the maps, the High Sparrow was greeted by Qyburn. “The Mark
has been found.”

He did a double take, as did the others gathered around him. Daario, however, looked confused.
“What mark?”

into the surface?” All knew the constellation of the Lightbringer, from the Free Folk of the far north
to the merchants of Qarth to the east. “Where is it?”

Qyburn nodded, hand shaking as he outlined it on the back of his other palm. “On the Dragon
Queen’s hand.”

“Fuck me blind.” As the group shuffled out, Littlefinger quietly whispered a command to one of his
personal servants. It was time to set into motion an old arrangement.

While the city slept - some soundly, others restlessly - the Red Keep saw a flurry of activity.
Officials, guards, and servants dashing about the grounds like ants within a disturbed anthill.
Goldcloaks and Faith Militants formed a protective screen around Daenerys as she was led up the
staircase towards the main keep by Sovereignguards. Arms pinned in hands that could encircle her
tiny wrists twice over, she was literally frogmarched, feet not even brushing the ground. All was
dealt in a stoic silence. ‘A dragon sheds no tears.’

And thus she was thrust into the throne room itself. The Iron Throne, the twisted hulk of steel and
iron that she had so long fought for, loomed large over her. Towering like a leviathan over her. In
person, it seemed so… miniscule. Something one would take to be metal scraps, not the great throne
that her ancestor forged with the fire of Balerion the Dread. Curious, Dany began to approach it,
only for a harsh hiss from Lancel Lannister to stop her. The scrawny monk didn’t scare her, but Ser
Boros Blount gripping his blade was rather disconcerting.

Servants heaved open the brass-plated doors as the retinue entered the throne room. At the lead was
the High Sparrow, Daario and various members of the small council trailing behind him. Whispering
something to Brother Lancel, he then approached the glaring Daenerys.

“Where is Sansa?” Daenerys demanded. There was no doubt as to who this was - the same man that
introduced Joffrey and led the procession at the dragonpit. “Where is the Kingslayer? I demand to
know where they have been taken…”

A gloved hand clasped over her mouth. “Shut it.” While she struggled, Daario held her tightly in
place as the High Sparrow approached. Time slowed still, her skin crawling. ‘Gods, protect me,” she
thought, begging whatever deities existed to spare her unborn child from malicious intentions…

But the High Sparrow merely took her hand, tracing it with his fingerclaws. “By the Stranger,” he
murmured, finding the pattern of the scars easily. They were long since healed, a combination of
powder burns and pinprick gashes. Faded red/pink contrast greatly with the pale skin of the
Targaryen Queen. What resulted was a mark so uncannily in resemblance to the pattern of stars most
infamous in the winter skies.

Nearly an hour later, precise measurements through optical lenses borrowed from the now imprisoned Grand Maester’s office and the star charts used by the Septon’s Augurs, the impression was confirmed. The High Sparrow was as ashen-faced as the rest of the small council. All knew about the young King’s visions, and the ancient tale of the fall of the Golden One rang true to this very day.

All that had to be done now was to inform the Chimera himself.

A full moon bore down upon King’s Landing that night, shining a brightness only the midmorning sun could top upon the city. Not a cloud marred the starry canvas draped over the earth. While this was ominous in and of itself, those from the most sightful augurs to the lowliest peasant trembled at an event so rare it could only be a sign from the gods. A comet streaked across the sky. While the one that signalled the return of the dragons from extinction was blood red, this one glowed a blinding white, matching that of the moon. Some stated it heralded the coming victory of the great Chimera. Others quietly admitted something far different.

“The Lord of Light prepares himself to reclaim this land from the demon!” From atop an impromptu dias, Kinvara proclaimed the gospel to the gathered slaves. “The Long Night approaches, and only he will unify those under his banners and those under the grip of the Golden One.”

“Fuck that!” Jeers rang out from the crowd, mostly from Dornish captives and bondservants sold into slavery for their debts - the large collections of Essosi stayed silent, both sympathetic to the priestess of R’hllor and cowed from lives of servitude. “Where was the Prince that was Promised when Tywin burned his way through Dorne?!”

“He has vanquished the Scourge of the West,” Kinvara answered simply. “He will free us from bondage, as his wife the Dragon Queen did in Meereen.” The crowd broke out in whispers, mulling it over.

One rabble rouser was not buying it, swaying the majority of the crowd. “The wheel crushes us all. What did the Mad King do for us?! What did Ned Stark do for us?! They are no different than the Lannisters!” The jeers turned profane, only the line of thugs surrounding Kinvara keeping them back. “Jon Snow the Bastard will never show up! He will burn us to death with his dragons!” the rabble rouser proclaimed. “He doesn’t care about us, only that damn throne.”

“We must stand with him. He has risen from the death, and soon the Prince that was Promised will wield the sword of flame and bring the New Dawn for all of us!”

“Sword of Flame,” Thoros of Myr mused, visibly drunk. “Shouldn’t that make you the Lightbringer, Beric?”

Beric Dondarrion rolled his eyes. “The downsides of a happy drunk. He can’t shut up before he deploys bad jokes.” He looked over at the hooded figure to his other side. “Still, do you believe in the prophecy.”

The hooded figure spared a quick glance at the still preaching priestess. Her eyes were alight with the fire of her cause, one he had seen often in Daenerys. In the mirror, not as much - not for a cause. “They are just myths.” He dropped his gaze. “Hope to those who crave such, but nothing more.”

“I’m sure you don’t believe that.” Beric chuckled. “Our friend the burned dog sulking in the back
“certainly does, but not you.” He crossed his arms. “You certainly won’t be here, in the land of the living, if not for it.” Looking at him, Beric smiled. “I am sure you saw something in the void of death, Jon Snow.” The last was a whisper, one only Jon heard.

Dispersed among the pen were his men. The great nobles and commanders of the Imperial Army. Men that Jon trusted above all others to accomplish the greatest feat since Daenerys Stormborn walked out of the fire with three dragons. One that would most likely fail, and leave him a widower and his children motherless…

Perhaps continuing with the plan in the face of such odds required faith. Not just in gods, but in himself.

“The Night is dark and full of terrors!”

“The Night is dark and full of terrors!” Without knowing, Jon found himself mouthing the words as Kinvara said them.

Sandals slapped on the narrow steps leading downstairs to the King’s private chambers. The High Sparrow did not question why His Highest ordered a renovation of the Red Keep to build a set of rooms underground. There were reasons cited, but he did not care. Joffrey Baratheon was the Seven’s chosen champion in the mortal world, and he would never question his commands.

As he struggled to both maintain his balance and scramble down the steps, he said a silent prayer that his sovereign wouldn’t take this too drastically.

‘But it completely compliments his nightmare…’ As Joffrey’s spiritual advisor, the High Sparrow was one of the few who knew. Washing the worry from his body and adopting total penetrance before his King, the High Sparrow reached the bottom step.

With practiced movements, a blind servant artfully arranged the various fruits, pastries, and roasted meats on the plate. The Chimera ate little, but when he did was very picky. She rested it upon the small table resting next to where Joffrey stood, other servants removing his shroud and the other clothes. Torchlight hit the bare, pale skin. Looking at the offering, Joffrey lashed out at the servant’s cheek. “Water!”

Rubbing her cheek, Arya bowed. Joffrey was more a monster than when she had known him before - and that said something. She rushed to get the bowl of water, knowing where it rested in the dark room. All the blind servant girls had seen others that had displeased Joffrey too many times - or what was left of them. She had just snatched it up when the High Sparrow burst in.

Normally resting his bare knees upon a cushion - one of the few luxuries the noble turned servant of the Seven allowed himself - in his rush the High Sparrow collapsed upon the bare stone. He winced as the rough floor bit into his skin but forced himself to ignore it. Splayed palms darted up to cover his face. “All highest, I must speak with thee.”

Joffrey hadn’t noticed him come in, but his normal rage was mollified by the soft hands of his servants caressing his pale skin. They were so meek, any defiance broken out of them by their blindness and his ‘treatment.’ Perhaps, he thought, he’d take one of them before bed. It had been a while. But for now, he had his religious advisor to deal with. “Please, Ser, say your piece.” ‘I haven’t got all night.’

“We…” The High Sparrow gulped, feeling every one of his seventy years upon the earth in his
creaking bones and dry tongue. “We found a symbol burned into the skin of the Dragon Queen, your Highest.”

Idle hands toying with the fingerclaws stilled suddenly. Two beings suddenly tensed, one royal and one servant, though the latter disguised it far better than the former. “Out with it!”

Gulping, the old man looked up to the vaulted ceiling. “The Mark… of the Lightbringer!”

The basin of water was knocked out of Arya’s hands as Joffrey snarled, lashing out with fury. “Impossible!”

Looking up, pausing his molars from gnawing at the wad of khat in his maw - one of the few things in abundance in King’s Landing - the Goldcloak peered into the darkness surrounding the farmhouse. “Did you hear something?” His halting tone indicated him a functional illiterate.

Eyes peering through the window of the farmhouse, the other scoffed. “Stop being paranoid,” he shot back, placing his attention back to the goings on inside. Feminine screams hardened his cock, the man salivating at the prospect of fresh pussy as soon as his officer and senior comrade were done. Arrogance and sadistic lust prevented him from noticing the crouching form behind him. “There are no Wolf fuckers here…”

Wrapping a mailed hand hurriedly over his mouth, Podrick Payne slammed a knife between his ribs, sharp tip piercing the chainmail. The Goldcloak’s eyes went wide as the metal tore through his heart. Muffled grunts ended, slumping dead in his arms. Beside him, Podricki could see Brienne slice the other’s head clean off, quickly catching it before it fell loudly upon the ground. A moment’s stillness, followed by an instant relief at the sound of laughs and further feminine cries.

They lined up at the door. “Ready?” Brienne breathed, readying her foot. Podrick nodded. “Now.” With a yell, Brienne kicked the door in, cheap wood tearing off its hinges and crashing to the floor. Rapidly they stormed into the cottage, swords at the ready - not that it mattered. The two Goldcloaks inside were too concentrated on their raping of the pair of farm women, mother and daughter, that they tripped on their yanked down pants before even reaching their weapons. Quick flashes of steel left two more piles of flesh and blood for cleanup.

Half an hour later, Tyrion hid his distaste by sipping at a skin of sour wine - creating new distaste. “I remember the days when the City Watch at least had some honor. Raping a woman…” He shook his head. “It isn’t good unless she enjoys it too.”

A Stark bannerman parked Bran by the fireplace. As he had insisted on coming along the fast march, he insisted on always being near the flames upon making camp. The young Stark child had a running contest with the Red Witch on who could disconcert Tyrion the most. “Quite,” was the only response from the Three Eyed Raven.

Plopping down onto a chair - well, as easily as a dwarf could - Tyrion regarded the boy. “And how would you know about that,” he chided, teasingly.

Bran looked over, a glint in his eye. “Only my legs are crippled, Lord Tyrion.”

“A true Stark. Never kissing and telling,” Tyrion smacked his hand on his thigh, chuckling. He caught Podrick out of the corner of his eye. “Ah, Podrick my friend. You should appreciate this conversation, considering how… skilled you are at pleasing a woman.”

Trying not to send a deathglare at Tyrion, his former mentor not having any blame at the kidnapping
of his now-lover, Podrick merely unfolded a map of King’s Landing as Brienne, Tyene Martell, and Harry Strickland entered behind him. “So this was one of the seven sentryposts lining the southwestern approach to the city.”

Tyrion sighed. His attempt at humor hadn’t cheered up the young lad - he really must be in love with Sansa Stark. Sweet and noble, but it also could drive a man to foolish brashness. Tyrion would know. “Without my father in charge, they’ve grown lax. It doesn’t surprise me that Joffrey is turned inward, rather than outward.”

“We’ve taken all of the sentry posts,” Tyene revealed flatly. “Not even a loss among our forces.”

“They won’t send replacements till tomorrow afternoon. Too lazy about it,” Strickland stated. He was still viewed with suspicion, and fought to prove his loyalty and the loyalty of his men. “According to the plan, things in the city will already be in complete chaos by that time.”

“‘According to plan,’ is the key phrase there.” Tyrion downed his wine, sour as it was. “Battleplans survive contact with the enemy as a buggerer’s erection survives a naked maiden. Can’t count on it, Strickland.”

“Oh, I know that.” The lives of his men on the battlefield proved it to him.

Suddenly, the ground shook as a low growl filled the room. The dragons had landed, shaken out of their torpor at the loss of their mother to journey with the vanguard of the Imperial Army. Tyrion was sure the direwolves would be here, but news from Riverrun stated that one was expecting a litter, so were out of commission. ‘Life goes on, I suppose,’ he thought.

“Do not worry.” All looked at Bran. “They are in position, I can see it. Joffrey’s prophecy - the prophecy of the Golden One - will come to fruition tomorrow.” Podrick hoped his, hopefully, future brother in law was right. Only the Unsullied, Golden Company, and Northern Hoplites had advanced - six thousand in total. Not enough to storm a defended city, but plenty to lend help to a revolting one.

‘Gods be with us all.’
Chapter Summary

Now begins the second of the three updates on the final clash of the Emperors' War. As with some other parts of the story, I've drawn inspiration from various other sources, including films I am fond of. Parts may seem similar in nature to those sources, but I have worked as much unique elements in as possible to get an authentic flavor to it. Some concepts are too perfect not to portray in an authentic Game of Thrones variety, and the desire is of creating an entertaining narrative of how I feel Game of Thrones should go. Hope everyone enjoys.

Chapter Notes

If I can get 15 comments for this chapter, I will post the finale of the revolution tomorrow :D

Dawn broke in King’s Landing with the caws of roosters and the snarls of overseers. Whips cracked as the glum slaves - matched by tens of thousands of impressed 'free' citizens - marched robotically towards their work details. Guards and Faith Militant thugs watched them with indifference, as a cruel child would view a line of chickens. Not human. Beasts of burden less valuable than the massive Essosi Mammoth used for heavier loads. Mere playthings for their whims and for the whims of their betters. Such occupations didn't draw footsoldiers from a pool of decent citizens.

The massive pyramid loomed over the entire city. Despite the war, treasure, resources, and blood secured by mass looting of the Reach, Dorne, and the Stormlands were still being poured into Joffrey's vanity project - loaned money financed the Army of the Divine Chimera, the Iron Bank basically owning the crown at this point. A golden statue, gilded copper of Joffrey resplendent in a Lannister military uniform atop a horse, rested at the summit of the pyramid. Work continued unabated, the base being finished off with smooth cuts of stone while the slaves labored on the middle and top.

Siegeworks being needed, Joffrey forbade any diversion from the project. Daario ordered the Goldcloaks to instead impress the smallfolk of Flea Bottom in order to handle the increased workload, creating a city on the brink. Food was scarcer than during Renly's siege, terror widespread, and the illicit faith of R'hllor upending centuries of religious tradition. King's Landing was wildfire, and all it would take was a tiny spark to ignite a conflagration.

It was in this that Jon and his elite warriors filtered into. Weapons were hidden, buried under sand or tucked into haystacks and bales of cotton - tucked away till the right moment, predators donning the same clothing as the sheep all around them. Jon, Robb, Gendry, Grey Worm, Barristan, Jorah, Bronn, Tormund, Davos, and dozens of others all donned cheaply spun wool or faded, dirty burlap, some tucking their faces underneath cloaks.

None of the guards noticed. The Imperials didn't find it shocking that hired thugs only in it for the
perks of raping and looting would be so lax.

Each knew their role. Their task in the upcoming orchestra of rebellion. Brotherhood agents spread word far and wide of a distraction, a symbol of liberty that would ignite the flame of uprising. But only the central core knew the actual plan. It was a plan simple in its complexity - dependent on factors that only Jon or Tormund had faith in. None of the others had dealt with the facts and players involved, man or beast. But it was the only way, and so they trudged with the slaves and impressed smallfolk towards their assignments.

Burlap shift over his cuirass, hood covering his head, Jon made his way through the throng of people. To his side towered the mammoth, normal serene and playful hooting and trumpeting nonexistent - beaten out of them by whip and spear. "Remember," he breathed. "Act a proper, cowed slave till my signal."

"We're with you, sire," Jorah replied.

"For Empress Daenerys," said Grey Worm, not happy to be back in bondage - if only for a little while.

Sandor Clegane only grunted, spitting on the ground. "Fuck King's Landing." That would have to do.

He weaved his way till he found Beric and Thoros. "All taken care of on your end, Lord Beric?" Jon asked in a low whisper.

"Aye." Beric spared his Emperor and Promised Prince a glance out of his one eye. "The word of revolution has been spread." At the closeness of a Faith Militant, beating a helpless woman - talisman of R'hllor on the dirt belying the reason - Beric hushed up.

"Pryjagon se grevy," finished Thoros, swigging from a small waterskin once they were out of range of the thug. Seeking to replicate his drunk charge at Pyke so many years before.


"...all just spokes on a wheel. This ones on top, then that ones on top and on and on it spins crushing those on the ground." Dany's words flooded his mind, ones of inspiration, of pure selfless duty rather than selfish ambition. "We're not going to stop the wheel, Jon. You and I, together, are going to break the wheel."

"Ready, Jon?" He looked up to see Robb next to him. "This better work."

"It will," he echoed Tormund's confidence… only they had seen it happen.

Nodding, an odd glint sparked in Robb's eye. Jon raised an eyebrow, and Robb slapped his back. "You know what today is, brother?"

Jon blinked in confusion, wracking his brain. "Lib… Liberty day?" But that would be a holiday that he would have to create, not one that currently existed…

Laughing, Robb ruffled his hair. "Happy name day, Jon. You turn four and twenty today." He chuckled once more, leaving Jon stupefied. He had completely forgotten his own name day - it hadn't been important growing up, only Arya, Robb, Bran, his father, and sometimes Sansa even recognizing it. Daenerys would have, and if she hadn't been captured likely planned a realmwide celebration… 'I will save you, my love.' He looked heavenward. 'Gods give me strength, for I will save her.'
"Move you scum!" screamed an overseer in Valyrian, whip cracking as it smacked into Jon's cloak. Skin protected by a concealed cuirass, the vicious snap still stung. Looking back in barely repressed anger, Jon shrugged it off and continued forward - an Emperor hiding in plain sight.

"Pryjagon se grevy," he whispered to Kinvara as he passed her, the creed of the new revolution that Jon was brewing. Gaze trained on his back, soon disappeared into the throng of the crowd, the High Priestess of R'hllor smirked darkly.

Winter has come for Joffrey Waters.

Turning the corner, unseeing eyes gazed upon the scene in the King's private audience room - from the sounds, it wasn't a pleasant gathering. Wasn't pleasant even under Joffrey's sadistic median. With perceptive ears, she could hear everything. Starting with the blubbering of someone completely pathetic. Even hearing it was embarrassing to anyone with self respect.

"Please, take it." Gold coins clinked on the stone floor as a prostate Grand Maester Pycelle emptied the sack Jaime had given him several weeks before. "Take it all." Tears and snot coated his wizened beard. "Forgive me, your Highest…"

"Silence Traitor!" Joffrey kicked him in the head, drawing out a whimper and further blubbering.

To his left, Jaime rolled his eyes in complete disgust at Pycelle and indifference to the entire proceeding. "Can we please get on with this?" he whined sarcastically. To his left, Daenerys and Sansa had something to lose, and were merely quiet. He had nothing to lose, and therefore did not hold his tongue. "Death is preferable to hearing a grown man piss himself."

Cheeks coloring to the complexion of a ripe tomato, Joffrey clenched his fists. "Ser Gregor!" Stepping forward nonchalantly, the Mountain slammed his mailed fist into Jaime's lower back. Gritting his teeth, Jaime couldn't help letting out a low grunt of pain from between his lips - mentally cursing a storm upon his hellspawn.

"I should have ran a sword through your back as I did the Mad King. You are no son of mine." Catching the muttered last sentence, Cersei's look could have killed a dragon. Jaime knew he had sealed his death warrant. With the woman he had loved being the one to swing the blade or deliver the poison. Once again, he couldn't find it in himself to care.

Too caught up in his rage, Joffrey didn't hear it as his mother did. Instead he crouched by Dany, taking the aforementioned hand in his own. Dany fought the urge to recoil in disgust at the clammy touch and metallic feel of Joffrey's fingerclaws. "These scars look like nothing!" He could barely make out any pattern at all. "How could this be the fucking Mark?!"

"We measured it, all Highest," replied the High Sparrow, trying his best to remain stoic - inwardly, his sovereign's mood and the nature of the prophecy filled him with dread. "Many times. It matches the stars exactly."

"How did she even get these?" Joffrey lurched back onto his feet, gossamer robes swishing upon the dusty stone. "Enforcer, you never saw them during your time together?"

Daario shook his head from behind his palms, covering his face as the High Sparrow did. "No. Not in Meereen. Her hand seemed injured after I carried out your will in Dragonstone, all Highest."

It was then the voice returned, that of his father - Robert Baratheon. "Mark of the Warrior, branded by one employed." Daario was his employed… "One God she crowns, one God destroyed." 'No.' Joffrey recoiled from imaginary demons… not imaginary to him. 'Not possible.'
It morphed into the Northern brogue of Ned Stark. "On female flesh, his sigil doth enjoyed. Azor Ahai lives, your reign will fall."

"Her husband," he choked out, voice hoarse. "The Stark Bastard. Who is he?" His heart began to beat out of his chest. 'He is but a bastard.' "What is his story?"

Cersei hid her scoff. "He is but the lowly bastard of Ned Stark." Gleeful hate tinted her voice. "The great and honorable Ned Stark, devoted to his family. And yet he disgraced himself and his harpy of a wife."

It started off faint, but grew in volume. Sansa and Daenerys, almost as if they coordinated with each other, began laughing. Quiet chuckles, but soon turned into painful howls of humor - bawling over in an inside joke that the Divine Chimera, born of the Womb of the Maiden, had no idea about.

Turns out, he didn't much like that. "What is so fucking funny?!" He grabbed Sansa's hair and tried to yank her up, but the awkward fingerclaws slipped through her silky locks once he could.

Sansa made it easy, abruptly pushing onto her knees… staring directly at him. The first time anyone had ever done that in years. "You are a fool Joffrey. You were always one, and now such idiocy brings you to your doom." She pushed her hair back from her face, ensuring her scorching blue eyes gazed directly into his black soul. "Jon is no bastard."

Joffrey blinked. "What?"

"Of course he is a bastard," Cersei stated haughtily. Daario simply kept his eyes behind his hands, having heard the truth from the Imperial commanders at Dragonstone. He certainly wouldn't be the one to tell his King.

Shaking off the final series of chuckles, Daenerys rose just as Sansa did. Her gaze was that of a Queen… of an Empress. A gaze that Joffrey had never managed to exude. "Jon is the trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark… the true heir to the throne you have usurped." An ominous gust of air wafted through the high slits in the room, her silver locks billowing as the wings of a dragon. "He is the Union of Ice and Fire."

"Lies!" Cersei shrieked, but Joffrey once again didn't hear.

"The Lord of Light, the previous son. His rule will win, his time will come."

Previous son. It all tumbled into place for Joffrey. Not the son of the previous king… one of Robert's bastards. 'I was the Crown Prince…' No, the son of his predecessor, Rhaegar…

"Son of your former, beware his call. The Stormborn sees thy eyes, thy reign will fall."

He felt his knees buckle, the voices bringing pain to him. Arms hauled him up from his near fall, but all Joffrey could think about was the prophecy. A prophecy… a prophecy come full circle. One that would lead to a certain outcome.

"The Stormborn sees thy eyes, thy reign will fall." And the Stormborn looked directly at him, violet eyes blazing directly into his soul.

"You will die before the sun sets, Joffrey," Sansa stated, beholding the first and final monster in her life.

Wrapping her arms around his shoulders, Cersei strained to keep her beloved son from collapsing bonelessly. "Your Highest. What troubles you?"
Joffrey trembled, shaking near violently. "Azor Ahai is reborn."

The blind servant disappeared from around the corner.

The mid-morning sun beat down on the main ramp towards the great pyramid. It dwarfed the one in Meereen, the famous statue of the Harpy having nothing on the garish splendor of Joffrey's statue. Even to someone not used to great art - as Jon had in his stay in Meereen or Dragonstone - the thing was an eyesore. Instead of look at it, he focused his thoughts on the backbreaking labor. He and his fellow warriors were assigned to a crew hauling a block of limestone up the ramp. Wooden rails on the sled made it mobile, but only just. He was in decent shape, but Jon could feel his muscles close to giving way.

Muffled curses left those around him, kept muffled by the presence of the guards not sparing in their use of whip or truncheon. Jon seethed but kept going, ignoring the rope rubbing his hand raw as he pulled with all his might.

Ahead of him, Grey Worm couldn't take his gaze off a line of crucifixes, each bearing a slave of various age or origin. It made his blood boil, anger building underneath his hard, docile exterior.

Bones aching, muscles on fire at pulling the thick rope, Robb threw his head back in agony - only to spot something. "Jon…" He nudged his brother, gesticulating with a jerk of the head. "That one?"

Jon looked at where his brother motioned. An eyebrow rose. "Tormund?" he asked the wildling behind him.

"Aye." Tormund nodded. "That's the one." The Essosi Mammoth plodded down the ramp, skin wrinkled and frayed with a long, hard life. What were once large and magnificent tusks had been sawed off, but the stumps were thicker than any other's. Towering at least two head above all the other mammoth, it was clearly the lead bull. Head of the herds - true of Essosi bulls as were those north of the wall.

"Beric," Jon told the highborn Lord and commander in the Brotherhood. "We've found the lead bull." Nodding, Beric whispered something Valyrian to a group of water carriers, who quickly scrambled up and down the ramp towards the various clusters of at least two dozen mammoth.

"Now!"

The command of their Emperor found the entire work gang halt in place, devolving into a melee of squabbling and milling as Sandor pushed forward to pick a fight with a Ghiscari member of the brotherhood. Jeers and catcalls rang out, overseers and Faith Militant immediately drawn to the scene like flies. Irritation coursed through them at the interruption of the work, distracted from the docile water carriers busy unhooking each mammoth from its harness. "Back to work, dogs!" they yelled, whips cracking in the air and truncheons smacking into flesh and bone.

One overseer, his Ghiscari features and absolute zeal in his work a common sight in the old slaver city states of New Valyria, grabbed Grey Worm by the back and began whipping him raw. The Unsullied commander gritted his teeth.

"Grey Worm, not yet," Jon commanded, peering up the ramp - where Beric had escaped to. Suddenly, grateful, the warrior of R'hllor gave his signal. Completion. "Break the Wheel!" Jon yelled.

Dropping the rope, Grey Worm spun around with the fluidity of an Unsullied and wrapped his hand around the overseer's throat. Eyes bugged out, never expecting a beaten dog to lash out,
the overseer gasped a breath out of his lungs before the freed slave soldier tossed him to his death off the ramp. His was the first action of the complete transformation of the warriors from cowed slaves into trained partisans. Overseers and Faith Militants, drawing their swords, axes, and knives for the first time, waded in but were overwhelmed. One darted forward with a spear and skewered a teenager from Volantis before Jon slammed a knife into his spine.

Spear clattering to the ground, Jon grabbed it and raced forward to the lead bull. The beast drew back, ponderous feet plodding as the strange little man before him - shift doffed to reveal his dark grey battle cuirass, waved at him with the spear. Just as Mance had taught him all those years before.

Grabbing an axe from a fallen guard, the Hound hacked off the head of a Faith Militant that was beating a slave boy. Another swing slammed into the groin of an overseer. Blood spurted on the dusty stone, the man falling to his knees. Walking around him, Sandor couldn't help but snort. "Well, well, we meet again." It was the same overseer that had interrogated him after Arya disappeared.

"Fuck you!" he snarled.

The Hound wrinkled his nose in disgust as the others finished off the last of the on site guards. "Last words? You can do better."

Blood gurgling in his mouth, a word spurted out with a splatter of crimson liquid. "Cunt."

"You're shit at dying." With that, Sandor brought the axe down on the sadist's head with a grunt.

Beric came upon the scene. "Stop playing with your food, Hound." He found it quite amusing.

"Come on you cunts!" Robb yelled, slicing the head off the last guard. "Form up! We must form up!" He jogged to where the Hound, Davos, and Tormund waited together. "Where's Jon?"

Davos pointed up the ramp. "His Majesty is up there." Jon was still swiping his spear at the beast, coaxing and fighting it in a deadly game of bait the bear.

"He will not charge," Tormund breathed. "Fucker is tame."

Running a hand through his hair, Robb looked at him. "Beaten for too long?"

"Aye. Had I been on a farm, I wouldn't be a fuckin' killer like I am."

"I doubt that," Clegane muttered, when the blaring of a horn reached his ears. Turning, he rolled his eyes. "Oh for fuck's sake." Continued blasts from the horn resonated across the city, fighters, slaves, and citizens alike gazing at the hundreds of Goldcloaks racing up the massive ramp. There was a general lack of formation, spears and shields carried haphazardly as the commander sacrificed skill for speed.

But skill wasn't needed to overwhelm a mere few dozen Imperials and rebelling slaves.

"Get everyone up the ramp!" Robb yelled, the others barking orders simultaneously. Devoid of weapons other than a smattering of knives, spears, and truncheons, no matter how a well-trained highborn could stack up man to man against a barely-trained thug in armor, quantity was its own quality. Fighters and slaves alike - the former disciplined while the latter a shrieking mass of humanity - careened towards the top of the ramp like an oncoming flood. None of which stopped the advancing Goldcloaks.

Staring at the ragged column, then at the Emperor still busy trying to coax the mammoth bull from the docility beaten into it, and finally back to the column, Ser Barristan made a choice. While his
bones ached from age, he was still a knight of the Realm, former commander of the Kingsguard. He failed to save his Prince, but he could save his Emperor. Knife clenched tightly in one hand, Barristan picked up a workman’s hammer from the ground as he charged at the Goldcloaks.

"Barristan! No!" Jorah yelled, only for Beric Dondarrion to literally push him to join the retreating mass.

Panting, the knight's momentum carried him forward as an expert blow sliced open the exposed neck of the lead Goldcloak. Another, having leapt into the fray too quickly to grab his helmet, found his skull caved in by Barristan's hammer. It was here that the ragged charge - for the sake of shaving valuable time in quashing the rebellion - boomeranged on the Goldcloaks. Essentially it allowed Ser Barristan the fortune of facing one man at a time. His knife and hammer grew slick with blood as Barristan the Bold felled man after man like a soul possessed.

Such fortune ran out quickly, four Goldcloaks advancing at once. His hammer dropped one, while a spear pierced through his side. The pain registered as a mere thud, and with a grunt Barristan slashed forward with his knife. A flash of steel to his right nearly found a sword lopping off his head, but a spear flew out of nowhere to run through the Goldcloak. "Thought you could use a hand," drawled Thoros of Myr, flaming sword in hand. A sword that soon met flesh as it disemboweled the remaining Goldcloak.

"Hope you're not too drunk,' quipped Barristan. The onrushing pain from his wound didn't stop him from dropping his weapons and picking up a fallen sword.

As the middle of the column approached, mouths open in a savage battlecry, Thoros shrugged. "Not too drunk."

Looking back, Jon had a perfect view of his bodyguard. The bodyguard of his father, the Great Barristan the Bold, essentially sacrificing himself for Jon… and Dany. His will rallied, a surge of power and fire coursing through his blood.

"HAAAAAGGGGH!" Jon slammed the spear forward, steel tip slicing through skin and flesh. A growling rumble left the massive mammoth, spear yanked out. "AAAAARRRRGGGGH!" Another guttural cry left the Emperor - the spirit of Mance Rayder likely nodding from beyond the grave - Jon raising the spear horizontally above his head as the mammoth reared back on its hind legs, trumpeting an enraged, vengeful tone of an animal driven beyond its breaking point.

The commander of the Goldcloaks, an old veteran of the Battle of Blackwater Bay, suddenly had enough. Driven to fury by two men holding up his entire attack - dozens falling victim to them - he mustered ten men to charge in a halfway cohesive formation. Spears and shields advanced, Barristan and Thoros struggling and giving back ground. It was the infamous Thoros of Myr that fell first, his flaming blade dispatching two before his throat was cut. Barristan the Bold lashed out, blade tasting blood once more before the commander buried a spear into his heart. Coughing out blood, the great Barristan Selmy managed to kill his attacker in one final blow before collapsing into the sweet embrace of death.

Bloodlust up, enraged at the death of their comrades and ready to sate said anger upon the innocent slaves and outnumbered Imperials, the Goldcloaks surged forward in a final dash towards the top of the ramp. Only for their unstoppable force to meet one even greater.

Vision blinded with fury, the lead bull mammoth charged at a top gallop. Behind it, the rest of the herd followed its leader, trumpets hooting and echoing across the landscape - heard far and wide, by slave, citizen, guard, soldier, and beast for miles, including six specific winged monsters of the skies. Battlecries of the Goldcloaks turned into blood-curdling screams of terror as the bull barreled into
them. What would have been a restoration of order turned into a rout for the Lannisters, use of the wild creatures turned beasts of burden against their captors a complete triumph of the Imperials.

As the last of the mammoth herd passed him, Jon leapt to his feet. He raised the spear in the air to his men and the rebelling slaves. "Pryjagon se grevy! Break the wheel, boys!"

They surged forward, behind the charging mammoth. Wolf whistles and battlecries rang proud into the air, only to be drowned out by distant but still air-splitting roars. Jon grinned, for the battle had been joined.

"Pryjagon se grevy!"

At the sight of the Goldcloaks fleeing, those not swift enough trampled to death by mammoth or decapitated by sword, Kinvara was the first of the onlookers around the entire city to raise her arms and shout the cry of rebellion. Brotherhood agents joined in not long after, tools, paving stones, and artfully concealed knives turned on the guards. Slaves and freedmen rose as well - first a trickle, and then a torrent that engulfed the building sites and stone quarries of King’s Landing. All shouted in Valyrian, even those that spoke the common tongue.

"Pryjagon se grevy!"

"Pryjagon se grevy!"

"Pryjagon se grevy!"

Brotherhood agents were everywhere, not just among the slaves. Years had been spent cultivating the denizens of Flea Bottom, the slum of King’s Landing that had grown larger and larger as the gap between the wealthy elite and the expanding underclass grew. They only wanted bread for their bellies and circuses for their eyes, only for Joffrey to deny them the former without backbreaking labor and use mass executions of their own people for the latter. They were primed to rise, and upon the call of the Emperor's Revolution, they gladly joined the call. Flea Bottom burned as Faith Militant strong points were torched and their denizens butchered by angry mobs.

Long waiting for their call, forced by their father to ignore their baser instincts to find their mother and burn down all that stood in their way, the dragons flew low over the city. The three larger ones cast their shadows upon the city. Inciting fear and hope among the people. The three juveniles used their size and agility to assault anti-air positions, jets of flame immolating scorpion tenders and rocket artillerymen with impunity. Rhaegal and Edderon saved their dragonfire for whenever a cluster of Goldcloaks or mercenaries attempted to stop the onrushing mammoth, leaving them blackened husks and the charge continuing.

Balerion, the Dread reborn, darted at five of the six great landward gates surrounding the city. Each, heavily fortified, was turned into a scorching pyre for the defenders, wooden doorways collapsing into ash from his jets of flame.

A situation that the Imperial Army and commanding general Podrick Payne would insert itself into quite forcefully.

"My Lord," one Goldcloak asked of Littlefinger. The Lion Gate overlooking the goldroad was the most heavily armed of all of them. Scorpions bristled along its battlements, a personal rocket battery under the guard captain's personal command. But approaching were a line of Imperial troops, and a dragon in the air ready to deliver death to those that defied its rider. "What do we do?" He did not want to die.
Smirking softly, Littlefinger didn't even look at him. It was his moment, the culmination of decades of backstabbing and ladder climbing. Of hedging on all sides, now he knew exactly the winner, and the strongest connection of all to it. "Open the gate."

"My Lord?"

"Our King is defeated, his cause poisonous. We shall join the Targaryen, so open the gate and let them in." As such, the orders were carried out, the Imperial Army racing into the city under cover of dragonfire.

The Revolution was here.

Muscles burning, Qyburn scrambled down the same steps that the High Sparrow had only twelve hours before. "Seven hells..." he murmured. "Seven hells... Seven hells..." Over and over. Only now a harried pace was turned into an out an out sprint, his thin body barely able to take having to run all the way across the Red Keep in a mere five minutes. Lancel Lannister was better off through youth, but was even more terrified than Qyburn.

They both burst suddenly into the audience room. In their fear and desire to inform their King, both forgot protocol. "All Highest, the slaves! They've risen!"

Frantic voices piercing the haze and whirring thoughts Joffrey had been clouded with, the clarity brought his eyes towards the intruders. And how they weren't bowing to him. Unlike the Dragon Empress, they were his subjects. A vicious snarl left his throat, rising as high as his middling height and platform boots would secure him.

Eyes widened in fear, the High Sparrow gesture wildly. "Bow before your sovereign!" he nearly screamed.

The realization upon them, Qyburn and Lancel both collapsed onto their knees. Mollified, Joffrey approached them. "What do you mean, they have risen?!" It was a nightmare, a nagging spearpoint to the gut that this was the work of the prophecy. His fall happening in real time - that he would be dead by the end of the day as Sansa had so confidently stated.

"One god she crowns, one god destroyed."

Catching his breath... never having been so terrified in his life, Qyburn raised his head with his palms draped over his face. "The Stark Bastard." He noticed how his sovereign tensed underneath his veil at the words. "He led a small detachment of men onto the monument. They caused a stampede of mammoth, and the slaves and citizenry have drawn inspiration and are rising up in revolution."

"Flea Bottom has already fallen, all Highest. A large Imperial host has broken through the outer defenses of the city." Lancel was trembling - here he was, transformed into the same coward he had been while Robert's squire. "They will come here next."

Breaths heavy, Joffrey swiveled his head from one figure to the other. He was at a loss. Normally he had his grandfather... or his uncle... or Littlefinger. But Tywin was a prisoner of the Starks, his uncle was his prisoner, and Littlefinger was nowhere to be found. Everyone else was useless for strategic and tactical matters. He was the King, and still had no idea how to truly rule...

"My brother will kill you," Sansa said flatly. "You could try to flee, but there is nowhere to go."

"Shut up!" Joffrey grabbed Sansa by the cheek, claws digging into her skin. "Perhaps I should take his whore on a ship with me. Her presence close to me would stop any attack!"
"A dragon does not burn, usurper." Daenerys could feel energy surging within her. The blood of the dragon burning fiercely as her other half drew closer. "My Dragonwolf would only burn all of you alive, knowing I would be safe." She smirked. "On this day, the day the Emperor Jon Targaryen, first of his name, was born upon this world, you have nowhere to go but the deepest of the Seven Hells."

Snarling, Joffrey lashed out. His fingerclaws slammed into Dany's cheek, leaving small cuts and sending her sprawling. "All guards in front of the Red Keep." He pointed at Dany. "She will stop them. If the bastard wants his whore, he can have her. IN PIECES!"
He is Not a God

Reaching a sand pit in the middle of the scrapyard, Jon plunged his hand deep within. Fingers enclosing on something hard and metallic, he pulled it out to hold Longclaw. Cheers erupted from his men as their Emperor leveled his blade at the Red Keep. "To the monster’s lair!"

"Hurry! Hurry!" yelled the High Sparrow, voice frantic as the Goldcloaks, guards, and fellow courtesans flooded out of the castle and onto the display of Joffrey’s might and majesty. All knew that the crowd would rip them to pieces, overwhelm anything that stood in their way. Only spectacle could stop them, and spectacle they would give.

"Look!" At the sound of Cersei, all eyes were drawn to the top of the pyramid - the symbol of Royal greatness turned into the symbol of revolution itself.

As heavy as the golden idol was, brute force won out. The ropes and chains overwhelmed the bronze cast, legs snapping and the entire edifice to Joffrey’s god complex shearing the stone lining to the pyramid. It slammed into the ramp below, kicking up a vast cloud of dust.

"BREAK THE WHEEL!"

It was as if the entire city was an ant hill. Driven mad by the oppressive and blood-soaked rule of Joffrey, with the single lit spark the detonation of revolution drove all out to the streets. Tipping the spear were the thousands of the Imperial Army, but behind them were hundreds of thousands surging forward with a singular mission. The mere hundreds of Goldcloaks that lined the bridge and the inner plaza of the Red Keep, remodeled for the Chimera to address his captive slaves but now left an unarmored hole straight for the black heart of Joffrey’s regime.

Such drove them forward. Such fueled the rage and vengeance within the horde.

"Ho! Ho!" the hoplites hooted, mass of the crowd behind them and their Emperor and Lord alongside them as they surged from the houses and buildings onto the square overlooking the Red Keep. The balcony and dias overlooking the walls and plaza filled with guards and dignitaries - as if the entire Lannister host was on display before them. Along with...

Jon saw it first. Terror stabbing through him, he immediately raised Longclaw in the air. "Stop!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Stop!" At the order, the charge petered out, humanity still surging forward but tapering off just several yards from the bridge. Confusion reigned. The wheel was almost broken, the Red Keep laid out before them as enticingly as a naked, moaning virgin.

It was then that all caught glimpse of what had so frightened their Emperor. Tied up together - the Kingslayer along with them - were Daenerys and Sansa. The Empress and Hand of the Emperor. Glinting in the sun, the sword of Ilyn Payne awaited the mere command to end their lives for good.

The horns atop the Red Keep boomed with the signal of the Chimera. Automatically, beaten into them by years of whips and propaganda, the sheer number of citizens and slaves that had risen under the call of revolution - of Azor Ahai himself - simply dropped to their bellies in reverence to the man that had for so long controlled their very existence.

While it was galling and shocking to the Imperials, it was Kinvara who let the rage and indignancy at her calls for faith in the Prince that was Promised collapsed into the refuge of devotion to Joffrey. The ‘Golden One,’ the false prophet of the original story of Azor Ahai. "Get up!" she snarled. "Get
up you fools! GET UP!” But to no effect. The conditioning was too severe.

After a mere minute the entire city was prone before the Red Keep.

From the dark interior of the palace of the Kings of Westeros, out walked Joffrey, first of his name. Robes made of cloth of gold draped over him, topped by a veil of the finest, gossamer silk. Solid gold fingerclaws adorned his hand and gold-buckled sandals were tied around his feet. But behind such finery, Jon could sense the true Chimera. Gaunt, pale, wild-eyed, absolute power and certainty of omnipotence had taken an already fragile psyche and condemned it to unadulterated madness.

And this was the man who now held Daenerys’ life in his hands. ‘Gods protect me,’ Jon thought with a steeled inhale.

“Behold in all his glory, His Highest Joffrey,” the High Sparrow began, arm extended to to - admittedly - resplendent, majestic figure of the usurper King. “His most Holy Chimera. Messiah of the Seven, born of the womb of the Maiden. King of the Andals, Rhoynar, and First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. Representative of the Gods upon the Earth.”

Grumbled curses left the lips of the Imperials at the sight of the cause of the Realm’s suffering, fists tightening around sword and spear. Even more so at the continued penitence from the slaves - whether it be true belief in his divinity or conditioning. Or both. But for Jon, all he could do was fight the fear within him. Control the heavy beating of his heart.

Stepping forward, eyes squinting from the glare of the noonday sun, Jon left the safety of his numbers till his boots clattered upon the stone bridge. A lone conqueror in his dark grey cuirass, sword in hand and humble before the gilded opulence of the dynasty challenged.

An image flashed in his mind. Vividly displaying a scene of the past, one mirroring this almost exactly. But as soon as it came it was gone.

Jon shook it off. “Joffrey Waters,” he announced loudly. “We meet again.”

Willing himself to ignore the slight - much as his rage burned at the insult, threatening to overpower him - Joffrey pointed a clawed hand at the challenging monarch. “Jon Snow, Bastard of Winterfell.” He let out a laugh. “My late grandfather underestimated you.”

Looking straight at Dany, the first time they saw each other since the interrupted embrace of weeks past, he felt ice form in his core to see her tied up like a human sacrifice. “It seems as I have done the same with you.” Jon stopped, locking eyes with the Chimera once more. “Let her go.”

Barking a laugh, one in which Cersei and several others joined, Joffrey gazed down upon the lone man separate from the massive mob behind him. An unimposing, rumpled man, his curls down around his shoulders and cuirass covered in dust. Nothing like the glorious God King regalia that he sported. Unworthy of rule. “You don’t make demands of me, Bastard. Daenerys Targaryen, as well as your whore of a sister, are mine to do with as I please.” Joffrey leered smugly. “Ser Ilyn?”

Closing her eyes, Dany felt as the mute executioner rested his sharp blade on her shoulder. Metal brushing against her bare skin. She shuddered, eyes opening to look straight at Jon. While his exterior was placid, she could tell he was seething. If he could be composed, she would be. ‘A dragon is no slave.’ Her stomach fluttered, reminding her of what she fought for.

“You will die if you harm them!” Ser Jorah - still grieving over the death of his friend, Ser Barristan - snarled, sword high.

“Restrain your dog, Bastard.” He pointed at Ser Ilhan. “My executioner holds the same blade as had
killed your filth of a father.” Disgust dripped from his voice. “ Consorting with a common harlot. For shame.”

“Be careful what insults you throw, Joffrey.” The Emperor was nonplussed, all his followers - and most of those that followed the Chimera - silent as they watched the exchange. “They may hit you square in the face.” A whole city… a whole nation waited on baited breath as the two monarchs faced off.

Rolling his eyes, the King nodded to Ilyn Payne. “If you try to continue this blasphemous quest, then she will die.” The royal executioner calmly swung his sword, lopping off the withered head of Grand Maester Pycelle without the old man even expecting it. Bearded head tumbling to the ground, a look of surprise still rested upon it. “Like this traitor. Ser Ilhan knows how to execute traitors. Your whore sister knows that.”

“You will never win, Joffrey,” Sansa’s voice rang out. “You own only this castle, and soon it will…” Ser Ilhan hit her in the gut with the hilt of his sword.

Not exposing a single thought of his, Dany could see all she needed to in his stormy grey eyes. Supreme fear, and supreme anger. Somewhere out in the city, a roar echoed… one came after the other in quick succession, till six resonated across King’s Landing. “And yet my sister is not here, while the Kingslayer is. Family disunity, Joffrey?”

With the constant insult of using his first name, Joffrey was boiling inside. “I have no family but the Seven, bastard!” Outburst let out, he calmed down, smug smile returning. Raising his arms, Joffrey showed his magnanimity. “Tell you what. Go back to your icehouse land. Take your army with you, fight the skeletons or whatever it is you prattle on about. Leave here forever, and you will have your whore and your sister.” He laughed. “I’ll even throw in my useless, traitor uncle. My gift to you. All you have to do is leave.”

“Don’t do it, Jon!” Dany screamed before Ilyn Payne slapped her cheek with a resounding crack.

“Monster!” yelled Jaime Lannister, though it turned into a coughing hack when the Mountain slammed his fist into the Kingslayer’s gut. The crowd’s furor only increased, ready to surge forward at their Emperor’s orders.

“Jon, kill him!” Sansa demanded.

An offer designed to tug on his heartstrings. Utilize his deep love for Daenerys against him, his sister against him - it would be tempting, but Jon knew Joffrey never meant what he said. Glancing over his shoulders, the giant throng of men and women that had followed him into the jaws of death simply waiting. “And what of the others?” Sad, battered faces looked back on him, hope of liberty in their eyes. “What of those in bondage.”

“The slaves?” Joffrey’s arrogant laugh returned. “They are barely even human. All the beasts of burden on this earth belong to me, and they shall work and live as I see fit.” Disgust poisoned Jon’s brain like the vilest bile, but before he could retort a blinding white filled his vision...

Glancing around him, slightly frantic, Jon was struck with a sense of deja vu. Everything around him was - for the most part - virgin earth. Green fields, snow-capped mountains, and wildlife going about their existence with nary a care about human encroachment. All that marred the landscape was a small human settlement nestled against the cliffs. One eerily familiar, but scaled rapidly down till it could fit a mere twenty thousand or so. “Is that…?” he wondered out loud.

“Yes, it is.”
Jon turned at the familiar voice. “Bran?”

His brother smiled softly, legs working and standing without the use of his magic. “Welcome Jon. My body is still within the camp outside of the city, but I had to show you something of… well, your past, so to speak.”

Parsing that statement, certain truths did come quickly to Jon. “So…” he said. “This… this is one of your greensees?” A nod from the Three Eyed Raven. “But why am I here? How is it possible that I can see?”

“You are here, Jon, because I want you to be here. To witness how history has repeated itself.” Extending his arm toward the outskirts of the city, they were greeted with something Jon was quite familiar with.

Following Bran’s finger, Jon’s eyes led him to a scene not unlike his confrontation with Joffrey. A crowd, gathered around two men. One, draped in gold and atop a massive litter. The other, draped in rags and surrounded by peasants. “What is this?”

“The Lightbringer,” Bran replied. “The North knew of the threat of the Night King, while the Southern King only laughed.” Eerily familiar indeed. “To fight the dead, Soryn Targaryen united the living.” Jon jerked his head back to Bran, mouth agape.

“A Targaryen?”

A smile crept on Bran’s face. “Yes, Jon. Destiny is intertwined quite strongly.” They both gazed on the scene, Soryn Targaryen raising a javelin. “Now, it is up to Jon Targaryen to unite the living…” The words, the throw of the spear… all echoed at the same instant that the world went white again...

Eyes opening, Jon was back in the here and now. Only an instant had passed in reality, but a greater sense of wisdom had filled the Emperor in that time. He took a calming breath, stoking the inner dragonfire within his blood. Jon knew the truth of what had to be done. It would never change. Joffrey would never stop - without an army, he was still a knife poised right over his back. Over the back of the entire realm as they fought the very specter of death itself. ‘This has to end. This all has to end.’

Turning his back to Joffrey, Jon’s voice still boomed. “Tell me Joffrey, what do you know about divine providence?”

Confused at the question, arrogance quickly allowed him to regain his composure. “I am a god upon this earth. My word is the natural law.”

“You certainly act like a god,” Jon mused aloud, walking towards his army. Eyes signaling out Ser MacKenzie of the Imperial Handcannon battalion. “Mortals like me, we have vices of the flesh. Lust, desire, sadness, fear… you apparently have none.”

Joffrey preened. “I am glad you have recognized my divinity.”

“Sire,” whispered Qyburn. “I am unsure he…”

“Shut up!” snarled the Chimera.

Glint in his eye, Jon looked at Ser MacKenzie in the eye. “Remember what we trained for.” Weeks since Dany’s capture had found Jon in a determined haze, deep in the countryside with the handcannonier training for this moment.
“Aye,” replied the captain, cogs clicking within his mind. ‘You crafty bastard, sire,’ he thought, pride in his monarch swelling within him.

“Now,” Jon whispered, knowing that the tension only increased as none else could see

MacKenzie handed something specific to Jon, a wicked grin on his face. Tucking it in his belt loop behind his back as he turned, Jon looked directly at where the Chimera’s eyes had to be. “There is one way to prove divinity.” He clasped his hands behind his back, sovereignguards starting to get edgy as even Joffrey felt a twinge of fear in his heart with the Emperor’s advance. “Gods are immortal. They cannot be hurt or injured. As I have known the sweet embrace of death, I certainly am not among the divine.”

“What the fuck is he doing?” Tyene Martell hissed to Bronn.

“Brother…” Robb began to call, trailing off as Grey Worm elbowed him, supremely confident in his Emperor.

Terror stabbed through Dany. “Jon!” Her voice nearly caught in her throat, more worried for Jon than Ilan Payne’s blade. “Get back! You’ll be killed” Jaime, lips pursed in an incredulous, uncomprehending of the Emperor’s conduct now stared in wonder - seeing Rhaegar in the flesh.

Hiding his trembling - and failing, to the sight of the prostrate masses around the Red Keep - Joffrey involuntarily stepped back. “Your reign will fall…” Frantic rage erupted. “You stand before a God, bastard! Born of the Womb of the Maiden! Get back or the Seven will strike you down!”

“Tell me one thing, Joffrey.” Halfway across the bridge, Jon slowly turned, agily drawing the weapon and holding it level with the front of his belt without it ever emerging into view of the Chimera. ‘Lord of Light,’ he quietly thought, throwing religious caution to the wind. ‘See me through the night.’ “Do you bleed?” Swiveling with a fluid speed, a piercing crack changed everything… in an instant.

Shrunken into a mere foot and a half, the ‘dwarfcannon’ fired its deadly payload with a gout of flame and smoke. Jon had practiced every day in the woods for weeks, honing his accuracy, the range of the weapon left much to be desired. It was left in the balance, providence to determine the fate of the little lead ball.

Providence kept true. Rocketing through the air like a fast crack, the projectile hit the shoulder of the Chimera with a wet slap. He pitched back, bones cracking and blood spurting out to splatter against the marble floor of the balcony. Too shocked by the events, no guard, warrior, or archer were able to move. Stunned, none dared fire upon the Emperor, focusing their attention to the man thought their god.

His retinue watched in abject horror as he collapsed to his knees, ripping at his veil. Joffrey gasped at the air in sheer terror. For the first time in years the sun hit his bare face, blood soaked veil falling to the ground as he pressed against the wound. “FUCK! FUCK!” Qyburn, shaken from his shock, ran forward and pressed a handkerchief against the wound.

Drawing Longclaw, Jon pointed at the battlements. “The God King bleeds! He is no god!”

A great cry rose from the entire host, from Lord to soldier to citizen to slave alike. A cry of freedom… a cry of certain vengeance against the supreme tyrant.

“Grevy pryjatas!”
With the surging Imperials clashing against the remaining Lannister forces, the inner courtyard of the Red Keep was filled with scrambling courtesans and fleeing councilmen, desperate to escape the bloodlust of the crowd. Most had a singular desire to escape, but some instead focused on the bloody business of vengeance.

Ser Gregor Clegane and all of the sovereignguards by her side, Cersei Lannister had the three prisoners dragged to the middle of the courtyard. “Your services won’t be needed, Ser Ilyn. I shall be dealing with them myself.”

“You condemn yourself to death, sister,” Jaime stated. “Joffrey will die. Do not make Tommen motherless as well.”

There was nothing left in Cersei but madness, and it was directed at Jaime. “You would like that, wouldn’t you. Seeing us all with a sword in our backs like you did with the Mad King.”

Hacking through the ragged line of Goldcloaks, Jon stepped onto the dias to see Cersei with his wife and sister. “Dany!” Racing towards them, he only just managed to dodge the flash of steel that passed inches from his neck.

“Hello, Snow,” Daario stated matter of factly, curved arkh in hand as he darted forward again - only now for the steel to groan as it slammed into Longclaw. “We finally meet, face to face.”

Calming his mind of the Targaryen fury that so filled him, Jon met each attack with his own parry. The sellsword was agile, but so was he, the morning’s fatigue and aching barely slowing him down. Daario could match him in a battle of maneuverability, but brute strength would overcome the day.

More Imperials stormed the courtyard, the dozens of guards around Cersei breaking off to engage them. Drawing his own massive sword, Gregor Clegane decapitated charging warriors. He had sworn to defend Joffrey and the royal family, and he would give his last breath to do so. And yet, there was one person determined to make that happen.

“Brother!” Sandor snarled, charging at the hulking form of the Mountain. “I’m home!” Gregor was by far the larger fighter and stronger warrior, but the Hound had fury and skill on his side as their blades collided. But there was no chance Sandor could burst through the thick slab of meat he shared blood and name with… leaving the women Jaime Lannister at his sister’s mercy.

Drawing the crossbow back, savoring the click click click of each gear, Cersei stalked the three prisoners tied up before her. “Dearest brother. Would you rather die last, or die before watching your precious Rhaegar Targaryen’s son lose his wife and his sister in an instant?”

Red with anger, Jaime spat at his sister. Much as it hurt him, his sister had turned into the same kind of monster their child was.

“Very well, so be it.” Grinning maliciously - the spitting image of Joffrey - Cersei placed the bolt in the chamber and raised it at Sansa. “Let’s start with the great beauty of Winterfell. Do say hello to your father for me.” Her finger brushed on the trigger.

“No!” Cersei toppled to the ground as Dontos Hollard knocked her off her feet. The crossbow clattered to the ground beside her, and the knight turned fool dashed to Sansa’s side. A quick swing of the blade he carried - Saracen, stolen from Joffrey’s chambers - several times in succession cut the ropes binding the prisoners together.

Cersei, however, had recovered. “Guards!” They rushed forward, ready to kill in one last act of loyalty to their King. Dany grabbed Saracen from Hollard’s hand, pushing Sansa to the side as the
Valyrian steel sliced off the head of a halberd. She rammed it through a chink in the chain mail, blood spurting as she drew it back and prepared to face the next threat.

‘Balerion,’ Dany commanded. ‘Come.’

Headbutting his brother square in the face, Sandor watched as he staggered a bit but recovered, more enraged than before. “I should have burned your entire head!” he snarled, charging with blade up.

The Hound batted it aside with his sword, the blow to the head having done more damage than he thought. “Fuck you!” he hissed, slicing across his brother’s chest. The wound was shallow, but send the Mountain to the ground. Before he could finally finish the job, Beric Dondarrion grabbed Gregor’s fallen sword and slammed the hilt into his head, knocking him unconscious.

“Finishing what Ned Stark sent me to do,” the lord offered by way of explanation.

“Taking all the fun out of this, huh?”

No slouch himself, Daario nevertheless was struggling to keep up with the Emperor. His agility was superb, but Jon was indefatigable, matching blow for blow and growing stronger by the minute. Once advancing, Daario now gave ground to relentless attacks as the initiative shifted. “You are not worthy for her, bastard!” he growled.

“Aye, I’m not,” Jon replied, knocking Daario’s arkh down and spinning in a furious roundhouse kick. His boot hit Daario in the breastbone, the sellsword staggering. “I don’t deserve her, but I would die for her nonetheless.” At one final lunge from his opponent, Jon sidestepped it and took advantage of Daario’s outstretched hand… a hand that in one instant was sliced off, clattering to the floor with his blade. Daario cried out in pain. “That is for Arya.” Another swipe of Valyrian steel sliced through a leg. Daario collapsed. “That is for Sansa. And this… is for Dany!” In a swing that would make an executioner proud, a drop of blood fell from Longclaw, Daario’s head falling atop the ground.

Daenerys had used her short stature to an advantage, able to slide around wide swings and slash at legs with impunity. Four corpses ringed her, but she grew tired. Robb, charging with the piercing wolf howl that so terrified the Lannister infantry at the Whispering Wood, killed Boros Blount but was blocked by the suicidal stalwartness of Preston Greenfield. He would dispatch the crazed knight, but too late to save Dany.

Bringing Saracen up, Dany just managed to deflect a blow from Ilyn Payne when a oar blasted through the courtyard. Black wings beating up a storm, Balerion - the Dread Reborn - gripped the red brick with his claws. Hooting, his jaws clamped down on Goldcloak and sovereignguard alike, breaking them for good as many fled, or surrendered to the charging Imperials.

“SER ILYN!” Cersei shrieked. “KILL HER NOW!”

Wordlessly, the royal executioner raised his blade to do to Dany what he had done to her father-in-law… but the only blade that would shed blood here was that of the Kingslayer, embedding in the executioner’s gut.

Furious, Cersei dove for the crossbow upon the floor, but a blow from Jaime’s metal arm sent her to the ground. She had just picked herself up as her brother picked up the crossbow. They stared at each other. “Don’t make me do it, Cersei,” Jaime pleaded, one last time. “Please just give in.”

Her eyes were hard, expression fierce. “Funny, I always thought Tyrion was the volanquir. Not you.” But Jaime was her younger brother, by thirty minutes. “Do it.”
The bolt slammed into her heart, organ’s beating further tearing itself apart on the iron point, spilling blood all around in violent spurts. In the last seconds of consciousness, Cersei stared at her murderer… mouth and eyes both registering their shock and grief. As the blackness descended upon her, Jaime let the crossbow fall from his hands. Tears running down his cheeks.

Fatigue from the entire day slowly descending on him, Jon looked out over the entire inner courtyard. At the corpses and bloody forms of those survivors. “Jon!” He barely blinked before Sansa embraced him, holding him tight.

“Are you alright, sister?”

“Yes.” She looked behind her, where Daenerys pulled away from Balerion, staring directly at Jon. Sansa broke the embrace. “Go to your wife, brother.”

Not the Night King himself could have stopped Jon from sweeping Dany into his arms. Covered in blood as he was, as he had at the Battle of the Bastards he didn’t care. Burying his face in the crook of her neck, listening to her cries of joy, he finally felt at home. Finally felt complete. Pulling back, he gazed in your eyes. “The baby?”

“He or she is still kicking,” she replied, her fear and pain evaporating in his arms. She kissed him. “Thank the Gods you are alright.”

He set her down, clutching her hands in his. “I can say the same for you.” Once again, he embraced her. “And now it is over.”

“No.” Both turned to Sansa, pain and hate in her eyes. “Joffrey still lives.”

Blood seeping through his fingers, Joffrey hobbled as fast as he could through the hallways of his castle. The crimson liquid dripped onto the marble and travertine tiles, leaving a trail behind him. All around him, the high vaulting echoed with the clopping of his boots. Images on frescos, mosaics, and stained glass - images of past Kings, warriors, and heroes - seemed to stare at him. Stern, joyless faces filled with rage at the sad, pathetic little monster that had perverted their kingdom. From the bright sunlight, they seemed to glow.

It was all too much. Whispers of hate and doubt overwhelmed his senses, spurring his madness till Joffrey didn’t know where the false pain ended and the real pain began. “Shut up! Shut up all of you!” Joffrey yelled at the statues, at the paintings, trying desperately to find his way to the royal dock. ‘I shall go to Braavos,’ he thought, obtain sanctuary from the Iron Bank. In their past dealings, he was sure that they would support his proper claim against the Stark Bastard.

A roar nearly made him jump out of his skin. The Red Keep rocked from the booming of the dragons, overwhelming the sounds of steel and shot that echoed through the cavernous halls. Joffrey ran faster, putting as much distance between him and the oncoming imperial horde. The entire edifice of his godhead was collapsing around him. He refused to believe it though.

“QYBURN!” He screamed, calling for his advisors and confidants. “SER GREGOR! NAHARIS!” No response. Handcannon fire crackled in the distance. Tears streaming down his cheeks from pain and frustration, he shrieked at the top of his lungs for everyone under the sun. “BAELISH! MOTHER! UNCLE! GRANDFATHER!”

But no one was coming. Not even the most lowly servant. He was alone. Dreadfully alone, no one behind him as he would face the dragon and the wolf. The vision of Ned Stark, blood seeping from
his neck and eyes blue as ice, followed him. “Shut up!” he screamed, gritting his teeth and closing his eyes.

“One god she crowns, one god destroyed.” Jon Snow. Jon Targaryen. Azor Ahai. The Lord of Light reborn. Years of running from the visions, years of building the greatest Empire in history, ended by a petite, fair queen and an unassuming, humble warrior. With the Dragon Queen as his messenger, Jon Snow had destroyed everything.

Truly Ned Stark’s revenge.

Stepping onto the battlements overlooking Blackwater Bay, another soul came into sight. “You, girl!” It was one of his blind servants, staring aimlessly at the placid waters of the bay as if she could actually see. The castle shook again, various human screams followed by a piercing shriek. “Get over here cunt, and help your King!”

The nameless girl, no one essentially, did not respond. One of the many who would scurry about like frightened mice if he so sneezed… simply did nothing.

Fueled by the pain in his shoulder, and the greater anguish of his Empire collapsing, Joffrey snarled and lunged forward to the girl. “I SAID, CUNT. GET OVER HERE AND…”

Joffrey’s high-pitched screaming was suddenly cut short. He suddenly felt short of breath, as if all the wind was knocked out of him. There was no pain, as if punched, but there was some sort of force pressing onto his stomach - an invisible hand, almost. Struggling to wheeze in air, the Chimera’s eyes drifted from the girl to his abdomen. There was the culprit. A sword… almost thin as a sewing needle, tip buried in his gut. No pain, but even a cloistered, spoiled highborn as Joffrey knew that there would be pain. Far worse pain than any other wound.

Looking back at the servant, the blind eyes seemed to sparkle, lips below curved into a wolfish smile. Predatory even. With expert movements, she pushed into his gut, sending out the first tendrils of pain - ones foretelling even greater pain as the seconds ticked by. Slowly, the girl guided him towards the battlements. Till his back pressed against the stone.

“Who…” he choked out, struggling to take in breaths. “Who are you…?”

The smile seemed to grow more sinister, more predatory. Slowly, the hand not gripping the hilt of the sword reached inside her shift and pulled out a pendent. Centered around a brilliant, large stone that glowed red with power. The red of the hair of the witch, the one who had obtained Joffrey power and yet began the spiral of doom. Fingers brushing over the stone, the girl’s features morphed before him into the real face of death.

“No.” Joffrey gaped like a fish, the pain starting to become unbearable. “It can’t be…”

Arya smirked darkly. “Oh, but it is, Joffrey.”

“You’re dead. You were killed…” The moment of triumph, when Naharis had brought her to him… replaced with exactly the scene from the river at Moat Cailin. Where the wisp of a girl had disarmed him, holding his life in her hands. She laughed, digging the tip of the sword deeper in his gut, reveling in his gasp of pain.

A shadow draped over them, gust of air billowing as a grey demon slammed into the ground. Joffrey screamed, the monstrous form of one of the Dragon Empress’ children roaring from the same beachhead where he watched his uncle’s fleet burn. Only the face of the great dragon dwarfed any number of ships in sheer terror and majesty.
“You were the first person, you know.” Arya enjoyed this, the moment that she had so long sought. That consumed her soul. “No matter how many crossed me. How many tried to wipe out my family and all others that I loved… you were always first on my list.”

The dragon was whipped into a frenzy, snarling and clawing at the high seaside walls. Leaping on hind legs, its jaw took a chunk out of the battlements. No protection was left against it except the height of the wall and its own sense of sadistic fun at the cat and mouse game. Arya, though, was a deathly calm. Joffrey didn’t know who was more terrifying.

Gaze drawn to the dragon, Arya threw her head back in a barking laugh. This was the scene that Jon came across as he turned the corner, sword in hand. His shock was replicated by Robb, Sansa, and Daenerys. Grey Worm was unresponsive, while Clegane snorted. “Of course she gets to the fucker first,” he muttered.

Working off the last of the laughs, Arya grinned evilly. “Fitting, isn’t it, Joffrey?” She reveled in his pained confusion. “You chose to kill Eddard Stark, a man you aren’t fit to lick his boots. Now, his daughter has a sword in your belly. And Edderon, the dragon my sister named in his honor, stands poised to devour you.” As if on cue, Edderon roared, jaw bared open in utter fury. Daenerys had never seen her child this enraged.

Teeth clenched, hands gripping the blade as Arya pushed him closer and closer to the edge, Joffrey stared Arya in the eye. “Please…” he wheezed. “Mercy.”

“Mercy? HA!” Arya was incredulous. “You deserve no mercy.” She enjoyed the panic and suffering over his face. Her longtime dream had finally come true. “Enjoy it, Joffrey. Knowing the last face you will see is a Stark smiling over you.” And with a jerk of her arm, Needle withdrew from his gut… leaving Joffrey nothing else to maintain his balance. Arya - and her family - watched as the Chimera toppled from the battlements toward the waiting beast below.

Cry leaving his throat, utter agony stabbed through his legs as Edderon snapped his massive maw over them. Actual dragonfire boiling through his blood, the dragon burned with the desire for vengeance for his namesake, jerking his neck upward and sending Joffrey flying into the air. Cries turned to primal screams as Edderon let out a burst of dragonfire that engulfed him. The burning husk of a man plummeted toward the ground, still screaming at the dragonfire searing him in complete and total inferno. A scream that only cut short at the resounding snap of Edderon’s maw.

The Divine Chimera, first of his name, was no more.

Peeking over the parapet, witnessing the final moments of Joffrey, the Vicious Idiot King, Jon allowed himself a moment of satisfaction. Of triumph over vanquishing his father’s killer, bringing him to justice after so long. “Burn in hells, motherfucker,” he heard Robb mutter, thoroughly agreeing with him. Sansas lips were pressed together, face both quiet and yet exuding victory. He looked at Dany, the Mother of Dragons smiling regally. All understood this very moment. The gravity of it.

Lastly, Jon looked at his sister. Arya was panting, clutching her stomach as the gravity of what she had done fell upon her. His most beloved sibling, one he hadn’t seen since leaving for Essos in what seemed like a lifetime ago. A girl who had saved his beloved, endured the slave pens of King’s Landing, and infiltrated deep into Joffrey’s palace. It was as if the Stark pack was destined for greatness…

Breathing deeply, Arya felt drained. Her list, finally purged of the top name. The name always muttered first while she drifted to sleep, finally crossed off. It was… surreal. At long last, she looked at her family… her beloved brother. “It is done, isn’t it?”
Jon nodded. “Aye, it is.” A mere moment passed before Arya ran into her brother’s arms.

Booming over the city, the horn that announced the late King Joffrey’s presence was heard from the highest point of the Red Keep to the lowest piss-stained alcove of Flea Bottom. Only now, it was coupled with the ear-splitting roar of six dragons. Maws gaping, spittle flying every which way as they delivered their intimidating bellows upon the city. All fighting stopped. All looting stopped. What few Lannister loyalists remaining and the attacking Imperials and revolutionaries lowered their weapons. Something miraculous was about to happen. It was in the air.

Out of the balcony - the same balcony where the Divine Chimera had so been humbled, his blood still staining the sandstone floor - two figures emerged. Others flanked them, but all that could be paid attention too were the two. The Imperial couple. Jon Snow, his tunic and hair matted with blood. Daenerys Targaryen, silver locks sparkling in the sun. Hands clasped together in unity, there was no doubt as to what had transpired after the Emperor had disappeared inside the keep.

As to what had transpired at the hungry growl of the dragon.

A supreme silence had descended over the capitol city, broken only by the errant trumpeting of a loose mammoth, enjoying their newfound freedom. It was in this that Daenerys cleared her throat. “People of King’s Landing! People of the Realm!” She looked at Jon, as if seeking permission. He merely nodded, thumb ghosting lovingly over her scarred hand, as if no permission was necessary. “Joffrey the Mad. Joffrey the Usurper. Joffrey the Vicious Idiot is dead! His life given so that the Realm may live!

“It is over!” She continued. “The war between us is over! There is no further butcher to follow, no further madman to fight for out of fear for your lives and your families. Now is the time that the conqueror would ask for all of you to bend the knee… but I will not ask that of you!” She looked back at her family, at her Emperor. “I always believed that I was born to rule the Seven Kingdoms. My husband, the Emperor, always had the blood to rule the Seven Kingdoms. Through the fires of war and the light of freedom we have bled and toiled, we have labored and sweated. We forged this Empire, but not for us. For you, every one of you.” She swallowed, taking a deep breath. “A realm in which there is no wheel, but only one people united for survival against death itself.

“Long before, in Astapor, I told my Unsullied warriors what I will tell you now. You have been slaves all your life, slaves to the whims of those that considered themselves your betters. Slaves to tyrants. Slaves to gluttons. Slaves to monsters in human form. Today I give you freedom!” She stepped back to Jon, took his hand in his, and raised it high in the air. “We give you freedom! I ask you to follow us, though we will not force you. Will you fight, fight with your Emperor and your Empress as we journey into the maws of death itself? Will you fight, as free men?!”

The silence continued, louder than any horn or roar or explosion. No one moved, only the wind piercing the din as it blowed gently from the ocean.

It was then broken by one man. A man that had been through it all, through a journey of discovery and struggle, adversity and wisdom spanning decades and four different monarchs. Hated by most, respected by some, known by all, the whole realm took notice as Ser Jaime Lannister slapped his clenched fist against his tunic… and bent the knee.

Ser Jorah Mormont, fatherly pride all over his face, bent the knee. Harry Strickland, retaking his oath from the plains of Highgarden, bent the knee.
Petyr Baelish, smile stretched out and meeting the gaze of Sansa Stark, bowed gracefully and bent the knee.

Ser Bronn of the Blackwater and Tyene Martell, standing together as lovers brought together by war, bent the knee.

One by one, individually or in a massive wave, the entire throng of people - soldier, citizen, and slave alike, be they followers of Lannister or Targaryen - fell to their knees not as slaves, not as subjects, but as free men willingly pledging themselves to their monarchs.

Striding forward, chest beaming with pride, Sansa Stark - the Red Wolf - grabbed her sister’s hand. “Gods save the Empress Daenerys!”

With the same awe, the same inspiration that led him to pledge to Daenerys at the Plaza of Astapor, Grey Worm took Jon’s other hand and raised it in the air as well. “Gods save Emperor Jon!”

And the cheer broke out in the capitol. Wracked with war, with slavery and broken lives, light had finally descended to banish the darkness.

“GODS SAVE THE EMPEROR!

“GODS SAVE THE EMPRESS!”

“GODS SAVE THE EMPEROR!”

“GODS SAVE THE EMPRESS!”

And the call of the revolution… of the Empire itself. “PRYJAGON SE GREVY!”

From the farmhouse outside the city, Bran Stark smiled. History had been repeated, a realm united in the face of death. Emotion cracked through to the exterior of the Three Eyed Raven - Jon, his brother, had risen from nothing to take his place in the sun. Daenerys, his sister by law, had risen from literal slavery at the hands of her brother to reclaim her birthright. They truly were the Promised.

Suddenly, Bran nearly doubled over in pain. His hand, it burned a cold fire… the mark upon it searing itself as it had in the cave of the Children of the Forest. He knew exactly what it meant… before the pain even subsided he knew.

Regardless of Joffrey’s defeat, regardless of whatever nation or house ruled over the living, it would not stop the Long Knight. The Night King was coming, and only Jon and Daenerys that could stop him.
Chapter Notes

WOW. JUST... WOW. ARYA, YOU MAGNIFICENT... FIRST, YOU KILL JOFFREY, AND NOW YOU KILL THE NIGHT KING... I HAVE NO WORDS EXCEPT... YOU GO GIRL!

That out of the way, I have mixed feelings about the episode. Jon, Dany, and everyone fighting did awesome, but the tactics just f-ing sucked. I mean... they needed far better defenses and a sense not to waste most of their troops to death. Also, I think Jon deserved to have a fight with the Night King, though Arya doing the deed was awesome.

In any case, I have the Long Night plotline all thought out, and trust me, it will both have the best of season 8 and will be unique :)

For now at least, I think Jon and Dany have earned some R&R, along with the rest of the pack. There will be time jumps between the chapters, so bear with me.

Enjoy and review! If I can get fifteen comments, I'll update tomorrow. Same rules :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tranquility. It was… alien to Daenerys. Not being chased, not being hunted, not having all that stood between her and an executioner's blade was her army and her dragons.

Now, none of that mattered. She was now Empress of all she surveyed.

Even in the dark of night, King's Landing never slept. Hands splayed out on the balcony, Dany leaned on it as she watched the hustle and bustle of the massive metropolis. The celebration had been a going concern since almost right after Joffrey's death, renewed food shipments driving what would likely be a week-long thanksgiving to the Targaryen Restoration.

'My subjects… my people.' They had actually done it. They had won.

Dany sighed as two strong arms wrapped around her waist. "Galleon for your thoughts, my dragon?" Jon whispered, dropping a feather-light kiss to her neck.

Not replying immediately, Dany nevertheless pressed back into his chest. Enjoying his spicy scent - one that would always be her refuge in the storms that chased her existence since her very birth. "We really have won, haven't we?"

Jon kissed her temple, hiding his frown. There still was the Night King, lurking in the north and ready to sweep down in a malevolent quest to extinguish all life - but there was no need to dwell on it at the moment. "Aye, we have." Joffrey was dead, the realm united. Truth be told, unifying Westeros was a coup in the fight for the dawn. He tightened his hold on her. "We won, Dany."

How he whispered her name - in his low northern brogue - it always made Dany shiver. "I just can't believe it, Jon." In the distance, captured Lannister rockets exploded in the air, fired in celebration by the citizens, freed slaves, and Imperial soldiers.
"Believe it." Turning her around, Jon made sure he was staring directly into her amethyst eyes. Eyes he had fallen in love with since that first meeting so many years before in Pentos. She immediately melded into the kiss, the Imperial couple sharing an intimate moment so long postponed. He beamed, allowing himself the joy of the moment. "We avenged our family," Jon finally whispered, foreheads touching. "Now we can set things to rights."

Daenerys kissed him again. "Gods, I love you." He smiled even wider. Dany loved his smiles. She never knew how she survived without him. "I am his, my Emperor."

"And she is mine, my Empress." His hands trailed up and down her sides. "I have some news." A moment of worry crossed her eyes. "No, it's good news. I am now an uncle, and you an aunt."

It took a mere second for Dany to put it together. Her eyes sparkled with joy. "Margaery?"

"She's headed to King's Landing now with Jon Stark, the healthy heir to Winterfell."

"Named his son after you?" Ecstatic for her brother and sister, and for the pack to add its newest member, she couldn't wait for the twins to arrive from Winterfell, where their uncle Rickon was tending them. Dany cupped his cheek - stubble growing once more. "The name you so desired."

He leaned into her palm. "I've gotten used to it, but… it still overwhelms me sometimes." An image of Ned Stark, and then Rhaegar and Lyanna, flashed in his mind. "I am of Rhaegar's seed. I am a Targaryen, but Ned Stark… I still see him as my father. I'm… a Stark too."

"You are a Stark. As much a wolf as a dragon." She pushed onto her tiptoes. "My wolf." The kiss resumed. The tender moment quickly morphed into one of passion, hunger for each other returning after a prolonged absence.

They fought for dominance in the kiss, Jon finding the fiery little dragon pushing him from the balcony into the interior of their chambers. "Dany," he husked, thoughts in a lust-filled haze as Dany broke their kiss and attacked his neck. "I missed this…"

Dany moaned as she soothed the love bite she had left on his shoulder with her tongue. "Fuck, I did too." Her fingers began to yank at the straps of his cuirass. "Take me to bed, now." A tone that left no room for delay. Jon growling and lifting her, hands on her ass, Dany slammed their lips back together.

Servants, delighted at the regime change, had worked up a storm in purging any trace of Joffrey and his madness from the various chambers. His basement inner sanctum was abandoned as a dank hellshole, the Imperial couple instead snagging Cersei's old chamber - which in and of itself was the previous chamber of the King. The Queen had her own titular chamber, but Dany insisted Sansa have it. She would never sleep in a different room than Jon, and knew her Emperor felt the same. Lannister reds and golds had been tossed for Targaryen Black and Red and Stark grey, new sheets, blankets, and furs thrown onto the bed. 'Good,' thought Daenerys just as Jon tossed her onto them.

"Gods." Jon drank in his gorgeous wife. If they had been the smallest of smallfolk, he still would have felt the luckiest man in existence by having such a woman. "I love it when you wear those dresses."

King's Landing still quite warm, Essosi trade winds blowing heat from the continent straight into the capitol, Dany took advantage and wore one of her Meereenese dresses - one that covered her body with nothing else underneath. She blinked innocently at him. "Oh, why is that, your Majesty?"

Suddenly he jumped on her, plundering her mouth. They clutched frantically at each other. Hands went for places long since memorized, coaxing out moans and grunts of pleasure they so desperately
wanted to hear. Jon's hands flew to her hair, pulling it out of her simple braid till it was wonderfully free.

The Empress took advantage of his preoccupation. Jon soon found himself flat on his back, shimmering silver-blonde locks swaying as she straddled him. "Goddess. You are a goddess." While the Dany he had met in Pentos would have blushed, this Dany smirked saucily, rolling her hips into his crotch. He gazed up at her, her eyes a stormy violet. Dany finally divested him of his shirt, placing gentle kisses on every inch of his exposed skin.

Feeling his erection harden at her hungry gaze, Dany smirked again and pulled at the hem of her dress. Soon she was completely bare, and such provoked a pure wolfish growl from Jon, Dany yelping as he yanked her down and took a nipple in his mouth. She had no complaint – her moans grew louder, clawing at his pants.

Expecting him to ravish her body, Dany was let down when he climbed off her… only to feel a fresh gush of wetness when he manhandled her to her hands and knees. "Gods, Jon, yes." Her eyes rolled in the back of her skull, sensing Jon's perfect tongue lapping at her from behind. "You are so good at that." He could always perform the Lord's Kiss perfectly, but she wanted more. So much more. "Fuck me, Jon," she commanded, glancing over her shoulder. He looked so delicious, hair let down in flowing curls. "Inside me, now."

Aroused to the point of pain, Jon would be an idiot to refuse. "As you command, your Highness." Grabbing his member, he positioned it below her entrance and thrust upward. He gritted his teeth at the amazing tightness around him. At how she pushed back wantonly to take him all in. He thrust hard, setting a bruising rhythm that Jon knew his dragon could take. They got lost in their pleasure, bedchamber filled with sounds of passion so long absent.

Suddenly, Dany's eyes – now a shade so dark that it was indistinguishable from black – flew open as she shattered around his length. Letting out a half-moan, half-scream, the Empress bucked her hips and undulated her inner walls. Dany buried her head in the pillow, muffling her scream. In the distance, Balerion let out a booming roar that shook the very city. A grunted "Dany" behind her was followed by Jon's climax - and a twin roar from Rhaegal - filling her with his seed. She shook with a mini-orgasm, collapsing from sheer exhaustion onto the bed.

Jon, legs shaking, pulled out - to a sad moan from Dany - and fell beside her. A quick rearrangement found them under the furs, Dany pulled close against his chest. "I almost lost you, Dany," he murmured, holding her tighter.

"You didn't, my love." She replied, snuggling back into him. A certain feeling caused her eyes to widen. "Jon," Dany said excitedly, guiding his hand to her belly. "Feel that."

Peering into the darkness, Jon smiled widely as he recognized it. "Is that our baby?"

"It is." Daenerys was ecstatic that he could now experience it with her. She turned in his arms. "I love you, Jon."

Fatigue overcoming him, he kissed her head and let the comfort her embrace gave overcome him. "Love you too, Dany."

A soft tune left Dany's lips. Spending a spare moment brushing her silky hair, she hummed a Valyrian lullaby, one her brother used to sing to her before the madness gripped him. She loved being at Winterfell. Sharing the same familial warmth that her family had had here all those years.
The smile stretched over her face as she felt the wonderful presence of a certain Stark. Dany could sense him out anywhere. A gloved hand, dark grey cloak draping over her, soft lips kissing her head. She stood, his arms pulling her up. "Dany..." he whispered, voice low with desire.

Enjoying the feel of the soft, dark curls of her handsome northerner, Dany turned in his arms. Ready to kiss him. But instead of the loving face of her Jon, staring at her was the frigid glare of a demon. Blue eyes cold as snow, lips set in a malevolent frown, a crown of ice rested atop his head. Fear coursed through her.

The Night King grabbed her wrists, pulling her to him. Immune to fire, Daenerys still screamed as his freezing touch burned into her skin...

Jerking upright, covers falling off, Dany felt drenched with a sheen of sweat. Head swiveling all around the chambers, she could find no sign of the blizzard. No howling winds. No blinding snowfall. Nothing but Jon's shallow breathing as he slept.

"A dream..." she murmured, resting her hand on her breastbone. Calming the tempest within her chest. "Just a nightmare." But a nightmare so vivid. Could they be her future? A sign? A forewarning from the gods?

The baby started to kick up a storm, grounding her in the real world. Her son or daughter wasn't the only Stark to make their presence known. "Dany." Jon's eyes fluttered open, voice groggy with sleep as he looked up at his wife's fair profile in the moonlight. "What's wrong?"

Jon's touch spread vital warmth back into her. "When the time comes, Jon. Kill him." She held him close, burying her face in his neck. "Kill the Night King." His heartbeat soothed her.

Feeling her gentle breathing against his skin, Jon prayed her fear and apprehension would cease. "I promise."

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Unsullied guards snapped to attention as Jon and Dany breezed into the small council chamber. The now open blinds shone sunlight upon the Stark and Targaryen Banners hung on the walls, replacing various gaudy decorations depicting Joffrey's 'military prowess.' All in all, in Tyrion's mind, the decor had improved greatly.

Daenerys beamed as she approached the woman sitting across from her seat. "Margaery, dearest sister." The raven-haired woman stood, Dany embracing her. "I am glad you are looking well after childbirth." Her experience did not go as well.

"I am thankful, Daenerys," Margaery replied. "My grandmother says hardiness in childbirth is a hallmark of the family - as are healthy boys."

"Which you now have one of," Jon boasted, grabbing Robb's hand and clasping his back. "Congratulations, Robb. A handsome Stark pup." The Warden of the North returned the brotherly embrace. "Afterwards. I would like to see my nephew."

"Wouldn't try to deny you that right, your Majesty," Margaery replied, bowing. A small smirk danced on her lips, causing all the Starks to laugh. Happy moment passed, and the monarchs taking their seats at the head of the table.

"Good," Tyrion announced. "Now we may begin. The remaining Lannister liege Lords have sworn
fealty to House Targaryen...

However, a raised hand cut him off. "Forgive me, Lord Tyrion, but we are missing one participant." Sansa turned her head to Jon, sitting directly to her left. "He will be here shortly."

Jon's brows furrowed. "Sister, who is left to seat…"

The door opened, Grey Worm entering. He he bowed at Jon. "Your Majesty. A Lord Petyr Baelish has requested entry."

"That is good, Grey Worm," Sansa spoke up. "Let him in."

For those that knew Ser Petyr Baelish, the small smile on his face was his trademark. Woven gambeson of gold-colored silk draped over his slender form, moustache and goatee trimmed to perfection. "Your Majesty, your Highness," he bowed, arms extending with a fawning humility. "Forgive me for my tardiness. Your Unsullied guards are not well-versed in the common tongue."

"It is quite alright, Lord Baelish," Sansa replied. "They are only temporary while we wait for new Kingsguards to be selected."

"I'm sorry," Robb began, speaking up. "What is he doing here?"

"I am inclined to ask the same question, Lady Sansa." Daenerys leaned forward to see her sister. Jon merely kept his mouth shut, content with observing.

Clasping her hands together, Sansa softly inhaled. "I asked Lord Baelish to be here. As Hand to His Majesty, I am exercising my authority to name him to the Small Council."

Tyrion blinked. "Has Davos concurred with this, for you are merely Hand in the North?"

"Ser Davos has been appointed Quartermaster of the Empire," Jon finally replied, having given both Littlefinger and his sister the once over. "Sansa is my Hand for all of my domains, and I trust her judgement. If she feels Lord Baelish should be on the Council, then he will be."

"Are you kidding me?" Arya was incredulous. "This man was one of Joffrey's main allies!" And on her list.

"While secretly feeding me information from their war councils," Sansa retorted, Littlefinger taking his seat across from her. "It was his order that sent the Knights of the Vale to Winterfell, and he who opened the Lion Gate for our armies."

"I must protest, your Majesty," Tyrion said. "It would be wise not to trust Lord Baelish till he has proven himself…"

Quiet till now, Littlefinger leaned forward. "Pardon me, Tyrion. May I ask where your brother, the Kingslayer, resides?"

Tyrion stared at Littlefinger with pursed lips. "He is being held in the dungeon, awaiting determination of his loyalty. Which is where you should…"

"Does a stay in the dungeon normally involve or a feather bed and silk sheets? My late Lady Wife did inform me that even Lannister prisoners aren't accorded such luxuries normally." Tyrion glowered, eyes dark. "See, it seems you have prejudged your brother's loyalty from your own intuition. Why discount Lady Sansa's?"
There was silence. "Tyrion, please proceed," Jon stated, ending it. Questioning eyes were directed at Littlefinger - except for Arya, who narrowed her gaze at Sansa. "Now, about the Long Night."

The absence of General Caryn, most of the Lords, Lady Catelyn, and Quartermaster Davos was acutely felt. Defeating Joffrey, while ending the bloodshed, left the Targaryen Empire bloated and chaotic. Bad roads, bad weather, and an impending refugee crisis, would only hamper the movement of the disorganized Imperial Army to Winterfell. White Harbor would help… some. That, and what to do about the freed slaves of King's Landing, consumed most of the discussion for nearly an hour.

Jon, finally, came to a decision. "Lord Beric has informed me that the Brotherhood is willing to reinforce the Night's Watch. I have decided to accept, and after discussions with my wife and Lady Missandei, will allow freed Essosi slaves to join them."

"They have just been freed…" Varys began.

"And are supremely loyal their Emperor for freeing them." Littlefinger said. "Let them build new lives here by fighting for their new land." Neither monarch objections, so let it stand.

"Their Majesties have informed me that they have come to a decision on various appointments." Sansa scanned over a sheaf of parchments.

Dany nodded. "Aye. Lord Varys will resume his position as Master of Whisperers." The bald eunuch bowed, respectfully at the honor. "Ser Jorah Mormont will be Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, and I am appointing Lady Yara Greyjoy as Master of Ships. She and the Ironborn fleet will oversee the arrival of foodstuffs from Essos, as well as new recruits as both reinforcements and laborers for road building, smelting, and mining efforts."

"Shouldn't they all be soldiers, given the threat of the dead?" Arya asked.

"Logistics win wars, sister," Robb answered. "We need good roads."

Nodding, Jon continued. "I have decided to appoint Yezzan zo Qaggaz as master of coin."

Tyrion furrowed his brows. "Isn't his loyalty suspect?"

"He fought bravely at Highgarden," Jon replied. "He is someone with whom the Iron Bank could deal amiably with."

It still made some uneasy, Dany being one of them. "Although I do trust you, your Majesty, may I inquire the Lady Missandei's opinion."

"You may." He didn't take offense.

All eyes turned to the Empress' handmaiden. "I have spoken to Lord Qaggaz, your Highness. While he is a former slaver, I believe his loyalty has shifted. As a freedwoman, I do not make this statement lightly. We have all suffered enough."

"That is set for tomorrow," replied Varys, normally stolid voice tinged with respect. Barristan the Bold's reputation was high among all. "Cremation and interment of the ashes into the wall of heroes."
Jon, to his credit, didn't allow it to overwhelm him. "If that will be all, then this meeting can be concluded. All further matters may be discussed with Lord Tyrion or Lady Sansa."

With a succession of bows - including a rather glowing smile of loyalty from Littlefinger - the council shuffled out. "Better than expected," Dany whispered to him.

"Aye. No news from Edd, so that gives us time. I hesitate to estimate how much, but time." Jon put his hands on Dany's growing stomach, heart warming at feeling his child move around.

"Jon?" He looked up from his chair to see Arya, biting her lip. 'Nervous?' he wondered. Arya was never nervous - not once since their reunion had she been anything other than angry, determined, or happy. "May we speak to you two?" He noticed Gendry behind his sister. He was just as nervous.

He and Dany shared a quick glance. She was thinking exactly what he was - but formalities were formalities. "Of course," Jon allowed. "Anything for my sister and the Lord Paramount of the Stormlands." Shireen Baratheon had about as equal a claim, but there was no doubt that Gendry had earned his lordship on the field of battle.

Seconds ticked by, Gendry quiet while Arya repeatedly opened her mouth to speak, only to retreat soon after. "Well?" While it was amusing to see the great Arya Stark so tongue tied, Dany took pity on her. "This doesn't have to be politic, sister. Just spit it out," she chided gently.

"We would like for our wedding to happen tomorrow." Surprisingly, it was Gendry who blurted it out, not Arya. Jon and Daenerys hid their amusement, while the bride to be just glared at him. "It's something that has to be said, Arry, and I'm saying it."

"Before even the coronation?" Jon asked. "I mean, you already have my blessing, Arya. But I remember you telling me, and I quote, 'It's just a dumb ceremony. What's the… damn point between now and later?'" He cleaned up the language. "What changed?"

Arya looked at Gendry, who covered her hand with his. She sighed. "I still think it's a dumb ceremony. But as a Lord, Gendry will need heirs and I'm not letting some Fat Usurper oaf clone take Storm's End…" Fists clenching, she willed herself to calm down. "Plus… I guess that…"

"You truly want to get married." She truly was still a girl at heart. Daenerys could tell - same as all women of Houses Stark and Targaryen. Passionate, all of them.

Faced with the truth, Arya's facade broke down. "Aye. I want to be married... to the idiot here." Gendry merely grinned, a grin shared by the Emperor. Knowing Arya, that was a supreme compliment. "So… I know the King's Landing weirwood is probably in all states of fucked, but…"

"If you're asking me to give you away in father's stead," Jon interrupted, "The answer is yes."

So radically did his sister's demeanor change. Leaping out of the chair, she threw her arms around Jon. "Thank you. Thank you." Part of her hated being so… girly, but she allowed herself to indulge. "I'm still not wearing any stupid dress."

"I don't think anyone would ask that of you."
What is Littlefinger planning, and why is Sansa condoning it? Nothing good follows that man.

Lot of reviewers wanted some hot moments between our monarchs. Was always planning on it, but I hope I didn’t disappoint :D

Now the Night King is poisoning Dany's dreams? Hmmm...

Next time, the Kingslayer meets the Dragons ;)

Daenerys woke to a beam of sunlight shining right in her eyes. Quickly banishing all notions of going back to sleep, she soon noticed the presence of her husband - his arms wrapped her snugly, her front flush against his. Breath hot on her neck. Even in his sleep Jon couldn't bear to let her go. Not that Dany minded anyhow.

Gazing upon him, strong jaw relaxed in sleep and muscled chest rising and falling, a sudden, overwhelming hunger overcame Dany. The baby growing inside her drove her arousal to new heights, something unfamiliar but oh so good now that Jon was close by her side. All other thoughts were cast aside as she forcefully gripped his shoulders and sucked on his neck.

Jon's eyes flew open, only to close as he groaned. "Gods, Dany." He felt a soft hand wrap around his length, bucking his hips into her grip. "We have a meeting… you're so fucking insatiable."

"Irresistible and delicious, my Emperor." She soothed her love bite on his shoulder with her tongue. "Your fault."

Growling in a way that made her shudder - a mix between a wolf and a hungry Rhaegal - Jon forcefully shoved his tongue into Dany's mouth. He swallowed her moans as he slipped inside her in one fluid motion.

She screamed into his mouth. Gods, he knew just how to send her into a lust-filled frenzy. Perfectly tuned to each other's bodies. Dragon and dragonwolf, the former writhing in pleasure as the latter started pounding away. One day soon the belly swelled with child would prevent this position, but for now Daenerys dug her nails into Jon's back, both tumbling over the edge.

"Your Highness." Missandei entered without a thought, practically skipping. Leftover euphoria from her own sensual night with her paramour left the handmaiden absentminded, and finding her Empress wrapped around her own paramour in flagrante delicto knocked her out of it. "Oh," a bright blush adorned her cheeks.

Still normally prudish, enough of his wife rubbed off on him to treat the matter nonchalantly. "A knock..." He fought to catch his breath. "Would have sufficed, Missandei." Dany buried her face in his neck, giggling.

Missandei fought a smirk herself. "Apologies, Emperor." She turned, allowing him a little privacy. From glimpses, she knew he was quite well endowed, but her Empress was quite jealous and she wouldn't dare to poke the dragon.
Jon pushed off the covers, sliding out of bed and grabbing his trousers. "I'll see you in the council chamber, my dragon." He kissed her. Today would be a long day.

Time made no difference to Jaime Lannister anymore. Not down here in the dungeons. There was no sunlight, no clock, no sense of routine, and vengeful guards thrust his meals through a slit in the door. No, they didn't beat or rape their captives as was common in Joffrey's time, but the stone-faced Unsullied showed dislike for all that stood against their beloved Mhysa and Vrysa.

Jaime didn't care. It brought him face to face with his thoughts. The most gut-wrenching - of killing the Mad King. Of killing Cersei, the woman he had loved. For pushing Bran Stark from the tower. That should have sealed his death warrant, but here he was being left to rot instead. Would he be tried? At least if he did, he had one good act on his conscience by saving the Empress. "Rhaegar's sister."

He could hear the other prisoners, but did not talk to them. The Unsullied guards considered him an enemy, and his former side thought him a traitor. "I can't win," he muttered. Even with the extra comforts someone - probably Tyrion - granted him, most of his days here were spent with a small ball. Throwing it up in the air and catching it one handed.

"Well well..." The sneering voice of a man broken. Tywin Lannister. "If it isn't my loving son daring to visit his father's lowly prison cell."

"This is new." For the collection of half a dozen prisoners housed here, the only people that dared to visit were the guards. Setting the ball down, he hauled himself upright on the bed. Listening.

"You're lucky the Emperor only took your leg." Tyrion was angry, but also sad. Jaime understood.

Tywin hissed. "Spare me. You know I'm a dead man. For killing the precious Targaryen babies," the last was a sneer. Silence from Tyrion. "You've gotten what you've always wanted haven't you? You killed your mother. Killed your sister. Now killing me."

"Come on, 'alf man." Ser Bronn. "He ain't worth it." Boots clipped on the stone floor until keys jingled in the lock of Jaime's cell. He moved to sit on his bed as it opened and Tyrion and Bronn stepped in. "You look like shit."

Jaime snorted. "It's good to see you, Ser Bronn. I heard you finally decided on a highborn lady."

"Aye. Gettin' me a castle too." The former sellsword had earned his smugness.

"And all of Dorne, if my sources are correct." The knight looked at his brother. "Tyrion. It's been a while."

"Yes it has," Tyrion replied. He shuffled his feet awkwardly. "Well... is this any way to greet your brother?" Silent for a moment, Jaime smiled and crouched, letting Tyrion give him a brotherly hug. "Get up, you have places to be."

"And where would those places be, brother?"

It was Ser Bronn who responded. "Emp and Lady Emp want to see you." Jaime's face fell. "Deciding your fate without a trial. It's been nice knowing you, Kingslayer."

Tyrion took in the resigned look on Jaime's face. "It will be alright, brother. I will plead your case to them." From his tone, Jaime could tell Tyrion was not as confident as his words suggested. 'Well, if
"All my life," the Dragon Empress began. She looked beautiful, skin glowing in her black dress with red trim, complimenting her pregnant figure. Her expression was ice, however, voice cold. As if the moments of the last twenty-four hours of Joffrey's reign had never happened. "My brother would tell me stories. Tales of the man that murdered our father. That stuck a blade in his back - he would often rant about what he would do to that man."

"Are you asking me to apologize for that?" Jaime said stoically. "Because I won't. I'm not proud, but I did what had to be done."

"Of this I have no doubt. My father was a madman, and so was my brother by the end." Her face was unreadable, sipping at a glass of water. "That doesn't by itself discount his portrayal of you, the great Kingslayer, Jaime Lannister." Having heard the name so many times, Jaime was immune to the taunts - so why did it, on Daenerys' lips, make him cringe with shame? What perplexes me is what kind of man you are."

Tyrion took the moment to stand. "Your Highness. I know my brother…"

"Like you knew your father? Yet you still didn't predict his attack at the God's Eye, or Dragonstone." Losing that had been a disaster. Mining would be started forthwith, but the delay cost them plenty.

Taking a deep breath, Tyrion continued. "He tried to rescue you, knowing full well what would happen to him if Joffrey found out. He killed… our sister to save you. Why would he do that if he was the man your brother portrayed him as?"

The Empress leaned back, crossing her arms. "I don't know. He could be sincere, or yet he could be plotting some form of betrayal. I can't be sure at this moment."

"I am reluctant to trust him," Sansa said, breaking her silence. Her dress was as black as Daenerys', but unlike the jewelry that adorned the Empress, all she had was a silver hair clip and the pin of the Hand. Ice blue eyes steeled at Jaime. "Grateful as I am for your conduct on the Day of Revolution, you were an enemy to my family since Robert's Rebellion. Dany fought a smile at Sansa's lumping in House Targaryen into her family. "You attacked my father in the streets. Tried to kill Daenerys on the battlefield of Riverrun. Assisted your family to destroy my House. Any person who would follow that monster Joffrey is suspect to me."

"Do you think I wanted to follow Joffrey? After seeing what he became?"

Dany cocked her head. "He was your son, was he not? Don't try to deny it - it insults my intelligence." Jaime didn't respond. He really didn't need to. "Ser Bronn spoke in favor of you, as did Lady Brienne. I am sure the northern and Riverlands houses would want your head on a spike, but my family has demurred on such calls after your recent actions." She leaned forward. "Tell me, should I trust your behavior now, or from before?"

"If you are asking me to beg for my life, I won't." Jaime chuckled dryly. "I don't want to die, I don't, but I will not beg. During the course of the war, I fought for my family and my House, just as
"The things we do for love." Jaime went white at the sudden, monotone voice. Nearly shocked out of his skin, he finally noticed the crippled boy in the wheelchair, nestled in the corner. Bran looked at him... blankly. No sign of hate or anger. For the life of him, Jaime did not know what to think.

Daenerys looked straight into Jaime's eyes. "Why did you do it, then? Why did you betray your family to save Sansa and I. Twice?" For the first time, her voice broke slightly. Curious and... wanting. Wanting to believe the man that saved her and her sister wasn't evil.

Sighing, Jaime felt the years of exhaustion upon him. "I should say that it is because I fight for the living, but that is only the reason I sent Ser Bronn to you." Daenerys blinked, while Sansa furrowed her brows in confusion. "The truth..." He cast his eyes upon a figure leaning against the window, gazing out at the expanse of the city. "I couldn't let Rhaegar down. I... promised him that I would protect his family as devotedly as Arthur Dayne. I couldn't then, so I did it now." A slight tear fell from his lid. "And damn me to hell for turning against my family, but I regret nothing."

Quiet until now, Jon had allowed his wife and sister - both the women who the Kingslayer had risked his life to protect - to conduct the interrogation. They were more likely to expose his true core, but with the recent revelation Jon sensed his turn had come. Shifting his gaze from the outside to the man in front of the ad hoc tribunal, the mid-afternoon light shone against his silhouette like he was glowing. "You said you swore to my father." Interrogating, but also his voice carried a hint of emotion. He wanted to know all he could. "Why does it matter to you?"

Jaime gulped. The Emperor was clearly Rhaegar's son. Looks a copy of a Stark, but Rhaegar's nonetheless. "He was the kind of leader I had dreamed of serving. My father was cold, the Mad King vicious, Robert an oaf, and Joffrey... evil. With him, I had a purpose and that purpose was right."

"And yet you still fought my family."

"My House was the last hope of my life meaning anything other than serving scum, at least until Lady Brienne showed me differently while journeying to King's Landing. For years I thought about what purpose that was, and seeing that corpse rise from the dead. Seeing the only hope to stop it being hunted like animals by... my own son. I knew what I had to do... to uphold my oath to Rhaegar."

"So what do you wish to be done to you?" Sansa's voice lost some of it's edge, but was still hard. "What fate do you think you deserve?"

For years, Jaime had heard propaganda droned out by Robert and Joffrey - that Daenerys Targaryen was a cross between a frightened little girl over her head and a bloodthirsty vampire ready to butcher tens of thousands at the mere snap of a finger. The woman in front of him was neither. Undoubtedly decisive when needed to be - pure fire and blood - but also human. Grounded with a kind heart. "I stand here, ready to fight for the living. Ready to serve under any capacity, be it as a Lord or as a mere bannerman." Clicking his heels, he shifted back to Daenerys. "But if you wish to kill me now, so be it."

Eying Jaime, then Tyrion, then back to Jaime, Jon leaned in to Daenerys. They had a hushed conversation, which the Dragon Empress shared with Sansa. All Jaime could make out was an "Agreed," from the Hand to the Emperor. Which could mean anything.

"Lord Lannister," Jon began. "We need every man we can get to fight the Army of the Dead. You fought honorably at the head of the Lannister army at the Battle of Riverrun." That it was directly against the Imperial couple, neither felt the need to point out. "Ser Barristan told me stories about you
as a youth. About how honorable he felt you were. From what I've seen, and have been told by Bronn, Brienne, and Tyrion, I feel you are what Barristan told me. Therefore, I am appointing you to lead the initial detachment to the Wall."

Jaime blinked. For the second time today, he was completely floored.

"You will serve under Lord Commander Eddison Tollett, but as the senior Imperial commander there." Sansa had softened, but was no less decisive. A far cry from the girl brought to King's Landing to marry Joffrey. "We do not yet trust you with your Lordship by birthright in the Realms of Men."

"I understand, my Lady," he stated.

"Your son, Tommen, he is no longer Lord of Storm's End." Both Jon and Sansa let Daenerys finish it. "However, I will allow you to formally adopt him as heir to Casterly Rock, as I am told he is a sweet boy. But the Westerlands will be held in regency until you prove yourself at the Wall." Jaime merely nodded, unbelieving of his good fortune. "Plus, you must bend the knee." He complied, and Dany rose to her feet. "Do you so swear, that you will pledge your strength, loyalty, and honor to the Targaryen Empire and House Targaryen-Stark?"

"I so swear, your Highness."

Finally, Daenerys allowed her gratitude to show. "Rise, Queenshield."

For the first time in decades, Ser Jaime Lannister - Kingslayer no more - felt true pride surge through him.

------------------------------------------------

"A little bird told me that Jaime Lannister was given an actual military command today." Soft-orange light bathing the otherwise dark hallway, Sansa looked up at the much taller Petyr Baelish with a cocked brow. He gave her a ghost of a grin. "My sources aren't as vast as the Spider's, but I do alright."

Snorting, Sansa continued down the corridor. "Well your 'little bird' is correct. Ser Jaime is in charge of the first military expedition to the Wall." Littlefinger had popped into her office in the Hand's Tower just as she was getting ready to leave, and offered to escort her to the quarters of the Imperial family. The only bedroom in the tower was Tyrion's, so Sansa accepted. "A means to test his loyalty."

"Smart. Always wise to test a defector." His face was unreadable, but his words always dripped with subtext. Subtext only one trained in reading it could grasp - though perhaps that was what Littlefinger intended. No one had ever truly unmasked his true thoughts. "The word of a traitor always creates more doubt than the word of an enemy."

"Ser Jaime saved my life, and that of my sister."

"I presume to remember doing the same, with the Knights of the Vale." Not an accusation, just a statement.

To which Sansa replied with a statement of her own. "You wish for your loyalty to be tested."

Littlefinger chuckled. "I presume to tell you nothing. Only offer my services as one who knows all the dirty secrets within these walls. Ones useful for tribunals to discuss the guilt of Joffrey's confidants, among others."
'So he wants Master of Laws,' Sansa thought. 'Interesting.' "I shall relay your qualifications to His Majesty." They had reached the Imperial wing. "Remember what you promised me, Lord Baelish."

"That I would flush out the Lannister Vipers one by one." The words he had written long before were etched into his mind. He bowed. "Night, my Lady."

Still processing the conversation, the goings and comings with the true snake of King's Landing. He had come to her aid time and time again, but many times she simply wished Jon or Arya would just behead him or slit his throat. He had sold her to Ramsay. Unknowingly… possible, but Sansa doubted it.

Opening the door to her chambers, she was greeted by a figure. As Sansa yelped, she realized it was Podrick. "Well, good evening to you," he quipped.

Sansa hit him on the chest. "Don't do that again." Inhaling to calm her beating heart, she finally looked him over. "Despite that, I'm glad you're here." She leaned up and kissed his lips chastely. "I couldn't disobey an order from the Hand of the Emperor." He nevertheless pulled away. "I still don't understand why you had to summon me. We didn't have a problem last night…"

"I love you." Sansa forced the words out abruptly, not willing to trust herself with a delay. "I wanted to tell you for weeks, but…" Her captivity precluded that.

He looked shocked, emotions racing across his gaze. "Is it just because you were scared of dying…"

Soft hands grasped his. "Please don't… don't overthink this. I Love. You." Each word was punctuated with a poke of the chest. "I hate that it took getting kidnapped to make me realize it, but I shouldn't let ghosts keep me from what I want." Sansa pulled him into her arms, resting his head on her shoulder and stroking his back softly. A smile curled on her lips as he returned the embrace.

They stood silently for a few minutes, Podrick enjoying her soft curves. 'Has any man ever held her like this?' No woman Podrick had ever been with could ever compare. He pulled away and was met by azure blue. She gazed back at him, in awe.

Her look seemed to affect him. Sansa could feel… him, against her hip. Forming a sultry smirk of her own, Sana deftly unfastened the ties of his tunic. "It would appear you enjoy my presence, Ser Payne." It felt… liberating to flirt with him. Like each word banished the dark memories of years before. The Hand of the Emperor leaned forward enough for her breath to tickle his ear. "You are wearing too many clothes."

A groan left Podrick. "You are such a tease."

"Am I?" Feeling uncharacteristically playfull, she gently nibbled on his earlobe. "Why would you say that?"

Unable to hold himself any longer, Podrick hungrily attacked her lips. Their mouths opened immediately, insatiable lust of two youths in love pouring out in a clash of teeth and tongue. The redhead was uninhibited tonight. Desiring the feeling of ecstasy. Desiring to banish Ramsay forever. Desiring the young Knight pushing her to the bed, his shirt tugged off and her dress pooling to the ground.

Soon, he was hovering over her, both of them naked. "I think you have a clue, San."

Her eyes widened for a split-second at his nickname for her. Sansa smiled. She liked it, liked the sound of it on his lips. Running hands down her sides soon shifted the mood. "Perhaps I do." She
cupped his cheek. "Gods, I want you." Pulling him down, they kissed again.

Resting flush against her, the bruising kiss showed no hesitation on Podrick's part either. Moans were muffled in each other's mouths as he slipped inside her, losing themselves in their shared pleasure.

"Stop squirming," Missandei insisted, enjoying the novelty of working with dark brown locks instead of silver.

Arya gritted her teeth, disgusted at herself. "I would if you cut this girly torture chamber short." Training from the faceless men and she was being subjugated by mere hairstyling. "Oww, fuck!" Somewhere Syrio Forel was laughing at her.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have kept your hair in such a tangled mess," Sansa chided, assisting Missandei in drawing a proper - if simple - northern style. "Sit still or you'll be wearing a dress by order of the Hand."

"I hate you," Arya hissed, but complied. The indignity of it all.

Sansa ran the comb through particularly tangled locks, resulting in further profanities. "Oops," she apologized, smirking at Arya's angry look. "Let your sister fix you up."

"I'd barely let mother 'fix me up,'" Arya sneered. Catelyn was still held up with the army, dealing with the newly sworn lords. She'd have likely come, but Arya insisted on having this ceremony over and done with. "The idiot is lucky I love him."

Unable to hold back her giggles, Daenerys withstood the Wild Wolf's fury. "You're already allowed to wear breeches and have Needle clipped to your belt. I think a little work on your hair is perfectly reasonable for your wedding." Unintelligible grumbles came from the Stark daughter, but she endured the rest without incident.

The door opened a crack. "May I come in?"

"You may, sire," Missandei answered, smoothing the pleats on her dress.

Jon stepped through the doorway. Dany licked her lips, finding him delectable in his black cuirass, hair let down. She so desired to get him alone, but it was Arya's night. "She looks, beautiful, doesn't she?"

"Aye, she does." Arya couldn't help blushing slightly. "Ready, sister?"

There was no hesitation in her voice. "So ready."

The Godswood at King's Landing had barely been maintained during peacetime. Once Joffrey was crowned, it descended into pure dilapidation. Overgrown with weeds, part of the weirwood was even starting to die. No one visited, so there was no need.

But in preparation for the wedding, Sansa had ordered the entire holy site restored. It wasn't on par to those in the North, but passable. Considering the increase in traffic from pious northern bannermen and curious smallfolk disenchanted with the post-Joffrey Faith of the Seven, such was a welcome development.

"Hard to believe Arya's actually getting married," Robb mused, leaning against the sacred tree. He glanced at his wife, beside him. "I wish father was here. Jon should be giving away his daughter, not
Balancing little Jon Stark in her arms, the little boy wrapped tight in his blankets and snoring softly, Margaery leaned over to kiss her husband's cheek. "I know you miss him. Everyone says he was the most honorable man there is. Letting everyone think his nephew was... just to protect him?" Few men in the Empire would exhibit such nobility.

Robb hung his head. As Warden of the North, he was presiding over the ceremony. Maester Aemon presided over his and Jon's weddings, but the old man could only travel to King's Landing slowly - bringing the prince and princess with him. "He was a great man. I try to follow his stead... but..."

Smiling, Margaery gently took his hand and placed it on their child. "He would be proud of you, of the entire family."

Only a smattering of people milled underneath the weirwood tree. Deliberately kept small and simply at the request of the bride - no one willing to challenge the woman that killed the Chimera - few individuals not a Stark or the paramour of a Stark were present. As the early evening sunset cast a decreasing low light upon the southern ground, it had a rather quaint charm to it. Hopefully, the fifth of the Stark weddings would turn out as the last two, rather than the two preceding.

"I've been to one of these before, Podrick," Tyrion stated to his former squire. He didn't know whether he was here as the Hand, or because Sansa liked Shae and he came with her. "Northern ceremonies end quickly. You'll be with your lady love soon."

Despite being a battle-hardened veteran of countless battles, the crimson blush on his cheeks proved he was still the same Podrick Payne. "I'm not..."

Tyrion laughed. "Please, I was a lovestruck youngster as well once. I know the signs. Plus it's exactly like the groom there." He pointed to Gendry, who had a manic excitement about him, though likely hiding nervousness. The poor lad was a complete orphan, the only blood relative present being the Lady Shireen. Though getting closer over the last several months, they were still strangers. "Relax, Lord Baratheon," the Imp called out. "If you're nervous about the wedding night, this man can give you tips." Gendry blinked confusion, while Podrick looked like he wanted to melt into the ground.

"Shut up, Tyrion," Robb growled. "That's my sister." He paled as more came to him. "And he's with my other sister... oh gods." All non-Starks enjoyed his mortification.

The arrival of Missandei heralded the start of the ceremony. First came Sansa, and then Daenerys, each carrying two bouquets of winter roses. The favorite of Lyanna Stark-Targaryen, long considered the elder doppelganger of the bride. They rested both on either side of the weirwood, Dany taking her place of honor at the center of the grove while Sansa settled next to Podrick, inconspicuously weaving her hand in his.

Lastly, the woman of the hour. Darkness banished by only a barely waning moon and flickering lanterns, Arya felt butterflies fluttering away the determination within her. It was true, she did look radiant even in her breeches, makeup and hair simple but causing her face to practically glow. The snow white cloak was feminine, styled wool flowing behind her. But inside, she was a near wreck. "Calm down, sister." Jon's familiar voice grounded her, but all the training of Syrio Forel and Jaqen H'ghar flew right out the window upon spotting the strong jaw and warm eyes of her betrothed waiting by the weirwood.

Trying not to tremble, Arya fell into place across from Gendry. It took all her energy to steel herself, not willing to look up and likely fall apart. 'Breathe, Arya. Breathe.'
"Who comes before the Old Gods tonight?"

"I," Arya croaked, clearing her throat to several worried murmurs. "Arya of House Stark, a woman grown and true of birth. I come to wed in presence of the Gods." It surprised her that she managed to get through all of it without collapsing.

"And who gives her away?"

Jon leaned down to kiss his sister on the head. "This is what you want," he whispered. "I, Jon of House Targaryen. Brother of the bride." Quietly, he stepped beside Dany.

"And who come to wed her?"

"I, Gendry of House Baratheon, Lord of Storm's End."

Robb, trying not to show his apprehension at Arya's hesitance, spoke loudly. "Arya of House Stark, do you take this man?"

Blinking, a bead of sweat trickling from her forehead down her cheek, Arya looked up at the far taller man she was about to marry. 'To marry…' To become Lady Baratheon. All culminating in this moment, the reality came crashing upon her right as she was to make a decision. To choose a life that she so desired from childhood or a life her choices brought her too.

Bated breaths of the pack were let out in relief when a wry, awkward smile curled on her lips. "I… take this man." Arya didn't care about her childhood wish. She wanted this man. He accepted her for who she was, and he wanted him.

"Gendry of House Baratheon, do you take this woman?"

Sporting a rare, ecstatic demeanor, Gendry nodded. "I take this woman." Jon heard Arya's breath hitch, ever so slightly. In her own little… Arya way, this was comparable to a teenage Sansa swooning over the romantic tales of knights and princes.

Missandei stepped forward, holding the strip of silk. On it was embroidered a wolf at one end and a stag on the other. Robert's wish to join the two houses of Baratheon and Stark in marriage had finally come true, and this time both the desire and the blood were present. Robb gingerly tied the bride and the groom together at the wrist. "In the sight of Gods and men, I bind these souls for eternity."

Caution to the wind, Arya pulled her new husband down and crashed their lips together to the clapping of her dear family.

And the watchful eyes of an old foe, hidden among the far-away trees...

Chapter End Notes

Hmmm, did they miss an enemy?

Jaime... he was a pill in the first few seasons, but his character arc was quite sympathetic in the rest of the show. It's only natural that he got a warmer reception by the Wolf and Dragon after his actions here than in Season 8, but I doubt they would give the Kingslayer an easy time of it. I think "Queenshield" would look much better in the histories of the Kingsguard, don't ya think?
And now the Stag and the Wolf are bound together, finally. Arya can pretend any way she wants. She wanted to marry Gendry cause she loves him ;)

Lot of reviewers wanted some hot moments between our monarchs. Gotta give the people what they want, lol. All the Starks deserve some fluff.

Next time, the Night King returns.
Hi all. Exams are done, and another light, fluffy chapter before things start to heat up.

...what can I say about the direction the show is going? Finales tend to lack satisfying endings, largely cause I think the trend in hollywood today is to muddle things up rather than go the traditional happy ending route. I think this is a mistake. We all like protagonists with flaws and antagonists with depth, but still want the former to win and the latter to lose. The writers are muddying it all up for no valid reason.

Plus, I think they butchered Dany's character. She was shaped all her life believing she and her brother were the last Targaryens. But then when she realizes Jon is related to her, she... worries about who gets the throne? I call BS. She's never been about power for power's sake. Her goals are: 1) restore the claim of her family and 2) create a better government. Not only can she do that even with Jon on the throne instead of her, but she can actually have her cake and eat it too. The showrunners instead want to bury that just so we can get chaos? It's butchering a character for some artistic effect that isn't even good. We've been on a ride for the last 9 years. That deserves a happy and satisfying resolution.

Sorry, rant over. As I finish off this story, I will do my best to give a satisfying ending. The ending these characters deserve.

Based on a suggestion from a reader on Ao3, I have changed Jaime's title from "Queensaver" to "Queenshield in the next chapter. The reader was right, that sounds far better!

Enjoy and review! Please let me know what y'all think, and that everyone's still reading although the show is wrapping up.
Such was how Empress Daenerys Targaryen and her sister, Hand to His Majesty Sansa Stark, found themselves riding through the open air foundry. The heat was welcome to Dany, banishing away the cold gusts of southern winter. Pregnancy obvious and starting to wear her down, the blood of the dragon within her appreciated the molten temperatures surrounding her. Her child certainly did, frantic movements within her growing belly tapering off in the heat.

Workers bowed enthusiastically at the two women, whoops of enthusiasm breaking out every now and again at their liberator. The ground shook as Wun Wun stood, broadsword fit for a giant propped up against his shoulder. Clipped to a belt of rope were two dragonglass daggers, each the length of a regular sword. He pumped his free fist in the air. “Dnnnn-eeerrrrras!” Though it was close to intelligible, most figured it out and a ragged cheer from the laborers echoed through the camp.

If it wasn’t for the ring of Unsullied surrounding them, Daenerys figured they would hoist her up on their shoulders as did the freedmen of Yunkai. “They love you,” Sansa remarked, faint pride tinging her voice.

While the adoration did arise enjoyable feelings, Dany nevertheless refused to bask in it. She had a job to do.

Out of one of the few large, stone buildings in the foundry quarter emerged Gendry. “Your Highness.” He bowed. “Your presence is an honor…”

“Oh cut that out…” Daenerys laughed, dismounting her horse with the help of a servant. “You’re family, so formality is not needed.”

Gendry reddened. “Forgive me… sister. Still difficult to think, married into the Imperial family. Hells, still difficult to think being married at all.”

Sansa smirked. “It’s difficult to think Arya is married at all, but what can you do?” After a round of chuckles, her face hardened into a businesslike frown. “Now, is work proceeding as scheduled?”

Cracking his knuckles, resting the large hammer on his belt as if it weighed nothing but a feather, Gendry nodded. “With the trade routes opening up again, the vast majority of our forging needs are being handled by the foundries of New Valyria. All but the cannon of course.”

“And how does that go?” Daenerys had firsthand knowledge of how powerful cannon were. The Imperial army had few, but they always packed a mean punch. Combining them with Lannister Rockets and scorpions, one would have the best artillery in history.

“We’ve improved the design, based on a captured sketchbook from Qyburn’s study. Mounted upon a larger carriage, they can fire faster and are far more easily deployed. As for the Dragonglass, we have enough for five Imperial Armies. Currently, I’m working on fixing proper spears for the Unsullied, but it proves to have far more uses.”

“Explain.” Dany was intrigued.

“Dragonglass is both strong and brittle. Depends on the level of force exerted.” Gendry rubbed the back of his neck. The temperature - if humid - was comfortable, but the blast furnaces and forges left the smith covered in a sheen of sweat. One that soaked through his clothes. “It’s fire resistant and can apparently take cold as well, but against steel or stone it will shatter.” A wry grin formed on his lips. “However, I think I can make dragonglass bullets.”

Dany’s eyes widened. “Bullets? For the handcannons?” She had seen their volleys decimate the final cavalry charge. Foundries all over King’s Landing and New Valyria were cranking them out as
Caryn hoped to increase their number from one thousand to at least twenty times that number. Slow-firing, inaccurate, and useless in close quarters, they only had strength in one or two volleys. Against the human wave tactics of the dead, they could be game-changers. “Are you certain?”

“Wouldn’t they shatter?” Sansa inquired, equally excited and hopeful. ‘But there has been so much false hope in this fight.’

Gendry shook his head. “Smaller bullets are far more shatterproof than one thinks. Plus I coated the back end with lead. Should work well enough.” A loud bellow boomed over King’s Landing, the dark black shape of Balerion winging down towards them. While many instinctively dashed for cover, the sight of the beast only jogged Gendry’s memory. “Oh, uh… sister. That special project… it’s ready for forging.”

Smile forming in recognition, Dany nodded. “Excellent. I presume you’ll need Balerion.”

“Aye.”

Daenerys began to walk to her dragon, it having landed in the field, kicking up a cloud of dust. “Set it up, Gendry.” Her new brother in law gave a thumbs up and dashed off.

The dragon let out a contented growl as Dany ran her hands along his snout. “What are you planning, sister?” Sansa asked, walking alongside her. She was used to Rhaegal, but the Dread Reborn still made her uneasy sometimes.

“Well, if you believe he is the person for the position, then I trust you. But keep your eyes peeled.” As Sansa nodded, Daenerys took her own advice to heart - noticing something exposed by the sway of her sister’s fiery hair. Could it… “Sansa, is that a… “ Dare she say it? “Love bite upon your neck?”

Sansa initially twitched in confusion. “What?” Involuntarily, her hand moved to touch the spot on her normally pale neck. The confusion morphed quickly into a bright flush of crimson. “Oh, umm…” The old, coquettish teenager was evident as she frantically - efforts to hide her embarrassment as slapdash as Lannister positions on the Heights of Luther - tried to cover the glaring mark with her long locks. “It’s nothing.”

Biting back a giggle, Dany cast a knowing look at her sister. The young woman deserved a good relationship, given the past. “Podrick a bit possessive, hmmm…?” Her face reddened to almost pure blood. For her sake, Dany let the normal teasing slide - Arya wouldn’t have, but the girl was walking on clouds as a blissful newlywed herself, so was not in the position to mock. “Next time your man is being possessive, make sure he goes for the shoulder. Easier to cover up.”

“How would you… never mind.” Sansa violently shook her head. “I don’t want to know.” That did cause Daenerys to laugh, initially getting a glare but eventually joined in by her companion. “Sister… thanks. It’s been amazing.” The two shared a contented smile.

“We’re ready, your Highness,” Gendry called out, sprinting far from the smelting platform.

‘I hope you like this, my love.’ Dany turned to Balerion. “Dracarys.”
Showering kisses on soft, female cheeks, Jon delighted in the squirms and giggles he caused. “Poppa, your whiskers tickle.”

“Bow before your Emperor!” Rhaegar shouted, thumping his chest in excitement. Mischievous violet eyes met grey counterparts. “Now!”

Suddenly the tables were turned upon Jon. He fell upon the bed, a chaotic tumble of limbs draping over him in a scene reminiscent of battlefields long past. Only now, the guttural battlecries were replaced with pangs of joy, the mighty wolf letting his wee pups climb all over him. “I’m fallen. Mercy, great dragons.” He grunted as a knee took him in the ribs, sputtering when Ghost joined in, licking his face. “I bend the knee to House Targaryen.”

The sounds of a happy family had finally returned to the Red Keep, so long absent from within its walls. They were with their strong, loving poppa once more - everything was right in the world, seen from their innocent eyes. No war, no death, no trials or tribulations or abductions. Reunited with their family, the pack was complete and they couldn’t be happier.

“Poppa?” After their little romp, Arya and Rhaegar were tucked underneath Jon’s arms. “Why is Nym so sleepy?” The female direwolf laid in the corner, lethargic as Ghost hovered over her.

“Why, because she’s with child, like muña.” It was a delightful surprise, Nymeria arriving from the north swollen with pups. A new generation of direwolves for the pack. One for each of his children, one for his nephew, and enough for the next little wolves as they came.

After several minutes of the twins excitedly rubbing their hands all over Nymeria’s fur - something the direwolf enjoyed, from her yawns and wagging tail - they plopped back down next to Jon. “I have a question.” He looked at his son, inviting him to continue. “How is it, riding Rhaegal?”

Blinking, he really pondered Rhaegar’s question. “On Dragonstone, you know how the winds can whip your hair. Chill you to the bone and yet refresh you?” Twin nods. “Well little wolves.” He had taken to call them the nickname his sister cooked up for them. “Being in the sky is like that and more. You can see the entire world below you… and it just shows how small everything really is.”

“Wow.” Even for Targaryens, blood of the dragonriders running through them, it still inspired awe. “Can we begin our lessons?” Arya pouted at Jon’s frown. “Please please please?”

“Yes, poppa, please!” Rhaegar joined in. “Nuncle Robb and Aunt Arya already have us really practicing with swords! We can start dragonriding. Please?”

Why could he deny them nothing? “Maybe, but only with your mother and me keeping you secure…” He didn’t get farther before he was being squeezed tightly.

Pure joy coursing through his veins, the embraces of his children completed an empty part of Jon’s soul. Reminded him of everything he fought for - of why he fought without complaint. For the Realm, yes, but fundamentally for Rhaegar and Arya. For Robb, Margeary, and baby Jon. For Sansa, and Arya - the elder - Rickon and Bran. And for the love of his life, his beautiful little dragon…

Speaking of his little dragon. The flash of silver hair, sparkling in the low firelight. Dressed in a soft grey dress, colors of his house. His eyes lit up even more. “Looks like we have a visitor, little wolves.”

Two heads swivelled. “Muña!”
Daenerys had been watching her family for several minutes now. Leaning against the doorway, the scene brought unshed tears of joy to her eyes, the Empress unwilling to disturb the moment between father and children. Her children. Who were now crashing into her, arms round her petite form. “My sweetlings,” she gushed, enveloping them. “Oooh, don’t squash the little one.”

Their grip loosened. Two sets of eyes - one violet, one grey - looked up at her, faces pressed against her belly. “Sorry, Muña,” Arya said. “Sorry baby.” She pressed a peck to Dany’s stomach.

Eyes sparkling with joy, she caught Jon’s gaze. He leaned against the sofa, serene smile on his face. It was so rare that he was ever this happy. Dany loved it. “Want to say hello to your brother or sister, Rhaegar?” He looked so much like his father, it made her heart catch.

“Hi baby brother.” The certainty in his voice made his parents chuckle. “Can we see him now?”

Dany laughed. “No, not for a few more months.”

“Don’t give our momma that look,” Arya chided her now pouting brother. “We have Nunci Robb’s baby.” The twins had fallen in love with their little nephew. The pack watched over its own.

While Dany could spend hours in just this position, she had other business. “Now sweetlings. I have to steal your poppa for a bit, so head to bed.”

“Poppa…” they both wined.

“Don’t ‘Poppa…’ me, little wolves,” Jon chided, but it didn’t reach his eyes, full of mirth. “Head to sleep.”

“Fine.” Before she entered their shared nursery, Arya turned to give Jon her mother’s pleading look. “Remember, you promised.”

As Dany cast a raised eyebrow at him, Jon bit back his laugh. “I remember, little wolf. Go to bed.” At last, he managed to lead his wife into the hallway of the Imperial quarters. Checking to make sure they were truly alone, Jon pushed her against the wall and covered her mouth with his.

Just about to say something, Dany melted into the sweet kiss. Her arms dropped to her sides. Offering her body to Jon and his possessive touches that plundered her sensitive places. Only when they began to gasp for air did he pull back, foreheads touching. “Jon…”

“I’ve been wanting to do that all fucking day.” His voice was low.

Dany shuddered at it. “I hate you, my Emperor. How you do this to me.”

Jon smirked. “I don’t see you complaining.”

“Cocky prick,” she said back, matching his smirk. Oh how he’d grown from the somber boy in Pentos. “I really wanted to show you something. In the throne room.”

“Oh?” They hadn’t been in that place since the day of the revolution. Jon calmed the flames of desire within him. “Lead the way.”

They walked side by side like an old married couple, manifestly comfortable with each other - her hand looped in his. “What did Arya make you promise?”

“She’s just like you, always getting her way,” Jon replied, mock exasperated. “She and Rhaegar made me promise that we’d start their dragonriding training.”
Daenerys blinked. “Aren’t they too young? Far too young.”

“I didn’t plan on them being alone, Dany.” Jon leaned over to kiss her head, calming her. “Arya would be with me on Rhaegal, and Rhaegar with you on Balerion. Ropes securing them and everything.” She looked at him skeptically. “Don’t give me that look. It’ll be far better company for their first dragonride than I had.”

“And who did join you on your first?”

Jon looked away, quiet. “Tormund…” Faint, almost inaudible.”

His wife heard him all the same. “Tormund?! The visual just caused her to chortle. “This I have to hear…”

“Dany, do I have to do this?”

Daenerys giggled. “Yes, Jon. Keep your eyes covered.” She smacked his side at catching him peeking. “Behave or I’ll have Rhaegal get a fondness for looping.” Jon grumbled, but obeyed. “You’ll like it, trust me.”

“I do not like to be kept waiting.” He was becoming more and more a dragon - wolves could wait forever if need be. “Dany, please. This is humiliating.”

Feeling a rather youthful sense of humor at this whole scene, Dany took pity on her husband. “You may open.” He did.

Blinking, Jon gazed upon the gift his wife had given her. “Dany… what is this about?” Resting right beside the Iron Throne, the trophy sought by all that threw their hat into the game of thrones, was a second throne. Taller, bristling with bronzed hilts of Lannister blades, it had a polished freshness about it that its ancestor lacked.

“The Iron Throne, forged in the fires of Balerion the Dread. The manifestation of Aegon I’s conquest and the birth of the Targaryen dynasty. Beside it, the Dragonwolf’s Throne, forged in the fire of Balerion the Dread Reborn. The manifestation of how Jon Targaryen gave birth to a new age. A new conquest.”

Jon watched his wife in awe. “Daenerys…”

She smiled, cupping his cheek. “Happy name day, my love.”

He blinked back tears. “I love you so much.” She was so perfect. Born to rule, born to rule. Ambition not for the sake of power, but out of dedication to the nation and its people. “You deserve to rule, Dany.”

“So do you.” She kissed him. “I thought I was alone. Even with Viserys I was alone. But you brought me a family. Brought me what I was missing. That hunk of steel… it means nothing without you ruling by my side.” She threw her arms about him. “I would choose you over the throne in a heartbeat.”

“And I would too.” Inhaling her scent, Jon’s hold tightened upon her. “What would I do without you, Daenerys?” Brushing her hair to the side, he placed a kiss on her exposed neck.

How he said her full name… how he kissed her neck. It made her shudder with delight. “You will
never need to know the answer, Jon.” Rubbing his back, she broke their embrace and looked into his
eyes - leaning close to kiss him gently.

Her quivers of pleasure had ignited something in Jon. Something that he had suppressed for so long
in the past - enduring endless teasing from Theon and gentle teasing from Robb - but now blasted
forth like dragonfire. He stared at Dany, eyes dark with a devious smirk on his face.

Dany furrowed her brows. “What?” His grin widened, eyes flickering in the direction of the Iron
Throne. It took her a split second to catch on, eyes wide as saucers. “Jon… no.”

“Why ever not?”

“It’s… public.” His hands dropping down to caress her ass made it hard for Dany to think straight.

“No one’s here.”

“I… mmmm…” It was true - no one was here. Her resistance was failing, arousal mounting. “When
did you get this adventurous?” She felt him lean in to her ear.

He loved how she moaned, trailing his tongue along the shell of her ear. “You make me this way,
little dragon.”

That was it. At her breaking point, Dany snapped. Fisting his hair, she yanked her husband down
and crashed their lips together. The dragon was awoken, Daenerys pushing Jon up the steps to the
throne.”

It was all so sudden. Tables turned on him, Jon could barely breathe at her relentless assault. Dany’s
tongue speared into his mouth, hands shoving him onto the Iron Throne. “Seven Hells, Dany,” he
choked out before she crawled onto his lap, attacking his neck. “Fuck…”

“Which is what I will do to you, my wolf,” she growled, sucking and biting. Grinding her
superheated body into his groin, she felt his length. Hard as Valyrian steel. “That is going in me.”

“Not… shit… before I get my fill… ahhhh…”

She soothed a large love bite on his shoulder. “You make no commands to your Empress.” Her tone
was that of the Dragon Empress, dark and firm, with a sensual tinge to it. But instead of cowing her
dragonwolf, the words did the opposite.

Daenerys found her hands pinned behind her back, by one of his arms. “My turn,” he husked,
yanking her dress with one arm till her breasts were exposed. Annoyed as she was now that the
tables turned on her…

‘Gods, what he does to me.’ She bit her lip as he latched onto her. “Fuck. Jon, please.”

Jon sucked like he was but a babe, nimble fingers pinching and kneading at the mound not being
attacked by his lips and tongue. He bathed happily in her moans of pleasure. Needing to hear more
of them as he did breath in his body. With a wolf snarl he detached from one nipple, only to lunge at
the other while his fingers filled in to occupy what territory he had left. “Mine,” he growled, voice
dark.

“Oh Jon…” Coming undone from her husband’s feasting on her breasts, Daenerys could have sworn
that she came just from his husky possessivity alone. “Yours… fuck… all yours. Gods, suck my tits
my wolf…”

He basked in his prize, pleasure so great that his grip on her hands slackened. Soon after, he felt her fingers going for his breeches. “Dany?”

“I’m dripping,” she moaned, exposing his member. “Need it inside.” Not waiting for him, she pulled up her dress, exposing her bare heat.

“I knew you were up for this,” Jon grinned, only to grit his teeth as she impaled herself. “Damn… still so tight.”

Her eyes rolled back in her head. “Yes, yes, yes…” She needed this. Needed it so much. They had made love twice this morning but it wasn’t enough. Their shared moans, the smacking of their skin, it echoed through the empty throne room. “My Emperor. You are my Emperor.” The tone gave the words a new meaning.

In lieu of reply, Jon gripped his wife’s hips and slammed up, meeting her gyrations thrust for thrust. She screamed, tightening around him as he hit her spots. A savage kiss ensued, sloppily dueling with each other and swallowing the fevered sounds of their lovemaking. Returning new life to a place that had seen nothing but death and misery for decades.

Sensing his climax approaching - certain Dany had shattered around him several times - Jon guided one hand to her shoulder and another to rub at her clit. The little nub he loved to tweak and suck long into the night. A scream let loose into his mouth, her hips growing frantic as she fucked herself on him and he rubbed her nub. They hurtled off the cliff together, stars exploding within their eyes.

Dany’s head had fallen on his shoulder, snuggling close to calm her racing heart. “I’ll never look at this thing the same again.”

Jon chuckled. “Always a nice little memory to keep us going during the drudgeries of rule.” His fingers lazily traced her nipple. “I really can’t get enough of you.”

She pulled back, violet eyes dancing with a growing mischief. “Perhaps we should continue this, Jon Targaryen.” There was no questioning, the two of them rising from the Iron Throne to set their clothes to rights.

Watching with a grin as she fixed her dress, Jon strode forward and scooped her into his arms. “Jon!” she cried, happily. “Put me down.”

“Not a chance.” He bounded for the doors, holding Dany all the way. “I want to be in our bed, tasting you as soon as possible.” There were no further objections from the Empress.

Light streamed into the Great Throne Room, the bricked up windows crippled by sledgehammers and stained glass returned. The dragon skulls from the basement were returned to their mounts, each flanked by a black and red Targaryen banner to one side and a grey Stark banner to the other. Unsullied guards lined the row, but otherwise the atmosphere was joyous. Music filled the open hall, a chorus ringing out with the coronation hymn that had preceded past Targaryen kings.

Heralding the procession of Daenerys Targaryen. Clad in the same royal robes worn at Riverrun, it was now time to make it official. To use the Red Keep and confer that final bit of legitimacy to the Empire she had created. Ser Jorah in front, Missandei slightly behind her, Daenerys kept her eyes straight ahead as she stepped ever closer to the Iron Throne.

Her family greeted her. Beaming smiles from Robb, Margeary, Arya Gendry, Meera, and Podrick. The warm but subdued joy of Sansa. The placid but inviting nod from Bran. Daenerys accepted
them with warmth, but her true attention was on the man standing before her. Jon. Her husband and the Emperor. The man she loved, the one who would be crowning her. Without prompting, she knelt.

“Do you, Daenerys of the joined houses of Targaryen and Stark, swear upon the gods above to swear your life to the Realm? To pledge your loyalty to the people of the Empire, and to defend the peace forged in the ashes of tyranny? As long as you have breath in your body?”

“I so swear,” she said firmly. The struggle of her life, to unite the Kingdom and achieve her birthright. Not just completed, but decisively secured with an equal by her side. The man she loved.

“All hail Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen-Stark, first of her name.” Jon’s voice was clear, uttering the words that would cement the culmination of his wife’s journey. “Empress of the Targaryen Empire. Queen of the Andals, Roynar, and First Men. Lady of Westeros and Queen in the North. Queen of New Valyria. Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea. Mother of Dragons, Breaker of Chains. Princess who was Promised. The Unburnt, Valyria Reborn. Joint Protector of the Pax Targaryana and Ruler of All She Surveys. Long may she reign!”

“Long may she reign!”

Rising, Dany ascended the steps as her husband descended them. Servants guided the trains of their royal robes, providence from above guiding the steps fluidly - without a hitch. Sparing a loving smile to his siblings standing in the front row, then to his wife, Jon bent the knee to the Targaryen Empress. Head bowed in loyalty.

As with their investiture as Emperor and Empress in the great hall of Riverrun, the ceremony would be done in a single motion. Each of the steps was to be performed jointly, so that Jon would be anointed immediately after Daenerys. So that she would crown him as he did her - Emperor proclaiming a Queen, and Empress proclaiming a King. Each item of regalia was delivered to him immediately after being given to her, a procedure that found no precedent in the history of Valyria or the Seven Kingdoms. Co-monarchs. Equal rulers.

A Song of Ice and Fire, one hopefully sung for the entirety of history.

“Do you, Jon of the joined houses of Stark and Targaryen, swear upon the gods above to swear your life to the Realm? To pledge your loyalty to the people of the Empire, and to defend the peace forged in the ashes of tyranny? As long as you have breath in your body?”

“I so swear,” he stated, voice heavy with surreality. Only half a decade before, he had been a bastard at the wall. Now, the monarch of all he surveyed. He imagined his father standing beside him… ‘I will make you proud.’

‘You already have, my sweetling.’ Jon could have sworn the words had been said, that Rhaegar Targaryen had spoken to him. A tear fell from his eye.

Setting the crown upon his wavy locks, Dany brushed her thumb upon his cheek. A subtle gesture of complete love. “All hail Jon Imperator of House Stark-Targaryen, first of his name.” After long discussion, Jon had decided to keep the name Ned Stark gave him, a connection to the man who raised him. “Emperor of the Targaryen Empire. King in the North, Riverlands, and Vale. Lord of Westeros and Defender of the Valyrian People. Father of Dragons and Prince who was Promised. The Unburnt, the Resurrected. The White Wolf, the Dragonwolf. Friend of the Free Folk and Joint Protector of the Pax Targaryana. Long may he reign!”

“Long may he reign!”
Rising to his feet, Jon’s eyes glistened as they stared into Dany’s. ‘Fuck propriety,’ he thought. Reaching out, he cupped her chin and brought her lips to his. Kissing her sweetly in front of the gathered dignitaries.

Kiss over quickly, he made his way to the Throne of Revolution and sat upon it. Daenerys mirrored him, taking her long sought after seat on the Iron Throne itself. The throne of liberation and the throne of conquest. Side by side. Hands seeking each other out to wrap together. Forever.

“For the Emperor and Empress!” Arya Stark called out.

“LONG MAY THEY REIGN!”

Chapter End Notes

Jon and Dany can't help themselves. Hell, none of the Starks can help themselves, lol ;)

Coronation is based off of Napoleon's.

I think for Dany, who is ambitious for reasons unrelated to power and who has found the family she so desperately craves, what I had her tell Jon is more in line with her character. Plus she can have her cake and eat it too, so no harm no foul! That's what her feeling should have been in the show, but subversion of expectations is the hot new thing I guess.

I think her name day gift is perfect!

Sorry that the Night King didn't show up. Turns out the throne room scene went a little longer than I thought (had to post my counter to episode 4, reclaiming Dany's personality).

I haven't put too much about the twins in the bulk of the story, but now as we approach the finale, they will get a larger role. Plus, direwolves puppies! The pack doesn't just survive, it thrives!

Missandei will have a tough time pronouncing all the titles for the foreseeable future. Essentially, Dany and Jon share the crowns of the Targaryen Empire, Westeros, the North, and New Valyria. Largest single nation since the Valyrian Freehold owned Essos.

Next time, Littlefinger begins his investigations, and the Night King makes a discovery.
Hi all! This was a fun chapter to write.

Enjoy and review! Please let me know what y'all think, and that everyone's still reading although the show is wrapping up.

A low hum of voices - a hushed cacophony were the words that best described it - echoed through the throne room. Benches were set up along the walls running parallel to the corridor, packed with nobles, dignitaries, and ordinary citizens willing to pay a single silver piece to watch the show, not to mention the thousands in the grounds of the Red Keep waiting to hear the pageboys bring them updates. Today was the first trial of the Lannister swine, and all of King's Landing was waiting with baited breath.

It had been three weeks since the official coronation of Jon and Daenerys Targaryen as the monarchs of a united Targaryen Empire, or simply "The Empire" to the citizens. Life in King's Landing was returning to a sense of normalcy under their beloved Emperor and Empress - White Wolf and Mother of Dragons. Not much was left of Lannister rule aside from the massive pyramid. Atop it, however, rested not the golden statue of the Chimera but a planned equestrian statue of Aegon the Conqueror in bronze, founder of the Targaryen Dynasty.

Just the beginning of the Imperial Couple's plans for the capital. But now, more pressing concerns took precedence. "I hate trials."

Tyene Martell gave her lover a sidelong look. "Had run ins with the King's justice in the past?"
Frankly, she didn't care if he did. Only enhanced his allure.

Bronn snorted. "Nah, just the last one of these I was at ended in me a champion for a certain dwarf."
He crossed his arms, fancy silks only chafing at his skin. "I do not want to get looped into that again. I got my castle and my… highborn gal. No need to risk anything."

"You have such a way with words, sellsword." Tyene appreciated it all the same.

At that point the Unsullied guards pulled open the side doors, clanging against the stone walls as the Imperial family walked in. Arya Stark, the Lady Baratheon - though no one called her that to her face. Lord Robb and Lady Margaery Stark of Winterfell. Brandon Stark, pushed in his wheelchair by the Lady Reed of Greywater Watch. Lady Catelyn Stark, stepmother to his Majesty and grandmother to the Prince and Princess. And finally Hand to His Majesty Sansa Stark, Hand to Her Majesty Tyrion Lannister ambling beside her. They took their seats, the Stark family on chairs set at the base of the steps, while the Hands sat on chairs adjacent to their respective monarch's thrones.

Before a single word could be said, the Empress' translator entered. Missandei ascended the steps, standing between the twin thrones. "All rise for the Emperor Jon, first of his name and the Empress Daenerys, first of her name."

All rose to their feet as Jon and Dany entered, Ser Jorah and Grey Worm escorting them in the
absence of a proper Kingsguard. Crowns rested upon their heads, swords on their hips. Aside from the direwolf snarling on his cuirass, both were pure Targaryen in dress. Black armor and dress, red felt lining on the sleeves, collar, and boots. Fire and Blood made manifest. Even the most loyal of Targaryen partisans felt a chill go through them at the sight.

However, upon reaching the steps, the facade dropped. Jon reached out of his hand for Daenerys to take. The Empress shot her husband a beaming smile, her obviously pregnant self appreciating the help. It was lost on no one that the couple was in love, the first of its kind to grace the Keep in decades. As she sat, Jon pressed a kiss against her knuckles before lowering on his own throne. Such looks of love then vanished. Hardened into Fire and Blood once more.

"The imperial court is now in session," Missandei proclaimed, the Imperial Squire Ollie slamming his staff against the marble floor. All took their seats, not a single word uttered.

"Before we begin the trial, there are some matters to dispense with." Daenerys looked out amongst the crowd. "Ser Dontos Hollard, step forward."

From his seat near the front of the platforms, the weathered fool of King Joffrey approached the throne. He was far thinner since the tourney that resulted in his new employment, the ruddy complexion and red lines along his nose gone from abstention of wine and mead. He was grizzled, but no longer the oaf many considered him to be. "Your Highness," he said, bowing.

"I owe you a lot, Ser Dontos," Daenerys stated, genuinely. "Cersei Lannister may very well have killed Sansa and I had you not taken my sword from Joffrey's chambers."

"Just doing my duty, your Highness." The grizzled knight sighed. "Only by the grace of the Lady Hand, did I live. Wiser now than my previous humiliation, I pledge my fealty to House Targaryen."

Dany glanced at Sansa, who nodded to her. "Doing your duty is why I'm giving you Duskendale." Dontos' eyes widened, mouth slack in shock. "House Rykker sided with Joffrey, and therefore it deserves a new overlord. I am putting my trust in you, Ser Dontos, for I can tell you are an honorable man. I hope you prove my trust correct."

"I will your Highness." He went back to his seat, awe on his face.

Folding her arms in her lap, Dany cleared her throat. "Though he is not in court at the moment, I am officially bequeathing the holdings of House Bolton to Ser Davos Seaworth." It had been discussed with Davos the preceding day, this announcement making it official while he was in Dragonstone overseeing the mining operations. "I shall offer the floor now to His Majesty."

Jon gave Dany a small smile. "Thank you, my Empress." The tone was placid, but left a trace of far more than that to anyone who truly listened. Which Daenerys did. "These trials are to proceed in tandem with investigations into the full length of Joffrey's corrupt and evil acts. They will be conducted and prosecuted by our Master of Laws, the eminent Lord Petyr Baelish, Lord Protector of the Vale."

From his perch at the stand of the crown prosecutor, Littlefinger bowed. "His Majesty and Her Highness humble me with such a solemn assignment." He spared a quick meeting of gazes with Sansa and Lady Catelyn - so imperceptible that only the targets of the looks realized them - and a satisfied smirk at Lord Royce, his former rival. The old man simmered in the stands, but said nothing.

Continuing, Jon began to outline the structure of the trial. "The judges today will consist of myself and the Empress Daenerys. If we are not present, the judges will consist of Lord Varys, the Lady Margaery Stark of Winterfell, and the Lord Hand Tyrion Lannister, who shall serve as chief judge of
the proceedings." All had accepted the format at a small council meeting earlier in the week. "If there are no further questions, we shall begin."

Licking his lips, body coursing with pure, prideful exhilaration, Littlefinger stood. "Permission to call the first prisoner, your Majesty?"

"You may," Jon answered.

"Presenting before their Majesties," Baelish announced to those assembled. "False Maester Qyburn, former Master of Whisperers to the usurper Joffrey." The great doors opened as the Unsullied dragged in the first defendant of the day...

"Are you sure about this?" A steady gust of westerly trade winds blew in from Blackwater Bay. Horrible for Catelyn's styled northern bun, but perfect flying weather. She crossed her arms, squinting in the bright sun. "They are barely seven."

Daenerys watched as Jon, Robb, and Grey Worm wrapped strands of thick rope around Balerion and Rhaegal's neck. It seemed undignified for the Emperor and the Commander of the de facto imperial guard to do, but no other had the guts to approach the massive dragons - no other would be tolerated enough by them to do so, in all fairness. "They are being trained in swordsmanship and politics already," she told the worried grandmother. Lady Catelyn seemed to be perfectly hewing to the atonement that Dany had insisted years ago in Meereen. The twins adored her, and she and Jon had buried the hatchet in the Highgarden campaign.

"They are the prince and princess, and our family. The risk isn't worth it."

"They are blood of the dragon," replied the Empress as Jon tested how taut the ropes were. "As the future of the Empire, they must be dragonriders."

Leaning on his cane, hobbled by age but mind as sharp as ever, Aemon allowed his worries to collapse in the embrace of his family - long thought dead. "There are six dragons, and only two dragonriders. A dragon alone in the world is a terrible thing."

Laughing at Aemon's spot on comment, Dany watched as Rhaegar and Arya ran to their father. The twins looked on with excitement, barely containing their glee. "Besides, they are stubborn as anything." She couldn't help but grin.

"Aye, it could."

Jon nestled on his regular position on Rhaegal's back. 'Regular position dragonback.' He shook his head at the pure unlikelihood of it all. And not just the dragon. "Poppa, I don't need the rope." The pout on Arya's face reminded him of Dany... or his sister. "You're not wearing one."

He chucked his adorable daughter under the chin. "That's because I'm an expert, while this is your first time." Jon wrapped his arms around her. "You're quite precious to me, my little wolf." Kissing her head, he began tickling her lightly.

"Poppa... stop..." Arya giggled.

Looking over, he noticed Daenerys smiling widely at him as she helped their son get settled. This was how it was supposed to be - something Jon never thought he would ever have but one he now
couldn't live without. When Dany nodded, he knew it was time. 'Boy,' he mentally told Rhaegal, rubbing his scales. 'Listen to your sister today, but don't do anything too crazy.' His dragon let out a low hum in recognition. "Alright, little wolf," Jon whispered in her ear. "Grip the spines tightly." They both did. "Say 'sōvegon.'"

Arya braced herself. "Sōvegon… ahhhhhh!" With a roar, Rhaegal reared on his hind legs and ran along the beach, wings flapping as he took to the sky. Balerion roared with his brother, ascending into the air behind him.

The wind whipped through them, chilling them to the bone. But they were blood of the dragon, heating them pleasantly. Little hands clutched tightly, frantically to the spines, earlier bravado and excitement disappearing in the face of speed and altitude. The dragons caught onto it, working to slow themselves and avoid advanced maneuvers.

Soon, however, they had settled into a cruise. The sun shone down, clouds scattered around in a picturesque portrait of Blackwater Bay. Fear gone, the twins watched it all with awe from their perches in front of their parents. Seeing a sight known only to the valyrian dragonriders.

Magical. Even to Jon and Daenerys, veteran dragonriders both, familiarity couldn't negate the magic of riding dragonback.

"Take control, sweetling," Dany told Rhaegar, yelling but it being faint in the roaring wind.

Rhaegar closed his eyes, mind feeling what Balerion felt - the connection not as strong as that with his rider, but enough. "Higher," he all but whispered, Balerion suddenly flapping his wings to drive further upward, passing through the fluffy white clouds. A shriek behind found Rhaegal, flapping till he fell beside his brother. Looking out at his father and sister, a mischievous thought came to Rhaegar. "Bank."

Looking out over the sheer expanse of water and coast, Arya didn't notice Balerion approach till he was only one wingtip away. She gasped as Rhaegal hissed at his brother, Balerion hooting in amusement. Rhaegar laughed, causing his sister to smirk. "Bank." The tables turned, Rhaegal now letting out his hoot of laughter.

Chuckling, heart heavy with pure contentment, Dany met Jon's gaze from across the gulf of sky. Just… so perfect. In the distance, Dragonstone loomed, the ancestral home of House Targaryen. "Alright, sweetling. Time to land." She mentally took control back, commanding her child to land. Balerion hooted, angling down in a gentle descent.

Mining crews, Davos Seaworth supervising them, looked up in quick succession at the pair of dragons that circled over the island, roaring. The old smuggler's lips curled up. The monarchs hadn't said they were arriving… meaning they were here for pleasure. 'To be young and in love,' he thought with a chuckle.

Landing with a thud, both dragons settled and leaned their shoulders down, allowing their riders to disembark. Untying the ropes, Jon and Dany watched the twins race off into the grassy fields, laughing and chattering about their first dragon ride. Both rubbed a hand down their children's scales. Rhaegal looked at Balerion, hooted once, and ascended into the sky of their home. Balerion followed not long after.

Now they were alone. "It is beautiful here," Daenerys said, wrapping her arms around Jon's waist as they stared at the gentle waves crashing against the base of the cliffs. She buried her face in his shoulder. "I wish we could live here forever."
Jon turned to look into her eyes. "When the fight is over, and we win, I'll bring our family here on the hottest days of the year. Escape the capitol - or perhaps just you and me. On dragonback for a calm night alone." Even with their responsibilities, the Emperor and Empress still had the opportunity and means to do what they pleased.

Gazing at him with love, Dany leaned up to kiss her husband, wrapping her arms around his neck as the kiss deepend.

"Ugh!" The twins both looked away, retching from disgust. "Muña and poppa have ugly bugglies!"

Dany pulled away, amusement on her face. "Ugly bugglies?"

A half-embarrassed, half-amused flush coated Jon's cheeks. "What we used to say every time we saw my father and Lady Stark affectionate. The… evil vapors of intimacy." Dany couldn't help but giggle. "Arya… or Robb… probably Arya."

Shaking her head at the absurdity of it all, Dany simply pulled him down for another kiss.

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Nails digging into the mattress, Arya bit her lip as she hurtled off the cliff. Her hips attempted to jerk but were pinned by strong hands to hold her still as she rode out her climax. "Fuck…" she gasped, heart thumping in her chest. "You are good at…"

She was cut off by her husband's lips on hers. Arya yelped in Gendry's mouth as he filled her. Him completely ready, her extra sensitive from his oral ministrations. He was so big, stretching her as deliciously as their first time. His tongue plundered her, Arya surrendering to him. Outside, never - only here did she let her stag completely dominate her.

Nails gripped his back, hard. It wouldn't be the first time, and he was fine with it. The little moans that entered his mouth spurred Gendry on, thrusting harder. Pounding her as he would against an anvil in his smith. Arya felt him hit a sensitive spot deep inside her core. She screamed, the angle and tempo shattering her completely. Shattering him as well

Now with two hearts racing, Gendry rolled off. He and Arya's cooling breaths filled the post-coital silence. 'Well…' As always, Arya had to make the first move. "I'm certainly glad I married you."

Gendry glanced over at her with a raised eyebrow. "So you can use me for sex? Is that it?" His tone was firm, but Baratheon eyes sparkling with mirth.

"Not just sex," she replied, sweetly. "You can also fetch things from the top of the cupboard."

Gendry let out a snort, to which she laughed. "Stop being such an idiot." Arya smacked his shoulder lightly.

Used to the petty insults - it was just Arya's way - Gendry smirked, watching her rise and enjoying the view of his wife. "If you want to use me for sex, I have no complaints. Lady Baratheon needs to relieve stress."

Enjoying the conversation, Arya's eyes darkened at the comment. "I'm no Lady."

Certain that Arya wouldn't inflict major bodily injury on her husband, Gendry decided to keep poking the Wolf. "Well you're gonna have to be. Wearing dresses, hosting parties at Storm's End, entertaining the various ladies of the Stormlands as they talk about clothes and gardening… oww!"

He rubbed the bicep that Arya had slammed her fist into.
"I said, I'm not a lady," Arya muttered. "Do you want to have sex with me again, idiot?"

Having the brain to look sheepishly away, Gendry shook his head. "I do. Apologies, not-Lady Baratheon."

Arya felt her anger leaving her. 'Fuck, why is he cute?' "I'm alright with that title." Fastening her tunic, she walked over to Gendry - still laying naked on the bed - and kissed him, deeply. "By the way, I married you cause I love you." She loved his beaming smile. "But you're still stupid." But she was still Arya.

Outside her chambers, the Wild Wolf wore her mask. Giving away nothing, intimidating in and of itself. But she was in a good mood that morning, beaming inwardly. She supposed her younger self would have skipped. Fresh from a morning of feverish lovemaking, heading to training with Grey Worm. She rather liked the dour Unsullied commander. Spiced up her sparring with additional skills. Arya did not want to sit down with the new court… painter, Jon called it, as she was scheduled to after training, but that couldn't hurt her cheery demeanor.

"Lady Arya." With two words her entire mood was ruined. Well, more the distinctive voice that said them. Putting on a mask, she turned to see Littlefinger walking behind her. He carried a ledger tucked underneath his arm, smug smile upon his lips. "Would you give me the pleasure of escorting you to the training grounds?"

The sight of him repulsed her. 'How did Sansa allow him to charm her?' she thought. Nevertheless, Arya would not be antagonistic. "I do not need an escort."

"I suppose you don't." To her dismay, Littlefinger made sure to walk beside her, intent to talk. "The great Arya Stark, slayer of the Chimera." Every word dripped with an unctuous, yet guarded flattery. "Many have tried, many stronger, more powerful men. But you succeeded where they failed."

"Bear in mind, Littlefinger," she said bluntly, just as she had at the tourney many years before. "Anyone who seeks to hurt my family will end the same as Joffrey. As the Freys. Winter will come for them." Arya tried to speak flatly, but anger tinged it just the same.

Petyr Baelish merely smiled. A smile as poisonous as tears of Lys. "Such is the job of all of us who follow our beloved Empress and Emperor." He took the ledger from underneath his arm, holding it in both hands. "Such as the assassin from the coronation at Riverrun."

Arya said nothing, but a nearly imperceptible widening of the eyes was caught by Littlefinger. "Oh, what about it?"

"Mysterious, isn't it? A servant girl, appears suddenly and then disappears. Poisons the Blackfish and nearly kills Her Highness. Almost like at Harrenhal during the War of the Four Kings, when Tywin Lannister's chief interrogator suddenly dropped dead. And then his cupbearer disappeared. Strange." Smile widening, Baelish bowed. "Do not worry. My investigation shall get to the bottom of it. Your brother and sister will be safe on my watch. Good day, Lady Arya." With that, he turned the corner.

Standing there, Arya's eyes narrowed. 'So Baelish wants to play this little game. Cunt.' He was still on her list.

She was abruptly bumped into by an old servant. "Oh, forgive me, my Lady." Carrying a stack of sheets, the servant continued down the hall. Arya stared after her. Even continuing to the training grounds, she couldn't shake a sense of suspicion. Perhaps Littlefinger… but perhaps something else entirely.
Tens of thousands of picks smacked into the ground, ice cracking and splintering. They worked in a
coordinated wave, drones programmed for one task and one task only. No need to eat. No need to
sleep. No need to even breath. A mass of walking corpses, working the land in one massive strip
mine into the earth.

A gathering of their ice blue overlords, watching the work from their perch on a nearby cliff, couldn't
help but ponder the futility of it all. Unlike the corpses below, their minds were sharp. Emotionless
but more calculating than the coldest psychopath. It made no sense to be digging into the ground.

But it was the command of their leader.

The Night King stood alone, unmoving. Lost in his own thoughts - normally imagining his
vengeance upon the world, about battle strategies and massacres to bring new meat for his army,
lately they were all about one matter. One person. One woman. The woman with the silver hair, so
much like his past.

Nevertheless, he still focused on the task at hand. "Have we reached the burial chamber?" he asked
his generals.

'No, sire. Not yet.'

'We continue until the chamber is reached.' Looking down at his belt, he removed something. A
shard of dragonglass. Recovered from Hardhome. He didn't know why he insisted on taking it at the
time… but now it all clicked together.

His generals, utterly obedient, nevertheless made their thoughts known to him. 'It seems far-fetched
for it to be here, sire.'

'It is here,' came the reply, eyes never leaving the wide expanse of ice and snow. Beyond it was the
Wall. Beyond was all of Westeros, ripe for the taking…

Beyond was her.

'You could have had a dragon, had you not hesitated…"

Hands gripped the dragonglass tightly. 'Do not mention that again.' Losing his humanity had killed
nearly all emotion within him, but at the mention of that drew what remained in a pure rage. One that
could power the greatest blizzard. Snow clouds swirled overhead, sky in a roaring tempest. 'Do.
Not.'

The generals cast a glanced at each other, and then back to their ruler. A distinctly human gesture -
from the most inhuman monsters conceived by man or god. 'Is she really worth it, sire? Worth all
your thoughts and plans?'

Silence. Nothing but the swirl of snow and howl of wind. 'Yes. She is.' None would understand.
Made from Craster's children, none had any true human life. He had, and would move mountains…
cover the earth in piles of corpses to get just a speck of it back.

'Sire.' The man once known as Marden Stark turned, expressionless but nevertheless exuding a sense
of malevolence from his icy blue eyes. 'We have found it.'

Had the Night King been human, a smile would have stretched across his face. Not one of humor.
'Good.' He clipped the dragonglass back to his belt.
It's fun writing the Night King with emotions and a backstory. Adds a unique element for the story ;)

And the trials and investigations begin, with Littlefinger at the helm. As... interesting as that is, watching Jon and Dany hold court together was satisfying.

Borrowing elements off s8ep1 and Avatar for the dragonback scene, only now it's a family scene. Jon and Dany need some lighthearted moments with the little wolves, and Maester Aemon can enjoy the twilight of his life with his family. I think he deserves that.

Damn Littlefinger, ruining Arya's good mood, lol.

Next time, the Trial of Tywin Lannister.
The Crown v. Tywin Lannister

Chapter Notes

Hi all. Here's another chapter of our collective catharsis.

I... I am absolutely... dear God. Seven seasons of character development. Seven seasons of plot and character development... all for nothing. All junked in an effort to "subvert expectations." We fell in love with Jon and Dany, while hating Cersei and fearing the Night King as the ultimate villain. Only what happened? The Night King ended up a one-episode throwaway villain. Cersei... they actually made the true Mad Queen into an expert strategist and then a victim. A victim, really?! She committed countless atrocities and they make her the one to feel sorry for. They took away Jon's reason for existence - he was set up to be Azor Ahai (I like Arya, I really do, but it was Jon who deserved to be the one).

And Dany... I weep for her character. First, they make her into her brother, ripping away her love for Jon in favor of some power-mad desire for the throne. Jon loves her. They can take the damn throne together and no one would bat an eye. And this. The same character who locks up her own dragons after they kill one child does not burn innocents. The whole thing of her character arc has been her balancing her ruthlessness with her gentle heart. They destroyed 7 years of developing her up into the woman she was.

All I can say is thank God for this website, where we actually love good writing and good source materiel.

Enjoy and review! Please let me know what y'all think. With the show immolating itself, I hope no one is discouraged from seeing my take on it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And tell me Lord Cerwyn, what happened after your father refused to pledge to a false King."

Whereas most who conducted trials would stay in their chairs, droning on endlessly, Petyr Baelish had a certain style about him. Dashing about the well of the court, asking animated questions and making wild, sweeping gestures with his hands. One couldn't help but be riveted by it. "After he refused to betray House Stark of Winterfell?"

From the witness stand, Lord Cley Cerwyn glared murderously at the defendant before the tribunal. "He ordered my father to be burned alive. And then watched with pleasure as he screamed his death in the flames." Cerwyn was the last Northern Lord - excluding Robb Stark - left in King's Landing, the others long since heading back to the Imperial Army headquarters and Moat Cailin. But he remained, insisting to give testimony against the man that murdered his father.

The Emperor and Empress oversaw the trial today, and it was clear to the maze of onlookers as to why. Viserys Targaryen had always dreamed of how he would return to the Red Keep. Such dreams had been at the head of a Dothraki horde or a Northern army, but reality found him in chains in front of a tribunal that included his sister and Jon Snow. He couldn't decide which was more humiliating.

"And who had given the order for this burning?"
"It was Ramsay! That traitor!" Viserys' screech echoed through the hall. He was normally silent, but sometimes erupted.

Jon slammed his fist against the arm of the Dragonwolf Throne. "The prisoner will keep silent unless called on to speak!"

"You give me no orders, bastard! Northern cunt! Pimp!" It was obvious that all sanity had left him. 'When a Targaryen is born, the gods flip a coin.' Daenerys' had landed on greatness. Viserys' on madness, only here it came off to all as pathetic.

Dany had enough. "Guards, restrain the prisoner." The Unsullied gladly obeyed their Mhysa. "One more word and you will be gagged." That seemed to calm things. "Answer the question, Lord Cerwyn."

"Of course, your Highness. It was the Mad Prince."

"The record will reflect that the witness identified the prisoner as the one that committed the crime," Littlefinger stated smugly.

"I've heard enough." Eyes shifted to the Empress. "I feel that enough evidence has been presented to head to verdict." She glanced at Jon. "Do you concur, your Majesty?"

Jon nodded. "Aye, I do." It was a foregone conclusion. "As Emperor, I vote guilty."

"As Empress, I vote guilty." Eight years before, she had looked up at him with eyes full of fear, hoping not to wake the dragon. Now, the position was inverted. Daenerys, her husband and the true Targaryen ruler by her side - sharing the throne of Westeros between them - stared down at her brother. "Viserys Blackfyre, the Imperial Court finds you guilty of murder and treason..."

"You cannot kill the dragon, bastard's slut!" he hissed, struggling against the grip of the guards.

"...and sentence you to die."

Hand on his sword, Ser Jorah advanced to carry out the sentence - just as he or Grey Worm had done for countless traitors and war criminals. All justified. All deaths that neither lost sleep over...

"Stop." He stilled, turning his head to see the Emperor rise. "I must do the deed."

Daenerys, face allowing her concern to show. "Jon..."

"It has to be me." Grasping her hand, kissing it, he left her to walk down to the well of the throne room. "He is my kin. If I am to condemn him to death, then I must be the one to swing the sword." Dany retook her seat, hands plopping in her lap and watching her husband. So honorable, even if it kills him inside. 'But would he be the man I love without his honor?' She knew the answer.

Stepping gingerly, boots clicking along the fine marble tile, Jon said nothing as the guards dragged a squirming Viserys to a block of wood - brought up specifically for this moment. He was forced upon it, the Mad Prince screaming in pain as one grabbed his disfigured hand to force it down. Teeth gritted, his gaze met Jon's. "Any last words to say, uncle?"

"You are no kin of mine."

Drawing Longclaw from its scabbard, Jon looked down on Viserys. Dany's insane, incompetent brother. His uncle. Looking into his eyes, seeing the dark indigo sparkling with a fiery madness that he had so prayed that would never grace Dany's, Jon felt nothing but contempt for this husk of a man. A disgrace to House Targaryen. "Viserys," he said, denying him any honor from a name. "In
the name of Daenerys of House Targaryen, first of her name, Empress of the Targaryen Empire, I sentence thee to die."

Pure hate gazed back at him. In that one moment, Jon knew what his grandfather Rickard Stark saw as the Mad King sentenced him to die. "You may kill me, but you will always be a bastard."

Atop the throne, Daenerys never hated her brother more than this moment. "Kill him," she commanded, lips quivering with dragonfire.

Before him, Jon found himself transported back in time. To when the oafish coward Janos Slynt was placed before him, before Longclaw's blade. Jon hadn't wanted to kill him, simply wanting the coward to be banished from his sight in disgust. But Viserys. The embodiment of what drove his family to near extinction - what drove Daenerys into hiding and near assassination on multiple occasions - Jon felt the same hate towards him reflected back.

In an instant, a flash of Valyrian steel cut through the air to clunk against wood below. Head rolling across the stone floor, Jon stood there before the decapitated body of his uncle. Breathing heavily, the magnitude of what was done coming to him. He wordlessly handed Longclaw to Ollie before striding back to the throne.

"May the record state that the sentence was carried out by His Majesty." Littlefinger was nothing but thorough.

As Ollie wiped his uncle's blood off Longclaw, Jon took his seat on the Dragonwolf Throne. He felt heavy, the weight of it all falling upon him. 'My uncle.' He killed his own uncle. It was his responsibility - "He who passes the sentence must swing the sword" - and gods the cunt deserved it, but… The killing just never stopped. All he had done was kill. From no names to his own kin.

"I'm good at fighting, but I hate doing it."

But he had enjoyed it for the slightest moment. Enjoyed slicing Viserys' head off… Jon felt disgusted with himself, and weary with it all.

Soft fingers squeezing his hand brought Jon out of his brooding. Glancing to his right, Daenerys watched him intently. Her mouth was curled in a queenly glower, but her eyes sparkled with concern. With love. It was like energy filled him, his skin doused in fire after hours in a frozen lake. "Lord Baelish," he finally said. "Who is next?"

Littlefinger peered at the list in front of him. A ghost of a grin formed. "Tywin Lannister, your Majesty."

Jon fought a groan. "We will begin his trial in the morning." Daenerys caught his irritation and stress, speaking up. Someone that important needed a whole day to himself. "The court is adjourned till tomorrow." The page smacked his staff on the floor, all rising as the Emperor and Empress made their way out.

"The north will rest easy tonight now that Viserys is no more." From what Tyrion had heard from Ser Jorah, the middle child of the Mad King was a stupider chip off the old block - a 'right cunt' if you asked any objective northerner. "Cley Cerwyn will undoubtedly spread the word faster than ravens." He was leaving tonight for Moat Cailin, with his men, King's Landing's stocks of wildfire, and the Queenshield's men bound for the Wall.

Varys followed by his side, both behind their monarchs. "My worry is more on those not in the
dungeons. Lady Sansa thinks that there are many Lannister agents still remaining, and my little birds seem to concur. Littlefinger is investigating, but I'd like to do some digging on my own."

"Do it," Dany stated, distracted. The Emperor said nothing.

"And the court painter applicant is here," Tyrion cut in with some calm news as they entered the inner solar. "I think you'll like your portraits."

Entering, Jon immediately went to before the fireplace. It was empty on this cool day in the capitol, but Jon stared at it nonetheless. Hunched over, he braced his arms atop the bannister, sagging from the weight of it all.

All noticed by Daenerys, her husband close to the breaking point. "This will be continued later." Her tone left no room to counter. When Varys and Tyrion failed to obey her command immediately, her tone rose. "Leave, now!" The Hand and Master of Whisperers left with all haste, knowing it was wise not to displease the Mother of Dragons.

Sighing, Tyrion rolled the kinks out of his neck. "We saw two forms of Fire and Blood today, my cockless friend. One a pathetic imitation of his more infamous father…"

"...And the other most vicious only when her husband or children are hurt." In all his years advising Kings, from the vicious, to the idiots, to the vicious idiots, Varys had never seen anything like it. "Our Empress' heart has survived everything thrown at it, largely due to our Emperor."

"And someone who literally died from betrayal has stayed true to himself. Two kind souls, not deserving of any of this." Childless himself, the Imp often saw the two majesties as sort of paternal manner. When they were pained, he was pained. "Such a shame, Varys, what is happening to their Majesties." They proceeded down the hallway, down the row of statues of past Targaryen Kings, restored to their rightful place. "All they have is the best of intentions, and yet they are driven to madness by those with the worst." Oh did he know about those with the worst of intentions.

"Only those that do not truly wish to rule prove to be good at it." Varys reflected on the first time he entered these halls, during the final years of Aegon V's rule. "Aemon Targaryen truly desired to forego the throne, and he did. Perhaps the pain of the last decades would not have happened had he accepted his birthright?"

"And yet we wouldn't have had Emperor Jon and Empress Daenerys." Tyrion chuckled. "We are truly living in momentous times, Varys. Even without an army of dead men marching south to wipe us all out, change is in the air."

"We chose wisely in who to follow, at least at the end. They share the same gentle heart and moral compass, placing them above we schemers and sadists."

It was the truth, Tyrion knew. Few came to power without selling their souls to despair or madness. "They did, and they check their worst impulses. Daenerys protects Jon from indecisive brooding, and Jon tempers the Targaryen ruthlessness in Daenerys. I am a lucky man to be in their confidence, and fear for those who would get in their way."

The normally emotionless eunuch looked down at the Imp with a ghost of a smile. "I now know the meaning of the words in the fire long ago. 'You will die in a foreign land, my son,'" he recited, burned in his memory. "But rejoice, for you will do so gladly, in a land called Empire.' The voice was right, Tyrion. We've been lucky, but it is fortitude that nurtures such luck." Varys disappeared down a dark corridor, leaving Tyrion mystified at the cryptic statement.
As soon as the doors were closed, Daenerys threw her arms around Jon and pulled his head to her shoulder. "Oh Jon." She rubbed his back, feeling the heat of unshed tears. "You did right. You did right," she murmured over and over into his ear.

"I... I enjoyed killing him." Jon's voice was hoarse. "He was my uncle and I enjoyed slicing his head off."

"Viserys brought it on himself. I showed him mercy even when he threatened our twins, and yet he allied with a sadist in order to rape and massacre his way to the Iron Throne."

"He was still my family." Jon could just picture it. His grandfather murdering his other grandfather, raping his grandmother... "I fear I'm becoming the Mad King."

Horror gripped Dany's expression. "What, oh gods, no!" She kissed him, endlessly, fighting to get her message across. "You are a good man. Why would you even think that?!"

"It is in my blood... the madness."

"You are not mad. You are nothing like him." She gazed into his eyes, willing the thoughts of the terrible, evil past away. So beaten down for being a bastard, it only now occurred to him that he was truly a dragon. "If we look back, we are lost."

Jon's eyes still held an infinite weariness. "You know what they say. The coin flips..."

"And one half is greatness, Jon. That is you." Hands on his cheeks, she gazed into his weary grey eyes. "We don't fight for power. For a meaningless throne. We fight for our people, so that they may live in a better world than the shit one they've always known. So that the wheel never crushes them, nor that they may never know chains." Her hand traced his scar over his shirt. "You took a knife in the heart for your people. You are a good man, a good emperor." Dany took his hand and put it over her heart. "My emperor."

He leaned in for another kiss, quenching the emptiness of his soul with Daenerys. "Promise me, Dany. If I become mad..."

"You won't."

"Promise you'll take Saracen and do the deed." Tears pricked in Dany's eyes. "Please..." His words trailed off as they just stood there, swaying softly.

Gently, Dany pulled her husband towards their outer solar. 'Perhaps looking at the portraits would cleanse his mind?'

The artist had arranged two large canvasses - nearly reaching the ceiling - with drapes covering them. He was the same one from Meereen that Jon had so admired, and spent his time in White Harbor during the final stage of the Emperor's War honing his craft with images of the north. Now, he pushed for something far grander. "Your Majesties, I hope all is to your liking."

Daenerys gasped as the drape fell from the canvas, exposing the painting to light once again. "My gods..." The artist had truly created a masterpiece. Jon was posed in his battle armor as a decisive conqueror, black cloak with a red tinge draped over him in a billowing mass - the paint was so fine, she could even pick out the strands of fur on the cloak. One hand extended out to touch the top of a northern helmet behind him, the other gripping the hilt of Longlaw tied to his belt. What captured Dany the most was the expression. She looked with awe at Jon's brooding face peering out, with warmer touches of red reserved only for the full lips and cheeks. His grey eyes shined with an emotion of strength, one she fell in love with. "It looks just like you, my love." Everyone would
know what the great Jon Targaryen looked like in his prime. The man who had won the heart of the Mother of Dragons.

Jon didn't hear her. Too transfixed by Dany's portrait. Crown atop her braided head, she stood only feet away from the Iron Throne itself. One hand extended out, palm open in a gesture of grand altruism. The other rested on the pleats of her black battledress. Draped over her shoulders was a blood crimson royal robe, combining with the dress as the colors of House Targaryen. Silver jewels graced Dany's form - colored the same as her hair - but the one that stood out to Jon was the chain draped across her chest. The clasp was a direwolf's head. The sigil of House Stark. And set in her face were her violet eyes. The artist had captured the contrast of her, the pale colors set in a hard edge of a strong ruler, while the eyes radiated warmth. Love. Caring. The same gaze Dany gave him, one that could melt him in his most brooding.

The first person to truly show that to him. To give him a home. To prove him not merely a bastard named Snow… or a madman named Targaryen. Perhaps she would be his salvation from a horrible fate, and he hers.

Smiling at his reaction, Dany turned to the artist. "I believe the Emperor approves. If you can produce more like these, then you shall be the official painter of the court."

The Meereenese artist bowed low, gratefully. "Thank you, Mhysa. It is the honor of a lifetime."

Soon, they were alone. Dany looked once more at her portrait. "I do look pretty good there, don't I?" Jon didn't answer, merely enveloping her in his arms. She returned his embrace, looking up. "Jon…"

"I love you, Dany. You gave me a home."

His words of affection, of love, they melted her. This perfect man, one of kindness, honor, bravery, and strength, devoted to her more than even her dragons. So perfect, only for the world to use every opportunity to destroy him. 'He'd literally take a knife for his people.' If he had to die for her, he would in an instant. It broke her heart to think about, but at least she could give him the love he deserved. "You gave me a home as well, my love." Dany kissed him, deeply.

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Fist hovering barely an inch from the wood of the door, Jaime Lannister hesitated. A man that rarely hesitated. Trained by the Sword of the Morning and Barristan the Bold, he was used to making bullheaded, aggressive decisions. 'Perhaps that is what got me in hot water?' But this was not out of turning over a new leaf. Jaime just didn't know what he would say… simply standing there out of fear.

All was set for the Night's Watch Detachment of the Imperial Army to march out. Ghiscari volunteers, the Brotherhood Without Banners, the Fiery Hand irregulars that Kinvara had brought from Essos, and the remnants of the City Watch of King's Landing. Five thousand men ready to defend Castle Black, all under his command. Jaime figured he'd be afraid of the dead men, for the image of the snarling corpse in the dragonpit - generally with Cersei's face - haunted his very dreams, but he wasn't at the moment. Instead, fearful of a crippled boy. The one he was here to see.

As he was about to knock, the door opened. Jaime was face to face with Littlefinger. The Master of Laws nodded at him, smiling. "Lord Lannister."

Jaime scowled. "Lord Baelish." The oily, two-bit aristocrat slid past him toward whatever hole he dug for himself in the palace. Now it was only two within the room. Jaime bowed reverently to its occupant. "Lord Stark, may I have permission to enter?"
From his wheelchair, Bran peered out to him. "Of course, Lord Lannister. Please enter." Jaime complied with the invitation, closing the door behind him. He held a gaze on Jaime, one of infinite knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom to last thousands of lifetimes. "I am not Lord Stark, though. That honor belongs to my brother. You may call me Bran, though only half of me bares that name."

"Alright… Bran," Jaime replied hesitantly, sitting down. Not able to parse that statement for its true meaning. The boy had a dagger rested upon his lap, fingers occasionally fiddling with it - the only source of actual humanity Jaime could see. "Where'd you get that?" he asked, recognizing Valyrian steel anywhere.

Bran looked up at him, placid. "Lord Baelish wanted me to have it, as a gift."

He furrowed his brows. "Give away a Valyrian steel dagger?" Even Littlefinger wouldn't give away something so valuable…

"It was the blade that nearly killed me." Bran's voice was flippant as well as emotionless, as if he spoke of a fond childhood memory rather than his near assassination. "While I was asleep in my bed. Only mother and Summer kept me alive… a dagger supposedly owned by Tyrion Lannister." He looked at Jaime. "Why would he seek my death, Ser Jaime?"

There was no accusation in Bran's voice, but Jaime felt it all the same. "You didn't tell them." He stared at Bran, trying to see if any emotion flickered in the boy's eyes. "You knew it was me in the tower, and yet you said nothing."

No emotion was forthcoming. "My brother Robb already wanted you dead. I don't even think Sansa or Daenerys would stand in the way of your death or imprisonment if I told them the truth."

"Don't you want justice, Bran?" He didn't want to die, but Jaime just couldn't let it go. Couldn't let go of the guilt that started the whole war and chaos. "For your legs. For your family? I caused this entire war… just for…"

"Just for a woman who you loved, but who truly didn't reciprocate?" As always, Bran knew everything. "You weren't the cause of the war, Ser Jaime. Events were in play long before that."

Golden eyes widened. 'Jon Arryn?' So he was poisoned after all. In the end, it still didn't matter. "I deserve your hate. Deserve the Emperor's justice."

"What good would that do?" Bran looked out the window. "Just because you are here means you aren't your sister. Without your actions, I would never have been what I am. Out of the tragedy came the Dawn… so it seems I have to thank you."

Jaime blinked. "What? Why would it be you who…"

Bran cut him off. "I'm not sure yet, Ser Jaime. But I know that we both have our parts to play. Parts so vital that they hold the future of the living in their hands."

"I don't deserve it." A lifetime of running away from his decisions. Of welding himself to a woman he loved, allowing it to give him meaning… all of it came crashing down as he journeyed with Brienne, losing his hand and all his walls. Reevaluating his life as his son destroyed everything good and just in the Seven Kingdoms. Time to atone for his misdeeds, only for the victim of his greatest misdeed to forgive him just like that. "I deserve to suffer for my past sins."

"If I look back, I am lost." There was a terse silence. "The past is behind us. All that remains is the future, a future that will not exist unless we play our parts."
"How would I…"

"When the time is right," Bran smiled, "You will find out."

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Excusing the witness from the stand, Littlefinger looked at the Emperor and Empress, then at the watching packed audience, and then back to his monarchs. "And so it is shown, your majesties, the prisoner gave the order for Gregor Clegane to rape and murder Elia Martell and her children with Crown Prince Rhaegar Targaryen. A direct assault upon the Imperial family itself." He spread his hands wide, theatrical gestures that the crowd ate up. "All for the claims of a usurper!"

Tywin Lannister watched from the prisoner's perch. Hands gripping the lip, he strained himself to stand upright with the flimsy prosthetic attached weakly to his stump. The epitome of a fallen man, but no ordinary prisoner. Even in pain and with legacy toppled, he was still a lion. Still a lord.

Fire made flesh, the look in Jon's eyes could melt Valyrian steel. "Is this the last witness, Lord Baelish?" he ground out through clenched teeth. The charges for Tywin Lannister were long and the evidence ironclad. Hours of testimony ranging from the burning of Dorne, the carrying out of Joffrey's reign of terror, the war crimes during the War of the Four Kings - Arya being a star witness in this regard - and the murder of the Targaryen children had left many exhausted and hateful. Leaving Jon boiling with rage that would have overheated even Balerion.


"I believe we may proceed to verdict," Jon told his wife.

Unlike her husband, Daenerys was pure ice. Channeling her adoptive house. "Do you have anything to say for yourself, Lord Lannister?"

Glaring back, Tywin did not give the Targaryens an inch. "Nothing that would change your minds."

"Nothing could change Joffrey's mind," the Empress shot back. "Give us some modicum of regret, and we may accede to your son's proposal." Tyrion had tried to broker a deal, to send him to the wall rather than this. Tywin refused, but the Imp was in the throne room nonetheless. Heartbreak on his face.

"I know I will never get a fair trial from the likes of you," Tywin thundered. "I saw the madness of your father, your grandfather - my once friend - and there are no regrets within me that I tried to rid the world of House Targaryen and the death and destruction it caused. Of the Mad King reborn in the two in front of me."

Where once it would have crippled him inside, sent him to a brooding isolation, Jon sat with steel. "You served the Mad King reborn. The King that you sat next to at the dragonpit only months ago." Refusing to budge. "You don't deserve a fair trial, but House Targaryen gives you one nonetheless."

"Murdering my niece and nephew," hissed Daenerys. "Assisting Joffrey in the enslavement of millions. Nearly murdering my own children. The death and destruction of the last few decades rests on your feet, Tywin Lannister. There is nothing before us that precludes the finding of your guilt."

In one moment, the pain and rage of weeks in the dungeons evaporated from him. The fear of a red demon leaving. Tywin looked the epitome of the man that destroyed the Reynes - that made Dorne howl. "Oh, there is, my Empress. If I am to be guilty, then let the gods decide my fate."

"Father, please," Tyrion pleaded. He had already lost his sister to complete madness - a nephew to its
fires and a niece as collateral damage. Tywin may have hated him, but he was still his father. "Confess and take the black. Please."

"Shut your mouth, demonspawn," Tywin thundered. "I will not have you decide my fate as you decided your mother's." Tyrion hung his head, defeated. The former Lord of Casterly Rock locked eyes with Daenerys, mutual hate reflected in both. "The gods will be my judge. I demand a trial by combat, with Ser Gregor Clegane as my champion!"

The hall watched in silence as the Empress sat, normally warm and kind eyes blazing fire and blood. Trials by combat were an ancient rite, but each time they had been requested the Emperor denied them with the Empress silent. Now, the ball was in Dany's court…

"Very well. It shall be granted." Uproar.

Chapter End Notes

We really needed a trial by combat in the story. One thing that was lacking.

Viserys is finally dead. He didn't deserve to be more in the story than as a passing mention. However, it gave me an opportunity to delve more into Jon. The show refused to look into his true ancestry rather than as a means to push Dany to madness (completely OOC). They never looked as to how it would affect him. To make him feel not just pain at not being Ned Stark's, but also to make him feel the burden of a Targaryen. For a good man as him, he would worry about being a Mad King.

I think Dany, Tyrion, and Varys were far more in character here. Especially Dany. She and Jon truly have good hearts. Doesn't work well with the nest of vipers that is the game of thrones.

The paintings were a fun little aside due to my love of art history. Jon's is based of Titian's Philip II of Span, while Dany's is based of Rotokov's Catherine the Great.

Next time, a trial by combat. Any guesses as to who the champion will be for House Targaryen? I'll update Thursday if I can get 15 comments :D
The She-Viper

Chapter Notes

Hi all. Thank you so much for your wonderful comments! Please keep them coming!

Just to bring up, I am toying with the idea of a collaborative story (in addition to some other ideas) with another GoT writer on here and on fanfiction. A Jonerys story where Jon accepts Stannis’ offer in season 5 to be legitimized and fight for him. If I end up writing it with my collaborator, can I count on all of y’all giving it a look? :D

Enjoy and review! Please let me know what y’all think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lord Hand, it is an honor…”

Tyrion waved off the obsequious, sandy-haired major domo. “I know, I know. My presence brings glorious tidings to this simple establishment, yes, yes. I’ve heard the same in whorehouses from Winterfell to Meereen.” The trite fawning got old quickly. “I am here for two of your current patrons.”

“I am sorry,” the blonde said, furrowing his brows. “But Lord Petyr Baelish prides himself on granting his clients confidentiality…”

“You seem to be continuing to talk, which I don’t like.” Normally Tyrion would be more politic about it, but Littlefinger’s subordinates were just as oily as he was. ‘If he wasn’t so busy, he’d probably be here peeping on everyone.’ It irritated him. “See this man?” He pointed behind to Grey Worm. “He is Unsullied. They stood against the Golden Company and ten thousand knights at Highgarden and didn’t bat an inch. You do not want to get in the way of them.” Grey worm took that moment to narrow his eyes at the functionary.

He gulped. “But of course. They are in the red room… only for the most honored of guests.” He scurried off, knowing Tyrion could find his way.

The two men proceeded through the brothel, which was quite busy - through good kings, idiot kings, vicious kings, and vicious idiot kings, flesh peddlers could always count on business. “There were only five thousand horse at Highgarden,” Grey Worm corrected. “And they fought hoplites.”

“Hyperbole, my dear Grey Worm. You have to stop taking things so literally.” Tyrion drooled. A masculine growl, followed by a feminine giggle, left one of the rooms they passed. “You know, there’s no need for you to be here. I could have brought Jorah, or literally anyone else.” The fact that Grey Worm insisted to come here puzzled Tyrion to no end.

The Unsullied commander glowered. “Mountain kill Empress Daenerys family. She want champion, so I get her champion myself.” He had volunteered, but the Empress denied, not about to risk Missandei’s man beyond what was necessary. “Besides, I not tempted.”

“That’s cause you have a woman back at the keep that could put most of these to shame.” Tyrion became aware of Grey Worm’s glare directed to him. “What? It’s a compliment.”
Nestled in the back of Littlefinger’s brothel, Tyrion had experience with the Red Room. He had visited it himself during the years prior to King Robert’s visit to Winterfell, and it had been where he rewarded Podrick for his faithful service - proving he had a magic cock. Littlefinger only rented it out to the highest paying clients… and the person he wished to see was certainly the highest paying of all of them. Pushing the curtains back, he could already hear the multiple girlish giggles… along with a throaty, seductive laugh of a lady.

“Interrupting something?” the Imp finally said, arms crossed and a smirk on his face. Two women, a blonde and redhead - both pale as chalk - shot up. From the shy and modest expressions, they were clearly new acquisitions by Baelish. “Don’t worry, I’ll only be a moment.”

A groan left the lips of the previously happy man. “Go,” Bronn of the Blackwater groaned. “But I’ll expect you two back.” The girls frittered away, covering their nakedness. Upon the large bed rested a shirtless Ser Bronn, as well as a rumpled but otherwise clothed Tyene Martell. ‘Just like her father,’ Tyrion thought, amused. “For someone as… notorious as you, Tyrion, why must you interrupt my good times?”

Tyrion couldn’t help but chuckle. “Well, well. Ser Bronn, your betrothed is making a Martell out of you yet.” His chuckles continued at the obscene gesture Bronn threw his way. “Though, a true Martell would have men as well as women in his bed.”

“There’s still time,” Tyene grinned, earning an eye roll from the former sellsword.

“I’ll stick to the ladies, thank you.” Bronn lightly thumped Tyene on the arm, knowing that she could take it. “Preferably this lady.”

Tyene made a kissy face at him, and winked at Tyrion while Bronn wasn’t looking. “So, what brings you here that couldn’t wait for me to finish, Lord Hand?”

Clearing his throat, the Hand to the Empress pulled a up stool and took a seat upon it. Bronn grumbled something about it taking too long, Tyene silencing him with a punch to the shoulder. “As you know, my father has called for a trial by combat to determine his guilt.”

Her feline satisfaction changed to a snarl. “If you wish for my sympathies for your father’s plight, you’ve come to the wrong person.” Tywin Lannister had the unenviable distinction of topping the murder of Elia Martell in the eyes of Dornish hate. “Frankly, I’m shocked Her Majesty allowed this to happen.”

Tyrion chafed and Grey Worm scowled at the criticism of Daenerys, but they let it go. Their Empress was not Joffrey… or even Robert. She didn’t punish someone for criticism or hateful words. “Regardless, their Majesties need their champion.”

“No. Not just no, fuck no!” Bronn was adamant. “I am not fighting the fucking Mountain. I fought for you once, Tyrion, cause I could beat any of those pansy ass Vale fuckers with my eyes closed, but that hulking asshole… I just got my lady and my castle. I’m not doing it.”

“Her Majesty not ask for you, Ser Bronn.” Grey Worm cut to the heart of the matter. “She ask for you, Lady Martell.”

For once, both currently resting in the large bed were shocked speechless. “M… me?” Tyene finally sputtered.

“No. Not just no, fuck no!” Bronn was adamant. “I am not fighting the fucking Mountain. I fought for you once, Tyrion, cause I could beat any of those pansy ass Vale fuckers with my eyes closed, but that hulking asshole… I just got my lady and my castle. I’m not doing it.”

“Her Majesty not ask for you, Ser Bronn.” Grey Worm cut to the heart of the matter. “She ask for you, Lady Martell.”

For once, both currently resting in the large bed were shocked speechless. “M… me?” Tyene finally sputtered.

“Is this a fucking joke?” Bronn blinked, trying to process this.

“Empress Daenerys never joke,” Grey Worm said, flatly.
“Well…” Tyrion shrugged. Grey Worm and his complete loyalty. “Not about something like this, anyway.”

Bronn erupted out of the bed, face red with rage. “She’s not fuckin’ doing it!”

“Easy, Bronn.” Tyrion held up his hands. “It isn’t me asking, it is Her Majesty.”

“I don’t care of the Lord of Light and all the Old Gods fucking descended from snow white horses that shit gold to ask her, she isn’t…!”

“I accept.”

Three pairs of eyes swiveled to her. Grey Worm was emotionless, Tyrion’s was quizzical as he hadn’t thought she’d actually accept, while Bronn was completely incredulous - and tinted with fear. “That was quick,” Tyrion stated after a long silence.

The lady leaned forward, fire in her eyes. It would be my privilege to avenge my aunt and cousins. Their death is a blight in the history of Dorne, one needed to be rectified.” She laughed… sinisterly. There was no doubt she was a viper of Sunspear. “And killing him will only ensure Tywin Lannister’s death as well. Dorne will celebrate when I emerge victorious.”

Desperation in his voice, Bronn reached out and grabbed her hands. “Please… love. Don’t do this.” Tyrion stared at his longtime friend. Never had he seen the former sellsword so… vulnerable. “I don’t want to lose you to that… that…”

Tyene silenced him with a kiss. “I survived the damn Army of the Dead. I can survive Gregor Clegane. Besides,” she grinned. “My father taught me a thing or two. Now.” Tyene looked at Tyrion and Grey Worm. “If you’ll excuse me, the Lady of Sunspear wishes to enjoy the pleasures of this world with her betrothed.”

Leaving the couple to argue… or not argue, Tyrion and Grey Worm ducked through the curtian just as the girls returned. “Let this be a lesson about the Dornish. They like to fight and fuck, only.” Grey Worm merely grunted.

Sitting in front of the vanity table, Daenerys enjoyed the airy solitude of the Imperial chambers. Moonlight shone through the gossamer curtains, adding to the low firelight that shone against her silky locks. It was let out of her usual braid. Flowing free as she brushed it, just as Jon liked - how only Jon could truly see her with her guard down. How only he was entrusted with it.

Within her womb, the little one was rolling softly. Growing ever larger. Dany reached down with her free hand, stroking the bump underneath her nightgown. “Soon, my little dragonwolf. Three more moonturns.” The baby within her kicked in response, filling Dany with warmth. Pure happiness filled her. ‘How did I deserve such good fortune?’ Such a wonderful life?

Two arms wrapped around her from behind… and she stiffened. Jerked in her seat from terror. “Hey, hey my love.” Jon tilted her head back, looking into the violet eyes. “It’s me.”

Nightmare still haunting her occasionally, it was only the proof of Jon looking into her that calmed Dany down. “Oh Jon…” Fingers weaving into his raven locks, she brought him in for a kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He peered quizzically at his wife. “What’s wrong? Why are you so tense, my dragon?” Without urging, he rested his hands on her shoulder, kneading gently.
Daenerys’ head lolled back, a moan leaving her lips. “Oh gods… you have magic hands, Jon.” Hot on her skin, his fingers worked out knots and kinks she never knew she had. “You are perfect.”

Before, he would have just shot it down. Now, the Emperor merely smiled. “I’m glad you think so. Now tell me what’s wrong.”

‘He’s not giving up.’ “I’m just worried about Tyene… fighting the Mountain.” It was only a half lie - she did worry about that, but didn’t want to burden Jon with mere nightmares. He truly didn’t deserve it, and they were all worried about the Long Night, looming above like an evil shroud.

“She’s a strong fighter, you said so yourself.” He moved his hands to her upper back, caressing and working the pale skin. “But if you’re that worried, why did you name her as your champion.”

It was hard to think straight with Jon’s magic hands on her. “Because…” she finally said. “She’s the only one besides the Hound who truly despises Gregor Clegane on a personal level, and the Hound does not hold the key to Dorne in his hands. The key to eliminating any further discontent in the Seven Kingdoms.”

The Emperor chuckled. “This is why you are the Empress… because you are brilliant.” Daenerys smiled, pulling him down for another kiss.

Minutes later, the two were upon the bed, Dany holding her husband’s head between her breasts in a comforting embrace. Jon closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of her soft skin and rhythmic breathing against his head. “I think we should come up with names, my dragon.”

A wistful smile spread across Dany’s lips, falling more in love with her husband than she had been a mere five minutes before. “I believe that is a good idea, my wolf.” Her hand lazily breezed down his shoulder. “I think, if our child is a boy, he should have a northern name.”

“And a girl should have a Targaryen name.” He was still a northerner, but Jon wanted to honor Dany’s Valyrian ancestry - his ancestry. “Perhaps Rhaella, for your mother.”

“We already have one child named Rhaella, Jon.”

“True.” He furrowed his brows, thinking. “I like Alyssa, or Saera…”

It just seemed right to her. “Saera is beautiful. That’s the one.” Feeling a need to be even closer to him, Dany reached out for his shoulders, urging him up. Jon compiled without hesitation, nestling her head against his bare chest. “Mmmm… and what if our baby is a boy?”

He kissed the crown of her head, resting his hand on her swollen midsection. “I’ve always liked the name Benjen.”

“After your uncle?” At Jon’s nod, she smiled. “Prince Benjen Targaryen. Ben Targaryen.” It rolled off the tongue. “I like that.” Daenerys snuggled into the hard planes of his chest. “How did I get so lucky, Jon? I was never meant for this.” Sold like a broodmare… under the control of Viserys. At best, she would be in the position her mother was in during the last years of her life - not this… bliss.

“You’re Daenerys Stormborn, my love.” He looked into her eyes. “You make the once impossible happen.”

Leaning up, Dany pressed their lips together in a sweet kiss, arms looping around Jon’s neck. “Gods, you make me so happy, my dragonwolf.” It was now he that resumed the kiss.

As always between them, the kiss grew heated. The stress within him fueling an inner dragonfire,
and her pregnancy making her insatiable, the two dragons found themselves combusting into an inferno. “Fuck, Dany,” Jon gasped, feeling her soft hands clawing at his back and wrapping around his length.

“Make love to me, Jon.” The desire threatened to consume her. They had made love in the morning and twice the previous night - cries of pleasure a veritable typhoon within the Red Keep - but it was not enough. He could never be enough. “Attend to your Empress.”

He did not disappoint.

-------------------------------------------

Trumpets blared, heralding the thousands that crowded on the cliffside of the Red Keep to watch the coming show. Smallfolk pushed and shoved to get a glimpse of what would be the entertainment of the century: the infamous Gregor “The Mountain” Clegane fighting Tyene Martell, Sand Snake and Lady of Dorne. It turned itself into a veritable street fair, peddlers selling all manners of commemorative trinkets, food stands selling spiced wine, skewered pork, and roasted apples, and musicians plying their trade through witty, scathing ballads to the ‘Vicious Idiot Joffrey’ and whomever graced his small council. A grand old time for all.

Whatever highborn lords and ladies within King’s Landing were seated in rows closely overlooking the courtyard, where the fighting would be. The biggest Dothraki screamers the Imperial Army had lined the makeshift arena, ready to put the Mountain down if he went berserk, a tight cluster of a dozen Unsullied ringing the Imperial box lined with the three-headed dragon and direwolf banners. The Emperor’s direwolf, yawning in the heat, rested under the shade of the raised awning. No chances were being taken.

“You do not have to do this.” In spite of nearly two weeks of yelling, passive-aggressive silent treatments, and raw, animalistic fucking, Bronn still tried to convince Tyene to back out. “I am sure their Majesties can find someone else.”

Tyene took deep breaths, cracking her knuckles and rolling her neck. “No. I do this for my family. For my father, mother, and sisters. And cousins that I never will meet.”

Bonn furrowed his brows. “How do you think they’ll feel if the Mountain chops you in half?”

She leaned forward and kissed him. “I do not intend to die today.”

“Hey, snake bitch.” Head turning, Tyene found the scarred visage of Sandor Clegane, arms crossed over his chest. “I need a word,” he demanded gruffly.

Bonn narrowed his eyes at him. “I’d be careful of what you say to her…”

“Leave it.” Tyene silenced her betrothed with a finger to the lips. “What do you want, Hound?”

The former kingsguard turned reluctant-brotherhood mercenary stepped forward, an ugly sneer on his face. “So the fuckin’ Empress picked you over me, eh? Cunts sticking together or something like that?”

Tyene simply met his gaze. “And you speak of your monarch in such a manner?”

“What? She’s a she, so she’s got a fuckin’ cunt.” He laughed dryly at his own joke.

“So why are you here in front of me, Clegane? Angry that I stole your chance to send your brother to the deepest hell?”
Clegane snorted. “Aye, but I don’t care. I would have killed that motherfucker had that asshole Dondarrion hadn’t snuck in a blow.” Reaching to his belt, Sandor pulled out a small hunting knife, laying to rest Bronn’s fears of attack when he took it by the blade. “Here’s my knife. When you kill him, use this blade.” He laughed… a genuine laugh, though from him it seemed more a half-snarl. “The only thing that would piss Gregor off more than me killin’ him is a pretty little girl doing the deed with my childhood blade.”

Sharing a wry look with Bronn, Tyene grinned at the Hound and took the blade. It was as small as one of hers, only the steel thicker. “This will do quite nicely.”

The trumpets blared once more, this time in short, stucco bursts. “Presenting,” Missandei announced, “Their Majesties Emperor Jon and Empress Daenerys, first of their names of Houses Targaryen and Stark.” Through the doorway of the outer walls of the Red Keep, Jon and Dany exited arm in arm, clad in a simple grey gambeson and red dress respectively. The crowd went wild, cheering their names in a scene reminiscent of the people of New Valyria years before. In spite of the somber nature of the day, the monarchs smiled and waved to their people.

Each sat upon their mobile thrones, the rest of the highborns and dignitaries seating as well. “Bring out the prisoner,” announced Sansa. To jeers and boos from the crowd, Tywin was led out by Grey Worm and other Unsullied, hobbling on his prosthetic to the prisoner’s stand.

Tyrion watched with a grimace. A conflict of whether to hate the man who had made his childhood a living hell or grieve for the man that gave him life. “Are you sure you wish to do this, father?”

“You are no son of mine,” was the curt reply. And that was that.

“In the sight of the gods,” Sansa stated, speaking for the crown - in Tyrion’s stead, out of mercy for the poor soul - “We gather to judge the guilt of Tywin Lannister for the crimes of murder, high treason, and black magic. For the prisoner, his champion, Gregor of House Clegane.”

Led forth by the largest Dothraki that most had ever seen - even then towered by the champion - the Mountain’s chains were struck from his arms. He had been plucked from the dungeon for this, and he flexed his fingers with newfound freedom. Draped in armor, he made for his massive sword. Eyes sought out his brother with a hateful glare. Sandor responded with a middle finger that earned the roaring approval of the crowd.

“And for the crown, Tyene of House Martell. She-Viper of Sunspear and Lady of Dorne.” Dropping a savage kiss on Brone’s lips, Tyene advanced into the light. She dressed in the traditional costume of a Martell Warrior - head wrapped, golden tunic and trousers clasped tightly to her waist, and tall boots of the finest leather. Entering with style, Tyene cartwheeled into the courtyard, leaping into the air and landing on one foot - blades drawn, one her skinny dagger for which she fought in battle after battle, the other the hunting knife provided by the Hound. She was clearly the crowd’s favorite, judging from the wild screams coming from the smallfolk.

“Let the trial by combat begin!”

Snarling, the Mountain brought his sword down with all the force he could… only to pulverize the sandstone beneath. Tyene leapt out of the way, somersaulting to Clegane’s right, lashing out with her dagger in a crouch. The sharp metal pierced thin chain mail, spilling blood from bulky thigh muscle. The Mountain let out a hiss, swiping back with his thick arm and knocking Tyene to the ground.

Tywin grinned softly, watching the action. He didn’t care if he lived, only if his living managed to one up the Targaryens one last time.
Biting back a gasp, Daenerys could breathe again when Tyene managed to roll out of the way from another downward slice by the Mountain’s sword. She hurled herself upright, ignoring the aching bruise on her breast. Lashing out with her dagger, she stabbed through the join between breastplates. Clegane gasped out again with pain, gasp turning to a growl as he charged…

Only for Tyene to dance out of the way. “You know what you did to my family, motherfucker,” she shouted, each word dripping with her exotic accent. “You raped my Aunt Elia. You murdered her!” Another lunge. “You killed her children!” Might as well toy with him, annoy him to the point of blind rage. Besides, this was fun.

“Fuck, you!” Ser Gregor lashed out with his sword, only for Tyene to slash across his wrist with the hunting knife. Howling in pain, Clegane dropped the sword, the knife then slicing through the straps of his breastplate - an expert blow that didn’t cause damage but sent one plate clattering to the ground.

“Admit it, you fucker! Admit what you did!” Before she could continue, a mailed fist slammed into her gut, knocking the wind out of Tyene and sending her dagger to the ground next to his breastplate. But the Vipers of Sunspear were resilient. A left hook barely missed her face. But the hunting knife to the gut didn’t.

Sharp blade slicing through skin, flesh, and organs, the serrated steel ripping jagged edges through the Mountain’s body, the beast of a man stared at the bloody weapon with wide eyes. Recognition dawning on him through the pain. He swiveled to his brother, who wore a massive grin on his face. “Enjoy hells, cocksucking mother of shit!” he laughed.

Blood spurting from the massive open wound, Gregor Clegane knew his time was up… but he could still take the Martell bitch with him. Vision clouded with the red of pure rage - the knowledge that his shit of a brother’s childhood blade was the cause of his death infuriating him more than he had ever been - he lunged suddenly for Tyene. The She-Viper, preening to the crowd, only just managed to turn around before Clegane was on her. The crowd let out a collective gasp while Bronn was close to tears. Dany squeezing Jon’s hand in fear.

“I raped your aunt!” he snarled, punching her repeatedly in her stomach. “I murdered her! I killed her children!” Hands closed around her throat. “And now I killed her niece!”

Close to blacking out, a moment of clarity broke through the sudden pain when Tyene’s flailing hands grasped around something she had dropped. Dagger gripped tightly, she brought it with all her strength against Ser Gregor’s skull, piercing it to the hilt. The Mountain collapsed atop Tyene, body slack, while the She-Viper collapsed upon the ground as well.

Immediately, Bronn was racing onto the courtyard, dozens of nobles on their feet and Jon gritting his teeth from the pain of Dany’s squeeze. Kneeling by his betrothed, Bronn grasped her hand, feeling for a pulse. After interminable seconds, the onlookers watched as Bronn sighed in relief, falling upon the ground. “She’s alive!” He laughed, willing himself not to cry.

Raucous cheers broke out, the Empress smiling at the Emperor, all overjoyed except one - the prisoner, steeling himself.

Rising, looking out among the crowd, Daenerys gestured to the prisoner. “Before all who shall bear witness, the gods have provided their verdict to join with ours. Tywin of House Lannister has been found guilty of the crimes of murder, high treason, and black magic. I, Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen, Empress of the Targaryen Empire and Co-Protector of the Pax Targaryana, sentence thee to die.” Black violet sent nothing but contempt Tywin’s way. “I shall give you a choice. Do you choose the blade, or fire?” The crowd went wild, screaming for their favorite choice.
Based on the tenor of the smallfolk, a vast majority favored dragonfire. Above, Balerion screeched, his roar booming across the city.

Whatever hate Dany had for him was reflected right back. “I will not die as I saw your father send countless innocents to. I will die as a true Lord of the Westerlands. By cold, hard Valyrian steel!”

Silence reigning for a moment, the crowd roared. “Bring his head! Bring his head! Bring his head!” There was no doubt where their sympathies resided - with their Emperor and Empress, savoirs of the realm, providers of bread and peace.

Daenerys nodded. “And it shall be.” She turned to Jon. “Shall you do the honors, your Majesty?”

Jon nodded. “As my Empress commands.” Rising, he stepped slowly down the stairs to where Tywin was being manhandled by Grey Worm. A block had been strategically placed near the lip of the courtyard, overlooking the calm sea. Unlike Viserys’ nearly a month before, Tywin went with a stoic dignity. “Do you wish to entertain any mercy, Lord Tywin?”

“I will not beg for my life, Targaryen.” He closed his eyes. “I’ve seen too many beg your grandfather for mercy from the flames.”

The memory of the Mad King didn’t hurt Jon. He was nothing like Areys, and neither was Daenerys. “I don’t expect you to, Lannister,” the Emperor replied. “You are smart, and know pleas from you are outweighed by the screams of my brother and sister.” Drawing Longclaw, not one shred of remorse or apprehension within him, Jon felt the same deathly calm as Ned Stark had on the day he executed the Night’s Watch deserter.

“He who passes the sentence must swing the sword.”

“I, Jon Imperator of House Targaryen and Stark” he began, the image of his father flashing before his mind - both Rhaegar and Ned. “First of my name, Emperor of the Targaryen Empire and Co-Protector of the Pax Targaryana, carry out your sentence of death.”

The former Lord of Casterly Rock snorted. “Be quick about it, dragonspawn. I haven’t got all damn day.” And with those last words, the flash of Valyrian steel brought the long and eventful life of Tywin Lannister to an end.

Atop the world, life found itself in a constant struggle for existence. Cut off from the rest of Westeros by churning seas and a wall of ice and magic. Climate harsh and unforgiving, the constant gusts of snow and ice left only the hardiest life eeking out their meagre living. Until now.

Life in this hellscape was on its last legs. Extinguished by the grip of a supernatural force. A force, driven by fortitude and rage, determined to deliver the same hand of death to the entirety of the known world. From Last Hearth to Naath, Casterly Rock to Qarth, all would fall to the Night King if he had his way… but there was still one last summit to climb. One last objective to meet before he could finally exert his revenge on the world.

Walking quietly into the bowels of a cavern of ice and rock, two skeleton drones stepped out of his way - leaving a makeshift door of ice. There was no infrastructure in the land of always winter. No castles or walls or prisons, no real need of them, but when the need arose the Night King made due. Hand closing around the latch, he pushed it open against the groan of newly fallen snow from within.

Breath instantly condensing as it left his lungs, the tiny figure looked up as the door to his ‘cell’
opened. But instead of being the normal corpse guard, holding what meagre meal that an army of
dead men and ice demons would be able to provide, Chieftain Zilas of the Children of the Forest
found himself face to face with the Night King. His brainchild.

His creation.

“What are you doing here?” the former chieftain spat. The Night King said nothing. Face set in a
malevolent glare, he walked slowly to a ice-covered boulder and sat. Arms crossing. Zilas chafed at
the silence. “What do you want, demon?”

Lips were unmoving. Not a sound left the Night King… not any audible one in any case. ‘You
know what I want.’ This wasn’t the first time he spoke to his one prisoner. The only living thing that
came into his clutches that did not end up being turned into a foot soldier in his army. Both
understood each other - their wants and desires.

Zilas scoffed. “As if I would help you.” He took a simple wooden drinking cup, salvaged from
Hardhome, and threw it at the Night King. “You are nothing but a demon!”

‘You created me,’ was the simple response. ‘Perhaps that makes you the true demon.’

The last of the Children of the Forest hung his head in shame. “Perhaps it does.” A pair of black eyes
narrowed at the Night King. “You will not break me, Marden. You lust… you thirst to break
everything that stands in your way, but you will not break me.” He grabbed a clump of snow and
hurled it into the icy face. “I will never help you!”

Emotionless - just as Zilas had intended him to be - the Night King merely tilted his head. ‘We shall
see, old friend. We shall see.’

His slaves shutting the makeshift door behind him, Marden Stark began to ascend up the frozen path.
Feet kicked up drifts of snow in his wake. He stopped. Rage coursing through him, with a psionic
scream he slammed his fist against the ice wall - leaving cracks that etched several yards in every
direction.

He would reach his goal. By the old gods themselves, he would have what was his.

Chapter End Notes

That, my friends, is how you properly subvert expectations. I know y'all were hoping
for a Cleganebowl, but the image of Tyene killing the Mountain was just too good to
pass up. Plus the Hound got his revenge as well. I doubt he's complaining.

I think Tywin got what he deserved. Jon avenged his siblings. Dany avenged her niece
and nephew. And the Martells of Dorne avenged their family.

I couldn't help but put in a fluffy scene with our royal couple. They deserve some
happiness, don't they?

The Night King is still up to no good, and Dany is still having her nightmares. Not not
good.

Next time, a girl has no name ;)
Hi all. I know... the finale was awful. More people with greater reaches than me have savaged it, and all I can say is that we as the true fans must continue to show the world the true characterization of the show and the characters. All plot and character development for seven years brought Dany and Jon together, and one season of bad writing can't change that. Onward.

About my collaborative effort that I described last chapter, it is currently being written and will be posted soon. It's called Heart of the Blessed and will be a unique twist on a Jon/Dany love story in a world where Jon was legitimized by Stannis Baratheon after the Battle of Castle Black. I would love to see y'all giving me and BRuh4 (great guy; check out his story Regardless My End Is Your Beginning on ff and To Catch a Dream on Ao3) a follow and your thoughts once it is published :D

Enjoy and review! Please let me know what y'all think.

Mentally cursing, Jon felt his fingers slip once again. 'Couldn't they put straps in the front,' he thought, beginning his third try to fasten his leather armor - Ollie usually helped him, but he had given the boy a day off. And the Emperor suffered great frustration for it.

Such frustration began to leave him as two slender arms wrapped around his waist. "Having trouble, my Emperor?" came a soft voice, kiss placed between his shoulder blades.

"No." Jon kept fumbling with his ties. "I can do it myself."

He heard a chuckle against his skin, Dany's swelling breasts scraping along his back as she leaned up to nip at the back of his neck. "Even Emperors can have their wives help them." Her voice was swollen with love. "Let me."

Sighing, Jon made his way back to the bed alongside his wife. He grumbled a bit sitting down, but inwardly appreciated her caring. "I thought you were asleep," he said as she began to work at his laces.

"I was," Dany giggled. "Your child decided to dance on my bladder."

"My child?" Jon's eyebrow rose. "Why is it when he or she thump happily on your belly when either of us places our hand there it is your child, while when they bother you it is mine?"

She leaned in, nipping his neck again. "Because I am the Empress… and I command it." Daenerys smirked just as she finished the last tie. "There, all done. I should be your squire."

Turning with a growl, Jon grabbed Dany's tight hips and pulled her flush against him - their foreheads touching, lips hovering over each other. Eyes locked. "You can't be my squire."

Dany was close to panting, how rapidly the mood had changed. "And… why is that, Jon?"
"Because it wouldn't be appropriate for a ruler to be fucking his squire all damn day."

Gasping, Dany closed the distance and crashed her lips against his. The kiss was not subtle - hungry and sloppy. Two dragons displaying their white-hot passion for each other, hands blazing their way across unburnt skin wherever it rested…

Only for Jon to pull away. "Nooo…" Dany whined - in tones the Empress only reserved for her Emperor.

"I'm sorry, my love." Jon's expression clearly left no doubt that he would want this to continue to its natural conclusion. "I cannot be late to the muster at Harrenhall."

"Couldn't I come with you?" Dany smiled sultrily. "Or perhaps you could stay here with your needy wife?"

"You are a temptress, Daenerys Stormborn." He leaned down to kiss her again - but it was only a peck. "But this is absolutely necessary, and you have that… thing with my sisters."

'Oh that.' "I believe it's called a 'shower,' Jon. Just a family gettogether to prepare things for the baby." She patted her eight-month tummy, their child nestled within. "I'm sure Sansa will want to sew things and Arya will be bored out of her mind."

Jon laughed. "I'm glad I'll be missing it then." He found a pillow thrown at him. "Hey!"

A glower was sent his way. "Don't wake the dragon, Jon Targaryen."

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Furrowing her brows, Sansa watched as her sister continued working at her plate long after the servants had cleared hers away. "Gods, Daenerys, you can't still be hungry?"

"She's growing the next prince or princess inside her," Margaery laughed as Dany glared at her husband's Hand. "Cut her some slack, Sansa dear."

"Even I got that." Arya smacked her sister's shoulder lightly, harkening back to their childhood. Rubbing it with her hand, Sansa chuckled, realizing the sense of deja vu and appreciating it.

The 'shower' had been in full swing for hours, the various ladies of court showing their appreciation and loyalty for the Targaryen dynasty and their Emperor And Empress through the newest child in her womb. Even Tyene Martell, finally healed from her various injuries and broken limbs from the trial by combat, paid her respects with several lavish gifts. Palace cooks - led by the new head chef Hot Pie - brought platters of beef stew, braised lamb, honey-roasted pork, saffron rice, whole roasted tomatoes, the freshest of fruits, sweet wine from the Reach, and candied dates imported from Yunkai.

Now, the party drew down to simply the five ladies of the Imperial family. Dany was still immersed in a plate of pork. "These young ones will soon understand what it's like to carry a child, dear sister," she said, sharing a grin with Margaery.

"Not anytime soon," Arya huffed. "I love Gendry and want to give him heirs, but now is not the right time."

"Not from lack of trying," Margaery remarked, drawing a glare from the wild wolf. "The walls are thinner than you'd think."

"Shut up!" Arya crossed her arms. "Besides, I am not the loudest here." A not so discreet tilt of the
Sansa flushed a bright red once it dawned on her. "Stay away from my chambers, you little sneak!"

"So the rumors are true." Dany regarded her sister with a new eye. "Tyrion once bragged drunk of how he set Pod up with three whores - and they refused to take his money. You're quite lucky, Sansa." The flush grew an even brighter crimson, but not without a small smile. The Empress laughed jovially before a pang hit her stomach. "Oooh. Gentle, little one."

Margaery's brow rose. "Problem?"

"No, just a little dragonwolf who should stop moving around so much." She patted her belly. "Probably my fault. I... haven't been sleeping so well."

"His majesty keeping you up at night?" Meera chided - other than a disgusted look from Arya, there was silence. Especially from Daenerys.

Her silence was not lost on her sisters. Sansa shared a look with Margaery, who cast a worried glance to Meera, who raised an eyebrow at Arya - who rolled her eyes. "Daenerys, what the fuck is going on?" Now it was the other Starks that rolled their eyes.

Dany couldn't help the guarded expression. "What do you mean?"

Glaring at her blunt sister - though the hope Arya would ever change was futile - Sansa reached out and placed a hand on Dany's. "Something is troubling you, Daenerys. You can tell us."

"We won't judge," Meera added.

Even Arya softened in her own way. "Seriously, the pack sticks together. Let us help."

Sighing, Dany looked away. "It's nothing really... I've been having these dreams."

"We all have dreams, sister," Margaery replied. "They don't usually affect us that much."

"Mine do. My dreams largely come true." She closed her eyes. "When I was in labor with the twins, I was unconscious for the most of it. During that time I dreamt. Saw Joffrey at King's Landing. Saw the Wall... saw Jon, and the Army of the Dead..." Violet eyes opened, staring at her sisters. "They all came true, and now..." The thought of it made her shudder. "I see the Night King."

Darkness seemed to descend on the five women. Only Margaery and Meera had seen him as Daenerys did, but there was no doubt as to what he represented. No northerner had ever truly forgotten the long night of old - ever dismissed it as mere legend. "What was that fucker doing?" Arya hissed.

"That's just it... he... was just there. Every dream, I would feel Jon behind me. Feel him kissing and cuddling me, but when I turned it would be the Night King."

"Ugh, disgusting." Sansa wrinkled her nose. "I mean, he's my brother and I don't think of him that way, but there is no earthly way to connect someone as handsome as him with the Night King of all people."

Meera frowned. "Bran told me that the first Targaryen was in Westeros at the time of the Long Night." Dany's eyes widened a little bit at that. "He had... visions in the cave of the three-eyed raven. He was tight lipped about most of it, but that's what I gleamed. Perhaps the Night King had some sort of connection with him in the past - which is why he is connected to you, a pureblood..."
The thought chilled Daenerys more than the dreams had already done. "I loathe to think how it would come to pass..." She put her head in her hands. "My dreams come true though... to lose Jon to that monster..." Tears began to well in her eyes.

Fighting to keep the sadness at bay, Dany felt several sets of arms wrap around her. Margaery, Sansa, Meera... hells, even dour Arya held her in a comforting embrace. 'The Pack protects its own.' Warmth returning to her, she allowed herself to feel the familial comfort. One that she had lacked throughout her childhood but that Jon - her love - had given her. "Thank you," she whispered.

"You're our sister, damn it." Arya pulled out, thumping her chest. "Who else can you get comfort from?" The Stark patted her sister's stomach, the little dragonwolf giving a kick for her aunt. "Still, you have to tell Jon about this."

Pursing her lips, Dany rubbed her swelling abdomen, wanting to feel the movements of her child within her. The latest dragon in their pack. "I don't want him to worry." She hated feeling so weak, so powerless. 'It makes you human,' a voice within her said, frankly. Her humanity was what kept madness at bay.

"He's your husband," Sansa said. "You need to lean on him, to not go through this alone. It's not fair to the pack."

The baby was doing Dornish fighting styles within her... uncomfortable as it was, the little dragonwolf kept Dany grounded. Reminding her that she wasn't alone. "I know, Sansa. I know."

"Milady. Five sets of eyes turned to find a young servant, looking quite intimidated at the most powerful women in Westeros.

It took a moment before they realized she was talking to Arya. "Yeah? What is it?"

"Lord Stark wishes you and the Lady Reed to meet with him in his chambers?"

"Lord Stark is at Harrenhal with His Majesty," Arya replied gruffly, causing the servant to cringe.

Meera stood. "I think he's referring to Bran, Arya." She smiled at the servant. "Thank you, dear." The girl allowed herself a small smile, bowed, and scurried off.

Sansa then stood. "I should be going as well. Podrick is expecting me."

"We all know what that means." Eager to shift from the depressing topic, Daenerys wiped away the last of her tears and grinned at her sister. "Shall we expect another wedding soon? Or another wolf pup?"

The Hand flushed red. "If you weren't carrying my niece or nephew I'd smack you." All the ladies shared one final laugh - one that Sansa eventually joined at the end. Leaning down to give Dany a sisterly kiss, her voice grew concerned. "Talk to him," she whispered.

Dany sighed. "I will." The baby gave a sharp kick.

Normally, the past was vivid to the three-eyed raven. Every specific moment open to him in its entirety, divulging its secrets to the one who knew all there was to know... but this time was different. Things were... clouded. As if a divine force shrouded itself. Bran could only obtain
glimpses.

A hushed conversation, growing in volume as a large man with the armor of a stag shouted in rage… the other smirking when the stag turned his back.

A boy of gold, lips curled in a malevolent, savage grin as his advisor relayed a plan to him.

The Iron Throne. The great monstrosity itself.

"Burn them all!"

Bran opened his eyes, gazing upon his room. It was empty, they not having returned yet. He was glad for it. Sweat covered him, heart beating from the power of the visions… something that hadn't happened to him since becoming the Three-Eyed Raven. Such confused him - and yet it didn't at the same time.

'Jon and Daenerys have vanquished nearly all their earthly foes.' What remained were those not of this realm, or those that dabbled with that which was unknown to mankind. As he did what he could, Bran could feel the power behind their opponents. Fighting his magic with their own…

As such, it was best that he have a moment to compose himself before Meera returned.

Which in a moment she did, Arya behind her, who shut the door. "Yes, Bran," she asked, looking upon her brother - not without the slightest of a shudder. "You summoned me?"

His lips curled ever so slightly up. "So is that any way you greet your brother?" he asked with a tinge of humor as Meera kissed the crown of his head.

Arya crossed her arms, his banter bittersweet. For some reason, she took offense. "Well, sometimes you don't seem like my brother." She was nothing if not blunt.

"Arya!" Meera chided.

"It's true, much as I hate it, it's true." Years of war had changed all of them: her into a faceless man, Sansa into a political animal, Jon into the fucking Heir to the Seven Kingdoms… but it was Bran that affected her the most. It was as if… he was no longer Bran Stark.

All of this was not lost on Bran. "I know," he sighed. "I sometimes wish I was a man far different, the boy I was before all of this. But it is the price of my knowledge." He offered Arya a warm smile, and at that moment he looked like the Bran of before. "I am still here, sister. Just please bare with me."

Biting her lip, Arya simply walked over and hugged him. A proper sisterly greeting. "So why did you call me here, brother?"

Saying nothing, Bran merely withdrew a bundle wedged between himself and the edge of his wheelchair. "I want you to have this."

Taking the bundle, puzzled, Arya peeled back the rags only to gasp. "Bran…” She held up the dagger, admiring the rippled steel and golden hilt. "This is Valyrian steel. Where did you get this?"

"Littlefinger, he gave it to me." A dry chuckle left him. "Believe it or not, this was the blade that nearly killed me. That nearly killed mother." All the Starks knew that night. Arya shuddered involuntarily while Meera grasped Bran's hand, running a thumb on the skin - more to soothe herself than her love, who had long since gotten over it.
"But why do you want to give it to me?"

"I have no use for it. My mind is my weapon." He tapped his head with a finger before taking Arya's. "I don't see the future, Arya. Sometimes I can barely see the past or present, but I do see... trends. Tiny snippets that flash in a split second..." Bran sighed. "You will have a part in the song of Ice and Fire. Of Jon and Dany. You must be there to protect them, Arya. Promise you will."

"I promise." Without hesitation. Her family and Gendry were all that really mattered to her.

"We are at peace now, but that peace won't last. The Great Fall is coming, bringing with it death itself. We must all play our part or we will..."

Suddenly, the crippled figure started shaking violently. Arms flailed about, eyes rolling back in his head. Arya watched with shock, while Meera ran to Bran's side. "Bran." In all his visions, he had never experienced such a reaction. "Bran!"

But he was lost...

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Hands clasped together, Lord Varys strolled quietly through the hallways of the Red Keep, lost in thought. His silken robe swayed gently along the stone floor, the Master of Whisperers preferring the styles of his Essosi childhood over the more complicated garments of Westerosi nobility. After decades of serving five different monarchs or sets of monarchs, he should have been satisfied in the Realm being under the care of the two who actually deserved it. Who he felt proud to serve... but Varys wasn't.

A malevolence draped over King's Landing... over the Red Keep. Not the remnants of the Lannisters - well, only partly such. Varys heard only the whispers of his little birds. Rumors, errant glimpses of a servant or a stable hand lingering in certain places of the castle. For once in his life, Varys couldn't parse them. Lack of information for an overarching fact or narrative he had suffered, but never something so ethereal he could not make sense of it.

He turned a corner, wandering aimlessly through deserted parts of the palace of the great Kings of Westeros. Varys needed to clear his mind - search for the answer. Spoken words with Bran Stark had helped, but all they did was force him to focus on a muddled part of his past. The days before the Starks arrived, before Robert marshalled his forces to launch his rebellion. The calm before the storm of chaos that had born both his monarchs. For the life of him, Varys didn't remember much of that time, little snippets overshadowed by the literal inferno that would break out as soon as Rickard and Brandon Stark took their last breaths. 'Gods, what could it be?' It gave him a headache.

Just as he was about to turn another corner, he heard whispers. Silent, velvet sandals making not a sound as they slid across the smooth stone floors, he managed a quick peek into the other corridor. What he found caused Varys puzzlement. Littlefinger... talking to an old washerwoman in hushed tones. Why the Master of Laws was here, in the empty portion of the castle - why he bothered talking to a mere washerwoman? 'He can get whatever information he wants from his brothel.'

A second peek found Littlefinger gone, leaving the washerwoman alone. Sighing, Varys moved in to investigate. He was the Master of Whisperers, and a purveyor of misery could easily find their smallfolk allies stolen from a purveyor of happiness.

Within him, a small voice said he was being overconfident. Varys ignored it.

"Excuse me." The washerwoman jumped. It wasn't just startling, but more as if she hadn't ever
expected to be snuck up on. "What did he want?"

"I do not know what you are talking about, my Lord," she replied.

"I hesitate to ask what Lord Baelish would want with you, unless…” Varys trailed off, memories tumbling into place. Of a plan to dispatch Robb Stark. Of one of Joffrey's many rantings. Of a meeting long ago within this same palace. In spite of himself, his jaw dropped like a fish… only for a sharp pain to enter his gut.

The Waif drew the dagger from the eunuch's stomach, watching his crumple to the ground not without satisfaction. Killing a man… it filled her with exhilaration - that and envy being two of the few emotions no one allowed herself to feel.

But after a moment, the satisfied smirk fell. This was also a shot across the bow. No turning back. They would have to move now or risk losing all opportunity. 'Fuck.' Determined scowl on her face not in any way that of a kindly old servant, she dashed off around the corner, leaving Varys to face his fate.

Hauling himself into a seated position - each movement just sending further stabs of pain through his system - Varys gazed up at the coffered ceiling with realization. The realization of death. 'I shall die in Empire,' he mused silently. Only before he could warn his monarchs of the evil in their midsts. The depths of such betrayal. Of the memory that was now full and vivid within his mind.

Outside, on the window ledge, a single raven was perched. Cawing at nothing in particular. Such jogged Varys' memory.

In his last conscious thought, he let out a whisper. His final words before the sweet embrace of death draped over him. "The Mad King… the Mad King…"

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"Bran… Bran! Bran!" His irises came back to view as Bran blinked himself awake. Unlike before, his face was a checkerboard of emotions. As if Brandon Stark and the Three-Eyed Raven battled for dominance - terror battling with a more pensive worry. Arya's heart thumped. "What… what is happening?"

Coming back to his surroundings, Bran started to breathe rapidly. "Daenerys is in danger."

Meera's gasped. "What?!"

Arya's jaws clenched in fury. "By who?"

He gazed at his sister. "No one."

Only a moment passed before Arya's eyes widened. Without another word, she dashed off.

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"He certainly looks like a Stark." Little Jon cooed as Daenerys stroked his cheek, swaying softly. "With the blood of Eddard Stark and the Queen of Thornes… any foe would rue the day they crossed the North."

Margaery laughed. "I doubt they would, considering his uncle and aunt had dragons at their disposal."
"That is true." The Empress watched as her nephew drifted off to sleep in her arms. "So it's decided that he is heir to the North?"

"Aye. Robb is the Warden of the North. To have his eldest be groomed as the heir to Highgarden would be a political slight to the other Lords. Neither of us want another Bolton situation."

Dany's eyes darkened. "Jon and I would never allow it." Fire and Blood.

The Lady of Winterfell nodded. "No doubt, but it's best not to get to that point. Our second child will take the helm of Highgarden and the Reach, while Jon here will be the next Warden of the North." She smirked, holding her head in her hand. "Starks controlling both the Empire itself and two of the most powerful Kingdoms. Grandmother is likely proud of how the Wolves of Winterfell - which she has often stated were the least political in the seven kingdoms - turned out to tame the Dragon and the Rose."

It was a rather poignant observation. "Well Jon is a dragon himself… though I guess Lyanna began the whole direwolf takeover of the Seven Kingdoms." Dany handed back the sleeping Jon Stark to his mother. "Melisandre would say it was prophecy… my brother Rhaegar thought the same. I hate to agree with such, but…"

Suddenly, Missandei burst into the guest chambers, Grey Worm and half a dozen Unsullied guards behind. He barked orders in valyrian, eyes scanning the chambers with a crazed determination. "Your Highness!" Missandei walked up to Dany, who shared a puzzled and apprehensive look with Margaery. "Are you alright?"

"Seal off the Red Keep!" Grey Worm was not taking chances. "No one leaves wings of the castle!"

"Missandei, what is…?" She was cut off as baby Jon began to wail, Margaery struggling to calm him down.

"Lord Varys is dead." Dany's eyes widened. "The Crown Prince and Princess have been attacked."

"WHAT!"

"There is no time, Empress," Grey Worm stated. "We must secure you in your chambers!"

Dany shook her head violently. "No, I must get to my… ahh." She gripped the back of a chair, bending over in pain.

Her handmaiden rushed to her. "Your Highness?"

"No…" she pleaded through gritted teeth. "It's too early… ahhhh!" The Empress screamed as her water broke.

Chapter End Notes

Baby dragonwolf is coming at the worst possible time.

Nice little scene between the Stark ladies, whom I think in a well-written show would end up close friends.

Varys figured out a secret to the heart of all of the Realm's problems, and Bran now sees
it too.

If I can get 20 or more comments, I'll update Thursday :D
Laughter, the joyous laughter of children echoed through the halls of the Red Keep that fine, sunny morning. Eight years old and filled with the rambunctious energy of their wolf and dragon blood, Rhaegar and Arya Targaryen - Crown Prince and Princess of the Targaryen Empire - raced into their chambers. While many would have been exhausted from over an hour at the training grounds with Grey Worm and their 'Uncle' Podrick, the two had the stamina of their father the Emperor. That is, boundless. They fell onto their beds, still laughing and grinning over all the new tricks and stances they had learned that day.

"Alright," Stated Catelyn Tully Stark, her ankle-length skirts brushing the travertine tile as she entered behind. "Time to get ready for your studies with Lord Samwell." With the Emperor and Robb at Harrenhal and the ladies cavorting in Daenerys' solar, Catelyn had volunteered to watch her grandchildren - they may not have been of her blood, but were hers from love. 'The way I should have been to Jon.'

Still clad in their training leathers, the twins jointly stared at their grandmother. "You should do the lessons, grandmother." Rhaegar pointed to the small bookshelf in the corner of the shared chambers. "Read us a story."

Smiling at them, Catelyn shook her head. "Fun as that would be, you need to truly absorb the wisdom of your lessons." She sat in between the beds, switching from Rhaegar, to Arya, and back to Rhaegar. "A Prince or Princess must learn more than stories or how to wield a blade. You will be ruling the Empire one day, Rhaegar, and your sister will be right alongside you as your loyal ally and advisor."

"Please, grandmother," Arya pouted. "These stories aren't boring like the lessons." Despite her pure Targaryen looks, the grey eyes and simple earnestness reminded Catelyn of her children at that age. Rambunctious, but so hard to say no to.

Sighing, Catelyn couldn't say no. "Alright, little wolves." Even she had gotten fond of the pet name. "How about the first chapter of the Dance of Dragons?" Delighted squeals made her chuckle. As far as she knew, the twins' lessons were on the history of Westeros and House Targaryen. This was part of it, after all.

Just as she was about to peruse the first line of the old but simply written epic, the door opened to
revealing a balding, pudgy man. "Oh…" He seemed slightly aback at her presence. "What are you doing here?"

Catelyn couldn't help a slight chill up her spine - as if the air in the chambers reminded her of something from her past. "I am the Dowager Lady of Winterfell, Catelyn Stark. Who are you?"

The pudgy man hefted a load of books tucked underneath his arms. Entering, he bowed. "Forgive me, Lady Stark. I am their tutor, Maester Tellfar."

Her eyes narrowed, slowly stepping in front of her grandchildren. "Where is Lord Samwell?" asked Arya. Though she preferred her grandmother or aunt Sansa's lessons - or more specifically, her Aunt Arya's training - Samwell did his best to spice up the learning beyond the droll basics since he arrived from the Citadel with an armful of books. He mostly secluded himself in his chambers researching, but emerged to gladly tutor the children.

"He has fallen ill, Princess." Maester Tellfar dropped the books off on top of a side table. Haphazardly, as if not caring that they could be scratched or ripped. Subtle, but someone as experienced as Catelyn Stark was one trained to sense the subtleties. It was not a habit one would pick up at the Citadel.

Puzzlement filled Rhaegar's face. "No… I saw him with Little Sam in the courtyard earlier, playing. He didn't look sick."

Eyes widened just as Catelyn heard the distinctive scraping of steel against a scabbard. Just like when her Bran was in danger, she reacted. "No!"

"Daenerys' pregnancy is coming along well," Sansa mused, walking towards her own solar holding Podrick's extended arm. "I'm rather excited to become an aunt… from the start this time."

"Rhaegar and Arya certainly adore you, my lady." Sansa smiled up at her lover - even though he practically lived in her chambers, he nevertheless was a complete gentleman. "I'm not sure what they think of me, though."

Sansa's eyebrow rose. "Oh? And why is that?"

Podrick looked put out. "Every day at the training yard, they essentially run me ragged. Lady Brienne treats me less strenuously, and I still think I have the bruises from when she and I trained."

It took a moment before the Hand of the Emperor started laughing. "Oh, Podrick." Feeling more carefree than she ever had since leaving Winterfell all those years ago, she leaned up and kissed his cheek. "I do love you, you know. A lot."

Tugging on his collar, feeling a bead of sweat rolling from his forehead down his cheek, Podrick summoned the courage to ask the question he'd been meaning to ask for a long time. "Enough to marry me?" In the end, the question was asked less than perfectly - it sounded like one large word, and with a squeak. 'Seven Hells,' he inwardly cursed, blushing as he slowly looked at Sansa.

She just stared at him, eyes wide and jaw dropped. "Do… do you mean that?"

Gulping, he nodded. "Aye, I do. Marry me, Sansa." Azure eyes sparkling, a beaming smile stretched out on Sansa's face as she leaned in to capture his lips in a sweet kiss…

"No!"

Their moment was shattered by the sounds of a violent scuffle. Mind snapping into battle, Podrick
pushed Sansa behind him and drew his sword. "It's… twins' chamber…" Sansa croaked, shocked still as her shy lover… betrothed had transformed into the man that led the charge up the Heights of Luthor - now racing for the chambers of the prince and princess.

A resounding kick sent the door flying open, revealing a sight that made Sansa's entire face lose its color. "Mother!"

The lady Catelyn was caught in a literal embrace of death, arms twisted around the back of a heavyset man in maester's robes. He held a short blade, for which Catelyn clawed to get. Leaving lines of red blood all over his forearms. Hissing, the man dropped the knife to his other hand and plunged it backward, spaying blood from where it hit the screaming noblewoman.

Podrick dashed into the fray just as Catelyn fell back, grunting in pain. Her fingers made one last attempt to harm the one who dared attack her grandchildren… literally ripping his face off. Halting, Podrick took but a split second to look at the new face of the attacker. The true face. Long blonde hair, masculine jaw, dark green eyes. But the observation was cut short as he slashed at Podrick. Sending him back with a sort of animal ferocity - without even a flicker of expression on his face.

Cries from the corner revealed the twins. Arya tucked behind Rhaegar and the Crown Prince holding up a practice sword. Torn, the assassin made the decision to go for his prey…

But Podrick was quicker. Regaining his balance with agility that Lady Brienne would be proud of, his sword tasted blood just before the assassin could plunge his dagger into Rhaegar's throat. Guts spilling onto the stone below, the man collapsed into a heap of meat and blood. Dead.

"Mother…" Sansa knelt by her unconscious mother, her blood seeping out of the wound in her gut. She was alive… but barely. "We need a maester here, or she'll die." Podrick nodded.

"Aunt Sansa!"

"Little Wolves!" The twins leapt into their aunt's arms as Podrick yelled for the guards, and a Maester.

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"It's too soon!" The Empress shrieked, a mournful, piercing dragoncry driven by pain and terror. "I need to go to my children!" Missandei and Gilly held her down, Daenerys' protests loud but weak.

"You can't go, your Highness." Though trying to remain calm, inside Missandei's heart was thumping out of her chest. "Think of the child in your womb."

The contractions were rippling through Dany like knives. "I can't… not time yet…" If the baby was stillborn… or died soon after… "Where's Jon. I need Jon!" Missandei shared a look with the Lady Tarly. The Dragon Empress, honed through fire and blood, was gone. In pain and sorrow, all that was left was a wife in childbirth that needed her husband.

But Jon wasn't there.

"Towels, we need towels," Aemon mumbled, racing about the room. Sam pulled a stool at the edge of the bed. He didn't have too much experience, but was the only person with eyesight that had medical training - Gilly could assist given her practical experience with Craster's other wives.

"No one get in or out!" Grey Worm was having none of it. Had they not been maesters, he wouldn't have even let in Aemon, Sam, or Gilly. Three other Unsullied guards patrolled the bedchamber.

"Anyone entering will die!" No news drifted in about the Prince and Princess, so Grey Worm took
no chances. His heart already panged with the thought of them being hurt… he couldn't have the
Breaker of Chains on his conscience either.

"Ahhhhhh!" A wet rag on her forehead helped some with the discomfort of the body, but Daenerys
couldn't soothe the discomfort of the heart. "He needs to be here." This was supposed to be their
happy moment. Where Jon would finally see a child of his come into the world. Teeth clenched as
another contraction slammed through her.

The door opened. Grey Worm's short sword was already out. "I said no one enters!"

The old servant woman, hobbled by gout, looked with wide eyes. "I… bring… towels for Her
Highness."

It was then that Grey Worm noticed the stack of linen in her arms. He lowered his sword. "Fine, but
make it quick."

Setting the towels atop a table, the woman met the eyes of one of the Unsullied troopers. A nod was
given. A nod given in return.

Suddenly the Unsullied drew his sword and buried it in the back of his 'comrade.' Eyes wide, Grey
Worm drew his own blade as the mutineer dueled with the remaining guard - it didn't last long, throat
cut open and sent to the ground. It was then that Grey worm was upon him, the two short swords
clashing, steel to steel.

So riveted to the clash unfolding before them - or busy tending to their Empress - no one but the
screaming, moaning Daenerys noticed the old washerwoman brandish a knife of her own.
Malevolent grin on her face, she approached, ready to do the same killing blow that befell Talisa
Stark upon the Targaryen Empress…

Door flying open, Arya quickly found the threat and leapt into the room. The washerwoman
collapsed upon the ground, catching a punch to the face from the Stark girl before lashing out with a
punch of her own. Dany and Missandei watched in horror as the two tumbled about, Arya getting a
grip on the servant's hair and yanking back with a cry… revealing the Waif. "You will die for this,"
Arya hissed. The Waif elbowed Arya in the gut and quickly scrambled to her feet, racing for the
open window - the other girl hot on her heels.

Grey Worm was clearly gaining the upper hand, for the mutineer clearly wasn't an Unsullied. With a
guttural battle cry, the commander sliced the sword downward, sending it toppling to the floor
causing him to stumble back.

But he was unfazed, drawing two daggers. One flew from his hand, catching Grey Worm in the
abdomen. Missandei screamed as the Unsullied commander collapsed to the floor. His own breathing
an erratic cacophony and with an overwhelming duty to protect his best friend's wife and child, Sam
grabbed a short sword from the ground. As he faced the white walker, he would face the assassin.

Pain, blinding pain. The Unsullied were conditioned to block it out, but Grey Worm stumbled each
time he tried to rise. Perhaps it was weariness. Perhaps it was the wounds of his past eating into his
stamina. Or perhaps it was Missandei, and his loyalty to his Empress and her family - human
attachments that dulled the weight of his soulless conditioning. Ironic, given the things that gave his
life meaning also made him less resilient.

A scream. His eyes opened wide. Missandei, his Missandei, darting to Empress Daenerys' side as she
also screamed with the pain of childbirth. Lady Gilly Tarly and Maester Aemon attended to her -
draping their bodies over her while Lord Samwell struggled to fend off the assassin. He wouldn't
succeed. It was obvious - and it filled Grey Worm with a new kind of grit and determination.

Mind focused on one thing and one thing only, the warrior's fingers curled around the dagger buried in his side. Teeth clenched in a pain that would have blacked out any lesser man. Seeing red, he pulled and heaved until the clatter of bronze to stone rang out. Panting, Grey Worm spotted the assassin - still in his Unsullied armor - bat Samwell away. Sending him to the ground in a groaning heap. Gripping his short sword in hand, it rose as the assassin advanced on the Empress still wracked with contractions.

With a feral snarl that he didn't even register, Grey Worm lowered his head and charged.

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The chase played out not within the Red Keep, but atop it.

Gusts of wind slamming against her, Arya struggled to keep her balance as she chased the taller girl across the red-tiled roof of the great palace. She nearly stumbled as a sandstone shingle crumbled beneath her feet, but her skill and agility kept her going. Kept her in the fight. The Waif dangled tantalizingly before her, one of the last marks still breathing on her list.

Arya Stark would not let her family be hunted by these monsters ever again.

Each girl ran like their lives depended on it. Scaling walls, leaping over chasms of brick and stone. None noticed, hunkered in place or too attentive to their posts to notice the fight occurring above them. Smirking back at the chasing Stark girl, the Waif dove, sliding feet first down the sandstone shingles to a deserted inner courtyard below. Arya soon followed, but the shingles gave way again and caused her to spin. With a thud, she landed on her back, sending shooting pains through her muscles and bones.

Her eyes noticed the glint of the swinging blade just in time.

Needle shot up to parry the bronze dagger. Wrenching it to the side, Arya leapt to her feet. "A girl has quick reflexes," the Waif said, lunging forward. Her long dagger screeching against the straight steel of Arya's blade. Her smirk was untouched by strain. "A girl will still die."

She was giving ground, the clash of bronze against steel leaving a cacophony that echoed through the courtyard. Arya's muscles tensed, struggling prevent the massive razor's slices. 'No!' she screamed inwardly, feeling the Waif's sweat drip on her as she bore down with the dagger. "No!"

One hand still wrapped around Needle's hilt, her other slammed into the Waif's ribs.

The Waif stumbled, feet losing their balance and sending the lithe body toppling down a staircase… deep into the bowels of the Red Keep. Where the dragon skulls had long been kept. Arya allowed a quick, wolfish smile. It may have been a lifetime ago, but she knew them like the back of her hand. Without hesitation, she followed.

Only a single lantern illuminated the deep catacombs of the Red Keep. Its flame flickered, an almost ethereal glow that cast rippling shadows on the two girls. Heartbeats thumped, the silence all-encompassing around them. The mere chirping of a cricket blared with the resonance of a thousand handcannons. Such was a fitting climax to this story.

The knights fought in the open. No one fought in the shadows.

"The Many-Faced God requires an offering," the Waif stated.

Arya nodded. "Aye, he does."
The smirk widened on her former tormentor's face. "Even in failure, I am content for you to be my offering." The dagger shined dark orange, as if flames danced along the bronze.

Flicking Needle across her chest, Arya could hear Syrio Forel's words loud in her head. 'What do we say to the God of Death?'

"Not today." A flick of the wrist sent the lantern crashing to the ground.

Darkness.

"Easy, your Highness, easy…"

"Can't…"

"You can," Gilly said, encouraging her. "You've done it before."

Daenerys cried in pain, the contractions slamming into her like waves. "Jon… need… Jon…" Her own mother had died giving birth to her… alone. Without any person who loved her. If that happened to her… Dany needed Jon. Needed her husband.

Sam grasped her hand, hoping to give her whatever comfort he could in his friend's place. "The raven has been sent out. I'm sure he's on his way on Rhaegal as we speak." If he knew Jon, the Emperor would burn through mountains to return to his wife.

Wiping his sword with a rag, Grey Worm motioned in several Dothraki bruisers - ones his trusted soldiers had checked personally for any… additional faces within. "Get this filth out of my sight!" he simmered coolly, pointing to the body of the assassin. It was covered in bruises, the Faceless Man nearly beaten to death before Grey Worm finished the job with a slice of the neck.

"Hold still." Missandei gainfully wrapped the bandage around his torso. "Lord Tarly said the wound missed anything major by just half an inch… don't move so much!" Her Grey Worm was too proud for his own good.

"Take care of her Highness…" He winced in pain.

"You already dismissed Samwell. Let me." Daenerys would never forgive her if she let Grey Worm grin and bear it.

Another scream left Dany's throat. "Please… where's Jon?" Her voice was scratchy, nearly lost from all her wails.

"Jon will be here, sister. Nothing could keep him away."

"Sansa?" She opened her eyes to see the redhead looking down on her. "The twins… where…?"

"Podrick has them in the solar. They're safe." Relief spread on Dany's face before being engulfed in the worst pain of her life. The Red Keep shook from her dragon shriek.

"It's time," Maester Aemon said, having delivered enough babies in Wintertown to know the signs. "Is she fully dilated?" He shuffled to where the towels rested, blind but still useful.

Sam nodded. "Yes Maester. Gilly, be ready to clean up." She took a towel from Aemon. "Alright, Daenerys, push."
Her mouth hung open in a wail as she pushed with all her might. Eyes were scrunched tightly shut, hands fisting the mattress - desperate for Jon, needing to hold his hand through the worst of the pain. "Can't... too much..." She felt Sansa grip her hand, offering her the needed familial comfort.

"I can see the head, Daenerys." Sam could see the baby crowning. "One more push. One... two... three!" Another scream, and a hiss of pain from Sansa as her sister did her best to break every bone in her hand, echoed through the bedchamber...

Until all that was left was the sharp cry of an infant. Almost as if a heralding trumpet commemorating something joyous. "A girl!" Sam stated, smile on his face as Gilly cut the cord with a bronze knife. "A healthy princess."

Unseeing, milky eyes pricking with tears of his own, Aemon reached out with his bony hands. "Please, Samwell. Let me." Catching the earnest look of love, Sam nodded and handed the baby to Aemon - at long last, the eldest of House Targaryen could hold a babe of his own blood in his arms. A dream come true at last. 'I can now die in peace,' he thought.

"Uncle. Give her to me." Dany reached out, frantic for the now quieting down newborn. "Please, I need my baby." Maternal bond lashing out with fright and apprehension. Until her sweetling was in her arms, she could not be sure of anything.

Nestled in his grasp, Aemon shuffled gingerly to Daenerys' beside. "Here she is." His finger tickled the baby's cheek. "Here's muña."

Warmth finally returning to her as soon as her fingers came into contact with her daughter, Daenerys gasped. "Oh my gods." She stared in pure wonder. "She's so beautiful." Squirming softly, the newborn was flushed pink from birth, but that couldn't mask the wisps of dark hair and hypnotizing grey eyes. Her father's eyes.

"A little wolfling," smiled Sansa, tearing up as well. "But with plenty of you in her, sister. A fair beauty, of the North and Old Valyria."

Throat catching with emotion, Dany hugged the bundle to her chest. She was sore, aching all over from it all, but the little miracle in her arms was worth it. "My sweetling." There was no stopping her sobs. Joyous sobs. "My perfect little girl." Gently, she kissed the wrinkled crown of her head, welcoming the new princess into the world.

--------------------------------------------------

Silence hanging over the Imperial solar, it was shattered as the door was abruptly thrown open - slamming with a resounding crack against the far wall. "WHERE IS MY FAMILY?!" thundered the Emperor, every inch a Valyrian Dragonlord at that moment.

Having not left the arms of their Aunt Sansa or Uncle Podrick since the chaos earlier, Arya and Rhaegar were up and racing towards Jon - the only two among those present not recovering from near heart attacks at the pure dragonfire erupting out of nowhere into the solar. "Papa!" Fresh streams of tears fell from their eyes as they threw their arms around Jon.

Jon immediately knelt, arms open for the twins. Clutching at his babies, he was near tears himself - distraught at the thought that they had nearly been taken away from him. That he had been elsewhere at their time of danger. "Oh Gods, you're alright." He pulled back, checking them over. Patting them down for any injuries. "Are either of you hurt?"

"No, poppa." Arya buried her head in the soft fur of his cloak. "Grandmother and Uncle Podrick..."
protected us."

Standing, allowing them to clutch at him, Jon's fury returned as he glared at the others. "What in Seven Hells happened?!!" he ground out with a hiss, the only thing stopping Jon from going full Dragon Emperor being the twins still enveloping him. The raven from King's Landing had arrived at Harrenhal abruptly, and just as abrupt was how Jon hopped on Rhaegal and raced for the capitol.

"There was assassin, your Majesty," Grey Worm answered, fighting a wince as his bandaged wound ached. "Three assassin. They attacked the prince and princess, only for Ser Podrick to stop them. The Lady Catelyn was wounded."

"She's unconscious, Jon," Sam stated, having tended her wounds after dealing with the Empress' health. "We don't know if she'll live."

Jon gulped. This was bad, but there was something worse in the air. "And Daenerys?"

"There were more assassin in Red Keep." Grey Worm shuffled awkwardly - the enraged, terrified gaze of his Emperor was enough to wilt even an Unsullied. "They infiltrated palace to attack Empress Daenerys while she was…" He trailed off, not knowing if they had told Jon yet.

Jon searched the eyes of anyone who would look at him, gaze frantic. "What? While she was what?" Panic coursed through him. "What happened to my wife?!" he yelled. There was silence, as if no one was willing to breach it. "ANSWER ME!"

"Jon, please." At Sansa's frantic gesture, Jon looked at his children, both shaking as they tried to melt into his cloak.

The sight broke Jon's heart. "Please, just tell me that Dany's alright." He couldn't help how his throat caught. Just thinking that Daenerys could be hurt… or worse…

"The stress caused her to go into labor." Wide eyes found Missandei. "Her Highness is in her chambers…" The handmaiden couldn't finish before Jon kissed the twins' cheeks, nestled them back with his sister, and ran towards their bedchamber as fast as his legs could carry him.

Four Dothraki bloodriders stood menacingly outside the door to the imperial bedchamber, but stepped aside for their Khal as soon as he approached. Jon ignored them, various tragedies flashing through his mind at the speed of light. A sense of numbness infiltrating his body, Jon shuffled slowly to the door handle, gripping it and pushing inside.

Gasping, Jon fought to keep his knees from buckling. Lying on the massive bed was Daenerys, pale and worn, but a smile stretched out on her face. The smile widened as her violet eyes found him. "Jon," she said weakly, reaching out for him.

His head spinning, Jon rushed over to her side. "Dany!" A sudden rush of wetness clouded his eyes. "My love." He threw his arms around her and buried his head in her neck.

Draped in his warm embrace, Daenerys felt all was right in the world again. "Oh Jon."

"I thought I lost you." Jon was openly sobbing, tears flowing down his cheeks.

"I'm alright Jon. Hey." Pulling away, Dany cupped his face. Seeing the grey eyes she loved red and sparkling with tears, it broke her heart. "Please don't cry."

"I can't help it, my dragon." He kissed her, lips and tongue desperate for contact. "I don't know what I'd do without you in my life." His demeanor changed, now a blazing dragonfire. "Whoever did this
will get fire and blood."

His voice being a cross between a growl and a low roar, Daenerys kissed him again. Trying to calm him down. "My love, I want to show you something." A soft whimper snapped him out of his dragon-like rage. Blinking, Jon gazed down at his wife, finally noticing a tiny bundle wrapped in a light grey blanket nestled on Dany's side. A wide smile broke on her face as she lifted the bundle in her hands. "Meet your daughter, Jon."

Slowly, Jon took the bundle in his arms. As soon as he set eyes at the baby - their baby - all worries, fears, and anger just left him in a wave. An awed smile spread on his face, the baby yawning as he brushed his finger along her cheek. "She looks like you, Dany," he said, wonder tingling his voice.

"Yes, but with the Stark coloring," she said, tears starting to affect her too. As their daughter started to shift in Jon's arms, he handed her back to Daenerys. "Saera. Princess Saera Targaryen." The name wafted beautifully off the tongue. "We made her, my love. We made this beautiful angel," she breathed, settling little Saera on her chest.

He wiped the last tears from his eyes. "We did, Daenerys."

The door opened at that point, Sansa's whispers urging the twins to the bed. "Is that our baby sister?" Rhaegar asked, peeking over the bed to look at Saera.

Dany motioned for them to climb on the bed with her. "Yes, sweetlings. Your sister Saera is here at last." They began to coo at the little one.

Though the rage and vengeance were sure to return, at this moment nothing could stop the Emperor's unadulterated joy. Easing himself into the bed next to her, gingerly so as not to disturb the precious gems, Jon wrapped his arms around his family.

---------------------------------------------------

Shadows danced upon the inner hall of the House of Black and White, cast by the hundreds of flickering candles lining the base of the columns. A man sometimes known as Jaqen H'ghar walked calmly along the floors of polished limestone, relighting candles sniffed out from an errant draft. Occasionally, he gazed upon the vast alcoves containing the offerings to the Many-Faced God. Offerings obtained through the vast gulf of the centuries by the Order of the Faceless men. Soon to be adorned with four others…

Stopping, Jaqen sensed something out of place. A disturbance, one that brought him for closer inspection.

Looking up at the wall of faces, Jaqen saw three new ones resting on designated mounts. Three faces he recognized quite clearly. The Waif, and the two others he had sent to King's Landing. Dried blood, a brick red almost black, crusted over their cheeks and foreheads - whomever had killed them having made no attempt to clean the faces.

A warning. A message.

"You sent them to Westeros." Jaqen turned to see the girl who had saved his life so long ago. The girl he had recruited and trained… needlepoint sword levied to his chest. "Joffrey hired you to kill the Targaryens - my family - and you sent them there to do the job."

There was no denying it. "Yes, I did." Jaqen had no reason to lie. Not an ounce of fear coursed through him - no one who truly embraced the God of Death would feel fear.
Arya gripped Needle tighter, the Lady Baratheon fighting her anger. "Joffrey is dead. I killed him. Your contract is null and void."

"No contract is null and void." He tilted his head. "But even still, a girl took lives - lives whose time hadn't arrived. The Many-Faced God needs life to pay for the death."

Her teeth clenched, seething. "You mean to pad your coffers. Daenerys and Jon are fighting to make a better world, and yet you'd kill them to satisfy a monster!" As the last word echoed through the cavernous hall, her expression changed. "A death to pay for a life that was not mine to take. For Walder Frey, Meryn Trant, and Amory Lorch. Payment for the Many-Faced God." Zero emotion left for each word stated. Arya simply stood, face hardened into stone.

Jaqen finally allowed himself a smile. "At last, a girl is no one." His prized pupil, the one he had true faith would succeed, had finally done it. "A girl to carry out the legacy of the Many-Faced God."

Arya's brow rose in questioning. "Oh? That is where you are wrong." Standing straight, she began to walk in a circle around Jaqen. A she-wolf cornering, toying with her prey. "Did you honestly think, that Jon of House Targaryen will take this lightly? That the Dragon Emperor would tolerate the attempted murder of his beloved wife and children? Winter is coming for the Faceless Men. This place will not last the fortnight, Fire and Blood coming for it." Completing the circle, a wolfish grin spread on her face. "But you will be given mercy, Jaqen… for your kindness to me."

He showed nothing. "Mercy?"

"I killed Joffrey. The Many-Faced God deserves one final offering."

A flash of realization in his eyes, Jaqen only nodded. Accepting his fate. And the bite of Needle as it ran through his gut.

Meeting the eyes of her mentor, her refuge at the worst period of her life, Arya allowed the fire to fill her grey eyes. "A girl is Arya Stark, Lady Baratheon of Storm's End and Wardeness of the Stormlands. Sister of Jon Imperator and Daenerys Stormborn, Emperor and Empress of the Targaryen Empire. Anyone that touches my family will feel the wrath of Winter upon them."

'The God of Death, manifest in mortality.' The last thought in the mind of the high priest of the Many-Faced God.

Chapter End Notes

Princess Saera Targaryen. Isn't she adorable?

Catelyn defended the little wolves as she defended Bran.

Dragon Jon was fun to write. He is not going to be happy about this. Almost losing his family and not being able to be present for the birth of his daughter. Fire and Blood. Fire and Blood.

Arya gets vengeance and safety for her family, but what awaits her in King's Landing? I'll give you a hint: he's short, and was born in a place called the finger ;)

Next time, it's up to Sansa to get to the bottom of the assassination attempt on the Imperial Family.
Please read and review Heart of the Blessed :D
Hi all! Best wishes to Kit Harrington on getting better. Season 8 was hard on all of us.

About Arya getting to Braavos, I neglected to mention in the last chapter that there was a time jump. Sorry for the confusion.

Enjoy and comment!

The gears of the large clock clicked, turning as the seconds passed. Click. Click. Click. Interminably irritating to anyone with any sort of impatience. Normally, those seeking an audience with the Iron Bank would suffer such an indignity. However, today the tables had turned.

Sitting upon his tribunal, Tycho Nestoris drummed his fingers against the stone table. His eyes glanced to the clock for the seventh time that minute. "My Lord, did you not inform your monarch of the need to be punctual?"

Yezzan zo Qaggaz, Master of Coin, smiled apologetically. "Forgive me, Administrator. His Majesty will be here shortly, I promise."

"The Iron Bank prefers meetings to conduct smoothly, Lord Qaggaz." Nestoris did his best to control his rising annoyance. "If it weren't for the Emperor Jon's… title - or for your record of honorable dealings with our institution, my Lord - we would…"

At that point he was cut off as the servants threw open the hardwood doors. In walked Emperor Jon Targaryen, strides wide and back straight. Nestoris blinked in surprise, while Qaggaz raised an eyebrow. For once, only his coloring marked him as a northerner. His cloak billowed behind him, the color of fresh blood. His leather gambeson was solid black, chest emblazoned with the three-headed dragon.

He looked like Aegon the Conqueror reborn. Inspiring to his subjects… and unnerving to his enemies.

Qaggaz formed a smile. "Administrator Nestoris, allow me to present Jon of House Targaryen and Stark, first of his name."

Nestoris gulped, trying to recover his composure. "Welcome to the Iron Bank, your Majesty. I only wish you had been punctual…"

A loud clang echoed out in the chamber, Jon suddenly slamming Longclaw flat on the table, Valyrian steel glinting from the sun streaming through the windows. "My apologies, Administrator," Jon said flatly, taking his seat. "I was paying a visit to the House of Black and White."

If such affected Nestoris, he did not vocalize it. "I admit, your sudden arrival was... unexpected. Lord Qaggaz and I were in the middle of negotiations over the size of your debt instrument…"

"Not my debt, Administrator. That debt was racked up by Robert the Usurper and Joffrey the
"Vicious Idiot."

"The crown's debt, your Majesty." Nestoris allowed himself a smile. The young Emperor was strong, but naive. "Simply because House Targaryen conquered its throne back, doesn't wipe out its debt."

Jon chuckled softly. "Forgive me. I am merely a novice in banking matters. Lord Qaggaz has been giving me a crash course, especially on his efforts to obtain a discharge on a portion the debt."

"He and I have been settling on an amount of around ten percent…"

"I'm afraid it will have to be one third of the debt." Jon's face hardened. "That number is non-negotiable."

Nestoris secretly chided himself to allowing for a one on one meeting. It would have been much more pleasing to smack down this whelp in front of all his aides and accountants. "I think you should let your Master of Coin speak for you, your Majesty. It isn't wise to make demands of the Iron Bank. Such would only end in having severe financial penalties, ending in a complete cut off from further loans if such penalties aren't paid."

Jon smiled. Though it was outwardly calm, the dark glint in his eyes conferred something more sinister. "I think you should shut up and listen, Administrator." He enjoyed watching the man fluster. "It is wise not to anger a man with dragons."

"You cannot threaten the Iron Bank…"

"Do you know where I was, just now?" His eyes narrowed. "Three weeks ago, there was an attempt on the life of my wife and children."

"I am sorry such has happened to you, but that doesn't mean…"

A raised hand cut him off. "The perpetrators were determined to be of the Faceless Men, likely enforcing a prior contract on the part of Joffrey Baratheon. Needless to say, my dragon Rhaegal and myself have brought Fire and Blood upon the House of Black and White."

The fire in Jon's eyes caused a droplet of sweat to fall from Nestoris' forehead. "I'm not sure how that relates to our ongoing matters…"

"Oh, but it does, Administrator," Qaggaz piped up. "Your employees are not as loyal as you would think. Many pointed out to me various expenditures to unknown entities. With a little help from some Little Birds, I was able to piece together various schemes you have used in the past to punish recalcitrant debtors. Including the Faceless Men."

Jon's smile fell, the dragon within him fully awoken. "It was you that offered the services of the Faceless Men to Joffrey." He reached out and gripped Longclaw's hilt. "I should kill you right now."

He let Nestoris squirm. "But I won't. You are to accept this forgiveness of one third of our debt, or face our own severe penalties."

Nestoris, wiping the copious sheen of sweat off his brow, attempted to rally his composure. "Try getting any other loan from any other financial house if you target us…"

"Frankly, the crown does not consider the Iron Bank of Braavos a financial house, anymore."

Qaggaz was having the most fun he had in years. "Additionally, we found copious payments to each member of the Braavosi high council, making them your puppets. As such, we consider the Iron Bank the true government of Braavos."
"Which makes your payment of the organization that nearly assassinated its Empress as an act of war against the Targaryen Empire." Jon watched as Nestoris' eyes widened in pure fright. "Fire and blood is coming to you, Administrator, unless you meet our conditions."

"What are they?" Nestoris croaked.

"First, accept the one third forgiveness of the crown's debt. Second, you will resign, as will your toadies. Additionally, you will turn over all records of all payments made to the crown while Robert and Joffrey Baratheon were on the throne." He stood, sliding Longclaw back in its sheath. "Think it over and get back to me tomorrow. Otherwise there will be six dragons over Braavos instead of one."

He and Qaggaz hadn't gotten halfway out of the room before Nestoris cried out. "I accept."

Well, my Lady. You'll be glad to know that his Majesty did not target an innocent party." Dropping a leather binder of reports on Sansa's desk, Littlefinger smiled. "No one bearing the description of the three assassins were ever in the employ of the Red Keep, the Citadel, or the Unsullied. The man killed as an Unsullied resembled a dead laborer from Astapor, and I would presume the others resemble killed smallfolk whose faces were stolen."

Tapping her fingers together, Sansa leafed through the stacks of parchment. "Is that a characteristic of the Faceless Men. Forgive me if I'm not familiar with them."

A chuckle left the lips of the oily aristocrat. "Tis fine, Lady Sansa. A person would be lucky to never make their acquaintance. Yes, that is their signature." He cleared his throat. "The Faceless Men are an ancient staple of the Free City of Braavos. Handling matters of stealth and murder for whomever provide payment or offerings to their very own god." He shifted slightly on his feet. "They are so secretive and skilled, it puzzles me as to why someone would be in the exact right place at the exact right time to stop them."

Brows furrowing, it didn't take long for the Hand of the Emperor to understand. "Tread lightly, Lord Baelish. You do not wish to accuse the wrong person of the wrong crime."

"Sansa, I'm sure you know where this is going."

"No." Sansa shook her head, refusing to believe what the Master of Laws was saying. "She left immediately after the assassination attempt. No one's seen her since."

"She would never..."

Leaning forward in his chair, Littlefinger clasped his hands together in a sort of silent plea. "My Lady, don't act rashly. I know what you are thinking, believe me, I do." He sighed. "I grew up with your aunt Lysa. I never thought that she would almost throw her own niece out the Moon Door." Reaching forward, he took Sansa's hands in his own, gently stroking the back of the palms. "You don't believe that Arya is capable of this. Seven hells, I don't want to believe it... but you have to look at the big picture here."

Sansa felt revulsion at his touch - it made her skin crawl, nothing like Podrick's sweet, loving touches - but she kept it off her face. "What is this 'big picture' you are referring to, Lord Baelish?"

"Your sister is no longer Lady Stark. She is now Lady Baratheon. While Joffrey wasn't the trueborn son of King Robert... thanks to his Majesty, Gendry is."
"You can't honestly believe Gendry would want… It took convincing to get him to be Lord of Storm's End."

"I do not believe Gendry put her up to it, but it isn't his decision." Littlefinger shrugged. "As long as there are some that wish Gendry to succeed his birthright, then he will be thrust into this position. Your own brother was thrust into his position - it could be that Arya is using any connection she has with the Faceless Men to thrust Gendry into such a position by assassinating the Imperial Family. Gendry has Targaryen blood, after all."

"Arya would never," Sansa breathed. "She wouldn't."

"Lady Sansa, please. Think of your mother."

It was a low blow, but one that had some weight - Catelyn Stark was still clinging to life by a thread, having not woken since that fateful day. "Arya always had the biggest grudge against her for how she treated Jon…" The Hand put her head in her hands, feeling a headache coming on. "I just can't believe it." Gears turned within her mind. "We don't even know if Arya is connected to the Faceless Men. I - gods forgive me - cannot go to Jon with wild accusations about his beloved sister without definitive proof of a connection."

Inwardly, Littlefinger was beaming - he had won her over. "As the simple Master of Laws, I cannot execute a warrant on the Imperial family without authorization. Give me a warrant for the Lady Arya's quarters." He offered a small smile. "If she is innocent, as I hope is the case, then she has nothing to fear from my search."

Sighing, Sansa reached into her desk and pulled out a sheaf of parchment. "One moment, Lord Baelish." Taking her pen, she dipped it in ink and proceeded to write exactly what Littlefinger was authorized to do. Sansa then poured hot wax onto the bottom and stamped it with her seal. "Just get it over with."

Littlefinger stood, bowing. "I shall not disappoint you, my Lady. Whatever happens…” His voice caught. "We will avenge your mother."

The conversation replayed itself over and over again as Sansa walked gingerly through the caverns of the Red Keep. Night had fallen, the crescent moon covered with thick, grey clouds in a sort of ominous herald - one she didn't wish to deduce the spiritual meaning of. She pulled the hood tighter over her head. The only persons she'd need to show herself to were the Unsullied guards, and they were essentially sworn to silence.

Eventually, Sansa reached her destination. Where she needed to be. Eyes darting to either side, scanning the hallways to make sure nary a soul graced them, Sansa knocked on the door. Three quick raps. "Enter."

She turned the knob and pushed herself in, shutting the door mere seconds from opening it. "I need to talk to you."

From his perch by the fireplace, Bran smiled softly. "I've been expecting you, Sansa."

Sitting beside him, Sansa looked into her brother's eyes. "I need to know everything, Bran." He simply smiled.

"What is the meaning of this?" Gendry was angry - furious even - but the presence of fearsome Unsullied guards kept him from acting on his rage. Even if he had his warhammer, he wouldn't
attack his Empress' guards. "Get out of my quarters!"

Grey Worm leading, a collection of a dozen Unsullied were picking through Lord Baratheon's bedchamber with a fine-toothed comb. Closets ransacked, chests overturned, clothes tossed into the middle of the bed and patted down for sewn compartments. Lord Petyr Baelish was nothing if not thorough. "Read the warrant, Lord Baratheon," Littlefinger stated flatly. "Signed by the Lady Hand herself."

"Sansa would never do this…" Though finally literate, taught by Davos and his cousin Shireen, Gendry still read haltingly. It took a few minutes before his eyes widened. "Treason?! Conspiracy to murder?! What is this horseshit?! I never did any of these things!"

"You aren't suspected, Lord Baratheon."

"Why the fuck would Arya…?"

Grey Worm stepped forward, hand out. "Please, Lord Gendry. Calm down." Simmering, Gendry complied, sensing compassion on the Unsullied commander's face - tinged with disbelief. 'Lady Arya wouldn't do this,' Grey Worm thought. Now that Daenerys was using the Unsullied in more of an Imperial Guard role, he was stuck conducting policing errands for Littlefinger that made no sense.

"So have you found anything here?" Littlefinger looked slightly put out - impatient. "Anything Lady Arya may have hidden?"

"My Lord, it seems clear." Grey Worm was slightly relieved at the lack of evidence against Vhrysa's sister. Nothing out of the ordinary in the Lady Baratheon's quarters." The other Unsullied stood straight, waiting for orders.

Shaking his head, Littlefinger scrutinized everything with a more searching gaze. "Appearances can be deceiving, Commander. You must have dealt with that in Meereen with the Sons of the Harpy." He rapped on the walls, inspecting for hollow spots. "The Faceless Men are worse, and only someone possessing genius can defeat…"

He stopped suddenly. Slightly shifting his foot, Littlefinger could feel one of the travertine tiles below him shift, mortar crumbling away as he exposed it as loose. He motioned for the Unsullied. "What's going on?" Gendry asked from the doorway.

"Get over here. Pry this loose!" Crowbar in hand, a trooper wedged it through the gap and heaved. The tile lifted easily, soon slid out of the way - exposing a hollow alcove underneath. "Did you know about this, Lord Baratheon?"

Gendry stood, wide-eyed. "The fuck? How did that get there?!" He seemed sincere.

Clicking his tongue, Littlefinger knelt next to the hole. He reached in and pulled out a burlap sack. "What do we have here?"

Stacked within the sack were… faces. Over a dozen of them. Some Littlefinger even recognized - Amory Lorch, Meryn Trant, one of Joffrey's palace slaves… A grin spread on his lips. One of pure triumph. 'Oh, I shall sleep the sleep of the vindicated, tonight.'

Squirming, Dany couldn't help but giggle in domestic bliss. "Ghost... stop." The snow-white direwolf had found her taking a nap on the bed and decided to wake her up… by bathing her face with loving licks. She tried to bat him away, but the efforts were half-hearted. "Stooop..."
While he seemed to enjoy teasing her, Ghost nevertheless complied. Whimpering, he nuzzled his snout into Dany's side. Perhaps it was being married to Jon, or having carried three dragonwolves inside her, but Ghost was finely tuned to Daenerys at this point. Nearly as much as he was to Jon.

And Dany loved him as much as Jon did. "It's alright, boy. I'm still here." She scratched behind his ear, Ghost's tongue lolling out in contentment, tail wagging.

"He's just feeling extra melancholy today." Daenerys looked up to see her husband, leaning alongside the doorway - holding baby Saera in his hands.

Daenerys' lips curled into a beaming smile. "Hello my lovelies," she said, in awe as she gazed upon Jon holding their child. One hand continuing to scratch Ghost, the other beckoned them over. "Come here."

"Nymeria is close to giving birth, and he can't help but worry he'd lose his last family… like he almost lost his mother." Jon sat beside her, across from Ghost. "I almost lost his mother as well." He leaned over and kissed her, gingerly resting Saera on her chest. "But thank the gods I didn't."

Hands wrapping tight around her precious child, Daenerys let out a sigh of pure joy as Jon pulled her to his side. The Emperor and Empress sharing a moment of love, snatched from their busy schedules. "I didn't think I'd ever have this, Jon." Saera took that moment to yawn, stretching her little arms. It melted Dany's heart. "You. Three amazing children. A family."

Jon pressed a kiss against her head. "I didn't either." A finger stroked his daughter's head, eyes filled with love. "I was firmly resigned to die at the Watch, to die at Winterfell… but if I had to be resurrected a dozen times to get back to you and our children… I'd do it."

Tears coursed down Dany's cheeks. "Damn it, Jon." She was so emotional even after giving birth - if her love would go around saying things like that and leaving her in a state of tears, none of her subjects or advisors would ever take her seriously. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"You know very well…" She nuzzled Saera's head, inhaling her wonderful scent. "Stop being so sweet and everything."

He chuckled in his deep, northern brogue. "The boys at Castle Black would never let me live down being called sweet." Sitting up, Jon stared down at her, cupping Dany's cheek. His smile deepened as she involuntarily leaned into it. "I won't ever let anything happen to our family."

A flicker of fear crossed her face. "You don't know that, Jon."

"I do. I took care of it." His smile changed into something hard. Something fierce.

It was a look Dany understood. "Fire and Blood?"

"Fire and Blood."

While Dany loved Jon's good and kind heart… looking at the top of Saera's head. Watching her sleep peacefully between her breasts, Dany understood his feeling. A feeling that she had herself more than one occasion.

Anyone that threatened their pack would meet Fire and Blood. Anyone.

An hour later, Missandei cleared her throat. Before her were tens of thousands, a crowd so large that
it reminded all of the day of Revolution - but rage and bloodlust morphed into pure adoration.
An entire city out in force to meet their new princess. To show their love for House Targaryen. Not
out of birthright, but because it earned the privilege.

Being with Daenerys from the very beginning, and with Jon since the Battle of the Bastards,
Missandei channeled the spirit of the crowd. "Presenting, Emperor Jon Targaryen, first of his name.
Empress Daenerys Targaryen, first of her name." All six dragons flew overhead, increasing the
majesty of the moment. "And their children: Crown Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, Princess Arya
Targaryen, and Princess Saera Targaryen. Long may they reign!"

"LONG MAY THEY REIGN!"

Basking in the adoration of the crowd, it was not something Jon desired but a feeling he wasn't upset
to accept. Crown atop his head glinting in the sun, one arm wrapped around Arya's shoulder while
the other waved to the masses. All practically fighting each other to catch a glimpse of their Emperor
and Empress. He bent down to Dany. "They love you, my dragon."

Rocking Saera gently, Rhaegar by her side, Dany smiled at her husband. "That is true, but not the
whole truth, my direwolf." As if proving it to him, a small nudge pushed him forward a step. It was
as if one of Balerion's roars boomed from the crowd. "See. The people of Westeros love you, Jon."

Smiling, Jon did the same to her - and getting an equally roaring reaction. "Don't sell yourself short,
my love." He looked down at the children. "Or perhaps it is the children they love."

"Perhaps it is all of us." She leaned up to kiss him, the roar growing louder than ever before.

"Are you sure you know where you're going, girl?" Taking a swig of sour wine, the captain looked
at the small female in puzzlement. Quiet and dressed as a street child, she nevertheless paid him in
several gold dragons for a cabin on his usual route from Braavos to King's Landing. "The
Targaryens have improved safety in the capitol, but there are still cutthroats and brigands." He didn't
know exactly why he cared - perhaps the fact she was such a mystery.

Looking back on him with amusement, Arya stilled in the middle of the gangplank. "I'll be fine.
Thank you for the voyage." Mumbling something, the captain merely ducked back into his ship,
putting her out of his mind.

Gazing out at the port of King's Landing, Arya had to admit that the captain was right. Underneath
the fluttering three-headed dragon and direwolf banners that seemed an almost omnipotent presence
out of patriotic zeal, it was as if the aura of new life had returned to the formerly weary city. Trade
was resuming, colors other than the dull tan of dust predominating, and the people with a hustle and
bustle unseen the last time Arya had been at the port.

All thanks to her brother and his wife. "Oh Jon," she mused to herself, smiling. "How far you've
come." It seemed like just yesterday he had given her Needle, a brooding, solemn bastard of a
northern lord. Now, the Emperor of all he surveyed. Arya couldn't help but feel pride in her beloved
brother.

Her musings were cut short by the scuffle of boots along the quay. "There she is! There's the Lady
Baratheon!" Not expecting an attack, the sole surviving Faceless Man was caught off guard as
Sandor Clegane knocked her to the ground. Unsullied troopers raced to her, grabbing Arya by the
arms. "Knew exactly where you were headed, little cunt," the Hound laughed.
Arya glared at the Hound. "I'll fucking kill you for this."

He smacked her in the stomach with a backhanded slap - fist mailed, it knocked the wind out of her. "Go ahead and try."

His laughs grew, and Arya just noticed he wore the cloak of the Kingsguard. "Since when are you a fucking knight?"

"I ain't, but somethin's gotta keep me from being bored. Chain her up!" The Unsullied complied to Clegane's order.

"What is this!" Arya writhed as the Unsullied clasped her arms in chains. "Unhand me! I am sister to the Emperor Jon!" If these were Joffrey's thugs, she'd have already had Needle out, but these were Daenerys' men. Not her enemy.

"Arya Stark." Looking up, she found herself face to face with the smirking visage of Littlefinger. "Or Arya Baratheon, rather. You are under arrest."

She blinked, feeling her cheeks flush with rage. "Arrest? For fucking what?!"

"Treason." Littlefinger's smile widened. "Conspiracy to murder Her Highness the Empress Daenerys."

Chapter End Notes

Whelp. Arya is in deep shit.

Jon is truly the Dragon Emperor, lol. He really deserved to settle into a balance between Targaryen/Stark.

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed :D

Next time, the fallout to Arya's arrest. I have the next two chapters prepared, so I'll update tomorrow if I get 25 comments :D
Hi all! Thank you for all your wonderful comments!

For everyone asking about why anyone would allow Arya to be arrested, look at it thus: After the Imperial family was targeted by the Faceless Men, it's revealed that Arya is a Faceless Man and didn't tell anyone even after Dany was targeted at Riverrun. Mighty coincidence.

Enjoy and comment!

"YOU ARRESTED MY SISTER?!!" Fire and blood in his eyes, Jon slammed Littlefinger against the wall by the collar of his doublet. It took every bit of his self-control not to shift his hands to the oily aristocrat's neck.

"Jon, stop. Please," Sansa begged - fear on her face.

Daenerys only watched with crossed arms, the anger simmering beneath her icy expression. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't have you beheaded… or have Jon strangle you."

"Your Highness, I…" Littlefinger began to sputter, the Emperor pulling harder on his collar.

His voice only spurred Jon's anger. "I should strangle you right here, you little shit." Only Sansa's word had convinced him to appoint Littlefinger - Jon would have put him on trial if he followed his own instincts.

Sansa stepped forward, placing her hands on his arm. "Jon, he acted under my orders!"

Suddenly the grip on Littlefinger's doublet slackened, the man toppling to the floor in a sputter of coughs. For the first time since learning of Arya's arrest, Jon paid him no heed. His jaw slackened, gaping like a fish as both he and Daenerys stared at his sister in complete and total shock. "Wha… what did you say? Did I hear you correctly?"

"Either it is shared madness, Jon, or else you did. For I heard it too." Dany blinked, hoping that Sansa was just trying to avoid of having the Emperor murder someone with his bare hands. "Tell me it isn't true." Family backstabbing was nothing new to either House Stark or Targaryen, but it was to the new pack.

Sansa hung her head. "It is true, much as I wish it weren't."

In a daze, Jon had to brace himself against the wall to keep from collapsing. "Why?" His voice was but a murmur - the passion of a dragon left plenty of room to tumble into the abyss. "Why would Arya betray me? Betray our family?"

"After…" Littlefinger coughed, clearing his throat as he composed himself. "After I obtained a warrant to search the Lord Baratheon's quarters, I discovered a hidden alcove with… well… faces inside." Jon just stared blankly at a random spot on the wall, while Daenerys listened, sorrow in her
violet eyes. "It is without a shadow of a doubt that Arya is one of the Faceless Men."

"Our going theory is that she is trying to put Gendry on the throne," Sansa cut in. "I cannot fathom why and it breaks my heart, but the whole ploy with the Faceless Men seems to be part of a coordinated effort at a Baratheon Restoration."

"Gendry would never do that. He's loyal, and a good man." It broke Daenerys' heart as much as Jon's, but she managed to keep from breaking down. "This whole… it makes no sense…"

Abruptly, Jon stormed out of the room, head in his hands and a brooding glower on his face. "Jon, wait!" Sansa called out.

She was stilled by Dany. "I'll talk to him, sister."

As the Empress followed Jon, hurrying after him, Sansa sighed and fell into a chair. "That was brutal." She felt tears well in her eyes. "I must've broken his heart."

"It was to be expected." Littlefinger stood next to Sansa, comfortingly patting her shoulder. Quite intimately. "Jon was always close to Arya, who loved him unconditionally when he was a mere bastard. I would be shocked if he took the news of her treachery well at first, but I have no doubt he'll accept it. The evidence is iron clad."

Sansa fought every instinct she had to not rip Littlefinger's hand off her. Now wasn't the time or place. "He can't be allowed to see her, not until the trial. Much too painful."

Littlefinger smiled lovingly down at her. 'Gods, so much like her mother.' If he could honestly say, Sansa looked even more beautiful than Catelyn did at her age. 'Such radiance wasted on an awkward whelp like Podrick Payne.' "You love your brother." She nodded, fighting back tears. "I'm glad. His Majesty will need those that are loyal to him in the coming fight against the dead - and the succession fights that will surely follow. If Lord Baratheon wasn't part of plots for a Baratheon restoration, he will be now."

Wiping away the droplets from her lids, Sansa's expression hardened. "Yes, he needs those loyal around him. To have those that have wronged him exposed of their duplicity." Littlefinger grinned in triumph, not noticing the flicker of the Hand's eyes as she made her declaration.

"I'm not talking to you, scumbag." No precautions were not taken with the last of the Faceless Men. After holding Arya down, the Dothraki bloodriders chained her to the chair, leaving barely any room for her to move. Chaining the world's deadliest assassin, preventing her from any tricks. "If I could, I'd kill you right here, Joffrey ass-kisser." Arya hissed, squirming against the chains.

"Easy girl," Sandor Clegane cautioned. "Don't try something you can't follow through on."

Arya glared at him. "Fuck you." Her eyes shifted to the man sitting across from her. "And fuck you too!" Lord Baelish had questioned her every day over a 'plot' to assassinate Dany and the Little Wolves and install Gendry on the Throne after renewed instability. 'What a bunch of horseshit.' But somehow the Master of Laws had convinced the crown, and here she was.

Smiling, Littlefinger stood, smoothing out his coat. "I'm afraid it isn't my humble self that will be questioning you today."

Her eyes narrowed. "If it isn't Jon or Daenerys, then I'm not interested." She wished to talk to Gendry, but Arya doubted Littlefinger would let him anywhere near her at this point.
"I think you'll be interested." Smile never wavering, he opened the door to the interrogation room in the dungeon. "Come in, my Lady." Arya's eyes widened slightly as Sansa stepped into the room. She wore a full black dress, pin of the Hand clipped to her breast and a chain held by a dragon-clasp draped around her. Her fiery red hair pulled back in a severe bun, the color of dragonfire.

If there was the prototypical Targaryen Hand of the King, Sansa embraced the part.

Such meant nothing to Arya. "If you mean to intimidate me, it won't work." She snorted. "It didn't work when you were ten and you were ten and I was seven, and won't work now."

"I didn't expect it to," Sansa replied coldly, taking the seat Littlefinger offered her. "The Master of Laws says you haven't been cooperative."

"The Master of Laws can get a sword up his ass as far as I'm concerned." Littlefinger merely leaned on the wall, enjoyment written over his face. Sensing Sansa wasn't about to speak, she decided to tell her the less profane version of what she told Baelish and the Hound. "I'm not cooperating, because I didn't do anything but protect our brother and sister."

"Oh? By being part of a group conspiring to end the Empire. To restore House Baratheon to the throne?"

"Do you honestly believe that?" Arya reddened with anger. "If you are, you're still as stupid as you were before all of this shit."

She was unfazed. "What does Gendry know?"

An inhuman rage seized Arya. "Don't you fucking talk about him." Her voice was low, menacing.

"Then who was part of your conspiracy?"

"There was no fucking conspiracy?! I killed the assassins. I killed their leader!" She rattled against her binds. "Jon burned down the House of Black and White, but I killed the man that controlled the operation."

Crossing her arms, Sansa's expression shifted not a bit. As cold as the north she had been born of. "Father's sayings… they keep running through my head." She allowed herself a chuckle, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I want to believe you, Arya. I really do. But…" Sansa paused, letting it hang.

Littlefinger, hells, even the Hound felt it an interrogation tactic. Arya knew better, catching it immediately. Her expression changed not one iota - except for the miniscule raising of an eyebrow, unseen by all except her sister. "Get on with it, Sansa."

"But the evidence is undeniable. You being a member of the Faceless Men, not telling us of it. Not telling Jon, or Daenerys, or mother. Not warning us after the attempt on Daenerys' life at Riverrun." Sansa trembled with an almost too perfect anger. "It was you that killed our uncle. You who causes our mother to cling to life by a thread. You who nearly killed our niece. You Arya, which is why you are in this cell."

Arya lunged forward, straining against her chains. "You're one to talk. You betrayed father, you two-faced bitch!" Hate burned on her face. "You supported Joffrey, weeping and snuggling up to him like a lovesick idiot, even going so far as to betray him and Robb - leading to his death. The great and noble Sansa Stark, her reputation built on a mountain of betrayal."

Sansa rose, eyes blazing. "Listen here, you whelp. I… I am the reason Jon and Daenerys sit on the throne." She beat against her breast. "I secured the support of the Vale. I secured the Northern
Houses and the Blackfish. I kept the Lords at bay while Dany lost Dragonstone and Jon was gallivanting on his plan that he told no one about! This Empire is built by my efforts, all for Jon and Daenerys! And no one will tear it down!" Her rage subsided, freezing into a mask. "Not even by you, dear sister."

"Fine then. So be it."

Pursing her lips in a thin line, Sansa turned. "Leave her in her chains. She deserves to stew in her own mess for a while." With that the Hand to the Emperor left.

"At once, my Lady." With a jerk of the hand, Littlefinger ordered Sandor and the Dothraki to follow him out of the room.

Left alone… left to rot by Littlefinger and the guards as a form of punishment, Arya smirked. Her father's words of wisdom ringing in her head.

"Everything after the word 'but' is horseshit."

________________________________________________________________________

Hands grasping a stone rail overlooking the training yard, Daenerys watched in an intense silence as her husband the Emperor was engaged in a… particularly strenuous sparring session with Grey Worm and the Hound. It had started with a training sword and a staff between Jon and the commander of the Unsullied, but then the newest member of the Kingsguard made an offhand comment of how "Fucking boring the whole shitshow was," and how a proper spar could only be conducted with real weapons. Jon countered by drawing Longclaw, and pretty soon steel clashed against steel and sweat coated their brows as they battled with fury.

"He certainly seems in a lust for battle," Missandei commented offhand, arms behind her back as she kept the Empress company. "Does he ever tire?"

Daenerys barely heard her handmaiden, instead too intensely focused on her husband. How his muscles flexed underneath the padded leather armor, raven curls matting to his forehead - he had taken to ditching his bun in favor of letting his hair fall free as he had when they first met - while he battled two of the world's most renowned warriors. Fending off their combined attacks with a passionate ferocity.

It set her alight.

Violet eyes dark with enchantment and desire, watching her dragonwolf battle away. Sword clashing with Clegane's, fending it off one handed as his other batted away a thrust from Grey Worm's spear. A snarl left him as he parried the other blade and then bullheaded his way into the Unsullied's shield - forcing Grey Worm to give ground. Jon ordered his guards to never take it easy on him, each giving their all, as did he. Only when training with her did he relent, though less and less as she improved.

And Gods, did she love it when he gave it his all. The pure dragonfire of his attacks and defenses leaving his passion on full display - images heading straight to her core. Leaving the Dragon Queen trembling with lust…

"Your Highness?"

Blinking, Daenerys turned to look at Missandei. "What?"

The translator smirked. "I was asking you a question, but it appears you were too preoccupied with gazing at his Majesty." Daenerys reddened, embarrassment mixing with frustrated desire - she had
fully recovered from her childbirth and was ready to make love to Jon until both were screaming each other's name, but he was preoccupied and they hadn't yet to her dismay. "He does look magnificent when he fights."

She smiled with love and lust at him. "That he does." She no longer worried when he sparred, knowing Jon could hold his own. "What did you ask, Missandei?"

"Haven't you noticed he's… not himself?"

Turning back to him with new eyes, Dany noticed things that she had missed in her lust. The dull look in his eyes. The frenzy in which he attacked - as if he was deliberately forcing himself forward. Normally he joked and showboated when he sparred, using it as something fun to do. There was no sign of that Jon.

Dany sighed. "He hasn't been himself since Arya was arrested." She closed her eyes, sharing his pain. "We can't believe she'd do anything, but the trial is tomorrow…" A tear fell down her cheek. Her family made her vulnerable, the chink in her armor - one she would always be grateful for. "I don't know what to do."

"Perhaps he just needs love." Looking at Missandei, smiling softly, Dany answered with a smile of her own.

Letting out a snarl, Sandor charged with a rightward slash, hoping to catch the Emperor off balance. However, Jon was nimble. Sweat pouring off him, he jumped out of the way and slammed the hilt of his sword against the Kingsguard's shoulder plate, causing him to stumble with a grunt of pain. The attack opened him up to Grey Worm, who forced him back with a swipe of the spearhead. Jon nearly fell, but managed to catch himself just to block a thrust from his commander.

"Stop." Three pairs of eyes flickered to the Empress, entering the courtyard itself.

Heaving, Jon raised a finger. "Pause." Grey Worm, panting, collapsed to the ground - quite undignified, but he was too exhausted to care, sucking in breaths as he removed his helmet.

Clegane bounded to a large bucket of water and unceremoniously dumped it over his head, soaking and cooling him before he collapsed to the ground himself. "Fuck, Emp." He coughed. "There's something the fuck wrong with you." While Joffrey would have executed anyone that spoke such about him, Jon merely flipped him off, tired himself.

Before he could say anything to Daenerys, the silver-haired Empress grabbed his hand and tugged him out of the courtyard. "Don't speak," she commanded, pulling him through the halls toward the Imperial Chambers. Jon kept silent, her tone leaving no room for dissent.

Door shutting behind them, Dany pulled Jon into a deep kiss. A hungry one. A pleading one. One begging him to let out his emotions into a passionate coupling. Like the dragon she was, Daenerys demanded it, pushing her husband into the wall and plundering his mouth. "Dany… fuck… what has gotten… into you?" Jon ground out in between kisses.

She coaxed a gasp out of him, palming his crotch. "You… got into me." She bit his shoulder, sucking hard. "Or at least… get into me now." Daenerys rolled her hips into him. Reveling in his groan. "Let it out Jon. Let out the dragon and the wolf. Now!" The command was a veritable roar.

Eyes darker than she had ever seen before, Daenerys was unprepared for the sheer tongue of dragonfire she had unleashed. Growling - one that undoubtedly made Ghost look like a puppy - Jon lifted Dany in his arms and roughly slammed her into a column. "You woke the dragon, Daenerys,"
he husked. Unlike when her brother used to say it, Jon's voice was filled with desire, his northern brogue making her shiver with delight.

Dany yelped as Jon hiked up her dress and ripped off her underclothes. "Jon…"

"I'll send for more," he growled, diving into her heat. Tongue lapping her hips until there were undoubtedly bruises - only such a grip could control the violent thrashing of her lower half. "Bisa ıkis ńuhon, Daenērys Jelmāzmo. Iksā ńuhon!"

His accented Valyrian caused a flood of wetness to soak Dany. "Aōhon." Jon giving her the Lord's Kiss always ravished her. Wet tongue clouding her mind with wanton lust. "Mērī aōhon!" She screamed, gripping Jon's hair as she climaxed. "Jon, ńuha jorrāelagon!"

Watching her come down from her high, Jon rose and pinned her to the column. His worries had left him, at least temporarily. All the Emperor cared about at this moment was pleasing his Empress. "I didn't say we were done, my dragon."

Voice eminently wolf-like, Dany felt her arousal spike. She clawed at his clothes, needing him naked, while he instead crashed their mouths together. Needing her. Needing the connection. Such was how it always was with Jon. Fiery. Passionate. Loving and sweet. "You're perfect," she gasped, Jon entering her. Stretching her so deliciously. "The perfect man. Fuck me, Jon."

Spurred on, Jon grunted as he began a bruising thrust. Pushing into her, delighting in the wanton moans and mewls that left his wife. His body was tired, exerted beyond belief and straining from the new movements, but he couldn't stop. Nothing registered to the Emperor but coaxing more and more of the moans from his dragon.

Their eyes gazed into each other's. 'Love comes in at the eyes.' Hurtling towards their shared climax, pleasure building, burning through them, they never broke their gaze.

Before Daenerys could scream her orgasm, Jon savagely kissed her. Riding out his explosion, needing to feel her as he pulsated. Riding out his pleasure as she milked him. Legs trembling, skin hypersensitive while flush against her. Somewhere in the distance, twin roars from their dragons pierced the din.

Soon they were spent, muscles sore and mind foggy in the wonderful afterglow. Dany sighed contently as she felt Jon pick her up, carrying her to the bed. They tumbled into it together, a laugh leaving her lips and a grin formed on his. "We both needed that," she said, kissing his chest - right above his scar.

"We did." Jon's voice was hoarse with emotion. He sighed, sadness replacing the earlier euphoria - and numbness. "I'm worried, Dany."

"I know, my love." She cupped his cheek.

He shook his head. "Arya didn't betray me. I don't know what Sansa and Littlefinger are doing, but she is innocent." Seeing acceptance and agreement in her expression, Jon went on. "I will pardon her before the trial. I don't care what that will show, I…"

Dany leaned up and kissed him. "She's my family too. The pack sticks together, or else it won't survive. We can't let our family die." Catching a smile from him at her loyalty, their lips brushed together as further desire stirred...

A knock on the door disturbed their peace. "Go away!" Jon snarled.
"Jon, please let me in." It was Sansa, not someone either could ignore. Cursing in High Valyrian, which caused Dany to giggle, Jon threw on his breeches and stormed over to the door. Sansa's eyes widened as she gazed on him shirtless, the implication obvious with Daenerys still nestled in the bed. She chose to ignore it. "We need to talk."

Zilas watched in silent horror, narrowed eyes sweeping over row upon row of corpses. Bodies in various states of decay - from fresh to mere skeletons - lined up as far as the eye could see in every direction. Men, giants, mammoths, ice spiders, direwolves… every form of undead creature that could be assembled by the most inhuman force to have ever graced the earth.

Including the most fearsome of all. One Zilas had known personally in his long lifetime. A sweet, gentle beast… nothing like the creature towering before him.

Tied to an undead horse, one of the generals atop it, Zilas heard the crunch of boots atop fluffy white snow behind him. A distinctive footfall he could identify anywhere. "So I take it the war is beginning?"

The Night King stepped alongside him, staring at the last rays of the northern sun before it would disappear beneath the clouds and the horizon. So far north, winter brought total darkness. The day-long night. 'Soon. The Great Fall approaches, my friend. And with it the greatest power.'

"Second greatest." Icy blue eyes shifted to Zilas. "There exists only one greater, wielded by your brother."

'My brother is long dead.' He twirled the piece of dragonglass in his hand, never having parted with it once. 'And I hold the last of his legacy upon this earth.' The behemoth right ahead of them loomed large. 'The boy is but a distraction. Soon, he will be dead as well, and his woman mine.' With that, he stepped towards his mount, command shouting to all. 'FORWARD!'

The Army of the Dead lurched forward like a drunken sailor. Slow, ponderous, but ever forward.

Gazing up into the fury of the blizzard, his creation obscured more and more as he ascended onto his mount, Zilas let out a defiant scream. "You will never win!" It was lost in the howl of the wind.

But the Night King's senses were powerful. His psionic voice piercing any force of man or nature. 'Neither of us believe that, my friend. Neither of us.' With a demonic screech, his mount charged forward, Zilas hanging his head in shame as the other walkers ordered the Army of the Dead forward. In the distance, he could almost see the tops of the Wall poking above the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

Didn't think we saw the last of the Night King, did you?

Littlefinger has broken Jon's heart and is set to have Arya executed on Sansa's orders. But does Sansa know more than she's telling?

I know, I know, I inverted the quote by Ned Stark. A little poetic licence for the story.

Had to put a fun little scene with our two monarchs, plus Jon kicking everyone's asses at sparring was fitting. Perhaps I should do one later of him and Dany sparring :D
Translations:

Bisa iksis ūunon, Daenērys Jelmāzmo. Iksā ūunon! = You is mine, Daenerys Stormborn. You are mine!

Aōhon = Yours

Mērī aōhon = Only Yours

Jon, ūuha jorrāelagon! = Jon, my love

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed.

Next time, Arya's trial. I'll update Friday if I get 25 comments :D
To Kill a Mockingbird

Chapter Notes

Hi all! This chapter was hard to write, but I think it turned out well. Big reveals!

Enjoy and review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Muttering a rather… innocuous curse, Sam removed the burned out candle and fixed a new wick in place. Taking the still burning lamp on the other side, the perfect amount of light returned for the Lord of Horn Hill. "Ah, that's better." What would really be better was a light source with a continuous supply of fuel, but Sam doubted that would arise in his lifetime.

Peering at the thick volumes in front of him - desperate for some insight that would put them at an advantage to the coming battle against the dead - the sounds of giggles and high-pitched whining proved too much a distraction. "Little Sam, please be gentle with the pups," he chided softly.

"But they cute," the cherubic five year old called out, tickling the belly of a pure white pup.

Rhaegar laughed, his hand softly stroking a grey one. "Aye, they are Sam. But be careful. They're only a week old. Nestled in a large basket in the Imperial Solar were six direwolf pups, some dozing comfortably while others squirmed around. The Twins hadn't left the side of the pups in days as their mother rested. Ghost, the proud poppa, was shifting in between his duties as a father and as the Emperor's personal direwolf… leaving the twins to bond with them. Rhaegar lifted the grey one, softly stroking its back. "When I grow up, Eddy, you'll be by my side protecting the Realm."

A smile formed on Sam's face. How he got roped into babysitting the children, he did not know - oh seven hells, he did know. Someone needed to watch them while the trial went on, and since he was usually secluded with his books, he and Gilly were the perfect pair to watch over their son, the Prince and Princesses, and six direwolf pups.

"Alright, Saera." Gilly gently rocked the newest princess to sleep, walking to her crib. "Their Majesties will be back soon for you. Get some rest, little one." The lass, almost completely northern in look and color, opened her little mouth in a yawn before falling into a soft sleep. Gilly set her down. "Their Majesties make beautiful babies, Sam." She stepped close to her husband. "I hope our new one will be just as pretty."

Sam reached out to cup her belly. "If he or she looks like you, they will be." His family meant the world to him, and now House Tarly was expanding by one more. With Dickon now taking the white cloak of the Kingsguard, it would be up to Sam to manage the Reach until Margaery Stark's prospective second son would come of age. "Good news from home." Thinking about the Reach popped it into his mind. "Momma says Tella has been betrothed to Tommen Lannister."

Gilly smiled widely. "I'm happy for her."

"The boy is sweet, if I remember correctly. Nothing like his vile brother." Tommen had been at Casterly Rock since the fall of Joffrey's empire, adopted officially by Jaime and heir to the Wardenship of the West. His betrothal to the daughter of a noble house of the Reach and the sister of
the Emperor's best friend was a first step in rehabilitating House Lannister. "I really want to be ecstatic for her, but these damn… sorry… books…” He trailed off, frustrated. Gilly leaned down, kissed his cheek, and picked up some read books to put them away.

"I hope Ghost and Nymeria have more pups," Arya sighed, happily tickling the belly of a rather active one, a dappled grey and tan she had named Rhaenys. "Then Aunt Sansa and Uncle Robb can have new ones for the ones they lost. Plus for our future brothers and sisters." She squealed in delight at the thought of all the puppies.

Her silver hair swaying as she laughed, the young Tarly heir was mesmerized. "They just puppies," Little Sam said, softly stroking a light-grey and white pup. "They grow big like Ghost?" The thought astonished him.

"They sure will. Maybe bigger." She cuddled Rhaenys some more, the puppy softly licking her face. Little Sam watched the princess with awe, as if she was the most interesting thing in the world.

Chuckling, enjoying the sight of his son - despite the lack of blood relations, Sam was damned if Little Sam wasn't his own and his heir - dealing with Jon's daughter. She may have been three years older than him, but Sam could see betrothal negotiations happening between him and the Imperial couple in the future. If Little Sam picked up any of the Tarly stubbornness, he'd be zealous in pursuing the most eligible maiden in Westeros.

His amusement and happiness trailed off as he caught sight of Gilly standing. Alone. Holding a book in her hand. "My dear, what's wrong?" He stood to walk over to his wife.

She didn't move from the text. "Sam. You said Jon's real father was named… Rhaa-ger, right?"

"Crown Prince Rhaegar Targaryen, yes. Same as his son." He peered at Gilly questioningly. The book in her hand was thin. Old, but thin. "Why?"

"This book says is a diary by Rhaegar, but it only has a few pages of writing." She looked at him, wide eyed. "All seem to be about the Great Fall."

Taking it from Gilly's outstretched hand, Sam leafed through the sparse pages, scanning the writing. Each word filled him with greater and greater dread, until the penultimate paragraph caused his normally ruddy face to go ashen. "We need to tell Jon about this!"

"But poppa's at the trial," little Arya piped up.

Sam ran a hand down his face. "Blast it."

Turning the corner, Podrick found her in the private audience room. His betrothed was quiet, hands clasped in her lap as she stared at the painting on the wall. "Sansa?" The knight of the realm walked to her side.

The Hand to the Emperor didn't budge, eyes glossing over the finely painted canvas - at the figures rendered through the precision of the paint and skill of the artist. It was one Jon insisted on, one of the entirety of the living Stark family. Men standing, in their full northern combat regalia, while the women sat in resplendent dresses. Jon and Daenerys, their children around them in the center. Robb and Margaery holding little Jon Stark to their left. Rickon, Bran, and Meera, the former of the three watched over by Catelyn behind him, the only Stark child without a betrothed or lover. On the right of Daenerys were her and Podrick, joined on the far right by Arya and Gendry. Gendry looked strong with his warhammer, but it was Arya that Sansa paid attention to. The artist was brilliant in
capturing her. Decisive, yet also graceful. Joined together with the entire family, a united front against all that stood in their way.

"The lone wolf dies, the pack survives."

"It must be done, Podrick," Sansa said, voice calm. Willing herself to be calm.

"I trust you, my Lady." Leaning over to kiss her cheek, she gripped his hair and pulled him into a sweet kiss on the lips. Chaste, but loving and passionate in its own way.

The door opened, causing Podrick to pull away. "Sansa?" It was Robb. He looked cold as ice - a mask all of the pack were putting on for today. "We're ready."

She nodded. "I'm coming now."

As she made her way out, Robb caught her arm. "I hope you know what you are doing."

"We'll soon see, brother."

Every noble within King's Landing at the time were crowded into the Throne Room. Many had even made the journey from afar, Bronze Yohn Royce bringing young Robin Arryn of the Vale, Edmure Tully and his family from Riverrun, and Tyene Martell and her new husband Bronn from Sunspear among the cluster of recent arrivals. Joined outside on the cold winter's day by tens of thousands of onlookers outside. This was to be the trial of the decade, as many had said. Rumors spread of how lively and entertaining it would be, decisive for the fate of the Realm and for the discovery of the deeper truth.

While nearly all had unease or disgust at the nature of the proceedings, Lord Petyr Baelish couldn't wipe the smug smile off his face. Notes tucked under his arm, dressed in his finest doublet and cape, he had no reason to feel anything but euphoric. He had an airtight case against Arya, and pretty soon the infighting within the Imperial Family would be like a wildfire storm. It was an amazing feeling, plans coming together like this.

Jon and Daenerys arriving in the annex, somber and dressed in their usual combination of Targaryen and Stark colors, Littlefinger bowed. "Your Majesties. Do not worry. I shall ensure justice is done this day, for you and for the Prince and Princesses."

Dany had no expression, while Jon looked simply tired. "Forgive me, Lord Baelish. But you won't be conducting the trial today."

Blinking, Littlefinger looked at his Emperor in surprise. "Sire?"

Jon held up his hands. "This isn't an insult of your ability. But Arya is of the north." He gestured to Sansa, who walked up behind him. "She deserves someone of the north to conduct this trial, and Sansa volunteered. Forgive me of any slight on my part, my Lord."

Eyes flickering between the Emperor and Sansa, Littlefinger sighed. "As you will, sire." Handing his notes to Sansa, he willed himself to put it out of his mind. While he wouldn't get his shining moment condemning Arya for the world to see, it didn't change his plans. His victory. The victory was still here, and it was glorious.

All rose to their feet as Missandei heralded Jon and Daenerys, the monarchs taking their seats upon their thrones with all due haste. Their guards - Ser Jorah for Daenerys and Ser Dickon Tarly for Jon - stood slightly behind the thrones, while the Imperial family were in straight-backed chairs to the left and right of the dias. Bran, passive as usual, had the most obscure position on the far-left. Same as in
the painting.

A quiet descended as Daenerys cleared her throat. "Bring in Arya Stark."

Utter silence as the doors opened, Sandor Clegane behind and two Unsullied flanking the chained Arya, who marched down the length of the throne room with her head held up high. Davos, Lord of the Dreadfort, stood next to Gendry, doing his best to calm Lord Baratheon down from his rage and sadness at seeing his wife in chains. But most just watched numbly, not knowing what to think.

Jon, especially, fought conflicting emotions. He drew upon all of his ice to steady himself. "Who speaks for the crown?"

"Are you sure you want to do this, brother?" Arya asked the Emperor, simply.

Calm, Jon looked away from his sister. "Who speaks for the crown?" he repeated.

"I, Sansa of House Stark, Hand to His Majesty." She took the stand of the trier of fact, looking at Arya. "May I have leave to begin, to bring honor to and justice for our family."

"You may."

Nodding, Sansa met eyes with her sister for an interminable moment. "Before we begin, do you have anything to say, Lady Baratheon?" Hanging back, across the throne room from Sansa, Littlefinger watched with his arms crossed, supremely enjoying the show.

Chains removed, hands now clasped behind her back, Arya would not allow her emotions to show. She merely stared ahead at the thrones, lips flat and expression passive. "I have none, except to ask to get on with it."

"Very well." Sansa cleared her throat. "The prisoner stands accused before us of the crimes of treason, murder, and conspiracy to commit murder. What do you have to say for yourself..." She drew out a long silence, allowing her eyes to fall upon the true prisoner. "...Lord Baelish?"

It took several moments for it to sink in. Still leaning on the wall, Littlefinger's expression registered confusion. "My sister asked you a question, my Lord," Daenerys said, flatly. Implied was the command to answer - and no one denied the Dragon Queen's commands.

"I'm sorry? I don't understand."

"Which charge do you not understand, my Lord?"

Pushing himself off the wall, Baelish now sported incredulity. "The Lady Baratheon is under trial here, not me." Arya merely smirked at him, no trace of worry in her expression. "I wrote the warrant for her trial myself."

"The announcement for a trial contained no names, so therefore the Lady Baratheon was not scheduled for trial. It is you that is on trial today, my Lord. Since you are Master of Laws at well, it would be ridiculous for you to try yourself, hence my presence." Sansa gave the court an innocent look. "I hope that clears the confusion."

Jaw dropped in the pure gall, Littlefinger looked to the throne. "You said, sire, that Arya needed to be tried by her sister."

"I recall no such conversation, my Lord." Jon's expression was hard, like ice. "Do you recall such, Daenerys?"
"I do not."

He cast his eyes back to Littlefinger. "Do you wish to claim the Father and Mother of Dragons as liars?"

Cast into an unwinnable fight by the Emperor, Littlefinger shook his head, resolved to play and beat Sansa at her little game. Wordlessly, he stepped into the well of the throne room. "The trial of Lord Petyr Baelish of Harrenhal shall begin." She smiled sweetly. "Where should we begin?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Lady Sansa." Littlefinger's arms were up in shock and incredulity, mirroring his swashbuckling prosecutorial style. "I have no idea why I'm here!"

"Allow me to start, you murdered your wife and my aunt Lysa Arryn by throwing her out the moon door at the Eyrie." Previously bored, Robin Arryn looked up in shock, gazing at Baelish with new eyes.

Littlefinger merely rolled his. "We've been through this before…"

"You also gave my aunt Lysa tears of Lys to poison Jon Arryn, Hand of the King, and then advised King Robert the Usurper to journey north to ask my father Ned Stark to be his next Hand."

"What!" The moment was paused as Lord Harrold Hardyng calmed down his cousin, Robin.

The pause allowed Littlefinger to compose himself. "Your aunt Lysa was a weak woman, plagued by demons that both of us witnessed. What she must told you is not reliable in the slightest." No one interrupted either, allowing the drama to play out in front of them.

Unfazed, Sansa flipped over a sheaf of parchment for another below it. "Alright, you also conspired with Joffrey Baratheon and the Lannisters to betray our father, Ned Stark. To gaslight war between the Lannisters and the Starks by ordering the assassination of my brother Brandon. To ensure that war broke out between Joffrey and my brother Robb."

"Your majesties, this is ridiculous!"

"Is it?" The Young Wolf stood, walking into the well. In his hand was a Valyrian steel dagger. The one Bran had given to Arya. "You told my mother that this belonged to Tyrion Lannister. She told me of this, which is why she arrested him at the Vale - leading to my father's crippling at the hands of Jaime Lannister. It is your dagger, is it not?"

Unease began to creep on Littlefinger, as if something was brewing. Brewing to trap him before he could escape. But he could only react for now. "Aye, it was mine. But I gave it as a gift to Lord Tyrion, as a token for being my best customer at my house of pleasure." Normally many would laugh, but no one was laughing today. 'None of you were there! You have no witnesses.'

"No one parts with Valyrian steel." The Lord of Winterfell looked up at the Imp. "Lord Tyrion, were you ever given this knife?"

Tyrion glared at Baelish. "I have never seen it before today. Much as I appreciated Lord Robin's accommodations, it was based on false pretenses."

"So I fought that fucker for nothing?" Bronn's comment drew errant chuckles, but the mood darkened once again.

"The evidence is there for charging you with conspiring to begin the War of the Five Kings, just as it is there for the crown's other charges of planning the Red Wedding with Lord Bolton and Lord Frey,
not to mention the burning to death of Myrcella Baratheon being your idea." Tyrion's glare descended into near-homicidal at the fact. "But I shall focus on one other charge." Blinks of surprise came from all around - except for one. "You, Lord Baelish, are charged with treason against the Targaryen crown for conspiracy to instigate Robert's Rebellion, among other associated crimes."

Gasps resonated through the room. Jon's icy composure fell into shock, Daenerys stiffening beside him at the news. Sansa hadn't briefed any on that charge, nor did any expect it. Least of all, Littlefinger. "What is meaning of this?"

Setting her papers to the side, Sansa looked directly at Littlefinger, blue eyes dark with hate. "You hated my uncle Brandon for stealing my mother from you, so when you found out that Robert Baratheon lied about Lyanna being kidnapped, you went to King's Landing and told lies to ensure my uncle's death."

Littlefinger's jaw fell, gaping at the audacity of Sansa's accusation. "What kind of ridiculousness is this?!"

Sansa narrowed her eyes at Baelish. "So you deny these accusations?" Her gaze flickered to the side of the dias, a signal.

"Of course I deny it!" Inwardly trembling with fear, outwardly he shook with a righteous fury. "You stand here, making false accusations, with no basis in reality! I stand here, Master of Laws and Lord of Harrenhal, and I will not tolerate this!"

"You spoke to the Mad King." All eyes swiveled to Bran, except for the Empress, who watched Littlefinger like a hawk. She didn't overlook the slight hitch in his breath, the slight widening of his gaze. "He was in one of his rages, all guards and courtiers banished from the throne room. You gained access, and informed him of Robert Baratheon and the Starks marshalling forces against him." The stories of Bran the Greenseer had spread far and wide, trained by the warlocks of Qarth and able to see things others could barely remember. If he referred to a past memory, no one doubted him. "When you said that Brandon Stark was approaching to assassinate him, he replied 'Burn them all.' Lord Varys died trying to get this information to me, after you directed the Faceless Men to go after our Empress."

The tension in the throne room was so thick, one could cut it with only the thickest of Valyrian steel blades. When Jon finally turned to Littlefinger, the aristocrat stepped back involuntarily. His grey eyes were so dark to be indistinguishable from black. "It was you that convinced the Mad King to imprison my uncle Brandon? Who paid the faceless men?" He rose, only the deepest strain of his wolf ancestry keeping the blood of the dragon from burning uncontrollably. "To burn my grandfather alive. That started the war that resulted in my father's death. My siblings. My…" He couldn't finish, everyone watching as their Emperor forced back hot tears.

Panic began to set on Littlefinger. "Your Majesty, I…"

"YOU TOOK MY MOTHER AWAY FROM ME!" Jon's thundering roar felt as if it shook the entire castle, followed by six earth-shattering cries that literally shook the entire city. Growing up motherless, cast into the hell of being a mere bastard, denied the love of a mother's embrace… all for the ambitions of an unctuous cunt. "YOU TRIED TO KILL MY FAMILY!" For the longest moment, it seemed as if Jon would personally hack Littlefinger to death… until Daenerys placed a comforting hand upon him. Thumb stroking his palm, informing him of her understanding, her sharing of his pain, his anger.

For once it was the Empress calming her Emperor from his rage. Jon sat back on his throne, only now his face contorted with barely disguised rage. Daenerys was quiet, but her eyes said everything.
Looking upon the Empress, upon Robb Stark, upon the Lords of the Vale, Littlefinger saw no sympathy in any. Most mirrored the murderous look of Gendry Baratheon, realizing that his life had been each of seven hells simply as a power play. Thus, he threw himself upon Sansa's table. "My Lady, I have protected you and your family for generations…"

"Protected? By selling me to the Boltons? By selling out my uncle to the Mad King?"

"Allow me to speak with you and their Majesties alone. I'll explain these lies."

She leaned forward. "Sometimes I play a little game. Assume the worst in people, assuming the worst for you wanting to have my sister executed as leading a conspiracy for making Gendry King." Her eyes mirrored those of her brother upon the throne. "Putting you in a place of power, appearing to trust you, your motives and desires spilled forth for all to see. With a threat to all humanity before us, you wish to instigate civil war within the Imperial family - kill off every last Targaryen till all that is left is you to rule." Whispers began to drift through the throne room. Whispers for Littlefinger's head. "That is what you do, isn't it? Pit family against family. Sister against sister. My mother and aunt. Stark against Targaryen. You destroy all bonds of peace, simply because you know no other way to gain power for yourself."

"Please, allow me to defend myself. I deserve that."

Sansa fell back in her seat, crossing her arms. Waiting for what Littlefinger would say - not that it would matter.

Green eyes shifting, mind whirring for any words or actions that could protect his hide from the danger he was in, Littlefinger suddenly stormed towards the cluster of Vale Lords and knights. "I am Lord Protector of the Vale and I demand you safely escort me to the Eyrie!"

"I think not." Lord Royce was full of indignation, and did not easily forget how close he had come to death at the hands of Lord Baelish.

Littlefinger looked to Royce's left, at young Robin - now a gangly teenager. "Sweetrobin. I am your father by marriage…"

"You killed my mother!" Long an brash, spoiled child, now he spoke with a steel that reminded the Vale Lords of his father. "You are no father of mine."

"Please, Sweetrobin…" He grabbed his collar, pleading. "Don't believe the lies…"

"Get your hands off my liege lord, Baelish," Royce demanded, sword drawn.

Stepping back in the face of Vale steel, Littlefinger booked for the middle of the floor. "My Lady," he fell to his knees in front of Sansa. "I beg you." Tears - crocodile tears - welled in his eyes. "I've loved your mother since I was but a boy."

"And yet you betrayed her." Sansa stood from her post, black skirts swaying as she looked like the female incarnation of Edmyn Tully, Aegon the Conqueror's greatest supporter in the Riverlands and his second Hand. Just as Sansa was to Aegon's descendants. "It is thanks to your schemes that she lies in her bed, clinging to life by but a thread."

His grief turned into a tearful smile. "But I love you, Sansa. More than anyone."

Podrick, fists clenched, found himself in the same situation as Gendry - instead of Davos it was Bronn, stopping him with an outstretched arm. "Easy lad. Cunt'll get what's coming to him."

Honestly, the former sellsword feared his wife's potential outburst more than his friend's. Tyene
shook quietly, eyes ablaze. Littlefinger's schemes had nearly destroyed her family as well.

"Sansa." He pushed towards her, arms out. "You can't deny my feelings..."

A slap echoed through the hall. For the first time, anger seethed from Sansa Stark. "I love Podrick Payne, my intended." Sandor Clegane stepped between Sansa and Littlefinger, ready to knock the Mockingbird's teeth in should he try anything else. Sansa didn't let his presence - protecting her from evil, once again - stop her rant. "Your very touch disgusts me, knowing it wrote the letters that led my father to his death in this city. Your voice disgusts me, knowing that the lies it spun took my brother's family away from him. Sent my sister to live on the run like an animal." Her fists clenched. "You will never get mercy from me, Lord Baelish. Not for all the gold or power in the world."

Scrambling towards the throne, falling to his knees once more atop the steps, Littlefinger clasped his hands together in penitence. "Your Highness, do not believe these lies." He began to ramble, words tumbling from his mouth in a frantic plea. "I am loyal to House Targaryen. I opened the gates and ensured your army entered the city without bloodshed. My fealty was proven on that day."

Daenerys, casting a sidelong look to her husband, smiled when Jon nodded. "Of course I remember that gesture, Lord Baelish." All attention was on her for the first time that night. "House Targaryen will be forever grateful for your actions that day, and for that I grant you your pardon..."

Relief coursed through Littlefinger, his face softening and tension leaving his body. "Thank you," he blubbered - quite pathetically. "Thank you, Empress."

It was then that Daenerys leaned forward, violet eyes a shade so dark as to appear black. "...for the murder of Lysa Arryn." Her smile widened malevolently as Littlefinger's face grew white. "As for all other charges leveled against you." Dany - still leaning forward as if to converse with a dear friend - spoke in a sinister whisper, but it still echoed throughout the throne room. "I, Daenerys of House Targaryen. First of my Name, Empress of the Targaryen Empire, find you guilty on all counts."

Whatever hope he had rushing out of him, rather than acceptance, the ashen look only made Littlefinger appear more desperate. "Your Majesty, please." He looked at Jon, pleading.

While Daenerys gave off a simmering heat, Jon's was a blazing dragonfire. "You robbed me of my family, Lord Baelish." The memory of his mother and father, embracing him in the afterlife. That would have been his entire childhood if not for this monster. "I, Jon of House Targaryen, First of my Name. Emperor of the Targaryen Empire, find you guilty on all counts."

"For the crimes of treason and murder, I believe the sentence is death." Leaning back on her throne, Daenerys still had the sickly sweet smile on her face. "Lady Sansa, proceed."

Hearing a low growl, Littlefinger turned to see a young Catelyn Stark with the Emperor's white direwolf by her side. Her hair was a blazing inferno, untouched by age or weariness. The direwolf's fangs were bared in a menacing growl, one as fierce as even a dragon's. "You told me once that the only justice in this world is when we make it." Her hardened scowl curled up into a ghost of a smirk. Satisfied. Victorious. "Thank you for your many lessons, Lord Baelish. They were quite useful in protecting my family, and I will never forget them."

Pallor the color of chalk, trembling violently, Littlefinger let out a penitent hand. "Sansa..."

Sansa cut him off with a single command. "Ghost."

With a growl that echoed through the throne room, Ghost hurtled through the air as he set upon Littlefinger. The condemned Lord tried feebly to block and fight off the beast, but such attempts
were in vain. Ghost's paws cut long gashes through his body, jaws tearing chunks from his chest and face as the dogs did to Ramsay Bolton so long ago. Piercing screams shattered the din, bloodcurdling and of the greatest pain. But no one reacted. Lords, Ladies, Knights, soldiers, even the Emperor and Empress just watched with cold, satisfied eyes as the Mockingbird met his fate.

Finally, with a lunge of the jaw, Ghost ripped Littlefinger's throat out in a spurt of blood - deed done, he trotted back over to Sansa, who calmly stroked the fur on his neck. Blood gushing from the fatal wound, Littlefinger pushed himself up slightly, glistening eyes catching one last glimpse of Sansa. It was like Catelyn looking down on him with disgust one last time… then blackness.

No one said a word when the Mockingbird collapsed to the ground, finally dead - blood pooling around his corpse to cover the tile beneath the dias. Clearing his throat, piercing the silence, Tyrion turned to the official scribe of the court. "The record will reflect that the sentence was carried out by their Majesties' direwolf."

"It is so recorded, Lord Hand," the scribe droned.

At one final scruff of his fur from Sansa, Ghost trotted up the dias to curl up in the space between Jon and Daenerys. Nodding to the Throne, Sansa turned to the Unsullied flanking Arya. "The Lady Baratheon may take her place next to Lord Baratheon. The court found no evidence to sustain any charge against her."

Flashing a triumphant smile, Arya confidently strode across the chamber and took Gendry's side, their hands weaving together tightly.

Smiling herself, Sansa curtseyed to the throne. "At your service, your majesties. I present you the last justice for your family."

Daenerys looked down at Littlefinger's corpse with an icy hate. "Winter came for Lord Baelish."

Jon nodded. "Winter brought fire and blood."

Rising, Sansa stood straight. "Long may King Jon and Queen Daenerys reign."

The entire gallery repeated simultaneously. "Long may they reign."

With that, the last wounds of begun by Robert's Rebellion had ended. The healing could begin, Realms united fully under the Targaryen Empire.

"Need another cloak, Queenshield?" His new title usually a point of pure pride for Jaime Lannister, among the hardened men of the Night's Watch it was simply another chiding insult. "I'm sure we could find an entire mammoth hide that can cure your cold." Snickers and outright laughs followed from the men around him.

Tightening his own gold-lined crimson cloak around him, Jaime merely stared out at the vast expanse of forest and snow north of the massive wall. Try as he might, he couldn't remember any point along his journey north that matched the cold of these hostile lands. "Brooding, Lord Jaime?" The form of Beric Dondarrion plopped next to him, one eye glistening with mirth. "I'm sure the high winds of Casterly Rock prepared you for the cold more than this lad of the Stormlands."

Jaime looked at Beric incredulously. "Comparing Casterly Rock to this…" He shook his head. "Tyron was excited to see the wall. To 'Take a piss off the edge of the world.' Frankly he's insane." He shivered, wishing for a stout swig of wine. "Give me the sun of the Westerlands any day."
"Had enough adventure for one life already, Lannister?" Beric chuckled. "I've had six lives. Six resurrections, and still the Lord of Light has one more adventure for me to endure. Same as you, I believe." Looking around, he lowered his voice. "One last adventure so that son of yours can take up your mantle in peace."

Eyes widen, Jaime looked at Beric in shock. "I... I don't know what you mean."

Beric scoffed. "Please. Have you ever heard of a Baratheon with light hair? Even Targaryen blood couldn't fuck with that, and they're fucking Targaryens." The former Lord grinned as Jaime looked like he was about to pass out. "Don't worry, Lannister. I'm not planning to spill your secrets. You've paid the price for your sins."

Gazing down at his missing arm, Jaime reasoned that Beric had a point. Still... he didn't feel any less guilty. 'Live,' a voice that sounded like Rhaegar Targaryen said in his mind. 'For Tommen.'

"For Tommen," he murmured. "Cersei wasn't always mad. Wasn't always like Joffrey. Hells, even Joffrey wasn't always like Joffrey." Jaime ran a hand down his face. "Think I could have done something, anything before all of this shit happened?"

Shrugging, Beric leaned back on the ice battlements. "The Lord of Light conducts his work shrouded in mystery. We can't do much more than be good men and work towards what we can determine to be his will." He smiled softly, looking up at the sky. "All men are flawed, but it is never too late..."

The conversation was interrupted by a blaring horn. Sound echoing for miles upon miles and piercing the howling wind. Jaime's brows furrowed. "We don't have any patrols out, do we?"

"Only warged birds," Beric replied. The horn resounded once more. "There are no wildlings left north of the wall..." An icy feeling settled in his chest, hand slowly drifting to grasp his sword.

The ice spread to Jaime as the horn blared its mournful bellow into the din once more. "Three blasts." One for returning rangers. Two for wildlings. Three for..."

"LOOK!" A man in the red robes of the Fiery Hand pointed towards the treeline.

All those present at the dragonpit meeting, as Jaime had, felt the image of the undead monster snarling and biting was the most inhuman thing that could ever be seen upon the earth. Jaime had been wrong, so very wrong. Before him were tens... hundreds of thousands of the same beasts, spilling out of the trees onto the massive no man's land between the forest and the wall.

"That's not one hundred thousand," Beric breathed. He had seen them before, but not this many.

"Two hundred thousand at least," Jaime gulped. He gazed at the mounted white walkers leading the horde while the shouts and scuffles of hurried preparation were heard from Castle Black and the battlements.

Below, the line of mounted commandiers acted in unison. In one fluid move their ice spears dropped flat to point at the wall. And the front line of the army behind them surged in a frenzied charge.

Jaime had seen enough. "To arms!"

Winter was here.
And there you have it. The conclusion of the Littlefinger drama. Jon's anger... Dany's dark smile as she condemned Littlefinger to death. Those were fun to write, lol.

Who truly imagined the depth of his crimes... though it was obviously in his power. Please let me know what you think! :D

To any question on Littlefinger being old enough to schmooze the Mad King. If Littlefinger grew up with Catelyn Stark, then he has to be older than the book portrays him as (the actress that played Catleyn was like 45 when the show started). Littlefinger is minimum 38 in season 1, so he'd be like 22 during Robert's Rebellion. All I'll say.

Direwolf pups! Plus, who better for Jon to marry his daughter too than the son of his best friend? Now that the wars are done, it is up to love to heal the rifts within the Targaryen Empire.

Winter has come. The Long Night is here.

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed :D

Next time, the Great Fall.
Hi all! Got this out a day earlier than planned!

The crappy way season 8 was inspired me to write more for this fandom now that Empire is in its final act. In addition to Heart of the Blessed, I was thinking of two other ideas. One is a drama/dark comedy called "Death of Aerys" which is based off of the movie Death of Stalin, where Crown Prince Jon and his wife Daenerys must secure the throne in a thrilling but hilarious succession fight when the Mad King dies. The other will be called Dance of Dragons, which is a post-canon (the good canon, where Jon and Dany rule Westeros together) set ten years after canon, where our royal couple faces off against a new foreign threat - including a new twist on our favorite creatures.

Let me know what you think of these ideas. I'd love to count you as readers if I decide to do them.

Enjoy and review!

Daenerys tightened her grip around Jon's shoulders, holding him against her bosom as he wept softly. "Shh… shh my love." She kissed the crown of his head underneath the dark curls. Praying for the wonderful man she married to find peace and joy once more. Wishing to heap fire and blood on his tormentors. "Let it out. I'm here for you."

"He took her." Jon whimpered. He nestled close to her, the rhythm of Daenerys' heartbeat the only thing that could keep him from completely falling apart in grief and mourning. "He took her away from me, Dany. Took them all away."

"I know, my love. I know." Dany had never heard Jon so hurt… so broken. It tore at her heart - and filled her with a terrible resolve of hate and anger. "I wish I could have burned that monster alive. Had Balerion kill Littlefinger, the Usurper, Tywin Lannister, and all the other monsters." She meant it too - Fire and Blood wasn't the Targaryen creed out of mere sophistry. But she willed the anger away, concentrating on the wonderful man before her. "I love you, Jon." Her hold tightened ever more. "I love you more than anything in the world. If I could take your pain upon myself, I would." She would give up her life for him, for their children. Do it in a heartbeat - such was the depths of Daenerys Targaryen's love.

Moments ticked by with only the soft cries of a motherless boy piercing the silence. Of grief that he had never truly allowed himself to express. "I could have had my mother, Dany. Grown up with a family… grown up with you." Images danced in his head, of sparring with his father in the courtyard beneath Maegor's Holdfast. Of riding with his mother on the shores of dragonstone. Of reading the great epics with his grandmother in the library. Of laughing and playing with his cousins upon a visit to Winterfell. Of a lifetime with Daenerys by his side, never knowing a time without her in his life. A life that would have been his… taken away by evil men with only a lust for power. "I never would have been a bastard."

"You were never a bastard to me." She held him ever tighter, willing all his past pain from him. He
was good enough. He was perfect.

"I never would have been without you, Dany."

The thought of growing up with Jon, being betrothed to him from the beginning - there was really no doubt as to what Rhaegar would have done, given the family legacy - filled Dany's eyes with tears as well. "But we're here now, Jon. Here together with our children and our family." Pulling him up by his chin, she placed a delicate kiss upon his lips. Drifting across his skin to kiss away his tears.

"I… I love you, Dany." His voice was hoarse, needing her.

"I love you too, Jon." She closed the distance to kiss him again.

The sound of the door forced open pulled them apart. "Jon!" Seeing him, his eyes red and tear stains down his cheeks, Arya ran over and threw her arms around him. Behind her, the other Stark siblings slowly filed in. Sansa and Robb made their way to Jon's side as well, while Podrick, Meera, Gendry, and Margaery stood two paces back. Bran wheeled himself into a corner, lost in thought.

Jon didn't want them to see him like this… but they brought him comfort by being here. "Thank you," he breathed out.

"No need to thank us brother," Robb said, patting Jon's back. "What that cunt did… fuck." Robb felt his own icy anger building at Littlefinger. For putting all of them through this. 'Jon suffered the most,' he thought. "He's dead now, Jon."

"Aye, the monster roasts in all seven hells." Arya's voice was white hot. "You deserved to have that life, brother. To be prince, to have your mother. Even if you wouldn't be our brother, you deserved it."

Jon smiled, despite himself. He felt the warm, loving hand of Daenerys on his shoulder. "You would always be my siblings, even in the other life."

"You were always our brother, no matter what." He looked up at Sansa, who smiled down at him through unshed tears. "Forgive me, Jon. I knew… don't ask me how, but I knew… Littlefinger's true intentions."

"Then why did you make him Master of Laws?" Gendry was still slightly angry, and so his voice had a tinge to it. Quite Baratheon of him. "Why didn't you just execute him?"

Sansa crossed her arms, protectively. "What better way to flush him out? Instead of Daenerys looking like a mad Targaryen, his crimes were exposed to all. He couldn't help but try to take down Arya."

At that moment, Arya left Jon's hug and punched Sansa in the arm, coaxing a cry of pain from the Hand. "I am not happy with you, right now. Not. Happy." Her scowl slowly morphed into a smirk. "But you are one shifty little bitch."

Smirking herself, Sansa nodded. "I'll take that as a compliment." The two women hugged, whatever divisions torn into the pack repairing themselves.

"But how did you know Littlefinger caused Robert's Rebellion?" Margaery asked. "I know Bran had something to do with it, but how was he able to look."

"Varys." The Three-Eyed Raven was as blase as ever. "Before he died, he put it together. He knew to tell me where to look, and I did." He shrugged. "Regardless, the last wounds of Robert's Rebellion
are healed. House Targaryen and Stark can begin anew." Smiles formed all around at this statement.

The wonderful moment of family comfort was broken by Ser Jorah, who threw open the door to the solar. "Your Majesties, Samwell Tarly." Behind him walked… no, raced the portly Maester.

"Sam, now is not a good time." Daenerys normally was quite fond of Jon's best friend, but her love was in quite dire emotional straits - hells, they all pretty much were. Jon needed this moment, followed by what she planned to be a long night of tender lovemaking to soothe the pain in their hearts.

"Get the fuck out of here." As usual, Arya was far more blunt.

Sam ignored both, setting a stack of books onto Jon's writing desk. Determination burned in his eyes - something not normally seen in him - determination and… terror? "Forgive me, Jon, your Highness, my Lords and Ladies. But this is something I have to show you."

Breathing deeply to calm his heart, Jon's comforted mood evaporated into apprehension at his friend's appearance. "Sam, are you… shaking?" Noticing the trembling in the Lord of Horn Hill's hands, everyone began to grow worried. "Is it the twins? Or Saera?" Worry grew to an equal terror.

"Please tell me, they're alright." Daenerys felt her own fear stab through her.

"No, they are fine. Gilly is watching them." Clenching and relaxing his fists over and over again to control his terror for the sake of his friend, Sam gestured to the stack of books. "I've been pouring over everything from the ancient texts, trying to find what the 'Great Fall' is."

"Great Fall?" Gendry looked confused, and wasn't the only one. "What is that?"

A single book in hand, Sam took a seat opposite to Jon and Daenerys - the others crowded around, listening intently. "All mention it happening prior to the Long Night, but there were no descriptions of what it was. I assumed for the longest time it was something to do with a prophecy of the Wall collapsing." He handed the book to Jon. "But it was your father that cracked it."

Jon narrowed his eyes at Sam. "My father?"

"What did Rhaegar find?" Daenerys peered closely at the book as Jon opened it.

"That the Great Fall is something greater entirely. A signal, a herald that bathes the earth in darkness and ice. The Night King doesn't cause the Long Night, it causes him."

Everyone was confused. "What do you mean by it causes him?" Margaery asked.

"It is the source of all terror in the night." Heads turned to see Melisandre, cloak over her head as she entered the solar. "The fires, they burn bright tonight, the Lord of Light fighting against the pure darkness that will soon come. Heralded by a force so massive that even Naath will tremble from evil."

Suddenly, Bran's eyes melted into a milky white, the Three-Eyed Raven shuddering as he passed into his warg state. "Bran. Bran!" he heard his siblings and his love say, but he had already vanished into the abyss of greensight.

Trumpets blared into the darkness. Castle Black, a fortress that had existed for millennia, was a scene of veritable chaos trying desperately to organize itself into something cohesive. Steel scraped against scabbards and powder poured into handcannon barrels as over four thousand souls, speaking
languages diverse as the common tongue to High Valyrian, readied themselves against an onrushing horde numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The end of the world had begun at the most desolate place in the Targaryen Empire - the edge of civilization - but the forces here were damned if they would let it come without a fight.

The resonating snarls could be heard even atop the wall. Hundreds of thousands screaming their demonic shrieks as if a battlecry. Jaime Lannister felt frozen. It felt like the coldest metal burning his skin. "Why the fuck are they screaming?" It wasn't as if they could understand human emotion.

"The walkers," Beric answered. "They want to fuck with our minds."

'It's working.' Already, a steady stream of thousands was charging, led by a single walker. "Nock, men!" Over a thousand archers drew their bows, arrows tipped with dragonglass. Rockets, scorpions, and cannon were primed. Below, the single line divided into three, wights peeling off to either side while a slower force pondered ever forward in the center. Jaime did not hesitate.

"LOOSE!"

Projectiles flew, volleys flattening hundreds of the attacking dead. Dragonglass delivered clean kills, while the flaming rockets turned corpses alight, writhing pyres in the snow. But they kept coming. Mindless beasts bound as the perfect slave to the whims of the ice demons controlling them. As long as they shouted forward, the dead men, giants, spiders, and various other beasts would charge.

Eddison Tollett, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, had his sword drawn as he directed his men. "Get the elevators going! We need the Fiery Hand atop the Wall fucking two hours ago!" Arms straining, the strongest Essosi auxiliaries worked the winches of five large elevators, four of them having been installed with material from Winterfell as the Emperor and Empress battled for the south. All in preparation for this night. "Grenn!"

"Aye, Edd… I mean Lord Commander?"

Trembling at the dispatch sent from above, Edd looked at his longtime friend. "The dead will try to break through the tunnel. They have a ram."

"Fuck. It'll take half an hour to seal the tunnel!" By then they could have thousands and a walker storming Castle Black.

"I'm putting our handcannons with you and your rangers." He clasped his longtime friend's shoulder, as if they wouldn't see each other again - very likely the case. "If the Lannister doesn't keep the cunts out, you need to hold. Hold the fucking gate as long as you can, and then hold it fucking longer!"

Nodding, arms smacking together in brotherhood and camaraderie, Grenn said his silent goodbyes to Edd as the other man dashed off to his post.

"This is very bad." Beric watched as hundreds leapt atop the ice, climbing like insects… on that note they were joined by dozens of ice spiders. Deep thuds echoed through the ice as hundreds of others slammed a giant battering ram into the gate of the tunnel. The archers fired free, joined by roaring rockets and booming cannon, but it wasn't enough. "We gotta do something about the fucking gate! Release the fire!"

"We need the fire if they swarm us!" a rather dimwitted brother replied, close to pissing himself.

Beric ran a hand down his face in frustration. "If they get through the gate we're fucked!"

"Four inches of cold, rolled steel…"
"We have fucking undead ice monsters! Do you think they care… ah fuck it. Drop the fucking fire!"
Not hesitating a bit, the men in charge of the barrels of pitch let them loose. A gout of flame exploded skywards, incinerating nearly all wights at the battering ram. "That's how ya fucking do it!"

The fire left the white walker untouched. Stepping through, icy hands spreading out gusts of cold air that extinguished the still crackling flames, he said nothing as he raised his ice spear and slammed it against the steel. It frosted over, outworldly energy hissing and cracking the metal into something brittle. Something worthless.

Grenn watched, transfixed with fear and awe as the massive gate - four inches of cold, rolled steel - shattered like it was mere glass. Flecks of metal falling to the snowy ground to reveal the lone walker, pure white hair blowing in the wind as he pointed directly inward… replaced by a hundreds-strong swarm of wights and one immense undead giant. Torches flickering out from the sheer force of the horde charging forth.

And only one steel gate between them and the four score defenders.

"Dear fuck…" breathed a brother of the Watch. Further curses in High Valyrian from the handcannoniers. "We must fall back!"

"We hold here," Grenn murmured, leveling his sword, coated in dragonglass and sharp for battle.

The swarm surged forth. Like ants, shrieks echoing from their open maws and rusted instruments of death leveled high. The giant's eyes glowed an icy blue, his head ghosting over the top of the tunnel. "There are too many of them!" shouted one of the Ghiscari.

"Mother protect me," stammered a watchman. "Father protect me…"

"There are no gods here men, only us!" Grenn raised his sword high. "Night gathers, and now my watch begins." The oath tumbled from his lips, firm and strong, urging resolve from his men. "It shall not end…"

"Until my death…” began another, the mantra taken on by the other brothers, readying their swords and spears. "I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children…"

The Essosi handcannoniers joined, accents heavy but spirits ready to fight among their fellow men. "I shall wear no crowns and win no glory…"

"I shall live and die at my post!” Voices of the living boomed, shouting at the top of their lungs in defiance of the ever charging undead swarm. "I am the sword in the darkness! I am the watcher on the walls! I am the shield that guards the realms of men!"

Grenn saw the handcannons fall to the ready, taking aim in the mass of corpses." I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch, for this night, AND ALL THE NIGHTS TO COME!" A screaming cry that rivaled the greatest dragon erupted from the men as the dead slammed into the porculus, powder discharging in a rippling sheet of flame.

"Fuck you!" A mortally wounded former goldcloak, barely standing but still able to scream a guttural cry, charged at a cluster of several wights. He managed to stab a dragonglass dagger into his heart just as all tumbled off the battlements to the snowy expanse below.

Jaime slammed his gold hand into a wight, dragonglass shards he had the smith at the castle attach to it embedding in its chest and extinguishing the bright blue of its eyes. Widow's Wail swung to decapitate another, legs collapsing while the upper half fell below. "Cannons! Load shards!" he barked, long pikes of the Fiery Hand fending off the ice spiders that brought up loads of the Night
King's foot soldiers up the wall.

Smaller ones hauled themselves over the lip, engaged with swords, axes and dwarfcannons as they launched off the ice at the defenders. A giant demon assaulted a battlement, only for Beric's fiery sword to slice off its front legs. Wailing an inhuman snarl, the former lord drive the blade between its mandibles, ending the beast for good. Another found more success, ripping apart four brothers manning a pitch station before a Fiery Hand archer loosed an arrow at a leaking barrel. The whole battlement went up in flames, Ice Spider and the three wights atop its back joining it in death - along with the archer.

Two more giant spiders began pulling themselves atop the battlements. "FIRE!" The cannon fired their payloads over open sights. Dragonglass shards slicing everywhere, like a wave of locusts that vaporized everything in its path. The spiders disappeared into mere chunks of dead flesh and shell."

Jaime stabbed a smaller spider through the middle, Valyrian steel ending its tortured existence. "There's more coming!" someone yelled.

"Drop the Scythe!" The Queenshield's voice was frantic. "DROP THE DAMN SCYTHER!"

Sledgehammers dropped with snarling battlecries, the ice groaned beneath their feet. Jaime felt it trembling, shuddering as breakaway chunks exposed a massive scythe thirty feet in diameter. "Dear gods," murmured a young lad from the city watch, never seeing anything like it. With a shattering roar it broke away, foot-thick chain screeching as it careened down the ice. Climbing wights and snarling ice spiders were crushed, annihilated.

Cheers broke out, shouts of victory roaring from the mouths of the defenders. Jaime, sucking in icy breaths to calm his heart racing with terror, shook his head. This wasn't over. Far from over. "The men are fools," he said, watching the undead host just waiting among the trees.

"Fools that can fight," Beric replied. "Something on your mind, Lannister?" While he could hear the faint sounds of chaos before, for the first time since the dead arrived the top of the wall was quiet. Calm.

"Why are they doing that?" he shifted, peering at the dead. "Just waiting there? If they want to fucking swarm us, they should charge in force."

A thought came to Beric's mind. "Fuck, where's the Night King?!" An unholy roar answered his question.

Above them, a sleek shape as black as the night sky above shot through the air. Jaime had barely seen it for but a moment when it disappeared. "What the fuck was that?!" someone shouted.

"It's a demon! The demons are after us!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

Tightening his hold upon Widow's Wail, Jaime backed away from the edge of the battlements, ears and eyes peeled… until he saw it. A monstrous black shape, wings beating in the freezing cold air. "Dear Gods…”

"A fucking dragon," Beric stated.

Sure enough, a giant dragon flapped by, maw open in a booming roar - the Night King himself on dragonback, urging the beast on. Jaime trembled, heart thundering in his chest at the sight. It was bigger than the Empress' mount, the black dread reborn. A lot bigger. Wingspan the size of Casterly
Rock. Beating them to a stop, directly hovering only a few hundred yards from the center of the battlements. Staring at them.

"Run!" screamed Jaime. "Peel off the sides!" The men ran, booking towards far off battlements dug into the top of the wall before the dragon could incinerate this section of the wall. Brave volunteers manned the horns, sounding the hoots of retreat. To save the men they could. But the dragon did nothing, just hovering there as the Night King raised his arms high in the air, eyes glowing a vibrant ice blue as if surging with power.

And then the darkness exploded in light.

It was not of this world.

A massive chunk of ice and rock, sailing through the endless void that surrounded the earth. Ever moving, darting, changing. Losing mass as it approached the heat of the sun and yet gaining it back when hurtled into the black cold of the void. A cold so great that even the greatest dragonfire couldn't banish it away.

An outworldly force, shrouded in a magic so ancient only preceded by the divine. It only arrived close to the earth every eight millennia. Bringing with it the harshest of winters as the demonic cold outmuscled the sun.

And power. Immense power for one with the ability to harness it.

Eight thousand years before, the Clan Chieftain Zilas created such a being - driving a stake of dragonglass through Marden Stark's heart to erect a fighting force to defend them from the invading First Men. But such power proved too great to control once the new force arrived. Imbibing him with the greatest power known to man or gods.

Now, the streaking ball of ice and rock felt such a power exerting upon it. Draw it in a direction not intended to travel. The strain shook it, massive earthquakes and volcanoes spewing ice into the void rupturing the very crust. But the power it gave the being once known as Marden Stark proved its undoing. A large chunk broke off, larger than any mountain. Than any city.

Drawn to the Land of Always Winter.

To begin the Long Night as a similar chunk had eight thousand years before.

Good hand rising to cover his eyes, Jaime watched in sheer wonder as a new sun erupted to the north. The far north, farther than either man or god would know. "Seven fucking hells," Beric muttered, all sound ceasing as the light stabbed through the air, banishing the night away.

And then the sound. The earth shattering bellow that flattened them to the ground. "Fucking Seven, it's coming!" A wall of ice and snow, a giant cloud threatening to envelop all of them in a blizzard.

"It's getting closer!"

"Hunker down!" Jaime burrowed into the back of an ice dugout, images of his one surviving child dancing through his mind. "I'm sorry Tommen." A sweet, kind boy, not deserving of the hell Joffrey and Cersei put him through. "I'm sorry…"

But the roar of the cloud ceased… or mostly. It was still present, but faint. In the distance. Jaime stood, and gazed in awe as a shimmering blue wall - the color of the northern lights - blocked the
cloud. Encasing all of Castle Black and the Army of the Dead in a protective cocoon. The Night King's eyes glowed brightly, the color of a blue star in intensity.

The dragon's maw began to glow the same bright blue, head rearing back.

Jaime gave the same command, already on the move. "RUN!"

It was at that exact moment that the very earth shook.

Despite thousands of miles separating the impact crater from King's Landing, it hit just the same. Walls shook, weak buildings collapsing while stronger ones merely swayed, holding firm with nothing but cracks evidence of the terror. The sea seemed to roll back upon itself, driven from its banks as ships bobbed within the port. Some slapped upon the shore, others capsizing where they stood. Screams predominated. So much screaming.

Within the Imperial Solar, the Imperial family fell upon the ground. Some collapsed, toppling atop the tile floor. Others dove there on their own accord. Jon and the other men did what honor commanded, draping themselves over their wives and lovers to shield them from potential falling debris.

But Maegor the Cruel built his keep well. Walls and ceilings strong as the dragons he commanded. As soon as it began, the tremors stopped. Advancing further out like a ripple in a pond, leaving one of the largest cities on earth to its own devices.

"Fuck." Arya groaned, wriggling from out of Gendry's protective cover and rolling her shoulders.

"It happened." Fear cloaked Bran's face, grey eyes wide as they found Jon and Daenerys. "The Great Fall happened."

Dread seized Jon. His heart pounded, body shaking as invisible ice trickled up his body. From looking at his wife, Daenerys felt the same. "And the wall...?"

"It has fallen." Bran found himself in resignation. Acceptance for the coming destruction and death. "Castle Black is destroyed, along with over two thirds of our forces. Jaime Lannister barely escaped."

"How did he bring it down?" Margaery asked as Robb pulled her into a fearful hug.

"The Night King harnessed the power of the Great Fall and used his undead dragon to bring it down."

All stared at him with eyes as wide as saucers. A flagon of wine crashed as Podrick gaped. Arya felt her legs wobbling, collapsing into one of the couches. Robb turned as pale as a ghost. It was Dany who recovered first, her eyes glazed with a surreal fright. "A dragon? But that's impossible. Where would he..."

"The Long Night of the past. A dragon from Valyria fought during it and was lost in the Battle for the Dawn. He must have found its resting place north of the Wall." Bran was cryptic, obviously not telling the whole truth. But none truly noticed. Too wrapped up in the sheer apocalypse that was unfolding before them. "The Wall has been brought down, the Army of the Dead marching through it."
Rising, Jon looked over the vast expanse of the city - who's only worry at this point was the massive tremor that shook the city. Unaware that this was only the beginning. "So that's it then?"

Bran nodded. "Aye. The Long Night is upon us."

Chapter End Notes

And the dead have crossed the wall.

Poor Jon, having to come face to face with the fact he lost his mother. Grieving as he should grieve.

The Battle of Castle Black is one of my fav episodes. Watching Jaime and Beric fight ice spiders and Grenn dying against an undead charge, fighting like a madman... the GoT fan in me thinks it's freaking awesome!

The Great Fall is a comet. I'm a fan of Avatar: the Last Airbender, so I kinda borrowed the idea :D

Where did the Night King get a dragon? An undead dragon in the middle of the far north? Answers to come.

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed, and let me know your thoughts on my new ideas :D

Next, Bran takes Jon on a journey through time.
Hi all! I felt a little under the weather, hence the delay. Sorry

To answer the comments criticizing the story as being too fluffy and too fan-servicy, that is so far from the truth. I am carrying their character arcs to the natural conclusion. Where Jon has embraced his Targaryen ancestry along with his Stark one and where Dany finally has a family and a home. It is season 8 that betrayed the character arcs.

Enjoy and comment!

"Think it's still abandoned?" Peering into the spyglass, Jaime Lannister didn't see movement within the battlements and walls below. It certainly looked abandoned - but looks could be deceiving.

Shrugging, Beric Dondarrion motioned for the three dozen Fiery Hand and goldcloak survivors to follow him. "Dunno, but we're gonna have to find out or starve to death up here." It had been several days since the Wall had fallen at Castle Black. Several days since the Army of the Dead entered the realms of men. Sweeping away everything in its path. Jaime shuddered, just thinking of the hundreds of thousands wreaking havoc in the south.

An image of them swarming Casterly Rock with the collected undead of Lannisport, ripping Tommen limb from limb, was forced out of his mind. Now wasn't the time. He had to get back to Winterfell.

Queensgate was one of the many castles of the Night's Watch built during its heyday, when serving was an honor among the Kingdom of the North and constant warfare between the Seven Kingdoms produced many prisoners and war criminals to be shipped to the Watch. However, it had been abandoned in centuries past. Abandoned with the general degradation of the Watch as a force, culminating in the losses of the Great Range. Now with Castle Black destroyed, the Watch was essentially defunct.

And so was Queensgate. Covered in a layer of ice and snow, the wooden ramparts were close to rot and the stone walls falling apart. The men gingerly stepped down the network of stairs and ladders connecting the battlements of the wall with the courtyard of the decrepit castle, the hour's long journey feeling more like a day.

As they gathered in the courtyard, a man stepped on a rotting piece of wood, plank snapping like a twig. Suddenly, the entire castle came alive. "Fucking wights!" came a cry.

Jaime and Beric raised their swords, men of the Fiery hand notching their bows as the battlements around them disgorged hundreds of hidden warriors.

"See if they got blue eyes!"

"That fucker! He's got blue eyes!"

"I've always got blue eyes, cunt!"
"Hold up! Hold up!" Forcing himself to the fore, Eddison Tollett peered at the men below. "It's Lord Beric… and the Lannister." He knocked a crossbowmen upside the head. "Put your fucking weapons down! They ain't dead!"

Slowly, gradually, the tense standoff petered out, hundreds on the ground already trudging back to their makeshift quarters while the new party sought out hot food and rest for their aching muscles and tired minds. Arriving in the castle master-at-arms' solar, Jaime plopped into a rickety chair, letting out a sigh as he removed his boots and rubbed his blistering foot. "How many lost?"

Edd shrugged, pouring three cups of sour wine for his fellow commanders. "Didn't have an accurate headcount. I have about five hundred various forces with me. Another two hundred escaped to try and evacuate Mole's Town. Rest…" He grimaced. "All dead and buried… or just dead."

Laughing grimly, Beric enjoyed the acidic burn of the wine as it slid down his throat. At least he was feeling something. "I really thought we were gonna hold em' off. Until that dragon…"

"A fucking dragon." Jaime shook his head, trembling. "Where in seven hells did that fucker get a dragon? And such a big one as that?" He had nearly died charging one of the Dragon Empress' dragons, come face to face with Balerion the Dread reborn… and this one had to be nearly twice as big… "Winterfell is doomed. The North is doomed. He's probably ripping through Last Hearth as we speak."

"Actually." Edd looked apprehensive, as if something was spooking him. "He's staying in the Gift for now."

Both Jaime and Beric blinked. "What?"

"He's not moving. Got a warg among us who's keeping track, and the Army of the dead is clustered there. Milling about and detachments roving for gravesites they can get reinforcements from… but otherwise not moving."

"I have no idea why the cunts are doing that," Jaime observed after draining his wine, "But I do not want to stick around to find out." He rose. "We ride to Winterfell in an hour." Hopefully the rest of the Imperial Army would get there before things really went to shit.

The sound of steel on steel rang out in the courtyard of Maegor's Holdfast. Such was a common sound - since the Great Fall had brought the Long Night upon Westeros, angry, grey stormclouds bringing inches of snow to the capitol for the first time in recent memory, the Emperor found himself there to train with his guards. But this time Sandor Clegane, Dickon Tarly, and Jorah Mormont sat on the sidelines, swords in their scabbards as they watched Jon train with a different sparring partner.

"Well this is a rather interesting sight," the younger Tarly remarked as the Empress herself deflected a glancing blow from the Emperor's blade. "Did you ever think that a Queen or Empress would be that good with a sword?"

"Trained her myself," Jorah replied proudly. Light and powerful, Jon's bastard sword sliced through the air with a graceful furor as the Emperor combined strength with an speed not seen in more imposing men. But Daenerys had her own advantages - fast on her feet, her agile grace combined with the elegant curve of Saracen to both dodge and parry back Jon's attacks. "Though his Majesty started her on her journey."

Dickon furrowed his brows, confused. "How's that? Didn't the Empress first arrive in Westeros during the Battle of the Bastards?"
Jorah laughed. "You have much to learn, young Tarly. Their Majesties met in Pentos, early in the same year Robert the Usurper died. I was there, they fell hard for each other."

"Well I'll be… They really were star-crossed lovers."

"Just proves to me they're fucking weird," the Hound breathed. He shrugged. "Then again, after mad, drunk, and a fuckin' crazy cunt, weird is what we need."

Jon wished he could say he was holding back with Daenerys, but other than saying he didn't deploy his ultimate savagery, he honestly couldn't. Training swords clashing - Gendry having forged them specifically to match the size and shape of the Valyrian steel blades each of them carried - he raised his to chop down… only for her to angle her deflection so the steel would slide off. 'Clever girl…'

Soon, they had pulled back, licking their wounds and assessing their options. "Had enough, your Majesty?" Dany teased. Seeing his muscles flex, lungs heaving, lips pursed in thought. 'Gods, this man is a perfect specimen."

He spun his sword, keeping his wrists flexible and movements sharp. "You've gotten better."

Breathing deeply, hand brushing a bead of sweat off his cheek, Jon's eyes dazzled with mirth. "Did you find someone else to spar with?"

"Perhaps." Dany circled her husband like a wolf cornering her target. Lips curling up in a predatory smirk. "Your brother is a good partner, as is the Lord and Lady Baratheon."

"Sparring without your Emperor's permission? For shame," Jon chided, though the humor still shone in his grey eyes. He lunged, then pulled back, testing the waters.

Daenerys gave in no ground, meeting him with the demeanor of the Dragon Queen. Fearless. Fiery. "I do not need your permission, Jon Targaryen." She raised Saracen, keeping it parallel to her standing form. "lā zaldrīzes iksis daor buzdarī." A dragon is no slave. Very true.

Jon raised Longclaw, pointing it at her before mirroring her stance. "Iksan se muña hen zaldrīzes', se issa ūuhon." I am the dragon's, and she is mine. Also true.

Feinting with a dart to the right, Dany instead lunged left, racing forth in a crouch to hit underneath Jon's defenses. But the Emperor wasn't considered the greatest swordsman in the known world for nothing. He caught the coming uppercut with a parry of his own. He swiped at Dany's stance with his leg, but the Empress was quick and leapt up. Fake Saracen only just stopped at his neck as fake Longclaw stopped at her side…

Stalemate.

Nothing but the sounds of their breaths echoing through the soft snowfall, it took but a moment for them both to comprehend the turn of events. "Good work, your Highness."

"Same, your Majesty." And then the determination gave way to loving smiles, the two dropping their training swords and pulling flush together. Lips finding each other.

"Your Majesty." Pulling apart, they looked upon Olly, a blush on his cheeks and eyes upon the ground at the tender moment. Half-suppressed laughs at the awkward teenager left the lips of the Kingsguards.

Jon couldn't help his smirk either, hands still upon Dany's waist. It wasn't such a long time since he had been that way in catching Robb or Theon with the castle-hands' daughters back in Winterfell. "Yes, Ollie?"
"Lord Brandon wishes to speak with you in his chambers."

Looking in Dany's eyes, Jon's communicated a silent apology. The Empress understood, her husband's greenseer brother not being someone he could deny meeting - especially not in times like these. "Go, my love. We'll meet in our solar after." A sweet kiss followed, Jon softly stroking the back of her hand before he left the courtyard, Clegane and Dickon Tarly trailing behind him.

Bran was huddled before the fireplace, as usual. He didn't seem to be cold, but constant conversations with the Lady Melisandre had left him curious about whether one could actually see the future through the crackling flames within a hearth. "Jon," he said, not bothering to turn his head. He just knew. "Please, come sit beside me."

Closing the door behind him, Jon complied, taking a seat in the chair conveniently placed next to his brother's wheelchair. Blood of the dragon within him enjoying the heat of the hearth in the chilly weather. "Bran, you sent for me." His brother did not respond, the light of the fire reflecting off of his faraway grey eyes. After nearly a minute, he began to grow impatient. "Is there something you wish to say? To give me?"

"Aye, brother." He gave a small smile. "Answers."

Jon blinked. If it hadn't been for Bran, stating at the emergency war council meeting that time was not of the essence in confronting the Night King, he and Daenerys would have been off for Moat Cailin on dragonback the night of the Great Fall. The news that the Army of the Dead was simply congregating in the Gift rather than marching for at least Last Hearth. "Please, Bran, tell me."

"I cannot give them with mere words." Sighing, Bran looked upon his brother with sad eyes. Pouring an emotion akin to grief - a sympathetic pity, as if wishing fate upon anyone else other than the noble Jon Targaryen, undeserving of the suffering heaped upon him. It was in these moments that the pack knew that their broken, far-off Bran was still himself. Still with them. "Jon..." he began. "There is more. So much more that you deserve to see first."

Jon blinked. "What do you mean? Without the war council?" Bran shook his head, grey eyes heavy with pain. A breath sucked itself into the Emperor's lungs. "Without Daenerys you mean? Why can't she hear it from you?"

"Because she needs to hear it from you, Jon. Her husband. Her Emperor. Her love. The one prophesied to protect her... and to do what must be done to end the Long Night for good."

The last phrase filled Jon with dread. "What does that mean, Bran?"

Closing his eyes, when they opened they glowed a bright orange. A surge of power filling Brandon Stark. Slowly, body heavy with the sudden inflow of mystic strength, Bran pushed himself out of his wheelchair. Standing on his feet, as if the fall from years before had never occurred. That it had been a dream.

Jon watched, mouth agape, "Bran... what?"

"Be not afraid, Jon." Even transformed into what he truly was. Magic of the warlocks colliding into the magic of the Three-Eyed Raven to present the Keeper of the Dawn, Bran smiled upon his cousin by blood but brother by heart. "It is time to show you the truth of it all." He took Jon's hands in his.

"Bran, what is it that you desire to show me?" Jon felt apprehensive... he had never truly understood the depth of his brother's powers. "What will... I see?"

-reaching to grab Jon's hand, Bran gave him a genuine smirk. "A Song of Ice and Fire."
And then a blinding whiteness as the world around them disappeared...

Jon's eyes flew open. Having imagined some mad journey, a rippling effect through a dark tunnel as they traveled through time, Bran's greensight seemed more to be a transformation between worlds and times in a mere blink. He could see nothing but a tranquil plain, forests in the distance. A forest Jon was intimately familiar with. "The Wolfswood?"

"Aye." Bran had a serene look upon his face. "You're home, Jon." A loud hoot filled the air - one similar to Rhaegal's, but much, much louder. "Come, they are close."

A short walk brought them to the godswood, the same weirwood tree lush in the beauty of a warm, northern summer. Sitting in the shade of the tree were four men. Two with hair a dark brown and eyes a light grey, and two with hair silver-blonde and eyes a dark violet. "Northerners… and Valyrians?" Jon hadn't known that the Valyrians travelled this far to Westeros before.

Bran chuckled. "Not just that. Starks and Targaryens." The Stark man, greatsword in hand and whetstone slowly sharpening it, sat next to the female Targaryen - an almost exact copy of Daenerys. Her hand resting upon his lap. Propped up on the tree, the male Targaryen softly played his harp while the Stark woman laid against his chest, sleeping softly. Two direwolves were curled up beside the Starks, completing the moment. "A family. Two pairs of brothers and sisters, intermarried. Together, furthering their respective lines."

Now this was eye-opening to Jon. "Both families… I have Targaryen blood through my mother?"

"Through Marden Stark and Daenerys Targaryen." He grinned as Jon processed the information. "And your wife Stark blood, through her family. Soryn Targaryen and Serena Stark. Believe me, I had the same reaction."

It was then that Jon noticed the massive black shape beyond the tree. One as large as Winterfell. "A… dragon." There was no mistaking it. It had to be the size of Balerion plus an additional winglength. "The Night King's…"

"Aye. The great Vhalthrax. The ancient name for Valyria itself. First dragon to ever be tamed. And the last… for millennia." They gazed upon the happy scene for a longer while. "The Targaryens and Starks… they both have a deeper connection to the magic and mysticism of the world than other families, Jon. Fitting that they are destined to combine upon the greatest threat."

The world changed again. Upon a clearing in the woods surrounded by stone. The Children of the Forest, Leaf in the semicircle rounding the great weirwood and Chief Zilas in the center, each chanted ancient incarnations. Tied upon the weirwood was Marden Stark, angrily writhing against his bonds and gag. Drawing a sliver of dragonglass, Zilas approached the first of the Starks. Marden's eyes grew fearful, and then pain erupted from him as the sliver pushed through his chest.

Only there was no blood, only a foreboding chill that passed through Jon as Marden's eyes grew an icy blue.

"The Night King," Bran stated simply. "He was the first."

"He was a Stark?" Jon just couldn't believe it. The force he had so hated, fought for nearly a third of his life… was his kin.

"The first Stark."

And just as suddenly, the scene of death transformed into one of calm. Jon gazed around him, eyes
shifting among the small, wooden hovel. One reminding him greatly of Craster's Keep. "They overlooked settlements like this," Bran explained. "Little did the other know that his greatest threat resided in one."

"What do you mean?" The howling of blizzard winds was deafening, but even Jon could feel the heat that permeated every inch of the makeshift dwelling.

Bran gave him a sad smile. "You'll see."

"I cannot do this," came a voice. The same voice from earlier, Jon noted. Hunched over the blacksmith's forge was Soryn Targaryen. Gone was the brave dragonrider, serene and happy as he played his harp in the arms of his northern love. What was left was a shell of a man, grime and dried blood coating his clothes. His face was gaunt, silver hair matted to his brow, violet eyes - so much like Dany's - dull and weak from pain and loss. He hefted a sword from the forge, glowing with the heat of the fire, etched in red runes of ancient magic.

Jon's eyes widened? "Lightbringer?"

"Aye, Lightbringer."

Soryn gazed into the corner of the hovel, agony in his gaze. "I can't do it. I fucking won't!"

"You have to," came the reply. A voice that sounded so much like Lyanna, Jon's mother. It was Serena Stark, Soryn's devoted wife. "You know that the dawn cannot be obtained without a sacrifice? Only then can that forged within dragonfire be tempered."

"I WILL NOT!" the first Targaryen roared, channeling his inner dragon. He hefted the blade menacingly, angrily, ready to use what he had worked on for a hundred days and a hundred nights while the world collapsed around him. Seconds passed, the northern beauty standing quietly as her husband lashed out his rage upon anything in reach. Soon though, Soryn tired. Glassy anguish returning into his eyes. "Must I?" he asked, voice forlorn.

"You must, dear husband." Tears poured down Soryn's cheeks, not mere ones of grief, of sorrow - Jon knew those tears, the tears he shed for his mother and his father. No, these were worse. The tears of knowing that one's very soul would have to be ripped out... by one's own hand. Serena, quiet tears joining her husband's, walked over to him and kissed him deeply. Pouring out her undying love for him. "Fulfill your destiny."

"But I cannot kill you. I love you, wife."

Jon's eyes widened, shock filling him. "Bran... what?"

"She told him a sacrifice was needed."

"I do not want to die," Serena continued, kissing her husband's blistered hands. "But I shall, for the greater good." She smiled at him, baring her breast. "I shall see you in the afterlife. Come to the most beautiful meadow, and I shall be waiting."

Unable to stop his sobs, Soryn Targaryen nonetheless raised Lightbringer and drove it forth. Covering his eyes as a hiss of crackling flame burst from the boiling blood of Serena Stark, Jon saw in the ensuing white light as his long-ago ancestor became Azor Ahai...

In a mere whim of Bran's mind, the Three-Eyed Raven brought them to a snowy-white field... but the blizzard had disappeared. Snowfall disappeared. Grey clouds dark with fury but still, free of ordinance with which to deposit upon the earth. But a cacophony rang out nonetheless. From
beyond the slope of a hill to their right. "What is that?" Jon asked his brother… suddenly feeling he had seen this place before.

"The Dawn," Bran replied cryptically. Slowly walking up the hill, he motioned for Jon to follow. Pushing through the snowdrift, Jon crested the hill to stumble upon the sight of a battle. A battle larger than Jon had ever seen before.

It stretched as far as the eye could see, the cataclysmic apocalypse of the clash between the living and the dead. Dozens of giants, bellows roaring across the field, charged upon a swarm of dead. Clubs, daggers the size of men, bare fists and feet crushed scores each while a horde of arrows plummeted from archers among the first men. Flashes of orange light shone, groups of mystics gathered in a circle as they fought off those assaulting them with pure magical energy. A white walker fought like a one-man army, ice spear slicing through men, horse, and mammoth before the dragonglass javelin from a child of the forest turned him into specks of ice - hundreds of wights collapsing into bones as well.

Shadow passing above him, Jon watched as Vhalthrax dove with a shriek, tongue of fire incineration thousands of wights upon the ground. "They can't ever survive that," Jon remarked, the one dragon delivering more dragonfire upon the ground than all six of his and Dany's dragons could hope to do. But suddenly, a shard of ice pierced directly through the dragon's chest, sending the beast slamming into the ice and snow - crushing hundreds of living and thousands of dead beneath his massive corpse.

Blinking, Jon turned to Bran. "The Night King's dragon," Bran stated before Jon could even ask.

"How could we ever survive it?" Jon's question was now flipped.

"Only through Lightbringer," Bran replied as Vhalthrax's rider leapt off the beast, flaming blade shining with the power of the sun as it swung downward at his greatest foe…

And then nothing but light.
touch his brother's shoulder. "But now he has another purpose."

Peering at his brother, thinking hard, suddenly Jon's eyes widened. "No," he breathed. Jon's face drained to a pale ghost. "It can't be…"

"I'm afraid it is, Jon." Sighing, Bran looked out the window towards Maegor's Holdfast - where the Imperial quarters were. "He wants Daenerys." The words seemed to bring pain to Jon, eyes clenched shut and fists balling. "Craves her. Obsesses over her."

"I… it's impossible!" Is it really? The fight at the frozen lake. The Night King had the perfect opportunity to kill one of their great dragons. To obtain an undead aerial wight to supplement the massive beast he currently had… but didn't. Hesitated, eyes boring in on something in particular. Someone rather. Jon fought back hot tears, mouth opening and closing as he tried to find the words. "His… his wife, Daenerys. Dany looks just like her…" The implication was driving him closer and closer to agony.

"Now you know why he won't move. Why he won't attack as of yet. He's waiting for you to arrive… waiting for her." Milky grey eyes bored into the Emperor, pleading. Questioning. Searching. "To see if you have the strength to fulfill the prophecy."

"What prophecy…” It suddenly clicked. The bloodshot, agonizing Soryn Targaryen, blade erupting in flame as he drove it into his wife's back. 'Sacrifice…' Color drained from his face. "You are lying…"

"I wish I was, brother."

He shook his head. "There must be another way."

"There is none." Bran reached out, grabbing Jon's hands. "I have seen it first hand, spoken to both Melisandre and Kinvara. The great Azor Ahai is chosen by the divine to carry this burden, and in order to bring the Dawn he must grant the divine a sacrifice of what he holds dear. The greatest power on this earth requires the price of the most valuable… a soul." Fear coated his gaze, seeing pain and agony turn to defiance within Jon. "I do not know what will happen if the Night King has Dany. I cannot see into his mind, his power too great for mine to pierce. Only death and destruction could follow if he gains what he wants without you to destroy him…"

Jon erupted out of his seat. His eyes blazed blood red dragonfire, Dragon awoken inside him in a way Viserys could only cheaply imitate. "I WILL NOT LOSE DANY!" Snarling - roaring - he slammed his fist into a cabinet, wood shattering in his arm's path. "I would bring fire and blood upon the gods themselves for her, Bran. Winter will come for the Night King. If I have to die to destroy him, then so be it!" Slamming his fist into the wood once more, knuckles raw and bleeding, Jon left.

Bran collapsed back into his chair. "Oh brother…” For once, nothing within everything could provide him comfort… or answers.

It had been said that the sight of the Wall - the immense sheet of ice and rock that towered over the surrounding landscape like nothing else by man or gods - was the most awe-inspiring sight upon the earth to one that had never been graced with such a sight. Trudging through the snow, the cloaked figure would have had to disagree. He remembered the first time he saw the Wall, feeling the same awe as thousands before him…

Such feelings paled in comparison to see the gaping breach. Edges collapsed, nearly a half-mile had been blasted through - chunks of ice and rock towering fifty feet in the air all around, giant
tombstones of the buried men and beasts underneath the rubble. A marker for the once great Castle Black. Home to the Night’s Watch.

’My brothers.’

Nearly all dead.

The dead marching through, already prepared to extinguish the living.

The figure shrugged it off, marching ever forward to begin his hike through the debris. Cold bit at him, but he didn’t feel any of it. No, all he felt was the call of the dawn. The dawn burning inside of him from the shard driven through his heart, calling him to find its keeper.

For he knew what was to come, knew the plan of his enemy and the sheer death that would follow should he succeed.

And knew what he must do to prevent it.

Chapter End Notes

One can only imagine Jon’s pain.

Jaime, Edd, and Beric have lived, as well as Benjen journeying south of the Wall. What could the Dawn have in store for him?

Couldn’t help but have the Dany/Jon spar scene. She has her husband, Jorah, Robb, and Arya to help teach her. Of course she will gain great skills.

I don’t want to spoil anything, but trust me. I do not intend to leave all of you disappointed. There will be a happy ending.

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed, and let me know your thoughts on my new ideas :D

Next, the journey north.
It had been a tearful goodbye.

A pair of Targaryens had clutched at their parents - Rhaegar to his mother and Arya to her father - holding on tight and wishing never to let go. Their cries echoing through the Red Keep, a castle that had held too much pain and hate in its centuries of history. Stoic tears fell from the Empress as she held her infant daughter, while the Lady of Winterfell was less composed as she bid goodbye to the little heir of the Northern castle. Both the Princess and Crown Prince received a gentle lesson from their father, that they, their sister, and their little cousin were staying south for the good of the realm and House Targaryen and House Stark.

The quiver in his voice and unshed tears in his eyes belied another reason. That if the North was lost... if Westeros was lost, then the next generation could escape with their lives.

In the distance, Catelyn Tully Stark - leaning on a cane and bandages wrapped tightly underneath her loose dress - watched as the large naval convoy left the harbor. Maegor's Holdfast provided a panoramic view of Blackwater Bay, the hundreds of ships and six dragons sailing away towards the port facilities of White Harbor. The North. Home.

In harm's way.

"I don't know how you do it, Catelyn." Too entranced by the sausage-shaped ships, sails unfurled in magnificent plumes, Catelyn hadn't noticed Olenna Tyrell until the older woman was upon her. "Popping out five children, and then taking care of four grandchildren. I had enough problems with my one son, and little Jon is the future of my House and everything..." She chuckled, shaking her head as she took a seat to rest her old bones. "But I'm too old to deal with a screaming baby still in his swaddling clothes."

"Children are an acquired taste, for sure." Catelyn groaned, feeling an ache in her wounds as she slowly sat beside the Queen of Thorns. With most of the government headed north with Jon and Daenerys, officially, Crown Prince Rhaegar would manage affairs from the capitol - unofficially, a
revamped Small Council, of which both Olenna and Catelyn were part of, handled matters. Essentially, all it involved was feeding the people and managing the stream of refugees from the northern regions. "It's the duty of a hightborn lady to bear children, not to be forced to like them." But Catelyn loved her children, and grandchildren.

"It's better to like them - that's why I'm more fond of Margaery than I was for my son, more wits about her." She looked at her companion. "Little Jon should be fine. He has Stark blood. My brains with the Stark stability… the North will be in good hands, mark my words."

Nodding, Catelyn kept her gaze at the window, just catching the red-black speck of the Empress' dragon. The Dread Reborn. If Bran were to be believed, the Night King had a dragon half as big. There was every reason to be apprehensive, but… Feeling something boring into her, Catelyn turned to catch a quizzical gaze. Olenna wouldn't let her get away with staying silent, so she sighed. "I'm worried about Jon."

Olenna snorted. "The boy's a strong Emperor. Got the best of both families. I'm not optimistic, but I'm the closest to it only with him and Her Highness leading us."

"I'm not worried about him fighting the dead… well, no more than usual. It's just… there's something going on. He's been distant, sullen, quick to anger. That isn't either Jon I knew in the past, and I'm at a loss…"

"I think I know what is affecting his Majesty, I'm afraid." Both women turned to see the wrinkled face of the old Maester, the patriarch of House Targaryen. Silver hair long turned to the silver of age - the mighty dragon long weakened and hobbled by gout and blindness. But a mind still as sharp and prone to passion as the mighty creatures upon his family's sigil.

Catelyn merely looked, wanting to ask but not knowing how to. It was Olenna that therefore broached the question. "Out with it, Aemon."

A sigh left the old Maester's lips, sadness overcoming him. "Did you know that a dragon mates for life." He smiled, wrinkles shifting on his cheeks. "The old dragonriders often brokered marriages by using their dragons. Each beast would find their mate, and their riders would get married. It was said that those marriages always ended up ones of love." He chuckled. "Even those that didn't partake in the tradition, the love matches always ended in their dragons mating as well."

"Damn you odd Targaryens," Olenna muttered. "Either spewing Fire and Blood or spewing riddles. Reason I didn't marry one." She tapped her cane upon the floor. "Glad the Emperor has stolid Stark blood in him, evens it out."

Catelyn rolled her eyes. "Please, Aemon, what are you trying to tell us?"

"My great-nephew will soon be faced with an impossible choice. One that will destroy him either way." A tear coursed down his uneven skin. "Rhaegar, his father, talked about it to me. Even in his words one could tell his pain at the idea. At what his newborn son would have to do to Daenerys…"

Ice settled into Catelyn's gut. Even the Queen of Thorns felt a foreboding within her. "Do what… to Daenerys?"

Not responding, too painful to even think about, Aemon stood. "If my death could protect my family from the coming prophecy, I would give it in a heartbeat." Over a century old, he had lived his life. Lost and then found his family, experienced his dream of holding a newborn Targaryen in his hands. 'A Targaryen alone in the world is a terrible thing.' His life would be a worthy price to pay to ensure the future Targaryens would never grow alone.
But he feared that would never come to pass.

Topside on the large galleon - flagship of the Targaryen Imperial Navy, aptly named Aegon the Conqueror - the sound of steel clanging against steel echoed through the chilling air of the Shivering Sea. One man against three, that one man being the slight, normally unassuming form of the Targaryen Emperor. Unbothered by the garish silks and outlandish golds and jewels normally befitting royalty, for someone of his reputation the great Jon Targaryen would take aback those that met him for the first time.

However, when he fought, all was explained. All made sense. A fusion of grace and ferocity, his movements with his Valyrian steel bastard sword Longclaw fluid, as if both were joined together in one form. An icy cold calculation of each step fueled by a bottomless well of dragonfire within him. His Majesty had fought every single fighter on the ship since they had left the capitol, and a quick spar among his Kingsguards would have been considered just a warmup.

But Jon did not treat it that way. "I yield!" At the gruff nod from his Emperor - only but a moment before he leapt back into the fray with Ser Jorah and the Hound - Dickon Tarly darted out to the sidelines where the Lord of Winterfell waited. "Your brother," Dickon wheezed. "He's not human."

While he wouldn't hesitate in quipping back, Robb instead watched transfixed at the fight. Both the older knight and the bulkier bruiser were larger and stronger than Jon, but the blood of the dragon could be seen as Jon forced them back slowly but surely. Fire and Blood in each of his strikes and parries. Robb could sense this, the power in each strike, how Jon matched fancy swordsmanship with the basics he had learned sparring with him and Theon under the tutelage of Ser Rodrick back in the Winterfell courtyard.

But there was something else. Blocking a down thrust from the Hound, muscles straining, he spotted Ser Jorah coming at him from behind. With an enraged snarl he kicked Clegane in the knee, forcing the Hound to back off with a howl of pain. The training sword batted Jorah's thrust away, smacking into the Bear Knight's back leathers without delay. Not honorable - moves straight out of a Flea Bottom gutter brawl - the effort worked well, Jon increasingly using them. "Yield!" both men screamed.

"Again!" Jon demanded, not a hint of exhaustion in him.

Robb looked at his brother incredulously. "Brother, please. Don't exhaust yourself… or your men." Jorah was a panting mess, while the Hound dunked his knee into a bucket of ice cold seawater. "Have some mercy on yourself. Take a breather."

Huffing, Jon said nothing else. He complied, instead trudging to the railing of the ship and standing there, quiet and brooding. The same quiet wolfling as he had learned to be as a child - silent, unwilling to speak or share anything. But underneath that hard, guarded expression was a harshness. The dark foreboding of a dragon, passion be it anger or something else ready to unleash itself.

Jon wasn't brooding, he was simmering. An icy mask of determination concealing a swirling cauldron of emotions that no one present was skilled enough to parse through. "Brother…"

"I'm fine, Robb," was the gruff reply, cutting him off.

"You need to rest."

"The dead don't rest. Neither can I." Robb hissed in frustration. This would be impossible.

"Jon!" There were few that could address the Emperor by his actual name. Aside from family, that
privilege applied to only those with the title of His Majesty's Friend - bestowed by the court as a title of great honor. And primary among these was Samwell Tarly, Lord of Horn Hill. He scrambled onto deck, a little green around the gills.

The Emperor noticed this. "Shit, Sam. You look like… well, shit." Smirks and snickers resounded from those on deck - many genuine but others forced. Hoping to lighten the mood darkened by the sullen Jon.

Sam chuckled as well. "Hard to imagine. Gilly loves boats, and traveling. Me, not so much." A small wave against the hull and the sway that followed caused Sam to pause. The green pallor to him increasing, clutching his stomach in worry. Luckily, he managed to hold in his meager meals. "I put the books in your room, as you requested. Although… I'm curious. When did you learn High Valyrian?"

Whatever humor Jon found in teasing Sam descended back into the previous brooding glower. "I'll make due." Not a single word further leaving his lips, Jon pushed his Kingsguards out of his way and headed belowdecks. Leaving his brother and friend staring in shock.

"Sam…" Robb began, drawing his cloak tighter on his frame as an icy gust charged forth from the Shivering Sea. "What books did you give to Jon?"

Unable to decide whether he wanted to puke or to shiver, Sam only shrugged. "Um, Jon requested several different volumes. Tomes on black magic, his father Rhaegar's notes, books on Valyrian prophecies… mostly things like that." He looked at the shoreline. "It confused me, because I read most of them, and can tell him anything I found about the Long Night and the Night King… Or he could ask his brother, Bran."

"Jon hasn't talked to Bran since before we left King's Landing." Robb shook his head. His brother's behavior was just getting more and more illogical, beyond his comprehension at least.

"I told ya'. The Emp's fuckin' crazy," muttered the Hound, simple and blunt as ever. He snatched up a mug of warm ale. "Fuck, it's cold!"

Tens of thousands. Lined almost shock still in a discipline that even the brutalizing sadists who trained the Unsullied would have envied in a jealous frenzy, even a fraction of the Army of the Dead lined before him was a sight in which nightmares were made of. Giants, saber-toothed cats, snow bears, ice spiders, mammoths, direwolves, wooly rhinos, and the ever present dead men that filled in the gaps between them. Some fresh as the day they died, others walking skeletons without even eyes to glow the haunting ice blue - most various stages in between.

All dwarfed by the great black dragon resting quietly as his master - the same master of all before him - gazed south. Army behind him, generals behind him. The Night King, the one once known as Marden Stark, simply played with his ever-present sliver of dragonglass. Drawing satisfaction from the swirling stormclouds that draped themselves all over Westeros since the Great Fall.

'My source of power.' He could feel it. Feel the icy energy coursing through him like a lightning strike. Unable to breathe, no longer needing of air, the scourge of the children of the forest instead opened and closed his fingers. Watching as the clouds danced above. Watching the winds howl ever louder. All a livewire electrifying his very being.

"Why don't you make an icicle," Zilas commented snidely. "Then stick it up your ass." He received a punch in the gut from a white walker for his trouble.
Marden laughed… or felt as if the human emotion of laughter would be appropriate here. He had killed many a child of the forest in his mortal life. It felt… satisfying. ‘Be careful, dear Zilas. I may need you, but your ear is another story.’ The dark scowl brought him even more satisfaction. ‘Take him away.’ One of the walkers complied, dragging the scowling child of the forest away.

Watching the only living form within miles being dragged off, the Night King looked upon the dragon. The great Vhalthrax. The Bringer of the Dawn himself. First ever dragon to be tamed… the mount of House Targaryen, ridden by his brother. ‘He is mine now, brother. Mine to bring vengeance upon this blighted earth.’ Oh how his supremely honorable brother would hate that - honor passed down to Marden's own son. Soryn Targaryen, the man to whom his sister had married… and whose sister married him…

'Daenerys.' The thought of her always sent Marden, the Night King, into a tailspin. A wave of silent brooding for which only the twirling of the dragonglass kept him occupied. 'Daenerys, my love.' Flaxen hair, the color of pure silver shimmering in the sunlight. Pale skin, ruby red lips that felt warm against the harsh northern winter. Oh how he loved her. The woman stolen away from him by the children of the forest - oh how he would delight in wiping them off the face of existence.

And his love, reborn. Almost identical - Marden knew the woman atop the dragon wasn't his wife, but the Night King did not care. She would be his, no matter what.

'Great One.' Marden's attention was drawn to one of his generals, disdain tinging the psionic communication. Odd, his men were usually as tractable as any of his corpse footsoldiers.

He turned, seeing the culprit. 'Yes?' It was a younger general. Turned from a toddler wilding boy rather than the others, all descendents of Craster's male children. This one had a brashness, a streak of disobedience that the others didn't. 'What is it? I am busy thinking.'

'Such is all you do these days, great one.' Marden's fists clenched, a booming thunder echoing from the tempest above. 'I request we move on the first settlement of the living. Last Hearth, I believe. Then Karhold and White Harbor below it.'

'No. We wait. They are coming.'

'They make you weak, Great One. Clouding your judgment. Gearing us for a certain defeat when victory is within our grasp, and you cannot see it.'

Marden’s eyes blazed ice. 'Tread lightly.'

Whereas normally such a glare would wither them, quiet them and secure the same unquestioning obedience that the vast swarm of corpses provided, the other refused to back down upon his point. 'You could have had more than one dragon, and you hesitated. You could have the entire north before they arrive, and yet you still hesitate. Why should we follow you if all you do is…'

Strong as they were. Powerful fighters as they were, none could match their monarch. One who had forged the legendary greatsword Ice in the fires of the first dragon ever ridden, who had only been bested by one in battle. Who created all before them through his efforts alone. With a psionic cry that transcended the bounds of the mystical and into the physical realm itself, the Night King spun and drove the dragonglass shard deep into the gut of his general. A mouth opened in a surprised gasp, but nothing came out.

Not one word as the monster turned into specks of ice before all others of his kind.

Shard still clutched in his hand, Marden Stark dusted off errant flecks that sprinkled onto his leathers.
A quick glance found his other generals staring at him, eyes widened to saucers in an uncharacteristic display of emotion. 'Does anyone else seek to question me? Or my decisions?'

Silence. 'No, Great One,' replied his lead general, eyes rooted to the snow beneath them.

'Good. Get back to your commands. Bring them all together, I can sense… their presence growing ever closer.' The others looked at one another, even they not contemplating the depths of their monarch's powers. 'They will fight me, and I will fight them. Be ready.'

'As your command, Great One.' One by one, the generals mounted their undead steeds and rode for their commands.

Turning away from them, the Night King gazed upon the frozen land. Looked upon the land of milk and honey that he had once called home. In which he had been born, raised, and started his life with his sister and the two wanderers from across the Narrow Sea. Built a life that was stolen from him. Was it truly home to him anymore. *There is no home.*

The clouds roared above as his anger rose. Bitterness and rage swirling within the icy pit of his heart. *No home, only death. Only vengeance.* Lightning cracked and ice slammed into the ground before him, the gale outside reflecting the raging torrent within Marden Stark.

Long, silver hair flashed in his mind. Of a smile that could melt the iciest heart. For the fleetest moment, an emotion akin to grief flickered within the Night King's mind… only to drown in the lust for vengeance. 'I will have you again, Daenerys.' He sheathed the dragonglass in his belt once more, calling forth his brother's great dragon that he now rode himself. 'You may not be her, but that doesn't matter.' Wordlessly, Marden Stark climbed onto his mount.

'You and I, we will break it all together.' The wind howled, as if it was the very earth responding.

For once, the seas off the coast of the Vale were calm - the harsh winter gales that slammed into the rough, mountainous land stilling and only simple waves rocking gently against the hull of the great galleon. But within, the storms only grew fiercer and fiercer. A silent gale that raged through the tense atmosphere. North laid the Army of the Dead, finally past the wall. Infecting everyone with a sense of dread that only training… and affection could hope to soothe. Or at least mask.

But there existed a different type of tension. One that stoked the storm. One that the Lord and Lady of Winterfell found prudent to bring to the attention of their Empress. "You have to do something, Daenerys," Robb stated, worry in his eyes.

"What would you have me do?" Daenerys sighed, frustrated beyond belief. "The possible end of the world is approaching, brother. My plate is full, so you'll have to be more specific."

"Jon..." Robb ran a hand through his hair. "He was always prone to brooding, but this is out of control. He barely eats, barely speaks - only keeps to his quarters, rides Rhaegal, or spar. And the sparring..." He remembered his one spar with Jon atop the deck. "He's like some spectral demon. Relentless… and an enraged relentless at that."

Reaching the cabin shared by the Warden and Wardeness of the North, Daenerys motioned them inside. No need for a nosy servant or sailor to spread across the ship the worries of the Emperor's brother and wife. Inside, she crossed her arms. "Robb, Jon is literally faced with the destruction of humanity. He has to lead his army personally to battle that ice monster. He has earned the right to brood..."

"It's not just that, Daenerys," Margaery insisted, sharing a look with her husband. "I saw the Night
King at Hardhome, seeing how Jon reacted afterwards. We all saw Jon's reaction after the ranging
beyond the wall. This is… different. There's something more, something burdening him that he won't
share."

"I know." Dany wrapped her arms around her body, allowing a glimpse of vulnerability in front of
her family. "He doesn't talk to me either. I've tried to give him some
space to brood, but…" She had seen the look before, a look of loss. Of frantic bargaining with
whatever divinity existed for respite - she had the same look as well, when gazing into her past. 'If I
look back, I'm lost.' For Jon it was different. The future scared him, a future without his family.

But she couldn't tell Robb or Margaery. It was only Jon's pain to tell. "I'll try to speak with him."

Robb offered her a small smile. "He shouldn't deal with this pain alone. The lone wolf dies, but the
pack survives." The Empress reciprocated his smile before slipping out of the room, lips then pressed
into a thin line as she made her way towards her own cabin.

He was where she thought he'd be. Huddled in his chair by the brazier, piles of books and
documents lumped on the worn, wooden desk before him. Jon had never been the best reader, or the
most studious - that was saved for his friend Sam, the researcher while he was the doer of the duo.
But Jon did have determination, bordered on zealousness. He completed a task when set before him.
In this he was exactly his father's son, both for Ned Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen. Looking upon
him now, tearing through page after page as he digested all the information he could like an obsessed
madman, Dany could see Rhaegar in him. Her brother had been the same according to the tales Ser
Barristan had told her.

Slowly walking behind him - having dismissed Missandei and all of her handmaidens for the night,
they were completely alone in their cabin aboard the Targaryen flagship - Dany rested her hand on
his shoulder. "Jon?" His skin tensed underneath her palm, but he otherwise reacted not. "What are
you doing?"

There was no answer for a long while. "It's nothing," was the eventual response.

Dany fought back a grimace. He was shutting her out, the confident dragonwolf turning back into
the quiet, whipped-dog bastard she never wanted to see ever again. "Jon, whatever it is, you can tell
me." She reached down and hugged his shoulders, sighing at the welcome heat of his body. "My
love, ānogar ānograro. 'Don't shut me out, please,' was the silent plea.

"I'm just tired, Dany." He wasn't giving it up, voice guarded and… pained? Dany could detect a
suppressed agony in his voice, one that seemed to drive his determination.

"Of course you're tired, you've been training yourself to death - at least when not imprisoning
yourself here in our cabin." She didn't mean to sound harsh, but the frustration was getting to her.
Daenerys sincerely thought he had finally outgrown the forced quiet of his past. "I can't see you like
this, Jon."

"Please sleep, Dany. I'll be fine."

Rounding the chair, wedging her slim figure in between Jon and the table, Dany sat in his lap. Violet
eyes boring into his own as she looped her arms around his neck. "Tell me what bothers you, ōhuja
jorrāelagon. Please." She leaned forward, pressing a small kiss on his lips.

Tender, loving, pouring comfort, Dany pulled back from her kiss hoping to see his icy heart melting -
for his facade to fall and the man with whom she shared the world with to emerge once again.
Instead, looking into his grey eyes, what she saw from the kiss was an inferno. "Daenerys…” His
voice was deep, low, menacing. He only used her full name during small council meetings... or
when he was...

The kiss was nothing like hers. Pulling her flush to him, one hand firmly threading through her hair
and the other gripping her ass like talons, he slammed their lips together. Jon feasting on her mouth
like a hungry wolf.

Like a hungry dragon. Taking what he wanted. What he needed.

'Jon, no…' She tried to say it, tried to push him back with her palms. But all that escaped was a
moan, equally desperate. All her hands could do upon his chest were to stroke the hard planes, slide
up and snake around his neck. All she could do was lose herself in him. Giving up, allowing him to
forget his pain through her body - he was Daenerys' weakness, not that she complained in this very
moment.

Letting go of her hair, tongue still plundering her mouth with the savagery of a wilding charge, Jon
sunk his fingers into her free asscheek. Coaxing a yelp of pain and pleasure from her. Daenerys
automatically looped her legs around his waist as he lurched out of the chair, giving back in the kiss
as good as she got.

"He will not take you..." he murmured against her lips in a faint growl. "Nothing will take you from
me." Faint, but dragon-like in the fury behind it. The words confused her, a glimpse into the mind of
her brooding husband and the pain that ailed him. But Daenerys couldn't think straight. Couldn't
contemplate the dread that draped over them, not with his tongue down her throat. Not with his spicy
scents in her nostrils as he held her tightly to him while bounding for the bed. Not with the feel of his
hardness pressing into her through his leathers as they lowered onto the sheets.

"Ǹuha zaldrīzes zokla." She gave in. She had to have him. "Qogralbar aōha zaldrīzes." They made
short work of their remaining clothes... or rather Jon did. He was relentless, pinning Daenerys to the
soft sheets with a growl and a scorching glare - grey eyes black with desire and a faraway rage. She
shuddered with a reactive lust as he tore off his undershirt, hands blazing a pathway of rough touches
and gropes down her body that only spurred the Empress' desire to higher than her dragons could fly.

With that same frenzy written over his face, Jon tore her dress apart. Ripped it from her, drawing out
a gasp. He pushed the ruined fabric from her body. "You are mine, Daenerys." Hands palmed her
breasts, lips lunging for her neck. He had spoken this possessively before, when some lord eyed her
hunggrily or she chatted with some young knight - the Emperor always eager to stake his claim upon
the Mother of Dragons, show the world she was happily taken in a marriage for love. "No one will
take you from me."

But this was different. So very different. There wasn't jealousy in his voice, only grit. Only anger.
Only fear, terror... As if just letting her move an inch from their positions flush against each other
would see her disappear. Shatter into specks of ice like a white walker pierced by dragonglass.

"I will let none take you from me."

Daenerys opened her mouth to speak, to inquire about the specific words, but all rational thought
died on her lips when she felt his tongue slide into her most intimate place. All that left was a languid
moan, hands gripping Jon's raven locks in desperation. "Jon... don't stop..." Dany stopped fighting
it, letting her lust for him consume her.

He ravaged her. Conquered her - not that she complained. Jon plunged into her depths, lapping up
the copious wetness that soaked over him. Her fingers tugged hard on his hair but Jon didn't even
notice, gaze focused on her flushed cheeks, eyes shut from pure pleasure. He was desperate to hear
her shatter above him. To hear that Daenerys Targaryen was here with him.

To prove to the Old Gods and the New, to the Lord of Light and to whatever other divinities existed that he would never let her go. *That I would bring winter, bring fire and blood to the very heavens to protect her.*'

A scream left her, echoing through the boat of just how deeply the Empress was being pleasured. Panting, gasping for breath, Daenerys waited for the teasing quips her husband would normally shower upon her along with kisses. But it didn't come. Instead, an even deeper kiss came, a savage one. The stretch of her inner walls as Jon slid inside her - Tormund called it a 'small pecker' but the ginger wildling couldn't be further from the truth. Ravaging her like no other man could.

Jon gripped the edge of the bed, using it as leverage to pound his wife beneath him. She looked so small, so fragile shed of her armies, her dragons, and her finery, but Jon knew better than anyone that the strength was inside her. Blood of the dragon. The same blood as his. "Ānogar ānograro." He doubled his pace. "Kesan daor ivestragī zir ēy gūrogon ao." His northern accented Valyrian made her even wetter for him. "Iksā ūuhon." A change in angle made her scream "Daorun kessa gūrogon ao hen nyke."

"Jon! Kessa!" She moaned in pure pleasure, forcing herself against the dragonfire exploding beneath her lids to look at him. To meet his dark, fearful gaze with the love of his own. "Iksan aōhon." Dany gripped his back, feeling herself come apart under him. "Daorun kostagon mirre gūrogon... ahhh... nyke hen ao... Jon!" Back arching, she screamed once more, trembling as her body lost control of itself in the wild climax. Above, Jon gripped her cheek as he grunted, shooting into her violently as he continued to pound away until exhaustion drowned them.

Heart thumping wildly, a sheen of sweat covering her from head to toe, Dany felt completely drained. Sore, wonderfully sore from their exertions. He had taken her like an angry dragon and she loved it. But in the middle of her post-coital bliss. Of her glorious aftermath, the worry still remained in her husband. Like a coiled snake, muscles tense from some unknown cause that even animalistic sex couldn't cure. Looping her arms around Jon, whispering her love and stroking his back, nothing worked to cure it now that they rested together. No response.

Only the same words as before. Repeated as almost a chant. "He will not take you… Nothing will take you from me." Words that would haunt her mind even long after Jon had fallen into a restless sleep above her.

Chapter End Notes

Seen it all the time, Jon's trying to avoid telling Dany by rocking her world in the sack. She's gotta love it, but still...

Translations:
ānogar ānograro - blood of my blood
ũuha jorrāelagon - my love
Ñuha zaldrīzes zokla - my dragonwolf
Qogralbar aōha zaldrīzes - fuck your dragon
Ánogar ánograro. Kesan daor ivestragī zirī gūrogon ao. Iksā ñuhon. Daorun kessa gūrogon ao hen nyke - Blood of my blood. I will not let them take you. You are mine. Nothing will take you from me.

Kessa. Iksan aōhon. Daorun kostagon mirre gūrogon nyke hen ao - Yes. I am yours. Nothing can ever take me from you.

Lots of emotions going around, from Maester Aemon to Robb. And the Night King. By the old gods and the new, he even creeps me out. And I wrote those lines!

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed :D

Next, arrival in Winterfell.
A Dance of Lovers

Hi all! We're getting closer to the first showdown with the Night King, so buckle up!

Important news! I have decided to write my Dance of Dragons idea after Empire finishes, but I have also decided that to properly go into that, we must have a true fix for season 8. Therefore, I've decided to write a prequel to it called A Terrible Resolve, where we have Dany come to terms with her love for Jon and Jon come to terms with his Targaryen identity, all while in a backdrop of an actually coherent final battle for the Iron Throne. Hope y'all will like.

Enjoy and review!

Oathkeeper ready to plunge down into the Empress' shoulder, Brienne suddenly felt the touch of cold steel gently brushing against her neck, right above the steel breastplate guarding her torso. Paused - stilling in mid assault - both women panted. Drawing in the icy air that burned their lungs with each gasp. "Yield..." Dany said through the creeping tide of exhaustion. Blood of the Dragon fighting to overcome it.

Brienne gingerly lowered her sword arm, quickly wiping a sheen of sweat from her face before it froze in the northern winter. "Good show, your Highness," she told the diminutive Empress. Petite body belying the pure dragonfire ready to explode at the right opportunity within. "A worthy opponent."

Grinning, rather enjoying the pair of trousers provided her for the training session underneath her thick coat, Daenerys eyed the Lady Knight of Tarth as many were taken to calling her. "From that tone, I believe you haven't had many worthy opponents."

Shaking her head, Brienne matched the wry smirk on her monarch's lips. "Only three - besides yourself - have ever bested me in a fair fight. His Majesty..." Not surprising for Daenerys. "Ser Jaime, before he lost his hand. And..."

"Don't you forget it, my Lady," came the sarcastic chuckle. Arya's chestnut hair, grown out slightly longer as befitting the Lady Baratheon, was tied back in a more practical ponytail. The Lady Baratheon, yet also the Wild Wolf of Winterfell. Still chuckling, she patted Brienne's arm-plate. "I just knew she'd still be bitter when my Needle kicked her Valyrian Steel into the dust." Arya turned to look Daenerys over. "You look good. Our sister would probably disagree, but the trousers suit you."

Daenerys laughed. "Rhaenys and Vinsenya both wore trousers over their chainmail dragonriding outfits, so I don't consider myself out of the Targaryen style." Arya grinned widely, quite supportive of the answer. "It was a good spar, Lady Brienne. I shall hope we can have a rematch another time."

She bowed to her partner.

The Lady Knight of Tarth bowed back. "I look forward to it, your Highness."
With Brienne moving off to find Podrick or General Caryn, Daenerys and Arya fell into lockstep as they made their way through the gates towards the massive camp nestled between Wintertown and Winterfell Castle. "He's still not talking, is he?" Sighing, Daenerys' answering look said it all. "My brother was always a stubborn ass in his own way. Never did like expressing his feelings. No man does… but he's worse."

"Believe me, I know." Around them, thousands of men and women - of every conceivable nationality and ethnicity, from all corners of the Targaryen Empire - milled about, working around the clock to prepare for the final clash with the Army of the Dead. Unsullied prepared to march for Last Hearth, Northerners working around the clock with the Essosi auxiliaries to construct the Winterfell defenses, men of the Westerlands and men of Dome standing in line together by the forges to receive their dragonglass-coated weapons with only… a few brawls breaking out.

Eyes stared at Daenerys wherever she walked. Everyone from Tyrell bannermen in their steel burgonets, the wildlings in their mismatched furs, to the sallets of the Knights of the Vale watched her as if she was a golden mammoth. Even the Westerlanders, men who had fought her from the very beginning of the Emperors' War, looked upon her not with hate but with awe.

"We'll lick them good, your Highness!" hooted Lord Lyle Crakehall, the Strongboar of the Westerlands. His men, refitted with dragonglass-lined blades and shields, smacked their new weapons together and hooted in bravado.

It heartened Daenerys, even the men most predisposed to wish her dead united under the Targaryen banner to fight the greater threat. "I aim for that, my Lord." The bannermen of House Crakehall cheered that answer, even though it was less than the soaring confidence of their Lord.

Arya was just shaking her head in amazement at it all. "Wasn't too long ago that I wouldn't have run Needle through Lyle Crakehall's head like I did Polliver."

She didn't know who 'Polliver' was, but Dany knew Arya well enough to deduce the mystery man was a former name on her list. "The Pax Targaryana is alive and well, sister. Once we defeat the dead, that is." Jon's behavior made her worry about his readiness on that front - or was there something else. "At least the army is well-oiled and ready to fight."

Arya snorted. "Fuck the army. Go after the head fucker and stab him in the heart. Won't need an army then." Daenerys couldn't fault her sister's logic.

Catching a merry laughter, Daenerys turned her head to find an interesting sight. Her handmaiden Missandei, engrossed in conversation with Tormund and the two massive giants, Mag Mar and Wun Wun. "Now this seems interesting," the Empress remarked to her sister.

"Giants are a riot," laughed Arya. "Let's go."

The translator was talking haltingly, seemingly in gibberish with Tormund and even the giants, until Mag Mar straightened from where he sat and slammed his fist against his chest. Wun Wun looked up, soon reciprocating - then Tormund and Missandei caught their new arrivals. "Your Highness. Lady Baratheon," the handmaiden stood. "I didn't see you arrive."

"That is alright, Missandei." The woman was far too formal, even after this long. "So what is this?"

Missandei's eyes sparkled. "Tormund, Mag Mar, and Wun Wun were teaching me Mag Nuk, the Great Tongue of the giants. It's magnificent in its simplicity!" She was like a little girl sampling a platter of sweets.
"What is that, language number twenty?"

"Twenty one. I learned the Old Tongue from the wildings during our time at Riverrun."

Wun Wun giving Mag Mar a sidelong glance, his stocky jaw curled into a grin. He began speaking, guttural words ending in a stream of laughter. Dany watched as Missandei giggled, while Tormund hung his head in his hands, muttering obscenities. "And what is so amusing?" she asked, hands on her hips and smirking.

Missandei looked up to Wun Wun. "Bar... nuk meg... jek, nute Wun Wun." The two giants bellowed in a chuckle as Wun Wun gently patted the translator on the back - who wore a huge smile at having gotten it right. "I was just telling the noble Wun Weg Wun Dar Wun that he told a great, humorous story about Tormund."

"This I've got to hear," Arya cackled, smirking at Tormund.

"For all fucks that is good, please don't," Tormund begged.

Arya thumped him on the shoulder. "Shut up. Tell us."

At Dany's nod, Missandei turned on her impromptu seat to face them. "Well, it concerns Tormund's name." Dany and Arya listened intently while Tormund groaned. "Apparently, Wun Wun says that Giantsbane is a euphemism for Giantsbabe, and that our wildling friend here secured that name by surviving a rather heavy winter storm by a female giant mistaking him for her babe and nursing him on his teat for two weeks." The responding laughter only made Tormund want to bury his head in the snow and suffocate himself.

The young Stark was near tears. "Oh, wait till I tell Jon this…"

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The fire called to him.

Jon was alone in his solar, the solar of the guest rooms in Winterfell. Rooms that once held visiting dignitaries of all stripes, including that of Robert Baratheon, arriving North in that fateful trip. Only instead of the whores of Wintertown, Jon's bed was graced by the sleeping form of his beloved dragon, Daenerys enjoying a peaceful slumber while he was out here - restless, unable to find peace wherever he went.

Born of war. Life of war. All that differed Jon from the great warlords of the past were that he hated what he was good at… that didn't mean it did not follow him. Did he truly wish peace for himself? Or did the dragons seek out flame. Did the wolves seek out ice. Both destructive, untempered, deadly in their true form. The paradox tormented him, ripped apart his soul, leaving Jon unable to make sense of his life. Of his duty.

Crackling within the hearth, log twisting in agony as more and more of it transformed into blackened ash, the flames reached out to Jon. Giving him part of that sense of peace that he so craved - if only a fraction. Unable to stop himself, the Targaryen Emperor slowly inched his hand into the flames. Searing heat enveloping him in a comforting embrace. It was a new feeling, one he hadn't ever experienced before.

Jon suddenly pulled out his hand. Shaking it like mad, his heart beating. "Why did I do that?" Why had he sought out the flame.

You are the blood of the dragon, Jon.
The voice inside him sounded like his father. His real father, Rhaegar. He had appeared in his dreams, increasingly making his presence known. Only now the voice seemed as clear as if his father was right next to him. But he wasn't - Jon was alone. "Gods, what is wrong with me?" he said to no one in particular. He took in a deep breath, trying to steady himself.

*Dragons do not answer to gods nor men. Let alone mere to prophecies.*

Jon shook his head, as if banishing a demon from his head. "Am I going mad?" A fear more found in Daenerys, but he had the blood as well. The trend to madness, just like his grandfather. Like his uncle.

*You are not mad, my son. I am here, and you need to listen.*

He fell into his chair, eyes shut in pain. 'You aren't real!' he wanted to shout, but something stopped him. An instinct, a mystic force swirling within him that he understood not but for a gut feeling. Innate for the blood of the dragon and wolf. "What do you want from me, father?"

*Do not kill, Daenerys. You must fight those that say you must.*

"Do you think I want to?!" he thundered. As fast as the rage came, it simmered out in the cold. "But I may have no choice."

*There is always a choice, Jon. You are a dragon and a wolf, ice and fire. Born with all you need to bring the Dawn. You must shape your own destiny.*

"Father…" Within the hearth, the fire swelled, roaring alight.

The knock on the door broke the moment. The fire stilled, returning to a normal flicker. Jon stood, sweat pouring down his back. "Come in," he answered breathlessly.

Sandor Clegane opened the door. "Sire, your brother, the kid, and the red bitch are here to see you."

He suppressed a smirk at how blunt his Kingsguard was. "Tis fine, Sandor. Let them in." Nodding, the Hound opened the door further, Melisandre walking in with her hands clasped in front of her. Bran entered behind, the diminutive form of Leaf pushing his wheelchair. Bringing up the rear was Davos, looking uncomfortable as he always had among the mystical. A final muttering and Clegane shut it behind him. "Bran, Leaf." Jon's mask was on full display. "Lady Melisandre."

She curtseyed low, respect evident. "Your Majesty. I hope that I may serve you during your moment of doubt and destiny." A silence permeated, broken only by the crackling of the fire. Melisandre spoke up before Jon could address her once more. "The Keeper of the Dawn informed me of your predicament."

Jon felt anger and frustration at Bran well forth within him. "Why?" he choked out, not amused that his private tumult was discussed with those he hadn't himself sought out.

"My… sight is not foolproof, brother," Bran answered, his voice flat but emotion glinting in his eyes. "That which I do not know of only comes to me randomly, and that which I do know only appears in pieces. Intense energy is needed to see more, energy finite within me." He sighed, hands clenching on the armrests of the chair. "I cannot give you any more information other than that I already have shown you." A slight tear fell from his cheek. "Please forgive me Jon, but Melisandre and Leaf are the only ones among us that can share insight for you."

Watching his brother, so broken and heartbroken for him, Jon felt his anger cool. "Tell me what you know."
"The Prince that was Promised… he is prophesied to be a great man. A man who overcomes the greatest obstacles, who places his life on the brink to bring the Dawn against the terrible, terrible night." She brushed past him, to the hearth. As welcome towards the fire as Jon had been earlier. "But he is not destined to have a life of happiness. Only death and suffering does the Lord of Light have for his Prince."

"Such was true for Soryn." Jon turned to see Leaf, anguish on her cherubic face - one both monstrous and angelic at the same time. "I saw the pain in his eyes. The agony coursing through him as my leader and lover told him what he must do to counteract the stone magic used to create the Night King. His brother in all but blood." Grief filled her, the weight of millennia crashing upon her.

Jon's brow rose. "Your lover?"

Leaf nodded. "Zilas, the high leader of all our clans. He was the one that the clan leaders selected to lead us through the war with the First Men, and the one who created the Night King out of Marden Stark - our greatest human enemy." A tear fell from her cheek. "The one I loved. He is dead now, killed during the assault on the great Weirwood where you showed up to save Bran." She sat, forlorn. "I know the pain you feel firsthand, Emperor. I wish it were different, but this great evil can only be broken through the greatest selflessness."

Shaking his head, Jon hid his tears. "No… there can still be a chance..." His father's words still rang in his head.

**Do not kill, Daenerys. You must fight those that say you must.**

Despite at least grieving for her Emperor's anguish, Melisandre remained determined. "I have seen glimpses of the future in the fire. Hazy glimpses, ones that lack clarity - I thought Stannis Baratheon would be the Prince that was Promised, unable to see the flames for what they really were. But there was always one constant, Jon Targaryen." She paused, meeting his gaze. "A man holding forth the flaming sword, holding forth Lightbringer in the middle of the great blizzard, surrounded by snow. The prophecy is clear, my Emperor. You must do what is necessary to bring the Dawn."

Jon had heard enough. "I have to be alone!" Shoving past the Red Witch, he stormed out of his solar.

Melisandre's voice was loud behind him. "You cannot escape your destiny, Emperor. The Night is Dark and Full of Terrors!"

Emotion - dark emotion - swirling inside him like the harshest of tempests, Jon had it on his mind to head into the courtyard. Intending to find the first man or group of me he could and train with them. Knowing he would best them in no time flat, but not caring. Needing to lessen the tide of darkness before it enveloped him. "Your Majesty! Wait!" A hand on his shoulder, Jon spun and nearly broke it before he saw Ser Davos staring back at him. Not backing down. "Glad to see your reflexes are still sharp, sire," he laughed, easing the tension.

Jon relaxed, letting some of the tension dissipate. "Please leave me be, Davos. I'm not in the mood to talk."

"I won't keep you long, your Majesty, but just listen for a moment." Standing nearly alone among the many in the Empire, among the many that surrounded both the Emperor and Empress, Davos had come from nothing to be the right hand of more than one great noble. He had seen Stannis Baratheon as a strong elder sibling, but in both Jon and Daenerys he saw two young souls as close to his children as any not of his sire. Young and often overwhelmed souls that needed someone to look out for them, to care for their happiness that the squabbling jackals wouldn't do. "I'm sorry this is happening to you."
"If that is all, then leave me."

"No, that is not all, sire. Gods… you and her Highness, after seeing all the shit in the world, both of you are the light of hope. Not because of any magic or any fancy words some addled mystic says, but because you love each other. Pure. Genuine. Seven Hells, we haven't had either of those since… well since the first Starks and Targaryens that Lord Brandon told me about."

Closing his eyes, Jon tried to not think about the love. The radiating joy that sparkled in Dany's eyes whenever she laid gaze upon him. "All doesn't matter if Melisandre's prophecy is true. If the Lord of Light insists I do what the first Azor Ahai did…"

"Well fuck the Lord of Light then." Jon blinked, taken aback. Davos rarely cursed. "Fuck the gods and the prophecies and all that shite. What happens in the afterlife can wait till we're all dead and buried, for while we live we can only fight with our own two fucking hands." He clasped Jon's hands, almost fatherly in his touches. "I followed you because you made miracles happen. Her Highness' followers pledged to her because she made miracles happen. I have seen both of you achieved greatness, things unparalleled in history, untouched by madness or bloodlust or hunger for power. If there's anyone that can tell the prophecy to shove itself up its ass, it is you, Jon."

Despite himself, Jon couldn't help but chuckle. For the first time in weeks, the fire within him felt as if it was tempered. Calming. "Thank you, Ser Davos."

The Onion Knight nodded. "But you must tell her Highness. She deserves to know."

Jon's eyes darkened, resignation clouding his expression. "Aye, I know."

"The Unsullied are off to Last Hearth with the Dornish and Westerlands cavalry," Robb stated, Ice clipped to his hip. He was in riding clothes, for good reason. "I move with the Northern contingent after this war council. My wife and sister will be in command of Winterfell and the supply chains after I leave."

Jon found no need to disagree. "That is acceptable. Ensure the roads are clear, Lady Stark. I do not intend for Last Hearth to be where we make our last stand, just blood them." Margaery nodded, ready to defend her home. Jon pointed to the markers for the Umber home. "Lord Umber has evacuated everyone, so the lands are deserted except for our forces and the dead. The Night King will attack head on."

"Your Majesty," spoke Lady Tyene. "Why do you think…"

"He will attack head on," Jon replied, no room for doubt. None doubted him after that. "Our forces will be mobile. Kill as many of them as possible, then retreat back to Winterfell. No heroics, understood?"

After exclamations of assent all around, Daenerys began to speak. "His Majesty and I will ride to Last Hearth after this meeting as well. Our presence is needed there, and so we will take command there by nightfall."

"But it would take a few days by horse at the fastest," stated Leo Lefford, Lord of Golden Tooth in the Westerlands.

Dany shared an amused glance with Jon. "By horse, yes. Dragons are faster." The room shared a laugh at Lefford's expense, who smiled slightly to himself.

"Pardon, your Highness." Tyrion, lips drawn in a thin line, leaned forward to be seen along the table.
"Has there been any word from potential survivors at Castle Black? My..." He trailed off. It was not lost on anyone that he referred to his brother, the commander of the Castle Black relief force and currently missing in action.

Robb cleared his throat. "There was no news from the Wall since the Great Fall blocked out the sun." All their information, at least initially, were dependent on the Three-Eyed Raven's greensight. None were about to risk their majesties' dragons to the Night King for a proper scouting. "We must operate on the assumption that Castle Black holds no survivors." Tyrion sank back in his chair, resigned to the likelihood but still ashen, still grieving.

"My uncle is a survivor!" Eyes turned to the youthful glare of Tommen Lannister, Lord of Casterly Rock and adopted heir to the legacy of Tywin Lannister. "If anyone can live through whatever the ice monsters send him, it is Jaime Lannister." The boy still had the quiet disposition of the sweet, gentle lad under the sway of his mother and older brother, but as the compromise solution to the integration of the Westerlands in the Empire, the golden-armored young lord was at least trying.

Not that the other Lords welcomed a Lannister within the war council. Men such as General Caryn were only just now warming to Tyrion's presence.

But he held a supporter in the Empress, no less. "My brother means no disrespect, Lord Lannister," Daenerys interjected, dispelling any tension - well, additional tension. "We all wish for Ser Jaime to arrive back unharmed with the rest of the Castle Black garrison." Men her husband considered close friends. "But we cannot count on it, and must prepare accordingly."

The reply was a series of nods from across the room.

"It's a good thing Caryn sent the majority of the army to Last Hearth already," Jon mused, trudging through the snow. The powdery white crystals crunched underneath his boots, icy wind slamming against his cloak. It didn't bother him. He'd been through far worse - only thing was, worse was only slightly more terrible than this. The Great Fall infected all. "They would have been stuck in this snowfall while the Night King took the castle."

"You heard what your brother said, my love." Dany's head rested on his shoulder, pulled close to his side for warmth as they walked. "The Night King is moving slowly. Our forces will be there, blood them, and draw back." Her blood ran hot, but mere months in the colder climes did not acclimate her to the ice like her northern husband was. A shiver drew her ever closer to Jon - not that the Emperor complained. "It's odd. That monster could have been in Winterfell by now had he made haste. It's not like his army needs supplies or rest." She could hear the hitch in Jon's breath, but said nothing.

'She has to know.'

'You can't tell her, Jon.'

'I must.'

Conflicted, Jon remembered Bran's words. Melisandre's words. To leave Daenerys unknowing of what the Night King intended would not serve anything. 'I will tell her.' He just needed to wait for the right time and place. "There they are." He started trotting towards the dragons' little - well, not so little - nest.

Sighing, Daenerys let it go. He'd come clean on what was bothering him eventually. With what faced both of them, she wouldn't push.

Blackened bones and half-eaten husks of carcases laid strewn over the snow. Enough to pile a small
hill worth, with how much six dragons could eat. For the three eldest, their wingspans could already stretch out to about the diameter of Winterfell, having only grown since Jon had ridden Rhaegal into battle and Daenerys Balerion during the Battle of the Bastards. For their daughters, they had only grown exponentially since that day. Fed constantly, they were already the same size as their brother was when he saved Jon from near death north of the wall. The two monarchs shared a look with each other, knowing it would soon be time for Arya and Rhaegar to choose their dragons to ride.

If there would be time.

Noticing their mother and father, the dragons showered them with attention. "Hey, hey, easy there," Jon laughed, Sansenya and Rhaella butting heads as they tried to lick his face - Edderon and Rhaegal watching with their heads tilted in amusement.

Sweet, joyous laughter left Dany's mouth, gently stroking Balerion and Lyanarys on the snout. "They missed their poppa," she giggled, rather thankful at the more gentle welcome that the other two were giving her. Her laughs intensified as both adolescent dragons knocked Jon into the snow with their enthusiasm. "Relax, my love. You don't mind when Ghost does it."

"There's less of a chance... girls, please... Ghost would kill me if he... stop... has too much enthusiasm." He had to have been drenched with dragon slobber at this point, but Jon couldn't help but join in his wife's laughter. As Sansenya and Rhaella calmed down, merely nuzzling their prone father with their warm snouts, Jon decided his wife deserved a bit of fun. "Rhaegal, say hello to your mother."

At the nod from the large, green dragon, Dany's eyes widened. She scrambled to address her son. "Rhaegal, do not..." Suddenly she felt a large head gently knock her into the snow, a rather warm tongue drenching her white dress as it licked her. "Rhaegal!" Now it was her turn to squirm while the Emperor laughed.

"Turnabout is fair play, Daenerys," he chided, earning a glare from her. It didn't last, both of them exploding in laughter. A welcome respite from the tension and dread of the last few weeks. Just them, two mighty dragonlords in love.

Not long after, both were astride their dragons. Experts from an intense amount of trial and error. "You certainly look like a Targaryen King, my love," she called out, longing in her stare.

He smiled back. "Honestly, I think I rode dragonback before you did." Jon enjoyed how she opened her mouth to retort, only for it to die in her throat, confused and calculating as if he was right. "I'll leave you to it, Dany. Sõvegon." Hooting into the air, Rhaegal rocketed from the ground, leathery wings beating like mad as he ascended.

"Jelmõñe mittys," Daenerys glowered, chuckling despite herself. "Sõvegon." With a hoot of his own, Balerion joined his brother in the skies, rapidly followed by his other brother and three sisters.

Jon remembered the first time he had flown on dragonback. Pain over losing Ygritte, fear at the presence of the army of the dead, a wholly different fear at the lowly bastard of Winterfell having the only non-fatal choice being to entrust his life to the whims of a flying monster - and yet, he felt an innate calling. An instinct within him that said dragonback wasn't just a necessity, it was destiny. Something he was born to do.

And now, he accepted it. Revealed in it. Allowed the joy and exhilaration course through him as it had for generations of riders and dragonlords before him. The dothraki had the plains. The freefolk had the ice. The Ironborn had the seas. 'But the skies belong to the Targaryens!'
All worries left him. All pain and tension blew away from Jon through the gusts of wind slamming against him. He was free, freer than he had ever been.

*Dragons answer to neither gods nor men.*

Atop the world, joined by only himself, his beautiful wife, and his children - soon to be joined by all of his children, once they bonded and learned to ride their dragons - Jon was finally free. If only for a little while. He lived for these moments, desired by him for longer than he had ever known.

Glancing back, he had just caught Daenerys' radiant smile before Balerion lurched upwards, Lyanarys close behind as the Empress dared him. Herself just as carefree as he. Looking out at Sansenya, the orange-red adolescent bobbed her head, eager to give chase and best her brother and sister in this challenge. He grinned, nodding. "Ready, boy." Rhaegal growled, his older spirit no less challenged by his larger brother. "*Rhaegal, hepnon.*" A laugh left him as the dragon ascended into the clouds.

The grey haze clouded his vision, but Jon could make out the shapes of his beloved within the swirling vortex. Rhaegal soon caught up, his smaller size making for greater speed as they settled into a game of movements. A lover's dance as old as dragonriding itself. Laughter and whoops of excitement leaving the young monarchs as their passion and free spirits manifest in the loops and turns of their dragons. Young lovers born to ride, to witness the earth in ways only the gods could.

Fire made flesh.

Fire was passion.

Fire was life.

Wingbeats securing him the lead, the clouds of the Long Night suddenly disappeared, Jon greeted with a sheet of blue. The deluge of the sun, ever high in the sky and as bright as he remembered. Daenerys followed close behind, their mounts arcing in the sky. Basking in the light. Enjoying the warmth banishing away the deep chill. They met each other's gaze, time stilling, distance great but both seeing each other as if there was no gap. Dazzling smiles on their faces that only appeared when they were together, alone.

No worries, just each other.

And as quickly as it came, it was over. The dragons dove, sun disappearing in the clouds as they plummeted through the air. But neither Jon nor Dany cared. Roaring at the top of their lungs from the sheer rush through their systems. Taking the icy chill in stride as their children joined in, eight dragons answering a challenge from the booming snowclouds over who truly ruled the skies. Roaring till exiting the canopy and reunited with the expanse of ground beneath them.

Jon's laughs and shouts died down, heart settling into the rhythm of an expert rider. One arm still wrapped tightly round Rhaegal's back spine, the other softly stroked the beast's neck. "Good boy."

A hoot answered him, the dragon suddenly lurching forward. Jon barely had time to hold tight before Rhaegal arced upward, hoots barking from him as looped in the sky. His rider let out a cry of surprise, unsuspecting of the sudden move, something the dragon found quite amusing. One picked up on the bond, and from the eyes of the beautiful woman watching the whole thing.

Breathing deeply, steadying his bearings, Jon lightly smacked Rhaegal on his scales. "That wasn't funny." Craning his neck back, Rhaegal gave him a cock of the head, as if saying *'Yes it was.'* "Shut up." The dragon only hooted once more. Shaking his head, chuckling, Jon suddenly spotted
something on the ground. "Boy, dive over there." Not needing any further command, knowing exactly what his father wanted, Rhaegal complied with a steep dive.

Behind, Daenerys blinked, puzzled as to where Jon was going. But she trusted him. "Balerion, tegun." The Black Dread reborn roared into the air and dove, following his brother. The other dragons stayed airborne, circling over their mother, father, and brothers in a protective patrol.

While he enjoyed teasing his father with aerial gymnastics, Rhaegal knew the time to play and the time to be serious. Thus, he swallowed out the dive rather high in the sky, wings beating rapidly to slow the descent - he plopped down in the chilling snow, which he did not enjoy, with a greater gentleness than usual. Which his father did enjoy. Scrambling down the dragon with an expert's quick footwork, Jon found the dragon's head right in front of him, neck curled around. He smiled, rubbing his snout and resting his forehead on the warm scales. "Good boy, Rhaegal." The dragon purred, Jon feeling similar to when he was holding and cooing little Saera. "Poppa's proud of you."

The massive dragon seemed to nuzzle his hand, heart soaring at the praise.

"He's my child as much as she is." A dragonrider's bond with his dragon was as close as one with his children. Moments like these were when he truly felt a Targaryen - a pure, trueborn dragon like Daenerys.

Jon felt two arms wrapping around his waist, a soft mouth leaning up to press a kiss on the back of his neck. "I love you, my dragon," whispered his wife. "I wish this could be our life."

"I thought southern girls hated the cold," Jon chuckled, turning in her arms as the green beast ambled through the snow to where his brother waited. "Then again, we could always use our dragons to keep warm." His eyebrow rose suggestively. "Or each other."

A rosy blush spread across her pale cheeks. "Oh." The image of them nestled within his cloak, huddled close as they made love in the snow, caused heat to spread to rather… intimate places within her. "I would like that very much, my Emperor." Daenerys grinned up at him, both the only ones alive who could experience the sheer joy of dragonriding.

He was her dragon, and she was his. Towering above all, but equals to each other. 'A Targaryen alone in the world is a terrible thing.' Aemon's words often seemed confusing to her, but Dany got it now. Only Jon could truly be her equal. Someone who watched her from the same level rather than staring up from the base of the pedestal all Targaryens stood on. 'And he is such a good man.' Dany considered herself gifted by providence.

The rush of water caught her ears, drawing violet eyes to gaze to the right. Eyes that widened and sparkled in wonder upon the sight. A waterfall. Liquid pouring from and into a sulphuric hot springs, banishing the ice and snow around it. An oasis of beauty and hope in the middle of the harshest clime of the harshest kingdom within her domain. "Jon… it's beautiful."

"We used to travel here," he stated, face serene in the happy memory. One of the few from his childhood. "The children of House Stark, journeying on horseback - though I much prefer using a dragon." The two shared a knowing grin. "All of us, myself Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran… Rickon was too young, though had we had a few more years of peace, we would have brought him as well. We would just come here and enjoy a respite from responsibility. Be ourselves." The smile widened, though his eyes were heavy with emotion. "It was the only time I could be their sibling in the open. Where even Sansa would love me as a brother."

Dany held him close, enjoying the beating of his heart. His spicy scent. "I wish I could have come."
He nodded, kissing her head before pulling her chin so that their eyes met. "When this is all over, I want to bring all of us here. Margaery, Meera, Podrick, Gendry, all of us. Enjoy our hard won peace."

Gods, she loved this man. "I would like that, my dragonwolf," she beamed, kissing him deeply. Pulling back, she suddenly saw his smile falter, joy replaced with his hidden pain. Not banished away, only masked for a little while. Freedom crashing down with the weight of the chains of responsibility and duty. "What is bothering you, love?" Daenerys was going to find out. It was time.

"You don't wish to know, Daenerys."

"Jon." Cupping his cheek, Dany only pulled him closer when he winced at her touch. "Hey. You can tell me anything, Jon."

His resolve was wavering. "Not this… I can't. Can't let any of this happen to you." Jon looked straight into her eyes, willing her to believe him. To believe how determined he was. "I will not lose you. I will die before that happens."

Her gaze didn't waver from the fiery glint in his. The Dragon Empress remained focused on her husband, melting the ice coating his heart. "I'm not going anywhere, Jon. Why would you think that?" She leaned up, kissing him lightly on the lips. "Tell me."

Jon sighed, defeated. He couldn't keep this from her. "Dany…"

Chapter End Notes

Every proper Jonerys fic needs a real dragonriding scene.

Shoutout to Dakkaman777, who helped me with a lot of ideas for these chapters :D

Missandei is truly the happiest when she's learning a new language. I like her character, so underused.

Remember Jon's seemingly mad convo with his father. That will be important later.

If I get 20 comments, I'll update on Friday.

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed, and comment on my new story idea :D

Next, the calm before the storm.
Prophecy

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Emotional chapter ahead.

I will probably be delayed about a week or so till the next update came out. Working on Heart of the Blessed and A Terrible Resolve. Eager to see what you think of both :D

Enjoy and comment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jon's heart thumped inside his chest, dread filling him even as the both of them were bathed in an unseasonable warmth. The same hot springs that nestled underneath Winterfell warmed the waterfall, and a sudden gust of snow and ice sent the two monarchs into the caves branching out along the hillside. Naturally wandering off to the wall of the cave, hand atop the ice and rock, Jon was forced into a close embrace by Daenerys - the Empress holding him tightly and refusing to let him devolve into the isolation he had long existed in.

'Gods, I love her.'

'You may have to kill her.'

"You must fight those that say you must."

"You are burdened, Jon." She rested her hand on his heart. "Please, tell me. Unburden yourself. There is nothing you cannot share with your wife."

He sighed. "I know." And slowly, he told her the story. The saga of ice and fire, of what Bran showed him. Of how the first Targaryens and first Starks found themselves at the heart of the first Long Night. How they were connected from the start. Aside from a flash of joy, of delight that they had shared heritage from the very beginning, her expression was one of confusion. Horror that Soryn Targaryen was forced to take the life of his wife, Serena.

By the end of the tale, her expression was guarded. "Why is this important, Jon? I'm glad to know the past, as we can learn from it, but… why does it trouble you so, my love?"

Her beauty, the love in her violet eyes… Jon wanted to bury her in his chest and never let go. To just take her to Essos and leave all of this behind. "The Night King, do you remember when you saw him?"

In spite of the warmth of the sulfuric springs, Dany felt the shiver of cold bite into her. "Yes, I do." How he had stared at her, icy blue eyes boring into her very soul with death… and… longing? "All he had in him was hate, rage… except when looking at me…"

"You remind him of his love. Of the first Daenerys Targaryen, the mother to Bran the Builder and original matriarch of House Stark." Jon pulled away, unable to look into her eyes. "He wants you, Dany."

"Wants me?" Ice began to form in her gut.
"That is why he didn't move till we arrived. Why I know he will attack us head on. He wants you, wants the closest living representation of his long-dead love."

Daenerys shuddered, almost feeling the cold malevolence closing in on her. Suddenly her nightmares made sense - the Night King, Marden Stark, connected to her by their shared wolf blood. His longing, his desire. She felt filthy, defiled. "I thought it was just my fear."

Jon blinked. "What?"

Looking up at him, Dany made her confession. "I've been having nightmares, of the Night King." His eyes widened. "It would start with you touching me, loving me. Showering me with affection, but when I turned to look at you, it would be him." A faint tear fell down her cheek. Fear filled her heart, a primal terror that she had never before experienced - not since Euron Greyjoy threatened her children, but far, far worse. Without warning, she lunged at Jon, frantically holding him. "Don't let him get me, my love."

His arms crushed her against him. "I won't. We won't let him. He will die." A tear of his own formed in his eye. "Nothing will ever take you from me. No one will make me take…" He quieted, almost spilling the deepest, darkest secret of his. Hoping against all hope that she hadn't heard...

But she had heard. Heard every word. Searching eyes looked up at him, boring directly into his very soul. "What do you mean, Jon? Why would you worry about others making you…"

"I'm sorry, Daenerys. Gods…" His hold grew tighter. "Bran… and Melisandre. They… they told me of the entire prophecy of the Prince that was Promised. Of what he… I must do."

"What must you do…?" It suddenly clicked to her. Soryn Targaryen, forced to plunge his sword into Serena Stark - the Nissa Nissa of legend. Drew the blade out in a gout of flame, a sword alight. Lightbringer. "You… you have to kill me." The words came out a whisper. "Kill me to bring the dawn." She pushed away from him, arms wrapping around herself like a comforting blanket.

No comfort was forthcoming. Just cold. An all encompassing cold.

Jon looked like he had been stabbed, pain coursing through him at her fear. At her look of helplessness. "Dany, I won't do it." He ran a hand through his hair.

Images coursed through her mind. Of their children - of their happiness. Of a lifetime with Jon, taken away from her. When he moved closer to her, Dany flinched involuntarily. The look of agony on his face broke her heart. "It is prophesied, Jon."

Davos' words echoed through his mind. "Fuck prophecies. You and I make miracles happen."

She felt numb. Unknowing of what to feel. "But what if we don't?"

"It won't happen, Daenerys." He tightened his hold, as if just a fraction of her not pressed flush against him would bring physical pain. "We will end the Long Night together, and be victorious. I promise you." Pulling back slightly, Jon saw his wife looking out to her right… at the waterfall. At their dragons. "Please, Dany. Trust me." Slowly, gently, his hand drifted up to cup her cheek.

Unbidden, instinctual, Daenerys fell into his touch. Leaning her cheek to his palm, nuzzling it gently. The warmth of Jon, it banished all. Made her whole - even if it was temporary. Her lids fluttered open, gazing up at him. "I trust you, Jon."

Inside she felt hollow. Unfeeling when they broke apart. Unfeeling as she mounted Balerion, the great dragon subdued, quiet - as if sensing her inner turmoil. A tempest of fear and doubt.
'Can you trust him?'

'Of course I can!'

'It isn't he you don't trust... it is fate.'

No matter what, fate always had other plans.

The skull glared malevolently, unseeing eye sockets trained on a place upon the far wall. Just as menacing as it had been when the great beast was alive. Bone bleached white with age. Past Targaryen kings had it grace the throne room, to remind all that passed before them of their family's greatness. Robert Baratheon had it and the other skulls tucked away in the basement, only seeing them when reliving how he had killed Rhaegar Targaryen. Upon restoring the Targaryen Dynasty to the throne once more, neither Jon nor Daenerys felt the need to bring any of the skulls back. No reason, for they had six live dragons flying over the city if intimidation was needed.

Aemon Targaryen didn't know why he was here - he did in a way. Seeing the ancient relics of his family brought the dragon blood within him a calm not felt since his great niece and nephew left the capitol. But why was he in need of calm? Why did the dread fill him, warning him of certain death that would line the snows of the vast wilderness in blood?

'You know what is to come. What Rhaegar told you.'

He took in several deep breaths, lungs fighting against the fetid air with a chorus of coughs. The joys of age. But there was another noise, one that caused his eyes to narrow. "Who is down here?" he asked. "Show yourself."

Hearing the patter of boots scuffing on the dusty stone, the stern frown melted into a smile at the little voice replying to him. "Great-uncle?" It was the Crown Prince - likely with his sister. "We didn't mean to scare you."

It all made sense to Aemon now, and he chuckled. "What were you doing down here, little dragons? I know your handmaidens and tutors, not to mention Lady Stark, wouldn't want you down here alone."

Hands in her pockets, wanting to be defiant but unable to feel such against her warm-hearted great-uncle, Arya just kicked at a few pebbles on the ground. "We just wanted to see the skull of Balerion the Dread. Aegon's Balerion."

"I can see that." Leaning on his cane, Aemon remembered when he and his little brother Aegon - Egg - did the same thing. Oh had their mother scolded him for scaring the poor boy of only five. His heart burst with a fundamental joy at the scene replayed before him.

Arya was not about to not justify her actions. "We're bored up there. Nothing to do, and grandmother won't let us go out into the city."

'They are blood of the dragon, alright.' Though the stubbornness was probably of the direwolf. "You are just like your grandfather, Rhaegar. I visited when he was but your age, and he hated being cooped up in this prison. Always liked to venture out into the city, enjoy himself."

"When poppa and muna come back, can they take us somewhere fun?" Rhaegar looked hopeful, but the quiver in his voice exposed a hidden worry... he worried for his parents, that they wouldn't come back - or come back in ways neither of them wished to see.
"Of course. I doubt your father would enjoy staying here all the time." The trappings of royalty were wasted on Jon Targaryen. "Come with me, little dragons." Aemon offered his hands, to which the twins took. Arya to his left, Rhaegar to his right. "Did anyone ever tell you the story of my namesake, Aemon the Dragonknight?" One didn't have to be sighted to notice how the Princess and Crown Prince both stared at him in wondrous excitement.

Arya tried not to squeal in excitement. She loved to hear stories of her great ancestors, as did Rhaegar. Uncle Robb would regale them of the brave Kings of Winter and how they fought off the Andals and tangled with the Red Kings of the Dreadfort, but so desired more about the grand Targaryens of old, more so than their aunt Arya could tell. "Please, Uncle Aemon. Please tell."

Chuckles left the old Maester's lips. Perhaps - just perhaps - the future of his house could distract him from his worries. "He was known as the greatest knight to grace this fair land, and with good reason. Serving his family faithfully... four Kings at that."

"Did he really survive a pit of vipers in Dorne?" Apparently Rhaegar had heard quite a few stories himself about House Targaryen.

"One story at a time, my Prince. Let me get there." Aemon's smile was wide, wrinkles furrowing on his elderly cheeks as he led his great niece and nephew into the gardens.

"Is that the last of them?" A line of soldiers crossed over one of the many newly built bridges over the Last River, onto the large island that held Last Hearth and the earthen fortress that now surrounded it. Banners fluttered in the biting wind, lions of House Lannister and boars of House Crakehall. Robb noticed a thatch of golden hair. "There's Tommen Lannister, bringing up the van with the Strongboar. Not hard to imagine he has none of Fat Robert's blood in him."

Jon scowled, imagining Joffrey. Robert the Usurper was not one of his favorite people, but perhaps a bit of the drunk, pleasure-seeking Baratheon blood could have tempered Joffrey's sadism - on the other hand, Tommen was a gentle soul, so blood may have had little to do with him. "House Lannister is quite hated, these days. Needs someone like Tommen to win back the favor of the rest of the realm." Daenerys, Davos, and Tyrion's political chops had rubbed off on him. He stared up at the sky, at the ugly grey clouds. Remembering the bright sun, heralding the warm, prosperous future just out of their reach. "Are the men ready?" Jon asked.

"As ready as they can be. Everyone knows their part, though battleplans always fall apart on contact with the enemy." He patted Ice, strapped to his waist. "We'll give them as good as we can get, then withdraw under cover of dragonfire if all else goes as planned." A frown formed on Robb's face. "But if the dead bypass the island, we're fucked." It wasn't pessimism. It was the truth.

Jon's face paled, his eyes darkening. A mix of fear and anger, of will and pain. "They won't. They'll come head on... he'll come head on."

Eyebrow raised, Robb looked questioningly at his brother. "And how do you know that?" An otherworldly demon, mounted atop a millennia-old undead dragon, was bearing down on them with a horde numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Only sixty thousand faced them from behind the defenses of Last Hearth, the same amount of less mobile forces waiting in Winterfell. Blind confidence wasn't something that many held - no one of sense holding it. Therefore, Robb was certain that Jon knew something the rest didn't.

"I just do."

Suddenly it clicked, his eyes widening. "Does it have something to do with your brooding? With
Daenerys' brooding?" Jon had been a walking corpse for weeks, but the war council had been taken aback to see the Empress retreating into her own shell. Quiet, introverted, the normal restrained fire she displayed to all no longer evident. Essentially a pseudo-traumatized version of Jon before he had sailed with their father to Pentos. Before Jon could respond, Robb cut him off. "We grew up together, brother. I know when you lie or try to feed me horseshit, so you better tell me the truth."

Sighing, Jon felt a defeated shudder course through him. He wasn't about to tell Robb every little detail, but the truth spilled out of him for the second time. A flurry of emotions crossed over Robb's face as the tale was spun. Confusion, surprise, anger, horror, and then finally a grim realization. Wordlessly, he wrapped a comforting arm around his brother's shoulder, offering what little support he could.

While it did not help his quandary, Jon appreciated the gesture nonetheless. "I told Daenerys at the waterfall... you remember, the one we used to visit."

"Yeah... fuck, Jon." Robb at that point didn't know what to feel. He felt numb - Gods knew what Jon and Dany went through. To have both the ice demon king after her and the prospect of her death being not just inevitable, but necessary to defeating them. "Has Daenerys said anything?"

Jon hung his head. "I've tried to speak with her, but she keeps changing the subject. War planning, working nonstop when we're with others and when we're alone..." He trailed off, further explanation not needed.

"Oh." Robb couldn't judge. Whenever he had been suffering with stress and worry, getting lost in Talisa or Margaery's bodies was something he availed himself often.

"Not just her. I've been guilty of that as well." Jon laughed, but the mirth didn't reach his eyes. "I'm sorry for dumping this on you."

Robb waved him off. "No, who else could you come to?" He furrowed his brows in thought, delving deep into experiences that he had buried for so long. "I felt the same sense of guilt with Talisa, after her death - a death that was my fault." There was still pain there, a sorrow at losing the first woman he had truly loved along with his unborn child... but what had been a sword to the gut was now more a hollow ache. Margaery and little Jon had truly saved him.

The Emperor gave the Lord of Winterfell a heavy look. "That was different. Talisa was victim of a betrayal that likely would have happened even if you hadn't fucked up. This is... She died from Lothar Frey's knife. For Dany... it would be..." He couldn't even go on, emotion overtaking him.

"Does anyone else know... besides you, Bran, and Daenerys?"

Jon nodded. "Leaf, and Melisandre. They want me to do it, that the greater good requires it of me - to bring the dawn." He clenched his fists. "Davos also knows, and he told me to 'Fuck prophecies.'"

"I knew I liked that man," Robb smirked, despite himself. "I tend to agree with him, Jon." The two brothers looked upon the courtyard within the castle, watching as Arya and Gendry sparred - Needle and Catspaw battling the mighty Warhammer on an even footing. Gendry swinging the giant weapon, but Arya ducking underneath, forcing the Lord of Storm's End back with a jab from Needle. Had Robb or Jon worried about either of the two hurting each other, they would have insisted they use training weapons. "Brother, I watched you engulfed in flames a corpse, only to emerge alive and with three dragons. Daenerys wandered into the fire, only to emerge alive and with three dragons. You were submerged in the freezing cold and turned the color of ice, only to be perfectly fine. I don't know how, but both of you are kissed by the gods themselves. Nothing is beyond you to accomplish."
Offering his brother a small smile, Jon reached out to clasp his hand. "Thank you, brother."

"Riders at the bridge!"

Dozens of horsemen, along with over a hundred rapidly moving foot soldiers of various units. Black cloaks of the Night's Watch, red overcoats of the Fiery Hand, and the charcoal grey of the Essosi auxiliaries. And at the van were Ser Jaime Lannister and Ser Beric Dondarrion, alive and well. Quite worse for wear, but well.

In spite of the two highborn lords among the cluster of men, Jon first approached the lead man in black. "Edd." Two old friends from a different life embraced, hugging each other tightly. "It's such a relief to see your face."

"Aye, same to you, Snow." The Lord Commander eyed his former Lord Commander wearily. "Not Snow, anymore. Though I should have fuckin' known after you rode into Castle Black on a fuckin' dragon," he laughed. Edd's smile suddenly fell. "Grenn didn't make it."

Jon sighed. Only he, Edd, and Sam remained of the stalwarts on the Wall. "His watch has ended."

"His watch has ended."

Clasping hands with Edd once more, Jon turned to see a tired Beric being thumped on the shoulder by the Hound - and Jaime Lannister kissing his 'nephew' Tommen on the brow. "Ser Jaime," the Emperor said, striding over. Both Lannisters bowed, Tommen's fresh finery contrasted with Jaime's haggard appearance, armor stained with blood and grime and clothes tattered. "I am heartened to see you alive. We had thought all had died at Castle Black when the Night King's dragon felled the wall."

Momentarily confused as to how Jon had gotten the information, Jaime suddenly remembered Bran, the lad's greensight. "We held them off the wall as long as we could. Hells, we probably would have blocked them off for days, but the Great Fall… it gave him the power to tear it all down. Only a few hundred of us managed to escape."

"Do you have a bead on his location?" Jon hadn't had contact with Bran since he left Winterfell with Dany, and they weren't going to risk their dragons.

"We had our riders doing some scouting," Beric began. They had begun to draw a crowd - Robb, Lord Crakehall and the other Westerlands commanders, Grey Worm, the Lord and Lady Baratheon, Tyene Martell, and Daenerys herself, striding till she was right beside Jon. "He's on our heels. Probably a few hours off, give or take."

"Ah, fuck," muttered the Hound.

The commanders began barking orders, whatever serenity and calm remaining under the dark thunderclouds ending. In an instant.

It was inevitable.

Upon arriving with the refugees at Winterfell - in transit to the boats at White Harbor - Ned Umber had granted his Emperor and Empress the use of his personal bedchamber. Outside, among the soldiers and Lords, they were all business. When among their advisors and family, they were twin pillars of ice. Giving away nothing. But retreated into privacy, just the two of them, the deep passion befitting the Dragon Monarchs found itself erupting with the sheer power of the Doom of Valyria.
Door shutting behind them, nothing could stop the Emperor from pulling the Empress flush against him. Mouths fused together after only mere seconds. Both were consumed in the sensual dance, in the blinding lust and love shared between the two dragonriders. Piercing the ice between them, shearing aside the dread and anguish that draped over their souls since the Great Fall - there wasn't much time for this. Little time before the world around them plunged into the searing inferno of the coldest hell. So they would have to make the most of it.

"I love you, Dany," Jon rasped, voice hoarse with desire. He drifted to her neck, hands insistent as they tugged expertly at her overcoat.

Daenerys gasped, hips jerking into his. Hands gripping his beautiful curls. It was hard to control her body with his lips and tongue sending jolts of warmth through her each time they licked or nipped at her neck. "I… I love… you too, Jon." Their eyes suddenly met. 'Love comes in at the eyes.' He surging forth, growling like a wolf. She moaning, fingers firmly tugging on his gambeson. No further words said.

No further words needed.

They wore thick layers, but dragons were impatient, stubborn creatures - insistent in their goal, the clothes began to pool on the floor of their chambers. Daenerys, naked and desperate, gently pushed her equally nude husband on the bed. Jon complied, his grey eyes dark with lust and wonder. She was a vision. An ethereal image of pure beauty slowly straddling him, licking up his chest and to his neck with a blazing hunger for him. All of him.

Their lips touched once more, tongues battling for a lazy dominance that both knew would end in a draw. Sometimes Daenerys' dragon would roar and stake her claim over him, while others found Jon's wolf pouncing, taking what he wanted and leaving her writhing and moaning. Not this time. Here they were the Emperor and Empress. Fire and Ice. Equals, perfectly balanced in dominance, submission, and passion.

From the back of her throat, Dany mewled upon feeling Jon slide inside her. It was like her husband, her love, was everywhere. His hands, calloused fingers she adored brushing up and down her ultra-sensitive skin. His lips, wrapped around a rosy nipple and sending shocks of pleasure through her body. His length thrusting up, hitting spots inside her that made dragonfire explode beneath her lids. She loved it. She loved him. 'I love him, oh Gods…' Dany's mouth opened to scream, but all that left her lungs was a tiny puff of air.

'She is perfect.' There was nothing more beautiful than Daenerys Targaryen. To Jon, proof of perfection existed before him, the gorgeous form of the Dragon Empress. His Dragon. Silver hair sparkling in the low light, as if magic. He felt a deep desire within him, to protect this woman. To make sure she stayed his. The wordless cry turned audible as he bit her nipple, sucking the puckered bud hard to coax more sounds from her. But all that came were his hands gripped tightly, slammed above his head. Eyes searching to find her gaze. Hungry. Predatory. 'Do not wake the dragon.'

He had not heeded that advice.

Lust overcoming her, Dany began to ride her man. Hard. Every downward thrust filling her deliciously. Painfully. A pleasurable sting that stretched her more and more. Catching his eyes roll into his head through the wayward hair loosely falling in front of her face - victims of his hands, and how they loved to bury themselves into her tresses. Angling up, baring her nude form to his returning gaze, she grabbed his hands and led them to her breasts. Gasping as he kneaded them. "Jon, ūuha jorrāelagon… ahhh, kessa!..." Her climax approached, it so hard to even think. "Ivestragī jikagon. Kostilus. Pryagon syt nyke!"
"Dany, Dany, ſuha zaldrīzes..." The Valyrian taught to Jon by Missandei, he rarely used it. But like his wife, it fell from his lips in the heat of passion. Upon hearing it in his northern brogue, Daenerys fell apart above him. It was too much. "Daenerys... Kessa, kessa!" He tumbled over the edge right after him, Jon falling exhausted upon the bed and Daenerys falling exhausted atop him.

Her body flush against his, head resting atop his chest in the languid aftermath of their coupling, Daenerys purred in contentment. Nuzzling the ugly scar on his chest, still red and gaping as if it would erupt in blood at the slightest notice. Most would be repulsed, but not Dany - the Empress gently kissing the mark of Alliser Thorne. One that nearly took her husband away from her. "I am yours forever, my love."

Jon felt the emotion tearing at his heart. A calloused but considerate hand reached down to caress her cheek. "And I yours, my dragon."

In normal times - hells, even the abnormal days of their stay at Last Hearth - Jon and Daenerys would have simply lost themselves in each other's bodies. Making love into the wee hours of the morning until they fell into an exhausted sleep. Not speaking, not worrying, not thinking about anything other than how to make the other moan and quiver as they found release. But not now. Not with the dead so close. Reluctantly, they broke apart. Helping each other dress, gestures so intimate and familiar. The gestures that of longtime lovers, their passion still burning brightly.

Daenerys tied the strings of Jon's thick woolen tunic and boiled leather cuirass. Jon held the heavy cotton of Dany's white overcoat as she slid her lithe arms into the sleeves, the sword belt of Saracen soon to join. Daenerys eased the Valyrian steel breastplate - a gift from Yara Greyjoy, from among Euron's personal collection gleamed from across the world - onto his chest, resting a hand atop the three-headed dragon that adorned the front. Jon slowly tied her hair into a simple Dothraki riding braid, not purporting to be an expert but having seen Missandei perform the task enough to grasp the basic steps. Preparations fraught with loving touches and smoldering glares - as if committing the other to memory.

Just as they had done that night in Pentos long ago.

Armor surprisingly light on him, Jon gazed out on the dark landscape in the distance as Dany tied Longclaw to his hip. Only a smattering of torchlight and campfires banished the darkness away, clouds blocking out the calming illumination of the moon. Ominous. The nights every northman feared, ingrained in their bones. 'I guess I know why, now.'

Belt tightened around his waist, Jon then felt his wife's soft arms join it. "Why couldn't it always be like just before, Jon?" Her voice was quiet. Fearful, not the mighty Mother of Dragons, but the scared, gentle little girl she had been when they met. The girl she only allowed herself to be when alone with him.

He sighed. "Then we wouldn't be dragons, or wolves. Our blood comes with a duty, I suppose." Or prophecy. Jon didn't want to think about it.

But Daenerys did. "Jon, if it comes to it..." She hesitated for a moment, sucking in a breath. "Do it." There was no doubt to what she meant.

Eyes widening, heart clenching in pain, Jon turned in her arms. "Dany, no." He pulled her close to him. "I... I won't."

A tear fell from her cheek, mind thinking to the last day they had all spent together. Her, Jon, and their children. 'The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.' "If it is the only way, then you must."
"It is not the only way." You must fight those that say you must.

"I don't want to die." She sobbed, vulnerable with him. "I want to live with you and our children until we grow old and grey, but if it comes to it, do the deed. Kill that monster before he can destroy everything." She clasped his hand between hers. "Save our children."

Pulling her up by the chin, Jon stared into the stormy violet of her eyes. "He will die before he touches them. Or you." Their love for each other overwhelming, joyous and tragic at the same time, Jon and Daenerys met in a passionate kiss.

As was apt for them, as Emperor and Empress, their tender embrace was interrupted. Drawing them out of their happiness. But irritation didn't rise - interruption being not from a knock on the door, pitter patter of their children racing into their room, nor the insistent tone of Tyrion or Davos drawing them out. Instead of irritation, they broke apart with dread stabbing into their very souls.

The mournful bellow of the horns atop the battlements of the keep. Their haunting funeral cries echoing across the meager winter landscape all around them as they heralded death itself.

Once.

Twice.

Thrice.

Jon tensed, hardened gaze falling upon his wife. Her eyes burned fire and blood, a hate that he had never before seen. It grounded him. "They're here."

Daenerys nodded, surging forward to kiss his lips with a fierce passion before they both dashed out of the room.

'They have fortified themselves on an island, Great One.'

The Night King gazed through the night - seeing all, as the darkness was his domain - at the fortifications of Last Hearth, a place he had assaulted himself in a different life, before he granted his young bannerman Creeg Umber the honor of building a home there. The boy and his generals had set it up quite well. An almost impenetrable nest of defenses, one that would make the largest armies of the world cry uncle. He was impressed.

His generals, not so much. Marden could sense the trepidation within them. 'We can go around them, starve them out,' one commented.

'With six dragons on their side?' another replied. 'They will ultimately try to break out. We should go for Winterfell. Make them follow us or watch their loved ones die.'

'Perhaps that would be best…'

Marden held up a hand, ending all discussion. 'We attack. Full frontal assault.'

Milling about, the walkers looked as if he was insane, but not willing to say anything. 'Their defenses are strong, Great One.'

'She is there. I can feel it!' The Night King felt her presence, icy heart clenched in a vice of pain at the memories of a life long past. Take the castle! Find them!'

'Yes, Great One.' Silently, each walker gave the commands to the vast horde enslaved to their will.
And the showdown is finally here. Our heroes v. the Night King.

Lots of heavy emotion, I hope I did it well. Writing Jon and Dany going through all of these feelings, it really angers me. Kit and Emilia, they would have killed scenes like this. Given the performances of a lifetime, not a dry eye in the world for those watching it - but fucking Dumb and Dumber robbed us of that. Robbed us of the most compelling scenes on television. It only underscores how utterly radioactive season 8 was.

Sigh. I should be over it but I'm not. I guess I won't ever be truly over it.

Jon had his moment with Davos last chapter, now it's Robb's turn.

Ah, Maester Aemon. It's fitting that he spends his twilight with the future of House Targaryen.

Translations:

Jon, ñuha jorrāelagon… ahhh, kessa - Jon, my love… ahhh, yes


ñuha zaldrīzes- My dragon

Be sure to check out my new collaborative fic Heart of the Blessed, and comment on my new story idea :D

Next, the Battle of Last Hearth.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!