A Spark to an Inferno, a Snowball to an Avalanche

by cir2

Summary

The movement of one tiny piece gives Robb Stark the chance to play the Game of Thrones
properly, marry his Frey girl, and take back the North. His path takes him straight through the Neck and past Howland Reed, whose secret may be the key to winning the game.

Or, alternatively, Ned Stark can’t restrain himself from banging his wife while she’s in King’s Landing and inadvertently saves his son (though not himself) from his own stupidity.

Notes

This is, in some ways, very far from the sort of story that I usually write, with a few notable exceptions. My usual formula is to use plot to justify writing the ships that I want to write, but in this story I am writing largely for the sake of the actual plot that I want to explore with ships as a secondary consequence to that (but don’t worry; there are still ships!).

The story is pretty big, so just for a little bit of primer on what to expect (so you can run away screaming if you’d like!): it’s looking to be around fifty chapters or so, and should be at least 150k words, if not longer (EDIT: definitely longer!). The four POVs in the story will be Catelyn, Robb, Jon, and Daenerys, and all the tagged relationships that involve one of the four of them will be a “main” ship in the sense that you’ll be viewing the romantic interactions (and sexymemes!) directly, while any other tagged ships will be background ships. It may seem early on that it’s all going to be told through Catelyn’s eyes, but I promise the POV does start to shift around eventually. (Actually, I think Robb will be the most numerous POV character, and Jon and Dany only become prominent in the second half.)

This is based almost entirely on the book canon, but I will be snagging some ideas from the TV series in places in which it has outpaced the books; however I will be exploring those things with my own spin on them. I’ve done my best to keep track of a lot of the minor characters and where they are at certain points of the story/extrapolate where they might be based on the changes that I made, but I only recently finished reading the books (finally) and haven’t done any rereads except to look up certain pertinent scenes, so might have a penchant to get things wrong. I hope I don’t do it badly enough to turn some of you ASOIAF fanatics away in disgust.

There will be lots of politics, war strategies, and maneuvering of game pieces that might be pretty boring if you’re not into that kind of stuff. There will be a certain amount of family time and romance, too, but it’s definitely not the primary focus. Also, this ASOIAF timeline as well as the AWOIAF wiki were basically my saving grace in planning and writing this, and my eternal gratitude goes to everyone who helped put them together.

If you’re not scared away yet, please enjoy.
Catelyn woke with a start, uncertain at first what had roused her. She was in a strange bed, she realized, and in place of the furs to which she had long grown accustomed, the sheets were soft, fine linens, gentle against her skin. The noises filtering in around her were queer as well, soft moans and exhalations of pleasure that could be mistaken for nothing other than what they were.

Petyr’s brothel, Catelyn remembered once the nature of the sounds struck her. Petyr had bid her take a bed there, pleading that it was the safest place to house her, and Catelyn hadn’t had it in her to refuse—not in this strange city she barely knew, in which it seemed she was able to misjudge everything. Their journey had been exhausting, the revelations of the day even more so, exhausting enough that returning to the inn they’d originally selected seemed too much a hassle.

She could still hear Ned’s words that afternoon in her head, warning her about the possibility of war. It seemed almost as though Ned was in the room with her, so distinctly could she imagine his voice. “Two hundred determined archers can hold the Neck against an army,” she remembered him saying. “If there is war…”

“My lady?” came the voice again, tentative and accompanied by another soft knock. She scrambled to get the latch unfastened, her injured hands coupled with her haste making the thing take twice as long as it likely should have. It seemed far too long before the latch clicked and she pulled open the door to find Ned standing there. Catelyn’s eyes widened.

“My lord!” she objected, astonished, and before she was able to even process what she was doing, she’d pulled Ned into the room with one swift tug, slamming the door shut behind him and throwing the latch closed again. “What are you doing here? Has something happened?”

They’d agreed that it was safest for Catelyn not to betray her presence in the city, for her to have no further contact with her family while she was there. If Ned had come to her room just hours after they’d made that determination, hours after he’d warned her of the looming possibility of war…

But Ned looked slightly abashed at the inquiry.

“No. Nothing has happened,” he assured her with more than a hint of embarrassment. The room was dark, with only the lingering lights of torches outside and the moon filtering through the gaps in the curtains, but Catelyn had known her husband long enough and well enough to be able to imagine the slight flush that might have crept onto his cheeks.

“But what is it?” she pressed, her hand resting against his chest, somehow unable to not touch him, not when she’d had no opportunity to do so for so long. She felt Ned hesitate.

“I simply… I could not sleep knowing you were so close and I could not touch you,” he admitted.
finally, reaching up and pressing his hand over hers where it rested against his chest. Catelyn found that she could do nothing but stare at him in the darkness for a few moments, torn between wanting to kiss him and wanting to scold him. In the end, the latter desire won out.

“This is dangerous, Ned,” she reminded him quietly, her chest clenched tight with fear for him, for all of them. And yet there was also the feeling of warmth in her chest at the realization that Ned desired her so desperately still that he was willing to take the risk. “If someone had seen you…”

“Then they would think that I’ve taken the freedom of being away from my wife to go whoring,” he supplied easily, though his voice was a little unsteady. “Robert would be thrilled, no doubt.”

Catelyn felt a laugh rise up in her chest before it was supplanted by a surge of something entirely less humorous. Because the explanation had come a little too readily to him, made it too easy to recall bitterly that it would not have been the first time her husband had strayed from their marriage bed.

*Was Jon’s mother a whore, my lord?* Catelyn wanted to ask. *Did you sire him in a brothel like this one?*

But Catelyn swallowed the question the same way she had half a hundred times over the years. She still remembered the day she’d asked Ned about the Lady Ashara all those years past, the way Ned had gone rigid with anger she’d never seen directed toward her, not before and not since. “Never ask me about Jon,” he’d commanded her coldly, and she hadn’t, but that hadn’t meant the question had ever stopped plaguing her thoughts.

Ned must have felt her stiffness, because he grasped both her hands in his. The touch was sincere but careful, mindful of her injuries.

“You must know that I wouldn’t—not truly—” he began, and Catelyn felt a familiar bitterness well up inside her.

“No, my lord,” she told him coolly, though she didn’t pull her hands from his grasp. “I don’t know.”

Ned sighed, deflated; whatever excitement, whatever passion had driven him to her door despite the hour and despite the dangers had fled him at her words, and Catelyn knew it.

“Let us not do this now,” he entreated, nearly begging. “Please.”

She knew what Ned meant, the merit of his words; it might be months, even years before they could see each other again. It was not a night to be calling up old hurts, and doing so was not fair to Ned. They had scarcely met when he’d put Robb in her belly and ridden off to war; whatever had happened during the rebellion, Ned had since proven himself honorable and true. If he’d ever visited brothels or kept other women on the side, he did it so discreetly that Catelyn had never so much as heard a whisper of it, and he’d never brought another bastard into their home. And she didn’t believe there were any secret liaisons, not now, didn’t really believe Ned capable of that level of deception.

Catelyn squeezed his hands gently, trying not to wince at even the soft pressure against her still-healing wounds.

“I missed you,” she admitted softly, giving in to Ned’s desire to let the subject drop. Ned’s relief at that was palpable as some of the stiffness disappeared from his posture. Letting it go wasn’t even a difficult thing to do, not anymore; it was a concession she’d been making for so many years that it had become almost second nature to her to put Jon Snow to the back of her mind, and it was even easier now that she wasn’t tortured by the sight of him every day.

When Ned’s mouth met hers, any anger she’d felt was quickly forgotten. He’d pressed his lips to
hers almost chastely before they’d parted that afternoon, but that kiss had been nothing like this, like
this touch of lips and tongue with clear intent behind it. Her body knew his so well that it felt almost
as though she was melting into him.

He was impatient; that much was clear to her almost immediately when he pulled her close with a
rough jerk of a movement, pressing his hips tight against hers. He wore entirely too many layers for
her to feel his hardness against her, but she still felt a shudder go through her body, for his desire was
clear enough despite that. His fingers went to the laces of her nightdress, pulling it open far enough
that her breasts spilled out, and he cupped one of them in his hand. He broke their kiss to catch his
breath, leaning his forehead against hers, as though he couldn’t bear to be any further from her than
that.

“Cat,” he breathed, and the raw need in his voice was such that she felt desperate to have him bare,
too. Her fingers scrabbled at the laces of his tunic, but her ruined hands seemed unwilling to obey her
directive. She released a sound of annoyance, and Ned seemed to take pity on her, making quick
work of the laces. He loosened the garment only enough that he could pull it over his head, leaving
him in only his shirt and his breeches.

Before Catelyn could think of divesting him of either of those, though, Ned was on her again, his lips
meeting hers with a ferocity that made her ache with need. He turned them and pushed her against
the door with enough force to make it rattle against its hinges, and Catelyn couldn’t help but let out a
squeak of surprise, half-swallowed by Ned’s mouth. His hips pressed flush against hers once more,
the solid pressure of the door against her back keeping her in place, and the urgency of his need was
perfectly obvious then, pressed against her core through the layers of fabric.

When had been the last time Ned had been this ardent in his need for her? Catelyn wondered. He
had always been a man of few words yet quite unable to mask his feelings during their lovemaking,
but when had he last been so urgent that they hadn’t even been able to make it to the bed? They’d
been separated before for a few weeks or a few moons at a time when Ned had been dealing with
business with one bannerman or another and for a longer stretch when Balon Greyjoy had rebelled,
and that had mayhaps been the only time she could remember him wanting her nearly this badly.
He’d had her so many times during the week of his return, she remembered with both fondness and
heat, and Bran had come into the world nine moons later.

Ned’s urgency then certainly rivaled the urgency she remembered from those days, and the way his
hands pulled at the skirt of her nightdress, hiking it up with purposeful movements, it seemed he
might even intend to take her right there against the door, and the thought gave her an absurd thrill.
He pushed the fabric of her smallclothes aside with impatience, feeling how wet she was for him.

“Gods, Catelyn,” he groaned as his fingers slid inside her.

A knock sounded at the door then, booming and urgent and shaking the wood behind her. Both of
them stilled instinctually.

“My lady?” came a familiar voice. “Are you all right?”

Catelyn looked at Ned, fighting back the urge to laugh as she realized how ridiculous the situation
was, her breasts spilling out of her clothing and Ned in just his undershirt, two fingers buried inside
of her. She pressed her head against the curve of his shoulder, losing her battle with laughter as she
shook with mirth against him.

“I’m…quite fine, Ser,” she assured the knight, fighting and losing any attempt to inject seriousness
into her voice. Ned remained still, his fingers still buried inside her. She heard Ser Rodrik clear his
throat.
“Are you certain, my lady?” he pressed after a beat, sounding entirely unconvinced. “I heard—”

Ned didn’t wait to find out the details of what the man had heard, though Catelyn could guess well enough that it may have sounded as though she was being assaulted, and in a whorehouse no less. In seconds, Ned’s fingers were gone from her, and the little noise he released left no doubt at how he felt at being interrupted. Catelyn straightened her dress, tightening the laces enough to cover her breasts as Ned unlatched the door and pulled it open with ferocity.

Rodrik stood outside the door, swordbelt around his hip and a hand on the pommel of his sword. The moment he laid eyes on Ned, he looked immediately embarrassed.

“Oh—my lord,” he blustered, “I—ah—I did not realize—”

Ned took a slow, deep breath, an obvious attempt to fight back any annoyance he felt, for the last thing he’d want, Catelyn assumed, was to discourage the knight from looking after his wife.

“It’s all right, Rodrik,” Ned told the man in a reassuring tone. “No harm done.”

Rodrik looked uneasy, still, as though he wasn’t fooled by Ned’s placid tone. He glanced over Ned’s shoulder at Catelyn, and she gave him what she hoped was a reassuring look. She wondered what she looked like to him at that moment, if her lips were as swollen and kiss-bruised as they felt. Not that it mattered, of course; he was her husband and had been for many years, and there was no shame in what they had been doing.

“You should get some sleep,” Ned told the man when he made no obvious move to leave. “I’ll watch over the Lady Stark for tonight.”

The words seemed to jostle Ser Rodrik back into motion.

“Yes, of course, my lord,” he said, sounding somewhat dazed. “As you were.”

Ned was closing the door almost before the other man had turned to leave, and he latched it behind him with a vehement movement, as though that would stop any further interruptions.

“Curse that man,” Ned breathed, although his tone lacked the venom the words might have suggested. He came to her once again, then, his lips meeting hers as he walked her backward toward the bed. Catelyn let him, laying herself back down onto the comfortable mattress, watching as Ned stopped only long enough to remove his shirt before slotting himself on top of her. He made quick work of her smallclothes but didn’t bother to remove her nightdress, pushing it up just far enough to give him the access he needed. His haste was almost palpable; he’d barely gotten his breeches unlaced before he was pressing inside her.

Catelyn felt calm and settled and whole suddenly, for the first time in many moons; she moaned and relaxed back into the soft sheets as Ned surged forward until he was buried inside her to the hilt. His lips met hers once again as he began moving inside of her; there was no slowness about it, no easing into it, but it didn’t matter, because although she hadn’t lain with her husband in many moons, her body remembered everything about his touch, about the feeling of him inside of her. He thrust into her with rough, impatient movements, the kind Catelyn knew she’d still be feeling the next morning, and she craved that as much as Ned seemed to, for if she couldn’t keep him, she would at least savor the lingering feeling of him having been inside her.

It was all over terribly quickly, as though he were nineteen again rather than five and thirty. But Ned had never been one to leave her unsatisfied, not unless he was truly agitated; he lay atop her only long enough to catch his breath before his face moved between her legs. His climax seemed to have
calmed his fervor not at all, and that excited Catelyn even more when he thrust his fingers inside her roughly, her passage already slick with his seed. His tongue found her nub at the same time, and the dual assault was almost too much, too overwhelming.

Catelyn let out a choked moan, then tried to quiet herself—then realized that she didn’t need to, because her own noises would simply mingle with those echoing in rooms around her. Moans of pleasure in a whoreshouse were nothing anyone would turn their head at, and something about that realization was oddly liberating.

Except Ser Rodrik was clearly still awake and in the room right next door, she reminded herself, and yet even that could not make her ashamed; instead, she tangled her fingers in Ned’s hair and allowed him to pleasure her, letting the sound she made give him subtle clues, although like as not he had no need of them to know how to please her. Every movement of his tongue and fingers was purposeful, and he knew her body far too well for her to last long, either.

It was only after he had finished her that Ned finally shucked his breeches and his boots, and that brought a rush of warmth to Catelyn’s chest. He’d told Rodrik that he would watch over her until morning, but Catelyn hadn’t dared believe he would truly stay the night, not until he obviously settled himself in to do so. But when he lifted the covers over them and pulled her to him, Catelyn felt a surge of melancholy.

“How could I have urged him to come here? she cursed herself. How can I possibly live without this?

It wasn’t even the feel of him inside of her that she missed the most, though it was pleasant enough; it was these quiet moments in his arms. Ned seemed to have felt it, too, Catelyn thought, when he leaned over and pressed a kiss against her mouth, soft and slow and lingering, like he was unwilling to allow it to end.

“How could I have urged him to come here? she cursed herself. How can I possibly live without this?

And yet she must have slept, because some time later, she woke to Ned atop her, already guiding himself inside her. He took her with deliberate slowness that time, rubbing her with their combined slickness until she came apart with him buried inside her this time. She grasped at him, then, desperate to feel his seed spill within her body.

“If I cannot take Ned back to Winterfell with me, mayhaps I can return with a babe in my belly, she thought as she felt him shudder, then go still above her. A little piece of him to bring back with me. Mayhaps Robert would even allow him to return to Winterfell for the birth, she mused wistfully.

Ned remained still atop her for a long minute, breathing heavily against her neck, and Catelyn savored the moment, knowing it was something she was not like to experience again for quite some time. She carded her fingers through his sweat-slick hair for as long as he remained there, until he moved away and she could no longer. Catelyn felt the loss when he came apart from her, a strange sense of emptiness settling where he’d been. Mere moments later, he leaned over and pressed his lips against her brow, and she knew he was leaving.

“T dare not stay any longer,” he told her finally, regretfully. “The fewer people who notice my absence, the better.”

The first hints of dawn were just creeping into the sky, Catelyn noticed. In the meager light, she watched him dress, her eyes lingering on the last snatches of his skin as they disappeared beneath his clothing, not knowing when she would lay eyes upon such a sight again. The thought made her
unbearably sad.

*It’s too soon*, she thought helplessly as he finished dressing; she wanted to beg, to plead with him not to leave her again, but she knew she couldn't. And even if she did, she knew that he would go anyway. So the words were better left unsaid, for it would do nothing but make them both despair even more if she gave them voice.

Without that, without being able to speak the sentiments that would be of no use to either of them, there seemed to be nothing left to say that hadn’t been said already. So Ned crossed the room and leaned over, kissing her long and slow. For a moment, she could almost believe that their kiss would never end, that he’d linger there with her forever.

But the kiss eventually did end, and then he was gone.
Catelyn II

Chapter Notes

The events of this chapter correspond to AGOT, Catelyn VI, and much of the dialogue is borrowed from there, along with a small bit from the preceding Tyrion chapter.

The smell of food was what roused Catelyn from sleep, and she rolled over beneath the sheets with a groan, trying to press away any thought of waking, trying to linger in the dream she’d been having. But every moment she began to wake, the dream faded away a little bit further. It had been a nice dream, she thought, although she remembered the feeling of warmth more than she did the details. She’d been back home at Winterfell, with Ned by her side, the two of them watching all their children run about in the courtyard, playing some children’s game. Robb had protested, of course, that he was getting too old for those sorts of games, but one wide-eyed entreaty from Arya or Bran would have silenced any objections from him. He’d looked as gleeful as any of them, chasing Bran around at much less than full speed; he’d always had enough courtesy to allow his younger siblings to win some of the time.

And that was how Catelyn knew it was a dream, because before even the realization that Ned was in King’s Landing with Sansa and Arya came the realization that Bran would not be running, could never run again. The news had been bittersweet, that her darling boy would live but would never be whole again. It seemed as though everyone, everything that she held dear was slipping away from her slowly, like sand through her fingers, and she didn’t know how to stop it.

Her eyes slipped open, but it was not the familiar walls of her chambers at Winterfell that she saw but instead the unfamiliar walls of an unfamiliar room.

The Eyrie, she told herself. I am at the Eyrie.

Slowly, Catelyn swung her legs over the edge of the bed, feeling almost more exhausted than when she had retired the night before. She had slept, she thought; she must have, for she had dreamed that lovely dream of Winterfell and woken up to this reality. She took a few steps toward the window and pulled back the curtain.

The sun had already risen over the Eyrie, but everything outside was hazy, a cloud of fog hanging over the cliffs surrounding the keep. Alyssa’s Tears, Catelyn reminded herself as her eyes followed the cascading water as far as she could see, until it fell below the thick blanket of mist past which she could see nothing. It seemed almost as though they were floating in the air, separated entirely from valley floor below. She wondered if Ned had felt like that, during his years in residence at the Eyrie; thinking that he’d once been standing in this very same castle, looking over this very same scene gave her only the smallest bit of comfort.

Be safe, my love, Catelyn thought, wishing he could somehow hear her prayers. But she doubted he could be safe; no doubt, the news that she’d taken the Imp had reached King’s Landing by then, and there would be consequences for her husband. She could even imagine Ned looking at her with scolding eyes.

“He tried to murder our son,” Catelyn whispered toward the waterfall, as if Ned was there, as if he could hear her. But there was a part of her that was still trying to convince herself of that fact; she
had been so certain, when she’d taken him. Petyr’s words had rung in her head, but beside those words were the words of the dwarf, arguing his innocence.

“Only a fool would arm a common footpad with his own blade,” the ugly little man had spat at her, and Catelyn had felt a moment of indecision, one she hadn’t had time to delve into any further before the clansmen had attacked. The Imp was too clever by half, she thought to herself, clever enough to see the sense in trying to talk himself out of a difficult situation.

Clever enough not to arm an assassin with his own blade?

Catelyn shivered and let the curtain fall closed, stepping back into the room and rubbing her arms to try to ward off the chill. The same servant who had dropped off the food had also lit enough candles that the room wasn’t too dark, even with the heavy drapes closed. And Catelyn wasn’t certain her chill was entirely due to the temperature in the room.

Clever enough to realize what you realized on your way here? she asked herself before shaking the thought away. The Imp did not know her in any more than the most cursory way; he couldn’t have known that she wasn’t usually squeamish at the sight of blood, that emptying her stomach at the sight of Ser Rodrik’s wound had been an anomaly for her and not a habit. Rodrik had been too injured to question her behavior; they’d had to lash him to his horse to keep him from falling off, and for some time, she’d despaired that they wouldn’t make it to the Eyrie at all.

When they’d seen the last troop of riders heading their way, Catelyn had been close to desperation. They’d lost six men on the High Road to attacks by the clansmen; she’d doubted that they’d been able to withstand another. I cannot die, she’d thought desperately to herself. Not now, not when it’s no longer just my own life at stake.

But it had only been Ser Donnel Waynwood and his men to escort them to the Bloody Gate, and Catelyn had been so relieved at the sight of the moon-and-falcon banners that she’d nearly wept. It had taken some work to hold the tears back; she could not be a hysterical woman when she already had a rash action to justify. She’d thought she might weep anew when she’d heard her uncle call her “little Cat” in that familiar, comforting voice, the voice that reminded her of Riverrun, of safety, of her childhood. Of a time before Lannister plots and her crippled son and six dead men on the High Road. She’d wanted to throw herself into his arms the way she had when she’d been a girl. “I’m with child,” she’d wanted to tell him, wanted to see his celebratory grin and hear his congratulations at her good fortune.

But is it good fortune? She’d asked herself half a hundred times since she realized that she’d missed her moonblood by more than a week, then a fortnight. She knew how many babes were lost in the first few moons in the best of circumstances, and traveling through the mountain passes with a murderous imp, harried by vicious clansmen at every turn, was not the best of circumstances. Every time she stopped to make water, she expected to see blood—her moonblood come late or her body telling her that this was no fit time to be carrying a child, expelling the babe from her body before it had ever truly taken root. She feared she’d feel the pain of losing the babe she’d just realized existed, but all she felt was the low-level, roiling nausea, never quite enough to make her ill until she’d seen all that blood. That was when she’d been certain.

So she hadn’t told her uncle anything about the child, instead telling him of the circumstances that had led her to their door. He’d listened patiently as they’d ridden for the Gates of the Moon, rode silently along for quite a long time as he’d taken in all the details.

“Your father must be told,” he had reasoned finally. “If the Lannisters should march, Winterfell is remote and the Vale walled up behind its mountains, but Riverrun lies right in their path.”
“I’d had the same fear,” Catelyn had admitted to him. “I shall ask Maester Coleman to send a bird when we reach the Eyrie.” That wasn’t the only raven she’d wanted to send, either; Ned had instructed her to command the men of the north to ready the defenses, and the need for that had seemed sharper than ever. And she’d thought then about another raven that she couldn’t send but wanted to send desperately; Ned should be the first to know about this child, the sixth he’d planted into her womb. But she feared such a letter would not be well-received in the capital, not until the business with the Imp was concluded, in one way or another. She couldn’t ask Ned to celebrate with her in one breath and forgive her her rashness in the next, especially not when she was almost certain the letter would fall into another’s hands before it ever got to Ned’s. Petyr and the eunuch would know all its contents long before Ned ever saw the scroll; of that she was certain.

Her thoughts had turned even darker when they’d finally arrived to the Gates of the Moon, after dusk, and begged Lord Nestor’s hospitality for the night.

“My roof is yours, my lady,” he’d told her gruffly, “but your sister the Lady Lysa has sent down word from the Eyrie. She wishes to see you at once. The rest of your party will be housed here and sent up at first light.”

Her uncle had at least had the thought to protest, though no words had found their way to Catelyn’s lips. Her hand had instead flown to her abdomen, as if to cradle the tiny life that was growing inside it. They’d traveled for a fortnight in frankly appalling conditions, and the babe had somehow held firm in her womb through all of that; she had to pray that they could both manage to make it up to the Eyrie in one piece. Catelyn was no maester, and she’d certainly not confined herself to bed for any of her previous pregnancies, but neither had she ascended a mountain on muleback after two weeks of hard riding on little to no sleep.

Be strong, little one, she’d thought to the life growing inside her, we’ve made it this far. We need only make it a little further.

The ascent had been both easier and harder than she’d expected. The mules knew the way, at the least, which was the only way she’d made it up in one piece; Catelyn was so exhausted she was half-dozing for most of the way, and the higher they got, the more she’d felt her nausea. For some time, she’d thought she might be sick right there, but she’d thankfully been able to keep her wits and the contents of her stomach both.

She’d almost lost both when she’d met with her sister, nothing like the woman she remembered. No, if she’d thought it wise for even a moment to send a raven to Ned about the babe, she’d rethought it the moment she’d left her conversation with Lysa. “Two babes stillborn, twice as many miscarriages,” her uncle had told her—and Lysa was far from stable, her husband dead, and she coveted her boy far too much. If Maester Coleman had known the contents of her letter, if he informed Lysa…Catelyn had known her sister once, but she couldn’t quite predict how this woman would react to hearing Catelyn’s news.

If this babe lives, I will have as many living children as you have had lost ones, Catelyn thought of her sister, and that might be the fact that finally became too much for whatever was left of Lysa’s sanity.

Catelyn sighed and tried to pull herself from her dark thoughts. She’d been two days at the Eyrie, and though her body felt the better for the rest in a true bed, her mind felt no more settled than it had been on the road. She took a few steps to the table to regard the food the servant had left for her to break her fast, but the mere smell of it that close up made her stomach roil. Catelyn swallowed thickly and sat down, trying to will her stomach not to rebel. She poured herself a cup of water, drinking slowly to quell the nausea.
She could not tell her sister; that much was clear. She would not tell her uncle, and she could not send news to Ned—but how long before someone noticed? It had been not even two turns of the moon, long before the signs would be obvious to most; if she chose her wardrobe carefully, she could hide it even longer than that.

_Ned should be the first to know_, she told herself again, but when would it be that she could tell him? When she was back in Winterfell? She had no inkling of when that might be. She could be back within a moon’s turn if she went home via White Harbor and they made good time, but how long would she be here in the Eyrie? She felt increasingly like she was the one being held prisoner, not the Lannister dwarf; in the light of day, before her volatile sister, all this seemed no more than folly.

How far along would she be before Ned knew? Five moons? Six? If she wasn’t gone from the Eyrie before then, she wouldn’t be leaving, not for quite some time; she would never chance the descent down the mountain on muleback, not when she was heavy with child and not with a babe in her arms. Not with Ned’s babe in her arms. Would that be the way of things? Would it be like with Robb again, Catelyn birthing Ned’s child alone while he served Robert Baratheon in the South? Catelyn felt sick again at the thought of birthing her baby in the Eyrie, under Lysa’s envious eyes.

But it did Catelyn no good to worry of that now. That time would be many moons away, and if the gods were good, this would all somehow resolve itself and she would be back in Winterfell with her boys in time to bring their newest brother or sister into the world. And mayhaps even Ned could be there, if Robert would allow him the time away.

_Not if the boy demands the Imp leave via the Moon Door before he’s made a full confession in front of all the lords of the Vale._ Robert Arryn, the Lord of the Eyrie and Lord Paramount of the Vale, and his mother his regent. The thought was not reassuring.

_I’m sorry I cannot tell you now, my love_, Catelyn thought, though Ned was not there to hear the words even if she’d spoken them aloud. _But I will do everything I can to bring this babe safe into the world for you._

Another son, she silently hoped, one with brown hair and grey eyes and a face like Ned’s.
Catelyn III

Chapter Notes

The final scene in this chapter corresponds to *AGOT*, Catelyn VIII, and the bits of dialogue there are taken straight from the source material. Also, I do promise the plot begins to properly diverge soon.

The trip to White Harbor was mayhaps one of the most unpleasant she’d ever experienced. She’d never been greensick before, but she’d also never been on a ship in uncertain waters with a babe swimming around in her belly, and she spent nearly as much of the trip vacating the contents of her stomach as Ser Rodrik did. He’d thankfully been too ill to give much thought to how she’d been fine the whole trip to King’s Landing, but her uncle spent the whole time giving her odd looks.

“I’ve never seen you get sick on a boat before,” he’d remarked three days into their journey by sea, but thankfully enough it had been nigh twenty years since her uncle had been anywhere near a boat with her, and that was cover enough. *Ned must be the first to know*, Catelyn told herself for mayhaps the hundredth time as she made her excuses to her uncle.

“I’ve been too far from the water for too long, uncle,” she’d told him, and she’d likely sounded miserable enough that he hadn’t been willing to argue with her. “And a riverboat is not the same as this.”

She wasn’t certain if her uncle was convinced, but he didn’t remark upon it any further. He had even been kind enough to hold her hair back when it had come free of her braid and she’d been holding too tightly to the rail while she retched up the remnants of her morning meal to hold it back herself.

She’d never before had such a miserable time carrying a child. It had been difficult with Robb, with her husband she barely knew off at war, not knowing if he’d ever come back to meet his child, but even then she’d been surrounded by the comforts of home and family, and most times she’d been able to rest when she’d needed it. Even the stress of that time had been nowhere near as much of a strain on her body as all this traveling had been, none of which had happened under any kind of favorable conditions.

Catelyn was three moons gone already, and the nausea should soon be subsiding, she knew. If the gods were kind, they would have kept her at the Eyrie at least until this part was done, so she could have made her sea voyage in peace. But no, she reflected—better to be gone from that place, from her sister and all her ravings. She feared for the boy, for what he would become under Lysa’s care, but there was nothing for it; Catelyn had her own children to worry about and one more yet to come, and her sister had threatened to escort her out the Moon Door when she’d suggested taking young Robert to Winterfell to be in the company of his cousins. Catelyn was not aggrieved to see the back of her sister; that was for certain.

If there was one good thing that her sister had done for her, it was to allow Catelyn to bring some of her gowns with her when she’d left. She’d given her sister the excuse that she hadn’t planned to be away from home this long—which was true enough—that she hadn’t brought enough clothing, and Lysa had been happy enough to foist some dresses off on her if that meant Catelyn would be gone with all her Lannisters and suggestions for the young Lord Robert. Lysa had grown wider through the years, and all her dresses had been large on Catelyn when she’d taken them—a saving grace,
Catelyn thought, because it meant they would be voluminous enough to hide any changes in her body when they came.

*Once I am at Winterfell and I know the state of things in King’s Landing, I will write Ned*, Catelyn assured herself even as she knew it may be a false hope. For she was presuming that the state of things in King’s Landing would be stable, but Jaime Lannister was gathering an army in the Westerlands, Edmure was sending men out to guard the Golden Tooth, and she’d promised her uncle a thousand men from the North to take to defend the Riverlands. Everyone seemed poised to go to war at the slightest provocation, and Catelyn had given them just cause, if only because the Lannisters had done it first. Mayhaps they would all back down once they knew she’d released the Imp, and yet that somehow seemed a false hope as well.

The news when she reached White Harbor was worse than she could have imagined. She’d gone to the sept and prayed for hours, until her knees and her back ached and she couldn’t remain for a moment more. She felt terribly naïve then, the way she’d worried that she’d have to wait until she returned to Winterfell to tell Ned the news of the new babe. Now she couldn’t tell him at all, for the king was dead and the Lannisters had Ned in a cell.

It was there in the sept that her uncle found her.

“What are we going to do, then?” he’d asked her, as though the choice was nothing more consequential than whether they’d have lemoncakes or applecakes for dessert. That was the question that Catelyn had spent hours praying upon, and she felt no closer to an answer for all of that.

“My husband is in prison, my daughters are hostages, and one of my sons rides to war,” Catelyn remarked darkly to him. “My middle son is eight years old, acting Lord of Winterfell, and crippled, and my youngest son is three and most like he doesn’t understand why everyone in his family keeps leaving him. They all need me, and to whom do I go? To which children do I say they are the least important to me?”

The Blackfish grimaced at that, mayhaps thinking it was for the best that he’d never married and had children of his own. Though it wasn’t true that he’d never had to make a decision between one of his family and the other. *How many years had it been since he and her father had stopped speaking?* she wondered to herself. As many years as she had been married, near sixteen already.

When he didn’t offer any suggestion, Catelyn found herself speaking again.

“My place is at Winterfell,” she told him seriously. “But Robb is five and ten, not even a man grown and leading a host to war. My husband is in the South, and my daughters, and my brother and my father as well, and they will be the first in the Lannisters’ path of destruction if they march north.”

Ser Brynden leveled an odd look at her. “You know nothing of war, child,” he reminded her, not unkindly. “I will meet his host at Moat Cailin. I can give him sound advice.”

She didn’t doubt it, nor did she expect any less from him. “A campaign is no place for a woman,” he might have said, though he didn’t. And it was certainly no place for a woman who was slowly but most assuredly growing round with child. But Catelyn couldn’t shake the understanding that Robb was in more danger than Bran and Rickon were, safe within the walls of Winterfell, with Moat Cailin standing between the Lannisters and the North. She couldn’t shake the feeling that Robb needed her more.

She rode for Moat Cailin three days later with her uncle and Lord Wyman’s sons and bid Ser Rodrik go to Winterfell to act as castellan. It was the right choice; she had to believe that. Rodrik had started looking at her strangely since they’d landed at White Harbor, once he had his feet on solid ground
again. He could tell something was off about her, although she felt fairly certain that he hadn’t yet settled on what that something was. He’d seen her nearly every day for more than fourteen years; it would be easier to hide the truth from her uncle than from Winterfell’s newly-appointed castellan.

Of course, if she’d returned to Winterfell with Ser Rodrik, there would have been no cause to continue to hide it, for she would be a fool to think that Ned could possibly be the first to know now. But when she chose to ride to Moat Cailin with the her uncle, she knew she had to keep the farce going for as long as possible, elsewise one of them would send her back to Winterfell without a second thought. The nausea had begun to pass, at the very least; that made the whole thing so much easier to conceal, at least until her belly began to swell noticeably enough that she could no longer conceal it beneath the folds of her skirts. And Lysa’s dresses had bought her extra time, time she wouldn’t have had otherwise.

When she reached Moat Cailin, she found her son in the Gatehouse Tower surrounded by Ned’s bannermen, seated at a table covered in maps and papers. He looked more a boy than he ever had, surrounded by the likes of Rickard Karstark and Greatjon Umber, both huge men in their own right. Even Roose Bolton, who stood more than a foot shorter than the Greatjon, looked a man next to a boy beside her son. But Robb’s expression as he studied the materials on the table was all Eddard Stark, all sharp seriousness of a man grown, and all her husband’s bannermen were looking to him.

Seeing her son sat there before her and knowing the precarious state of so much of her family, she was struck by the same urge she’d felt when she’d first heard her uncle’s voice at the Bloody Gate. She wanted to throw her arms around him, cry with him, rejoice with him at the news of his new brother or sister…but she dared not undermine him in front of his lords, would not make him look any more like a boy than he already did. And she could not tell him of the babe, elsewise he’d be ordering her back to Winterfell before she could even finish getting the words out, and his men would carry her all the way home if she refused; she had no doubt of that.

Grey Wind noticed her entrance before any of the rest of them did; he lifted his head from where he was lying beside the fire, regarding her with golden eyes for a long minute before Robb finally looked up and spotted her.

“Mother?” he asked incredulously, his voice thick with the same emotion she felt bubbling in her chest. She held herself still only by sheer force of will, but the direwolf had no such compunctions, standing up and padding toward her. The wolf already reached to her waist; she shuddered to think how large the beast would be when it was fully grown. But he came at her with no aggression, moving forward to sniff her hand.

“You’ve grown a beard,” she remarked finally when the silence grew too awkward, and Robb reached up to touch his stubbled jaw, as if he’d forgotten it was there.

“Yes,” he agreed in an odd voice, watching as Grey Wind moved closer to her, pressing his snout into the folds of her dress. Catelyn felt a sharp moment of panic as the wolf nuzzled her belly, struck by the sudden certainty that Grey Wind knew, had known immediately. She rested her hand upon the wolf’s head, though she dared not push him away.

“I like it,” Catelyn forced out, unsteadily, determined not to give away that anything was amiss. “It makes you look like my brother.”

Ser Helman Tallhart was the first of the lords to greet her, and Grey Wind remained by her side all the while as he came to her, followed by both the Glovers and then all the rest. Robb watched the whole exchange with a perplexed expression, and Catelyn’s heart raced the entire time. Just because Robb’s wolf knows doesn’t mean that Robb knows, she thought desperately. He does not read his wolf’s mind.
She responded to her husband’s lords with an automatic courtesy born of years of practice, though she scarcely heard their words, her heart beating too loudly in her ears. *This is a thin line I am walking,* she considered, the seriousness of everything hitting her anew, only stressing more strongly how careful she must be. Her son knew her, in ways that her uncle no longer did, and the possibility of exposure seemed suddenly all too real.

*I must not let him see what his wolf has already seen,* Catelyn told herself with conviction. *I must not let him send me away.*
Catelyn IV

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue from this chapter is taken from Catelyn's recollections in *ACOK*, Catelyn II. This chapter also marks the proper beginning of the major plot changes I'm making. Next chapter will be Robb's POV (finally!).

Catelyn lingered in the warmth of her bed in a hazy moment between sleep and wakefulness, feeling a moment of sheer and utter contentment. Her hand rested on her belly; she could feel the babe moving around inside her, seeming to struggle at her insides, as if so desperate to get out that he was trying to force his way straight through her skin.

“Peace, little one,” she murmured as she ran her hand over the distended skin of her belly, and for a few moments, she was able to believe that everything was as it should be, that she was in her bed at Winterfell and Ned was sleeping beside her, and excited for the new life growing within her. Until she opened her eyes, she could pretend that it was true.

But when she opened her eyes, she recognized her room at Riverrun, and she knew that she would never wake with Ned lying beside her again. That he would not be there to see this babe be born, that he would never hold the child in his arms. That this babe of hers would grow up never knowing his father as anything but a story, and as a statue in the crypt. That was, of course, supposing that they did not all perish in this war. It all settled like a stone in Catelyn’s chest.

With a sigh, she got up out of bed, making her way to her chamber pot to relieve herself. She went to the looking glass and turned to the side, regarding her reflection carefully, her hand resting on her belly. She was five moons gone already, inching closer to six, and in her nightdress, it would have been obvious to anyone. She would not be able to hide this truth much longer, she knew, had been telling herself so every day. Lysa’s gowns could do quite a lot, but they could not work miracles. But she was far enough along now that sending her home would be a difficult proposition, especially with the roads less than safe.

This babe will be born here, at Riverrun, Catelyn thought to herself with satisfaction. Just as Robb was, all those years ago.

The thought was both a comfort and a disgrace, the first Stark born outside of Winterfell in near sixteen years. But Catelyn had no doubt that she’d made the right choice in following Robb, in not returning to Winterfell. She had been the one there to negotiate with Walder Frey. They hadn’t been able to save Ned, but without the crossing and the Frey troops, Riverrun would doubtlessly still be under siege, and her father…. 

…her father would still be dying, regardless, but at least this way, she could be with him. But Catelyn hoped that she was a comfort to him the way he was a comfort to her, in a way no one else could be. It felt wrong to be glad at how feeble-minded he had become, because she hoped that at least he might not be aware he was dying. She hadn’t seen him lucid for more than a few minutes at a time in several days, and it was only then that she’d begun speaking the truth to him, knowing it was unlikely he’d remember what she’d told him. And even if he did, and he repeated it…well, she wouldn’t be able to hide it for much longer.
“I’m to have another child, father,” she’d told him just the previous day, placing his hand on her belly, and he’d smiled weakly at her.

“A…child? The gods…have blessed you…my little Cat,” he’d breathed. “How many…now?”

“It will be my sixth, father,” she’d told him thickly, trying not to think too much on her children who were separated from her, about how much danger Sansa and Arya were in. “You met Robb just the other day. Do you remember?”

Her father had blinked sleepily, everything about him hazy. “Robb…yes…has my eyes,” he’d said unsteadily, and then he’d fallen asleep. Catelyn had sat by his bed for some time after that, holding his hand, but he hadn’t woken again, and eventually she’d left. It had been the first time she’d said the words aloud, but strangely, she didn’t feel at all liberated. She simply felt reminded that her husband was gone, and her father would be gone soon enough, too. She wondered if he would linger long enough to meet his newest grandchild, if that would bring him joy. If he’d even realize what was happening.

Catelyn sighed and made to get ready for the day. Men may have had their armor, but she had her own queer sort of armor now, not to protect her from harm but to protect her babe from unwanted attention. Catelyn rifled through the dresses she’d brought from the Eyrie, trying to find the most likely one. Only a handful of them even fit her now; most of the dresses she owned were voluminous enough in the skirt to fit, if not to hide the child growing inside her, but almost none of them were large enough to contain her bosom any longer. The babe seemed to be doing backflips inside her. She laid her hand upon her belly once again, letting herself revel in the moment.

Dressing herself was somewhat of a chore, but she dared not let handmaidens do it, for there would be no hiding then. She hadn’t had any on hand, before they’d reached Riverrun, and once they had…well, it was easy enough to parlay her grief into a desire to be left alone without anyone being suspicious. And hiding it wasn’t as difficult as it could have been; it seemed to Catelyn that she was smaller, now, than she had been with Bran or Rickon, as if the babe sensed the need for secrecy.

She’d no sooner gotten herself dressed when there came a knock on her door. Catelyn stilled; it was rare that anyone came to her chambers, for she’d made it clear she’d wanted no one in her rooms, the prospect of discovery far too dangerous.

“Mother?” came her son’s familiar voice after a moment. “Are you awake?”

Catelyn felt a rush of warmth in her chest at the sound of her eldest son’s voice. When he called out to her like that, she could almost forget that he was a king now, fighting a war. She could remember he was still a boy of five and ten, a boy who still needed a mother. She crossed to the door and opened it for him.

Robb was standing in the doorway with Grey Wind by his side; the wolf moved forward instantaneously, nuzzling against her with enthusiasm. Robb no longer found it strange how much his wolf had suddenly bonded with his mother, a bit of a saving grace, for there was no doubt in Catelyn’s mind that Grey Wind knew exactly what she was hiding beneath flowing skirts.

“Have you broken your fast yet?” he asked courteously, although he likely enough knew that she hadn’t, for when she’d forbade servants to enter her chambers during the night and early morning, they’d stopped bringing her any food except on direct request. She shook her head. “Would you do me the honor of joining me?”

Catelyn smiled at that; it was rare anymore that she got to see the boy and not the king, and abruptly, she remembered holding Robb in her arms in this very room just after he’d been born, red-faced and
squalling. The memory brought a rush of warmth to her chest.

“Of course,” she agreed, and her son took her by the arm and guided her back to his solar. It had been kind of him to fetch her himself instead of sending some servant to do so, she thought as Grey Wind trailed along behind them, and as they stepped into his solar to a vast array of foodstuffs, pastries boiled eggs and honeyed wine, it struck her that her son wanted something from her. Her supposition that she was seeing the boy and not the king for a moment seemed a miscalculation on her part. Still, she sat and picked absently at a pastry. Grey Wind settled beside her, resting his head on her lap. Close to the babe, which was where he always preferred to be.

“What is it you would ask of me, Your Grace?” she asked him in a knowing voice with a raised eyebrow, and Robb’s face flushed red in embarrassment at being caught in his obvious ploy. Still, he did not balk, which said enough.

“I need you to be my envoy,” he’d told her seriously. “To treat with Renly Baratheon.”

Catelyn was equal parts shocked and unsurprised by the request. When just two moons before, he’d been eager to organize a guard to take her back to the safety of Winterfell, she would have expected that he’d want to keep her safe behind the walls of Riverrun. In fact, she’d counted on it. How could she convince her son this was folly? There was one way, of course, but Catelyn preferred to keep that piece close to her chest as long as she could, even if it was a matter of days. She scratched Grey Wind behind the ears, silent and thoughtful for a moment.

“When last I saw Renly, he was a boy no older than Bran. I do not know him,” she tried. It was true enough, though she wondered if the argument would be enough to sway her son. He may have been a child of Eddard Stark, but he’d inherited all her Tully stubbornness. “Send someone else. My place is here with my father, for whatever time he has left.”

Robb just shook his head.

“There is no one else,” he told her practically. “I cannot go myself. Your father's too ill. The Blackfish is my eyes and ears, I dare not lose him. Your brother I need to hold Riverrun when we march—”

That took her aback.

“March?” she echoed dimly. She knew he must, of course; wars weren’t won sitting behind walls, but she’d already pleaded with her uncle to keep him from marching on Harrenhal, from doing precisely what Tywin Lannister expected of him. Catelyn knew little of warfare, but she knew enough to know that was folly.

“I cannot sit at Riverrun waiting for peace. It makes me look as if I were afraid to take the field again. When there are no battles to fight, men start to think of hearth and harvest, Father told me that. Even my northmen grow restless.”

My northmen, Catelyn thought with a sense of unease. He was even beginning to sound like his father. As little as she liked it, she knew Ned had spent much of his life preparing their son for this moment yet wishing it would never come. Part of her wished her husband had never prepared their son for this war, but what good would that have done? Then Robb’s may have been the host that was smashed on the battlefield instead of just Roose Bolton’s.

“No one has ever died of restlessness, but rashness is another matter,” Catelyn tried again. “We've planted seeds, let them grow.”
Her son stood firm, utterly unconvinced.

“We’ve tossed some seeds in the wind, that’s all. If your sister Lysa was coming to aid us, we would have heard by now. How many birds have we sent to the Eyrie, four? I want peace too, but why should the Lannisters give me anything if all I do is sit here while my army melts away around me swift as summer snow?”

Catelyn felt a little desperate by then. She’d forgotten entirely his original request, had only a mind to keep her son from marching on Harrenhal. I’ve made the right choice coming here, Catelyn reminded herself once more, for it was the only thing that kept the guilt at bay. She tried again.

“So rather than look craven, you will dance to Lord Tywin’s pipes? He wants you to march on Harrenhal, ask your uncle Brynden if—”

Robb cut her off impatiently.

“I said nothing of Harrenhal. Now, will you go to Renly for me, or must I send the Greatjon?”

Catelyn said nothing for a moment, feeling a chill run through her veins. It was a boy’s ploy, for she knew even a boy of five and ten would be able to see how poorly suited Greatjon Umber would be for the task. If it was a threat, it was an empty one, or at least she hoped so. But in other circumstances, could he have convinced her with threats toward rashness? She was afraid he might have.

No, Catelyn realized, there was nothing for it. Robb was too stubborn to be made to back down on this issue with arguments about her father’s health. It was the lever she’d pulled to get to Riverrun, but she could see that he wouldn’t let her pull that same lever again. She knew she only had one argument left to her.

Grey Wind whined softly in her lap, as if sensing her moment of inner conflict, and Catelyn scratched him again to soothe him.

“Robb...” Catelyn trailed off slowly, still not certain what to say to him. Would he be angry at her, she wondered, when he knew the truth? She took a deep breath. “If it is I who must go, I could mayhaps deliver your message to King Renly, but I fear I would not be fit to make the trip back.”

Robb’s brows furrowed. “Not fit...?”

Catelyn took another breath. Her whole body seemed to be trembling, uncertain of what the next few moments would bring. She tried to say something, but the words seemed to catch in her throat, so in the end, she reached for his hand, catching him by the wrist and flattening it against the roundness of her stomach, smoothing her skirts down so he could see.

A thousand different emotions seemed to pass over Robb’s face, then, and she could see him casting back in his mind, trying to figure out how he had missed this, when this had possibly happened.

“Mother...” he said after a long silence, “how long?”

There was a fear in his eyes, Catelyn saw, and for a long moment she was uncertain of the cause until suddenly it struck her. His father was dead, and he feared the worst, that this might have been the result of some misfortune that had befallen her on the road. She felt stricken by even the thought. She hadn’t expected that fear, but she could see how he could jump to that conclusion, that the reason she’d hidden it had been from some sort of shame. She exhaled slowly.
“I am nearly six moons gone,” she told him finally, evenly, and she saw Robb doing the math in his head, saw the moment he came to the right conclusion. The apprehension in his expression turned to confusion, and he smoothed his hand over the roundness of her belly, seeming unable to pull away.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, betrayed.

How could she explain it in such a way that didn’t make him feel more betrayed than this? she wondered. How could she explain it in a way that didn’t make it sound as though she still thought him a boy who needed her protection, without wounding his pride? Catelyn felt herself crumble under the pressure, the pressure she’d put on herself all this time, the weight of the secret she’d been keeping almost too much to bear.

“I couldn’t go back to Winterfell and do nothing,” she confessed after a moment, her voice wavering. Her throat felt thick with the words, but once she started speaking, it was as though she couldn’t stop. “Your father…he didn’t even know, Robb. I never got the chance to tell him.”

Her words had lost all intentionality as soon as she’d begun speaking, but they achieved her aims in any case, for her son looked aggrieved for her, not at all offended. He reached for her hands instead, grasping them both in his. She could feel his fingers against her scarred palms.

“Oh mother,” he breathed, his voice filled with the same grief she felt. “Have you shared this burden with anyone? Have you spoken with the maester?”

She regained some of her composure at that.

“I’ve given birth to five healthy children, Robb,” she told him matter-of-factly. “I hardly think I need a maester to tell me what I already know.”

And she did know, felt it in her bones that everything would be all right. She’d been sicker this time than she’d been the previous times she’d been with child, hadn’t yet grown as large as she might have with Bran or Rickon, but all that could easily be explained by her changed circumstances. The babe seemed to dance circles around her belly whenever she tried to sleep, and that was confirmation enough that it was okay.

“Mother, you must—” he protested, but this time, she cut him off.

“So who shall you send to treat with King Renly in my stead?”

Robb seemed surprised by her abrupt change in topic. “This is surely not the time—” he began to protest, but she shook her head.

“I’m with child, Robb, not insensate. Did you have a backup plan for who to send?”

Robb looked almost petulant at that. “I didn’t imagine you’d be able to refuse me,” he admitted glumly. “I certainly can’t send the Greatjon.”

Although Catelyn had suspected it, it pleased her to hear him say so aloud, that the threat to send the man had been an empty one. She released a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. And then, after a moment, a thought struck her.

“Why not Roose Bolton?” she suggested. Robb’s face screwed up in confusion.

“Roose Bolton is retreating to Moat Cailin,” he reminded her impatiently, but the moment Catelyn had spoken the words, she’d known that she’d struck on the right solution.
“You might send a rider to intercept his party and bid him come here instead,” she suggested slowly. “Allow the remainder of his force to regroup at the Moat.”

It was as desperate a stab as her earlier attempts to sway him from the idea of sending her to treat with Renly had been, but this time, it seemed to have worked, for she could see her son was considering it.

“Under whose command?”

Catelyn tried to remember everyone who had left in Lord Bolton’s host, tried to remember who had perished and who had been captured in the defeat of his forces. This wasn’t her area, and most times they didn’t share as many details of their military movements as they could have. But Catelyn had known all these men as men for much longer than her son had, for until not long before, Robb had been unquestionably a boy still.


“Bolton will not be pleased at having command snatched from him,” Robb reasoned, but it was then that Catelyn knew she’d won this argument. “He is far too prideful, and he has just lost a costly battle, planned or no.”

Catelyn nodded. The pride of men was a thing she knew well.

“Win him over with flattery,” she told Robb. “He is cautious and well-spoken and not quick to anger. You are right that there are no Starks nor Tullys to spare to act as envoy, but the Boltons are an old house, and powerful in the North. Impress upon Lord Bolton that he is the only powerful enough lord we can send without it being an insult to Renly. Impress upon him that he is uniquely qualified for such an important diplomatic mission. He is ambitious. Be prepared to give him some small concession, if flattery is not enough.”

Robb nodded, then, reaching up to scratch at his red chin hairs.

“I shall acquiesce to your suggestion on one condition,” he told her after a moment, his voice measured. She tilted her head at him in inquiry. “You shall go see Maester Vyman, and now.”

*Defitely done, Catelyn thought to herself. He has made me an offer I cannot refuse.*

Nor should she, she knew. She’d avoided seeing the maester for she knew he could not be trusted to keep the secret, not from his lord and his king. But the secret need not be a secret any longer, and it was scarce more than three moons before the babe would come. It was not much of a concession to make, but better to let her son think he’d earned one from her.

“Of course,” she agreed, squeezing his hand.
Robb’s mind was racing as he helped his mother to her feet, taking her arm as they made their way out of the room he’d taken as his solar. He’d woken that morning and steered himself for the prospect that he may have to argue with his mother upon the subject of her acting as his envoy; he hadn’t woken expecting anything quite like this, hadn’t been in any way prepared for it.

Robb got the attention of one of the servants in the hall.

“Please find my uncles and have them meet us outside Maester Vyman’s rooms,” he told the woman briskly, and she fell into a deep curtsy.

“At once, Your Grace.”

He led his mother through the halls of Riverrun with single-minded determination as Grey Wind trailed behind them, until she placed her hand atop his where it curled over her arm.

“Robb,” she said gently, “I will be no less full with child if you race there than if we walk.”

Realizing he’d been all but dragging his mother along beside him, Robb deliberately slowed his pace, forcing a sense of calm he didn’t feel. He looked over at her once again, unable to keep his eyes from trailing to her middle.

How could I not have noticed? he asked himself. For now that he knew, he couldn’t imagine how he’d ever missed it, the obvious bulge beneath his mother’s skirts. It was clear enough that she’d gone through some pains to hide it; he couldn’t recall the last time he’d seen her in one of the slender gowns he now recalled she’d once favored.

I was focused on fighting a war. Not scrutinizing ladies’ attire. The thought wasn’t actually much of a comfort as he considered how long his mother had been holding this secret close to her chest. How must it have felt when Father had died, when she’d known that she carried his babe that he’d never know about? Would it have made a difference if I had been there to comfort her?

He knocked at the maester’s door and waited until the man bid them entrance.

“Your Grace, Lady Stark,” Maester Vyman said, surprised to see them there. Robb let Grey Wind pad inside after them, then closed the door behind them. “How may I be of aid?”

Robb expected his mother to speak, but she was silent; when he glanced in her direction, she had the look of a frightened animal or chastened child. She looked much the way Robb imagined he himself must have looked, when Father had called him to his solar and expected him to admit some kind of misdeed. Robb cleared his throat.

“I need you to examine my mother,” he told the old maester finally when it seemed as though his mother would not speak up on her own. “She is…she is with child.”

It was some small consolation that the old man looked as startled as Robb himself had felt. At least, he reflected, he wasn’t the only witless fool in the castle. To the man’s credit, he recovered quickly, and bid her to remove her gown. He looked at Robb as though he was expected to leave, but Robb didn’t budge an inch, and he knew the maester wouldn’t dare order him to.

If Father cannot be here for her, then I must, Robb told himself. I am Lord Stark now; I am King in the North, and if I cannot stand by my mother when my father cannot, what good am I?
Robb averted his eyes instinctually when she had stripped down to her shift, then forced himself to look back; it hadn’t been so long ago that he’d been a child bounding into his parents’ chambers in the mornings. He’d seen her in her nightdresses, and this was no more intrusive, however strange it felt. Grey Wind went back to his mother’s side, pressing his nose against her belly for a moment, licking her hand before retreating to lie by the window.

_He knew_, Robb thought to himself then, remembering the way his wolf had gone to her that first day in Moat Cailin. His wolf hadn’t been long in his mother’s presence before she’d departed Winterfell, but he’d never been quite so attached to Catelyn as he had become since she had reappeared. It had been easy to discount that, to think that his wolf had missed his mother as much as Robb himself had. But his wolf had known, even if he hadn’t.

_Traitor_, he thought as he looked at Grey Wind, and the wolf gave him a disinterested look before resting his head on his paws and dozing off. _How had he known?_ Robb wondered. _Could he smell it? Or…_

As Robb thought about Grey Wind, he almost imagined he could hear it, a low, fluttering heartbeat. It seemed too impossibly fast. Robb shook the thought away as the maester bid his mother lie down on a cot.

“This is…quite advanced, my lady,” he remarked, still startled.

“Nearly six moons,” she confirmed somewhat guiltily, and the maester made some blustery noises beneath his breath about how she should have come to him sooner. She looked a bit sheepish, but Robb could not disagree.

It seemed almost _more_ implausible that he could have missed it, now that he saw her out of her flowing gowns. She certainly had the look of a woman heavy with child, though whether one six moons gone Robb could not have said. He realized how little he knew about these matters as he waited anxiously as the maester began feeling his mother’s stomach and asking her questions. When she’d last bled, what she’d been eating, if her breasts were tender, if she’d been sick…

_Gods be good_, he thought to himself as she answered all the maester’s questions clearly and without any of her previous hesitation. He’d never realized how much consideration had gone into carrying a babe. _How had she managed to worry about it all and still keep this a secret?_

“You are a bit smaller than I might have expected, my lady,” the maester confessed after she’d answered all his inquiries, and Robb felt his heart beating faster than it ever had in battle. Would they be able to stand it, he wondered, if something happened to this babe? He’d just found out it existed, and yet already the thought of losing it, after having lost Father, was almost too much. He swallowed thickly.

“Does the babe move?” Vyman asked after a beat.

“For weeks now,” she confirmed easily. “Often enough when I’m trying to sleep.”

The maester nodded. “Did you have any complications with your previous births?”

Robb only then realized that _he_ couldn’t have answered that question if someone had posed it to him. He’d been too young to remember Sansa’s birth with any sort of clarity, but Arya he should remember, and certainly Bran and Rickon. But he’d never _thought_ about it, not really; he’d just counted on the fact that they’d be born and everything would be fine.

_Mother and Father shielded me from it_, Robb realized belatedly. _From the fact that she could die_
giving birth, or the babe could. But there was no one to shield him from that truth, not any longer.
And his mother wasn’t as young as she used to be. Was five and thirty old to have a child? Robb wondered. He had no idea.

“ Arya,” she started to say, and then she paused, as if talking about it was too much for her. Robb felt it too, at the sound of his sister’s name, the pain of the realization that the girls were in the Lannisters’ clutches. That they had the Kingslayer didn’t take away any of the sting of that. Catelyn cleared her throat delicately and began a second time.

“Arya—my third child,” she began softly. “She was feet first. Maester Luwin had to reach inside to rotate her.”

It struck Robb anew how little he knew about any of this; he’d never known that about Arya’s birth, that anything had come close to going wrong. Father had left for war not a moon’s turn after Arya had been born, Robb remembered, but Mother was already back on her feet and managing the keep. This time, though, his father wouldn’t be returning, not ever.

“But the rest of your children’s births were normal?” Vyman pressed after a moment, and Robb saw his mother nod.

“You can write to Maester Luwin at Winterfell if you’d like any of the details. He delivered all five of my children.”

Maester Vyman pursed his lips tightly, as if fighting once more an urge to scold her. Robb could certainly sympathize with the urge.

“I shall,” he agreed, “though I see no reason to suspect any complications. But I’d tell you to take it easy, and not to skip any meals. I’d like to see you gain more weight than you have.”

Robb felt a knot of tightness in his chest release at the words. “I’ll make certain she does,” he said seriously. He was helping her re-lace the back of her gown when there was a knock on the door.

“Lord Edmure and Ser Brynden are without begging entrance,” came the voice through the door, and Robb looked at his mother. She nodded wordlessly at him.

“Send them in,” Robb called out in return, and when the door opened, his mother’s uncle was the first through it, his eyes taking in the scene before him with the focus of a soldier. It must not have been difficult to come to a conclusion, with Catelyn getting dressed in the maester’s rooms.

“ Cat?” he inquired with a raised eyebrow. “Are you all right?”

Robb heard his mother sigh. “I’m all right, uncle,” she reassured him, and Maester Vyman cleared his throat and excused himself.

“I’ll give you the room,” he said, and then he closed the door behind him and was gone. Brynden Tully looked back and forth between them in inquiry.

“I’m with child,” Catelyn finally told them, and Robb had scarce ever heard a room go so silent so quickly. Robb watched as Edmure’s eyes widened to the size of saucers, but Ser Brynden’s expression turned sharp and thoughtful.

“I should have known,” he said after a moment, and he took two steps toward her and pulled her into his arms. “I’ve never seen you greensick on the water before, not ever. Why didn’t you tell me, little Cat?”
Catelyn’s arms came up to return her uncle’s embrace, and it struck Robb suddenly that he was seeing for the first time who his mother was as a woman, seeing the girl she’d once been rather than the mother she now was.

“I hadn’t been able to tell Ned yet,” she confessed against his shoulder. “I wanted to tell him first, and then…”

Robb felt his heart clench in his chest. He wished desperately that his father was there, to tell him how to navigate all this. Of course, were his father there, he’d never have had to navigate it at all.

“But you’re all right?” Edmure pressed after a beat, when they’d all fallen silent again, the rawness of Catelyn’s confession heavy between them. “And…and the child?”

Edmure looked and sounded completely overwhelmed, and it struck Robb, then, that his uncle was nearly as close to Robb’s own age as he was to his sister’s. Edmure was but a scant few years older than Theon, and there were some who would still consider Theon more a boy than a man. And he’d been only a babe when his mother had died; Robb remembered that clearly enough.

“Maester Vyman says she needs to gain more weight,” Robb told them, and Catelyn pulled back from her uncle’s embrace, fixing Robb with a pointed stare. Robb held his ground, refusing to crumple under his mother’s displeasure.

“Maester Vyman says everything should be fine,” she argued, but Brynden ignored the words.

“But you weren’t keeping anything down the whole trip from Gulltown to White Harbor. And you knew already, didn’t you? How long?”

Robb wasn’t certain he’d ever seen his mother look quite so chastened.

“I’d realized before I even arrived to the Eyrie,” she admitted then, quietly. Brynden shook his head.

“Gods, child,” he said in a disbelieving tone. “With everything that’s happened…it’s a wonder no sort of misfortune befell either of you.”

That made her angry; it was plain enough even before she spoke.

“I would never willingly endanger my child,” she said, with a sharp edge to her voice. “Everything is fine.”

“Are you certain?” Edmure prodded worriedly, and Catelyn looked at her brother with an uncompromising expression.

“I’m certain that not a single one of you has ever carried or birthed a child,” she said seriously, eyes flicking between them. They all shifted uncomfortably under her gaze, even Ser Brynden. “I would have you trust my judgment on this.”

All three of them were immediately cowed by her harsh words, and yet Robb felt the beginnings of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Had he ever doubted how strong his mother was, those doubts had been banished in a single moment.

*It is a good thing for Tywin Lannister that my mother does not fight in battles, Robb thought to himself fondly, or he would be cowering before her within moments.*
The news had spread through the castle like wildfire. Catelyn supposed she should have assumed that it would; secrets were never long-kept in a castle, and Catelyn had grown up in Riverrun, so she knew this well. Some of the attendants in the keep were the same ones that had been there when she’d been a girl, and the years had made them no more reticent.

It had become immediately obvious when she’d been escorted to the Great Hall by her son, who had been tittering all the while about how she’d scarcely taken a bite of her morning meal. All activity had stopped, then, and the Greatjon had been the first to remove himself from his seat, coming to kneel at Catelyn’s feet. He took her hands in his.

“You should have told us, my lady,” he said, though his tone was regretful rather than scolding. “If there is anything you need, I am ever at your service. That’s Eddard Stark’s son or daughter you carry in your womb.”

As if I needed reminding, Catelyn thought to herself, unable to keep the bitterness at bay. But the respect that Ned had commanded was palpable in this man as well as the love he obviously still bore for him. It was moments like this that Catelyn lamented that she’d ever believed the northmen to be cold. And yet she would trade every ounce of this warmth and caring, every ounce of deep respect Ned’s men bore for him even now, to have Ned’s head back on his shoulders.

“You have my thanks, my lord,” she managed to make herself say, past the thickness in her throat. Rickard Kartstark was the next at her feet.

“I have lost my sons, and you have lost your husband, but all is not dark, my lady,” he told her grimly. “This blessing for you is a blessing to us all.”

Galbart Glover was next. “Your strength is a boon to us all, my lady,” he agreed, and when he went to retreat, Robb stepped forward and placed his arm around her, holding up a hand before anyone else could approach.

“My lords,” he announced, with all the sense of command his title would imply. “My mother and I both appreciate all your support, but mayhaps we should allow her to get off her feet?”

There was a murmur of abashed agreement before everyone in the hall made their way back to their seats, and Catelyn let Robb lead her toward the high table. Catelyn gave her son a long-suffering look.

“It will be some time before simply standing becomes a chore,” she said to him, pitching her voice low enough so that it would hopefully not be overheard. Robb gave her a good-natured smile.

“But were you so keen to stand there all afternoon?”

She had to concede that she wasn’t. But she wasn’t quite willing to hide her sigh when Edmure pulled out her chair for her when they reached the table. Her brother had never been one to play at gallantry. Robb didn’t miss her sigh.

“Oh, let them, Mother,” he advised quietly. “We get precious little good news in war time, and they are all away from their wives and their families. Let them remember what they are fighting for. Seeing you and the babe well cheers them, as it cheers me.”

And so Catelyn did. She let them ask after her health and bring her cups of water and offer her their
seats with increasing frequency. She let out some of her own gowns in the chest, finally, and without all the folds of Lysa’s skirts, with her condition so much more obvious, the men only became more blatant about it. And Catelyn remembered this, too. She’d gotten shades of it when she had carried Sansa, the first time the men of Winterfell had ever seen her carrying a Stark babe. And as she’d gotten increasingly full with child, everyone in Winterfell had grown more and more deferential to her.

And it did give them heart, there was no doubt about that. With Ned gone, she and her unborn child had joined Robb as a new rallying point for the northmen. These men were fiercely loyal to the Starks, and that much was plain enough when all were saddled up to march not a fortnight later. Not to Harrenhal, Catelyn had finally found—but to the Westerlands.

“It’s the only way to get Lord Tywin’s attention,” Robb had told her when he’d outlined his plan to her. “If we march on Harrenhal, we’re playing his game. Hit him close to home, and he’ll be playing ours.”

That he wasn’t going to march on Harrenhal was a comfort but not much of one. There was no doubt in Catelyn’s mind that the closer Robb’s forces came to Casterly Rock, the more furious Tywin Lannister would become. But there was a force gathering at Oxcross, they’d said, and if they could maintain the element of surprise, they could destroy the half-trained force before Tywin Lannister even got wind of their movements. It was a good plan but a dangerous one for her son. She’d rather he remain in Riverrun, where he was safe, but wars were not won behind walls.

“I still don’t feel right about leaving you, not now,” Robb had confessed to her the night before he’d departed, and it was there that she saw the boy, not the commander or the king. Less than three moons until her time would come, and she would have to be the one to encourage her son to do precisely what she wished he wouldn’t.

“You said it yourself, Robb—your northmen grow restless,” she reminded him gently. “I’ve done this five times already. I shall be fine.”

And as she watched her son mount up the next day, none of the indecision from the previous night showed on his face. She remembered the same sort of fierce determination on Ned’s face so many times. *Five and ten, and yet he is truly a man now,* Catelyn thought to herself as she stood to see him off. Grey Wind lingered by her side, and Catelyn sighed, crouching down in front of the direwolf. She brushed her fingers through the wolf’s fur.

“I know you don’t want to leave me and the babe,” she told the wolf, as if it could understand her, “but Robb needs you more than I do now. We’ll be safe here.”

And mayhaps the wolf had somehow understood, because he’d nuzzled at her belly once more before loping off toward Robb. The Greatjon had been one of the last lords out of the gates.

“And don’t worry, my lady,” he’d assured her with a confident tip of his head. “We’ll take care of the king. You focus on taking care of the littlest Stark.”

And then they were gone, and Catelyn found herself, for the first time, a bit at a loss. She’d had a mission for so long—going to King’s Landing, then bringing the Imp to the Eyrie, returning to Winterfell to write Ned about the babe, meeting her son at Moat Cailin, keeping the child in her womb a secret, preventing her son from marching on Harrenhal…and all of a sudden, all of those motivations were gone, and she had nothing to do but sit in Riverrun and wait. Wait for news of her son, for news of Roose Bolton’s venture to the Stormlands, for the birth of her child. But there were leagues and leagues between Riverrun and Oxcross, between Riverrun and the Stormlands, and it would be some time before she got news of either. The babe would be first, she thought, like as not.
“What shall you name the babe?” Edmure had asked her one evening as they’d eaten in the lord’s solar, and that had been the first time that it had struck Catelyn that she hadn’t given any thought to what she’d name the child. So focused had she been on when she’d be able to tell Ned and then on keeping the whole thing a secret that she’d never managed to think ahead to the babe’s birth.

If it’s a boy, the northmen will want me to name him Eddard, Catelyn thought with a pang of sorrow. In his honor.

The thought alone brought a thickness to her throat, one she could scarce swallow around. As if naming the child that would make it true, that Ned was truly gone from her. She knew that he was, and yet part of her couldn’t fathom it, couldn’t fathom the fact that she still lived in a world in which Ned no longer existed.

It was only when she noticed that Edmure was looking at her strangely that Catelyn realized she had most likely been silent too long. She cleared her throat to try to banish the sudden discomfort.

“A northern name,” she said finally, with conviction. “A Stark name.”

She searched through her mind, through the lineages and histories that she could recall, and when nothing immediately struck her as right, she took herself to the library, perusing old tomes and histories. Looking through Brandons and Rickards, Rodriks and Benjens, and Edderon and Edwyn and Eyron and Edwyle, Cregan and Cregard, Mariah and Raya and Serena, Lysara and Lyarra and Lyanna. She read through their histories and accomplishments until her eyes began to cross, feeling a lingering sense of indecision.

I am not of the North, she thought to herself despairingly. How can I possibly make this decision? How can I know what Ned would have wanted?

She was going through the books for the hundredth or thousandth time the day the babe came. It seemed to have taken years, and yet at the same time it seemed too soon. She was not ready, the babe had no name, and Ned was not there. Her uncle was not there, either, for he’d ridden south with Robb. Only Edmure remained, and Edmure would never attend her in the birthing chamber, not even if she had been his own wife bearing his own child.

He is too much a southron man, Catelyn thought, and I’m too northern now to fit here, and sometimes too southron to fit in the North. It had seemed unfathomable when her time had come with Sansa and Ned had burst into the birthing chamber, refusing to leave even as the babe had been pulled from her body. But now it was impossible to imagine doing it without him.

And Catelyn had no one else, not anymore. Her father was too ill and shared Edmure’s sensibilities besides. Her mother was long dead, and Lysa…Lysa was not there, unwilling to bestir herself from the Eyrie even as their father lay dying, and had she been there, she would have been no comfort at all. And Sansa…Sansa would mayhaps be old enough to attend her now, she reflected, but Sansa was…

She clenched her teeth as one of her labor pains hit her, breathed through it. Not bad enough to scream from the pain, not yet—but that time would come, she knew well enough. She closed the book in front of her and levered herself out of her chair with considerable effort. When she opened the door, the guards turned her way immediately.

“Fetch Maester Vyman,” she commanded authoritatively. “The babe is coming.”

And then she went back inside, sat down, and waited. It wasn’t long before the maester and the midwife appeared to help her to the birthing chamber. Edmure was waiting for her at the door,
looking a little green as he greeted her.

“Have courage, sister,” he told her grimly and remained without to wait.

The labor was long, and worse than she remembered.

*Only four years since Rickon, and you’ve already forgotten what this felt like,* she scolded herself as the midwife wiped at her brow.

She couldn’t help but recall the last time that she’d given birth at Riverrun, near sixteen years before. She had been so hopeful, then, for by that point, it had been clear that the tide of the war had been turning, and in their favor. There had been every indication that her husband may actually return to her—and he wasn’t Brandon, but she’d still remained hopeful. *But what do I have to remain hopeful for now?* she wondered. There were still so many ways that things could go wrong for her family and very few ways she could see for them to go right.

*But this, at least, must not go wrong,* Catelyn told herself with determination. *You owe Ned at least that much.*

That determination seemed like the only thing that kept her going, hour after hour, when it seemed the pain would never end. She prayed to the Mother to let her have this child, safe and healthy in her arms. The rest of her children remained far away from her, and most of them in grave danger, but she could have this one babe to hold close to her chest and keep safe within the walls of her childhood home.

It was deep into the night when he was finally born, red-faced and squalling. *Dark hair,* Catelyn realized dimly through her exhaustion as they wiped the fluids from his body. Robb’s had been red already from the moment he’d been born in this very same room, and so had Sansa’s and Bran’s and Rickon’s after that. She felt it as though through a fog when they handed her son to her, when he looked up at her with dark eyes and not the Tully blue of most of her children.

And then Catelyn laughed, because if she didn’t laugh, she knew she would weep. She’d prayed for so long to have a son with dark hair and dark eyes, a son who looked more Stark than Tully. A son she’d hoped might rival Ned’s bastard in his father’s affections. But the bastard was finally gone from Winterfell, as she’d always wanted, and Ned would never look into the grey eyes of his trueborn son.
Robb II

Robb was agitated by the time he finally walked through the threshold at Ashemark, blood staining his plate and mail—somehow, miraculously, none of it his own. Smalljon Umber was the first of the captains that he found in the lingering chaos.

“Has Lord Marbrand been located?” he asked the other man impatiently, hoping he’d have the answer.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the Smalljon affirmed. “Would you like someone to bring him to you?”

The answer to that should have been yes, and Robb knew that well enough, but he had other priorities before he saw to the lord of the castle they’d just stormed. Ashemark had been poorly fortified, garrisoned with an almost laughably small force; they hadn’t been expecting the attack, had never believed any enemy force from the north could make it past the Golden Tooth, and that had been their undoing. Robb had expected more resistance, however; they’d decimated the Lannister force at Oxcross, but he’d expected at least some word of it to have reached the other castles, some raven flown off or stray rider who’d escaped. The Blackfish was excellent at preventing those sorts of lapses, but even his men couldn’t shoot down every bird every time.

*If I can be so lucky in this, let me be so lucky again,* Robb prayed to himself.

“Put a guard on him and confine him to his rooms, and find me the maester’s tower,” he ordered instead, and Jon nodded and was off, barking orders at the other men to carry out his directive. Olyvar Frey appeared at his side almost immediately.

“The maester? You haven’t been injured, have you, Your Grace?” he asked nervously, looking over the blood on his armor, and Robb felt a brief moment of fondness for the other boy at the question. Olyvar was always like that, anxious and worried about everything, his watery brown eyes constantly darting around as if searching out some unknown foe. It was almost easy to forget that Olyvar was older than he was.

“No, Olyvar,” he assured the boy. “I require something else from the maester.”

What Robb required from the maester was every letter he’d received in the past three moons; they’d been desperately lacking in news since they’d departed Riverrun, since no ravens could find them on the road. They’d gotten some useful information from those they’d captured at Oxcross, but most of that confirmed what they’d already known about the movements of the Lannister forces. Until Tywin Lannister got wind of what Robb’s forces were up to in the Westerlands, there was likely to be no change on that front.

Robb’s great uncle appeared before him next. “We only lost five men, all to archers,” the Blackfish reported without preamble, his tone all business. “Eighteen more are injured, but most of those are minor. One may be fatal.”

“And the other side?”

“Only about a hundred men garrisoning the castle, plus the women and children,” Ser Brynden informed him. “Twelve dead, another handful injured.”

Robb nodded, pleased. It wasn’t quite bloodless, but it was closer to that than a massacre. The Smalljon reappeared just then.
“I can take you to the maester’s tower, Your Grace,” he said, and the Blackfish made to move away before Robb stopped him.

“No, I’d have you remain with me,” Robb told his great uncle, as kindly as he could manage in his current state. “You can help me make sense of whatever news we find. Smalljon, after you show us to the tower, take charge of rounding up the captives and checking the stores.”

Ser Brynden and Olyvar trailed after them, Grey Wind loping along a few yards behind.

“There won’t be news of your mother, Robb,” the Blackfish told him not unkindly, having easily guessed Robb’s motivations. Robb had already known that to be true enough; there was almost no chance that they would have any news of Riverrun at all, not unless Tywin had managed to besiege it already, which seemed unlikely if the news they’d gotten of his movements was true. Even if his uncle had been in the habit of sending news to rival castles, he certainly wouldn’t be sending news to as small a castle as Ashemark. And yet Robb knew it had been more than a turn of the moon since his mother should have given birth; she and the babe could both be dead, or they could both be alive and healthy, and Robb had no way at all of knowing. It was some small consolation that the matter was at the forefront of his great uncle’s mind as well.

“Then we shall send a raven to Riverrun and find out,” Robb told the older man, not to be deterred. “We should be here at least long enough to get a reply from Riverrun.”

Ser Brynden didn’t argue with him, which meant that he was as worried about the situation as Robb himself was, as the Blackfish wasn’t exactly the sort of man to hold his tongue. They said nothing more until Smalljon Umber opened the door and let them into the maester’s chambers.

The maester was a small, wrinkled, grey-haired man with wizened hands and dark brown eyes. Was there ever a maester who wasn’t old? Robb wondered to himself as he took in the man. Robb waited until the door was closed behind their group to address him.

“Tell me any recent news you have of note. And I will be checking any letters you have here, so I would suggest not leaving anything out,” Robb commanded the old man, who looked perfectly unfazed by his appearance in the castle, blood-soaked and commanding. “Any news of the Riverlands or the North?”

The maester looked bored.

“Our latest news is that Lord Tywin is encamped at Harrenhal,” he said dully, confirming the news that Robb had already heard at Oxcross. “Some rumblings from the North about some violence with some lord’s bastard.”

Robb felt the blood in his veins run cold at the second pronouncement, thinking first of Jon at the Wall. The last news he’d heard from the Wall had been that his Uncle Benjen had gone ranging and never returned. The possibility of something awful happening to Jon made Robb’s heart beat erratically.

“No, not him,” the man demurred. “Some other man’s bastard—Bolton? I don’t quite recall. The news was near a moon’s turn past, and it came to us secondhand from Casterly Rock. I’ll find the letter for you, if you insist.”

The words were just this side of insolence, but Robb decided to let it slide for the time being, but
only because of the confirmation that it was not about Jon. But the news about Bolton’s bastard reminded him of the other mission, the one Lord Bolton had been heading.

“And from the Stormlands?” he pressed. “Anything about Lord Renly?”

“You haven’t heard?” the maester asked with a little cackle. “Lord Renly is dead.”

*That* news stopped Robb in his tracks.

“Dead?” he echoed, dumbfounded. “How?”

“Well I thought you’d know, seeing as your men killed him,” the maester said with a raised eyebrow. Robb exchanged a look with his great uncle, then with Olyvar—whose brother, it struck him, had been accompanying Lord Bolton to the Stormlands. *Could it be true?* Robb wondered in disbelief. *Could there possibly have been some heated exchange of words, some conflict that had gotten out of hand?* But no, that was not Lord Bolton’s way—precisely the reason Robb had sent him and not a man like the Greatjon. But he tried to suppress his instinctive reaction, decided it was best not to show his hand, not in front of this maester. He looked back at the man.

“Stannis?” he ventured.

“Besieging Storm’s End, last we heard,” he mused disinterestedly, and Robb exchanged another look with his uncle. The timing was convenient,* too* convenient to be a coincidence. If one didn’t believe that Roose Bolton’s men had killed Renly Baratheon—which Robb didn’t—could it mean that Stannis had killed him? That would make the man a kinslayer, an affront to all the gods, old and new. Robb said nothing.

“King’s Landing?” he prodded. “My sisters?”

The maester just shrugged, like he couldn’t be bothered to care, and Robb shook his head, finally too annoyed to continue to engage. He opened the door, then flagged down one of the men that he saw in the corridor.

“The maester is going to show me where he keeps all his letters, then you will confine him with our other prisoners,” he told the man, who had a pine tree emblazoned on his gorget—one of House Mollen’s men. Once the maester had shown him his collection of recent scrolls, Robb let the Mollen man take the maester out. Grey Wind growled warningly at the maester as he went by, and it was the first time Robb saw him look worried. Only when the man was gone did Robb turn to his uncle.

“Renly Baratheon is dead,” he repeated, still stunned. Ser Brynden looked, somehow, unsurprised. This wasn’t his first war, far from it. Mayhaps nothing could shock him anymore, which was one of the reasons he’d proven so useful.

“His Stormlords will have turned to Stannis, like as not,” the Blackfish said blithely. “The Tyrells, though…that is more interesting. Mayhaps Lord Bolton remained to make our case to them.”

Robb frowned. “Doubtful, especially not if people believe our men slew Lord Renly,” he returned. “Lord Bolton is too cautious by half to remain there. My guess would be that he fled.”

“If he returns to Riverrun, it will be some time before we get any news of what really occurred there,” Ser Brynden surmised. “That is, if they’re not all dead as well. And if they’re not dead yet, chances are they will be before they reach Riverrun again. Lord Tywin and Ser Gregor stand in their path.”

Olyvar made a strangled little noise in the back of his throat, and Robb shot his great uncle a warning
“They’re a small party, and they will know to be careful, to avoid major keeps and scout for Lannister outriders,” Robb said pointedly, something that he hoped to be true. Roose Bolton was cautious; that was one of the few things that Robb could count on.

“And what of the man’s bastard?” Ser Brynden asked after a moment. Robb frowned at the mention.

“I’ll have to find the letter the maester mentioned, but I’d imagine that if there’s violence with Lord Bolton’s bastard, the bastard is the cause of it,” he said darkly. “I’ve heard queer rumblings about the man.”

Boy, he corrected himself mentally. He’s scarcely older than I am, if I can recall correctly. He had to hope that Ser Rodrik could take care of whatever havoc the boy wreaked; even if Robb wanted to do something about him, he was too far away, and it rankled him. He was always too far away—to far to help his father, too far to know how his mother fared, too far to reign in Lord Bolton’s bastard.

“What do we do now?” Olyvar asked into the silence, still sounding unsteady. The mention that his brother might be dead hadn’t done his temperament any good.

“First I’ll need to write to Riverrun to ask about my mother and the babe,” Robb declared nervously. “And then to the Twins to tell your father about your brother’s death at Oxcross.”

That wouldn’t be a letter Robb would be keen to write; far from it. Ser Stevron had been Walder Frey’s eldest son and heir, and he’d been the only significant casualty in the battle. Not that Lord Frey didn’t have other sons, and plenty of them, but he’d doubtlessly groomed Ser Stevron to be his successor, although he hadn’t hesitated to send the man, already in his sixties, off to fight in a war.

“Half-brother,” Olyvar corrected meekly, sounding supremely unconcerned. That was something that was taking a bit of getting used to; House Frey was less a large family and more a collection of many smaller families that happened to share a name. Olyvar was fiercely loyal to his own siblings but almost ambivalent about his numerous half-siblings. It was something Robb couldn’t fathom; he loved Jon as fiercely as he loved any of his full siblings, regardless of whether or not they shared a mother. But Robb didn’t have any half brothers old enough to be his grandfather, either.

“Well in any case, he needs to be told,” Robb remarked, still feeling a bit wrong-footed. “Then I shall meet with Lord Marbrand to see if I can get any additional information from him, and once that’s done, we’ll meet with my lords to discuss our next move.”

He didn’t get considerably more from Damon Marbrand than he had gotten from the man’s ill-tempered maester, but he did manage to get the necessary ravens off before he sat down with his lords. He nearly forgot he was still in his armor until Olyvar reminded him and divested him of it, then nearly forgot to eat until his squire told him there would be a feast, which Ser Brynden had gotten going.

“The men need to celebrate their victories, elsewise they will lose heart in their defeats,” Robb’s great uncle had reminded him, and Robb stayed through the feast, watching as his men twirled the various serving women around the room, raising toasts to increasingly ludicrous things as the night wore on. But all the while, Robb’s mind was on the scrolls in the maester’s tower he had not yet read and on the ravens he had not yet received back.

It was four days later when Olyvar came running down the halls at full speed, so breathless that he could scarce get the words out when he reached Robb.
“A…raven…” he managed between gasps of breath when he stopped in front of Robb. “Tully… seal.”

Robb didn’t run to receive it, but it was a near enough thing, and someone else must have run to get the Blackfish because he was there to meet Robb. The scroll, with the Tully fish stamped in wax on the outside, sat unopened on the desk. It was a good thing that none of their men were watching him then, Robb thought, because the haste with which he grabbed the letter was nearly embarrassing. He only forced himself to slow as he broke the seal, so as not to rip the paper.

There were two pieces of parchment rolled up together. The top one had Edmure’s signature on the bottom and Robb tossed it aside immediately, those concerns better left until later. The second letter was in his mother’s familiar hand, though the letters were less precise than they’d once been; the writing was recognizable as hers, but the cuts on her hands had been so deep that their dexterity had been all but ruined. Robb read through it as fast as his mind could process, holding his breath.

“Well?” Ser Brynden asked impatiently after a long minute. “Are you trying to kill me with suspense, boy?”

It was only then that Robb remembered that he had to breathe; he sucked in two long, desperate breaths before laughing nervously.

“Both of them are hale and hearty,” he said finally, handing over the letter to his great uncle. “A son. Edrick.”

The Blackfish read the letter as well before setting it aside and moving to the corner of the room. He poured two cups of wine and handed one to Robb.

“Drink,” he said seriously. “You’ll likely need it before you read whatever my idiot nephew has to say.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Remind him to hold Riverrun, nothing more,” Ser Brynden growled once he had read the letter, the wine seeming to have mellowed his temper not at all. “That boy is an imbecile. Would that I had remained there.”

“You’ve been indispensable here,” Robb reminded him gently, but his great uncle was correct; Edmure had no head for strategy and a thirst for glory, a bad combination in a lord in wartime. It made Robb wonder, for a moment, which one of them was a boy and which a man grown.

The letter from the Twins two days later was no less aggravating. Robb found Olyvar in the lord’s solar refilling the water jug and thrust the letter into his squire’s hands.

“Who does your father think he is?” he demanded in a hiss, feeling rage boiling through his veins. Olyvar shrank back, nearly dropping the letter before he caught it again in trembling hands.

“I—I don’t know,” Olyvar confessed with wide eyes. “What has he done?”

“He demands I return and wed one of his daughters now,” Robb complained, dimly aware that he was nearly shouting, though somehow he couldn’t stop himself. “The agreement was that I would wed one of them at the end of the war. Is the war over, Olyvar? Have we won?”

Olyvar looked as though he would like to be anywhere but in front of Robb, dealing with his wrath. He opened his mouth as though to answer then closed it again, shaking his head helplessly.
“Stop shouting at the poor boy, Robb,” came a voice, and Robb turned around to see Ser Brynden had entered the room, and without permission. Robb was halfway to shouting at him, too, but the Blackfish was already speaking again. “You can go, lad; let me speak with the king.”

Olyvar looked helplessly between the door and Robb, as if wondering whether he was allowed to obey the directive without Robb’s leave. Feeling some of his anger deflate, Robb sighed, giving Olyvar a nod. The boy was gone almost before Robb had managed to blink.

“What are you doing here?” Robb asked his great uncle without turning around, pinching the bridge of his nose where a headache was beginning to form behind his eyes.

“Well, you stormed through half the castle halls looking about to murder someone,” the older man remarked blithely. “Understandably, people were concerned.”

When Robb didn’t say anything, Ser Brynden took a few steps forward, picking up the letter that Olyvar had dropped in his haste to leave. He stood there silently, reading the letter from Walder Frey with raised eyebrows.

“Ah,” he said finally, understanding.

“What does he expect us to do, simply abandon all our positions here and go all the way back the way we came?” he asked, frustrated. The Blackfish released a wry chuckle.

“Well that would certainly confuse Tywin Lannister, wouldn’t it?”

Robb rounded on him, surprised to hear the man so glib. “Do you think this is some sort of jape?” he demanded, disbelieving.

“I think that yelling at your squire won’t help matters at all,” Ser Brynden pointed out levelly. “He’s Walder Frey’s what? Sixteenth son? Seventeenth?”

“Eighteenth,” Robb corrected glumly, understanding blooming.

“And how much sway do you think he’s ever had over his lord father’s actions? How often does Lord Frey even remember he’s alive?” The Blackfish raised an eyebrow. “I’ve known the old man regrettably too long, and the answer is like to be ‘almost never.’ He prefers creating sons over raising them. Your father loved you; you forget that it isn’t always so.”

The words stung in more ways than one, the ever-present reminder that his father was gone mixed with the realization of how unfair he’d been to the other boy. But even if he apologized to Olyvar, it would do nothing to solve their current crisis.

“The agreement was the end of the war,” Robb repeated unhappily. “What changed?”

“You’ve proven yourself in the field more than once, and you’ve also cost him his heir,” Ser Brynden pointed out.

“I won’t be proving myself in the field much longer if I have to abandon my defensive positions the moment Lord Frey has a flight of fancy.”

The Blackfish grimaced. He plainly did not disagree, but for once he’d decided to hold his tongue. “And your mother has just reminded him how many Starks there are in the line of succession,” he added instead, then paused for a moment. “And you with no sons.”

Robb turned toward the window, annoyed.
“It’s always about politics, isn’t it?” he asked scathingly. “Can’t anyone just be glad for my mother?”

“I’m glad,” Ser Brynden supplied, though with the air of a man who knew his words meant little.

“The Others take Lord Frey, and all his daughters,” Robb said, though his rage had morphed into reluctant acceptance. He took a few deep breaths, steeling himself for everything that was to come, before he turned around to face his great uncle. “So what shall we do about all this?”
Catelyn VI

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue from this chapter is taken directly from ACoK, Catelyn V. Because why mess with it, even when I’ve messed with the rest of canon, when GRRM has already done it better than I could ever hope to manage?

Catelyn was walking circles around her room, trying to soothe her son to sleep, when she heard the sound of the horns that signaled approaching riders. She fetched a blanket to cover the babe’s head, so the sunlight wouldn’t wake him, continuing to rock him and make gentle shushing sounds as she stepped out onto the balcony. She could see men gathering in the courtyard, could see riders approaching. A small troop of men were visible in the distance outside the gates, all mounted, but too far away for her to make out any of their features.

No banners, she noted, frowning as she watched the men grow larger. A few of their own men rode out to meet them, Tully banners flapping in the wind. The approaching group were Roose Bolton’s men, with any luck, or at least Catelyn hoped they were. The reports they had been getting out of the Stormlands had been chaotic and confused; the one point of commonality was that Renly Baratheon was dead, but who had slain him was a matter up for much debate. According to some reports, it had been their men, Northmen and Riverlanders, come to treat with Renly under false pretenses. Other reports blamed a woman who had been in Renly’s tent with him, then fled, though that report seemed as false as the first, if the other rumors Catelyn had heard about Renly Baratheon were true. Another report was that Stannis had sent an assassin to slay his brother in secret in order to sway the Baratheon bannermen to his cause. That story Catelyn had not wanted to believe either, that Ned had died trying to remove one illegitimate ruler only to replace him with a kinslayer.

No man is so accursed as the kinslayer, Catelyn thought with a shiver, though the prospect that their men could have murdered Renly Baratheon made her feel no better. If that was what had truly occurred, something must have gone catastrophically wrong, but Catelyn could imagine nothing quite so terrible as to lead to that outcome.

Edrick was asleep against her shoulder, finally; Catelyn walked back into her room and lowered him gently into his cradle, careful not to wake him again. Little Ned, everyone in the castle had taken to calling him, exactly the thing Catelyn hadn’t wanted, the reason she hadn’t been able to bear naming him Eddard. Or was it? a traitorous voice inside her asked. You could easily have named him Cregan or Torrhen, Rodrik or Harlon, or any number of ancestral Stark names, and yet you called him Edrick.

Catelyn ignored the voice and turned to the boy’s nurse. “He should sleep for some time. I’m going to see to the visitors,” she told the woman. “Have someone fetch me if he needs anything.”

“Of course, m’lady,” the woman said with a curtsy, and Catelyn left with a nod, heading down to find her brother. He was waiting in his solar, not in the great hall; a wise choice, Catelyn reflected, if he’ll have to question his own men on whether or not they’d murdered Renly Baratheon. Best not do it with an audience.

Catelyn pulled up a chair at her brother’s side. “Bolton’s men?” she inquired carefully, and Edmure nodded.
“It appears so,” he confirmed grimly, “but Bolton was not with them.”

That news, Catelyn thought, was far from comforting, and for the first time, she wondered if Roose Bolton truly could have killed Renly Baratheon. What could he have been thinking, if so? That Robb might thank him for killing a rival king? It was true enough that Renly’s claim to the throne was weaker than Stannis’, for Stannis was the elder, but could Lord Bolton truly have believed that Robb would praise him for such an act? Killing a man in battle was one thing, but murdering him in his tent was another thing entirely. Could she have judged Lord Bolton so wrongly?

“They have a woman with them,” Edmure added after a moment, his voice troubled, and that made Catelyn even more uncertain. A woman had murdered Lord Renly in his tent, one of the rumors had said, the daughter of one of his bannermen. Catelyn fought to remember the details of what she’d heard, the details of the rumor she’d earlier dismissed. Tarth, she thought she recalled, the daughter of Lord Selwyn Tarth. Nothing of this made any sort of sense.

Eventually, the door opened and the guard let four men inside, the four highborn companions who had accompanied Lord Bolton to the Stormlands. Catelyn couldn’t have imagined a more mismatched band of traveling companions even if she had tried. Ser Wendel Manderly was one of the roundest men Catelyn had ever seen, outdone only by his father and older brother. He had a large, bushy mustache, possibly to compensate for the utter lack of hair on his head, and he was older than Catelyn by around ten years if she had to guess. In contrast, Lucas Blackwood was almost unreasonably tall, thin and black-haired and scarce a few years older than Robb. And where Blackwood was thin and sinewy and Manderly unreasonably stout, Hallis Mollen was fit and muscular, with a beard that was somehow as neatly trimmed as Manderly’s mustache was bushy, despite the many moons he’d spent traveling. The last of the four men was Perwyn Frey, the elder brother of Robb’s squire Olyvar, and Ser Perwyn’s face was so drab and featureless that Catelyn would have had a difficult time describing him mere moments after he’d walked away, had she been asked. He would have benefitted from growing a beard of his own, Catelyn thought; it might have masked his rather miserable lack of chin. The only thing more obvious than the lack of physical commonality between the men was the absence of Lord Bolton.

“There has been a rumor that our men had a hand in the murder of Renly Baratheon,” Edmure intoned finally, his voice clear and commanding. “I dared not believe it, but now you appear at Riverrun harboring his supposed murderer? Explain yourselves, now.”

He sounds a true lord, Catelyn thought to herself, surprised. He sounds like Father did once, before he’d fallen ill.

The four men clearly thought so as well, because they exchanged uncertain looks, as though not a single one of them wanted to speak first. Lucas Blackwood was the first to find the courage.

“We brought her here because we thought you should hear what she has to say with your own ears, my lord,” the Blackwood boy said, voice uncertain. “Lord Renly was slain, yes, but not by us and not by her.”

Edmure looked rightly skeptical. “If not by you then by whom?”

The men exchanged another nervous look, no answers forthcoming. After a long pause, Ser Perwyn cleared his throat.

“It was Stannis, my lord,” he announced without a shred of indecision. “Stannis and his red woman. I wouldn’t have believed it myself if I hadn’t seen her, my lord. She was…queer. Unnatural.”

The words, at first, seemed to make no sense to Catelyn, but after a few moments, she recalled
another rumor she’d heard some time before—that Stannis Baratheon had taken up with some red priestess from across the Narrow Sea. They worshipped a fire god, she remembered, and were said to work some sort of spells.

It was only then that it struck Catelyn that Ser Perwyn was not saying that the two had physically entered Renly’s tent and slain him. No, he was saying something entirely more sinister.

“You are claiming Renly was murdered…with sorcery?” she ventured disbelievingly. The four men shifted uncomfortably before them.

“The Lady Brienne saw it, my lady,” Ser Wendel spoke up. “And Lord Roose, he saw it too. He wasn’t the sort of man to believe in such things; I know it. Not unless he saw it for true, with his own eyes.”

Catelyn was inclined to believe that, at least; Roose Bolton was a cold man, a calculating one. Not the sort to go jumping at shadows.

“And where is Lord Roose?” Edmure demanded then, asking the question lingering heavily in the air. Wendel Manderly looked abashed and didn’t respond; Hal Mollen rescued the other Northman.

“Renly’s knights thought we murdered him, my lord,” he explained carefully. “Lord Bolton was injured in the confusion as we tried to flee. His wounds…they were too grievous. He died after two days. We wanted to bring his body back with us, but the conditions were too precarious, and the trip too long.”

Catelyn frowned at that; Bolton’s men were encamped to the east the last she’d heard of them, under Robett Glover’s command. The original plan had been for Lord Bolton to rejoin them once the business with Renly had concluded, but that would clearly no longer be happening. Would Bolton’s men remain loyal with their lord dead, his body abandoned somewhere to the south? Bolton had no living sons; even his bastard had been slain, Catelyn knew from one of the last ravens they’d gotten from Ser Rodrik at Winterfell, before…

But no, Catelyn could not think of it, could not fall apart in front of these men. I warned Robb to keep Theon close, came the thought, unbidden. I warned him, and he did not listen, and now my sons are hostages as well as my daughters.

Catelyn wrenched her mind away from that thought just in time to hear Lucas Blackwood pleading with her brother. This one has more bravery than sense, she thought to herself as he spoke.

“Please, my lord,” he entreated, “listen to what Lady Brienne has to say.”

The words seemed to please Edmure not at all. “A woman who parades around in mail and wears a sword like a man, and I should listen to what she says?” he inquired in a scornful voice. Catelyn felt a pang in her chest at those words, her thoughts straying to Arya. She’d never let her daughter have a sword, but she would let Arya wear a thousand swords if only she could have her daughter back in her arms, her future Frey husband be damned.

“I wouldn’t let Lady Maege hear you speak like that,” Catelyn scolded her brother. “We should at least listen.”

It wasn’t long before Catelyn was wondering if she should take back her admonishment when she laid eyes upon the Lady Brienne. She was the largest woman that Catelyn had ever seen, with hair the color of dirty straw and face sprinkled liberally with freckles. Her eyes were large and blue and the only part of her that could be considered remotely beautiful. All her features seemed too large for
her face, her lips wide and plump, her teeth overlarge and crooked. Even the pretty eyes were wide-set enough that they appeared to have been poorly placed on her face, and her nose was so crooked that it was clear it had been broken more than once.

*Gods be good,* Catelyn thought to herself, *could this truly be a woman?*

But the voice, when Edmure bid her to speak, was inarguably a woman’s voice.

“It was a shadow, my lord,” she told them, her voice holding none of the hesitance that had been in the voices of the men who had accompanied her. “A shadow with the face of Stannis Baratheon.”

Edmure’s eyes flicked to meet Catelyn’s before falling back onto the queer woman in men’s garb who stood before them.

“Sorcery,” he intoned skeptically. “And the only other person who saw this is conveniently dead.”

But the Lady Brienne was not at all dissuaded by Edmure’s disbelieving tone; in fact, Catelyn would have been hard-pressed to guess whether she’d picked up on his skepticism at all.

“He testified to the other men before he perished,” she told them evenly. “Ask them if you do not believe me.”

Catelyn could sense her brother struggling to accept the words, as was she. *Could this be some sort of plot?* she wondered helplessly. *If so, to what end? And how had this woman gotten Lord Bolton to go along?*

“I have,” Edmure admitted begrudgingly, “and they have told me the same tale. You truly believe this is what you saw, my lady?”

He called her ‘my lady’ with the same scorn with which he’d spoken the word ‘sorcery.’ The girl had no noticeable reaction to the slight.

“I know what I saw,” she said, her tone uncompromising. Edmure seemed perplexed.

“And why have you come all the way from the Stormlands to tell us this?”

It was the first time Brienne had looked uncertain since she had walked into the room, her teeth worrying her swollen-looking lower lip. “I had hoped…” she ventured, then took a breath. “I had hoped you would help me to get revenge.”

Edmure looked stunned, but Catelyn was not. She was no stranger to the desire for vengeance, and the list of those upon whom she wished to dole it out had recently gotten longer. She could understand the desire for vengeance, yes; but they were not the ones to give it to this girl.

“Stannis is not our enemy, child,” she ventured when Edmure made no move to respond. “I cannot speak to what my son would say if he were here, but the enemy we seek to fight is the Lannisters, not Stannis Baratheon.”

If Catelyn had expected Brienne to be dejected at the realization that her entire trip had been for naught, she did not show any indication of it on her face.

“He is not your friend, either,” she told Catelyn with a certainty. “If he thinks your son stands between him and the throne, he may not hesitate to murder him with the same impunity.”

The words had an effect on Catelyn, although she tried not to show it on her face. Two daughters
captive in the south, two sons in the north, and Catelyn was acutely aware that any of them could be killed at any time. And Robb, though returning to Riverrun at their last report, was far from immune to danger, for one way or the other, he was most like to meet Tywin’s host on the road. All Catelyn could do was pray that Robb would be the one with the element of surprise and the high ground when that happened, that Lord Tywin had not yet gotten wind of his movements. Only Edrick was safe, asleep in his cradle above...if only until Riverrun came under siege. She took a deep breath.

“King Robb is...away, my lady, and I cannot say when he will be back,” she admitted, wary of offering any additional information. “You may wait here for his return, if you so desire, but I don’t know that his answer will be what you wish.”

Edmure made a strangled little noise in the back of his throat, and Catelyn could guess why; it was not her place, nor was it wise, to offer a place of refuge to a woman suspected of having murdered Renly Baratheon. If news of her being in Riverrun reached the wrong ears, it would only seem more proof that their own men had had a hand in it. But Catelyn could stand to do nothing less, for this was not a man standing before her, not even a woman. She is a girl, Catelyn thought helplessly, and alone and in danger. To what was most likely Edmure’s relief, however, the girl refused.

“Then I must take my leave of you, my lady,” Brienne declared, her tone clear and without hesitation. Though somehow unsurprised, Catelyn was not pleased by the response.

“If you left us, where would you go?” she couldn’t help but ask. The girl’s answer was immediate.

“Back. To Storm’s End.”

Catelyn blinked. “Alone,” she intoned. It was not a question.

“Yes,” Brienne confirmed flatly, emotionlessly.

“You mean to kill Stannis.”

Brienne gritted her teeth in grim determination. “I was a member of King Renly’s Rainbow Guard,” she said with conviction. “I swore a vow.”

The words brought up a strange sense of panic in Catelyn’s chest, one she had a difficult time identifying the source of at first. Arya, she thought again, trying to calm the erratic beating of her heart. She reminds me of my own daughter. How could I let this girl throw herself into the clutches of certain death?

“Vows should be kept, I agree, but Stannis has a great host around him, and his own guards to keep him safe,” she reasoned gently, but that seemed not to deter Brienne in the slightest.

“I am not afraid of his guards. I am as good as any of them. I never should have fled.”

But she had, Catelyn thought, on the desperate hope that another king would help her avenge her fallen one. And yet she would not find the help she sought at Riverrun.

“Is that what troubles you, that some fool might call you craven? Renly’s death was no fault of yours. You served him valiantly, but when you seek to follow him into the earth, you serve no one. I know how hard it is—”

Brienne’s blue eyes turned sharp as steel. “No one knows,” she hissed, and her ugly face looked even uglier then, twisted in anger...and sadness. She loved him, Catelyn realized then, the poor fool. Catelyn didn’t know Renly Baratheon, but she knew enough of him to know that he would never have had this girl, and yet she loved him all the same. Catelyn felt a surge of understanding.
blossoming in her chest; she’d loved Ned just as fiercely, if not more so.

“You’re wrong,” Catelyn intoned before she even realized what she was saying. “Every morning, when I wake, I remember that Ned is gone. I have no skill with swords, but that does not mean that I do not dream of riding to King’s Landing and wrapping my hands around Cersei Lannister’s white throat and squeezing until her face turns black.”

Catelyn could sense Edmure's gaze out of the corner of her eye, could see the undisguised shock there even without turning her head. Her brother was wondering if he'd ever known her at all, like as not. Catelyn was not the same idealistic girl who’d left Riverrun nigh fifteen years before—couldn’t possibly be, not after all that had happened. Brienne’s expression softened slightly.

“If you dream that, why would you seek to hold me back?” she asked then, her voice even and frustratingly logical. Catelyn turned to Edmure, whose expression said it all: he wanted Lady Brienne out of his castle, and he wasn’t certain who is sister was anymore, not at all.
Catelyn VII

Chapter Notes

Some of the dialogue is lifted directly and unceremoniously from ASoS, Catelyn II. I promise I'll be running out of dialogue to steal from GRRM soon. Not yet, but soon.

Catelyn wanted so desperately to be cheered when she saw Robb riding through the gates. He looked so much more a man now, she reflected as her eyes roved over him, his auburn hair long and shaggy and his beard fuller than it had been when he’d left. She wanted to rejoice that both her sons were back in Riverrun, safe behind its comforting walls.

Both my sons, Catelyn thought with despair as she watched Robb dismount, for here in Riverrun are the only sons I have left.

She forced the thought away and instead watched as her brother stepped forward.

“Riverrun is yours, Your Grace,” Edmure said formally and a little stiffly, as if he still had trouble paying homage to a boy. Not a boy any longer, Catelyn corrected herself silently, but six and ten, and a man grown. Robb’s nameday had come and gone just a few days past; she wondered if he’d even realized. Robb went to his uncle, as custom dictated, and took his hand.

“You have my thanks, my lord, for looking after my mother in my absence,” he said, sneaking a glance over Edmure’s shoulder to regard her. Catelyn supposed that her expression must have been terribly transparent, for Robb’s face fell immediately, and he released his uncle’s hand and came to her.

“What’s happened?” he demanded without preamble as the rest of the men in the courtyard were dismounting, although Robb seemed to have entirely forgotten they were there. The Frey boy had already taken charge of his horse, she saw, even though Robb had given him not a single direction.

Catelyn knew she should answer him, but the words seemed to slip away before she could grasp them. All she could manage was to bite down on her tongue, trying to hold back tears. I shall not weep now, she told herself sharply, not in the amassed company of all the northern lords.

But when Catelyn didn’t answer, Robb began venturing guesses. “Is it Edrick?” he inquired with a terrified expression, looking all of ten years old again. She managed only to shake her head, and Robb looked puzzled. “Your father?” She shook her head once more and took a deep breath, mustering her courage.

“Not here, Robb,” she managed, surprised by how raw her own voice sounded to her ears. “Come inside.”

Robb nodded stiffly, flagging down Olyvar and giving him a litany of tasks that entirely escaped Catelyn’s notice. She let Robb take her by the arm, and without much thought about it, she led him to her own rooms, Grey Wind following at their heels. She’d scarcely left her chambers for three days since Maester Vyman had come with the raven from the north, unwilling to let her little boy out of her sight for a moment. It had only been at Edmure’s prodding that she’d managed to leave him for long enough to receive her eldest son at the gate. She dismissed Edrick’s nurse once they were
Robb seemed to forget entirely that anything was amiss the moment she was gone, as his eyes fell upon his little brother, asleep in his cradle. Robb’s face was all Tully, held no hint of his father in it, but still Catelyn could not help but think of Ned when she saw the wonder in Robb’s expression as he came up next to his sleeping brother. He reached out, his fingers brushing at the thatch of soft hair on Edrick’s head.

“He’s beautiful, mother,” Robb said in a whisper, as if afraid that speaking any louder would break the moment. Or mayhaps he remembered when Rickon had still been a babe, how easy the boy had been to rouse from sleep.

Rickon, Catelyn thought in despair, and when Robb met her eyes again, he must have remembered.

“Tell me,” Robb commanded her, though gently. “What’s happened?”

“It’s Bran and Rickon,” she finally told him, her words nearly catching in her throat. And once she started speaking, she couldn’t seem to stop, telling him all of it, knowing he wouldn’t have had any word. She told him of the news of the ironborn raiding along the Stony Shore, of the raven that told of Ser Rodrik heading to put them down at Torrhen’s Square. Of the news that Theon had taken Winterfell, taken her two sons captive, and then…

She couldn’t manage to get the last words out to tell him what had happened, but he seemed to have understood anyway, shock and anger and horror all seeming at war upon his features, as though he was unable to process all the feelings at once.

“You—you must have it wrong, mother,” he intoned finally, meekly. “Theon can’t have—he wouldn’t—”

“He did,” Catelyn told her son darkly, and it was on the tip of her tongue to say to him, *I told you to send someone else, anyone else. I told you to keep Theon close.* But she didn’t, because suddenly Edrick’s eyes were open and he was wailing loudly.

Robb jumped back from the cradle, startled by the sudden noise, but Grey Wind came closer, pressing his nose toward the babe in what seemed an attempt to soothe him. That only made Edrick wail more loudly, and Catelyn gathered the boy into her arms. She began to sway him gently, attempting to soothe him when she wanted nothing more than to wail alongside him. When he didn’t quiet, she sat down at the edge of her bed, unlacing her bodice to give him her breast. Robb sank numbly into a chair.

“T...
and Edmure, at least, should have known better, would have known precisely what it was that she had to tell her son.

“Yes?” she called out then, her voice sounding unsteady even to her own ears.

“My lady, your uncle Ser Brynden is without, begging audience with you and the king.”

Robb looked up at the final pronouncement, his eyes red-rimmed and shining with barely-contained tears. Catelyn met his gaze, and he gave her a helpless look, then a sharp nod, a pain in his eyes that she easily understood. Robb did not stop being king simply because of what had happened, didn’t have the luxury of saying that he needed time. Not when Brynden Tully was the one calling at her door seeking him, for there was no way that he would come so soon on trivial business, not when they’d just been traveling together for many moons.

Catelyn brushed her hands across Edrick’s silky, soft hair, sighing quietly to herself. He was starting to doze again already, his suckling growing weaker and slower.

“Send him in,” Catelyn called quietly, trying to keep from rousing her drowsing son. The words seemed to have been loud enough for the guard, though, because moments later the door opened to reveal her uncle. She watched as he took in the scene before him, watched his eyes flick to the babe at her breast, to Robb’s red-rimmed eyes. In a rare moment, he seemed to hesitate, and Robb just sighed deeply.

“What is it, Ser?” he inquired, his voice resigned to the business of kingship. The Blackfish still seemed uncertain as to whether he should ask them what was going on, leave them in peace, or answer Robb’s question. In the end, he honored the directive of his king.

“I’ve found why we did not encounter the Lannister host on the road,” he told Robb purposefully. “Like as not, they’ve turned toward King’s Landing, where Stannis Baratheon has already directed his forces. Tywin Lannister may be beating back Stannis’ host even now.”

Robb frowned deeply. “How did he know to turn south?”

Ser Brynden looked grim as Catelyn went to lay Edrick back in his cradle, closing her bodice once more.

“He was heading west until my idiot nephew scuffled with him along the Red Fork near Stone Mill. Undeterred, we would have been able to catch him in the mountain passes. Instead, he must have been delayed long enough to get news of Stannis marching.”

This all seemed to be news to Robb, and news that didn’t please him at all.

“Why would Edmure fight Tywin at Stone Mill?” he asked with a raised eyebrow, turning his gaze toward her. The grieving brother was gone, Catelyn saw, and the King in the North had made his reappearance.

“He thought Tywin Lannister might turn north for us, sought to beat him back,” she answered uncertainly. Robb looked flabbergasted by the words.

“He thought Tywin meant to cross the Red Fork and then turn north to Riverrun?” he asked with a blank look, as though he absolutely couldn’t fathom that. “Did he, at any point, consult a map? Tywin was plainly heading for us.”

Catelyn frowned, for it was the first she’d heard of this, too; Edmure was far stingier in sharing his plans with her than Robb and her uncle were. She hadn’t realized Edmure had engaged the Lannister
forces quite so far south of Riverrun. Robb must have seen the confusion in her gaze, because his anger softened.

“We planned for the eventuality of meeting Tywin Lannister in the mountains,” he explained slowly. “Grey Wind was good at finding even the oldest goat trails, and we split our forces so as to encircle him in an ambush. He wouldn’t have known that we were marching yet; we had the element of surprise.”

Catelyn looked at her uncle in inquiry, and his expression was grim. “We’re not like to have such a chance again,” he admitted.

He sounded more certain of the possibility of success than Catelyn felt; Tywin Lannister had had the larger force, and her son’s cavalry had not the same advantage in the mountains as it would have had in an open field. She knew little of tactics, but she knew that much, at least. She couldn’t help but wonder if Edmure had, in fact, prevented the slaughter of her son’s entire force, but she was wise enough not to say that aloud.

“Why did you not tell Edmure your plans?” she asked instead. Robb gave her a penetrating look.

“And have a raven intercepted by the Lannisters?” he asked disbelievingly. “No. We told him to hold Riverrun, and instead he ruined us. A decisive victory over Tywin Lannister might have brought the Tyrells to our cause, but instead Edmure won a few scuffles and may have allowed our enemies to rejoin their forces in time to prevent their destruction.” Robb sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “At least we still hold the Kingslayer, or has Edmure botched that, too?”

Catelyn couldn’t help but wince at that, thinking of how close Edmure had come to letting Jaime Lannister slip through his fingers, how close the Lannister plot to escape with him had come to working. But worse than that was the guilt that hung heavy in her chest, the knowledge of how close she’d come to betraying her son in this.

To which of my children do I say they are the least important to me? she wondered as she had half a hundred times before. She’d chosen to abandon Bran and Rickon once, and now they were dead. If releasing the Kingslayer could buy the lives of her daughters, how could she abandon them, too?

But that was where the idea had begun, and that was where it had died. Jaime Lannister was a kingslayer and an oathbreaker; if she released him, he would be more like to rejoin his father on the field than he ever would to return her girls to her, and there was no one she could trust to see that Lannister kept to his word even if she’d compelled him to give it. Robb would not agree to release him, not for two girls, and none of his men would dare defy him in that.

“We still have him,” she said stiffly. If only barely, she added silently to herself, but she would not speak those words, either. Let Edmure be the one to explain what had happened, and he could be the one to bear the brunt of Robb’s displeasure.

And he did. Catelyn had never thought to see her sixteen-year-old son so berate her brother, who already fancied himself Lord Paramount of the Trident while their father still lived. And she’d never thought to see her brother so cowed, either, sinking into a chair in the corner and sulking like a boy as Robb continued to discuss their next moves with her uncle late into the night.

“The first thing I will need to do is get this wretched marriage taken care of,” Robb said with clear distaste, his expression almost as sulky as his uncle’s. “How am I meant to be taken seriously as a king if one of my bannermen can recall me from war with a simple letter?”

Catelyn would have scarce thought she’d ever be defending the actions of Walder Frey, but she was
nothing if not glad of his intervention; without it, her son would still be in the Westerlands, leaving the ironmen to raid the north. Leaving his brothers unavenged. With how things had turned out, Catelyn had at least a chance to convince him to move north instead of south.

“This isn’t just any of your bannermen, Robb,” she reminded him evenly. “He’s contributed a good portion of your force, and he controls the crossing. The northern houses are more like to remain loyal to our cause even if you refuse a summons from them, but Lord Walder is a fickle man. Once you have wed his daughter, he shall be easier to refuse. Especially once you put a babe in her belly. That should leave him content.”

The words left a queer feeling in her stomach, for she still could not imagine seeing her son wed, much less becoming a father. But she would take that over seeing him dead, and she did not trust Lord Walder if he was spurned. She desperately hoped she didn’t have to convince her son of the folly of refusing, at the least. Robb gave her a distasteful look, though he did not argue.

“The question is, of course, what we shall do after the wedding.”

This was her chance, and Catelyn saw it clear as a midsummer day. Her uncle would not argue for her vengeance, for the security of the north, so she would have to.

“So long as Theon Greyjoy sits in your father’s seat with your brothers’ blood on his hands, other foes must wait,” she said, as evenly as she could manage. “Your first duty is to defend your own people, win back Winterfell, and hang Theon in a crow’s cage to die slowly. Or else put off that crown for good, Robb, for men will know that you are no true king at all.”

Robb looked at her as though he was surprised she’d dare speak to him so pointedly. Good, Catelyn thought to herself. Mayhaps he will see sense.

“The last word you had from the north, Ser Rodrik had defeated a force of ironmen near Torrhen’s Square,” said Robb skeptically. “Surely he will have turned back toward Winterfell already, and he is nearer than us by leagues. And what of the Trident, if I turn north? I can’t ask the river lords to abandon their own people.”

Catelyn stood her ground.

“No. Leave them to guard their own, and win back the north with northmen.”

She said the words with stern confidence; the northmen would support her cause, she knew, when they heard the peril their families faced, if they had not heard already. If Robb was not so easily convinced, it may be that she could rally the northern lords’ support. Would Robb dare defy their wishes, if most of them desired to look north and not south?

The suggestion that Edmure should be left to defend himself against what might possibly be the combined forces of all the south seemed to shock him out of his petulance.

“How will you get the northmen to the north?” he challenged. “The ironmen control the sunset sea. The Greyjoys hold Moat Cailin as well. No army has ever taken Moat Cailin from the south. Even to march against it is madness.”

The words had clearly been meant to deter Robb, but they seemed to have the opposite effect; he frowned deeply, and a look of determination found its way upon his face.

“There must be some other way,” he murmured distantly, seeming to be talking to himself more than he was speaking to them. “As Grey Wind found us another route through the mountains, there must be another route around Moat Cailin. They will not expect an attack from the north.”
Catelyn fought to keep her smile from emerging on her face, knowing she had won the argument. Robb would march north, and he would have her vengeance for her dead sons.
Robb III

Chapter Notes

An absolutely obscene amount of dialogue from was taken directly from ASoS, Catelyn V. Robb’s entire plan, basically, because wanting to see the plan followed through was a huge part of why I started writing this in the first place.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Robb had never felt such a boy, and his crown had never felt so heavy on his head as it did as he sat at the front of the hall, watching all his bannermen filter in. His mother, great uncle, and uncle flanked him on the dais, and Robb had never felt so glad as he did now for his Tully looks. I am about to tell the riverlords that I will be abandoning them to their own defense, Robb reflected darkly to himself. They will forgive me for it better here flanked by Tullys, with my Tully auburn hair and my Tully blue eyes.

It was the first time in a long while that such a thought had struck him; he’d long wished he could look more like his father, more like Jon. Anyone might have thought Jon to be the trueborn Stark and Robb to be the bastard from the look of them, a fact Robb had been acutely aware of the first time he’d sat in his father’s chair looking every bit a Tully. While he watched the various lords filter into the room, Robb let his mind wander for a moment to his brother, wondering how Jon was faring on the Wall. Even a bastard can rise high in the Night’s Watch. That was what Jon had said to him before he’d left, with a hopeful look in his eyes.

Mayhaps he will rise high, Robb thought to himself. Or mayhaps he is dead, like Bran and Rickon. Like Uncle Benjen too, like as not.

Once, he would have thought that Jon’s wolf would have protected him, but after Bran and Rickon, he wasn’t certain of that anymore. If Summer and Shaggydog couldn’t defend his brothers from Theon, how could Ghost hope to protect Jon from fierce clans of wildlings? The best he could hope for, he supposed, was that their wolves had died with them, that they had been a comfort to each other at the end.

Summer and Shaggydog are not dead, said Robb’s traitorous mind. Grey Wind would know.

Grey wind had felt it when his sister had died, but he’d never had that feeling again. He couldn’t feel his white brother, not now, but he knew he wasn't gone forever. And his little sister—she wasn’t far, he knew it. But she was wary of man, wary of their man-rock. And she had her small cousins, and they needed her.

Robb looked over at Grey Wind and shivered, a queer feeling in his chest. I am not Grey Wind, he had to remind himself desperately. I am not a wolf. I am Robb Stark, and I am a man. I am King in the North.

And he was. His men were all standing below him riverlanders and northmen both, regarding him with expectant eyes, and he realized he’d been silent for far too long. Robb cleared his throat pointedly.

“We’ve received a raven from the south,” announced Robb without preamble, and an uncertain
murmur rippled across the room. “Stannis’ forces were defeated on the Blackwater and have retreated. The Tyrells have joined forces with the Lannisters. The false king Joffrey is set to marry Lord Tyrell’s daughter, Margaery.”

The sounds became louder as everyone reacted to the news, but they quieted when Robb held up a hand. He was still becoming accustomed to that; it didn’t seem all that long ago when some of these same men might have told him to run home and play with his toys. But none of them made any move to do so now, the room hanging upon his every word with bated breath.

“My sister has been set aside, by their report,” he explained, and he could see his mother’s expression out of the corner of his eye. She looked no less worried by the news than she had when he’d first told it to her. “It seems they believed the Tyrell match more advantageous.”

And rightly so, Robb added to himself. Thousands of troops in their camp immediately instead of the hope for a future claim to the north if he and Edrick both died was an easy gamble to take. It was difficult to believe that his youngest brother, scarce four moons old, was already such a force, yet another blockade standing in the way of the Lannisters’ potential claim to Winterfell. Because they could still always try for it, if Edrick no longer lived and Robb himself were to fall in battle. Cersei Lannister had another son. The thought alone was chilling.

“Will your sister be safe?”

Robb looked up at Maege Mormont’s words. It was sometimes difficult to remember that such a fierce fighter was also a mother.

“She is still a useful hostage, and thus should be safe and well-treated regardless of the broken betrothal, or so they say.” But my father was an even more useful hostage, and Joffrey executed him all the same.

Robb kept that thought to himself. He simply had to hope that their desire for the Kingslayer’s survival was stronger than any desire they might have to harm his sisters. “In any case, the wedding is set for the first day of the new year. It buys us some time, since the Tyrells most likely will not consent to march until the Lady Margaery is wedded and bedded, and it would be too great an insult for Lord Tywin to leave before the wedding.”

More rumblings went through the room at that, until Galbart Glover’s booming voice effectively silenced them all.

“What shall we do, Your Grace?” he demanded. “The ironmen have taken the north, Winterfell and Deepwood Motte included. My brother's wife and children are hostages in their own home. We cannot sit here waiting for the bastard king to marry so his grandfather can march.”

It was an impassioned speech, and Robb could hear some of his northmen echoing their agreement. Some of the riverlords began exchanging looks; they could already see what was coming, he guessed. Most of them appeared resigned to it.

“Nor will we,” he confirmed with all the confidence he could muster. “After my wedding, we march for the north. I have already sent word to your brother at Harrenhal, and with any luck, he can meet us so you can both take back your castle with your own hands. He cannot make it to the Twins, not in time for the wedding, but mayhaps he will catch us at Moat Cailin.” Robb paused, turning his attention to Rickard Karstark. “Lord Rickard, your son Harrion rides with him. I will not begrudge it if you would prefer him to return to Karhold, once the north is retaken.”

It was the first time Robb had seen Rickard Karstark smile in a long while, he reflected, but the
riverlords were not smiling. *I pat my northmen with one hand while I slap the rivermen with another.*

“Moat Cailin?” echoed Lord Glover, seemingly too preoccupied by that to be nearly so overjoyed by the impending return of his own brother. Robb flicked his eyes to one of the riverlords.

“Lord Mallister,” he began, and Jason Mallister, already a tall man, stood up even straighter as he realized he was being addressed. Robb said a silent prayer to the old gods that the riverlords would still support him after he’d told them he was about to abandon them to their own defenses. “You have a fleet at Seagard?”

The question seemed to perplex him for a moment before a dark cloud passed over his face.

“A fleet, Your Grace? Half a dozen longships and two war galleys. Enough to defend my own shores against raiders, but I could not hope to meet the Iron Fleet in battle.”

Unfailingly polite and courteous, Robb thought, but he was honest, and Robb appreciated that about the man.

“Nor would I ask it of you,” he assured the older man. “My lord, I need two of your longships to sail around the Cape of Eagles and up the Neck to Greywater Watch.”

If anything, the directive seemed to perplex the man even further.

“A dozen streams drain the wetwood, all shallow, silty, and uncharted. I would not even call them rivers. The channels are ever drifting and changing. There are endless sandbars, deadfalls, and tangles of rotting trees. And Greywater Watch *moves.*” Lord Mallister looked around nervously, as if wondering whether the other lords in the room would judge him a craven for his misgivings. “How are my ships to find it?”

It was a fair question, and one Robb had spent the better part of a day and night mulling over, thinking of everything he knew of the swamps of the Neck, of the crannogmen, of Howland Reed. The answer to that was little and less, for no crannogman had ever visited Winterfell that Robb could recall. But his father had called Howland Reed one of his closest friends, had told Robb once that Lord Reed had saved his life during Robert’s Rebellion. If his father had believed Lord Reed to be a loyal and true man, then Robb had no choice but to believe it, too. And he was staking his entire plan upon it.

“Go upriver flying my banner. The crannogmen will find you,” Robb said with more confidence than he felt. “I want two ships to double the chances of my message reaching Howland Reed. Lady Maege shall go on one, Galbart on the second. You’ll carry letters for those lords of mine who remain in the north, but all the commands within will be false, in case you have the misfortune to be taken. If that happens, you must tell them that you were sailing for the north. Back to Bear Island, or for the Stony Shore. Moat Cailin is the key. Lord Balon knew that, which is why he sent his brother Victarion there with the hard heart of the Greyjoy strength.”

Some of the rivermen were looking at him with different eyes then, mayhaps not expecting him to be capable of such caution, such circumspection. They had not fought with him in the westerlands, and mayhaps some had still thought him a boy. *No more,* Robb promised himself. *They will see me as a man before I leave here. They will believe that I will return to protect them and finish this war.*

Lord Glover remained the most skeptical.

“You cannot mean to attack up the causeway, Your Grace. The approaches are too narrow. There is no way to deploy. No one has ever taken the Moat.”
His tone bordered on insolence, but in truth, Robb was glad for it. The moment his men became wary of questioning him was the moment he stopped receiving good advice. His father had taught him that.

“From the south,” Robb corrected him with a penetrating gaze. “But if we can attack from the north and west simultaneously, and take the ironmen in the rear while they are beating off what they think is my main thrust up the causeway, then we have a chance. I mean to divide our men into three battles and start up the causeway a half-day apart. If the Greyjoys have eyes south of the Neck, they will see my whole strength rushing headlong at Moat Cailin. Rickard will have the rearguard, while I command the center. Greatjon, you shall lead the van against Moat Cailin. Your attack must be so fierce that the ironborn have no leisure to wonder if anyone is creeping down on them from the north.”

The Greatjon’s mouth spread into a huge smile.

“Your creepers best come fast, or my men will swarm those walls and win the Moat before you show your face. I’ll make a gift of it to you when you come dawdling up.” He said the words with such confidence that Robb almost believed him capable. He gave the Greatjon a warm smile.

“That’s a gift I should be glad to have,” he told the older man gracefully.

“You talk of attacking the ironmen in the rear, but how do you mean to get north of them?” Robb heard his uncle ask, and he turned his head to give the other man a piercing look. Edmure shrank back visibly.

“There are ways through the Neck that are not on any map, Uncle,” Robb told him after a moment, trying to keep the venom out of his voice. It would do no good for the riverlords to see any discord between him and his uncle as his grandfather lay dying upstairs. “Ways known only to the crannogmen—narrow trails between the bogs, and wet roads through the reeds that only boats can follow. Tell Howland Reed that he is to send guides to me, two days after I have started up the causeway. To the center battle, where my own standard flies. Three hosts will leave the Twins, but only two will reach Moat Cailin. Mine own battle will melt away into the Neck, to reemerge on the Fever. We will fall upon the Moat from three sides.”

Another murmur passed through the crowd of them. Even some of the rivermen looked approving, though they largely remained silent.

“I like this plan,” the Greatjon admitted with a sly smile. “I like it well.”

Unsurprisingly, Lord Glover remained more circumspect. “There are risks. If the crannogmen should fail you...”

Robb was fully aware of the risks, had scarcely slept the past two nights thinking through every possible thing that could go wrong. He’d even let himself into his mother’s room the previous night simply to watch his brother sleep, having given up hope for sleep for himself. He’d gone back to his own room just before dawn and dozed for no more than an hour.

“We will be no worse than before,” Robb interrupted. “But they will not fail. My father knew the worth of Howland Reed.”

Robb looked around the room, as if daring any man there to contradict his father’s word, with Eddard Stark unable to defend himself or his friend. As Robb had expected, not a single one of them dared. He met the eyes of his many lords, each in turn.
“Does anyone have any further objections?” he pressed. “If not, I would like to speak with my family alone. Ready your men. The northmen and the Freys will ride for the Twins in two days.”

Robb felt his mother looking at him in approval as the lords began filtering out of the room, quiet conversation passing between men who moved toward the doors in groups of twos and threes. It was only when the door closed behind the last of them that Robb allowed himself to slouch a little in his seat, the whole exercise having left him feeling exhausted. Grey Wind appeared at his side, then, pushing his wet nose against Robb’s hand. Robb scratched behind his ears and turned to his great uncle.

“Ser Brynden,” he addressed the man formally. “You would doubtlessly be a great help to me in the coming campaign, but I have greater need of you here. Once their marriage pact is sealed, the full force of the Lannisters and the Tyrells are like to march with all their strength upon Riverrun. The riverlands will need every ounce of your strategic mind to hold them until I may return. You will be vastly outnumbered, and there is a good chance they may resume their siege. After all, Jaime Lannister still sits in our dungeons.”

Brynden Tully looked at Robb as though he approved of the decision, although Robb did not know that he could have expected anything else. Edmure Tully may have been many things, but a man who could be trusted to hold the riverlands, he was not. It was clear enough that Edmure understood the rebuke; he voiced no objection though his frown deepened.

“Mayhaps you should bring him north with you,” the Blackfish suggested, but Robb shook his head. He had thought of this too, agonized over it during his sleepless nights.

“No,” he said with a sense of finality. “He shall stay here. Should the situation become too dire and I do not look to be returning soon enough to relieve you, you have my leave to trade the Kingslayer for the girls if you can see some benefit in the exchange. I shall trust your judgment on this, Ser.”

Where Edmure looked cowed, Robb’s great uncle seemed proud, confident.

“It will not come to that,” he said with conviction, though Robb sensed false bravado. As he should; he’d just done his best to project it to a room full of his bannermen.

“I should hope not,” he acknowledged, because that was the best he could do—hope. Hope that the riverlands could hold out whilst he beat the ironmen out of the north and was able to march back south. But unless Stannis was less crippled than he seemed, Robb couldn’t foresee anything that would stall the Lannisters and Tyrells once the wedding was over with. Robb turned to his mother, slightly more nervous about this pronouncement.

“Mother.” Catelyn looked at him warily, as though she knew she would not like what he would have to say. “I would have you and Edrick safe, but I don’t believe that safety will be found here. A siege is no place for an infant.” He paused, then shifted under her penetrating gaze, feeling all of ten years old again. “You could remain at the Twins after the wedding—”

“No,” she said sharply, not at all cowed by him, as ever. He could be the king of the entire Seven Kingdoms, but she was still his mother, and she was not like to let him forget that. “I do not trust Lord Frey. Bring us with you to Moat Cailin. We will stay far from the fighting as we can. Once we join our force with the crannogmen, they can escort Edrick and his wet nurse to Greywater Watch. The Lannisters will never find it. Regardless of what befalls us, Edrick shall be safe.”

It was such an obvious solution that Robb cursed himself for not having thought of it himself. Greywater Watch moves, Jason Mallister had told them. It was said that no man could find Greywater Watch save the crannogmen, that men died in the bogs from poison arrows and lizard
lions before they ever got anywhere near it. Riverrun could come under siege, and even the north had proven to be vulnerable, but Greywater Watch might be the safest place in the realm from the Lannisters.

“You should be safe too, Mother,” Robb urged, but he knew already before she responded that his mother was having none of it.

“I should be in Winterfell if I am anywhere,” she said with grim determination. “Once we have taken it back and the north is safe, we can have an escort bring Edrick home as well. If you command me to remain at Winterfell after that, I shall. I swear it. But don't ask me to remain at the Twins.”

She was pleading with him by the end, her conviction having fallen into uncertainty. She knows I can command her, Robb realized, and I should. She should be away from the fighting. But how could he deny her, truly? He had lost his brothers, and she had lost her sons, and if she wanted to see justice done with her own eyes, he was not about to tell her that she could not.

“You will stay as far as possible from the fighting,” he said seriously. “You will have a guard on you, day and night. And if it gets too dangerous, if I order you to leave, you will listen to me without question.”

“I swear it,” his mother said without hesitation, “by the old gods and the new.”

So this is it, thought Robb. It is decided.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb IV, in which Robb meets some more lovely Freys and chooses his wife from amongst a wealth of...erm...eligible bachelorettes.
Robb IV

Chapter Notes

Much dialogue stolen from *ASoS*, Catelyn VI, with obvious changes where obvious changes were needed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was after they crossed the Blue Fork at Fairmarket that they saw it, a small group of men riding toward them, banners flapping in the wind. Riding next to Robb at the front of the column, Olyvar was the first to spot them, two blue towers on a silver-grey field. Robb narrowed his eyes as Olyvar pointed his family’s banners out to him, feeling a bubbling sense of unease. Olyvar was kind and loyal, and Ser Perwyn was a good man, but Robb’s mother had given him a healthy dose of mistrust for Freys, and Lord Walder had done not a single thing to earn Robb’s trust.

“It is kind of your father to have sent an escort all this way,” Robb remarked as neutrally as he could manage. It was a group of about a half-dozen men, Robb could make out at a distance, but even with a small group ahorse, they’d likely traveled at least a week’s time from the Twins to reach Robb’s party. It would take the northern host another fortnight to arrive to the Twins if they were lucky.

“I don’t think it’s an escort,” Olyvar admitted with a furrowed brow, eyeing the approaching group nervously. “My father is not so courteous.”

Robb had to hold back his urge to snort at that; it seemed that Lord Walder did not encourage much loyalty or warmth in his sons, either. He called out for a spyglass and one of his men rode up with one, which Robb handed to Olyvar. “Who are they?” he asked matter-of-factly. Olyvar took the spyglass to observe the approaching men.

“My half-nephew, Rhaegar,” Olyvar said slowly after a beat. “My half-brother Ser Hosteen. Ser Symond; he’s Alesander’s father. Walder Rivers, one of my father’s bastards, and Lothar, another half-brother. My half-brother Jammos, you should be careful of him. He’s the father of one of the boys who was sent to Winterfell. I’m certain he can’t be happy about what’s happened up there.”

Robb raised an eyebrow; he hadn’t expected his squire to be so frank about his own family.

“And he should blame me?” he asked in disbelief. “As though *I’m* happy about it?”

Olyvar shrugged and handed the spyglass back so Robb could look. He winced as he moved the spyglass from one to the other, hoping that Lord Frey had at least one daughter who was fair to look upon. Olyvar was not precisely comely, either, but compared to the company riding toward them, he may have been the most beautiful man in the world.

“Who will be the leader of this group?” Robb asked carefully, and Olyvar shrugged again.

“Ser Hosteen is the eldest—he’s the broad, square-faced one,” he told Robb without preamble. “But he’s more of a fighter than a talker. Mayhaps Lothar? He can at least string two words together without tripping. He’s the fat one, with the curly hair and the beard.”

Robb ordered their host to stop, to wait for the group of Freys to come to them. He held up a hand in
greeting when they were close enough.

“We did not think to receive an escort,” Robb said evenly as they approached, and the fat one, the one with the curly hair and the beard, spoke. *Lothar*, Robb thought.

“We received a raven, Your Grace, from Castle Cerwyn,” he announced. His tone was respectful enough, but there was something about it, something that put Robb on edge. His mother had the right of it about the Freys; of that much Robb was certain. “My father believed you should see it at once.” He paused for a moment, then spoke again. “Winterfell is burned, Your Grace, and Theon Turncloak has abandoned it.”

Robb felt his heart stop in his chest, for nothing about that news made any sense. Ser Rodrik must have been poised to take back the castle; Robb was certain of it. But Rodrik would never have burned Winterfell, for it was his home, too. But why would Theon have burned it and then fled? How could he have gotten past Ser Rodrik’s force?

The burly one Olyvar had identified as Ser Hosteen guided his horse forward and reached out to hand Robb a scroll. Robb grasped it in a quick movement, unrolling it without preamble. He felt no more certain about what had happened even after reading it.

“Gods be good,” he said, more to himself than anyone around him. “They say Cley Cerwyn, Leobald Tallhart, and Ser Rodrik all perished trying to take back Winterfell, and their forces were scattered. But if Theon was winning, why would he burn Winterfell and run?”

“Mayhaps he knows you’re coming for him,” Lothar Frey said with a sly smile, one just on the far side of vindictive. Robb saw Olyvar’s horse move anxiously next to him; Olyvar’s brother made him nervous, that was plain enough, and the animal was sensing his unease. That didn’t make Robb feel at all optimistic about the upcoming days. He frowned deeply.

“The sooner we get there, the sooner we can untangle this web of reports,” he announced, and the column got moving again. Part of Robb would have hoped that the new contingent of Freys would have ridden ahead of them back to the Twins, but they remained with Robb’s host, plodding too slowly due to its sheer size. Robb misplaced this band of Freys; he’d forgotten how much he disliked Freys in general because Olyvar and Perwyn and Alesander were all good men.

Olyvar disliked his half-brothers, too, especially Lothar and Walder Rivers, and he didn’t go to great pains to hide it, either. Ser Perwyn was largely dismissive, and Robb would have put their behavior down to the normal Frey tribalism that he’d come to expect, but Alesander was cold even to his own father, turned suddenly surly and withdrawn in the man’s company. None of that put Robb in a particularly good mood, nor did it give him any especially positive feelings about his impending marriage into the Frey family. He wasn’t certain what his chances were of choosing a bride he’d actually want to be with, let alone one he could someday learn to love. His parents had had an arranged marriage, he knew, and they had grown to love each other somehow, but Robb did not believe he would be quite so lucky in his own marriage.

Robb had gotten a bit of a primer on the available Frey girls as soon as he’d received the letter from Walder Frey while he’d still been in the westerlands. Olyvar and Perwyn had had nothing but praises to sing for their sister Roslin. “Just about your age, or near enough as makes no matter,” Perwyn had assured Robb when he’d asked about the girl. “She’s a bit shy, but kind, and if you will excuse me for saying so, Your Grace, she’s one of the prettier ones of the lot.”

Alesander had been of a different opinion, of course. “I know he told you daughters, but if he lets you have your pick of granddaughters too, I’d tell you to go for my sister Alyx. She looks like me, with a few notable exceptions, if you know what I mean.” He’d said the last bit with a wide grin,
pleasant and affable as always. That wouldn’t be the worst proposition, Robb thought to himself; Alesander was comely enough for a man, not nearly as weasely as many of the rest of the Freys Robb had met. His mother had been Braavosi, and he had dark hair and hooded, dark eyes that spoke of his foreign heritage. Alesander’s father, once he’d arrived, had been of an opinion with his son, but Robb had not been particularly keen to take the advice of any newcomer Freys, who he trusted little and less with each passing day.

It did, in fact, take another fortnight before they reached the Twins, and it should have been a relief to come to their destination, but Robb was not relieved, merely agitated and annoyed. Even Grey Wind picked up on his agitation, growling warily at anyone who came near him. Robb had half a mind to leave his wolf outside, but he thought better of it; he could not pick a bride who was frightened of his wolf, and how they reacted to the sight of him could tell Robb a great deal.

“Settle down,” Robb urged softly, trying to soothe the wolf before they entered Lord Walder’s hall. He might as well have sung the wolf a song, for all the good his words did.

Walder Frey was an ugly old man, wizened and spotted and afflicted with gout. He made his excuses for being unable to rise nor kneel before Robb, but Robb wondered if he would have done it even if he’d been able.

“Lady Catelyn,” he greeted with a wicked grin as he spotted Robb’s mother behind him. “And is this the new babe? Would that your son’s new wife is as fertile as you are, heh.”

Robb fought to school his features at the comment, but his mother bore it with grace.

“I shall pray for it, my lord,” she commented courteously, though Robb did not miss the way she seemed to hold Edrick more tightly to her. Not for the first time, Robb found himself glad that his mother had been so adamant about not remaining at the Twins despite his protests.

“I suppose you’d like to see your selection of brides, heh,” Lord Walder intoned, seeming to be taking some perverse enjoyment in the process. He’s likely never felt so powerful as he feels now, commanding a king to do his bidding, Robb thought sourly as the old man waved his hand. The sides of the hall were crowded with children and grandchildren, dozens of them, some as old as sixty and some scarce more than babes. A gathering of girls all stood up, coming to line themselves up in front of Robb. Seemingly innumerable sons and grandsons watched the proceedings with watery eyes.

“My daughter Arwyn,” Lord Frey said of the first girl, who looked to be around fourteen with a plain face and mousy-brown hair. “Shirei, my youngest trueborn daughter.” Robb frowned; the girl couldn’t have been more than seven, not fit to be a wife, not yet. “Ami and Marianne are granddaughters. I married Ami to Ser Pate of Sevenstreams, but the Mountain killed the oaf so I got her back.”

Robb stood up straighter at that, looking at Walder Frey with new eyes, suspicious eyes. The agreement had been for Robb to marry one of Walder Frey’s daughters, but here he was offering granddaughters as well. Something about the offer felt backhanded, stank of trickery. Would he insist Robb an oathbreaker if Robb chose a granddaughter instead of a daughter and the tide of the war turned against them? Was that the old man’s calculation?

Seemingly oblivious to Robb’s unease, Lord Frey continued to move down the line.

“That’s a Cersei, but we call her Little Bee, her mother’s a Beesbury. More granddaughters. One’s a Walda, and the others…well, they have names, whatever they are…”
Robb again had to fight not to wince, remembering his great uncle’s words back at Ashemark. “He prefers creating sons over raising them,” Ser Brynden had told him. “Your father loved you; you forget that it isn’t always so.” Apparently it held true for daughters and granddaughters as well; he had nary a care for any of them.

“I’m Merry, Lord Grandfather,” one girl piped up.

“You’re noisy, that’s for certain,” he scolded her brusquely. “Next to Noisy is my daughter Tyta, and next to her my daughter Roslin. Then another Walda. Alyx, Marissa…are you Marissa? I thought you were. She’s not always bald. The maester shaved her hair off, but he swears it will soon grow back. The twins are Serra and Sarra. There they are, all maidens. Well, and one widow, but there’s some who like a woman broken in. You might have any one of them.”

Robb passed his eyes over the group of amassed girls, trying to keep all their names straight in his mind, trying to remember which were daughters and which were granddaughters, a distinction that suddenly seemed vitally important. The more names Lord Walder listed, the more convinced Robb became that this was some sort of ploy by the Lord of the Crossing, some attempt to confuse him. Best choose one of the daughters, Robb thought to himself with a sense of detached unease. Best not give the old man any excuse to say Robb Stark did not uphold his oaths.

But they were mostly granddaughters, Robb realized, and Alesander had not been wrong that his sister Alyx was one of the comeliest of the bunch. But Robb forced that thought away, knowing he could not choose on that basis alone. It would not do to dwell on choices that would be more danger than boon, not in a bargain with a man as fickle as the Late Lord Frey. He instead turned his attention to the daughters, of which there were only four.

The youngest Robb discarded immediately; there was no doubt that his mother had been correct, that the quickest way to ensure the continued loyalty of the irascible Lord Frey was to put a babe in his wife’s belly, and the sooner he could accomplish that, the better. He could not wait years for his wife to flower, and he couldn’t believe Lord Frey would be pleased if he chose a girl of seven as his bride.

Another trick, he thought. This truly is uneven ground I am walking.

With Shirei discarded, three daughters remained. Tyta was tall and black-haired but closer to his mother’s age than to his own. The younger girls are like to be more fertile, said a voice in Robb’s head, one that sounded unmistakably like his mother. The thought brought a wave of discomfort to his chest, making him feel as though he was selecting a horse and not a bride.

Two choices remained to him, then, Roslin and Arwyn. Both girls had brown hair and eyes, pale skin and narrow frames. His mother would be pleased by neither of them, Robb knew, but he was not about to chance future treachery from Lord Frey over a pair of shapely teats or wide hips, which some of the granddaughters had in abundance.

Roslin was the comelier of the two; that was without question. She had small, delicate features and a tumble of chestnut brown waves falling to her waist, her skin so pale it may well have been freshly fallen snow. Arwyn was the younger and she still had the look of a girl about her, with overlarge teeth and eyes so tiny and beady she seemed scarce able to open them. Roslin was incredibly slender, but it was clear enough that she had a woman’s body beneath her dress while Arwyn was straight as a beam with a chest flat as a board. And yet Robb could almost hear his mother saying that there was a chance this girl could still grow to be a shapelier woman in a few years’ time whilst Roslin wasn’t like to grow much more at all.
But when Robb tried to imagine bedding her, he felt something in his chest recoil. He could not
imagine seeing her as a woman, could not imagine seeing her unclothed and thinking her anything
but a child. *And to think, I thought myself nearly a man grown at fourteen. And only two years later,
I already see the folly of that belief.*

So there was only one choice, then, and Robb could do nothing but pray that he was making the
right one, that Roslin would be a good woman and a good wife. She was Olyvar and Perwyn’s full
sister, Robb reminded himself, and that at least was an encouraging sign.

“*It would be a great honor to marry any one of you,*” Robb declared finally, with all the politeness he
could muster. Lord Walder was already dismissive enough of his children; Robb would not treat
them with the same discourtesy. He took a deep breath. “*But I can only choose one, and I would be
most pleased if the Lady Roslin would give me her hand.*”

Olyvar was beaming on one side of him, Robb noticed, while his mother was frowning slightly on
the other.

“*Heh, one of the prettier ones,*” Walder Frey remarked with a look Robb would have been hard-
pressed to call anything but lecherous. “*I might have removed some of the ugly ones from the
selection, but I couldn’t have known for certain. Some men like them pasty and pockmarked.*”

Roslin flushed prettily, Robb noted, the color blossoming high on her cheeks. It was unclear whether
the flush came from embarrassment at the attention or shame for the sake of all her half-sisters and
nieces and the slight her lord father had just paid them, though Robb could not imagine they were
unused to such slights. But despite any shame she may have felt, she stepped forward with her head
held high before coming to her knees before him.

“*It would be a great honor to be your wife, Your Grace,*” she said with lowered eyes and kind
courtesy. Before he could return the sentiment in kind, Grey Wind was padding forward, as though
he understood the impact of this, wanting to judge Roslin for himself.

*My mate,* Robb thought, unbidden, before blinking the thought away with some effort.

Some of the girls in the hall recoiled and gasped as the wolf came closer to them, but Roslin, to her
credit, did not move. She remained tense on her knees as the wolf came right up next to her, sniffing
curiously at her hair. After a moment, he turned and loped back to Robb, seeming to shrug in his
own wolfsish way. It wasn’t approval; it was at best indifference, but Robb would take it for what it
was. He stepped forward, then, taking Roslin’s hand and helping her to rise.

“I hope my wolf did not frighten you, my lady,” he said softly, and she met his eyes finally, gazing at
him with a shy smile. She had a small gap between her front teeth, he noticed, but it only enhanced
the kind look about her face.

“*Not at all, Your Grace,*” she lied, her voice shaking a little. She had been frightened, he could tell,
which was a healthy enough reaction—but she had not shied away in fear. He had to hope there was
more of that bravery in her; being a northern queen would be a struggle for a woman who was too
timid.

“*Enough,*” Lord Walder said suddenly, breaking Robb from his reverie. “*Save some for the bedding,
heh. The sweetest part. For all, for all.*”

Robb wasn’t certain what the man meant at first, until he realized he still held Roslin’s small hand in
his. He let it fall away gently, and Roslin lowered her eyes demurely.
“Benfrey, see your sister back to her chambers. She has a wedding to prepare for,” Lord Frey commanded before he seemed to spot another of his sons in the retinue that had accompanied Robb into the hall. “And Perwyn, you too. By your leave, of course, Your Grace.”

The tone was less courteous than his words, but Robb nodded his assent anyway. But even Lord Frey seemed unwilling to do Robb the discourtesy of ordering his squire away, though Robb saw Olyvar watching his brothers and sister leave the hall with a longing look.

“You can go, too, Olyvar,” Robb offered kindly, “provided you return in time to help me dress for the ceremony.”

Olyvar’s face lit up. “Of course, Your Grace,” he agreed readily before running off after his siblings.

Some of the other Frey men showed them all to their chambers, but Robb wasn’t surprised when his mother followed him into his, Edrick fussing quietly in her arms. Despite that, she didn’t leave him to his nurse, mayhaps conscious of the fact that she would be leaving him soon. She’d been loath to part with him for even a few minutes at a time since they had departed Riverrun. She bounced the babe in her arms with a practiced air about her.

“You don’t approve of my choice,” Robb remarked after a moment. It was not a question.

Catelyn frowned. “I would have preferred some of the other girls,” she admitted freely, “one with wide hips to bear children, big breasts to nurse them, and strong arms to carry them. Roslin is of Rosby stock, Robb, and the Rosbys have never been robust.”

Robb fought back the urge to smile, having expected every word from her. He’d already heard much and more from her about the virtues of childbearing hips, though he could at least concede that she knew her fair share about birthing children.

“Olyvar says his mother birthed a babe in every year of her marriage,” he pointed out with a raised eyebrow, though he didn’t add the fact that only five had survived to adulthood. That was not a thing his mother needed to hear then, with a babe in her arms still younger than half a year. “And mother— the pact was a daughter, but he offered me granddaughters,” he pointed out then. “Does that strike you well, from a man like Walder Frey? I don’t imagine he was doing so out of generosity and kindness.”

The room was silent for a long minute. “I had not considered that,” she admitted gently, and Robb graced her with a gentle smile.

“It was you who warned me of the possibility of treachery with this man,” Robb reminded his mother. “Best not provide him an excuse, wouldn’t you agree?”

His mother regarded him with appraising eyes. “You have become a good man, Robb,” she said after a moment, her expression slightly wistful, “and a good king. And you shall be a good husband as well; of that I have no doubt.”

Robb did his best to smile, but he felt a niggling itch of doubt in his chest. It was difficult to believe that come morning, he would be wedded and bedded when just two years prior, his father would not even let him wear an edged blade. He still felt half a boy, in this at least.

“I hope so, Mother,” he said with confidence he didn’t feel.
Up next, Robb V, in which Robb is wedded and bedded!
Robb didn’t begin to become truly nervous until Olyvar appeared to help him dress. He certainly didn’t need Olyvar’s help, of course, could easily dress himself, but if there was one thing that Robb had realized, it was that allowing the nervous-tempered boy to assist him usually helped Olyvar more than it helped Robb. Walder Frey expected a knighthood for his son, and Olyvar was a fair enough fighter, but Robb sometimes wondered if Olyvar’s temperament wasn’t more suited to a steward than a knight.

“Roslin is a good girl. You’ll like her, Your Grace, I promise,” Olyvar said cheerfully as he laced up the sleeves of Robb’s direwolf-emblazoned doublet. “And I used my time well; I told her how you like everything. She’ll please you well.”

How could you tell her how to please me when I have no idea what I like? Robb wanted to ask, but he stopped himself just as he realized that Olyvar wasn’t talking about the bedding; he was too earnest for that, and Roslin was his sister besides. He needed to stop being preoccupied on that point, he realized with an edge of almost-hysteria. Olyvar had been Robb’s squire for months; there were many things he could have told his sister that had nothing to do with bedplay, from what type of wine he preferred to how late he preferred to sleep when he had no especially pressing engagements to how dreadfully he hated being interrupted when he was busy trying to formulate strategies. The last fact Olyvar had learned to his own peril; Robb was ashamed to say that he’d yelled at Olyvar that day with enough vehemence he’d almost worried the other boy might cry. It could only benefit Roslin to know these things, Robb thought; he somehow doubted she would recover quite so quickly from that sort of verbal flaying from him.

“And now she knows all about me, and I know nothing about her,” Robb said with an uncertain laugh as Olyvar went to his other sleeve. Olyvar looked at him with a sudden seriousness.

“She is eager to please you, Your Grace,” Olyvar told him in a careful tone. “She is a bit shy, but she will gain confidence if you let her know she’s done well. She…she needs a gentle hand.”

You need a gentle hand, Robb thought fondly, although he didn’t say the words aloud. But Olyvar could very well have been describing himself with those words.

The sept at the Twins was smaller and drabber than Robb would have expected considering the sheer amount of Freys. It was larger at least than the sept at Winterfell, which was truly tiny, but the Starks kept the old gods. The Freys, at least nominally, kept the Seven, though Robb did wonder if some of the Freys kept any gods at all. Freys and northmen were packed into every corner to observe the wedding; the air was cloying hot and Robb felt himself sweating beneath his cloak. He would not be sad to take his leave of the place; that was for certain.

Lord Walder had apparently deemed himself too old and too gouty to walk his daughter to the altar;
Ser Stevron’s son, Ser Ryman, took that honor. The man was fat and balding, with eyes so small they seemed almost to be retreating into his fleshy face. The contrast, at least, served to enhance Roslin’s beauty. Her hair was pulled back from her face, though the bulk of it still hung loose down her back in pretty waves. Her dress was silver-grey lined with blue, her maiden’s cloak fastened around her shoulders. The whole thing still seemed surreal, Robb thought as she approached him. It was near unfathomable to think that within minutes, she would be his wife.

Roslin gave him a shy smile when she stopped before him, and it struck Robb again how small she was. Robb wasn’t terribly tall himself; he’d only recently overtopped his own mother, wasn’t yet near as tall as his father had been. The Greatjon still towered over Robb by more than a foot, but even so, Roslin scarcely reached Robb’s shoulder. And yet she didn’t look a child, not at all; her dress dipped low enough to provide more than a mere suggestion of the shape of her breasts, and Robb could see even more than that from his height.

It was possibly the first time Robb had ever been glad of the times that his mother had made him accompany her to the sept, because the whole ceremony seemed to pass as though in a blur. He recited the words from memory, feeling oddly detached from the whole thing, as though it were happening to someone else.

My father said the words in a sept, he reminded himself dully. I wonder if it felt as strange to him then as it does to me now. But there were no weirwoods at the Twins with their carved faces to observe this wedding, and it was best for him to appease the Freys however he could. The old gods bear witness no matter where I am, he assured himself as he unfastened Roslin’s maiden’s cloak and wrapped his own around her shoulders. And with that, she ceased to be Roslin Frey and at once became Roslin Stark.

It was some small consolation that Roslin looked nearly as overwhelmed as Robb felt.

The wedding feast was not an extravagant one, but Robb had expected nothing else. They were at war, and he’d come with an entire army at his back, a few thousand extra hungry mouths when Walder Frey already had so many to start with. They were sat up at the high table in a place of honor directly next to Lord Frey, although Robb thought that was an honor he could have done without.

Alesander Frey, also quite a talented singer, had a pleasant voice at least and did a more than passable rendition of “The Bear and the Maiden Fair.”

“I imagine you’ll be taking your wife with you when you march north,” Lord Walder remarked to Robb after the third course had been served. “After all, you must be eager to put a son in her, and not all women are as lucky as your lady mother, to get a babe in her belly on her wedding night, heh.”

Robb took a sip of his wine to hide his annoyance at the remark, glancing over at his mother. She was seated next to Ser Ryman, and she looked no happier to be sat next to the man than Robb did next to his grandsire. And though Lord Frey had made the comment in an offhand way, Robb recognized the words for what they were. He was beginning to understand how this game was played with the old man.

“I should like to keep my wife with me, yes,” Robb confirmed, and it was true enough, if only because he had no desire to leave her with her lord father, though he had the sense not to say that aloud. Robb glanced at Roslin, and she gave him a pleasant, if vague, smile.

“I should think so!” Lord Walder exclaimed with a smirk. “She’s a sweet one, and once you taste her honey, you’ll not want to part with her ever again, heh.”

Roslin’s face remained impassive, and Robb hoped his did as well. How could a father speak of his daughter that way? Robb wondered in helpless annoyance. Robb couldn’t imagine his own father
ever showing such disrespect to a woman, and certainly not to Sansa or Arya.

*Mayhaps Lord Walder will finally do us the favor of dying soon,* Robb thought discourteously. But even if he did, Ser Ryman didn’t seem an any better choice as lord. Olyvar had not a single good thing to say about his nephew, and what Robb had seen had given him no cause to doubt the supposition.

He was saved from having to formulate a response when some of the men began to demand that they dance, and so he led his wife out onto the floor. She was a more than passable dancer, Robb noted to himself, and her small body seemed to fit surprisingly well against his. His mind wandered ahead, to the prospect of the bedding, but he forced himself to tamp that thought down, lest his body begin to react to that.

Robb danced with some of the other Frey women after that, daughters and granddaughters, and even with Dacey Mormont, who was a better dancer than Robb had expected. Arya had hated dancing, he remembered, but apparently not all women who would have preferred to wear breeches also hated dancing. He watched as his wife was passed from man to man to be twirled around the room, keeping a careful eye on them as he moved from girl to girl himself. But Roslin was smiling more oft than not, and eventually, the whole room was laughing as the Greatjon began twirling her around as if she were no more than a child. The man was in his cups, Robb noticed, and decided to intervene before anything got too far out of hand.

“I would have my wife back, my lord,” Robb said with a smile as he interceded, and the Greatjon laughed but passed her back to Robb.

“I’m sure you would, Your Grace!” he agreed with a twinkle in his eye, and they were just close enough that Lord Frey seemed to have heard the exchange, for his loud cackle was audible even over the sound of the music.

“The septon has prayed his prayers, some words have been said, and the King in the North has wrapped my sweetling in a wolf cloak, but they are not yet man and wife,” he remarked loudly, and the music and the talking all stopped at his words. “A sword needs a sheath, heh, and a wedding needs a bedding. Is it meet that we should bed them?”

It was pandemonium after that. Roslin looked startled as she was parted from him by a chorus of men yelling, “To bed! To bed! To bed with them!” Unseen hands began to pull at the laces of Robb’s doublet, and Alesander Frey launched into “The Queen Took Off Her Sandal, the King Took Off His Crown.”

“Is it true northmen are as cold as ice?” Alyx Frey murmured into his ear as her hands scrabbled at his laces, the crowd of ladies propelling him out of the hall, giving him no choice but to follow. “This one’s half Tully,” remarked another girl, a heavysset one they called Fat Walda, “with hair the color of fire.” Another girl, another Walda, he thought, joined in, “Half Tully just means he’s got a fish between his legs instead of a cock!”

His doublet was unlaced in the front, and two women were working on the laces at his sleeves. He hoped his men were treating his wife with a bit more courtesy, but several of them had been deep in their cups, and he wasn’t particularly hopeful for her.

This was the most he’d ever been touched by a woman, any woman but his mother when he’d been a child, he realized with a sense of detachment. Most of these women couldn’t be considered in any way comely, and yet he found his body reacting to their touches all the same.

One of the girls had gotten his breeches unlaced. “Not a limp trout!” she proclaimed with the air of
someone who had made a great discovery. “And hair as red as his beard!” yelled another as they continued to strip him down until he was naked as his nameday. After what seemed like a lifetime, he was being shoved roughly through a door.

Roslin was already there, stripped of all her clothes as well, though she had already been bundled beneath the blankets. He could see even less of her than he’d been able to see when she’d been in her wedding gown, for the covers were gathered tightly in her hands and pulled up to her chin. The men who had brought her there had already retreated, though they must have gone through another door, for Robb had not encountered them on the way. Before he could think upon that any further, the women were pushing him toward the bed as well, providing any number of creative suggestions as they went.

“You’d best not lick her like a wolf!” one of the Waldas advised as the women lifted the covers and all but shoved him inside. Robb thought they would never leave, and even when they did, the room was still a chorus of muffled shouts, men’s voices from behind one door and women’s voices from behind another.

Robb tried to block them out, turning to look at his new wife with a slightly helpless feeling in his chest. He swallowed thickly and looked up to meet her eyes, and it was only then that he realized she was crying. Whatever fervor Robb had felt in the preceding moments had vanished, replaced immediately by concern.

“What is it?” he asked worriedly. “Was one of my men too rough with you?”

Roslin’s lower lip quivered, another tear slipping down her cheek. *This is too much, too much pressure for her,* Robb thought to himself, and he shifted to make certain that he was covered by the sheets as much as he could be, turning to his side in hopes that she wouldn’t notice his hardness tenting the sheets, for his cock had remained stubbornly erect despite everything, despite Roslin’s unpleasant relatives and the chorus of voices outside and Roslin’s tears. When she didn’t look to respond, he reached out tentatively, placing his hand against her cheek with as much gentleness as he could muster, though he made certain that his body remained far enough from hers that they were not touching in any other place.

“Tell me who it was, and I will see that they are punished,” he promised, but Roslin just shook her head helplessly, her expression desperate and pained.

“Not your men,” she finally admitted, her voice scarce more than a whisper. At first, the words didn’t seem to make sense to him, for all the rest of the men in the hall had been her brothers, half-brothers, and nephews, and surely they wouldn’t—

And then Robb felt his thoughts screech to a halt, thinking of how anxious Olyvar always was and how much worse it became whenever he was near some of his family members. *She needs a gentle hand,* Olyvar had said to him earlier with a pleading sort of seriousness in his eyes.

*What is happening in this castle?* Robb wondered with a rush of rage.

“No one will ever touch you again,” he promised her fiercely, finally giving in and pulling her into his arms. She let out a quiet sob at that, burying her face against his shoulder, and Robb felt frustratingly powerless as he held his new wife in his arms. It took a long few minutes before she finally pulled away, wiping furiously at the tears on her face.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” she apologized quietly, unable to meet his eyes. “This must be an awful wedding night.”
Robb reached across the bed and pressed his hand to her cheek once more, wiping away the remnants of her tears. The sounds of yelling from outside had begun to abate; apparently those waiting in the hall had decided they’d rather have more ale than listen to the silence coming from inside their chamber. That was well enough, he thought; like as not, there would be nothing interesting for them to hear.

“You shall be my wife for a great long while,” he reassured her. “We don’t have to do this tonight. I can say I’ve had too much to drink.”

On the one hand, it would be almost a relief to avoid it; he knew how to comfort a woman, had comforted his sisters more times than he could count when someone had said or done something cruel to them. But he’d never done this, never lain with a woman, and he was as apprehensive as he was excited, if not more so. But rather than calm her, Robb’s words seemed only to alarm her.

“We have to,” she said somewhat frantically, then took a deep breath. “I want to,” she declared then, with an utterly forced sense of calm.

Robb doubted that she did, but there was a bravery in her. Is she afraid I’ll send her back, if we don’t consummate this marriage tonight? he couldn’t help but wonder. It was clear enough that her full brothers loved her fiercely, but Robb doubted that anyone else ever had, and the thought made him both sad and angry. Would it be worse to consummate this marriage when she is so clearly vulnerable and afraid, or would it be worse not to consummate it and have her worry she hasn’t pleased me? He’d been married for nought but a few hours, but already marriage was proving as complicated as kingship.

She needs a gentle hand, Olyvar had said. Robb decided to try to put her at ease.

“I’m afraid I’m a bit nervous,” he admitted to her, and that much was the truth. “I’ve never done this before.”

That seemed to surprise her, seemed to banish some of the fear. “Never?” she echoed in disbelief. “I thought most men…”

She trailed off with a slight flush, but Robb had no doubt what she thought of most men. He’d already taken Olyvar, Perwyn, Alesander and Stevron Frey with him, and Ser Stevron had perished; he doubted there were enough honorable men left in this castle to fill a thimble.

“I’m not most men,” he told her gently, because it wasn’t that he’d never had the chance. Theon had tried many a time to bring him to the brothel in the winter town, and an army never had a want for camp followers. But every time he even thought of indulging in something like that, he imagined the disapproving looks he’d have gotten from his parents, thought of his mother angry at his father for siring a bastard and all the strife it had caused for their family. And once Bran had fallen from the tower and his father had left him as acting lord of Winterfell, there had been too many more important considerations to think too much about bedding a woman, a fact that had only become truer with time.

“This shall all likely be very embarrassing for me,” Robb told her in a somewhat conspiratorial tone, the way he might talk to his sister rather than his wife. The attempt seemed to have worked, too, Robb noted when Roslin laughed. It was a soft, refreshing sound, although she brought her hand up to cover her mouth as if to stifle it.

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about, Your Grace,” she assured him with a soft flush, and Robb was certain he must also have blushed as red as his beard. Roslin had already been bundled beneath the blankets when he’d come in, but she’d been able to see him in all his naked glory. That
his body was nothing to be ashamed of was true enough, he knew; though he’d only recently become taller than his mother, the months of campaigning had filled out his body, and his shoulders had broadened markedly since he’d departed Winterfell. His legs were toned from riding, his arms muscled from holding sword and shield, and with his whiskers had come a considerable though not overwhelming dusting of bright red hair across his chest.

As if called forth by her attentions to his body, his cock seemed to have been reminded what they were there for, beginning to twitch in renewed interest.

“Nor do you,” he told her, and then, with one last look into her eyes, he moved slowly across the sheets and pressed his lips to hers.

This, at least, was something Robb had done before, though not with any particular seriousness. Kissing games in the godswood when he’d been three and ten had been nothing like kissing for real. Roslin’s lips were pillowy-soft against his, and he reached his hand around her head to tangle in her hair so as to pull her closer. He fought to keep his movements gentle, but he was rock hard again within seconds, and that didn’t inspire a feeling of patience in him.

Robb slid his hand tentatively beneath the sheets to cup at her breast, fingers teasing along the nipple. It seemed not to be a bad choice when he felt the pebbled flesh go rigid against his fingers, and Roslin gasped softly into his mouth. He pulled back after a long minute to look at her, hoping not to see fear or apprehension in her gaze—and what he saw nearly took his breath away. Her flesh was flushed with arousal, her lips swollen from his kisses, and the sheets had slipped enough to reveal the full roundness of her teats. Her breasts were small but shapely, the entire expanse of her visible skin the same even tone of milky white, broken only by the soft pink blush of her nipples.

“Gods, you’re beautiful,” he told her before he even realized he was speaking, and her flush only grew deeper. Some of her fear and uncertainty had fled; he could be bolder, he knew, but he was uncertain what to do next. He wanted his hands and mouth on every inch of her, wanted his cock inside of her, to feel her cunt wet and clenching around him. He forced himself to take a deep breath, trying to stamp down his ardor. His hand found her breast again, but this time he leaned down and took one of those pert pink nipples in his mouth.

“Oh,” she gasped as he sucked on it, gently at first, then harder. She was trembling then, but it was from arousal and not fear; that much seemed clear enough. And when he moved to her other breast, she was even bold enough to reach up and tangle her hands in his hair. His hand found her breast again, but this time he leaned down and took one of those pert pink nipples in his mouth.

He let his hand travel down her torso again, allowing it to come to rest against her waist, waiting to see if she’d balk. Her waist truly was impossibly tiny; were Robb a larger man, he likely could have touched fingers on both ends if he’d wrapped his hands around it. When she didn’t protest or squirm away from him, Robb let his hand trail lower, experimental fingers dancing along the concave of her belly before he found the thatch of hair at the juncture of her thighs. Robb gave her a searching look, and Roslin bit her lip before parting her thighs a little for him.

There was something heady about that; it was such a small gesture, and yet it made his heart pound even faster. It gave at least the appearance that she wanted him, although in all honesty it was possible that she saw this as nothing but her duty. But when he reached her core, parting her folds, his fingers found wetness there. That’s good, he thought to himself in a daze, for he hadn’t been riding with an army for so many moons to have not heard in graphic detail about how this worked. Robb slid his finger inside and Roslin whimpered.

“Does it hurt?” he breathed out in concern. He’d been told that a woman losing her maidenhead could be painful, but if he was already hurting her with a single finger, he couldn’t imagine ever
managing to get his cock inside her. She shook her head, skin still flushed a pretty pink.

“No, Your Grace,” she assured him, still courteous even in this. “I was simply surprised.”

“Call me Robb,” he told her before pressing his lips to hers again, for he simply could not imagine being called by his title, not here. He sometimes wore his new title uncomfortably, even after all this time; he would not be the king here, not in bed with his wife. Robb found himself moving closer to her, his finger probing her slickness experimentally as he kissed her, and then his hardness was resting against Roslin’s thigh, and it took all the willpower he had not to rut against her like some animal. It would do no good to fail to consummate his marriage simply because he’d been an overeager boy who hadn’t been able to stop from spilling himself against his wife’s thigh.

Robb withdrew his finger when it was slick with her juices and felt around for that spot, the center of a woman’s pleasure, some of his men had said with confidence. He found the little nub and moved his slickened finger against it, and it was easy to tell when he’d done something right there, because she was groaning almost immediately into his mouth, canting her hips against his hand as though she couldn’t help herself.

Is this a gentle hand? he wondered wickedly, and then he moved again, plunging two fingers inside her now. She didn’t whimper this time, just rolled her hips against his fingers, and Robb was so hard then that it nearly hurt. Could a man lose himself simply touching a woman with his hand? he couldn’t help but wonder, and he was almost certain that if he wasn’t inside her soon, he was like to find out.

Not breaking his mouth from hers, he rolled himself so that he was on top of her, careful not to press all of his weight onto her. Robb was not an unreasonably large man, but it was impossible to forget how small and slender Roslin was when he felt the full length of her body pressed against his. And yet his body somehow slotted perfectly against her, his cock resting right against her slickness. Robb broke the kiss finally, pushing himself on his elbows so he could look down into his wife’s eyes—and though she bit her lip nervously, she gave him a wordless nod.

Robb reached down and took himself in hand, guiding himself toward her entrance. At first it seemed that it wasn’t even going to work, and then somehow he was pressing himself inside of her. She hissed out in discomfort, but Robb didn’t think he could stop himself even if he’d wanted to. Whatever he had imagined it might have felt like, it was better. Suddenly he understood why this made men make awful decisions, why wars had been fought over what was between a woman’s legs. Part of him wanted to thrust into her with abandon, wanted to lose himself inside her until he found his satisfaction, and part of him was terrified that if he moved even an inch, he’d spill himself inside her without ever truly getting started. Once he was fully sheathed, he buried his face against the crook of her neck, forcing himself to take one deep breath, then another.

After he had felt that he had gotten control of himself, or as close as he was like to come, he pulled back and looked into her eyes, searching hers for signs of discomfort. It was clear enough that the feeling was there, because she was biting her lip hard enough that it seemed almost painful. Robb reached forward and pressed his thumb against her lower lip until she released it with a ragged, near-hysterical chuckle.

“I’ll try to be gentle,” he promised her softly, because that was all that he could say, that he would try. She nodded her understanding wordlessly, and then Robb slowly pulled back, until he was almost out of her, before sliding back in as slowly as he could manage without losing his mind. She whimpered, and Robb felt torn; he didn’t want to keep hurting her, but his body was practically screaming at him to pump himself inside of her until he spent his seed.

He buried his face against her neck again, kissing softly against the skin there as he continued to
move his hips, slowly and carefully. She made a sound then, one that wasn’t quite pain, and so he darted his tongue out, tracing along the line of her neck, and she tilted her head to the side as if to encourage him to continue. Robb did, rolling his hips slowly as some of the tension seemed to fall out of her body, and he could physically feel her relaxing against him. That only made him more excited, that now Roslin seemed to be…well, if not with him, then at least not suffering through it. He brought his hand beneath her chin and turned her head so that he could meet her lips again, kissing her thoroughly.

His release came upon him in an unexpected rush, and he felt his body shuddering, Roslin’s legs curling around him as though trying to hold him in place, encouraging him to spill himself inside of her. When it was finally over, he felt himself fall limp against her, and he just barely told himself not to let all his weight fall on top of her, not wanting to crush her. With some effort, he managed to extricate his sweat-soaked body from hers, Roslin wincing audibly as he pulled out. He pressed a soft kiss against her chest, between her breasts.

“T’m sorry,” he breathed against her skin, resting his head against her chest. She carded her fingers through his sweat-soaked hair.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” she told him, though her voice was thick, as if she was choking back tears. “You’ve given me a great gift in making me your wife.”

Her father had likely told her to say that, Robb thought with distaste, had probably told her to be courteous to her husband no matter what he did to her, no matter how he hurt her. But he swore to himself that he was going to be worthy of those words, that the next time would be better. He was going to treat his wife with the courtesy his father had treated his mother, and not the way the majority of the Frey men seemed to treat their women. Because Roslin wasn’t a Frey anymore—she was Roslin Stark, and she was his.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb VI, in which Robb heads toward Moat Cailin and learns a thing or two about the realities of life for a Westerosi lady.
Robb VI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They remained only two days at the Twins before they marched, and in Robb’s opinion, it had been two days too long. He appointed Dacey Mormont to stay with his queen at all times while they remained, ordering her to never leave Roslin alone with anyone, not even members of her family. If Dacey thought anything of his level of paranoia, she didn’t say a word about it. It wouldn’t surprise him to learn that she misliked the rest of the Freys as much as he did.

Olyvar and Roslin seemed gladdest of everyone to leave the castle, Robb thought, followed closely by his own mother. But her eagerness to leave was doubtless tempered by the realization that she would soon have to part with her youngest son, a fact that Robb also knew well enough. He visited her and the babe every night in her tent, and Edrick was fussy and anxious more oft than not, as if he sensed what was coming. Robb would not be happy to part with his newest brother, but it would be better for him to be settled in one place again, for Robb could not imagine all the traveling had been good for a babe so small. For all that had befallen his family, they had been blessed at least in this, Robb thought, that all the children of Eddard and Catelyn Stark had lived past infancy. And he would not let Edrick be the first that perished before he ever had a chance to live.

It would be at least a fortnight to Moat Cailin, Robb knew, and they were traveling more slowly than even they needed to; Robb had never before been aiming to telegraph his movements to the enemy, but this was one of the only times that it would be best that they saw him coming, that they believed they knew all there was to know of his movements.

A little extra time in his tent in the mornings was more than appreciated, anyway; if he’d thought Roslin timid when he’d first met her, Olyvar’s assessment of her character was more than correct, and she was quick to come out of her shell when he let her know what he wanted from her. She’d had the bravery one morning to wake him near dawn with a hand on his cock, and he’d been so pleased by that that they’d taken to lying together nearly every morning, and every night as well, sometimes more than once. And they weren’t always terribly quiet about it, either, which Robb hadn’t realized until the Greatjon had ridden up alongside him with a teasing grin one day.

“Trying very hard to make us some little princes and princesses, aren’t you?” he’d teased, and Robb was embarrassed, but certainly not embarrassed enough to stop bedding his wife. The Greatjon was right that it was duty, that he had an obligation to ensure the succession, as odd as it was to consider the possibility of becoming a father when he’d scarce had time to come to terms with being a man, then a lord, then a king, then a husband. But duty or not, she was gentle and kind and was quickly learning what he liked, just as he was quickly learning how to please her in return. His men had been glad to give their share of suggestions about that, too, thankfully when she was far out of earshot.

Either way, the canvas walls of a tent, even his royal pavilion, did less to muffle sound than the walls at a castle would, and he’d quickly come to terms with the fact that the greater part of his army knew exactly what he was doing in his tent and precisely how often he was doing it. After a few days, it even ceased to be embarrassing and began to become somewhat exhilarating to let anyone within earshot know precisely how well he pleased his wife.

Robb might have expected to be tired after all of it, but it seemed that his time with Roslin only worked to invigorate him, and he was more optimistic about things than he’d been in some time. That was, of course, until he remembered why he had married this girl, why he had gone south in the first place, why he was returning north. The memory of all that was almost crippling, but Roslin had
somehow sensed his melancholy and hadn’t asked him about it, just kissed him and held him gently as he’d stayed awake for the bulk of the night, feeling guilty for his own happiness and optimism in the wake of all the death that had preceded it. He couldn’t help but feel as though he was betraying the memory of his father, of his brothers, by being so happy with his new wife.

The next day was better. He stayed with his mother for hours that evening, holding little Ned in his arms even as the boy slept against his shoulder, drooling all over his doublet. Catelyn watched him with a wistful look in her eyes, and Robb wondered if she was thinking the same thing that he was.

_You and I are the last remaining trueborn sons of Eddard Stark_, he thought as he brushed his hand through his brother’s impossibly soft hair. _And I will make certain you know what kind of father he was, what kind of man he’d want you to become._

It was already long past dark when he entered his tent, late enough that he’d expected that Roslin might be abed already. But instead, he found her still awake and pacing the length of the tent, an admittedly small distance, her hair let loose from the plait in which she’d taken to wearing it while they rode. Robb immediately felt guilty.

“You needn’t have stayed up to wait for me,” he told her softly, coming up to take her by the arm. When she turned to face him, Robb saw that there were tear-tracks staining her cheeks, and the weight in his chest at that was crushing. “I should have told you that I would be late to return.”

But Roslin just shook her head helplessly. “I’m sorry,” she said, lowering her eyes, but Robb cupped her face in his hand and moved her gaze back up to his.

“Why are you sorry? You haven’t done anything wrong. If anyone’s done something wrong, it was me.”

Roslin shook her head again, appearing lost. “My moonblood has come,” she told him finally, her voice unsteady.

Robb stared at her for a few long seconds, at first not comprehending at all. A woman’s cycles were a thing he knew of, of course, but not a thing he’d ever had much cause to think upon. It should certainly have struck him that sharing a bed with a woman nearly every night would mean that the subject would inevitably arise, but it had never struck him before that moment.

_Is that why she was crying?_ he wondered. Some women became emotional when their moonblood came, he thought he’d heard, but that didn’t explain why she was apologizing to him.

Robb pressed his lips gently against her brow. “Are you apologizing because we cannot lie together?” he asked her after a moment, delicately. “Because we needn’t, not every night—”

He was surprised when Roslin wrenched herself out of his grasp with an unexpected fervor. “We do!” she insisted with a small sob, and it was only then that it struck Robb why she was so upset. If her moonblood had come, it meant that he had not gotten her with child, and that gave Robb a sick feeling in his stomach. He’d been bedding his wife because he’d enjoyed it, and he thought she’d been enjoying it too—and if a child came from it, that was only an extra merit of the activity. But it struck him only then that her motivations had been different from his own, that she’d been carrying the weight of all that on her shoulders when they’d scarce been married more than a week.

He stepped forward and enfolded her tiny body in his arms, pressing a kiss against the crown of her head. “It’s all right,” he assured her gently. “It doesn’t always happen the first time, or even the hundredth.”
And it would almost be better if it didn’t happen for a little while, he thought, and not before he knew the state of things at Winterfell. His mother lugging his infant brother through a war march as though he were a sack of grain was bad enough, and until he knew whether Winterfell was truly destroyed, truly abandoned, it seemed an inauspicious time to be creating a child.

Roslin pulled in a shuddering breath. “I have heard...that your mother fell with child with you on her wedding night,” she admitted quietly, her tone uncertain. “I...I don’t wish to be a disappointment to you.”

And Roslin’s father had taken great pleasure in rubbing that in on their wedding day, too, Robb remembered. He silently cursed his mother, though of course it wasn’t her fault, either. But it was an unreasonable expectation for his wife to place upon herself.

“You’re not,” he told her with conviction. “We have time.”

She sobbed against his chest, a quiet, pitiful sound. “What if we don’t?” she asked with desperation. “What if you die, and I’m not yet with child? They’ll make me go back to the Twins, to my father. If I’m carrying your heir, mayhaps I can go with Lady Catelyn to Winterfell instead...”

And that’s the heart of it, Robb thought to himself, everything seeming finally to fall into place. Roslin knew not the details of his plan except to know that his men in the middle of their host would be leaving within a few days, if the gods were good and Maege Mormont or Galbart Glover had managed to locate Howland Reed. And she knew that within a few days after that, there would be a battle, and Robb himself would be in the thick of it. And she feared going back to her father, her numerous wicked half-brothers and nephews, none of whom seemed to treat her kindly.

The Others take them all, he cursed to himself, but he tried to reign in that anger, tried not to let Roslin see it, for she seemed frightened enough already.

“I don’t intend to die, Roslin,” he assured her softly, but her eyes remained sad and knowing.

“But you can’t promise you won’t.”

Robb sighed, cursing her softly. If only he could have had a stupid wife, one too dim-witted to know to be afraid for him. Not that he’d have wanted that, not truly, but it wasn’t easy knowing that he was causing her such pain. Did Mother feel this frightened when Father rode off to fight the Greyjoys? he wondered. Or even when he went to fight the Targaryens? he added silently, for he and Roslin scarce knew each other better than his mother and father had then.

“No, I can’t promise,” he admitted honestly. “But I have good men around me, protecting me, who will be doing their best to make certain I don’t.” Robb gave her his most confident look, but she didn’t seem much reassured. He sighed again. “Mayhaps you are putting too much pressure on yourself. We’ve been married scarce more than a week.”

She murmured some indistinct thing that may have been agreement, but Robb thought better of pressing her too hard upon the point. She fell asleep that night, trembling and sobbing in his arms, though the next morning, when she left their tent before the men began to break it down to march, she looked as put together as ever. When Olyvar came that morning to tell him his horse was ready and ask if he need anything else, Robb bid the other boy to go stay with his sister for awhile. If Olyvar thought the request queer, he didn’t say so.

Robb went off to find his mother, who was already in the covered wayn in which she’d been doing most of her traveling, easier for Edrick than being carried on horseback, or so Maester Vyman had advised. Her blouse was open, the boy suckling hungrily at her breast when he let himself inside.
Little Ned looked at Robb with suspicious eyes for a moment before recognizing him, then turned his attention back to his mother’s breast. Catelyn sat and listened attentively as Robb detailed what had happened the previous night.

“Can you speak with her?” he asked his mother when he was done with his retelling, and Catelyn sat back and rubbed the babe’s back once he had drunk his fill.

“And what would you have me tell her?” his mother asked him with a curious look. Robb could not help but feel frustrated by the question.

“That sometimes these things take time?” he ventured. “That I don’t expect her to give me a new child for every year, the way her father likely expected her mother to?” For some reason, his annoyance seemed only to amuse his mother, and that only annoyed him all the more. “What?”

Catelyn shook her head fondly. “I was just thinking how like your father you are,” she remarked with a gentle yet wistful smile. “You both have tried so hard to be understanding, but you cannot know what it is to be a woman and a wife.”

Robb gave his mother a piercing look. “Then explain it to me.”

Her smile turned indulgent. “Women cannot fight in battles,” she told him evenly. “We watch our husbands and our sons ride off, and all we can do is pray that they will return to us, alive and whole. What we can do is keep our husbands’ households and give our husbands sons. When Sansa and Arya were born, and I despaired I’d never give your father another son, he told me that I needn’t worry, that I’d already given him a son. That he’d love a daughter just as much as a son. In the years after Bran, then after Rickon, when I feared I couldn’t give him another child, he told me that I’d already given him many lovely children, that it was in the hands of the gods and didn’t do us any good to worry about it. But I would have given him a child for each year of our marriage, if I could have.”

Hearing his mother talk about his father like that caused a strange feeling to well up in Robb’s chest, despair and fondness both. He moved closer to his mother and wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

“A child for every year would have been rather a lot,” he remarked softly, placing a kiss against the auburn hair at her crown. Edrick directed a toothless smile in his direction.

“I would have given him that many, and gladly,” his mother admitted softly. “He would have told me it was too much to put myself through, all those moons carrying children and all those births, but I would have endured it with pleasure just to see his happiness when I told him he’d be a father yet again, to see his pleasure at holding his newborn child in his arms for the first time.”

Robb squeezed his mother more tightly, feeling the loss of his father more keenly than he had in some time. He looked at Edrick’s pudgy little face and couldn’t help but imagine how his father would have reacted to the news, how glad he would have been to have another son. He sucked in a long, shuddering breath.

“I can’t have her despair every time she bleeds,” Robb said helplessly, and his mother simply laid her head upon his shoulder.

“That is the way of things, for a wife,” she told him practically. “You can tell her that you are not disappointed, which may be the truth of it, and you can tell her that she should not be disappointed either, but it will not change things. She will simply learn to hide her disappointment from you and try to weather it on her own.”
Robb sighed, watching as Edrick stuck his stubby little fingers into his mouth with a feeling of fondness, wishing he remembered more of when Bran and Rickon had been this small, wishing he’d paid more attention to them before they were gone for good.

“So what shall I do, then?” he asked his mother resignedly.

“Be there for her,” she told him quietly. “That’s all you can do.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Catelyn VIII, in which Robb enacts his plan to retake Moat Cailin and Howland Reed has a little, absolutely unimportant thing to get off his chest. So it's an utterly boring chapter in which nothing of consequence happens. GET HYPE!
Catelyn VIII

Chapter Notes

This is not actually relevant to this chapter, but since multiple people have expressed confusion in the comments about why Arya didn't arrive to the Twins at the wedding, I thought I'd put a note here so I didn't have to keep explaining it. In this timeline, Walder Frey summoned Robb back from the westerlands just after he'd taken Ashemark. After Ashemark in canon, Robb storms the Crag/gets injured/gets the news of Bran and Rickon/sleeps with and marries Jeyne Westerling, none of which occur in this timeline. Since Robb does an immediate about-face after Ashemark, returns to Riverrun, then basically goes straight to the wedding after that, he's about 2~2.5 months ahead of the canon timeline when he arrives to the Twins. Most of the other canon timelines (Blackwater, the sack of Winterfell, literally everything Dany is doing, etc.) have remained unchanged by the events.

Also keep in mind that with Roose Bolton dead, events at Harrenhal might have gone down a bit differently. It all happens off-page, obviously, so you'll have to make some of your own inferences based on how everything goes down, but some obvious ones are this: Arya cannot become Roose's cupbearer, and Robett Glover is in charge of the force that takes and then garrisons Harrenhal. Since Robett Glover isn't the treacherous, self-serving asshole that Roose was, there's a very good chance that he might have handled things there a bit differently than Roose did. At the least, with a fair amount fewer leeches.

And with a note that is relevant to this chapter - I know that there are a lot of you out there who have strong feelings about Jon, Catelyn, and which one of them is an asshole and which one of them is a saint. My personal opinion is that Ned put them both in an awful situation, they've both been hurt, and they both have reasons to be bitter/angry. Just because one is "good" doesn't mean the other is "bad" and vice versa. If you think Catelyn is an evil harpy for ever being mean to Jon, or if you think Jon is a whiny little so-and-so for daring to be hurt by the fact that Catelyn was cold/cruel to him, I'm honestly not certain why you're still reading this story. This is a story that's attempting to look at both of them as utterly human, flawed characters who both have their own merits, grievances and shortcomings. Please keep it civil in the comments and remember that your interpretation of the text and what has happened "off page" isn't necessarily the same as everyone else's interpretation. You're all free to have your own thoughts and feelings, and if you want to debate them, please be polite to each other when expressing your opinions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The battle for Moat Cailin lasted five days. They were far enough from the action that they had no hopes of seeing anything, but they could hear the fighting well enough, even from a distance. The sounds were few and far between, however; this was a battle that would be won or lost with archers, she knew, so there was no clash of swords on swords, no sounds of screaming horses, only the occasional exclamation of pain as a man fell to an arrow. On their side or the enemy’s, it was impossible to tell, but more of their men were dying than the ironborn; that was almost a certainty.
What was it that Ned had said to her back in King’s Landing? *Two hundred determined archers can hold the Neck against an army.* But Ned had been speaking of defending the Moat against an army from the south; she had to hope that Robb was right, that they would be more vulnerable to an attack from the north.

It was on the third day that there seemed to be more action. For the first time, she heard the clang of steel on steel, though how long it lasted, she couldn’t have said. Roslin flinched beside her every time they heard a sound, mayhaps imagining that each scream of pain they heard might have been Robb’s.

*She’ll have to learn to be tougher than this, Catelyn thought wryly to herself, or the north will eat her alive.*

Catelyn wondered if she had ever been so delicate, so unsuited for the harshness of the north. Even after all the years, she’d never learned to brave the cold the way Ned or her children could, but she didn’t think she’d ever been quite so timid, nor so untested. *But I was already Lady of Riverrun when I was eleven years old,* she reminded herself, *and Roslin had had no such responsibility. But she will have to learn soon enough.*

It was a half day after the sounds ceased that a rider came to them from the Moat. “His Grace’s forces have taken the Children’s Tower from the north,” the messenger reported when they came to greet him. “The other two towers still hold out.”

And they did hold, for two more days, until finally a group of riders came to fetch them. Smalljon Umber led the escort, another man carrying the direwolf banner as he rode behind the Greatjon’s son. Catelyn came out to greet them, her son in her arms.

“What news?” she asked as they approached, and the Smalljon dismounted his horse. Even so, he stood clear a foot taller than her.

“The Moat has been taken,” he announced in his booming voice, and cheers went up from the crowd around them, all those Robb had designated to guard his wife, mother, and brother. Dacey Mormont stepped forward.

“Casualties?” she ventured apprehensively, and a strange look passed over Jon Umber’s face.

“Heavy,” he admitted quietly. “Mine own father took an arrow to the leg, and another to the shoulder, but he should live. Your mother and sisters arrived with Lord Reed’s forces, and I believe them all alive and well, my lady. I dare not say more when things are still so uncertain.”

Catelyn liked that answer not at all, and Roslin clearly liked it even less.

“What news?” she pressed nervously, and Smalljon Umber looked a bit guilty, perhaps for not having begun with that news.

“His Grace?” she pressed nervously, and Smalljon Umber looked a bit guilty, perhaps for not having begun with that news.

“His Grace is well and awaiting your arrival in the Gatehouse Tower,” he reported evenly. “If we set off now, we may hope to arrive before nightfall.”

And so Catelyn returned to the covered wayn in which she’d been riding with her son and the wet nurse who would accompany him to Greywater Watch, and they arrived at the Moat just as the sun was dipping over the horizon. Catelyn found Robb just as she had the last time she’d arrived at Moat Cailin, at the table surrounded by papers and a group of his men. But this time, Robb had been expecting her; he looked up the moment that she arrived and dismissed his men without preamble. Grey Wind lay sleeping in the corner, blood still staining his muzzle.
Roslin threw herself into Robb’s arms the moment the men had gone. “Are you all right?” she asked him, pressing her hands against his chest as though to feel for any injuries. “Truly?”

The expression on Robb’s face was grim.

“I’m all right,” he assured her, holding her tight against his body, and it was only then that Catelyn understood what had happened, why Smalljon Umber had been so evasive about casualties when he’d gone to fetch them. She gave her son a sympathetic look over Roslin’s head, holding Edrick more tightly to her chest. “Roslin… I’m sorry.”

Roslin pulled back to look at him, and it was then that she seemed to realize it, too. “Olyvar?” she asked, stricken, but Robb shook his head.

“Perwyn,” he told her instead, and she sobbed quietly at that, burying her face against his chest. Catelyn felt uncomfortable at the sight; Roslin was her good-daughter, certainly, but she didn’t feel as though she should be part of this scene, didn’t feel as though she should be a party to the girl’s grief. But there seemed no way to extricate herself from it, either, so Catelyn stood firm. It was only when Roslin’s sobs began to quiet that Robb pulled away slightly, so he could look down upon his wife’s face.

“He was a good man, and he died valiantly,” he told Roslin softly, and she threw her hand over her mouth, an attempt to muffle another sob. Robb placed a gentle kiss against her brow. “Olyvar!” he called out after a moment, and miraculously, his squire did appear then, his face drawn and his eyes red-rimmed. Robb looked down at Roslin with guilty eyes. “I wish that I could remain with you, but I must needs speak with my mother alone. I will come to you as soon as I am able. Olyvar, please stay with your sister. I have no further need of your service tonight.”

It was a difficult thing her son had just done, Catelyn knew, to give his wife such news and then abandon her. She wondered what it was that he had to discuss with her that would be more important than comforting his distraught wife, his wife who had just lost a brother. But Roslin didn’t protest, just nodded meekly as Olyvar led her out of the room. Robb rubbed his eyes as soon as the door shut behind them and turned to Catelyn.

“May I hold him?” Robb asked tiredly, and Catelyn could see it, then, how utterly exhausted her son seemed. She handed Edrick over wordlessly, watching as Robb took the boy in his arms. Edrick cooed and stuck his tiny fingers right into his brother’s face. Robb laughed at that, a short, strangled sound.

“Did we get Victarion Greyjoy, at least?” she asked when Robb made no apparent move to speak. Robb pursed his lips and shook his head.

“He wasn’t here.” Robb said dully, weathering it with a surprising amount of poise when Edrick tried to stick his fingers into Robb’s nose. “When we emerged on the Fever, only nine ironborn ships remained, the rest having fled some days before.”

Catelyn frowned at that. “For fear of your coming?” she asked, but that didn’t make any sense, either. They’d had no idea that Robb would have a way to attack them from the north, and even if they’d noticed the bulk of Robb’s forces heading at them up the causeway, they’d have doubtlessly believed they could hold out against them. Two hundred determined archers can hold the Neck against an army.

“I don’t think so,” Robb told her slowly. “We’ve only just begun questioning the captives, but it seems that Balon Greyjoy is dead. They got word just days before we mounted our attack, and Victarion left to return to the Iron Islands.”
That was queer news indeed.

“Does he mean to mount a claim?” she pressed with a frown. “Theon is the heir. And there was a sister, wasn’t there?”

Robb nodded. “Asha,” he provided. “She’s at Deepwood Motte, and no one seems to know where Theon is, nor whether he’s alive or dead.”

*If there are any gods at all, he is dead for what he did,* Catelyn thought sharply, *though I would not mind seeing him die a slow death instead.*

“But that’s not why I needed to speak with you, Mother,” Robb admitted with a sigh, and he sat down and sat his brother on his thigh, bouncing him up and down to keep him amused. Edrick giggled in sharp contrast to his older brother’s grim tone. “We received riders from White Harbor, with news they thought we needed to hear.”

It was plain from Robb’s tone that the news was not good. She gave him a patient look, and he sighed.

“I’m not certain which report to give you first.” Robb frowned, allowing Edrick to chew on his sleeve without complaint. “Your father has passed,” he said finally, unhappily.

There was a sharp feeling of pain in Catelyn’s chest, but there was also acceptance there. Her father had been dying for some time, and she’d known it. She’d known when she’d left Riverrun that it would most like be the last time she’d ever see her father alive, and she’d done her best to make peace with that. But she forcibly pushed away those thoughts for the time being; she could weep for her father later, but there was still more she needed to hear.

“What else?” she pressed, her voice sounding surprisingly rawer than she’d expected. Robb appeared to hesitate for a second before he finally answered her.

“The Lannisters have married Sansa to the Imp.”

It felt as though the world had frozen just then, just for a moment, the news too implausible to understand. Her daughter, her baby girl, not even yet three and ten and married off against her will to her enemy. She shivered. “Why? Why would they do that?”

Robb’s face was impassive. “Most like they hope to claim Winterfell through her, after they slaughter us all,” he said with an air of forced detachment. Catelyn forced herself to suck in a breath.

“That will not happen,” she said with force, as though saying it would make it true. Her son gave her an approving look.

“No,” he agreed with a wan smile. “We will not let it.”

But neither of them voiced what they were doubtless both thinking—that they may keep the north from the Lannisters, but they could not keep Sansa from them, nor could they protect her from whatever the Lannister Imp wanted to do with her. *Could* do with her, lawfully, now that she was his wife. And Arya…they had not heard news of Arya in months. Most like she had been killed right at the beginning, and the Lannisters did not want to admit that they were short one hostage.

“Will you be all right, Mother?” Robb asked softly after a long pause, breaking Catelyn from her dark thoughts. “It would grieve me to leave you alone now, but I should see to my queen.”

Catelyn had no trouble admitting that the words were truth, that Roslin likely needed Robb more
than she did. Her father’s death had been expected; she’d had many moons to prepare herself for the inevitability of it, though she was no less aggrieved for having seen it coming. But Roslin had just been forced to wed a man she scarcely knew and leave her home only to be unexpectedly blindsided by the death of her brother. Catelyn had weathered worse storms than this already.

“I shall be fine, Robb,” she assured him with whatever confidence she could muster. Robb looked slightly unconvinced, but he didn’t argue with her, only reluctantly handed Edrick back into her arms before standing up to lead her to the door. He opened it for her and nearly jumped back to find a man standing there, his arm raised as though poised to knock.

“Lord Reed,” Robb greeted in surprise, and Catelyn took a moment to take in Howland Reed for the first time. The man had long been somewhat of an enigma; Ned had always spoken highly of him, but he’d never once come to Winterfell, not in all the years of their marriage, and Catelyn knew blessedly little of him. He was a short, wiry man, with brown hair and impossibly green eyes, and he stood shorter than her by at least half a foot. It seemed impossible that this tiny man could be the one that Ned had always said had saved his life during Robert’s Rebellion, for he seemed incapable of fighting anyone, let alone knights of the Kingsguard.

“Your Grace,” Lord Reed acknowledged with a bow, but his appearance had apparently not been scheduled, because Robb looked perplexed by his arrival.

“Do you have some business with me, my lord? Because I was just about to see my mother to her rooms.”

It was then that Howland Reed looked up at Catelyn for the first time, and his green eyes were so strangely penetrating that she almost shivered under his gaze. She thought of all the queerest tales she’d heard of the crannogmen—that they’d intermarried with the Children of the Forest, that they could breathe underwater, that they spoke directly with the old gods. She’d dismissed it all as superstition, but looking into Howland Reed’s eyes at that moment, Catelyn could almost believe that all the tales were true.

“I am afraid I must needs have words with the both of you, Your Grace,” he said in a strangely penetrating tone, and then he looked at Catelyn again. “It might be best if the babe is away, my lady.”

Catelyn felt Robb go stiff next to her. “Is it…is it something about Father?” he asked helplessly, sounding all of ten years old again. Lord Reed gave him a sympathetic look.

“It is,” he confirmed with a slight sadness behind his eyes, and in that moment, Catelyn felt a sudden kinship to this man she’d never before met. He loved Ned too, she thought to herself, and she wondered what it was that had kept him away from Winterfell for all those years if he’d loved her husband so well. They’d exchanged letters, Catelyn remembered dimly, although it struck her that Ned had never told her the letters’ contents. She’d never once thought to ask, and not for the first time, she marveled at all that had remained unsaid between them. She wondered if she’d have let so many things lie if she’d known their time together would be so short.

Catelyn found someone in the hallway to fetch Edrick’s nurse as Robb let Lord Reed inside. There was palpable tension in the room when Catelyn returned, alone, Robb looking as though it was taking physical effort to keep himself from demanding that the man begin speaking at once. Lord Reed was looking uncomfortable under their gazes, as though he was just starting to rethink seeking them out.

“My husband always spoke very highly of you, my lord,” Catelyn told Howland Reed softly, in an attempt to put him more at ease. “He considered you a very dear friend.”
Rather than calm him, though, Catelyn’s words seemed only to discomfit him further.

“I thank you, my lady, for your kind words.” He paused, looking down at his feet, which were clad in well-worn brown boots. “But I fear I must now break a promise I once made to him, and I hope he would understand why I must do it.” Lord Reed stopped speaking again, looking torn. “But how could he, when even I don’t understand myself? I only know that the gods bid me to speak, and I must listen. The boy is old enough to defend himself now, and King Robert is dead.”

Catelyn frowned. Nothing of the man’s words was making any sense.

“Speak plainly, Lord Reed.”

And when Howland Reed looked back up at her, all his indecision was gone, his moss-green eyes seeming all-seeing. “You must know the truth about Jon Snow,” he proclaimed then, without hesitation, and Catelyn felt her chest clench in anger at even the sound of the boy’s name. But Robb felt no such misgivings; Catelyn saw him stand up at that, moving around the table to get closer to the crannogman.

“How can he, when even I don’t understand myself? I only know that the gods bid me to speak, and I must listen. The boy is old enough to defend himself now, and King Robert is dead.”

Catelyn frowned. Nothing of the man’s words was making any sense.

“Speak plainly, Lord Reed.”

And when Howland Reed looked back up at her, all his indecision was gone, his moss-green eyes seeming all-seeing. “You must know the truth about Jon Snow,” he proclaimed then, without hesitation, and Catelyn felt her chest clench in anger at even the sound of the boy’s name. But Robb felt no such misgivings; Catelyn saw him stand up at that, moving around the table to get closer to the crannogman.

“About his mother?” he asked in almost-desperation before he turned his gaze upon Catelyn, a question in his blue eyes. My eyes, Catelyn thought bitterly, not Ned’s. Not like the bastard’s. “You don’t know? Father never told you? I always assumed…”

Catelyn felt as though her veins had been replaced with ice water. “No,” she bit out coldly, and harshly enough that Robb recoiled a little. “Your father never told me.” She paused, forced herself to take a deep breath. “I had my suspicions, however. About the Lady Ashara of House Dayne. Your father forbade me to speak her name within the halls of Winterfell.” Catelyn turned her gaze to Howland Reed, resenting him for bringing this up again after all these years, after Ned was dead, and when Catelyn had nearly managed to put the wretched boy out of her mind altogether. “Is she the one?”

Howland Reed looked supremely uncomfortable to be faced with her anger and as though some part of him deeply regretted having begun this conversation at all. He cleared his throat.

“You may want to sit, my lady. And you as well, Your Grace,” he said instead of answering, but that only stoked Catelyn’s anger.

“I’d prefer to stand,” she replied sharply. “Tell it true, Lord Reed. Was Lady Ashara Jon Snow’s mother?”

Lord Reed looked regretful as he spoke.

“Lady Ashara had a child, aye,” he admitted haltingly. “Not Jon, though a child of Stark blood all the same. It gives me no pleasure to tell you this, my lady, for he was then your betrothed. I know not the truth of it, but Ned believed the child to have been Brandon’s. I believe Ned wanted to shield you from it, my lady, to allow you to remember him better than he was.”

Despite her furious words mere moments before, Catelyn found the nearest chair and sat, feeling as though her legs may not be able to keep her upright much longer. A wave of despair and resentment washed over her. Was I destined to have a man who would dishonor me, no matter which man I married? she wondered bitterly. Although mayhaps Brandon would have at least lacked the audacity to try to raise his bastard at Winterfell, in full view of all the realm.

Catelyn’s words seemed to have failed her, but Robb appeared to have retained the ability to speak, though his voice was shaky. “The child…?” he prodded uncertainly. Robb’s cousin, Catelyn thought
detachedly, my niece or nephew by marriage.

“Stillborn, Your Grace,” Lord Reed informed him with regret. “A daughter.”

The words all seemed to jumble around in Catelyn’s head, all the things she’d been trying rather unsuccessfully to avoid thinking about rising back to the surface. She remembered Ned’s anger at the sound of Ashara Dayne’s name, remembered thinking it proof that Ned had loved her, that he’d fathered a bastard on her. But it seemed it was proof of something else entirely.

“If not the Lady Ashara, then who?” she dimly heard herself asking. Lord Reed shifted uncomfortably.

“It is less about the identity of the boy’s mother than it is the identity of his father, my lady,” the crannogman said finally, haltingly. Catelyn felt a rush of irrational anger rise up in her chest.

“What do you mean? Ned was his father.”

Howland Reed’s eyes, when they met hers, were aggrieved. “No, my lady. He was not.”

The whole conversation was suddenly beginning to seem ludicrous and far from appropriate. Ned had spoken highly of this man, but how could he have cared so deeply for a man this cruel, trying so hard at trickery and bringing up old hurts?

“Howland Reed’s eyes, when they met hers, were aggrieved. “No, my lady. He was not.”

The words came rushing over Catelyn like a waterfall, and she wondered if she could be dreaming, if mayhaps she was ill and this was some fever-induced hallucination. How many times had she wished that Ned had not fathered a bastard and brought him back to Winterfell? How many times had she prayed to the Seven that Ned would have some other explanation, would send the boy away with some admission that the whole thing was some sort of mistake? But Ned had always been so adamant.

“He is of my blood, Ned had told her, and that is all you need to know.

Catelyn felt tears springing to her eyes. Gods, she thought frantically, had Ned been trying to tell me the truth all along, and I’d simply been too blind to see it?

“And then everything seemed to stop as the pieces clicked into place. Catelyn was glad that she was already sitting, because she thought she might have fallen over if she had not been. Robb sat back down, too, burying his face in his hands as he took a deep, steadying breath.
“So all these years, we were sheltering a Targaryen bastard,” said a voice that Catelyn only belatedly recognized as her own. Could there really be any truth to this? she wondered, feeling near hysteria. Was treason worse than dishonor, or better? Was one lie the same as another? She wondered if there was any true answer, but the crannogman’s nervous voice stopped her thoughts in their tracks.

“I cannot say for certain, my lady, but...I do not believe him to be a bastard.” Robb looked up at the words, his gaze suddenly sharp, penetrating, and entirely focused on Howland Reed. “When we found where Lyanna had been hidden, she and the babe were being guarded by three members of the Kingsguard, the Lord Commander among them. They were not guarding the king, nor Prince Rhaegar, nor Princess Elia and her children or Queen Rhaella and Prince Viserys.”

Her son didn't need that spelled out for him any more than she did.

“Three Kingsguard is a bit much to be protecting the prince’s captive and some bastard he’d fathered on her,” Robb remarked slowly, as if just turning it over in his mind himself. Howland Reed nodded in agreement.

“Aye, you speak it true. We have no proof of that, only suspicions, but if it is true...”

Robb sucked in a sharp breath, his face seeming to light up in one moment, and Catelyn felt a dawning sense of horror about it all.

“Then Jon would have been next in line to the throne, with Prince Aegon and Princess Rhaenys slain,” he proclaimed as he stood, suddenly seeming invigorated. He turned to her with a brightness about his face that made Catelyn sick to her stomach.

“Don’t you see?” he asked her in a desperate tone. “This is perfect! If we depose the Lannister bastard, who is to take the Iron Throne? Surely not Stannis, who murdered his own brother with blood magic? Not me. My place is at Winterfell. But Jon—with the Targaryen name and Stark blood, even the north would bend the knee to him, and who knows how many Targaryen loyalists remain in the south—”

This is madness, Catelyn thought to herself, a boy’s madness, dreaming with his brothers of princes and battles and glory.

“Robb,” she interrupted, but he didn’t seem to hear her, so she spoke louder the second time. “Robb. Jon is a member of the Night’s Watch. He is sworn to wear no crowns, to forsake all lands and titles.”

Her son looked at her with an air of annoyance, and she couldn’t help but wonder if that had been Ned’s plan, to send the boy off to the Watch to try to prevent this exact war, pitting the north supporting one king against the south supporting another. She felt a sick feeling in her belly as she wondered if she’d ever known her husband at all. What he had done had plainly been treason, and had it been discovered, it could have meant all their heads on spikes along the walls of King’s Landing. He’d made her complicit in the whole endeavor, had put them all in danger every day Jon had been within Winterfell’s walls. For the first time, she wished instead that the boy could have been nothing more than a bastard born of her husband’s indiscretion, even a bastard whose mother he’d loved too desperately to let go.

But Robb plainly shared none of her misgivings.

“Surely if a king can legitimize a bastard, a king can override the decrees of the Night’s Watch?” he put forth with an air of uncertainty. “Seven hells, Mother, he is the rightful king. He could dismiss himself—”
“Robb,” she hissed again, unhappily, still wondering if she’d wake any moment to find that she’d dreamed this whole thing. “The Targaryens were deposed. No Targaryen is the rightful anything; your father saw to that.”

And yet Robb could not be dissuaded.

“Castle Black sent ravens asking for more men, saying the situation there is dire—Mother, we must write to Castle Black, make sure Jon stays there until we arrive. We’ll have to deliver them more men in any case if we want to ensure the security of the north, and we can tell him and bring him back with us.”

Catelyn stared at her son sadly. Not an hour ago, you were a king, a husband with a grieving wife, a man who understood the practicalities of war and his responsibilities. Now you are a boy taken up with songs and stories.

And Catelyn couldn't help but fear, with a dark sense of unease, that that idealism would be her son’s downfall.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb VII, in which Robb hangs out at Moat Cailin waiting for the force from Harrenhal to join him, boinks his wife a bit, and basically nothing of any importance happens yet again. ;)}
Robb VII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Robb rolled over in bed for what seemed like the thousandth time, uncertain if he had slept at all. He must have for a while, he knew; it was his fifth nearly-sleepless night, and things had grown so bad that even Roslin had been bestirred enough from her grief about her brother’s death to find the time to worry about him. He certainly hadn’t blamed her when she’d wanted to share a bed for nothing other than sleeping after that news, but when she realized how poorly he’d been sleeping, she’d taken it upon herself to resume their nighttime activities—mostly with the aim to try to tire him out enough that he’d simply fall asleep, he guessed. And it had worked, in its own way, because he’d usually doze for at least an hour or two after they’d made love before waking to the darkness, plagued by his worries and unable to fall back asleep.

She’s better than I deserve, Robb thought to himself as he turned to regard his slumbering wife, inasmuch as he could see her in the dark room. He understood his wife’s grief at losing her brother; he’d already lost two, and his father as well, and the fact that she’d been able to come out of her grief enough to worry about him spoke volumes about how caring she was.

But there was nothing for it, nothing that seemed capable of curing his restlessness. He was tired of sitting at Moat Cailin and waiting to make his next move, with such an unsteady view of the state of things in the north. The news from Castle Cerwyn had told him little and less of Winterfell; the damage to the castle was extensive, the raven reported, but they didn’t have the men to garrison it, for too many Cerwyn men had died trying to take it back. But they hadn’t taken it back, nor had Theon seemed to have won; they were all simply gone, leaving the empty ruin of Winterfell the only indication that something had happened there.

Had Theon heard of his father’s death and gone back to the Iron Islands? But no, they had gotten news about Winterfell before Balon had even died, as far as he could tell. So unless Theon could tell the future, that hadn’t been why he had fled.

Unless Theon had caused that outcome, a cynical voice in his head pointed out, but he couldn’t bring himself to believe that, couldn’t believe that Theon would kill his own father. But why not? the same voice asked. He killed Bran and Rickon, and they were more Theon’s family than his own father had ever been.

Robb sighed and turned to stare at the ceiling. It wasn’t near dawn yet, so there was no use getting out of bed, but it was impossible to sleep, either, not when he didn’t know with any certainty what was happening anywhere outside the crumbling walls of Moat Cailin, such as they were. But he’d promised Galbart Glover that they wouldn’t resume the march north until his brother Robett arrived, that they could see the fate of Deepwood Motte together.

Mayhaps Asha has fled, too, and left only a small garrison, Robb thought hopefully. Mayhaps they can take their home back easily, and we can all be wiser next time so as to avoid making the same mistakes, expecting attacks from the south and not from the sea.

Or mayhaps Robett Glover would march upon Deepwood Motte to find his wife and children’s heads mounted upon the gates on spikes, said that traitorous voice, the one that was keeping him up all night.

Robb had considered the merits of marching north with only part of his force, had thought it through
half a hundred times, but in the end he’d discarded it. Galbart Glover would not march without his brother, nor Rickard Karstark without his son, nor Wylis Manderly without his brother, and all three would be arriving at Moat Cailin within days. Marching without the Glovers, Manderlys, and Karstarks seemed a ridiculous proposition, and there was still the matter of the Bolton host arriving with them, whether their loyalty would remain.

_Roose Bolton may be dead, but they are still northmen_, Robb reminded himself, but there was a bitter feeling in his belly. He knew not the state of the Dreadfort, either, with Roose and his bastard both slain. _Had Ser Rodrik named someone as castellan?_ Robb wondered, not for the first time, for no matter how many ravens they’d sent to the Dreadfort, not a single one had returned.

And then there was Jon, the matter that had begun his string of sleepless nights. He’d been so excited, so hopeful after his conversation with Howland Reed. Everything had seemed to be falling into place; all he needed was for Jon to stay put long enough for Robb to get to him, and how many southron houses could they get to rally to Jon’s banners, once the truth was out? The Tyrells had been loyal to the Targaryens until the end, until Robb’s own father had arrived to break the siege at Storm’s End. And the Dornish…well, they were more difficult to predict, for their loyalty may not extend so far as to support the son of the woman for whom Elia Martell had been spurned. But surely a Targaryen would be preferable to a Lannister?

But the raven from Castle Black had been the worst one by far. The bulk of the force at Castle Black had gone on a great ranging north of the Wall led by the Lord Commander himself, the letter had said, and most of their ravens had flown back with no messages at all. The message they’d gotten had spoken of a large-scale attack at the Fist of the First Men. No survivors had made it back to Castle Black as of yet. They needed more men.

_But Jon couldn’t have died_, Robb thought desperately, and not for the first time, surely not. For that would make everything in vain, all the lies that his father had told to keep Jon safe. _Were the gods so cruel? Would they tell Howland Reed to let us know the truth only when it is too late for us to do anything about it?_

Because Robb didn’t doubt that the gods had had some hand in it, didn’t doubt much about the crannogmen anymore. Some of them knew things, things there was no way they could have known; he’d heard whisperings of green dreams and wargs, and somehow everything that had once seemed impossible was starting to seem possible.

_You heard Edrick’s heartbeat in the womb_, that niggling voice reminded him. _You heard it because Grey Wind heard it, and how could that be possible unless you were a—_

“Robb?” a sleepy voice asked, and then the figure beside him was shifting on the bed, Roslin’s tiny, delicate hand tracing along his chest. She sighed deeply. “You haven’t slept, have you?”

Robb felt a stab of guilt in his chest. “A little,” he offered helplessly, and it wasn’t a lie—at least, he thought it wasn’t, thought he had dozed a little in the earlier hours of the night. Roslin sighed again, more deeply, and then her delicate little hand was wrapped around his cock. He was shamefully hard in seconds. “Roslin, you don’t have to—”

“Hush,” she said, and then she was climbing on top of him, hiking her nightdress up around her hips and sinking down onto him. She was still slick with his seed from when they’d made love earlier in the night, and the realization did nothing to calm the reaction of his body.

_I can’t believe I ever thought this woman timid_, Robb thought dumbly as Roslin rocked atop him, riding him until he found release inside her for the second time that night. He must have slept some after that, because the next thing he was aware, he was opening his eyes to see that it was morning,
and it was Olyvar by his side instead of his sister. Robb had a terrifying moment in which he wondered if he’d dreamed Roslin up in some fit of insanity until he realized that Olyvar was fully clothed and standing beside his bed, not in nightclothes and beneath the covers as his sister had been.

“Robett Glover’s force should be arriving within the hour, Your Grace,” Olyvar reported when he realized Robb was finally fully awake. “I had thought you might want to be there to greet them.”

Robb felt a little dazed as he got up and dressed, and it was likely the first time he had felt that he truly did need Olyvar’s help to dress himself, elsewise he might have ended up with everything backward or laced wrong.

“You shouldn’t have let me sleep so late,” he scolded, but Olyvar just snorted, wholly unintimidated.

“You may want to take that up with your queen,” he suggested, and Robb almost snorted in return; Roslin was ‘my sister’ to Olyvar when he was pleased with her, but always, ‘your queen’ when she had done something Olyvar didn’t like. “She soundly threatened anyone who so much as went near your chambers this morning. In fact, I might be on the receiving end of her ire, even now.”

*She is fiercer than I gave her credit for at first, Robb thought to himself, not for the first time, and more confident every day she is queen.*

He found her out in what remained of the Moat’s courtyard, greeting her with a kiss to the cheek. “How did you sleep, Your Grace?” she asked him with a knowing smirk, and Robb just shook his head at her, forgetting his many worries for just a moment.

“That was a wicked trick you played upon me, my queen.”

She only smiled more widely at that, so Robb went over to greet his mother, little Ned an ever-present figure in her arms. He fluttered little kisses on his brother’s nose, smiling at the way the babe giggled in response. When he broke away from them, Lord Karstark actually went so far as to embrace him, clearly gleeful at the return of his only surviving son—and not to be undone, Galbart Glover came to embrace him next. For the first time, Robb felt glad that he had not marched ahead, regardless of his eagerness to have the whole matter settled, glad that he had remained at the Moat for these reunions.

*Let Lord Karstark remember that I was here when his eldest son returned to him, and not just when his two younger sons were killed, Robb thought. Let the men cherish the memory of their brothers and sons returning to them for a time, so they will have the conviction to send them out to die all over again.*

It was somewhat sickening to have to consider every move like this with pragmatism, Robb couldn’t help but feel. Robb the boy would have simply rejoiced to see families reunited, to see the northern bannermen successful in this one thing, at least. But Robb the king had to think about how all his actions reflected to his men, whether they would be inspired to keep faith or driven away to desertion or worse.

A horn sounded from the top of one of the towers announcing the impending arrival of the men, so Robb moved back to stand between his queen and his mother. It was only minutes later that the host rode up, the mailed fist of House Glover flying at the front of the column right next to the direwolf of House Stark.

All sense of decorum vanished the moment men began dismounting. Robett Glover should rightly have greeted his king first and reaffirmed his fealty, Robb thought with some amusement, but his brother made that perfectly impossible when he stepped forward first and threw his arms around...
Robett. Rickard Karstark saw that and, with a furtive look back at Robb, stepped forward to embrace his son. The Manderly brothers did not embrace, Robb saw, but he wondered if it was truly a lack of affection between them or if they simply could not manage it around their combined roundness.

Robb made no move to interrupt their reunions, courtesies be damned. *Let them remember what they are fighting for,* he thought as he looked at his wife, then his mother and brother in turn. *Their homes, and whatever family is left to them.*

The moment was interrupted by a commotion from the rear of the party. There were shouts and surprised whinnies of some of the horses, and all the men turned in the direction of the sound, a hundred hands going to the pommels of their swords. Robb stepped forward as well, ready to draw at any sign of danger, making certain to keep his family behind him.

“*Mother!*” came a yell, the small frantic sound of a child, and then Robb saw a young boy duck between a pair of horses, two men in Karstark armor nearly colliding as they both tried to restrain the boy. He couldn’t be more than ten, Robb thought, his short brown hair unevenly cut, greasy, and unwashed. He was a skinny little thing, and far from a threat that needed to be combatted with swords. Robb let his hand fall from his sword hilt; he would not draw steel on a little boy, who was likely frightened and confused.

The boy ducked between the two fat Manderlys, neither of whom could grasp him in time, but Robett Glover managed to reach out and capture him with a hand to the back of the boy’s dirt-stained tunic. The boy was stopped in his tracks, nearly choked by the neckline of his own shirt.

“*Mother!*” he screamed again, tears leaving lines down his grime-encrusted cheeks.

“Arya?” Robb heard his mother’s voice behind him, and as soon as she uttered the words, he saw it. The long face, the grey eyes. She was dirty, dressed in boys’ clothes, and her hair was cut short in such an uneven pattern that it seemed as though it had been done in a haste, and possibly in the dark as well, but the face was unmistakably his youngest sister’s.

“Gods be good,” Robb gasped just as Robett Glover said, “Arya Stark?” in an incredulous tone and let go of the little boy’s tunic. No, not a boy, Robb thought in disbelief. His sister Arya.

As soon as the grip on her clothing had loosened, Arya was running forward, ducking even past Robb and throwing herself against Catelyn, burying her face in her mother’s skirts. She collided with Catelyn with such force that they all would have fallen if Olyvar had not caught them. Edrick shrieked in surprise, and a flustered Roslin took him from her good-mother’s arms as he began loudly wailing his dismay.

And then Catelyn was picking Arya up as if she were no more than five years old again, both of them sobbing as they clung to each other. Robb blinked, his mind just finally catching up to what had transpired in all the chaos. He took two steps forward and threw his arms around the both of them, realizing only belatedly that he was crying, too. In those moments, Robb forgot everything around him, forgot their men and forgot that he was king, and he squeezed his mother and sister so tightly that he thought he might never be able to let them go.

It seemed a long time before they separated, although in truth Robb couldn’t have said how long it had been when his mother finally lowered Arya to the ground, although Arya scarcely moved in inch, continuing to cling to her mother’s skirts the way she never had, not even when she’d been a babe. It mustn’t have been as long as he thought, though, because all the men were standing just where he’d left them, and Robett Glover was still watching frozen in shock.

“You should have told me, child,” he murmured numbly. “We would have protected you. Given you
a tent and a guard.”

“I don’t know you,” Robb heard his sister protest defensively, and Robb had never seen his mother look so overjoyed and dismayed in the same moment.

“Arya!” she objected, but Robett Glover just laughed, a big, booming sound.

“No, my lady; she is right to be suspicious of strange men, and I might be one of the stranger ones!” he said good-naturedly, wiping away tears of mirth. He turned his gaze to Arya. “You must be a tough little thing to find your way all the way back to the north without help.”

A flush of pride appeared on his little sister’s face, and she wiped at all the remnants of tears, looking up at her mother with a hopeful expression.

“I did have help, Mother,” she said seriously. “Can my friends stay with us? A baker and a blacksmith; they can be useful—they can work. I promise.”

Robb took a deep breath, trying to steel himself for what came next, to remind himself he needed to be a king still and not just a brother.

“Where are your friends, little sister?” he asked, his voice remaining a bit unsteady to his own ears, feeling as though he might burst into tears again at the slightest provocation. Part of him had despairs that he would never be able to address her as such again.

It took a minute, but eventually two boys were shuffled to the front of the column. They were nearly as different as two boys could be, Robb reflected; the older boy was about his own age, or near enough as made no matter, with shaggy black hair and the beginnings of a matching beard. He was taller and broader than Robb by a considerable measure, and his eyes were a startling deep blue. The second boy was short and plump. He had straw-colored hair and was closer to Arya’s age than Robb’s own, if he were to judge. The older boy stepped forward first and bowed deeply.

“Your Grace, m’lady,” he prefaced in a deep, clear voice. His speech clearly marked him for a commoner, but someone had certainly taught this boy his courtesies. “My name is Gendry. I was ‘prentice to the master armorer Tobho Mott in King’s Landing before the war started. If you’ll be needing a smith, I’ll be happy to go anywhere you send me. I only want to work.”

Robb opened his mouth to speak, but his sister beat him to it. “Don’t be stupid,” she said to the older boy with all the haughtiness of a lord’s daughter but none of the courtesy. “They won’t be sending you anywhere. You’ll be staying with us. What if Joffrey’s men are still after you?”

That was curious, Robb thought, and it was clear enough that some of his men thought so, too. We shouldn’t have started this in front of the men, Robb thought helplessly, but there was nothing to be done for it now; he’d have to let this play out, lest he look like he didn’t trust his own bannermen.

“Why are the Lannisters after you?” he asked the boy with his most penetrating gaze. “Have you committed some grievous crimes?”

The boy looked startled, shifting uncomfortably for the first time under Robb’s gaze, which was confirmation enough that he was being suitably intimidating despite the fact that Gendry was both taller and broader than he.

“I committed no crimes, Your Grace. All I’ve ever done is work in my master’s shop. Nothing else.”

Robb decided to let that go for the moment, allowing his eyes to flick to the second boy. “And you?”
The heavyset boy was visibly trembling under his gaze. “T-they call me Hot Pie. I’m n-nothing but a baker’s boy, Y’Grace. My mother is dead and I’ve got n-no one. I can work, I swear it. I just don’t want to die.”

Robb considered that he was possibly being too intimidating. Like as not, the apprentice of a master armorer had encountered a lord or two in his years, but this boy likely had never stood before a high lord, let alone a king. Robb sighed.

“Nobody is going to die,” he assured the frightened boy, meeting both boys’ gazes in turn. “You helped protect my sister?”

The younger boy looked around uncertainly, but the older one dipped his head in acknowledgement. “We tried our best, Your Grace,” he put forth. “Neither of us is fighters.”

“Then you are welcome here,” Robb told them with a smile, though the fat boy didn’t look much relieved. “Come, let’s get everyone settled; we can all meet later when our new arrivals are rested.”

The last words were directed at his bannermen, and they recognized them easily as the dismissal they were. As the men began filtering away, Robb walked over to his sister and pulled her into his arms again, holding her tight against his body. “You are the bravest little girl I know,” he said into her ear, his voice thick with tears that nearly threatened to fall once more. “Braver than half my bannermen, I bet.”

Arya laughed and clung onto him, and Robb rejoiced at the sound. His mother put a hand on Robb’s shoulder.

“We should get her cleaned up, and get her some clean clothes,” she pointed out, her eyes sparkling with her own unshed tears. Arya grinned against him.

“I haven’t had a bath in ages,” she confessed, and Robb reluctantly put her down, allowing his mother to take her by the hand. Roslin still held Edrick in her arms, and thankfully he seemed to have calmed when the commotion did.

“I’ll watch him,” she offered gently. “You go with Arya.”

Catelyn looked thankful, but Robb felt a moment of indecision. He wanted nothing more than to follow his mother and Arya, but he glanced over at the two boys who had arrived with her, and the strange pronouncement about Joffrey’s men. Best not let that mystery linger too long, he thought. Best get to the bottom of it sooner rather than later.

“You go,” he told his mother and sister, ruffling Arya’s unkempt hair. “I’ll see to your friends.”

Arya looked at him with such a grateful expression that he was instantly glad he’d decided to go with the boys, even if his motives weren’t entirely altruistic. His mother gave him a strange look, as if to suggest that he could leave that to one of the servants, but Robb just pursed his lips and shook his head, and she apparently thought better of saying anything in front of Arya, instead taking her by the hand and leading her to the tower. Robb turned to Roslin and dropped another kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely, and she smiled and nodded, walking away with Edrick in her arms. Robb called Olyvar over. “See if you can find some clothes that will fit these two.”

Olyvar nodded his assent and then he was gone, too, and Robb turned to the two boys who had arrived with his sister. They stood in place uncertainly, and Robb did his best to plaster a smile on his face.
“I’m afraid there are too many men and not enough space in the towers here to get you a proper bath, but I can get you some soap and water to wash off with, at least,” he offered, and he motioned for the boys to follow him. He watched the older boy, Gendry, out of the corner of his eye, thinking over his sister’s words once more. What would Joffrey’s men want with some blacksmith’s apprentice?

He led them to the area where he knew some of the men had been going for the same purpose; it was fairly crowded with all the men who had just arrived, covered in the grime of travel, but Robb managed to secure them a bucket of water, some cloths, and a bit of soap that the blacksmith carried to a spot away from the group at his insistence. He started stripping off his clothing without preamble, and the younger boy glanced at him and followed. Robb watched as Gendry wet his cloth and started soaping under his arms; he was as broad and muscular beneath his clothes as he had looked, though skinnier than he might be had he been better fed.

“You truly don’t know why Joffrey’s men were after you?” he pressed after a moment, deciding there was no need for subtlety with this boy. Like enough he was uneducated; subtlety might do Robb more harm than good. Gendry shook his head.

“Arry—I mean, Lady Arya, she thought the gold cloaks were after her,” he told Robb without hesitation. “But they were after me; knew me by name, and knew about the helmet I carried, but they didn’t seem to know what I looked like.”

Robb frowned. It was a queer tale, and an unlikely one, but he could ask his sister for confirmation later.

“And you have no idea why a king would be interested in you?” he prodded, and Gendry shrugged.

“Couldn’t say, Your Grace, but lots of high lords became interested in me all of a sudden,” he admitted with a somewhat sheepish look. “First the king’s Hand, Lord Arryn, came to see me at the shop. Then after he died, and your lord father became Hand, he came to see me, too.”

He looked a little nervous as he said the last bit, and Robb felt his breath catch in his chest at the mention of his father. He knew precious little of what had transpired that had led to his father being imprisoned by the Lannisters, but he knew his father had uncovered the truth about the Queen’s incest with the Kingslayer, that he had been the one to send word to Stannis Baratheon, who had then sprinkled the news about the Seven Kingdoms. But what did this boy have to do with it? he wondered.

And then, all of a sudden, he saw it, as he had with Arya; Robb had at first thought her to be a little boy, just as he’d at first thought this boy to be a simple blacksmith. But it wasn’t so.

“Gendry, look at me,” Robb commanded, and Gendry looked up at him, startled. Robb had looked into those deep blue eyes before, he realized, at Winterfell. “How old are you, Gendry?”

The question seemed to perplex the boy. “Five and ten, Your Grace,” he answered haltingly, and Robb tried to run a hand through his hair in exasperation before remembering his crown still sat poised on his head. Seven hells, he thought, then forced a smile.

“Finish your wash,” he told the boys as affably as he could manage. “I’ll make certain my squire brings you some cleaner clothes, and if you can find one of the washerwomen, they’ll launder your old clothes for you. You’ll have to bed down outside, but there will be food and wine on offer, and ample fires and furs to keep you warm.”

Both boys mumbled their thanks, but Robb scarce heard them as he made his way back to the tower where his mother and sister were. He found Olyvar on his way and directed him to the boys, shaking
his head to himself again. *Seven hells, should I put a guard on him?* Robb wondered in a daze. *Robert Baratheon’s natural son—a bastard with more claim to the Iron Throne than the boy who sat it.*

He discovered his sister had finished washing, and someone had found clothes for her, though they were several measures too large. Still in a pair of trousers and a tunic, Robb saw, and the trousers were rolled up several times and tightly belted so they didn’t fall. Likely his mother hadn’t been able to find anyone with a dress small enough to fit her, he thought, and trousers could at least be cuffed while she’d be tripping on overlong skirts enough that they’d lose all practicality. His mother was teasing the tangles out of Arya’s short hair with a brush, his sister wincing sharply.

“Are Gendry and Hot Pie okay?” Arya asked as soon as he came into the room, and Robb forced a smile and sat down next to her, grabbing her hand softly and trying not to think about Robert Baratheon’s bastard son. Nor about his own father’s bastard son, who *wasn’t* his bastard son, possibly dead somewhere beyond the Wall.

“They’re fine,” he told her with false cheerfulness. “Having a wash, just like you did. You were all very filthy, little sister.”

Arya stuck out her tongue at him. “You try staying clean while being dragged along through the whole of the riverlands and the Neck,” she said, and she seemed to be trying to keep her voice light as well, though there was something dark underlying the words. He’d have to ask his sister everything that had transpired to bring her to Moat Cailin, he thought, but that could be left for another time. She looked at him with wide grey eyes. “Are we going back to Winterfell?”

Robb looked up at his mother in a slight panic; he hadn’t thought ahead to what he would be doing with Arya, first glad to have her back and then distracted by the mystery of the blacksmith. Robb watched his mother’s face contort through several different emotions before she finally said, in a pained voice, “Edrick will be going with Lord Reed to Greywater Watch. It’s the safest place. You should go too, Arya.”

Arya jumped up out of her chair all of a sudden, barely even wincing as the brush tore out a small chunk of her hair.

“No!” she protested angrily. “I’m not going anywhere except where you’re going! You aren’t going to send me away, and you shouldn’t send *him* away either! He’s just a baby and he needs his mother, and so do I!”

By the end of her rant, tears were streaming down her face, and Robb looked at his mother helplessly; she looked just as torn. Catelyn stood up and engulfed Arya in her arms.

“I just want you safe, sweetling,” she said softly, but Arya wrenched her way out of her mother’s grasp.

“I don’t *want* to be safe!” she screamed hysterically. “I want to be home.”

There was a pang in Robb’s chest at the words, for he was feeling the same longing for Winterfell that she did. He didn’t know what had happened to his sister in the moons since their father had died, but he was more than certain that little of it had been good. And now they were asking her to go to another strange place; it must have seemed terribly unfair to her. He got up from his chair and squatted down beside her, and when he looked into her eyes, he felt a sudden conviction.

“Neither of you will be going anywhere,” he assured her quietly, clasping his hand in hers, giving her what he hoped was his most reassuring look. “Do you remember what Father always said?”
‘When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.’ We’ll all be sticking together until we’re back behind the walls of Winterfell.”

Robb pulled Arya into his arms and gave his mother a helpless look over her shoulder, hoping against hope that he was making the right decision.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb VIII, in which Robb takes back Torrhen’s Square, is confused about moonblood, gets some news, and thinks he has shit all figured out.
They diverted from the path to Winterfell to retake Torrhen’s Square, for Helman Tallhart had ridden north from Harrenhal on the promise of retaking his home, and as eager as Robb was to return to Winterfell, he certainly couldn’t ride right past Torrhen’s Square and ignore it, especially when Lord Tallhart’s own brother had died trying to retake Winterfell. But in the end, it was almost a waste of a trip; the garrison at Torrhen’s square was laughably tiny, less than fifty men, and when they had seen the army approaching flying the direwolf banner, Lord Tallhart’s fourteen-year-old nephew and his brother’s wife had slit the throats of the guards and opened the gates to them. Helman had been so proud of them that he’d wept and embraced them until they had all been covered in ironborn blood.

*Could southron women and children ever be so fierce?* Robb couldn’t help but wonder with some satisfaction when they told him the tale later.

The battle had been short but bloody; when the ironborn inside the castle had realized what had happened, they’d managed to kill one cook and two washerwomen, thinking them part of the betrayal, but the others had all locked themselves in the cellar, and the rest of the casualties had all been ironmen. They had been killed almost to a man; none had been willing to surrender, and even many of those they’d tried to take alive had fought so fiercely against impossible odds that there’d been nothing for it but to slay them.

They had somehow still been receiving ravens through all the chaos, and once she’d cleansed herself of all the blood from the slit throats of the ironmen, Berena Tallhart had taken Robb through all of them, clear and concise in her explanations and not seeming at all as if she’d just slit a man’s throat.

The turn of the year had already come and gone, and Robb had come with the lady expecting all kinds of horrific news. The bastard Joffrey should have been married, Robb thought, and there would be nothing stopping the combined forces of the Lannisters and the Tyrells from marching in force upon Riverrun. Or so he had thought.

“The Imp?” he asked in disbelief as Berena Tallhart told him of the letter they’d received, and she passed it over to him wordlessly to read himself. But the news she had told him had been accurate, at least according to the contents of the letter; Joffrey had been murdered by poison at his wedding feast, and his uncle the Imp had been implicated in the murder. Sansa had been implicated in it as well, he read, and there was a heap of golden dragons for the man who brought her to justice.

The news from the Wall had been no less dire. An army of wildlings, united under one king, was marching upon Castle Black imminently, and the letter once again begged any aid that could be sent. But the letter had been received more than a fortnight before, the lady reported; for all they knew, the attack may have already happened. The letter bore no news of Jon, but like as not, he would be dead along with the rest of them, and the north would be overrun with wildlings before Robb could get anywhere near the Wall.

Torrhen’s Square was the first place he’d been in some time with a godswood with a proper heart tree, and Robb spent hours there, praying for Jon, praying for Sansa, praying for Winterfell. It had been horrifying knowing that Sansa had been in King’s Landing in the clutches of their enemies, but at least he had known where she was, known that she was alive. Now, everything was in the great unknown; he didn’t know where Sansa was, didn’t know where Jon was, didn’t know if either of them was even alive, and somehow that was so much worse.
Could Sansa have had something to do with Joffrey’s death? Robb asked the unanswering gods, his heart clenching in his chest. The evil bastard had deserved death, that was certain enough, but to kill a man at his own wedding feast was inexcusable. The gods would not look kindly upon that, not old nor new. He could not believe his sister capable of such horrors, but he doubted the sister who had left Winterfell was anything like the sister who had apparently fled King’s Landing. All he could do was pray that she was safe, that she would somehow find her way back to them the way Arya had, against seemingly insurmountable odds.

When Robb finally returned from the godswood, he found Roslin sitting up in bed, a grimace of pain on her face and a hand on her belly. The sight immediately alarmed him.

“Are you all right?”

Roslin looked up at him with a surprised expression, as though she hadn’t quite realized he’d entered the room. “Oh,” she breathed out before forcing a small smile onto her face. “No, I’m fine, just…it’s simply my moonblood.” Her smile turned wistful. “It was a little late, so I thought…but I’m often late, so I should have known better.”

Robb didn’t say anything for a moment, thinking over his response carefully before he decided how to answer, his mother’s words still lying thick in his mind. Robb suspected that his mother had had the right of it, that if he told Roslin not to worry about the lack of a child in her womb, his wife would simply stop being so forthcoming with him. It had to be a good sign, he thought, that she was still being so honest. He glanced at her hand, the way she was pressing it tightly against her lower abdomen.

“Are you in a lot of pain?” he inquired instead, dipping his head to indicate the gesture. She looked down with a sheepish expression.

“Oh, not a lot,” she assured him in a light, airy tone, but Robb had his doubts. Was a woman’s moonblood meant to be painful? He realized that he had no idea, but it was blood, after all. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

Roslin looked slightly cheered that he’d bothered to ask. “A cup of wine would not be amiss,” she admitted, and he placed a gentle, chaste kiss against her lips before pouring one and bringing it to her in bed. He looked her up and down appraisingly as she took a sip.

“Will you be all right?”

Roslin gave him an indulgent smile, not unlike the one his mother had given him when he’d tried to speak to her on the same subject.

“Why don’t you let me worry about my womb, and you can simply focus on getting us to Winterfell?” she suggested, although the words were tempered by a good-natured smile.

And so Robb did.

His host split at Torrhen’s Square, leaving a larger garrison to guard it than they had the last time; the Golvers, Mormonts, and whatever Tallhart men Lord Helman was willing to spare marched toward Deepwood Motte while the remainder of Robb’s force turned toward Castle Cerwyn, then Winterfell. Their original plan had been to return to Winterfell first, then have a larger force head west from Winterfell to retake Deepwood Motte, but Lord Glover was confident enough that the garrison holding Deepwood Motte would be small that he had begged Robb for permission to head...
there first. Robb had been willing to let the man take the gamble; he hoped desperately that he didn’t live to regret it.

The snow began to fall the day after they left Torrhen’s Square. The trip from there to Castle Cerwyn should have been measured in days and not weeks, but they’d been blessed with unseasonably mild weather for a northern autumn already, and most of his bannermen agreed that they were long overdue for a proper snow. It slowed their progress, if not to a crawl then at least to something like it, and Robb once more questioned the wisdom of not having sent his brother to Greywater Watch as his mother had originally suggested. Arya could weather the cold, and even his mother could, though Robb could tell that she wasn’t much pleased by the turn in weather. But he was uncertain if the babe could, and every evening he visited his family, he was fearful that he’d hear that Edrick had taken ill.

“Calm down, Robb,” Arya had scolded him after the third day. “He’ll be fine. He’s a Stark.”

Robb wished that he could have shared his sister’s confidence.

It took ten days to Castle Cerwyn, and it might have taken longer if the snows had fallen anything but intermittently. Robb was uncertain if he’d ever been happier to see a place than he had been to see Castle Cerwyn rise out of the snowy landscape in the distance, for Castle Cerwyn meant that they were no more than half a day’s ride from Winterfell. It took all the willpower Robb had not to push the column to ride on for home; the knowledge that they would not be able to arrive before dark, that they weren’t aware of the state of available accommodations, and that all the news would be at Castle Cerwyn was all that managed to stay his hand.

Jonelle Cerwyn had traveled north with Robett Glover’s force after her father had perished from his wounds at Harrenhal; with her father and brother dead, she was now the Lady Cerwyn, and an unwed one at that. Robb had had to put a guard on her, too, after news of her brother’s death arrived; it seemed that every second son and minor lordling in his camp had been ready to offer their hand in marriage at the chance to become the next Lord Cerwyn, the sort of attention that the plump and homely maid of two and thirty had likely never received in her life.

Robb hadn’t expected much of her, perhaps due to her innocent and unassuming exterior, but the moment they passed through the castle gates, she was shouting orders and asking for reports from the man her brother had placed as castellan, everything accomplished with an air of unexpected efficiency. In short order, rooms were being settled for every highborn lord and lady in their procession, and the Lady Cerwyn had flagged down the maester to give them every report they’d had in the past fortnight.

Maester Rhodry was equally efficient, and began to tell Robb everything he knew before Robb could even ask. “Castle Black was attacked by a not inconsiderable force of wildlings,” he told Robb almost immediately, and Robb’s mood was grim at the news. He’d expected that they’d never be able to make it to Castle Black in time to offer aid, but the reality of it was striking. “They were saved by His Grace Stannis Baratheon, who demands that we bend the knee and hail him as the one true king of Westeros.”

Lady Cerwyn’s snort gave no doubt as to what she thought of that proposition, and Robb was not surprised to hear it; Stannis Baratheon had likely lost any chance of support from any of the northern lords the moment he’d burned the godswood at Storm’s End. Even if Robb perished, he’d expect the northern lords to hail his infant brother as King in the North before any of them even considered supporting Stannis as king of anything.

“What is Stannis doing in the north?” Robb couldn't help but ask, troubled, and the maester simply shrugged.
“Our correspondence gives no details as to that, Your Grace,” he admitted wryly. “Upon receiving news of your impending arrival, I did write to ask if they had any news of your bastard half-brother.” Robb thought he actually stopped breathing as he waited for the maester to finish the proclamation. “He was injured in some conflict with the wildlings, they reported, but alive.”

Robb could have wept and hugged the grey-robed maester for delivering the news. Could they be so lucky? he wondered to himself in disbelief. Could Sansa be alive and safe as well?

“Any news of my sister Sansa?” he asked somewhat desperately at the thought, but Robb could already tell from the maester’s sheepish look that there was not.

“Regretfully not, Your Grace. However, there is news of your aunt in the Eyrie. She has wed the Lord Petyr Baelish.”

Robb frowned deeply at the news, recognizing the name as the man who had been a ward at Riverrun, who had grown up alongside his mother and her siblings. The news was more than queer.

“He’s a minor lord, of some small holding on the Fingers,” Robb remarked in confusion. “What could she have to gain by wedding him?”

“Oh, according to the letter, he has been granted the lordship of Harrenhal for some kind of valorous act following the Battle of the Blackwater.”

Robb blinked; he’d never met Lord Baelish, but from what his mother had said of the man, he’d never seemed much the type for valor, or for battle. He’d have to ask his mother about the man, for if anyone could possibly puzzle out the woman’s motives, it would be her own sister.

“Harrenhal is not theirs to grant,” Robb remarked to no one in particular, but he also knew that Harrenhal was like to be the first bit of territory he’d have to surrender to the southron crown if it came to negotiations over borders. The castle was too large and unwieldy, and no family had been able to hold it for long; mayhaps it would be better for them to allow someone else, anyone else, to take it rather than to try to grant it back into the hands of the paltry remains of his grandmother’s family. “I suppose that means my aunt will be allying herself with the Lannisters, then.”

If it was true, it was not good news, not at all. Unless his mother’s childhood companion could sway her sister—but if familial bonds could not sway Lysa to come to their aid, he wasn’t certain how the word of some upjumped minor lord could, if even he were inclined to try. Robb shook his head to himself. He would have to worry about the north first; the Vale and the riverlands had to be later concerns.

“Have the Lannister forces marched yet?” he asked in exasperation, and Maester Rhodry looked uncertain.

“We have had no such news as of yet. The last news of the capital was that Tyrion Lannister has been found guilty of kingslaying and kinslaying, and he has been sentenced to death. Prince Oberyn Martell fought in a trial by battle as his champion and was defeated.”

Robb stared at the man in dim incomprehension, none of the words seeming to make sense. Why would a Dornish prince fight for a Lannister? But whatever the reason, he had died because of a Lannister, and he was not the first Martell to have done so; mayhaps that would be to their advantage. Mayhaps the Dornish could be convinced to ally to their cause, to help them attack the crownlands from both ends.

There was, unquestionably, the betrothal of the Princess Myrcella to the younger son of Prince
Doran, but the Dornish could mayhaps be made to see sense on that. They must have had their doubts that Myrcella Baratheon was even, in fact, a Baratheon, just as the rest of the realm now did. The path to Dornish compliance had once before been marriage; mayhaps it could be again.

But who did Robb have to offer them? He could not offer himself; that ship had soundly sailed, and some northern lord, no matter how prominent, would be not be like to convince the Dornish to turn against the combined strength of the Lannisters and the Tyrells. But his uncle was now officially the Lord Paramount of the Trident and still unwed—and could easily be reminded of his blunder on the fords if he had objections to such a match. Mayhaps that would be enough to nudge the Dornish into rebellion against the Iron Throne, though it was almost impossible to say with any certainty, for they’d not rebelled against the Lannisters such as yet, despite the crimes Tywin Lannister had committed against their family.

Would Edmure be a great enough prize to counter that? Robb was far from confident, but what else had they to offer the Dornish?

Jon, he realized with a start. He could offer then Jon, a Targaryen alliance, and the chance of another Martell queen on the Iron Throne. It would be a significant gambit, though, to offer them the son of the woman for whom Rhaegar Targaryen had dishonored their beloved princess. But the potential for reward was also high, mayhaps high enough to take the gamble. It depended greatly upon which slight Doran Martell held in the greatest contempt; it seemed reasonable to presume that the man’s anger over the murder of his sister and her children was greater than his anger over the slight to her honor.

“I’ll need to send a raven to Castle Black,” Robb told the maester finally, “that I will ride north, bringing men to help fortify the Wall, and that I have urgent business with my brother. Please stress to them that it is pivotal he remain at Castle Black to receive me.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb IX, in which Robb returns to the giant fucking disaster that is Winterfell.
Robb IX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Robb was up several hours before dawn—or, more accurately, he had never properly slept in the first place. He’d laid down in bed, at least, but he hadn’t allowed Roslin the same wicked yet well-meaning tricks to get him to sleep. He could ill-afford to sleep in, no matter how much his wife despaired when he slept poorly, which had been all too often as of late.

He dressed in darkness, not daring to light even a single candle for fear of waking her; just because his night was sleepless didn’t mean hers had to be. He slipped out of the guest chambers as quietly as he could manage and crept downstairs to the yard; Castle Cerwyn was mayhaps one of the only northern holdfasts he’d known well before the war began, so close had it been to Winterfell.

Olyvar was already awake as well, Robb noted, though he doubted the other boy’s sleeplessness had been for the same reasons; like as not, he had anticipated that Robb would wake early and had been determined to attend him if necessary. Robb gave Olyvar a halfhearted smile when he found his good-brother helping the groom to saddle horses but bypassed him, finding Hallis Mollen not far away checking the straps on his bridle.

“Good morrow, Your Grace,” the man greeted courteously as Robb walked up. “My men should be ready to depart within the hour.”

It was welcome news but no less than Robb had expected. Hal Mollen was a highly efficient man, and when Robb had commanded a group of his men to depart before dawn to scout out the situation at Winterfell, he could have thought of no one better for the job. Robb had wanted to lead the force himself but had reluctantly decided the better of it—but if he could not go, he was most comfortable sending a man who knew Winterfell as well as he did, if not better. Hal would know what was missing and what was destroyed; Hal would know where among the ruins to look for anyone who might seek to hide from them, anyone who might pose a danger before Robb and his own family even stepped past the walls. Robb’s orders had been to capture and not kill any squatters they found if at all possible; if the damage to the structure was as severe as Robb feared, they would need every hand they could get to repair things before winter came in earnest, and the fewer seasoned fighters and commanders he had to spare for the task, the better. If the squatters would work, they could remain and they could live.

“And if anything seems amiss, if it seems that there is any unexpected danger, turn back and bring the message to us,” Robb had commanded Hal the previous night. “Do not try to engage by yourselves.” He knew he did not need to repeat the order that morning; Hal would remember all that he had said.

Robb watched them ride of with a sense of impatience, wishing he could go with them himself. But he had a kingship resting heavy on his shoulders, his heir an infant of eight moons. If he were to be felled in battle, that was one thing, but to die to a squatter with a dagger hiding in a crumbling tower would not have been meet. His own contingent was set to depart just after dawn, not to pass the walls of Winterfell until Hal’s men had swept it, had gathered up anyone who might be hiding within and sent a rider back to them to deem it safe. And if he came back with the opposite news, that some more organized force had taken the castle and was prepared to defend it…well, then Robb’s force was to begin the preparations to lay siege.

Robb fervently hoped that that would not be necessary; he knew Winterfell’s defenses better than
most anyone, knew how well the castle could hold out against a siege. But he also thought it unlikely
that any force that might have encamped within Winterfell’s walls could possibly be well-
 provisioned; Robb’s force could outlast them, but he didn’t have the time for a siege, not when
Tywin Lannister’s force could already be assailing the riverlands and he needed desperately to get to
Castle Black to speak with Jon.

Roslin came to meet him in the courtyard as he prepared to depart, but his mother and Arya were
notably absent. Arya had been less than pleased when he’d told her they would be staying behind at
Castle Cerwyn, at least until Robb and the men could assess the damage at Winterfell; it was better
for all of them, Robb had argued, to be behind the sturdy walls of Castle Cerwyn, especially since
the weather had turned. Damaged walls would provide little protection against the cold, and Robb
would not have his queen, his lady mother, his infant brother, and his young sister sleeping behind
canvas walls when they could be warm and dry and safe. Robb knew his mother had seen the sense
of his words, though that didn’t mean she wasn’t displeased by them, too; like as not, she’d stayed
with Arya, if only to make certain that the girl didn’t try to sneak out after him.

The ride to Winterfell seemed longer than it had ever been; the path Hal Mollen’s men had trod along
the road left a clear trail for them, at least, so they must have had easier going than the pre-dawn
force had had. Grey Wind loped along ahead of them, as though he knew the way to Winterfell,
though likely enough he was just following the path of the other horses. The whole way, Robb tried
to prepare himself for what he would see when he arrived, tried to will himself not to break down
when he saw his home in ruins.

They were only a few leagues from the gates when the rider approached to tell them that it was safe
for them to continue on, but Robb could scarce focus on the minimal report the man gave. The main
structures still stood, he said, but the damage was as extensive as they had feared. Even knowing
that, Robb was not in any way prepared for the sight.

Even from a distance, the damage was obvious; where the winter town had previously boasted
hundreds of structures, Robb spotted only a few dozen still intact, all of them made of stone. Even a
few of the stone buildings were partially collapsed, and broken pieces of blackened wood stuck out
from between snow drifts, stark black against white.

Robb swallowed thickly as his horse plodded forward through the snow, not having expected how
much the sight would affect him. He thought he’d steeled himself, thought he’d be able to assess the
damage in a detached and methodical way, but it became clear enough that that would not be
possible.

The walls were both intact, he told himself with forced optimism, and the rider who had met them on
the road had said most of the main structures were too. Robb tried to remind himself of that, but the
thought seemed somewhat feeble, especially when Robb saw that the gates were gone, nothing but a
large gap in the walls to mark where they had been. Robb forced himself to take a deep breath.

The extent of the damage was obvious as soon as he made it through the space where the gates had
once been. Hal appeared out of nowhere to give him a report, but Robb waved him away
wordlessly, unable to do anything except stare mutely at the devastation surrounding him. He
dismounted slowly, automatically, handing the reins to Olyvar.

The walls of the Great Keep stood intact, but scorch marks marred the stone, leaving an obvious hint
of where the flames had licked them. The keep’s roof was completely gone, however, and its doors
had suffered the same fate as the gates, nothing more than bits of blackened wood hanging from the
hinges. Robb’s feet carried him forward without any conscious input from him, and he stopped at the
doorless entranceway, staring blankly inside. The walls were even more blackened on the inside than
they had been on the outside, dark bits of ash clinging tightly to the stone.

The barracks hall was also roofless and the First Keep more collapsed than intact. A stone gargoyle stuck its head out of the snow, half its face broken off, smashed stones decorating the ground all around it. Four out of every five windows Robb passed was broken, and nearly every structure was doorless and roofless, or near enough as made no matter. The stables, which had been constructed almost entirely of wood, were no more than a blackened heap of snow-dotted planks among the skeletons of dead horses, bits of decayed flesh and hair still hanging onto them. There were human corpses in the courtyard, too, burned and decayed beyond recognition and likely enough ravaged by animals who had eaten the majority of the meat from the bones. Ravens roosted along the ruined top of the Maester’s Turret, quorking their objections at him for disturbing their stillness.

Mikken’s forge had crumbled almost entirely into the snow, and his lady mother’s sept was little more than a pile of rubble. The roof of the Great Hall was only half-collapsed, at least, though snow crunched beneath Robb’s boots as he padded inside, between half-burned and snow-covered tables. He guessed one might be salvageable, and mayhaps even a few chairs as well, but the thought was somewhat of a weak defense against the extent of the destruction. Snow covered the floor and the tops of the tables that had not collapsed, and Robb rubbed at his arms, feeling a sudden chill that had little to do with the cold. Seeing the snow indoors rather than out was somehow even more chilling, a reminder that nothing was in its proper place.

Only the godswood seemed mostly untouched, almost queerly so. Was it the old gods who had protected this place from the flames? Robb wondered numbly as he made his way down the winding paths, Grey Wind padding along after him. Or had it been that whoever had burned it had feared the gods’ wrath? But neither explanation seemed to make any sense, for he could not imagine any godly man who could cause this destruction for no apparent gain, and the gods had done nothing to protect the godswood at Storm’s End.

But that is the south, Robb thought with conviction, and the old gods are stronger here.

The destruction had not spared the Glass Gardens, though, which were almost entirely destroyed, chunks and cracked panes of glass littering the ground between blackened plants that would once have been the food that would have helped sustain the keep through the winter. Glass would be difficult to come by, too; they’d have to board up most of the windows with wood rather than replace them, for if there was glass to be had, repairing the glass gardens would have to be their first priority.

Robb made his way back to Winterfell’s heart tree, staring at its carved wooden face and trying to instill a sense of calm into his heart when all he wanted to do was weep. Winterfell, like his own family, was a shell of what it had once been; the roofs and doors that had protected it were now gone, the way Robb’s own father was gone, unable to protect any of them anymore. But the framework still stands strong, Robb told himself fiercely. Winterfell will not be so easily destroyed, and neither will we.

Robb left the godswood with a new sense of determination and went to seek out Hal Mollen, finding him in the courtyard with a piece of parchment and a quill, using one of the walls to write down what one of the men was reporting to him. A few men were already working on removing the corpses and sifting through the remains of the forge and the stables, to see what could be salvaged. When Hal saw Robb approaching, he dismissed the man who had been speaking with him and came to greet Robb.

“What is the state of things?” Robb asked in grim determination, and Hal began to give him a dispassionate report.

“A few of the rooms in the lower floors of the Great Keep are largely undamaged, Your Grace, and
may be livable for you and your family with minimal work,” he reported first, giving Robb a reassuring smile. The rest of the news was less encouraging; it was all counts of broken windows and damaged walls, counts of skulls and still-standing structures in the winter town. Robb listened to it all with as much steadiness as he could manage, trying to think of it all in terms of practicalities, trying not to think of how he’d watched Mikken at his forge that was now a mass of rubble, or how he’d trained almost every day in a yard that was now being cleared of decaying bodies half-devoured by predators. He waited until Hal was done and took a moment to mull it all over, thinking of all the things that needed done.

“Have the men do what they can to prepare any rooms that might still be livable. Two of them, at the least,” Robb commanded, for that was all they would need in the interim. Arya could share with their mother and Edrick and he could share with Roslin; there was no need to have separate chambers prepared for all of them when there were so few on offer. “Whichever ones have suffered the least damage. I don’t care if they’re the lord’s chamber or the servants’ chambers—anything with four walls, beds, and a hearth should suffice. I’ll also need some parchment and a quill, and a group of men who rode in with you this morning who will not be too aggrieved to have to ride all the way back to Castle Cerwyn to carry my missive.”

Hal handed him an as yet unmarred piece of parchment and the quill he himself had been using to write before going off to fulfill Robb’s request. Robb returned with them to the Great Hall, and with some work he found a chair that seemed only a bit burnt and brushed the snow off of it, bringing it to the least damaged table he could find. He brushed away enough snow that he could have a place to write, then wiped it dry with his sleeve, ignoring the chill that brought to his skin.

He would have his family brought to Winterfell at once; that was the first order of business, and one that would doubtlessly cheer them all, though he wondered if they would feel the same once they saw the damage that had been done to their home. The majority of the force could come to them, too; they’d need as many hands as they could get in order to get most of the buildings at least livable, for there were enough trees in the wolfswood to make all the most pressing repairs. They could work on it while Robb made his own mission to see Jon at Castle Black, he thought; if the gods were good, the keep would be in much better shape by the time he returned.

They would need to leave some men at Castle Cerwyn in order to ensure its own defense, but he made certain to specify that they would require Gendry to come to Winterfell, for the blacksmith could examine what was left in the ruins of the forge to see what was useable and confirm what he needed in order to get it in working order once again. They’d also need Maester Rhodry, Robb knew; he could determine how many of the ravens lingering in the ruins of the Maester’s Turret were messenger ravens and how many were wild, could help them to corral the ones that could once more be bid to carry messages. Lord Karstark he would bid to scout out the situation at the Dreadfort once he arrived to Winterfell, with a mind that he could send his son back to the safety of Karhold if he so pleased.

The most difficult part, Robb knew, was the situation with the Night’s Watch; he would need to bring men with him, men he could leave at Castle Black to help shore up the defense of the Wall, but he doubted any men who had not seen the dubious allure of the Watch yet could be convinced to join it; no, he would have to tell them the post was temporary, that they would not be required to take any vows. It was an imperfect solution at best, but it was all he could do. But that was best left out of a letter, best left until his men stood before him and he could give them his most passionate pitch in hopes of rallying volunteers.

When Robb found his way back out to the courtyard, a group of men was already mounted and ready to depart to Castle Cerwyn, so Robb handed one of the men the letter and gave them his orders. He watched them ride out, and once he had seen them disappear past the castle walls, he
turned back to Hal.

“Tell me where I can be most useful,” he said without preamble, and Hal looked taken aback.

“I—Your Grace—I wouldn’t presume—”

Robb fought to repress a sigh, equal parts amused and despairing. It was amazing how much a mere title changed things, how much it made men he’d known all his life into entirely different creatures. It was as though Hal had forgotten that not three years past, he had been suspiciously asking Robb if his lord father knew what he was doing when he found Robb and Jon sneaking around the ruins of the First Keep, and now he was blustering over the idea of telling Robb, his king, what work needed done.

“I would not presume to stand around whilst there is work to be done,” Robb told him with a serious expression. “You know what tasks are ongoing, so I bid you tell me where I can be the most useful.”

Hal hesitated again but eventually nodded and began giving Robb orders.

Chapter End Notes

Good news! The next chapter contains many things a lot of you have been looking forward to. Bad news? I’m going to be out of town this weekend, and sadly, I cannot structure my life around updating this fanfiction. I can’t say for certain when the next update will come - it might be early, might be on time, or might be late. It really all depends on what my schedule ends up being like and how my internet access is.

Up next: Catelyn IX, in which you get your most anticipated reunion so far...that's right, Ghost and Grey Wind! Hurrah! ;)
Leaving Edrick was one of the most difficult things that Catelyn had ever done, and leaving Arya was almost harder. Edrick, at least, was a bit too young to realize that Catelyn was leaving, but Arya screamed and sobbed and threw tantrums for days after Catelyn told her daughter she’d be accompanying Robb to the Wall. Arya had never been like this before; to Catelyn’s infinite despair, Arya had been independent since she was scarce a year old, had never cried for or needed her mother the way her other children had. Indeed, she’d preferred Jon Snow almost from the first; if she’d ever screamed and cried for anyone, it had usually been Jon, a fact that had angered Catelyn beyond measure at the time.

And that was part of it, too, Catelyn presumed. Arya didn’t want her to leave, was afraid of being parted from her mother yet again for fear that they’d never see each other again if they separated, but she was also fiercely angry that Catelyn and Robb would be off to see Jon and she was not allowed to accompany them.

“You don’t even like him!” Arya had screamed at her in one of the early tantrums, angry tears streaming down her face. “You treated him like dirt; he won’t want to see you!”

That was the truth as much as anything was, and Catelyn wouldn’t have even tried to deny it. If it had not been for Howland Reed, she wouldn’t have wanted to see Jon Snow either, and part of her still didn’t ever want to lay eyes on him again, even knowing the truth, that he wasn’t her husband’s bastard after all. But there was the other part of her that was desperate to see him, too, to search his face for hints of Targaryen, for there was a niggling part of her that could not possibly trust that something she’d believed so fervently for so many years could be a lie. It was the same part of her that couldn’t reconcile the man that she’d loved with the man who had recklessly endangered all of them every day Jon Snow had been within the walls of Winterfell.

Robb’s attempts to soothe his sister had met with equal opposition.

“There must always be a Stark in Winterfell,” he’d reminded her in his sternest Lord Stark voice, the one he’d learned from his father, but she’d been having none of that, either.

“Baby Ned is a Stark, too,” she’d pointed out petulantly. “You don’t need me to stay here. I want to see Jon.”

Robb had looked at her helplessly then, as if he didn’t have any good answer for that, and in truth, Catelyn didn’t have one, either. Robb had tried to convince Catelyn to stay, and by almost any reasonable measure, he was correct in his assessment that she should. Edrick still hadn’t yet reached his first nameday, Arya needed her, and Roslin was far from well-equipped to manage things in both their absence, having been in Winterfell for all of four days. But Catelyn remembered the fervent excitement in her son’s eyes when he’d come up with the scheme to put Jon on the Iron Throne,
remembered the utter conviction with which he’d been determined to pursue it. There had been something so fanciful, so utterly dangerous about his staunch conviction that Catelyn was convinced that she could not let him go alone, that she had to accompany him to be a voice of reason before the two boys were utterly overtaken by the romantic song Robb was already constructing in his head.

If she could have trusted someone else, anyone else, she would have. But no one else knew the true purpose of Robb’s visit to the Wall save Howland Reed, and Robb had left all the crannogmen in the Neck to defend it should anyone think themselves bold enough to attempt an invasion from the south. His men should be placed where they would best serve him, Robb had argued, and the crannogmen best served him in Moat Cailin and the swamps of the Neck, where they could launch sneak attacks and wound with poison arrows should any army attempt to make it past the Neck.

But that meant that in this, in arguing for caution, Catelyn was utterly alone, for she had no idea how Jon Snow would react to this revelation. Would he share her desire for caution, or would he prove himself to be a true Targaryen, mad and reckless as any of them? Catelyn had thought about Daemon Blackfyre often as of late, sometimes waking up in a cold sweat. Tell a bastard that he has become the legitimate son of royal blood, and there will be no end to his thirst for power, she thought with a pounding heart. Tell a boy who believed he was nothing that he is everything, and the whole of the realm will bleed for it.

She sometimes couldn’t help but curse Jon Snow for being born, curse her husband for having ever put them in this position—and then felt guilty at the thought that she could ever think ill of Ned when he wasn’t there to defend himself and his actions. She cursed Rhaegar Targaryen, cursed Lyanna Stark, cursed Robert Baratheon for making Ned believe he had to hide the boy away.

Oh Ned, she thought despairingly to herself when she could do nothing else, what have you done?

The ride to the Wall was long and cold, and with a few hundred men with them, it had taken longer than it would have if they’d brought only a small party. Catelyn wasn’t certain how Robb had convinced these men to serve at the Wall, even if it would only be temporarily. But she had a suspicion that he had stressed the danger to their own lands, because the better part of volunteers had been Umber and Karstark men. Theirs were the lands closest to the Wall; theirs were the lands that would be the first ravaged by wildlings if they made it south.

The trip took more than a fortnight, even with Robb pushing them to make haste, and the weather helped them not at all. Catelyn had the additional discomfort of her aching breasts; usually, weaning a babe was a more gradual process, and her body seemed intent to provide for Edrick even when he was no longer by her side to drink from her breast. Maester Rhodry had showed her how to use her hands to express some of the milk, which did a little to ease the uncomfortable feeling of fullness, and if she was diligent about it, he had told her, there was even some hope that she might be able to resume nursing him once she returned, although she would still likely need the wet nurse to help supplement her vanishing milk supply.

Catelyn had never seen the Wall, and no matter how many times she’d read about it in books or heard her good-brother describe it, nothing could have prepared her for the sight of it looming up over the horizon. It was easy to say that the Wall stood seven hundred feet high, but it was difficult to understand how tall that actually was until she saw it growing larger and larger the closer they got. It was obvious enough that Robb’s feelings were the same; the sense of terror and wonderment she felt was reflected back to her in her son’s face.

There were tents set up south of the Wall, and nearly every building in sight was flying the standards of southron houses she recognized: the fox and flowers of House Florent, the turtle of Estermont, the swordfish of Bar Emmon, the crossed trumpets of House Wensington and at least a dozen more.
Stannis’ men, she realized with a shiver, thinking back on Lady Brienne’s words back at Riverrun. *If he thinks your son stands between him and the throne, he may not hesitate to murder him with the same impunity.* Catelyn might have begged her son not to come here if she had thought there was any chance he would listen, but at least she knew he was wary of the danger this man posed, could see it clearly in the way he stiffened at the sight of the flaming heart and stag banners flying over the largest tower in the complex.

*The flaming heart of R’hllor,* she’d heard some say. Even the name sounded sinister.

A group of men clothed in the black of the Night’s Watch was there to greet them when they rode up. Robb dismounted first, and a minute later, one of the men came to help Catelyn off her own mount. She saw one man step forward from the black-clad group, thin and dour-faced with a shock of grey hair upon his head.

“Rooms have been prepared for you, Your Grace,” the man reported in a dull, bored tone, and he looked past Robb in Catelyn’s direction, as if he couldn’t quite figure out who she was and why she was there. “My apologies that we have no rooms to spare for your men, but we already have another king in residence.” The man’s eyes flicked toward the tower that Stannis Baratheon had obviously commandeered as his own.

“Many thanks for your hospitality,” Robb said courteously, “but before I retire, I must needs see my brother Jon Snow. I have urgent business with him.”

The grey-haired man made a face. “Suspected you might,” he remarked disinterestedly. “Aye, I’ll bring you to Lord Commander Snow.”

The words hit Catelyn like a bucket of ice water, and Robb’s gaze moved to her, filled with the same shock and confusion she felt. “Lord Commander Snow?” he mouthed at her in disbelief before coming to take her arm and moving to follow their guide. It was clear enough that they had little idea of the state of things there at Castle Black, and that only made Catelyn feel more worried.

She might have expected the grey-haired man to lead them to the tower, but of course Stannis had encamped himself there already. Instead, they were led through the armory, and for a moment, Catelyn was certain she must have misheard what the man had said, that that was the only possible explanation, for what would a Lord Commander be doing meeting them in the armory?

But then Grey Wind rushed past them, as fast as Catelyn had ever seen the wolf move, and two balls of fur were rolling together on the ground, grey and white and grey and white. At first, Catelyn might have thought them to be fighting, but then Grey Wind was yipping in excitement as though he were no more than a pup as they nipped harmlessly at each other’s flanks. The second wolf was not near as large as Grey Wind was, and his red eyes, when they looked at Catelyn, were strangely penetrating. The man leading them stopped and gave the scene an unamused look.

“At least someone here is having a good time,” he remarked dourly, sidestepping the two direwolves as if there was nothing out of the ordinary about the sight. He knocked on a door that Catelyn had just noticed. “M’lord, His Grace the King in the North is here to see you.”

There was a muffled response from behind the door; Catelyn could not make out the words, but they were clearly enough for the man who had asked, because seconds later, he pushed it open.

“Ghost, to me,” said a commanding voice, one that nearly stopped Catelyn in her tracks. It was a voice she’d once hoped never to hear again; she’d once hoped the boy would go to the Wall and never return, to serve or freeze there, it made no matter. And yet instead, here she was at Castle Black seeking him out when she could easily have never come.
The white wolf extricated himself silently from his excited littermate and padded through the door at the behest of his master, and Grey Wind trailed after him, as if unwilling to be parted. Like Arya with me, she thought, unbidden, as Robb walked behind his wolf, then Catelyn last. The man who had escorted them shut the door behind her.

The rooms were modest and sparse, and it was there that Catelyn got her first glimpse of Jon Snow in near two years, standing up from behind a scarred pinewood table that was littered with papers.

*Gods be good,* Catelyn thought, nearly forgetting how to breathe at the sight of the boy. He’d always favored Ned in looks, but it was difficult for her to quantify how much since she’d never met Ned as a child, hadn’t ever seen him until he’d come to Riverrun to wed her in his brother’s place. But the boy who stood before her was clearly no longer a boy, looked so much like Ned had when Catelyn had first laid eyes on him that it was almost difficult to believe that she hadn’t traveled back in time to that day in Riverrun, that the gods hadn’t granted her another chance to do this all right, though Jon was younger still than Ned had been when Catelyn had first met him. She nearly wanted to run to him and throw her arms around him, beg his forgiveness as if he truly was her husband come again —and then she had to forcibly remind herself that he wasn’t Ned, that this boy had scars on his face that Ned had never had. Everything about that realization made her miss Ned more fiercely than she had in some time.

Jon stepped around the table and the two boys embraced each other with a fierce and desperate affection. Jon stood a few inches taller than Robb now, Catelyn realized, already as tall as Ned had been in adulthood; if he kept growing, Catelyn expected he’d be closer to Brandon’s height than Ned’s once he’d reached his full maturity.

*Closer to Brandon’s height or closer to Rhaegar’s?* The Crown Prince, Jon’s true father, had been a tall man; that much Catelyn remembered. Tall and gallant and the perfect epitome of a prince. *He’d won the Tourney at Harrenhal,* she recalled, although she had not attended herself. *He’d unhorsed Ser Barristan Selmy in the joust and crowned Lyanna Stark the queen of love and beauty.* All the pieces had been right there in front of her for so long, and she’d failed to see it.

“You don’t know how glad I am to see you,” she heard Jon telling her son, his voice thick with genuine emotion. “After all that’s happened, I feared I’d never see you alive again.”

She heard Robb laugh, and as he pulled back from Jon’s embrace, he was wiping his eyes, as if to banish tears. “I’ve managed to come out of my battles mostly unscathed. It doesn’t look like the same can be said for you,” Robb remarked in return, and Catelyn saw that it was true enough; in addition to his scars, he was standing somewhat awkwardly, as though favoring one leg. “What happened to you?”

Jon gave Robb a wan smile. “A story for another time,” he said in an almost wistful tone, and it was only then that Jon noticed her standing behind Robb. The undisguised shock on his face was enough of an indication of that. “Lady Stark, my apologies. I did not see you,” he remarked politely, glancing back at Robb then at her once again. A look of alarm passed over his face. “Oh no, something hasn’t happened, has it? To Arya, or to…the new babe?”

That he was so concerned for her children should have warmed her, but it didn’t. She leveled him with a serious look.

“No,” she remarked, tone colder than she’d intended. “Arya and Edrick are both quite fine.”

Jon’s grey eyes observed her for a long minute, as though unsatisfied by her answer.

“That…you will forgive me for asking, my lady, but why are you here?” he inquired after a
moment. There was the tiniest bit of hesitation in his tone, but beneath that there was a boldness she’d never heard from him before, at least not in her presence. “I can’t imagine it’s for the pleasure of my company.”

Yes, Catelyn thought to herself, he is bolder now than he’d been at Winterfell. This was his domain, not hers, and he wasn’t going to be cowed by her, not here. Robb looked back and forth between them, giving her a somewhat pleading look, asking her with his eyes to cease hostilities. And yet despite everything she now knew—or because of everything she now knew—she found that she could not.

“You should sit down, Jon,” Robb told him after a moment, and Jon frowned deeply but he did sit. There were a dozen chairs around the table, oak and worn leather, and Robb pulled one out for her before he seated himself, then turned to face Jon’s expectant expression. Robb swallowed thickly, apprehensively.

“There’s something we need to tell you,” he admitted, his strength already seeming to waver. “It’s about...it’s about your mother, and...”

The shock that passed over Jon’s face could not be feigned, and it cheered Catelyn in some way to see it, to know that he’d been lied to as much as she had.

“My mother?” he repeated in a somewhat strangled voice. “You know who she is?” Something of their dismay must have shown on their faces, because Jon looked back and forth between the two of them, and his expression fell as he came to a conclusion. “Oh. She’s dead, isn’t she?”

Catelyn wasn’t certain if she wanted to laugh or weep. If only that were the whole of it, she thought grimly to herself. Then I would not be here.

“Well...yes,” Robb admitted, startled, “but that's not what...that is...gods, I’ve had so much time to imagine this conversation that I should know how to tell you this, but I don’t. I...”

Robb looked at Catelyn helplessly, as though begging her to intervene, to save him, as though he was a boy again for true. Catelyn looked back over at Jon.

“Ned was not your father,” she told him matter-of-factly, her voice low and even. Jon looked at her blankly, then back at Robb, as though the words didn’t make any sense to him. And like as not, they didn’t.

“Is this a jape?” he asked with an unpleasant expression, as though he couldn’t quite believe that Robb would be in on it if it were. “I know you may have wished it hundreds if not thousands of times, but...” He trailed off when he saw Robb’s face.

“It’s not a jape, Jon,” Robb admitted quietly, grimly. “It’s the truth.”

Catelyn saw Jon flex his right hand, an odd, nervous gesture that she’d never noticed from him before, and it was only then that she saw the gnarled mass of burn scars across his palm. But the gravity of Robb’s tone must have been enough to sway him, because he turned his eyes to Robb with a resigned look.

“Tell me,” he said simply, and then Robb did. Catelyn couldn’t help but watch Jon’s face as he took in Robb’s words, a face that looked so much like Ned’s that it was near impossible to believe that Jon wasn’t his son. Robb made it as far as the part about the Kingsguard knights when Jon stood so abruptly that he sent his chair careening to the floor, turning his back on them and moving as far to the other side of the room as he could, as though he wanted to put as much distance between them as
“Get out,” Jon hissed suddenly, his voice low and dangerous. Robb looked startled, but he didn’t move to leave; instead he got up and began making his way around the table toward Jon.

“Jon, can’t you see? You’re not a bastard at all, you never were. You’re Rhaegar Targaryen’s son, the heir to the—”

But before he could make it around the length of the table, Ghost suddenly appeared in front of him, baring his teeth in a silent snarl. Robb recoiled visibly, a look of shock on his face, as though he couldn’t quite fathom one of the wolves turning on him, least of all the usually-placid Ghost. Grey Wind seemed just as surprised; he jumped up all of a sudden from where he’d been waiting, rushing to put himself between Ghost and Robb, growling even more menacingly at his littermate.

“I said get out,” Jon said again, without turning around.

Robb turned his head and gave her another helpless look, and Catelyn almost wished she could take it all back, all the malice she’d wished upon this boy, if only to have spared her own son the pain of this unexpected rejection. This was Robb’s fanciful dream shattered, she realized; Robb had thought he’d found the perfect solution in Jon, a way to unify the realm and keep Winterfell for himself. He’d thought that Jon would rejoice with him, that he’d jump at the chance to call men to the Targaryen banners, would jump at the chance to be more than he’d ever dreamed he could be. But Jon Snow—Jon Targaryen, her mind corrected helpfully—clearly was not the same boy who had ridden north from Winterfell nigh two years before; whatever had happened to him up here had changed him, and this was not what Robb had expected at all.

Catelyn rose slowly from her chair and walked over to her son, placing her hand on Robb’s arm. “Do as he says, Robb,” she counseled gently, attention on the two wolves as they stared at each other with dangerous eyes, red on one side and yellow on the other, both poised to attack if either of their masters were threatened. When Robb didn’t make to move, she squeezed his arm gently. “Give him time. Let’s go.”

Her second attempt seemed to get through to her son finally; he nodded and, with one last aggrieved look at the boy he’d for so long thought his brother, turned away. The wolves both seemed to sense the detente; Grey Wind was the first to turn away, following close on Robb’s heels as he led Catelyn to the door. Catelyn released a long, shuddering breath when it was closed behind them, only to jump in surprise a moment later when they heard the sound of a loud clang from within. The grey-haired steward appeared out of nowhere at their side.

“I’ll be the one cleaning that up,” he informed them gloomily. “I’ll show you to your rooms Your Grace, m’lady.”

There was another noise from within, one that sounded suspiciously like splintering wood. Catelyn winced involuntarily; mayhaps there was proof enough that Jon was a Targaryen after all.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon I, in which Lord Commander Jon Snow has a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.
Chapter Notes

Some of you may recognize part of the anecdote about Jon and Robb's childhood from *ASoS*, Jon XII.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The wine cup was the first thing to feel Jon’s wrath; he snatched it up from the table and threw it angrily at the wall, wine flying wildly across the table and floor as he did. But the cup was made of silver, an old possession of Donal Noye’s, and so there was no satisfying crash as the glass shattered, only a metallic clang as it hit the stone, then another as it bounced back along the floor, skidding to a halt with a reverberating sound of metal rolling. Then it was the chair, but that bounced off the wall with a similarly dissatisfying impact. He flexed his sword hand, the burn scar seeming to throb along with his heartbeat, along with the mostly-healed pucker of scar tissue the arrow had left in his leg.

Frustrated, he picked up the blow poke that lay next to the hearth, bringing it down on the chair with a huge swing of his arms. The oak finally shattered with the impact, making a sickening and satisfying crack that only just began to soothe his rage. He needed his sword, needed to hurt something, to kill something…or to kill it with his own teeth would be even better, to rip out something’s throat and feel the blood in his mouth—

A knock sounded at the door and Jon stopped suddenly, dropping the iron rod as though it burned.

“My lord?” called a voice softly, tentatively, and Jon forced himself to take a deep breath, looking at the destruction around him. Splintered bits of wood sat on the floor in front of him, held together by strips of worn leather. Some of his papers lay scattered around on the floor, a few of them soaking in pools of spilled wine. *Did I truly do this?* Jon thought numbly to himself, suddenly feeling very silly. He cleared his throat.

“Come in,” he called in a slightly strangled voice. If the man outside had been Bowen Marsh or Alliser Thorne, Jon never would have called them inside, would never have given them this show of his weakness. But he recognized the voice, not a foe but a friend.

A familiar head of dark ringlets slipped into the room with an unobtrusive movement, pretty dark eyes taking in the destruction Jon had wrought. Jon stared at Satin numbly, suddenly feeling completely at a loss, strangely disoriented and overwhelmed in the midst of the destruction he had wrought. Satin seemed to survey the scene around him for only a moment before he stepped forward and pulled out a chair, one of the eleven remaining that Jon had not destroyed. Dazedly, Jon sat.

The boy leaned down and picked up the wine cup off the floor as if nothing was amiss, went to the flagon of wine and refilled it before placing it straight into Jon’s hand. Jon took it wordlessly and stared, not quite remembering what he was meant to do with it. Satin cleared his throat.

“Mayhaps I should let him out, my lord?” he ventured uncertainly, and it was only then that Jon looked over at Ghost. The wolf was pacing the length of the room, more agitated than Jon had ever seen him. He wanted to kill; Jon felt it, the need to tear at something with his teeth, to drag an animal to the ground and hear its scream as it died. To taste blood and raw meat against his tongue…
Jon forcibly wrenched himself back and nodded, clenching his hand, unclenching it. Satin opened the door and Ghost loped out of it without a word from Jon—which was good, because Jon wasn’t certain he could find a word if it had been needed. He fervently hoped that Ghost would know to go to the woods to hunt, that he wasn’t so desperate for violence that he’d hurt one of the men if they made the mistake of getting in his way.

“That was me,” Jon realized numbly as he watched Satin close the door once Ghost had gone through it. *It was my anger he felt, and his desire for blood I felt.* It gave him a strange, unsettling feeling in the pit of his stomach and he suddenly remembered the cup of wine in his hand; he regarded it for a second then drank it down, all of it. Satin had bent down to retrieve some wine-soaked parchment; he’d found an old cloth, somewhere, and he placed the papers down on the table, trying his best to salvage them by soaking up some of the wine.

“What are you doing here, Satin?” Jon asked finally, his voice sounding foreign to his own ears. The Oldtown boy looked over at him with those striking dark eyes, lashes longer than those of most any girl Jon had ever met. He looked wholly unrepentant.

“I heard the commotion in here,” he admitted, “and I saw your family leaving.” Satin paused, his expression circumspect. “Many men get angry when they have to deal with their families.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to ask Satin what he knew about it before he remembered who Satin had once been, before he’d come to Castle Black. Like as not, many a man had turned to Satin for comfort after an unpleasant encounter with his family, Jon mused to himself, and the thought brought on a brief moment of discomfort.

_Gods, he thought numbly, he doesn’t expect me to be the same way, does he? To want to take my anger out on him? Mayhaps he had even wanted that, and that was why he came here?_

Satin had moved to the floor to try to wipe up some of the spilled wine, an elegance about his movements, a sense of total unobtrusiveness. The brothel he’d worked at hadn’t been one of the low-end ones, Jon wagered; there was an elegance to Satin’s speech that was uncharacteristic for one so lowborn, a graceful deference to his movements that spoke of one who had been trained to please a customer in more than just the physical.

_I could, came an unbidden thought. I could pin him down and fuck him with a violence I’d never have dared use with Ygritte, and like as not he would let me. _As soon as Jon thought it, he knew it was true; Satin had a natural and well-trained subservience, and Jon was the Lord Commander, and if Jon asked it of him, he would do it.

Jon tasted a sourness in the back of his throat, almost as if the wine he’d just drank might make a reappearance. *What is wrong with me?* he wondered numbly. *Why am I so angry?*

As if from nowhere, he remembered being in the yard at Winterfell, playing at battle with Robb with wooden sparring swords when they’d been boys. It had been children’s games, all in fun, or so Jon had thought at first. He’d call out that he was Aemon the Dragonknight and Robb would be Florian the Fool, or Robb would be the Young Dragon and Jon Ryam Redwyne. That was until the day that Jon had called out, “I’m the Lord of Winterfell!” as he had many a time before, except *that* time Robb’s face had screwed up in distaste.

“You can’t be Lord of Winterfell, you’re bastard-born,” Robb had told him haughtily. “My lady mother says you can’t ever be the Lord of Winterfell.”

Jon hadn’t thought of that in years. How old had they been? Six? Seven? Jon had been just beginning to understand what being a bastard meant, that that was the reason the Lady Catelyn hated
him with such vehemence. But he’d never expected that sort of disdain from Robb, his brother and his best friend.

_Not your brother_, a voice in the back of his head reminded him dully, and Jon closed his eyes, as if that could force the thought back. Jon had dropped his wooden sword that day and run away, tears stinging his eyes, determined not to let Robb see how he had hurt him. He’d run through the godswood until he’d found the heart tree, knelt before it the way he’d seen Lord Stark do half a hundred times. He’d prayed to the gods then, gods he didn’t understand, asked them desperately why they’d made him a bastard, prayed that they’d un-make him. Lord Stark had found him there some time later and enfolded a sobbing Jon into his arms.

“Why do I have to be a bastard?” he’d asked between great shuddering sobs, and Jon remembered Lord Stark’s face then, remembered how aggrieved it had been.

“The dishonor is not yours,” the man he’d called _Father_ had told him in a pained voice. “I wish that my actions did not serve to cause you such pain. The gods cannot change who you are, Jon, but you are of my blood, and I promise you that Winterfell is your home as long as you wish to remain here.”

_You’re not a bastard at all, you never were_. That was what Robb had said to him not half an hour before, and why wasn’t he pleased? How many hours had he spent praying to the gods that he could be anything but a bastard? How many times had he cried under the force of Lady Catelyn’s disapproving gaze? And yet there had almost been compassion in Lady Catelyn’s voice today, for just a moment, and why wasn’t he relieved? Why could he only summon anger and despair?

“My lord?”

It was Satin’s voice, and Jon’s eyes fluttered open to see the boy at his side, half perched on the arm of his chair. The wine had been wiped up; the ruined chair sat by the door, ready to be carried away, broken down for firewood most like. And Satin was close to him, _too_ close, close enough that he could feel the other boy’s warmth against his own body, smell the sweet scent of him, almost as sweet as a perfumed woman. Suddenly, Jon felt certain he had not misjudged Satin’s intentions, not at all.

_I could do anything I wanted to him, and most like he would let me._

Satin put a hand on Jon’s shoulder. Most other days, _any_ other day, Jon would have slipped out from under his hand and told him he had it wrong, that just because most of the men he’d known before he’d arrived at Castle Black had wanted _that_ from him didn’t mean all men were like that. He would have said something about vows and oaths and responsibilities and mayhaps even something about not taking advantage.

“We cannot do this,” was all he managed to say through gritted teeth, sucking in and releasing a long breath. “I…I could not be kind to you, not now.”

There was no denial that he wanted Satin, although that wasn’t precisely what he felt; he’d be just as happy to punch the man as to fuck him at that moment, but he knew what was on offer from Satin, and it was not the delicate bones of his pretty nose, which Jon could imagine would shatter satisfyingly under his fist, blood leaking down the soft paleness of his skin. Satin’s hand moved to rest against Jon’s cheek, callused from all his work with a bow.

“I don’t need kindness,” he told Jon with a knowing look.

Whatever resolve Jon might have had was gone then. He grabbed Satin around the waist and pulled the boy into his lap, dropping the silver wine cup and sending it clanging to the ground again. Satin
squeaked in surprise, as if he hadn’t quite expected Jon to actually give in, and that nearly stopped
Jon in his tracks. What am I doing? he wondered again, but only for a moment before he was
pressing his lips against Satin’s. This wasn’t kissing, he thought; kissing was what he’d done with
Ygritte beneath the furs. This was fighting, conquering, because Satin wasn’t fighting back, was just
letting Jon take and take until Jon was certain the other boy’s lips must be as bruised as they’d have
been if he’d punched him in the mouth instead.

Somehow, inexplicably, he heard his vows in his mind. Night gathers, and now my watch begins. It
shall not end until my death. I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children. I shall wear no
crowns and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post. And Robb was saying he could forsake all
of that, could hold all the lands from the Wall to the Summer Sea, could claim the ultimate crown by
birthright, when he’d for so long been told he had the right to nothing. And all he had to do was
renounce his vows and his honor to do so.

But why not? Jon thought to himself. It isn’t as if I haven’t betrayed my vows before.

But had he really? He’d slain Qhorin Halfhand on the man’s own orders and abandoning the Watch
had been nothing more than a ruse. Ygritte had been no wife but a spearwife. And Satin was
certainly no wife, and Jon wasn’t like to father a child on him. The thought nearly sent him into
hysterics. He pulled away.

“We should stop,” he gasped out finally, breathlessly, his mind feeling overfull and confused. “I
don’t know—”

And Jon stopped, uncertain of what he’d meant to say. He didn’t know why he was so angry, didn’t
know where all his self-control had gone, didn’t know who he was any longer. You know nothing,
Jon Snow, Ygritte’s voice told him mockingly, and the words were truer than she could have ever
known. Jon knew nothing, not even the few things he’d been so certain he’d known.

Satin took his words an entirely different way.

“I do,” he declared confidently, and then he was sliding off Jon’s lap, his fingers fussing with the
laces of Jon’s breeches. Jon stared down at his friend with a sense of dim unreality.

This is truly happening, Jon thought numbly. What am I doing?

But as soon as he’d thought them, the misgivings were gone, for Satin’s hand was upon his cock and
it was suddenly all he could think about. It was different than it had been with Ygritte, Satin’s hands
larger and more obviously masculine, and yet in some ways, it felt the same. The movements of
Satin’s hand were restrained yet skilled where Ygritte’s had always been bold and brash, but either
way, it seemed that all of Jon’s blood had rushed to his cock, and everything else in the world was
gone.

Jon realized what Satin was going to do next only just as it was about to happen, as Satin leaned
forward over his lap and engulfed him in a warm, wet heat. The noise Jon made in response would
have been embarrassing if he’d been in any state to care, half gasp and half whimper, and his hand
fluttered instinctively near Satin’s curls before he stopped himself, clenching it in a fist and lowering
it to his side. He bit his lip and stifled a groan—and Satin pulled back without warning, looking up at
Jon. His face was flushed, his lips pink and swollen, and he reached over and grasped Jon’s hand.

“I can handle it,” the boy said, and Jon’s mind fumbled for a moment over the words, uncertain of
what he meant until he pulled Jon’s arm gently and placed his hand precisely where Jon had almost
placed it himself, right upon the back of Satin’s head. Before Jon could puzzle that out, Satin’s
mouth was upon him again, leaning forward and swallowing Jon in one practiced, seemingly
impossible movement.

Despite his best intentions, Jon’s fingers tightened in Satin’s hair and he moaned, hips skittering, trying to thrust impossibly deeper into Satin’s throat. The boy groaned out what seemed like encouragement, and Jon was uncertain how Satin could not be choking on his cock. Satin pulled back, then swallowed his length again, and it was nearly unbearable. Jon needed something more, something to satisfy the simmering violence that lingered in his veins, although for the moment he’d forgotten entirely why.

He tightened his fingers in Satin’s curls and thrust forward, on instinct. Satin’s throat spasmed around him for only the briefest of seconds, and then he hummed again around his mouthful.

_I could do anything I wanted to him_, Jon thought again feverishly, _and most like he would let me._ It was a heady, overwhelming sort of power, and Jon nearly lost it right there, nearly emptied himself into Satin’s throat abruptly and without warning. He felt an untouched boy again, and at the same time he felt more in control than he’d ever been, felt frenzied and calm, hot and cold all at once. His heart beat a staccato rhythm as he gripped tightly in Satin’s hair, as he thrust forward into his willing throat. He was running through the forest, wild and uncontrolled and free, blood surging against his tongue with metallic pulses.

Without even realizing he was doing it, Jon tugged at Satin’s hair, the boy releasing Jon’s cock from his mouth with an obscene _pop_ and a startled gasp. Jon pushed Satin back with such force that the heavy wooden table skittered a few inches across the floor, and then Jon’s mouth was on Satin’s again, tongue delving far into its depths. He could taste himself against Satin’s tongue, salty and slick as blood, and Satin was pliant beneath him, sinking back against the hard wood of the table as easily as if it were the softest featherbed. Satin’s fingers scrambled with the laces of Jon’s shirt with far more coordination than Jon felt himself capable of at that moment, as if the other boy craved more of his flesh. Satin’s hands slipped along the newly exposed skin of Jon’s chest with a gentle kind of urgency, but Jon’s own fingers pressed against Satin’s neck with enough ferocity to bruise, blindly grinding his hips against Satin’s.

The boy made quick work of his own laces, and Jon gasped into Satin’s mouth at the sudden feeling of hot, hard flesh against his own. Satin’s hand curled around them both, not quite substantial enough to answer Jon’s ferocious, angry need, and so he swatted Satin’s hand away, pressing his hips hard against Satin’s, so hard he was certain the back of the boy’s hips would be bruised black and blue by the end of this, but not a single part of him cared. His teeth found Satin’s lip, and the blood was in his mouth for true then, real and tangible and intoxicating as he ground their hips together with more violence than passion, chasing his peak with fury and not desire.

Somehow, impossibly, Satin found his release first, shuddering and groaning against him, and Jon felt slickness against the exposed flesh of his cock, easing the rough discomfort that had somehow been so _satisfying_. Everything was slippery and slick and hot and somehow _not enough_, and Jon growled in frustration, both hands moving to dig into Satin’s hips, anchoring him in place and thrusting against his body, searching blindly for that satisfying _something_.

Jon’s own climax was a paltry, unsatisfying thing, not enough to quench or even push away the simmering anger in his chest. His body reacted, tensed and then let go, and yet he felt no relief, no satisfaction. His breaths came hot and heavy and labored, his chest tight and each inhale sharp and uncomfortable.

Slowly, reluctantly, Jon opened his eyes, pulling back to look upon Satin’s face. His once-neat curls stuck up at odd angles, his face flushed and his lips so swollen it looked almost as if Jon had simply punched him in the mouth. A trickle of blood lingered against his lower lip, and Jon remembered the
taste of it against his tongue.

Suddenly, Jon felt ashamed. He jumped back from Satin, unable to put enough distance between them, the room feeling hot and suffocating. He scrambled to put all his garments to right.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed guiltily. “I shouldn’t have—”

But Satin just shook his head, looking not at all ashamed. “You don’t have to apologize,” he assured Jon with a shrug. “I’ve certainly had worse.”

If possible, that made Jon feel even more wretched. He’d lain with Ygritte to keep up a ruse, but still there had been something sweet about it, something warm and passionate and wonderful. What he’d just done had had nothing to do with passion; it had been all about control and anger, and he suddenly felt stripped bare of all of that, leaving nothing but a void of confusion in its wake. It hadn’t made anything better, and even worse, it hadn’t even made him feel better.

“I take it I should go,” Satin remarked after a beat, and Jon stared at the boy for a moment, feeling overwhelmed and sickened with himself. He sucked in a long, painful breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said again. “It’s not…”

Jon trailed off, feeling entirely at a loss. How was he to explain what had just happened? How could he make Satin understand when Jon couldn’t even explain it all to himself?

Chapter End Notes

Okay, y'all - I'm instituting some rules here, because I'm done with everyone's bullshit this week. XD If you're going to whine that "Jon Snow is straight!!!!111oneoneeleventyone" (as some have already done at reading the tags) you can fuck off and leave, because this is my fanfiction and Jon Snow can fuck whomever I say he'll fuck. If you have actual meaningful dialogue you'd like to have regarding why I made the writing choices that I did - something that isn't some homophobic bullshit (or a failure to realize that fanfiction actually isn't meant to be canon, and that's why it's fanfiction), then feel free to express your feelings in a respectful way.

Up next: Robb X, in which Robb attempts to negotiate with Stannis and makes another feeble attempt to make Jon see that his obviously awesome plan is obviously awesome.
It wasn’t that Robb hadn’t expected the summons from Stannis; he’d have been a fool to have expected that he might come to Castle Black second, with Stannis’ forces already encamped there, and sneak back out before Stannis ever took note of him. It seemed even more ludicrous now, knowing that Jon had been elected Lord Commander, to expect that he’d be able to steal away with Jon, get him back to Winterfell, and declare him the lawful king for all the realm to hear without anyone taking note of his disappearance from the Wall. But Robb had wished he could have had a bit more time, that he could have at least slept or had a chance to speak with Jon again before the Baratheon men came to summon him. All he could see was Ghost stepping between him and Jon, teeth bared menacingly at him.

Would Ghost truly have attacked me if I’d taken another step toward Jon? Robb couldn’t help but wonder ruefully. He’d have never seen a day when one of Grey Wind’s brothers or sisters would turn on him; he’d never have seen a day when Jon would have turned on him. Was that even what had happened? He had been upset; that had been certain enough, but Robb still couldn’t quite wrap his mind around what had happened, how that conversation had suddenly taken such a wrong turn.

But there was nothing for it; there would be no chance for him to speak with Jon again before he stood before Stannis Baratheon, little as he liked it. He should have refused Stannis’ men when they came to summon him to the King’s Tower; the fact that Stannis presumed to summon him at all already said a great measure about the level of esteem in which the older man held him, which was to say very little. As it was, Robb had shut the door on them and bid them to wait.

His mother wanted to come with him; that much was clear enough, but Robb knew that he could not stand before Stannis Baratheon with his mother trailing along behind him. He could not be a boy who needed his mother, not when Stannis’ lack of respect was already so palpable. And if Stannis meant to kill him, what good would his mother be at stopping it? He had to believe that Stannis’ intent wasn’t to kill him right in that tower, but then, hadn’t Stannis killed his own brother in his tent? Stannis’ motives were more than clear, but his plans were nothing but opaque. Mayhaps he had come north at the summons for aid, but why had he remained? Had he intended to take back the north from the ironborn and then parlay Robb’s gratitude into asking the north to crown him and fight for him? If that had been his plan, Robb had soundly foiled it by marching north and retaking it before Stannis had ever had the chance.

Mayhaps, then, he had been waiting at Castle Black for Robb’s impending arrival. Waiting for me to come here and bend the knee to him, like as not. Because it was clear enough that Stannis did not have the forces to challenge the Lannisters and the Tyrells, had even fewer men than Robb himself could boast. He couldn’t say for certain, but guessing the occupancy of the towers and counting the number of tents he’d ridden past at his arrival, he would guess that Stannis had no more than two thousand men. Between his northmen and rivermen, Robb could boast more than ten times Stannis’ number, unless Stannis had another force hidden away somewhere, and that still wasn’t enough to beat the Lannisters and Tyrells in open combat. Robb’s victories had never been about numbers, had all been a game of tactics, of surprises and tricks.

Robb cursed himself for speaking with Jon about his parents before he’d asked him about Stannis. Jon’s insight about Stannis’ intentions and Stannis’ forces would have been invaluable before walking into a meeting with him, but all Robb had from Jon was anger and silence. That wasn’t what
he’d expected, not at all. He’d expected to be making plans with Jon, to be strategizing which men they might be able to sway to Jon’s banners. Instead he was exiled from Jon’s presence and walking into a meeting with Stannis Baratheon blind.

And then there was Stannis’ Essosi sorceress, the presence of whom Robb liked little and less. He understood Stannis Baratheon in some ways, at least; he had old stories of Robert’s Rebellion, the tales of the Battle on the Blackwater, the tales of the men who had interacted with Stannis Baratheon in the years between. But he knew nothing of Stannis’ red woman or her queer foreign religion except to know that she had real power, if the men he’d sent south with Roose Bolton had told it true.

This is the north, Robb tried to tell himself. Mine are the gods that rule here.

With that thought in the back of his head, Robb summoned Grey Wind and went out to meet the two messengers, who looked very put out at having been made to wait. A part of Robb, the pettiest part of him, hoped Stannis would feel equally affronted. Let him know that he is not the only king here.

Two of Robb’s own personal guard fell into step behind him without a word, and the two Baratheon men looked startled. “My lord, your men cannot be allowed to accompany you into the King’s Tower,” one of them protested slowly, haltingly. Robb didn’t miss the address. He gave the man a bland smile.

“My men will be happy to wait outside if all your men will,” he remarked blithely, and the men exchanged a look but didn’t protest again. They met another two men acting sentry at the base of the tower, and they looked so cold and miserable that Robb had to fight the urge to laugh at the sight.

Southron men don’t do well in the north, he thought wryly, and winter is coming.

They came across a second set of sentries at the top of the steps, outside what Robb presumed must be Stannis’ rooms. Unsurprisingly, they stopped him there, looking wary at the sight of his guards and even more wary at the sight of his wolf. He absently wondered if they reacted the same way to Ghost.

“You’ll need to surrender your weapons,” said one of the guards with a sidelong look at Grey Wind. “No arms are allowed in His Grace’s presence. Your guards and your beast must remain outside as well.”

Grey Wind bared his teeth warningly, as if he too understood the discourtesy, though like as not he was reacting only to Robb’s own annoyance. Both of the guards shied back at least an inch, and Robb gave them a placid smile, unhooking his sword belt and handing over his dagger as well.

“Grey Wind, guard,” he commanded softly, and the wolf sat right outside the door, eyeing the two sentries with a penetrating yellow gaze. They let him inside.

Robb’s eyes went first to the woman sitting in the corner. Her robes were red and her eyes as well, both of which matched a ruby choker she wore around her neck. She was beautiful, Robb realized after a moment, with hair a burnished copper and skin as pale as milk.

“It is customary to kneel before your king.”

Robb turned to look at the speaker, and it was only then that he noticed Stannis Baratheon standing behind the table. His voice was hard and unyielding, and his face even more so, his skin looking stretched too tight, like his face had been misshapen from being stuck in a perpetual frown. He had no hair left on the top of his head, but what he had at the sides was as black as King Robert’s had
been, as Gendry’s was. He had the same blue eyes and tall stature, too, but that was where the similarities ended. His face was long and severe, without a hint of Robert’s recklessness or Gendry’s earnestness. It was difficult to believe that the man was near the same age as Robb’s own mother was, for Stannis Baratheon looked at least ten years older.

Robb frowned and stood his ground.

“I am aware of custom, Your Grace,” he said as evenly as he could manage; he would give Stannis at least that much courtesy, the courtesy neither Stannis nor his men had offered Robb himself. Stannis gave him a withering look, but Robb would not be cowed. Stannis may have been of superior age and height, but Robb had the superior force to call upon if he needed it. If anyone had the leverage in this conversation, it was him. “However, as the north and the riverlands have declared themselves a free and independent kingdom, I must regretfully inform you that you are not my king. Forgive me if I have my courtesies mistaken, Your Grace, but one king does not kneel before another.”

It was clear enough that his response pleased Stannis Baratheon not at all.

“The Crown has not accepted your independence,” he said humorlessly.

“Nor have you, I’d imagine, since the Crown remains in the hands of a Lannister bastard,” Robb reminded him, and Stannis appeared to like that even less.

“I am the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms,” he hissed through clenched teeth, irate and angry. Jon is the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, Robb thought uncharitably, though he knew he could not say the words aloud.

“The north and the riverlands will no longer submit themselves to the authority of the Iron Throne,” he said instead. “We are in your debt for the aid you rendered here, but the north will not bow to you. My men would not bow to another Baratheon. Your throne is in the south. Your battle is in the south.”

Stannis gritted his jaw only more tightly at that, so hard that Robb was afraid his teeth might break. A vein pulsed in his head, his anger nearly palpable. His red woman watched the scene with a bland expression.

“If the north insists on defying me, I have no choice but to launch an attack,” Stannis declared with total seriousness, and Robb stared at the man in disbelief. He’d besieged his family’s own castle rather than attacking the Lannisters, and now he seemed to prefer attacking the north over taking on the Lannisters as well. The sheer stubborn idiocy of it all nearly left Robb speechless.

“With all due respect, Your Grace...with what army?” Robb couldn’t help but ask. “You have what, two thousand men? I have more than ten times your number.” Robb paused and took a deep breath when he saw Stannis’ face becoming even redder with anger; he didn’t think it likely, but he had to try to secure Stannis as an ally rather than an enemy, because he could not fight this war on two fronts.

“You are not our enemy,” Robb reminded the older man with some effort. “I would join you to fight the Lannisters, but I will not bend the knee.”

When Robb saw the look in those steely blue eyes, he knew that it was a lost cause. This man will not bend, Robb thought in dismay. Stannis may have had two thousand men or fewer, but Robb would still have to sacrifice some of his force to take care of them rather than send them all back south to defend the riverlands as he had promised. Robb simply did not have enough men to be
splitting this many ways, not indefinitely, and not when the Lannisters were likely bearing down on the riverlands already.

Robb left the meeting with Stannis Baratheon feeling more concerned than he’d felt in a long while, and he’d scarce slept in several moons for as concerned as he’d already been. Frustrated, Robb made his way back toward the armory. He had to talk to Jon again, had to find some way to salvage the situation. If he was going to be leaving northmen behind to fight Stannis and garrison all the castles besides, he would need more men. He would need whatever loyalists might flock to dragon banners raised anew.

There were two guards outside Jon’s door, but Robb didn’t need to knock; he came across a curly-haired boy dragging out the battered remains of what Robb imagined must have once been a chair. The boy’s hair was mussed, and he looked flushed and harried. Robb winced in sympathy as he looked at the boy.

“My brother didn’t hurt you, did he?” he asked in concern as he took in the boy’s appearance. He’d never have imagined Jon could hurt someone who hadn’t deserved it, but he’d also never seen Jon quite so angry before. The boy looked up at him with pretty, dark eyes.

“No, Your Grace,” he assured Robb with a halfhearted smile. “This chair wasn’t so lucky, however.”

Robb let the boy leave, dragging along the splintered remnants of the chair behind him. The guards exchanged a look and let him inside. When Robb saw that Ghost wasn’t in the room, he bid Grey Wind remain outside and let himself in.

Jon was sitting at the table where they’d met little more than an hour earlier, although already it seemed as though it had been a lifetime ago. And it looked as though it had been a lifetime for Jon; he was in his shirt and trousers only, his shirt laced all wrong, his hair bedraggled as though he’d run his fingers through it half a hundred times. He looked as though he hadn’t slept in a week even though Robb had seen him scarce more than an hour before, and he held a cup of wine in his hand. Wordlessly, he poured a second and slid it across the table. Robb sat and took it.

“I had a meeting with Stannis Baratheon,” he told Jon after a moment, his voice as neutral as possible. Jon frowned.

“I imagine it didn’t go well,” he remarked dryly, his tone odd and emotionless in a way that didn’t sound right coming from Jon’s lips. Robb couldn’t help but frown in return.

“I can’t quite imagine how it could have gone worse,” he admitted, taking a sip of the wine Jon had poured. He gave Jon a searching look before continuing. “We’re at a bit of an impasse, you see. He claims he’s the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, and I know that’s not so.”

Jon closed his eyes tightly, as if he were trying to shut out Robb’s words.

“You can’t just let Stannis Baratheon—”

Jon opened his eyes, and they were grey steel, the same unyielding expression Robb had seen in his father’s eyes too many times.

“The Night’s Watch takes no part, Robb,” he said in a grave tone. “I’ve said my vows; I don’t intend
Robb forced himself to take a deep breath. “You have a greater duty,” he reminded Jon in a measured tone, but that only seemed to make Jon angry; he slammed his wine cup against the table with enough force that a bit of liquid sloshed over the edges.

“According to whom?” he demanded angrily. “According to some man I’ve never met, and some story about three Kingsguard at the base of a tower, an event no one else living can verify happened the way he says it did?”

It sounded perfectly implausible when Jon put it that way, of course, but if there was one thing that Robb had learned about kingship, it was that things were less about truth and more about what people perceived. It didn’t much matter whether they could prove Jon’s legitimacy; enough lords would believe, and enough of them would be happy for an alternative to the Lannisters that it would be more advantageous for them to believe than to disbelieve. But then it struck him that Jon seemed to still be having his own doubts.

“You don’t really believe—”

Jon cut him off again. “It doesn’t matter what I believe,” he hissed bitterly, and then he seemed too agitated to remain sitting, so he stood up and turned his back to Robb for a moment before rounding on him again. His expression was fixed and serious. “You say I have a greater duty elsewhere, but I disagree. There’s no one else, Robb, no one else with an ounce of sense and enough support to be Lord Commander.” Jon paused, looking at Robb with desperate eyes, pleading for understanding. “How do you think I ended up with it? There’s no one else.”

Robb felt struck by the gravity of Jon’s tone. He knew that things in the Watch were grim, had received or been informed of their multiple letters begging for aid, but could things truly be so dire that they had no one better to lead them than a boy of six and ten? It wasn’t that Robb didn’t believe Jon capable, not when he himself had been crowned at fifteen, but the despair in Jon’s voice was jarring.

“There must be—”

Jon shook his head. “The Others are real, Robb,” he said in an eerily even tone, and Robb had to fight the urge to shiver at the utter conviction in Jon’s voice. “And mayhaps snarks and grumkins and every other terrifying thing Old Nan used to tell us about when we were children. Half the men don’t believe it, and the other half...Stark, Lannister, Baratheon, Targaryen, none of it matters if we all fall to a threat from the north most no one believes in.”

It was halfway to Robb’s tongue to insist that that couldn’t be right, but he remembered the eerie look in Howland Reed’s eyes, remembered Hal Mollen telling him about Renly Baratheon being murdered by a shadow, remembered hearing Edrick’s heartbeat in his mother’s womb. The Others have been gone for thousands of years, he wanted to insist, but Jon’s eyes were deadly serious. Robb swallowed thickly.

“There must be—”

Jon shook his head. “The Others are real, Robb,” he said in an eerily even tone, and Robb had to fight the urge to shiver at the utter conviction in Jon’s voice. “And mayhaps snarks and grumkins and every other terrifying thing Old Nan used to tell us about when we were children. Half the men don’t believe it, and the other half...Stark, Lannister, Baratheon, Targaryen, none of it matters if we all fall to a threat from the north most no one believes in.”

It was halfway to Robb’s tongue to insist that that couldn’t be right, but he remembered the eerie look in Howland Reed’s eyes, remembered Hal Mollen telling him about Renly Baratheon being murdered by a shadow, remembered hearing Edrick’s heartbeat in his mother’s womb. The Others have been gone for thousands of years, he wanted to insist, but Jon’s eyes were deadly serious. Robb swallowed thickly.

“I brought more men,” he supplied weakly after a moment. “Most of them don’t intend to say the vows, but they can bolster your numbers for some time. Four hundred men.” Robb paused, searching Jon’s face, unable to help the way his gaze lingered on the scars that now decorated it. “It’s not enough, is it?”

Jon sighed and sat back down in his chair. He clenched his sword hand, then unclenched it; the scars on his palm were thick and ropey, and bad enough that Robb wondered whether he could hold a sword anymore at all. Robb felt strangely guilty that he’d somehow made it through his own war
mostly unscathed, at least so far, when Jon’s path seemed to have been so much harder.

“No,” Jon admitted with a quiet sigh. “I don’t think that will be near enough.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon II, in which Jon reads a book and continues to have a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.
Jon II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon knew there was no chance he would sleep that night, so he gave it up for a lost cause fairly early. After all, how did one sleep after finding out everything they thought they knew about themselves was a lie?

Though if it had been simply that, mayhaps Jon would have made the attempt to lie down and close his eyes, at the very least. Everything his father—everything Ned Stark had said to him, and the look on his face when he’d said it, may have been flashing before Jon’s eyes every time he closed them, but mayhaps if that had been his only worry, he’d eventually be able to drop off to sleep. But that was far from the only thing that had him on edge.

Something in the air felt charged an uncomfortable, like violence poised to break out the night before a battle. It didn’t take a maester to puzzle out why, either: two prickly kings who refused to bend—three if he counted Mance Rayder—a thousand or so imprisoned wildlings, and a few thousand soldiers seemed like the beginning of a poor jape, one no one but the teller would laugh at. Add to that a volatile core of religious zealots with a propensity for burning people, and it seemed that there was no way to avoid disaster.

Jon cast his eyes over their nightfires as he picked his way through the Castle Black compound in the looming darkness. He prayed that Robb knew well enough to remain inside his own rooms, flanked by guards, rather than come outside to see their strange rituals. Jon had sent Maester Aemon away only a few days before Robb had arrived—the only remaining member of his father’s family, he thought with a hollow feeling in his chest—because he had king’s blood, because he was afraid of the danger posed by the Lady Melisandre. And then he’d brought her a nice fat serving of king’s blood in the form of the boy he’d grown up alongside, the boy he’d long called brother.

Imagine if she knew about me, Jon thought to himself, and that brought such a painful feeling to his chest that he wasn’t certain whether he wanted to laugh or weep. Like as not, I’d be roasting before I could finish saying ‘Rhaegar Targaryen.’ The thought of it all made him feel sick. Not just the thought of burning, although that was sickening in and of itself, but the thought of Targaryen blood flowing through his body. Half of him wanted to drain his veins dry just to rid himself of it.

Your grandfather was the Mad King, a voice inside him said, niggling and dark. He burned people for pleasure…and what of your father? Was he mad, too? Was he a kidnapper and a rapist or simply stricken with the madness of love—and did it even matter when the end result was the same? He began a war over your mother, toppled a whole dynasty, got hundreds and thousands of good men killed, and for what?

“Oh, Lord of Light, we beseech you, cast your fiery eye upon us and keep us safe and warm,” came a voice from the distance, one Jon recognized as the Lady Melisandre’s, “for the night is dark and full of terrors.”

“The night is dark and full of terrors,” echoed a score of men, all in unison, and Jon almost laughed. If only you knew, he thought to himself with dark dismay. They know nothing, know even less than I do. The sight of the fires made his hand throb in sympathetic pain; he flexed it inside his glove, though that did nothing to dispel the ache.

Instead, he turned away from the flames, moving to walk away, to walk toward…what? He
wouldn’t return to his chambers, but everywhere he looked, there were reminders of all the things that troubled him. Every tower at Castle Black was now topped with southron standards—the flaming heart of R’hillor, the black stag of Baratheon, the Velaryon seahorse, and the triple spiral of House Massey. In earlier days, he might have gone to talk to Aemon, but he’d sent him away just days before realizing the man was his only living connection to his birth father. He was half-tempted to send a rider galloping down the length of the Wall to catch their party and bring them back, but what good would that do? It would only draw more unnecessary attention to him, precisely the thing that Jon had been working to avoid. To bring Aemon back would be selfish, the whim of a boy who wanted to know his father. Jon couldn’t keep a dark laugh from escaping his lips.

*And to think, I once believed I knew my father at least,* he mused. *But I don’t think I knew them at all, not either of them.*

But then he remembered what Aemon had said when he’d left, about the book he’d left behind for Jon. With Robb’s impending arrival and the events that had come after, the thought of consulting some musty old book hadn’t seemed all that important, not when there were so many relevant current problems with which he had to contend.

But suddenly, it *did* seem vitally important. Jon did not fool himself into believing that Aemon would ever make the trip back to Castle Black. He was one hundred and two; he would remain at Oldtown if he were even lucky enough to make it there in the first place. Like as not, Jon had as good as killed Aemon himself, but at least he would not die to the Lady Melisandre’s flames. That book, and whatever else Aemon had left behind when he had gone, was all that Jon had left of his father’s last remaining relation.

Jon turned toward the rookery, to the rooms beneath it that had once belonged to Maester Aemon. Clydas opened the door when he knocked, a taper in his hand.

“Have I troubled you, Clydas?” Jon couldn’t help but ask as he set eyes upon the man. Mayhaps he would have been in bed already, Jon thought; it was the first time he realized how old Clydas truly was. Next to Aemon, he’d seemed young and sprightly, but without Aemon there as a contrast, his age was suddenly very apparent.

“Not at all, my lord,” he assured Jon and opened the door to let him in. “What may I do for you?”

“Maester Aemon told me that he left a book for me, that you should have marked a passage for me to consult.”

Recognition came into the older man’s eyes quickly. “Ah, yes,” he murmured after a moment, as if Jon’s comment had just jogged his memory. “If my lord would have a seat, I will bring it.”

Jon sat and removed his gloves, turning his hands in the direction of the fire to warm them, trying to flex the feeling back into them. His sword hand throbbed again, but before he could think upon the pain too much, Clydas was back with a large, leather-bound tome. He set it down carefully and flipped it open to a page he had marked.

Jon tilted his head and began reading. The page told of the tale of *Azor Ahai* and his legendary sword Lightbringer. *That is what King Stannis calls his sword,* Jon thought as he touched his finger to the page. *What is it that Aemon was trying to tell me?*

Jon read on. Even the foreign words sounded familiar, like he’d heard them before. *Azor Ahai reborn,* came an unbidden thought, *that was what Lady Melisandre had claimed of Stannis Baratheon.* And yet while Stannis Baratheon had carried a glowing sword, Jon had a difficult time believing he was some savior reborn.
Shouldn’t a savior inspire loyalty? Jon wondered to himself. It seemed that all Stannis bred was fear and contempt. I should hail Robb Azor Ahai before I’d ever hail Stannis Baratheon such.

Jon fought to hold back a snort. He was biased, without question; whatever it was that stood between him and Robb, whether Robb was his brother for true, he loved him as a brother, and he could think of far fewer positive attributes of Stannis Baratheon. *If Stannis Baratheon is our savior reborn, we may as well all lay down our swords and die now.*

And if Jon could see that, like as not Aemon had been able to see it as well; he was blind, but mayhaps in that way he saw more than any of them did.

The text said that the sword had been tempered by the blood of the wife of *Azor Ahai,* when he had plunged it into her heart. Had Stannis plunged his sword into his wife’s heart? From the way some of the king’s men told it, Selyse Baratheon may not even *have* a heart, but she was unquestionably still alive. Jon looked up at Clydas.

“Was Maester Aemon consulting any other books presently?” he asked after a moment, curious. Clydas frowned.

“I think there was a second one he asked Sam Tarly to bring up,” he remarked distantly after a moment. “I’ll see if he left it behind.”

While Jon waited, he flipped through the rest of the book absentely, but it was clear that Maester Aemon had had Clydas mark the only relevant passage. The majority of the book seemed to be about Qarth, he saw, a city far to the east of Essos. Interesting reading if one wanted to lose oneself in the ideas of travels far abroad, but Jon knew he would not be traveling anywhere near Essos; his obligation was here at Castle Black, and there was no time for daydreaming about exotic foreign travels, not with so many more pressing concerns.

Clydas came back with the book and set it down on the table beside the one Jon had open. The title sent a shock through Jon’s system. *Dragonkin, Being a History of House Targaryen from Exile to Apotheosis, with a Consideration of the Life and Death of Dragons.*

*Did he know?* Jon wondered with a pounding heart before he forced himself to calm; Aemon Targaryen needed no ulterior motive for pulling out a book about Targaryens. There was no reason to believe that Aemon had even suspected who Jon’s true father had been. *But why had he pulled it up now, at the same time as he’d been looking at Stannis’ dubious claim of being Azor Ahai?*

And it wasn’t just Targaryens the maester had been looking up. *Dragons,* Jon thought, his mouth dry. *He was looking up dragons.* There were no dragons left alive, of course; the last had died over a century before, before even Aemon Targaryen had been born.

*And yet if everything Old Nan told us in those childhood tales has now come back to the world, why not dragons?* The thought caused Jon to shiver.

“May I borrow this?” he asked carefully, trying not to betray too much interest. It was paranoia, he knew; now that he knew the truth, it was as though he was afraid that everyone around him would look at him and suddenly just see it, written as plain across his face as the words in these books. *Was this how Lord Stark had felt every day?* Jon wondered, his heart still pounding too hard.

“As it pleases my lord,” the steward said without much interest. Jon nodded and began sliding his hands back into his gloves, ready to brave the cold outside again when the sound of some sort of commotion reached his ears. He abandoned the book, and he was outside almost before he knew it. The sounds seemed to be coming from the direction of Lady Melisandre’s nightfires, and he saw
shapes scrambling around in a frenzy, heard the noise of men yelling in confusion. One voice rose up high above the others.

“The King is dead!”

*Robb*, Jon thought immediately in a panic. *They’ve burned him.*

He ran toward the leaping flames, heedless of anything around him, but there was no body in the fires, he saw, just a group of men encircled around something. Jon shoved his way through them, swallowing thickly.

Stannis Baratheon lay prone on the ground, a pool of blood seeping into the white snow beneath him. Jon almost made to ask why no one was helping him, when his gaze traveled to the man’s deep blue eyes, open and seeing nothing. The blood had welled from a wound through his neck, Jon saw; it would have been almost immediately fatal. The Lady Melisandre sat on the ground not far away, blood coating her hands, making her look even more red. Jon had never seen her look like this before, so totally stricken, as though she couldn’t make any sense of what she was seeing.

“What happened?” Jon demanded of the men surrounding him, and one of them finally seemed to come out of his daze.

“A man—we…we did not see his face…he…how did he get past all the guards?”

*Mayhaps if you spent less time staring into the fire and more time looking after your king, he wouldn't have,* Jon thought uncharitably. Lightbringer remained sheathed at Stannis’ hip; he’d never even had the opportunity to draw it. Jon turned away from the gruesome sight and found some of his own men.

“Fan out and search for anyone who doesn’t look to belong here,” Jon ordered shortly, turning to the group of men who had surrounded Stannis. “What do you know of the assassin?”

“He was…a large man…we didn’t see his face,” the same man protested again, and Jon shook his head. These men were meant to be soldiers, but they were useless. As useless as his Night’s Watch men would be, like as not; finding someone who didn’t belong when there were thousands of new men at Castle Black was a near impossible proposition. Jon clenched his fist in frustration.

“Go,” he said to his men, and they followed his order, but there were only a half dozen of them; everyone else would be sleeping, at some other duty, or manning the top of the Wall. Another group was moving toward Jon, and he turned; Robb was standing at the front of them, haphazardly dressed but with his cloak slung around his shoulders. Lady Stark was behind him, in only a nightdress beneath her cloak, though they were both flanked by a dozen Stark men. Robb’s scabbard was in his hand, not even belted around his waist.

“What happened?” Robb asked when he reached Jon, and Jon just stared at him for a moment. It would be obvious enough to anyone that Robb was not directly involved; he and his mother had both been abed when it had happened. But a king needn’t do his own dirty work, and that Stannis had been assassinated the same day that the King in the North had arrived would not look good, not at all. He could enlist Robb’s men’s help in finding the assassin…but no, that would not have the right appearance, either. It could easily be said that he’d allowed the assassin he’d hired himself to escape.

And they still didn’t know who the assassin was; there was no guarantee that it wasn’t some Lannister man, here to rid them of two of their rivals while they were both in the same place.
“Get back inside; both of you,” he hissed at them, not having the patience to explain. Robb opened his mouth, but Jon held up a hand to silence him. “Now. Don’t come out until I come to tell you that it’s safe.”

Robb stared into Jon’s eyes then, searching, before he nodded. He grasped Lady Catelyn by the arm.

“Let’s go, Mother,” he said, and then they were gone as quickly as they’d come. Jon turned back to the scene before them; he hoped fervently that some of Stannis’ men were doing something besides staring blankly at his corpse, because the chances that a handful of Night’s Watch men could find an assassin who’d gotten close enough to murder Stannis Baratheon and get away without being apprehended was incredibly slim. But who led Stannis’ men now? Who could give them the order? Helplessly, Jon turned to the Lady Melisandre, who was staring at her blood-soaked hands in disbelief.

“Aren’t you going to do something?” he demanded, and she gazed up at him with big red eyes that suddenly seemed lost.

She shook her head disjointedly. “Everything I saw in the flames was a lie,” she breathed, not even seeming to be talking to him. She would be of no help, either. Jon turned to Stannis’ men.

“Well?” he demanded. “Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to find the man who killed your king?”

That, at least, seemed to bolster the shocked men into motion, and they began scurrying away. Jon had to hope that some of the more competent men had gone off in pursuit of the assassin before he’d even arrived on the scene, for these men had already wasted too much time. Jon turned back to look at Stannis’ prone form.

_We’ll have to burn his body_, he thought grimly to himself. _A fitting end for such a man._

It could have been minutes or it could have been hours that he stood there, waiting by the side of the still-crackling fires. Stannis’ dead eyes stared up at him darkly, somehow accusing. Blue eyes like Robb’s, like Lady Catelyn’s. He hoped desperately that they’d had enough sense to lock themselves back in their rooms as he’d ordered.

Finally there was another approaching commotion, and Jon turned to see two men in black dragging along a tall, blond man between them, a mob of Stannis’ men following behind, shouting. Jon released a relieved sigh—that whoever this assassin was, his men had somehow, against all odds, gotten to him first. The man, Jon saw, wasn’t even fighting them, was walking along with his arms in the grip of the two Night’s Watch men without putting up even a token struggle.

_Gods be good_, Jon thought to himself as the group came closer. _That is a woman._

She was the largest woman that Jon had ever seen, and she wasn’t a comely woman, either; her shoulders were as broad as those of any man her height, no hint of femininity in her body. Her features were all too wide for her face, her thick lips cracked and chapped from the cold, and her nose looked as though it had been broken at least twice. When they reached Jon, the two men threw the woman to her knees before him.

“Who are you?”

She looked up at him with defiance in her eyes. “My name is Brienne of House Tarth,” she said with pride, as though she was not a prisoner on her knees. A highborn lady; _that_ Jon had not been expecting.
“Why did you slay King Stannis Baratheon?” he asked as clearly as he could manage, and the contempt in her eyes could not have been feigned. She was not simply some hired assassin; her grudge was personal.

“Stannis Baratheon was not an honorable man and was no true king. He murdered his brother Renly Baratheon by treachery and blood magic. King Renly was a truer king than Stannis could have ever hoped to be.”

One of Stannis Baratheon’s men found his way around the two Night’s Watch members and punched the woman straight in the mouth. She recoiled but sat back up after barely more than a second, spitting out a mess of blood and saliva.

“I did no more than my duty to my king;” she said proudly, through bloody teeth. “I will accept any punishment that is decided for me.”

“Burn her!” yelled one of the men in the back. “The Lord of Light demands his vengeance! King Stannis was the Lord’s chosen, and she deserves to burn for her crime.”

This is madness, Jon couldn’t help but think as choruses of “BURN HER!” came from the whole group of them. Jon glanced over at the Lady Melisandre; she remained strangely silent, staring blankly at the scene before her.

“No one will be burned,” Jon declared in his most commanding tone, but he was aware that he was plainly outnumbered; the group of Stannis’ men, whipped into a fervor, numbered at least thirty, and he had three. “This is Castle Black, and she is in the custody of the Night’s Watch.”

The response from Stannis’ men was almost a palpable force, and some of them began to step forward, around the men who held the Lady Brienne. I cannot stop them, Jon realized numbly as more men suddenly appeared from behind his back, swooping down on the kneeling woman. They will have their burning.

But then he realized that the newcomers wore the white starburst of House Karstark and the chained giant of House Umber. “I believe the Lord Commander gave an order,” one of them said in a warning tone, and Stannis’ men stepped back. A few of them drew their swords; the Karstark and Umber men drew in kind.

Robb, you stupid fool, Jon thought as he stared at the scene before him. This was going to be a bloodbath, and the only result was going to be that Stannis’ men believed that Robb had been behind this, that he was trying to protect his assassin. Like as not, he’d been trying to protect Jon, knowing how depleted the Night’s Watch was, but it would not be the truth that mattered here. Jon stepped between them, holding up his hands to both sides.

“Lady Brienne has committed a grievous crime, and she will be dealt with accordingly,” Jon said with all the confidence he could muster, knowing that bloodthirsty men could run him through as easily as they could stand down. “But these are Night’s Watch lands, and this crime falls under our jurisdiction.”

For a moment, it seemed as though they might listen; then, Ser Godry Farring began to advance, sword drawn. Jon reached for his own sword, his fingers numb and clumsy as he grabbed for Longclaw’s hilt, but then there was a snarl and a flash of fur, and the man was down on the ground, a wolf’s teeth closed around his wrist. His sword clattered uselessly to the snow as the wolf savagely shook the man by the arm. He cried out in pain, and all of Stannis’ men took a step back.

Grey Wind, Jon realized with a numb sense of realization.
“Grey Wind, stop!” he yelled, with no idea whether or not his brother’s wolf would listen to him. But Grey Wind did, dropping the man’s arm and padding over to Jon’s side, sitting meekly beside him. When he looked at Jon, his yellow eyes were oddly knowing, oddly familiar. Jon took a deep breath and turned back to his own men.

“Take her to the ice cells, and put a guard on her,” he commanded without preamble. Ser Godry was still rolling around on the ground, clutching his arm. He caught the eye of another of Stannis’ men. “You might want to take him to the rooms beneath the rookery, see if Clydas can do anything about that arm.”

All the men hurried to obey him without hesitation, then, the men in black leathers taking Brienne by the arms as she watched the whole scene with a sense of detached interest. Several of the Karstark men broke off to follow them, and two of Stannis’ men helped Ser Godry to his feet, dragging him in the direction of the rookery. When the other men began to disperse, Jon looked back down at Grey Wind, who eyed him with a curious expression. Jon met the wolf’s eyes.

“That was stupid, and dangerous,” he said to the wolf, feeling strangely as though he were speaking to Robb himself. Grey Wind moved forward and licked Jon’s hand, wholly unchastened.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XI, in which Robb makes some split second decisions which may or may not be awful, and Brienne's fate is decided.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was immediately obvious that Robb’s guards had taken Jon’s order with a sense of unabashed seriousness; they wouldn’t hear a single word from him until both he and his mother were back behind the doors of the rooms they’d been assigned. After a few minutes, Smalljon Umber appeared to report to Robb; two guards had been stationed at the outer door, two more in the hall, and the remainder of the dozen men who had accompanied him outside at the sound of the commotion were patrolling the area around the building.

“What is going on out there?” Robb demanded as soon as the Smalljon had finished giving his report. A smaller man would have been cowed by Robb’s obvious frustration, but Smalljon Umber was not that man; he stood there stoic, not at all perturbed.

“It appears Stannis Baratheon has been slain, Your Grace,” he reported evenly, confirming what Robb thought he’d seen amongst all the chaos. “The Lord Commander was right to send you back here. Until we know the identity and motives of the assassin, there is no way to know whether you might also be a target.”

The Lord Commander. It was still difficult to think of Jon as such, like as not as odd as it was for Jon to see him as a king. He couldn’t help but think of Jon as the boy with whom he’d sparred with wooden swords, the boy with whom he’d played children’s games in the godswood. It seemed simultaneously a lifetime ago and as though it had happened just yesterday.

But the Lord Commander had been, unquestionably, what Jon had had been just then. He’d been shouting orders without hesitation, even at Robb himself. The boy that Robb had known at Winterfell would never have presumed to give Robb an order about anything; as far back as Robb could remember, Jon had been subdued, stoic, never demanding.

But Jon was not that boy any longer, and that much was plain. He was not cowed by Robb or his title, not now—certainly not here at Castle Black. Like as not, he’d learned to be a leader the same way Robb had been forced to, by sheer necessity. There’s no one else, Jon had told him despairingly only hours before. And Jon deserved at least enough respect from Robb to be obeyed, at least in this. Not that Robb presumed his guard would let him through, even if he commanded it of them. Northern men had a rather queer definition of kingship; Robb had little doubt that Jon Umber would protect him from his own recklessness, if it came to that.

Robb knew he had to remain in his rooms, but he could not do nothing; Jon would never stop being his brother, regardless of blood or whatever titles they might each hold. He sucked in a long breath and turned to the Smalljon.

“Go rouse some of the men from our camp and have them keep close to Jon,” he commanded in an even tone. “Tell them not to interfere unless absolutely necessary—it will do no good for him to have his authority undermined.” Robb knew that well enough; he would wager a thousand golden dragons that Jon had had to fight for every tiny nod of respect that he’d received from the men of Castle Black. But if it came to violence, Robb also knew that Jon’s men were outnumbered at least forty to one by Stannis’ men, and those were not odds that worked in Jon’s favor.

“At once, Your Grace,” the Smalljon said and began to leave, but Robb called him back before crouching in front of Grey Wind, so that he could look his wolf in the eye.
“I need you to guard Jon,” he said to Grey Wind, as if the direwolf were a man. “Don’t let anything happen to him.”

His mother’s objection was immediate.

“Should Grey Wind not stay by you?” she protested. “We still do not know the nature of the threat.”

Robb had never wanted to shake his mother nor yell at her quite as much as he did in that moment, and the urge was strong enough that he had to take a steadying breath before standing up to face her. *It is natural for a woman to care more deeply for a child of her body than another,* he told himself silently, although the effort he had to put into the attempt at understanding was almost too much. *Don’t you see that he is in more danger than I am?* he wanted to scream instead. *I am behind walls with a dozen guards, and he is as good as alone.*

“Ghost is not here,” was what he said finally, and he had to remind himself that his mother would not know that, that she could not know what Grey Wind knew. “Jon needs Grey Wind now more than I do.”

Robb held his mother’s gaze for a long minute, as if daring her to disagree with his assessment. Finally, she gave a reluctant nod of acceptance, and Robb gave a nod in turn to Smalljon Umber. He opened the door wordlessly and let Grey Wind out and followed. As soon as they were gone, Robb turned away from his mother and sat.

“Robb, I—” she began, but Robb found himself in no mood for his mother’s dislike of Jon, not then. He would have hoped that it would have abated some at the knowledge that Jon had never truly been his father’s son, but his mother’s feelings seemed to have changed little, if indeed at all.

“I don’t want to hear it,” Robb told her with an air of finality, and for once, his mother seemed inclined to listen to him. He heard her sit down, and he closed his eyes.

“What are you doing?” she asked him after a long pause. Robb didn’t open his eyes.

“Trying to figure out what’s going on out there,” he told her finally, his tone sharp. “Be quiet.”

Miraculously, she listened. Robb took a deep breath, thinking of Grey Wind...remembering the sensations he’d felt only in dreams. Tearing into the flesh of a deer or a rabbit with his teeth, ripping through skin to get the taste of raw meat and blood against his tongue. He thought of the sound of Edrick’s heartbeat, thought about the feeling he had in his chest when he wondered where Grey Wind was and felt him nearby.

*The Others are real,* Jon had said to him not terribly long before, *and mayhaps snarks and grumkins and every other terrifying thing Old Nan used to tell us about when we were children.* Robb said a silent prayer to his father’s gods. *If you exist, this would be a good time to prove it,* he thought.

He slunk quietly through the shadows. It was dark, but his eyes could easily see through the dimness, and there were bright flames leaping up in the distance. He knew well enough to remain away from those when they were made by men he didn’t know, and remaining far from the fires kept him well-hidden. The sound of scurrying feet of men crunched over the snow as they hobbled along on two legs instead of four. The scent of blood was heavy in his nostrils, and he moved closer to it, paws padding quietly where the movements of the men were loud.

He spotted his target immediately, standing next to the fallen carcass, the source of the blood he had scented. He knew the man who stood there, knew his scent well. Pack. He was a man but he smelled of pack. He settled down in the shadows to wait. *Guard.* That had been the sound, the sound he’d
heard with his ears as well as something deeper, as if it had come from within him. Guard. He knew what that meant. He would protect his pack.

He heard the men coming before his pack-brother did, crunching footsteps and man-sounds accompanying their approach. More than two packs worth of men, he knew; he could smell them as well as hear them, man-sweat and meat. They were already almost upon his pack-brother when he finally turned to notice them. A man was tossed to the ground.

His eyes followed carefully as the noises came from one man, then another. They smelled of anger, excitement, and fear all at once. They wanted to kill, he knew, wanted to spill more blood in the snow. He inched forward as their noises became louder, and more men appeared. But he recognized the scent of these men; they had traveled together from the man-rock to the south.

And then the men uncovered their long, shiny claws; he stalked forward, as quiet as he could manage, staying out of the light of the fires as best as he could. His pack-brother was in the middle of all the claws, he saw, but still he held back. He could not take down a whole pack of men, but if he surprised them, he could give his pack-brother a chance to escape. One of the men advanced.

He lunged, teeth clamping down around the man’s paw. The man screamed in pain as he dragged his body to the ground, shaking until the shiny claw fell away. He would rip the man’s whole paw off along with that claw, he thought as he shook it while it remained clamped tightly in his jaws. No one threatened his pack.

“Grey Wind, stop!”

They were man-sounds, but they were familiar. Stop. He knew that sound. He dropped the man’s paw, licking blood from his snout as he padded over to his pack-brother and sat. His pack-brother made more man-sounds, and then all the men’s shiny claws were retracted. They began to scatter, and his pack-brother looked straight at him, making more man-sounds, but he did not recognize them; he moved forward and licked his pack-brother’s fleshy, hairless paw.

“Robb!”

Robb snapped back to himself in a moment, breathing hard; his mother was right beside him, and the two guards from outside the door, too, looking at him with concerned expressions. He waved them away.

“I’m fine,” he insisted, but his mother looked far from convinced.

“Are you certain? You were—”

Robb wasn’t particularly interested in hearing what he had been doing. “Jon is on his way here with Grey Wind.”

Catelyn fell silent, and only a minute later, Jon was there, just as Robb had predicted. Jon shot Robb a searching look once he was inside, but he didn’t say anything about the men he had sent or about Grey Wind. Robb’s wolf padded over to his side, and Robb scratched him behind his ears. Jon frowned when he did, but Robb cared little for that; Jon might not have been pleased at Grey Wind’s intervention, but Robb certainly was.

“I believe you should both be safe,” Jon told them once he’d sat and the guards had left the room, still eyeing Robb with an uncertain expression. “It seems to have been a lone assassin with a personal vendetta against Stannis in particular. A woman.”

Robb heard his mother’s sharp inhale. “Brienne of Tarth?” she asked almost breathlessly, and it took
Robb a moment to remember where he’d heard the name. The woman had been the one who had claimed to have seen Renly Baratheon murdered by blood magic, who had come to Riverrun seeking their aid in finding her vengeance. But she had been long gone from Riverrun by the time Robb had returned; he’d heard the tale from the men who had traveled to the stormlands with Roose Bolton, and from his mother.

Jon looked none too pleased by her recognition. “You know her?” When Catelyn nodded, he looked over at Robb, then back at her. “You’ll say nothing of that outside this room. It’s bad enough that Stannis is murdered the day you arrive, but now you’re familiar with the assassin? No, neither of you will say a word, and best that you’re both gone from here before any of Stannis’ men get any ideas about taking vengeance against you.”

“We had nothing to do with this,” Robb told his brother, feeling affronted by even the suggestion that he had. He would have killed Stannis Baratheon on the battlefield, had the man insisted on attacking the north, but hiring an assassin to kill him? That was not the man his father had raised him to be, and Jon should have known that better than anyone.

“I didn’t say that you had,” Jon said evenly, almost coldly. “But my opinion is not the one that matters here.”

They were all silent for a long moment, and Robb struggled with what to say in response to that. His mother was the one who broke the silence first.

“What shall happen to the Lady Brienne?”

Jon looked troubled at the words. “I shall have to execute her,” he reasoned finally, looking none-too-pleased by that fact. “And sooner rather than later, before Stannis’ men decide they’d like to burn her after all.”

Robb frowned. “Do you have the authority to do that? She’s not a member of the Watch.” Robb didn’t say the other thing that he was thinking, that Jon would have the authority for most things if he were only willing to claim his crown. But Jon had made it clear that he wasn’t willing to entertain that kind of talk, so Robb remained silent.

Jon fixed him with a penetrating look. “The alternatives are either that I hand her over to Stannis’ men to be burned alive, or I hand her over to you and have it said that I’m showing favoritism to my brother,” Jon pointed out with a dark expression. “As it is, I’ll have to give Stannis’ men some time to question her to prevent rumors that I executed her in order to keep her from revealing that you are the one who hired her.”

Robb’s frown only deepened that. “What will Stannis’ men do, do you think?”

Jon sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Well, those who are loyal enough to Stannis’ claim to the throne might return to Eastwatch, to crown his daughter,” he remarked after a moment, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “Like as not, some will return to the Lannisters and grovel for forgiveness. Mayhaps I can even convince some of them to stay here. As you know, we’re desperately in need of men.”

Jon sounded much less convinced of that final point, which surprised Robb little and less. Joining the Night’s Watch wasn’t an appealing prospect even to many northmen; to ask men from the south to commit to celibacy in the frozen north was not like to be an easy pitch. But there was something else in there, something much more interesting to Robb. If Jon thought it likely that some of Stannis’ men would return to the Iron Throne begging for forgiveness, it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility for Robb to sway them to his own cause instead.
“How many of Stannis’ men do you think will remain loyal to his family?” Robb asked after a moment, thoughtful. He scratched Grey Wind behind the ears again. Jon fell silent for a long moment before he finally responded.

“It’s difficult to say,” he admitted slowly. “The Queen’s men—Selyse Baratheon’s, I mean—will be the most like to keep faith, I’d say. Although the Lady Melisandre claimed that Stannis was some savior reborn, even the most devout might lose faith at the realization that her claims were false.”

Robb sat silently, considering his words, but Jon quickly seemed to understand what Robb was contemplating. “It’s not a good idea,” Jon told Robb in a voice that could almost be called stern. “Any men who believe you responsible for Stannis’ murder could easily pledge fealty to you and then stab you in the back before you ever return to Winterfell. You don’t understand how fervent some of these men are in their beliefs.”

He wasn’t wrong; Robb knew that. Jon doubtless had a better handle on these men in Stannis’ camp than he did, and if this woman Brienne had tracked Stannis Baratheon all the way to the Wall to obtain vengeance for her slain king, it seemed infinitely more possible for a man who desired the same sort of vengeance to plant himself in Robb’s camp in order to pursue it. But Jon wasn’t the only one who needed men; Robb had lost valuable men in the Whispering Wood and in Roose Bolton’s defeat, and he’d been splitting his force too many ways. Even when he marched back south to rejoin with his rivermen, he would not have enough men to face the Lannisters and the Tyrells in open combat, and would likely be in an even worse position after whatever losses the rivermen were almost certain to suffer in the interim. Stannis’ force wasn’t a very considerable one, but even just a few hundred extra men might be enough to make the difference.

“I’ll have to bring some of the men I intended to leave here back with me if any of Stannis’ men are willing to join me,” Robb reasoned finally. Robb had brought a small personal guard with him, headed by Smalljon Umber, who he’d intended to be their only escorts on the trip back to Winterfell. They were enough to protect him and his mother from raiders on the road, but they would be no match against even fifty of Stannis’ men if there was some kind of organized plot.

Jon looked at Robb and sighed, as if he knew that Robb could not be dissuaded. “Just be careful,” he urged.

Brienne’s execution was the next day at dusk. Robb didn’t have the opportunity to speak with Jon again before it happened, but he guessed that the timing must have been the best compromise he’d been able to find between leaving enough time for Stannis’ men to question Brienne to their satisfaction and not leaving enough for them to plot her burning. Stannis’ red priestess was nowhere to be seen; there were some murmurs around the camp that she’d disappeared, though Robb knew not the truth of it. Many of Stannis’ men were in attendance when Brienne was led out, and Robb’s mother clutched more tightly onto his arm as the girl came into sight.

The Lady Brienne was everything his mother had said, huge and blonde and bearing a face that had few redeeming features, if any at all were to be found. But the thing that struck Robb the most was that she was young; she couldn’t have been more than twenty. He placed his hand over his mother’s in a silent attempt at comfort. Murmurs rippled through the crowd as she was led past, but when she reached the block and Jon stepped up beside her, the crowd fell silent.

“Brienne of House Tarth,” Jon said in a loud, clear voice, though it was still shy of a shout. And yet even Stannis’ men looked to him without interruption. “You have been found guilty of the crime of kingslaying, the penalty for which is death. Would you speak a last word?”

It was deftly handled, Robb thought, clear and commanding and dispassionate. Robb would have expected to hear some grumbles from Stannis’ men at least, but all remained silent.
“I did nothing less than my duty to my king,” the woman declared, all prickly pride even then. “If that is a crime, then I shall accept my sentence.”

And that was all she said, before she dropped her head, bearing her neck with no visible fear. It was far from the first execution that Robb had witnessed, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last, but something about the way she stepped into it without fear made Robb shiver. He watched as Jon motioned for the grey-haired steward, and the man stepped forward with a scabbard in hand.

The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword, Robb thought with a sense of pride as he realized Jon meant to carry out the execution himself. Whatever else had happened, Ned Stark’s lessons had obviously stayed with Jon.

The pommel of the sword was decorated with a white wolf, and when Jon pulled it from the sheath, Robb saw the distinctive ripples of Valyrian steel. Robb felt his mother’s hand once again tighten its grip on his arm; doubtless she was also thinking of Ice, of the sword his father had taken south with him that had never been returned.

Where had Jon gotten a Valyrian steel sword? Robb couldn’t help but wonder as he saw Jon raise it in the air, then bring it down with a swift movement. The woman’s head separated cleanly from her body and rolled to the floor, and wide blue eyes stared sightlessly out at the gathered crowd.

Chapter End Notes

All right, y'all - I have good news and bad news. The good news is that the story is almost, sort-of, mostly, kind of finished. (Yay?) That means that starting either this week or next week, updates will become slightly more frequent. The bad news is that there will be no regular update schedule from here on out, so if you have an Ao3 account and you're worried about missing a chapter, you might want to subscribe now if you haven't already. If you don't have an Ao3 account and you're worried about missing an update, you might want to check back every few days to see if I've updated. What I can say is this: updates will be no more frequent than every 4 days, and I intend to finish posting the rest of this before the next season of GOT airs, because I just don't want to be thinking about this AU book plotline while the last season of the TV show airs.

Up next: Robb XII, in which Robb heads back to Winterfell, gets a surprise, and finds out the Lord of Winterfell receives a lot of goddamn mail.
More of Stannis’ men chose to join Robb than he had anticipated. The Florents all rode off to Eastwatch, but Robb had expected no less; Selyse Baratheon was a Florent by birth, and he did not presume they would betray their kin. And yet much of the rest of it was a bit more complicated. In name, the majority of the forces left, whether to rejoin Stannis’ wife and daughter at Eastwatch or flee back south via sea to beg forgiveness from the Lannisters, Robb was not certain. But there were deserters from nearly every camp, younger sons and ambitious hedge knights who chose to take a gamble that Robb would win, or that he may at least grant them lands in the north if they were able to maintain their independence, men who viewed their chances of reward with Robb’s force as higher than if they remained with their liege lords. Justin Massey was chief among them, and quick to remind Robb that his house was of First Men origin, that if anyone should be granted lands in the north, it should be him.

House Peasebury was the only house that declared for Robb outright, for their lord was there at the Wall with his men, but several of the houses of the stormlands came to him in force. Ser Richard Morrigen and Ser Ormund Wylde both brought the bulk of their force to him, with promises to write to their lords. It shouldn’t have surprised Robb as much as it did; after all, many of the houses of the stormlands had already changed allegiance once, so a second change of allegiance shouldn’t have seemed such a striking thing. But the loyalty of these men would be a tricky thing, he knew; the crownlands and the Reach stood between the lands Robb had declared and the stormlands, and there was little he could do to guarantee safety for their lands. Stannis’ men still held Storm’s End and Dragonstone, in name at least, but that meant little and less with how few men they had left behind to hold the stormlands.

Jon had been right; it was a tricky game that Robb was playing in recruiting these men, and not an easy position without Jon beside him. Should Robb be supporting the claim of a Targaryen to once more sit the Iron Throne, houses in the Reach and Dorne might even have been in his grasp; without Jon, Robb was watching the entire Velaryon force ride away, knowing that like as not, they’d have joined behind Jon had the truth been out. But thinking about that would come to naught; Robb had made one more impassioned plea to Jon before he’d left, hoping to sway him to change his mind about remaining with the Watch, but Jon had stalwartly refused him.

In the end, though, Robb did come away with around four hundred additional men and the possibility of quietly swaying more houses in the stormlands to his cause. At best, he could win enough men to allow him to attack the crownlands from both ends; at worst, they could cause enough chaos to buy Robb time to get back to the south. But he feared neither of those possibilities would mean anything positive for the men of the stormlands.

This is war, Robb had to remind himself with some effort. Robb had lost good men in this war already, had lost his father and his brothers and mayhaps his sister as well. He knew what war was, what it meant, but that didn’t mean he could callously act without considering the amount of damage it would wreak.

They met Galbart Glover and a host of his men on the Kingsroad about five days’ march north of Winterfell, riding out of the wolfswood under the mailed fist of House Glover, and Robb could already tell by the triumphant look on the man’s face that things had gone well there.

“Theon Turncloak’s sister had already turned tail and run before we even arrived,” he informed
Robb with a hearty laugh when Robb asked. “Sybelle rode right out of the gate to meet us as though nothing had happened!”

It was welcome news if not somewhat troubling; with Balon Greyjoy dead and Theon apparently unaccounted for, Robb had no idea who would even be in control of the Iron Islands any longer. By rights, it should be Theon’s sister, but Robb knew little and less of her—and even Theon, who he’d believed he’d known like a brother, had proven to be a false friend. What the ironborn would do next was a mystery, and one Robb didn’t much like.

The sight of the North Gate at Winterfell where there had been nothing but burnt planks a moon’s turn before was a welcome sight, but even more welcome was his family waiting for him when he made his way to the courtyard. Arya looked torn between being sullen at them having left her behind and happy at them having returned—and yet she ran to their mother at once, with absolutely no care for decorum, and neither of them seemed to have the heart to chastise her, not any longer.

Roslin, on the other hand, was all decorum, standing in place and waiting for him patiently with little Edrick in her arms. It was almost impossible to believe how much Edrick had grown in scarce more than a moon’s turn, and the little boy regarded all the excitement around him with a toothy smile.

“Winterfell is yours, Your Grace,” Roslin told him with a half-curtsy, quite a travail with a babe in her arms. It struck Robb only then how right the image seemed, Roslin with a babe cradled in her arms within the walls of Winterfell, and for the first time, he felt a strong pang of wanting for that, for her to be holding their child in her arms instead. Robb stepped forward and took Edrick cautiously from her; his little brother gave him a somewhat skeptical look, although he did not cry.

“I hope that things haven’t been too much trouble for you here,” Robb told her softly as he leaned down to place a kiss against her cheek. She flushed a little, though at the words or at the gesture, Robb was uncertain.

“No, Your Grace,” she assured him quickly. “The rebuilding is going well. Only…there are several ravens that require your urgent attention.” Roslin hesitated for a second, glancing over his shoulder toward Catelyn. “It would be best if your mother is there for them too, I think.”

The seriousness of her expression told Robb very clearly that it was not all good news, and he grimaced; he’d expected nothing less, of course, but he’d also expected his return to Winterfell to be a very different occasion, to be riding back accompanied by dragon banners and a hope for the end to the war. He sighed and handed Edrick over when his mother appeared beside him, and Edrick gave his mother the same sort of dubious look he’d given Robb.

Robb was about to tell his mother Roslin’s news when Grey Wind suddenly slid his way between them. To Robb’s surprise, he made his way directly to Roslin, and he pressed his nose against Roslin’s belly. Robb’s eyes widened.

“A child?” he asked desperately, and Roslin looked flustered.

“I…well, I can’t be certain yet,” she breathed sheepishly. “I’m often late, and…”

But Robb could hear it, then, with Grey Wind’s ears, the quick, fluttery sound of a second heartbeat. A huge grin split across his face, and he stepped forward, pushing Grey Wind’s snout out of the way to place his hand against her belly, still very flat beneath his palm.

“Grey Wind is certain,” he told her, and propriety be damned, he pressed his lips against hers. There was a loud wolf-whistle at that, and Robb turned to see Greatjon Umber grinning just as widely as
Robb himself had been. Robb gave him a warning look, but he appeared not at all chastened.

“Let’s go check those ravens, shall we?” Robb suggested, unable to keep the smile from his face as he summoned his mother to join them. Roslin led them through the Great Keep with a sense of familiarity that should have been unsurprising, but it was difficult to reconcile that with the Roslin he’d left there, when Winterfell had been half a ruin and she hadn’t known her way around anything at all.

The lord’s solar—once his lord father’s solar—was in almost acceptable condition, though the window was boarded over and that left it quite dark inside, even in the daylight. There was already a fire in the hearth that provided a passable amount of light, but Roslin quickly busied herself lighting candles. Robb took the opportunity to regard the room; the table was the same one that had been there before, and although the edges were a bit scorched, it was largely undamaged. All the chairs were different, though, and even the lord’s seat was a plain wooden one. Robb sat and watched as Edrick squirmed in his mother’s arms until she put him down on the floor, where he began to crawl about.

They’d missed that, Robb realized with a pang; when they’d departed for Castle Black, Edrick had been sitting unsupported, but he hadn’t been moving around yet. Robb looked over at his mother, but she did not even glance in his direction, her gaze locked on Edrick moving around the floor. Roslin cleared her throat quietly.

“I have much and more to tell you, and I’m not certain where to start,” she admitted after a moment, coming to sit in a chair beside the table. She rifled through some of the pieces of parchment before she found one with a moon-and-falcon seal and slid it across the table toward Catelyn. “It much aggrieves me to tell you so, my lady, but your sister has been killed. Murdered, it is said, by a singer.”

Catelyn looked up sharply from Edrick, who was crawling toward Roslin’s chair. “A singer?” she parroted, her expression filled with shock, and Roslin nodded gravely.

“There is a letter from her lord husband Petyr Baelish, which includes all the details. It is...not a pretty tale, my lady. You may wish to read that one in private.”

Robb watched his mother reach for the scroll as if it were a poisonous snake, taking it into her hand slowly, though she made no move to read it. Robb couldn’t help but frown; the timing of this felt all too suspicious, for they’d scarcely heard of his aunt’s marriage before they’d gotten word of this mysterious murder. Robb met his mother’s eyes, which were stormy and troubled.

“I am sorry for your loss, Mother,” Robb made himself say, although his mind was working miles ahead of his mouth. Lysa Arryn had been his kin, too, but he’d only met her once or twice, scarce even remembered her at all. “But does this not strike you as odd?”

Catelyn nodded slowly. “I think I know the singer in question,” she admitted after a moment. “A singer traveled with Ser Rodrik and I when we delivered the Lannister Imp to the Eyrie, and he chose to remain there.” Catelyn paused, pursing her lips thoughtfully. “He did not seem especially murderous to me.”

Robb blinked slowly, eyes trailing to Edrick as he pulled himself up against Roslin’s chair, tugging at her skirts. Roslin reached down and pulled Edrick onto her lap, then grasped a carved figure of a wolf that had been acting as a paperweight and handed it to him. Edrick quickly put the wolf’s head into his mouth and began gnawing on it contentedly. Robb looked back at his mother.
“And your friend Petyr Baelish?”

Robb did not miss the way his mother frowned. “I’m beginning to question how much of a friend he truly is,” she admitted after a moment, her tone thoughtful. “But if he is in command of the Vale’s forces now…he’s always had a particular…affection for me. Mayhaps I could convince him to commit them to our cause.”

Robb did not miss his mother’s tone, either, and something about the suggestion made him feel very uncomfortable. He was quite aware of what kind of affection to which his mother was referring, and the idea of anyone but his father feeling that way for her made Robb sick to his stomach. He frowned.

“We can discuss our options,” he said in an uncomfortable voice, turning back to Roslin, for he desperately wanted to change the subject away from men who desired his mother. “You said there were other urgent messages?”

Roslin startled, turning her attention away from the babe on her lap. She reached around him and began rifling through the papers on the table again, until she produced another scroll. Robb frowned when he saw the remnants of the seal on it; he hadn’t thought to see that pink wax again.

“One of Lord Karstark’s men returned bearing this message from the Dreadfort,” she said as she handed it over. “Roose Bolton’s bastard son Ramsay Snow holds the Dreadfort and has claimed himself the rightful lord. He claims to have many of Winterfell’s women, plus both young Walder Freys, and says that he has Theon Greyjoy as his hostage. He posits that he will turn them all over to you if you simply legitimize him as a Bolton and affirm his right to the Dreadfort.”

Robb started at the news; it was the last place he’d expected to hear news of Theon Greyjoy.

“Ramsay Snow is dead,” he murmured after a moment, feeling slightly dazed by the revelation as he took the scroll from her hand. “Ser Rodrik wrote to say he was slain.”

Roslin frowned. “Well, either he was mistaken or this man is a pretender,” she told him matter-of-factly. “But either way, he refuses to give up his hostages or abandon the castle, and the Ryswells are claiming the Dreadfort should rightly go to them. At the present time, Lord Karstark’s host remains encamped outside the Dreadfort, and a host of Ryswell men have ridden to join them. I believe they mean to make it a siege, if it is needful, but they are awaiting your orders.”

That was troublesome news, and not at all what he’d hoped to hear from the force he’d sent to scout out the Dreadfort. Roose Bolton’s bastard, if it was truly him, was not the sort of man Robb would choose to have in charge of anything, not if half of the things he’d heard about Ramsay Snow were true.

“Winter is coming,” Robb said gravely. “They could not hold up a siege for long, not even if we wanted them to.”

Roslin bit her lip, then rifled through the papers again. “I…I’m not certain what to make of this one, Your Grace, but it may change your opinion,” she said nervously, and handed over yet another scroll, one bearing the mermaid of House Manderly. This one she didn’t summarize for him, so Robb took it and unrolled it. Scarce but halfway through, he nearly dropped it in shock, and he looked up at his mother with wide eyes.

“This is from Lord Wyman,” he told her slowly, once he had found his voice. “He claims to have a boy, Theon’s squire. The boy is a mute, but they’ve managed to get some information out of him about what happened here. He says that Ramsay Snow is the one who burned Winterfell and slew
our men, and…mother, he says that Bran and Rickon are alive.”

His mother looked as shocked by that news as he felt. “Alive?” she demanded breathlessly. Robb looked back down at the letter, which was shaking a bit too much in his hand for him to make sense of it any longer. He placed it down on the table, smoothed it out and reread it to make certain that he hadn’t gotten anything wrong.

“At least…they were when Winterfell was burned,” he confirmed in a shaky voice. “He says they split up, but he followed Rickon and the wildling woman, Osha. He says he knows where they are.”

That was the part that gave him the most pause, but his mother looked as though she was close enough to strangling him if he didn’t tell her. Robb sighed softly. “Skagos,” he said finally, and his lady mother appeared ready to run all the way there herself, mountains and rivers and oceans be damned.

“We have to go get him,” she said in an almost frantic voice, and Robb stood, coming around the table and crouching before his mother’s seat. He took both of her hands in his and looked her seriously in the eye.

“Do you remember when you told me that if I let you come with me to Winterfell, that I could order you to remain here once we arrived?” he asked her in a serious voice. “I am doing that now, Mother. I absolutely forbid you to travel to Skagos. It’s too dangerous.”

His mother looked near-frantic at the words. “Too dangerous for me? I am a woman grown, and Rickon is a boy of five.”

There was truth in that, and Robb could not deny it, but Skagos was too much of an uncertainty. The Skagosi were Stark bannermen, at least in name, but it was said that they were more wildling than civilized. Robb wasn’t certain when the last Stark had visited Skagos, nor when the last Skagosi had visited Winterfell, but it was long enough ago that any truth about them was hidden between layers of rumor, and there was little way to tell what was truth. It could be that they truly were cannibals who still performed human sacrifices to the old gods, or it could be that they were little different from Robb himself, and there was no way he was sending his mother into that kind of uncertainty. Even sending trained fighting men, possibly to their deaths, seemed a difficult proposition.

“He’s five and he has a wildling woman and a direwolf with him,” Robb said in an attempt to reassure his mother. “Grey Wind would know it if Shaggydog was dead, mother; I swear it to you. Mayhaps if he hears we are back in Winterfell, he will return of his own accord. In the meantime, we will send them a raven with as little detail as possible to see what we can discern of them. If we send a host of men over to the island without warning, we may be as like to kill Rickon as we are to save him. And that’s only if this boy is telling the truth, mother. The ironborn are not to be trusted.”

The words, eventually, did seem to calm her a little; she slowly extricated her hands from Robb’s grasp and made her way over to Roslin, reaching out wordlessly for Edrick. Roslin handed the babe over and Catelyn held him close to her, as if she was afraid to let him go. She looked at Roslin with penetrating eyes.

“Is there anything else?” she asked pointedly, and Roslin all but squeaked in surprise at the sharp tone.

“No, my lady; that is all,” Roslin assured her, and Catelyn nodded wordlessly and disappeared with Edrick in her arms. Robb sighed and straightened before settling himself into the chair his
mother had vacated. He felt numb and overwhelmed with all that had happened, felt drained from having had to soothe his mother while his own mind had been reeling.

Roslin got up and placed a tentative hand on Robb’s shoulder. Robb pulled her down into his lap, where she tumbled with an exclamation of surprise, a sound Robb swallowed with his lips. That felt better, allowed him to push aside his other considerations, if only temporarily. Roslin was small enough that he was able to shift her easily so that she was straddling his thighs, and almost before he could consider what he was doing, his hands were pushing up her skirts. She pulled back from the kiss and gave him a startled look.

“What is it?” Robb pressed as his fingers found their way beneath her smallclothes, quickly finding the right spot to bring her pleasure. She bit her lip to stifle a moan.

“I…oh…I simply did not think you would want to…” Roslin flushed deeply. “That is…you cannot get me with child twice, Robb.”

Robb laughed at that, feeling suddenly carefree despite everything. There was an innocence to her that was so very refreshing, so different than all he had encountered in the preceding weeks. He desired her no less now that he knew she carried his babe inside her; if anything, he desired her more, with so much fervor that he could barely contain himself.

“Would you like me to stop?” he asked her, continuing to rub slow circles upon her with his finger. She shuddered atop him and clutched tightly at his arms, and when he slid his finger to her core, she was wet and wanting.

“Oh…well…not really…” she admitted breathlessly, and there was something so very charming about watching her war with her own feelings about propriety. This was improper, by nearly anyone’s standard; the door was not even latched, though most would know to knock before even considering the idea of entering.

Robb kissed her again, reveling in the feeling of her body against his, marveling at how much he had missed her. They had been married scarce but a few moons, and yet going so long without touching her had been an almost excruciating exercise. Robb didn’t know how he’d spent the first sixteen years of his life without her, without the feel of her in his arms.

Robb pulled his hand out from beneath her skirts, moving with uncoordinated fingers to try to unlace himself from his breeches—and after what seemed like far too long, his cock was free, desperately hard and eager. Roslin followed the movements of his hand, and her flush grew deeper at the sight of his obvious need for her. Robb reached back beneath his wife’s skirts without preamble, roughly pushing her smallclothes out of the way, and then he was guiding her to lower herself onto his length.

Weeks of worry and frustration seemed to disappear as his cock disappeared inside her, and Robb felt suddenly as though he could breathe for the first time since he had left her. For a little while, at least, none of it mattered, not the Dreadfort, not the south, not even Skagos. All of it was something he could worry about at another time, for in that moment, all that existed was her. Her, and Robb’s own babe growing inside her belly.

Chapter End Notes
Up next: Catelyn X, in which Catelyn learns a bit more about her children's connections to their wolves and anxiously awaits news from Skagos.
Catelyn woke with a start. The room was dark around her, and it took her a long minute to get her bearings, to remember where she was. She had to deliberately tell herself to slow her breathing, which was coming in short, ragged gasps, her heart beating far too quickly as the fragments of her dream left her. She only remembered bits and pieces, but what she did remember was Ned’s grey eyes staring at her, pained and accusing.

*Why didn’t you protect them?* he’d asked her, his words all sadness and anger and betrayal. And then his face had changed, had become younger, and scars had appeared around his eye. *You’re their mother,* Jon Snow’s voice had said then. *Why didn’t you protect them?*

Catelyn had once hoped to be rid of Jon Snow entirely. She’d once thought she’d be able to convince Ned to send the boy away, though she now knew why he’d never been willing to even entertain the notion. But when he’d gone off to join the Night’s Watch, she’d thought she would finally be rid of him for good, and instead he was now haunting her dreams, scolding her with a face that looked so much like Ned’s.

*Why are you still haunting me, Ned?* Catelyn thought helplessly, trying to hold back the tears that threatened to spill forth. *I’ve done the best that I can without you.*

Ned’s bones had already been laid to rest in the crypts beneath Winterfell, though he had no statue, not yet. It seemed improper to spare anyone to carve it, not when their stone was needed so desperately elsewhere. Not when there were still too many buildings in the castle that were partially collapsed, some others that still had no more than half a roof.

*Are you angry that you don’t yet have a statue, my love?* she wondered as though he could hear her. And mayhaps he could, along with several other ghosts of Winterfell’s crypts. When she’d gone there to see his bones interred, they’d noticed that several of the other statues were missing the longswords that had once rested across their laps, the swords that were meant to keep their spirits from wandering, Ned had once told her. Mayhaps there were half a dozen Stark ghosts wandering within the walls of Winterfell now. Catelyn couldn’t help but shiver at the thought.

Something moved on her left side, and Catelyn turned to look that way. Her eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness in the room; it was impossible to tell if it was morning yet or not, not with the windows completely boarded up as they were, leaving the room dark and gloomy regardless of the time of day. But even in the darkness, she could make out the tiny form cuddled against her side, and Catelyn felt a rush of affection, almost able to forget her dream. She reached over and carded her fingers through Edrick’s hair, which remained impossibly soft beneath her touch.

With Winterfell as it was, and with as many lords as were passing through, they didn’t have the rooms to spare for a nursery for Edrick, but that was just as well. Even if they had been able, Catelyn had been loath to allow him out of her sight for too long since she’d returned inside Winterfell’s walls, and most like she would have insisted he remain with her regardless. She’d been gone for scarce more than a moon’s turn, and yet when she’d come back, her own son had regarded her as little more than a stranger. A moon’s turn was a lifetime for a babe; for the first few weeks, more oft than not Roslin and Arya and the wet nurse had been the only ones who had been able to soothe him when he got himself into a true tantrum. It had only been in recent days that he’d begun to remember Catelyn—or, she thought with a surge of sadness, just begun to learn who she was again, as if for the
first time.

The thought that her own son had forgotten her made her sick to her stomach, and she couldn’t help but wonder about Rickon, if they ever managed to get him back. Bran would remember her, certainly, though they had not an inkling where he might be, but little Rickon…he’d been only three when she’d last seen him, had lived near as much of his life without her as he had lived with her, by now. Like as not, he thought that wildling woman was his mother now, or some Skagosi tribeswoman.

*Why didn’t you protect them?* Ned’s voice had asked in her dream. *I thought they were safe,* she wanted to plead in return. *I thought Robb was in more danger.* And if she’d chosen differently, would anything have changed for them? Catelyn had no skill at arms, would have been able to do nothing to stop Theon Greyjoy or Ramsay Snow. But at the least, she would have been with her sons instead of leaving them alone and frightened.

Catelyn shivered, and the body on her other side moved. Arya propped herself up on one elbow, blinking at Catelyn sleepily, and Catelyn couldn’t help but smile at the sight. Arya was staying in her room under the same pretext as Edrick, that they didn’t have rooms to spare for her to have her own, not with the current state of things. Once Arya would have fought that, would have said that she wasn’t a baby and didn’t need to sleep in her mother’s bed, but that Arya had come and gone with the war. Catelyn didn’t doubt that her little girl’s willfulness would be back, but she would selfishly hold onto *this* Arya as long as she could, the Arya who needed her mother’s comfort. “Good morning, sweetling,” she said softly, brushing her fingers through Arya’s hair the same way she had through Edrick’s not long before. Her two children with the Stark look, she reflected with a soft smile, with Ned’s dark hair and Ned’s dark eyes. “Though I don’t know if it’s morning or not.”

Arya closed her eyes again, and Catelyn wondered if she’d taken the words as an excuse to fall back asleep. But after only a minute, her eyes opened once more, and even in the darkened room, Catelyn could see a sharp sense of clarity in them. “It’s morning,” Arya confirmed with a smile, and she slipped across Catelyn’s legs to her brother, tickling him softly under his arms until he opened his eyes, too, squirming under Arya’s hands. Catelyn couldn’t help but smile as well, watching Arya help Edrick sit up on the mattress. “How do you know?”

Arya looked a bit sheepish at the question. She glanced at her mother, then back at Edrick, biting her lip as if she didn’t want to say. And yet it didn’t take long for that resolve to break. “I went to Nymeria,” she admitted softly, in a tone that said she expected Catelyn to scold her. *Nymeria,* Catelyn thought to herself, feeling somewhat frozen at the realization. *Her wolf.*

It shouldn’t have surprised Catelyn, not anymore—not after what she’d seen from Robb at Castle Black. He’d known what his wolf had known, the night that Stannis Baratheon had been killed. He’d closed his eyes and suddenly he’d been *gone,* had slumped over in his chair as though he’d passed out, and nothing they’d done had been able to rouse him—not her and not the guards from outside the door. But then he’d woken up as though nothing in particular had happened and had known exactly what Jon and Grey Wind had been doing, as if he’d been there.

Catelyn forced herself to take a long breath, and then in the calmest voice she could muster, asked, “Where is Nymeria?”

Arya was obviously relieved by Catelyn’s lack of response, though Edrick, who seemed entirely
bored by the conversation, crawled up the length of the bed and started grasping his hands at her bodice. Catelyn smiled and pulled him into her lap before opening the front of her nightgown and allowing the babe to take her breast. Maester Rhodry’s advice had been sound; she’d been able to resume nursing her son when she’d returned, and they scarce even needed to use the wet nurse, either, since he’d taken well to porridge and a few other foods.

“She’s still in the riverlands somewhere, I think,” Arya confessed after a moment, and she got up out of the bed to start lighting a few candles so they could see each other better. After lighting the second one, she turned to look at her mother for a second, as if trying to judge what to tell her. “She and her pack have been doing some damage there.”

Catelyn thought for a moment that her heart had stopped at the words. The riverlands had already been so ravaged by the war, having seen all the worst of the fighting, and Gregor Clegane and his men had ridden through creating destruction for the sole purpose of weakening them. Gregor Clegane, by all reports, had died in the trial by battle with Oberyn Martell, but even so, the reports from Edmure had all been rather queer. The Lannister forces had not yet attacked, as they’d expected them to, and suddenly Catelyn couldn’t help but wonder if her daughter’s wolf had had something to do with it.

“Arya, what have Nymeria and her pack been doing?”

Arya hesitated. “Taking down stragglers, any men in groups of ones or twos that the pack can take without being killed,” she admitted after a moment. “Mostly scouts and outriders.”

That could certainly explain the Lannisters’ caution, Catelyn thought. If they believed that the riverlanders were responsible for the deaths of their scouts, like as not they believed that Edmure knew of all of their movements, though in truth he knew very little.

“Arya, she could be killing Tully men just as easily as Lannister men,” Catelyn pointed out carefully, but Arya just snorted.

“I’m not stupid, Mother,” she said as she lit another candle. “I’ve been teaching her all the sigils of the riverlanders. She knows not to touch them.”

It struck Catelyn, then, that she had no idea the scope of the connection her children had with their wolves, and she wondered if they did either. That Arya could reach Nymeria from so far away, that she could teach the wolf to recognize specific sigils…whatever gods had sent these wolves to them, the old or the new, she would say prayers to them all. With any hope, it meant that Bran and Rickon’s wolves were protecting them as well, wherever they were. And yet that only made her more frightened for Sansa, if she was even still alive; her wolf was long dead, and she had no one to protect her.

Catelyn finished feeding Edrick before getting up and dressing for the day, Arya even remained to help her get Edrick changed and dressed, although Arya’s ‘help’ consisted mostly of making silly faces at her brother while Catelyn changed him. That was helpful in its own way, of course; it occupied his attention and kept him from squirming away, something he was much more wont to do now that he had learned to crawl. It was only when they left their rooms that Arya finally made to leave her, like as not to pester the baker boy in the kitchens to slip her more of the food she liked. Catelyn split off from her, heading first to Robb and Roslin’s rooms.

Like Catelyn and her other children, Robb and Roslin had been keeping only one set of rooms because so much was still being repaired. Catelyn and Ned had kept separate rooms, though more in name than in truth, for he had scarce used his own bedroom after their first year or two of marriage. The only time that he had ever retreated to his own rooms, Catelyn couldn’t help but recall, had been
when they’d fought about Jon. At the time it had made her feel vindicated, to imagine Ned alone in his bed torturing himself about the shame he’d brought upon her, but now she felt only sadness. If she’d known how limited their time together would be, mayhaps she wouldn’t have wasted all those hours bickering with him about Jon Snow.

She came upon Robb just as he was leaving the room, and though his wife was the one who was with child, Robb was looking a little green as he stepped through the door, so preoccupied that he nearly ran into her. Catelyn steadied him with one hand, shifting Edrick in her arms so that he was resting on her hip. Robb looked startled at her sudden appearance in front of him.

“Oh…Mother, I didn’t see you there,” he remarked distractedly, seeming quite intent on leaving. Catelyn raised an eyebrow.

“Is Roslin all right?”

Robb’s brow furrowed at the question, and he looked a bit aggrieved. “I don’t know. I think so. She says she doesn’t need the maester, but…could you check on her? I’m afraid I have no idea what to do.”

His blue eyes were boring into her, as if pleading with her to save him, and it was a look she rarely saw on his face anymore. He used to look at her that way after skinning his knee when he’d been a child, or when he’d gotten into some sort of mischief and been punished by his father. He may have been a man grown now, may have had a wife and a babe on the way, may have had his own kingdom to rule, but it was moments like this that she remembered that behind all that, he was still her baby boy. Catelyn pressed a kiss against Robb’s cheek.

“I’ll check on her,” Catelyn promised him. “But then I need to speak with you.”

Robb waved a hand distractedly. “I must meet with some of my lords to discuss the situation at the Dreadfort and make plans for marching back south,” he told her in an offhand way. “I can have someone find you when I’m done—”

But scheduling time to speak with Robb had recently been a near-impossibility, and Catelyn glanced back and forth down the corridor. Seeing no one, she stepped close to him.

“It’s about Rickon, Robb,” she told him in a low whisper, remembering her dream, remembering Ned’s accusing eyes. Robb’s face looked pained. “It’s been more than a fortnight and we haven’t gotten word back from Skagos. We can’t simply sit here and do nothing. He’s your brother.”

Robb pressed his eyes closed tightly, and Catelyn felt guilty for reminding him of another of the many things that needed to take up part of his focus. But he seemed almost to resent it, Catelyn thought angrily, to resent the inconvenience of his brother’s need of him. After a long moment, he opened his eyes and shot her a piercing look.

“I’ve already sent men out that way, Mother,” he told her sharply. “Even though we don’t truly have the men to spare. I have men doing patrols from every castle in the north looking for Bran. I’d be doing the same for Sansa if I had even the slightest idea where to begin looking. So I would appreciate it if you stopped insinuating that I don’t care about my family, when everything I am doing is in part to help keep you all alive.”

Catelyn felt immediately cowed by her son’s sharp words. “Robb, I—”

Robb shook his head, his blue eyes all steel now. “Just check on my wife,” he said angrily. “If she needs the maester, then make her see the maester. I can’t be everywhere worrying about everybody
all at once."

And then Robb made to move around her before stopping himself to press a gentle kiss against the crown of Edrick’s head, as if to assure his brother that he wasn’t angry at him.

“Ra!” Edrick exclaimed, though whether it was just a babe’s babble or a genuine attempt to say Robb’s name, Catelyn wasn’t certain. Either way, it seemed to make Robb smile, if only for a second, before he was gone. Catelyn sighed.

“Well, that could have gone better,” she remarked to her youngest son, who simply gave her a toothy smile in return. Catelyn shook her head and let herself into her eldest son’s rooms.

She made her way through the solar and into the bedchamber, where she found Roslin kneeling upon the floor. She had a cup of water in her hand, and she washed her mouth out before spitting it out into the chamberpot. It was clear enough that she’d just been sick. Catelyn came up beside her and handed her a handkerchief, which Roslin took gratefully. She wiped off her lips daintily before standing.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely, and though she did look a bit paler than usual—a feat Catelyn would’ve never guessed possible—she didn’t look particularly unwell. Still, Catelyn helped her to sit at the edge of the bed.

“Robb seems quite worried about you,” Catelyn remarked after a second, and Edrick was squirming in her arms, already trying to reach for Roslin. Catelyn fought to force down the feeling of jealousy that inspired, at how little time it had taken his son’s wife to replace her in Edrick’s affections, for Roslin was simply too sweet to be deserving of her anger. Catelyn silently handed Edrick over.

“It’s better for a child to have too many people to love him than too few, she told herself forcefully. Especially now that he will never know his father.

Roslin smiled as she took the babe into her arms, the happiness seeming to banish some of the pallor of her skin. She bounced him on her knee with a practiced sort of ease, Edrick smiling at the movement.

“He’s overreacting,” Roslin told Catelyn with a gentle smile. “I haven’t had it near as bad as some women do. Half of my brothers’ wives could scarce get out of bed during the first few moons.”

She sounded very self-assured, Catelyn noted, and those were not the first words she’d generally think of when trying to describe Robb’s wife. Usually Catelyn thought her a bit timid, but of course this might be one of the few subjects upon which she’d be something of an expert. She’d never carried a child before, certainly, but she had ample brothers and nephews who were married with children. She’d likely seen more women heavy with child, more children born than most women would in a lifetime. Like as not, many of the Frey women were half a midwife themselves.

“Ned was the same way, when I was carrying Sansa,” Catelyn remarked, feeling a surge of affection in her chest at the memory. It was the first occasion in some time that thinking of Ned had brought Catelyn anything but despair. “He wasn’t there for Robb, so Sansa was the first time for him to see me carry a babe. He all but tried to order me to bed every time I so much as yawned, and any time I got sick he reacted as though I was on my deathbed.”


Catelyn shook her head. “I came to speak with Robb first,” she admitted, and the moment she thought of food, her stomach rumbled quietly. Roslin hid a smile behind her hand.
“I tried once, with obviously unpleasant results, but I think I might be all right now,” she told Catelyn with a brave smile. “And if I know this little one, he’ll be ready to start smearing his face with food any moment now.”

“Ba!” Edrick exclaimed as if in agreement, and Catelyn couldn’t contain her resulting laugh at that. Roslin smiled affectionately at him.

“Will you join me to break my fast a second time?” Roslin asked her gently. “I make no promises that it will end well for me, but I do think I’m done being sick this morning.”

Catelyn couldn’t help but smile back at Robb’s little wife. She’d had her reservations about Roslin, when Robb had selected her; she was so tiny and seemed so shy that Catelyn hadn’t been certain Roslin would be up to the task of being her son’s wife, let alone a queen. But she hadn’t balked when they’d left her in charge of Winterfell after having been there for scarce four days, and she seemed fully prepared for the realities of childbirth and motherhood, at the very least. Roslin would be a good mother, Catelyn couldn’t help but think as she saw the practiced ease with which she cared for Edrick. Catelyn only had to hope that the rest of her son’s decision making was just as sound.

“Nothing would please me more,” she told her good-daughter honestly, and Roslin gave her a wide, gap-toothed smile in response.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XIII, in which Robb gets another bird from the Vale that is significantly more interesting than the last. ;)


When the raven arrived from the Vale, Robb could scarce believe what he was reading. He read the words through once, twice, three times before he could even begin to make sense of what it said, and even afterward, he almost believed that he was dreaming the whole thing. He expected any moment to roll over in bed and see Roslin, but instead he saw only Olyvar, whose face wasn’t nearly as pleasing as his sister’s.

“Your Grace?” he prodded after Robb had clearly been silent for too long. “Are you all right?”

That struck Robb out of his stupor; he turned to his squire and felt his mind begin moving again. “Please have someone fetch my mother and let her know I require her presence most urgently,” he told Olyvar, surprised at how even his voice sounded when his heart was pounding so hard in his chest that he was certain that it must be audible even to Olyvar. But if anything betrayed Robb’s inner turmoil, Olyvar hadn’t seemed to have picked up on it.

“Right away, Your Grace,” he assured Robb before ducking out of the room to follow the directive. When Olyvar was gone, Robb stood up from his seat, feeling as though he was walking through a swamp, and poured himself a cup of ale. He drank half of it, then refilled it again before he went to sit back down, and he picked up the letter once again. It had to be some sort of trick; there was no way around it. The Vale must have sided with the Lannisters, and this had to be some sort of ruse to get Robb to trust them and allow them into his lands. There could be no other explanation that he could see. Unless…

He had already drained half the contents of his cup when his mother finally arrived, looking somewhat harried, as though she’d rushed through the halls of Winterfell to reach him. Olyvar gave a quick bow and closed the doors behind her.

“Is it about Rickon?” his mother asked breathlessly as soon as Olyvar had gone, and Robb had to hold back the urge to laugh, though there was nothing at all that was funny about either situation. If only it were so simple as that, he thought wryly, shaking his head. Robb dropped the letter onto the table and met his mother’s eyes.

“Mother, what do you know of Yohn Royce?”

Catelyn stared at Robb, perplexed, as if she couldn’t quite understand the meaning behind his question. It must have seemed peculiar to her, of course, to have been called into his solar urgently only to be asked about some Vale lord she scarce knew. Robb had met the man, he recalled, though it had been some years ago, when he’d been perhaps twelve or thirteen. He remembered the man, if vaguely, but he hadn’t been very intent on judging Lord Royce’s character at the time. Robb had been more interested in watching him spar with his father and Ser Rodrik, something in which he’d proven himself skilled despite his age. And yet none of that information much helped Robb judge him as a man.

“I didn’t know him as well as your father did,” she admitted after a moment, sounding surprised but somewhat pleased to have been asked. She came to sit down in one of the chairs across the table from where Robb sat. “He seemed a good man.”

Robb tapped his finger against his cup thoughtfully, trying to reason out what to make of the
response. In truth, he’d been hoping that his mother had more than that, with a sister who had been wed to the Lord Paramount of the Vale and a husband who had fostered there, but his mother didn’t seem to know much more of Yohn Royce than he did.

“Did father trust him?” Robb asked finally, carefully. Catelyn pursed her lips thoughtfully at the question.

“Your father spoke highly of him, though I can’t say he ever spoke specifically to me of the man’s trustworthiness,” she remarked slowly, her eyes searching his face. “Why are you asking?”

Robb dodged the question. “If his word was placed against your friend Lord Baelish’s, which of them would you trust?” he asked instead. That seemed to truly perplex his mother; she sat there for a long minute, her expression deeply troubled.

“Once, I wouldn’t have thought to question Petyr’s trustworthiness,” she admitted, “but I knew Petyr the boy, and not Petyr the man.” Catelyn paused again, as if trying to collect her thoughts, before continuing. “He told me that the dagger that was used in the attempt on Bran’s life belonged to Tyrion Lannister, and I accepted it without question. And yet Lannister insisted it wasn’t so.”

Robb frowned at that. “He would,” he pointed out seriously. “What man would admit his crimes to his enemies?”

But Catelyn was shaking her head before Robb had even finished speaking. “Tyrion Lannister was a clever man. Too clever by half to be so obvious in an assassination attempt.” She paused, looking uncomfortable all of a sudden. “And Lysa’s death…”

Robb waited for her to elaborate on that, though she did not. He considered her words carefully, considered his own response. “Lord Royce says that there are many lords in the Vale who object to Lord Baelish declaring himself the Lord Protector. They would be prepared to declare their forces to our cause if we are willing to help them ostr around Lord Baelish from the position.”

“Lord Royce expects you to intercede in the affairs of the Vale?”

Robb shrugged. “The Iron Throne has backed Lord Baelish. We would be the natural ally, for one who opposes him,” he reasoned. Then he looked at his mother, taking a deep breath. “There is another reason he thinks we may take his side. He claims that Lord Baelish has Sansa at the Eyrie. He’s dyed her hair brown and calls her his bastard daughter Alayne, but Lord Royce recognized her from his visit here some years back.”

His mother’s reaction was not much different than what Robb had expected. She stared at him blankly for a few long seconds, as if his words didn’t make any sense to her. It took a long time before she regained her composure.

“Why would he do that?” she asked, seeming to be talking to herself more than to him. Robb answered her anyway.

“Mayhaps he believed that it was too dangerous to let us know of Sansa’s location,” he suggested, although part of him didn’t believe it himself. He’d never met Petyr Baelish, but every time the man’s name came up, it seemed in concert with something both confusing and sinister. It was clear enough that that had not escaped his mother’s notice, either.

“If he has had my daughter all this time and kept her from me, he is no friend of mine,” she told him with a sharp anger in her voice. “What does Lord Royce suggest?”

Robb picked up the letter again. “He does not believe he can get to Sansa while Lord Baelish
remains in the Eyrie,” Robb said as evenly as he could manage, as if he was discussing any sort of political prisoner and not is own sister. This was the closest that they’d ever come to being able to retrieve Sansa, and the consequences of making a mistake were looming large in his mind. “But if Lord Baelish could be lured away from the Eyrie…”

His mother seized upon that almost immediately. “I can do it,” she declared without hesitation, and that had been both what Robb had hoped and what he had feared. He swallowed thickly.

“Do you believe that the… affection he held for you is still so strong, all these years later?” It was difficult even to get those words out, difficult to think of his mother planning to use herself to bait a man whose motives and loyalties were so unclear. Catelyn’s face was as set as steel.

“It’s our best option,” she told him in a hard voice. “I may be able to bid him come here with insinuations that I’m open to marriage, saying that I can’t leave my youngest son to venture to the Eyrie. If anything, that will at least remind him that I remain young and fertile enough to carry another babe.”

The words made Robb sick to his stomach, and he had to swallow back against the nausea that roiled in his belly at the words. Asking his mother to attempt to barter her own body that way, even just as a ruse, was an incredibly uncomfortable prospect. And yet it was also necessary, if they were correct in supposing that Petyr Baelish didn’t simply plan to hand Sansa over as a gesture of his childhood friendship with Robb’s mother.

And yet Yohn Royce was an unknown variable as well; believing that he would truly retrieve Sansa and return her to them was taking a huge gamble. It could just as easily be that his initial fear was correct, that this was a ruse by the Lannisters to allow an entirely fresh army directly into the north on a false presumption that they were an ally. If his father had been there, Robb was more than certain that he’d have been able to give his measure of the man, but Eddard Stark was not there to provide his counsel, and thus Robb would be forced to make his own decision based on what limited information he had.

But in the choice between trusting a man his father had personally liked and trusting a man who had lusted after his mother in their youth, a man who was still at least in name an ally of the Lannisters, it was no question at all. Robb gritted his teeth against the discomfort of the whole endeavor and met his mother’s eyes.

“Then I would suggest that you begin crafting a letter for Lord Baelish in order to entice him here,” Robb remarked, ignoring his own feeling of unease at giving that order. “And mayhaps another one for Sansa, since she may be wary of going with Lord Royce without some reassurance. If she sees a letter penned in your own hand, that may help convince her that the rescue attempt is genuine.”

His mother looked positively stunned at that, and Robb could imagine why; the prospect of something so simple as writing Sansa a letter had hours ago seemed nigh impossible. Catelyn swallowed thickly and reached across the table to grasp Robb’s hand, and Robb turned his hand around so he could twine his fingers through his mother’s.

“If he laid even a single finger on her, I will kill him,” she said then, not even the slightest hesitation in her voice. Robb had to suppress a shudder at that, for he had no problem believing her.

“She’s a child,” he put in helplessly, and his mother just shook her head, pressing her eyes closed tightly.

“And that didn’t stop the Lannisters from marrying her to the Imp, did it?” she countered bitterly. “Though by all rights, she should be a widow by now.”
Robb wasn’t certain if that was a comforting thought, that his sister at three and ten had already been wed and widowed. They hadn’t heard the news of the Imp’s execution, though the last they had heard it had been planned, and that had been many moons before. Like as not, some news of that would make its way to Winterfell eventually; the further they’d gotten from King’s Landing, the sparser the news of the south had become. He squeezed his mother’s hand tightly.

“We will do everything we can to get her back, Mother. I promise you.” And the Vale forces could be exactly what we need to combat the combined forces of the Lannisters and the Tyrells, he thought, though he had the sense not to say that out loud. His mother had already accused him enough times of putting politics over family, and he wasn’t about to chance rousing that kind of criticism from her again. After a long minute of silence, she finally looked up at him once more, unshed tears glistening in her eyes.

“Robb,” she began thickly, “do you think that Bran…?”

Robb drew in a long breath, knowing precisely what she’d meant to ask. They’d once believed Bran and Rickon dead, and Sansa and Arya possibly destined for the same fate, and yet Arya was once again safe within the walls of Winterfell, and there was a chance they could get both Rickon and Sansa back as well. It was more good fortune than Robb would have been willing to believe possible, after he’d heard the news of the supposed execution of his younger brothers, and in the face of all of that, it felt easier to be hopeful about Bran as well. Too easy. Robb gave his mother a serious look, ignoring the feeling of pain in his chest.

“I don’t want to give you false hope, Mother,” he told her sincerely, his voice barely more than a whisper. “I’ve had nearly every northern lord send patrols out looking for him, but none of them have come up with anything. And if he’s gone south, or fled across the Narrow Sea…I don’t know how we’d find him.” Robb paused, swallowing thickly, not wanting to speak his other fear. “And Mother, he’s crippled. If he wasn’t taken in by one of our bannermen…”

He trailed off reluctantly, not wanting to speak the rest of that sentence, as if speaking it aloud might make it the truth.

“His wolf?” she pressed hopefully, and Robb released an exasperated sigh.

“I don’t know,” he admitted softly, feeling frustrated. “Grey Wind…he felt it when Lady died, and he hasn’t felt anything like that again, but…I don’t know how this is meant to work.” He didn’t tell her the rest of it, that Grey Wind couldn’t feel Summer anymore, that it was like the other wolf was simply gone, and he felt a stab of guilt in his chest at keeping silent. Was it worse to tell her something that would only make her despair even further, or was it worse to allow her to hold onto hope, when in all likelihood Bran was dead?

Robb felt his mother squeeze his hand again reassuringly, her scars rough against his palms. “I’m sorry for pushing you so hard, Robb. I know you’re doing the best you can.”

Robb pressed his eyes closed tightly, feeling a surge of emotion in his chest at the words, for he knew as well as anyone that his best might not be near enough.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XIV, in which a very unexpected visitor appears at Winterfell.
The situation with the Vale was not near as straightforward as Robb might have hoped, and communicating only via raven was proving an incredibly inefficient way of handling the whole crisis, especially since Robb had only a basic understanding of all the houses and geography involved. He’d have consulted Winterfell’s library if he could have, but nearly every book had been damaged if not outright destroyed when the library had been burned the second time. Maester Rhodry had been doing his best to restore what he could, but what remained was little and less, and certainly not anything that contained detailed lineages and geographical considerations of the Vale.

It wasn’t the first time since the war had begun that Robb wished that he’d paid more attention during the lessons Maester Luwin had given him about noble houses and keeps when he’d been a boy, but it had seemed that there were too many names and places for him to possibly fit into his head. And Robb had always thought he’d have more time before any of it would have truly become relevant, for his father had been young still, and healthy.

How is it that Walder Frey gets to live past ninety and my father dies at five and thirty? Robb wondered to himself balefully as he read through Yohn Royce’s most recent letter again. There were only six houses in the Vale that were prepared to declare for Robb in the event of Lord Baelish’s removal, which meant only a small fraction of the Vale’s available military strength would be on hand, for they would have to leave enough troops behind to defend against even their fellow Valemen. It all seemed just as precarious as Robb’s own predicament with the Dreadfort, which had tied up far more men and resources than Robb would have liked.

He had convinced Lord Royce to send the bulk of his men toward Riverrun once they began to march, which was at least some sort of a concession. Robb could not march with his own forces until after this whole mess with Petyr Baelish and the Vale lords was taken care of, so he’d sent a few thousand of his men ahead toward Riverrun to help bolster his uncle’s forces, but even with that, they’d need the troops from the Vale, too.

And even if Robb could march south himself, he reasoned, there wasn’t much that he could do. They were lucky enough that Mace Tyrell had seemed to concern himself more immediately with subduing the flagging ends of Stannis’ forces in the stormlands instead of marching north with Tywin Lannister’s troops, and the Blackfish seemed to be doing an admirable job of keeping Tywin Lannister’s force south of the Trident. But that was all that he would be able to do unless they found an advantage or a Lannister weakness. And eventually, the Tyrells would be successful in the stormlands and would ride north to join with the Lannister force, and Robb knew that if he hadn’t come up with a strategy before then, it would be the end of them. The Vale forces would help, certainly, but they still could not hope to match the combined forces of the Lannisters and the Tyrells, not unless Robb devised some sort of plan.

But Robb was fresh out of them. Thanks to his good-father’s demands and his uncle’s lack of strategic understanding, they’d never gotten the chance to see if their gambit in the westerlands might pay off, and it would be difficult to pull the same ruse on Tywin Lannister twice. Without the possibility that Jon might bring them at least some of Dorne and the Reach, Robb found himself quickly running out of options, and the longer the war lingered on, the greater the disadvantage was for Robb. The Lannisters were winning simply by virtue of still holding the Iron Throne; to win this war, Robb would have to gain territory and not simply hold his ground.
And even if he did manage to march a force all the way into the Red Keep, who would sit upon the Iron Throne? Shireen Baratheon? Robb didn’t even know where the girl was, and even if he had, she was no older than Arya. Robb didn’t see that Jon was like to change his mind about the Night’s Watch, but who else was there? He stared down at his map of the whole of Westeros, then back at the letter, and willed himself to come up with something. There had to be a way for him to win this war, if only he could see it.

A knock sounded at the door and interrupted his musings, and Robb might have been annoyed if he’d been getting anything accomplished rather than simply staring blankly at a map, hoping the answer would somehow strike him in the face. “Enter!” he called, and the door swung open to reveal Olyvar, looking sweaty and harried. Robb felt an immediate stab of fear at the worried look on his good-brother’s face.

“Olyvar, what is it? Is it Roslin?”

Olyvar shook his head with a frantic air, trying to catch his breath. “Our patrols, Your Grace—” he started desperately, and Robb just shook his head, moving around from behind the table to step up beside his squire. He put a hand on Olyvar’s arm, squeezing it reassuringly.

“Take a moment to compose yourself, Olyvar,” he told the other boy with a soft smile. “It’ll do no good if you pass out before you give me the message because you’ve somehow managed to forget to breathe.”

Olyvar laughed between heavy gasps, but he did make an effort to catch his breath. It was obvious enough that he’d run across half the castle to bring his message, but Robb had expected nothing less; his squire was nothing if not terribly earnest and dedicated to his duty. Not for the first time, Robb found himself feeling thankful that he’d gotten this boy as a squire and not one of the innumerable unpleasant Freys.

“Our patrols came across a group traveling north on the Kingsroad,” Olyvar reported when his breathing had finally slowed to something near normal. “A group of Lannister men, with the Imp Tyrion Lannister. They were being escorted by some of our men from Moat Cailin.”

Robb stared at Olyvar for a long minute, expecting him to say that the words were a jape, but no such utterance seemed forthcoming. The last that Robb had heard, Tyrion Lannister had been convicted of kinslaying and kingslaying and had been sentenced to death; there was no conceivable way that he should be found here, so close to Winterfell. Robb blinked.

“You’re certain?”

Olyvar shrugged. “They sent a rider ahead with word, so I haven’t seen the man myself,” he admitted after a moment. “It could be some other dwarf, and our men could be jumping at shadows. But the messenger sounded quite certain.”

Robb frowned, wondering what the Lannisters could possibly be playing at. “Have the Imp escorted here as soon as he arrives,” Robb managed after a pause, before something else struck him. “And have someone send for my mother as well.”

Catelyn, after all, had spent the most time with Tyrion Lannister of all of them, and being in captivity in the hands of Catelyn Stark would be a familiar enough condition for the man. She’d know how to deal with him if anyone did, and mayhaps she would have a better gauge of the trustworthiness of whatever explanation he had for his presence here in the north. Olyvar nodded and was gone the moment he was dismissed. Robb made his way back to his seat and sat down, rubbing his eyes against a sudden feeling of exhaustion.
His mother arrived first. “Is it true?” she asked him immediately, without even bothering to greet him. Robb simply shrugged dully and brought her a chair around to his side of the table. It wouldn't do to have her seated beside the Imp; it would be best for them to provide a united front. She sat down next to him and waited.

It was at least ten minutes more before there was another knock at the door, and Robb bid them entrance. Two of the men frog-marched the small man inside, his hands and feet bound with rope. There was enough slack in the rope around his ankles that he could walk but not enough that he didn’t look awkward doing so.

He was, however, unmistakably Tyrion Lannister. It had been two years, but Robb remembered his ugly little face well from Robert Baratheon’s visit to Winterfell, the visit that had begun all this pain and suffering for his family. Tyrion Lannister had the same squat stature, the same two-toned eyes and hair, but he was, if possible, even uglier than he had once been; he was missing at least half his nose now, which only added to the grotesquerie of his appearance.

“Good-brother, good-mother,” Tyrion greeted flippantly as he made his way to the chair, as though he was not there in fetters, and Robb felt a surge of anger rising up in his chest. “I don’t suppose you could offer me a cup of wine? It’s been a rather long journey.”

Robb looked over at his mother, but she didn’t even seem surprised at the dwarf’s tone. She simply stared at Tyrion Lannister coolly as Robb bid his own men to leave and allow them to speak with the man alone. The dwarf shook his head solemnly when he realized that Robb was not like to offer him a cup of wine and instead focused on trying to get himself up into a chair, which was rather a trial with his limbs bound and a chair that was far too tall for him. That, at least, Robb enjoyed witnessing. Once the little man had managed to get himself up into the seat, Robb finally spoke to him.

“What are you doing here, Imp?” he demanded with venom. “The last we heard, you were sentenced to death for murdering your nephew.”

The man gave him a wry, humorless smile. “Apparently even my father lacks the stomach to have his own son executed,” the man provided lightly, as though they were discussing nothing more grave than a singer’s performance or a jouster’s skill. “He decided to send me to the Wall instead.”

Robb blinked in disbelief. “Is he mad? To send his own son through enemy territory with only a handful of guards?”

Tyrion’s resulting laugh had no humor in it. “Not mad,” he said slowly, with an eyebrow raised, “merely calculating.” He paused and regarded Robb, as though waiting to see if Robb would say anything in response to that. When he didn’t, Tyrion continued. “This was his way out of executing me himself. If I arrive safely at the Wall, wonderful; I will probably die there given enough time. If I am captured and killed by your forces along the way, all the better. He's washed his hands of me, and he can claim that you’ve murdered his son rather than allow him safe passage to the Wall. Better to rally more men against you.”

Robb sat back in his chair and considered the words. It wasn’t a bad plan, really, and it was easy to see how carefully Tywin Lannister had managed to put Robb into a bind. Tyrion was worth little and less as a hostage, if his father had already decided to send him away to the Wall, but if Robb executed him, he could be a martyr, a symbol of the unjustice and honor of the savage north. There was nothing that Robb liked about that thought; he hated to be made to feel that he was marching to Tywin Lannister’s drumbeats.

“So you’re saying I should let you live and send you on to the Wall, then,” Robb remarked dully,
and Tyrion Lannister shrugged, as if supremely unconcerned by the whole thing.

“You could,” he agreed blithely, “but it’s rather dreary and cold up there, and if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not spend the rest of my days freezing my balls off.”

Robb felt, suddenly and uncomfortably, that Tyrion Lannister was the one who was in control of the meeting, although he was the one in chains. Nothing about that made him feel particularly comfortable; it made him feel a boy again rather than a king. Robb took a steadying breath.

“And what should I do instead, then?” he inquired dryly.

“You could grant me my freedom,” Tyrion suggested, with absolutely no hint in his voice that the words were a jape. “And I would pledge you my fealty.”

_The fealty of a man half my size with no army, and a criminal besides_, Robb thought cynically. _Does he think me mad or simply stupid?_ What he said aloud was, “What would I possibly have to gain from such a bargain?”

And that was when the dwarf smiled widely, a gesture that made his face somehow all the more unpleasant. “Casterly Rock,” he replied simply, and _that_ got Robb’s attention. He sat forward in his seat to regard the small man with renewed interest.

“You claim that you can deliver me Casterly Rock?” he asked skeptically, and the Imp merely shrugged.

“I can tell you how to take it,” he replied with confidence. “But as I have no army riding at my back, actually managing that would be up to you.”

The words had a ring of truth to them, if anything did; Tyrion Lannister had grown up at Casterly Rock, like enough knew more of its secrets than Robb could ever possibly hope to learn. Theon had taken Winterfell with only a handful of men because he’d known the castle, had spent half his life within its walls; it wasn’t so much of a stretch to believe that Tyrion Lannister might be capable of the same thing. Robb looked over at his mother, and she met his eyes for only a moment before turning to look at Tyrion.

“Did you kill your nephew?” she asked him suddenly, evenly. Tyrion looked nonplussed by the change of subject.

“That answer would you prefer?”

That response earned him a glare from both of them. “The truth,” she hissed simply, and the smile returned to Tyrion’s face, although this time it was almost _fond_.

“It’s always about truth and honor with you Starks,” he remarked offhandedly. “I had no part in it, though whoever did the deed doubtless did the realm a favor. You may want to ask my lady wife about it.”

Tyrion looked back and forth between the two of them, and something must have betrayed their worries about Sansa, because the man’s face fell a little. “Ah,” he breathed softly, his tone knowing. “She’s not here, then. I had hoped…”

Something about the words, about the reminder that Sansa had been forcibly wed to the Imp, brought up a feeling of rage in Robb’s chest. “Why? Were you hoping to get your hands on her?” Robb heard himself demand in a hiss. “You’ll never touch her again, Lannister.”
Tyrion held up his still-bound hands in surrender. “As I never have before,” he told them, his tone even. “I never once touched her, save a single kiss on our wedding day. And now I know she is not here, for she would have told you the same if she were.”

“Never?” Catelyn asked, seeming as stunned by the Imp’s proclamation as Robb felt. “But she was your lawful wife. You would have been perfectly within your rights…”

Tyrion gave a slightly disgusted look at that. “Within my rights, certainly,” he agreed easily. “And make no mistake, my lady—your daughter is very pretty, and will one day be as beautiful a woman as you yourself are. But now she is a child, and certainly not a willing participant in our most blessed of unions.” The sarcasm in his voice was so thick then that Robb was certain that even Edrick might have been able to pick up on it. “Much and more can be said about my failings, Lady Stark, and a great deal of it would be true, but no one can ever say that I’ve taken a woman against her will. Certainly, most women have been willing due to coin rather than any of my own rather dubious charms, but they were willing all the same.”

Robb exchanged a look with his mother, and he suspected she was as uncertain as to how to respond as Robb himself felt. Tyrion seemed fully confident that Sansa would corroborate his version of events, and if all went to plan, Robb would be able to test the truth of his words eventually. He wondered, for the first time, if he had misjudged Tyrion Lannister.

“You have our thanks,” Robb forced out finally when it seemed that his mother could not muster some way to respond, “for treating my sister with such kindness. As such, I may be willing to entertain your proposal. So tell me, what would you expect in return for letting me know how to take Casterly Rock?”

A smile began to spread across Tyrion’s face once more, and Robb suddenly got the impression that the mention of Sansa had been a calculated one, an attempt to achieve exactly what it had, Robb’s willingness to listen. Robb fought the urge to frown at the realization.

“A pardon would not be remiss,” Tyrion offered idly, “as I am innocent after all. I would also be most pleased if you would dispatch my father for me. I think that our goals are aligned on that point.”

Robb nodded in agreement, although there was a part of him that felt deeply uncomfortable at such dispassionate talk from a son about killing his own father, even if the father in question was one such as Tywin Lannister.

“And, of course, I would like Casterly Rock once you’ve so kindly taken it. It is mine by rights once my father has died, loath as he is to admit it.”

Robb sat back in his chair and considered Tyrion Lannister’s words. It was true that with Jaime Lannister sworn to the Kingsguard and in captivity at Riverrun besides, Tyrion Lannister would be the rightful heir to Casterly Rock. There were certain advantages to keeping the Rock in Lannister hands; the lords of the westerlands might be more willing to accept one of Lannister blood than anyone else Robb might install there. And yet they might be just as wont to reject the Imp, like as not for some of the same reasons Tywin himself had. Robb could instead give Casterly Rock to some man who had provided leal service, but what better service was there than delivering him the center of Lannister power?

And even better, if he could draw Tywin Lannister himself into the conflict and indeed bring about the man’s death, would it be possible to sway at least some of the westerlands to his own cause? There would be some houses that would refuse to back Tyrion Lannister as Lord of Casterly Rock and Warden of the West, but if nothing else, the ensuing confusion might be enough to give Robb’s
side the advantage. And with the addition of the Vale forces, Robb might even have enough men to execute a meaningful strike against Tywin. The thought made Robb feel the most optimistic he had been since Jon had refused to turn away from the Night’s Watch.

Smiling softly to himself, Robb called for Olyvar, who he knew would be right outside the door. Sure enough, Olyvar appeared inside his solar within only a few seconds.

“I will think over what you’ve said, Lannister,” Robb promised as neutrally as he could manage and turned his attention to his squire. “Olyvar, please have rooms found for Lord Tyrion and arrange for a guard to be put on his door. He is to go nowhere without my leave until we’ve decided what we’re to do with him.”

Tyrion, to his credit, did not look at all nervous about the noncommittal response. He slid somewhat laboriously out of his chair, astute enough to recognize the dismissal that the words were. Olyvar let Tyrion Lannister precede him out the door before bowing at Robb and closing the door after him. Robb turned immediately to his mother.

“You’ve spent more time with him than I have,” he remarked after a moment. “Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

Catelyn frowned deeply. “He certainly has reasons to hate his father,” she finally admitted. “But he also tried to use trickery to break his brother out of our captivity at Riverrun. I would not put it past the Lannisters to try some other sort of trickery to gain an advantage. But…”

She trailed off, but Robb could guess what she meant to say. The Imp’s words had rung as true; Robb had met many a man motivated by self-interest, and Tyrion Lannister made no excuses for what he hoped to gain from an alliance with Robb. And yet if he truly was working with his father and this was some sort of complex ruse, he might have stood to gain just as much. And yet convicting one’s own son of murder was a rather amazing length to go for such a ruse. Would Tywin Lannister go so far?

“We will wait for Sansa to arrive,” Robb concluded finally. “If she corroborates his assertions, then we will judge his words as truth.”

His mother reached over and grasped his hand tightly at his words, and though she didn’t say anything, Robb could well enough read the apprehension in her eyes. Their gambit in the Vale still had not come to fruition; until they had news that Sansa was with Yohn Royce, they couldn’t know that they would even get her back. And even then, Robb knew neither of them would feel at ease until she’d set foot behind Winterfell’s thick double walls again.

The weight of it all was nearly crushing, the certain knowledge that one miscalculation, one choice to trust the wrong man, could send everything crashing down. It struck him, not for the first time, how few Starks had survived the last rebellion against the Iron Throne, how much of his family had been decimated before he’d even been born. Robb could not stand the thought that that might happen again; the sooner he could get Sansa and Rickon back inside the walls of Winterfell, the better. And he still prayed for Bran every day, prayed for a single indication of where his other brother might be.

_The lone wolf dies but the pack survives_, Robb thought firmly to himself. _Don’t worry, Father; I remember._

Chapter End Notes
Before anyone yells at me (if you were going to): I actually started this AU with several different assumptions, a few of which were independent of each other. I decided I was going to take a few characters at their word, one of whom was Tywin when he said that his intention was to let Tyrion live and take the Black. I don't actually believe that was ever Tywin's intention, but since Tywin died in canon, it's technically still a possible plot thread that I thought would be interesting to explore - and I also wasn't ready to leave Chekov's drains and cisterns on the wall.

Up next: Catelyn XI, in which Catelyn and Robb *finally* get an update about Sansa.
Catelyn watched idly as Roslin walked circles around her bedroom, bent over at the waist with little Edrick’s hands clasped in her own as she helped him to walk along in front of her. Arya had been the one most often coaching her little brother into walking, but she’d run off to keep her friend Gendry company in the forge that day despite the falling snow outside, and Roslin had been the boy’s next preference. Catelyn had been handily manipulated into it, she thought, when her daughter pointed out that it would be warm in the forge next to the fire. How Catelyn had lost that battle to her eleven-year-old daughter, she wasn’t certain; what she was certain of was that Gendry was a good boy who clearly cared about Arya and who would have a much better chance at shooing her inside if it got too cold than Catelyn herself ever would.

Catelyn had no desire to brave the cold or the snow outside; even inside, they had a fire roaring in the hearth, the damage to the castle making everything colder and draftier than it had ever been. They’d only finally finished repairing all the piping in the walls a few days before, and yet even Catelyn’s old chambers, which had once been the warmest in the castle, felt cold to her now. At least Roslin seemed less bothered by the cold than she did, and Edrick, she was certain, would have crawled out into the snow naked as his nameday if she’d let him.

And Roslin looked perfectly natural walking Edrick around the room, looked every bit the mother she soon would be. Her belly even had a very prominent swell to it now, even at just four moons gone, and it was an overwhelmingly strange thought for Catelyn to realize that she’d still been concealing her own condition beneath voluminous gowns when she’d been just as full with child. It was impossible to imagine Roslin being able to hide it even if she’d wanted to; she was so petite that even the slightest change in her figure had been immediately noticeable, and all the men who hadn’t already overheard the news by chance had begun congratulating Roslin and Robb more than a moon’s turn before when it had become obvious.

The sight of her son’s wife so full with child was equal parts invigorating as it was heart-wrenching; the babe in Roslin’s belly was Catelyn’s own grandchild, and yet the sight only served to remind Catelyn that she would never again experience that herself, would never again carry Ned’s child inside her. For all the travails that had come with carrying Edrick, from the need to hide it to the unrelenting sickness on the ship to the way he’d kept her up with his movements so many nights, she’d reveled in the feeling of a babe growing inside of her, taken comfort in the knowledge that a part of Ned had remained within her even after he himself had been gone. She loved Edrick now just as much as she had then, if not more so, but nothing could compare to the feeling of a babe growing in her belly.

Roslin’s voice suddenly snapped Catelyn out of her reverie.

“Shall we do anything for his nameday?” she asked softly as Edrick seemed to finally have tired of being walked around in circles. Roslin handed him a small rattle filled with dried beans, which Edrick immediately took and began to shake vigorously as he laughed. He’d recently grown especially fond of any toy that could make noise or anything that he could roll across the floor.

Catelyn couldn’t help but frown at the question. Robb’s last nameday had passed while he’d been in transit from the Westerlands back to Riverrun; Arya’s had passed while Catelyn had been traveling back from Castle Black, and Catelyn’s own nameday had passed without her even remembering that it had occurred. And even worse yet, Sansa and Rickon had passed two namedays each since she’d
last seen them; if Bran remained alive, he had as well. None of those realizations brought Catelyn any measure of joy.

“We don’t have the provisions to waste on a feast,” she pointed out after a moment, unable to help being pragmatic. They’d been getting regular shipments from White Harbor, but even so, it was scarce enough to feed everyone, especially not with all the destruction the area had already suffered and winter soon upon them. All but the young children and pregnant women were on rations as it was; a nameday feast seemed too large an extravagance. “He shan’t even remember his first nameday.”

She didn’t say the other thing that she was thinking, that it may be years before they could have a real nameday feast for anyone. In peacetime, they could mayhaps have had enough to feed everyone through even a long winter; if the war persisted, it would be everything but an impossibility, what with the glass gardens destroyed and the Reach on the opposite side of the war. Roslin looked a bit saddened by the proclamation.

“I suppose you’re right,” she admitted reluctantly, settling herself on the ground next to Edrick as he shook his rattle at her. She opened her mouth as if to say something before closing it, as if rethinking it. After another beat, she tried again. “We scarce ever celebrated anyone’s nameday back home. With all the people there, there were one or two namedays nearly every week. We only had a nameday celebration for my lord father. I suppose I was hoping…” Roslin trailed off before shaking her head to herself. “But it makes no matter. We have larger worries than a babe’s nameday.”

She ran her hand unconsciously over her belly, and Catelyn felt a rush of sadness at the disappointment in the girl’s voice. In a better world, Roslin would have come to Winterfell in more favorable circumstances; Robb could have shown her all the warmth and hospitality that the north had to offer. But then, if there had been more favorable circumstances, Robb would not have taken Roslin to wife at all. Catelyn sighed, about to insist that they could do something small when the door flew open without so much as a knock. Roslin was on her feet within moments, seemingly unencumbered by the extra bulk of her growing belly.

“Your Grace,” she greeted with a polite curtsy, and when Catelyn turned toward the movement, she saw that Robb was indeed standing in the doorway. Catelyn couldn’t help but wonder if Roslin was this stiff and formal with him even when they were alone; she could remember a time when she herself had refused to refer to Ned as anything other than “my lord” even in private, but that had been more an attempt to distance herself from him, so slighted had she been by Jon Snow’s presence within the walls of Winterfell. Even in the later years, she and Ned had remained just as cordial in public, of course, for propriety necessitated it, but they had never acted with such formality among family. And yet Robb had voiced no complaints about Roslin within Catelyn’s hearing, but whether it was because there were no complaints to be had or because he was too afraid to voice them to his mother, she wasn’t certain.

The first thing that Catelyn noticed when she looked upon her eldest son was that he was smiling. It was a rare enough sight these days for it to be notable; they’d all had precious little to smile about in recent times. Catelyn stood as well and looked to Robb with suspicious eyes.

“What is it?”

Robb’s grin widened. “Sansa,” he declared simply, and when he thrust his hand out, Catelyn realized that he had an unrolled scroll between his fingers. She reached out and took it from his grasp with shaking hands; before she’d even turned it to read the words, she noticed that it was in Sansa’s own hand, small and delicate. A tiny sob unwittingly escaped Catelyn’s lips at the sight.

“Mama?” came a little voice then, and Catelyn covered her mouth guiltily, looking down at where
Edrick had abandoned his toy and was looking up at her with large, watery eyes, as if the sound of her sob had distressed him. Robb swooped down and picked his brother up from the floor without preamble.

“Mama is just fine, sweetling,” Robb assured Edrick, feathering the little boy’s face with kisses. Edrick immediately began laughing, waving his hands around as though to fight Robb off. “Your big sister is on her way home, little one. Can you say ‘Sansa’?”

“Sah!” Edrick provided proudly, and Catelyn wiped furiously at the corner of her eye as a tear threatened to escape. Content that Robb had Edrick well in hand, Catelyn finally turned her attention back to the letter from Sansa, biting her lip to keep ahold of her emotions at the sight of the familiar hand, the one she’d once wondered if she’d ever see again. The letter was short and sparse on the details; Sansa affirmed that she was safe and would be traveling to Winterfell with Yohn Royce, and that she loved them all and wanted to come home. Catelyn turned her attention back to her sons just in time to see Robb tossing Edrick in the air in a way that made her very nervous.

“Is this all you received?” she asked desperately after a moment, something about the whole thing feeling very off. Robb tossed Edrick in the air again; Catelyn couldn’t help but wince, though Robb caught his brother with ease.

“There was another letter from Lord Yohn,” he admitted casually, an obvious attempt not to upset Edrick again with a somber tone, and the incongruity of his tone with the seriousness of his words was unsettling. “It is not nearly as positive, I must admit.”

The words chilled her. “What happened?”

Something in her voice must have clued Robb in to the fact that the conversation was better approached without Edrick in his arms, for he handed the child over to his wife with a soft kiss to the crown of Roslin’s head. Roslin took Edrick wordlessly into the bedroom, and Robb waited until they were both gone before responding to her.

“Nothing bad about Sansa, Mother; I promise,” he told her earnestly. “Everything with that went as planned. Lord Baelish is heading here just as he wrote to you, and Lord Royce has retrieved both Sansa and the young Lord Arryn from the Eyrie in his absence with the help of some bastard daughter of King Robert’s and some mules.”

Something about that jogged Catelyn’s memory as she thought back to her own climb up to the Eyrie and her own descent back down. The mules had been minded by a girl named Mya Stone, tall, black-haired and blue-eyed. She was a few years older than Gendry, and yet when Catelyn called her to mind, she couldn’t help but think that the two of them could nearly have been twins.

“How many bastards did that man have?” she couldn’t help but ask, and Robb just shrugged.

“Far fewer than he does since Joffrey has had his way.”

The memory of the smith’s tale of being pursued by the gold cloaks and not having known the reason why made Catelyn feel a bit cowed for having spoken those words. But she forced the thought aside; the bastards of the dead king were of little concern to her then.

“What else?” she prodded, and Robb hesitated noticeably before he finally responded.

“He spoke to Sansa some before they sent off the raven with the message,” he prefaced after a pause. “He indicated that she has a number of rather disturbing stories. Most of them he said that he was wary of sending via raven, but he did say that she confirmed that the story about your sister’s murder
Catelyn had expected that, nearly to the point of certainty, but hearing it spoken aloud was still somewhat of a shock.

“Petyr?” she asked helplessly, and Robb nodded sadly.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” he said, seeming somewhat at a loss, and when she didn’t respond, he pulled her into his arms. It was a strange sensation, to have her son trying to comfort her rather than the other way around, and yet she sagged into his arms all the same, burying her face against his shoulder. She remembered Petyr Baelish as a child, remembered playing games with him in the godswood, remembered the day at Oldstones when she’d pretended to be Jenny and he’d been her Prince of the Dragonflies. She remembered him murmuring her name as he’d fallen back into the water with blood pulsing out from the stomach wound Brandon had given him. Petyr had been five and ten then, and yet while Catelyn’s own son had ridden out to war at that age and come out the victor of several battles, Petyr had been unquestionably no more than a boy at five and ten, frail and unskilled in combat. Lysa had been fond of him, fond enough to marry him when their uncle had told her quite clearly that she’d turned down much better suitors, and he’d returned that affection with murder.

How had this happened? she couldn’t help but wonder. How had the small, slight boy with stars in his eyes turned into a ruthless killer? And if he’d done this deed, if he’d hidden Sansa from her even when he’d had every chance to admit to her that he held her daughter, had had every chance to bring her back to Winterfell when he came…there was no telling what other things he’d lied about. She’d trusted his word about the dagger held by the man who had tried to take Bran’s life; she’d snatched the Imp on his word, and Tywin Lannister had begun mobilizing his army. Catelyn hadn’t thought there would be a day when she’d trust Tyrion Lannister’s word over Petyr’s, and yet Tyrion sat in chains within the walls of Winterfell, and his story about the dagger had never wavered.

Catelyn pulled out of her son’s arms and looked up to meet his eyes. “What he has done is murder,” she told him then, coolly. “And as good as kinslaying. He was like a brother to us, and Lysa’s husband besides. Once he is in the north, Robb, he is in your kingdom, and it is the job of a king to dispense justice upon matters such as this.”

It was clear enough from the look in Robb’s eyes that he’d understood her implications. “The Vale is not ours,” he said haltingly after a moment. “Whatever crime he committed, it was outside our borders.”

“Eight thousand Valemen marching toward the north and the riverlands would beg to differ, Robb.”

Robb looked uncomfortable at the prospect, as though he wanted no part in an execution, and there was a part of Catelyn that wanted to shake him and scream at him. Petyr’s lies had gotten her husband attacked in the streets; his lies had kept Sansa locked up in the Eyrie and away from her family. Jon Snow had executed Brienne with his own sword and he hadn’t balked; the fact that her son hesitated to do the same at the news that this man who she’d once considered a friend had killed his own kin made her unbearably angry.

“If you will not do it, put a sword in my hand and I will do it myself,” Catelyn told him darkly, and that seemed to strike a chord in him. Robb shifted.

“There will have to be a trial, Mother,” he said seriously. “In front of all the Vale lords who are riding to Winterfell, who must agree with the verdict. If it’s said that we lure men here as a trick to execute them, how will we ever gain another ally?” Robb ran a hand through his auburn hair with an exasperated sigh. “And even so, there will be those who say the trial is a sham. The Vale lords who...
ride here oppose Lord Baelish already. It cannot be said to be a fair trial.”

“Even so, it must be done.”

“I understand, Mother,” Robb said with forced patience. “But this matter must be handled delicately. We cannot be fighting a war with the Vale as well as the Iron Throne, not if we don’t want those eight thousand Vale troops to begin marching right back the way they came to put down a rebellion in their own lands.”

Her son’s words had truth in them, of course; Catelyn was not near the tactician her son was, but even she could see that angering the remainder of the Vale who had not yet declared for them would be nothing short of a disaster. Their best hope was that the remainder of the Vale lords would also side with their cause when there was some indication that the war was going their way, but at the least, they could hope to keep many of the more cautious lords neutral. Catelyn tried to stamp down some of her anger.

“I understand that this is a delicate situation,” she said finally, “but his crimes against our family cannot go unpunished.”

Robb squeezed her hands softly, still mindful of her scars, which had made her joints stiffer and more painful with the cold. “They won’t,” he said with conviction. “I swear it to you Mother, on the old gods and the new; his crimes will be punished.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XV, in which the wacky parade of weirdos through Winterfell just continues. And no, neither Sansa nor Littlefinger are in the next set of weirdos. ;)

Chapter End Notes
Robb made his way up the stairs to the top of the north wall with purposeful movements, eyes darting around until he spotted Smalljon Umber, an easy enough endeavor considering that the man was taller even than his father now, easily standing seven feet. Smalljon turned at the sound of movement behind him and gave an abbreviated bow when he saw that it was Robb heading toward him.

“Your Grace,” he greeted cordially, and Robb came up next to his friend, holding a hand out for the spyglass that the Smalljon held. The man handed it over wordlessly.

“How many men are there?” Robb inquired immediately, looking out over the northern landscape, though all he could see was a group of their own men riding away from Winterfell, the grey direwolf of Stark flapping in the wind as they rode.

“The scouts counted at least sixty,” the Smalljon reported, exactly the same information Robb had gotten from Olyvar when his squire had come to fetch him. The information had been perplexing from the start; sixty men was not enough to provide any serious threat against Winterfell, but scarce few men would be marching down upon them from the north, especially not without having sent some sort of word ahead.

“Not your father’s men?” Robb prodded carefully, trying his best to keep from sounding accusatory. Much of the land to the north of Winterfell was Umber land; men approaching from the northeast could most easily have been Umber men, but Robb would have thought that they’d have known well enough to send a raven before approaching Winterfell unexpectedly during wartime. Smalljon shook his head immediately.

“Not our banners,” he excused without preamble. “The scouts reported three banners: a ply flame on black, a green lobster on white, and a bare brown tree on pale green.”

It took Robb a moment to reason out why those banners sounded familiar, and when it finally came to him, he felt a rush of mixed apprehension and excitement in his chest.

“Skagosi?” he breathed out in disbelief. The Smalljon nodded gravely, and Robb knew well enough why. Smalljon Umber and his father were some of the few men to whom he had disclosed Rickon’s supposed whereabouts, for the men Robb had sent would have had to cross through Umber lands to reach Skagos. Greatjon Umber had wanted to lead the men to Skagos himself to try to retrieve his king’s missing brother, though Robb had been able to dissuade him from that; the same reasons the Greatjon would have been an awful envoy to Renly Baratheon still stood, were mayhaps even more true considering that they could predict little and less about the possible response from the men of Skagos. The lords of Skagos may as well not be governed by the same customs that they were; Robb had been acutely aware that the Skagosi would be just as like to kill his envoy as they would to hand over Rickon.

And if the men he had sent had been successful in retrieving Rickon, they would have sent him word; of that Robb was certain. The fact that there was a band of Skagosi, no matter how small, marching unannounced upon Winterfell could not be a good sign. Or could it? Robb had never felt blinder than he did at that moment, for most of what he knew about Skagos was rumor and conjecture.
When the banners finally rose over the hill, Robb held the spyglass to his eye to confirm the Smalljon’s words. The men the Smalljon had sent out to meet the approaching Skagosi rode in the front with their direwolf banner; the three banners flapped in the wind behind it, exactly as the Smalljon had described, but the approaching force was too far in the distance for Robb to make out much anything else about them. He turned away and handed the spyglass back to Jon.

“Only their leaders are to be allowed inside the gates,” Robb commanded after a minute of consideration. “Please instruct them that the bulk of their men must remain outside.” It would doubtless be safer that way, at least until they were certain of the intentions of the newcomers. Not that they had the space to house sixty men in any case; Winterfell was already full to bursting with only the visiting high lords and their households inside the walls; most of the other men remained in tents outside or in the structures that had been salvaged or rebuilt in the winter town.

“As you say, Your Grace.”

Robb descended the newly-constructed steps yet again and hurried back to his rooms to prepare himself for the impending arrival of the newcomers. He would be better served, he thought, to appear as kingly as possible, and so he exchanged his plain doublet for one emblazoned with a large direwolf and switched to a finer cloak, the one he owned that had the fullest collar of fur. Robb could never hope to be near the size of Smalljon Umber, but the cloak served to make his shoulders look broader, made him cut a more imposing figure. He would need every ounce of that kingliness, he suspected, for these men did not know him; all they would see was a boy of six and ten who called himself king.

Roslin, who had been in their rooms at sewing, stood up the moment she saw him begin to get changed.

“What’s going on?” she asked apprehensively, and Robb stopped halfway through lacing up his doublet to place a gentle kiss against her lips. His hand trailed unconsciously to rest against the swell of her belly; he’d found himself somehow unable to keep his hands from her middle since the moment she’d begun to grow thick with his child. He told her of the approaching men, and she looked only more apprehensive. “Shall I go with you to receive them?”

For propriety’s sake, she should, Robb knew, and yet he would feel better if she stayed inside, at least until he had the measure of these unknown men. And it would be easy enough to explain away her absence, in any case; it was natural enough to want to keep a woman who was with child out of the bitter cold.

“I’d feel better if you remained here,” Robb admitted. “We don’t know yet if these men are trustworthy.”

Roslin gave him a small, if slightly worried smile.

“Then bring Grey Wind with you at the least,” she suggested, and the direwolf’s head popped up from where he had been asleep by the fire, as if summoned by the sound of his name. Since he’d returned from Castle Black, Grey Wind had spent more time by Roslin’s side than he had by Robb’s, but Robb scarce needed the protection within the walls of Winterfell surrounded by his loyal bannermen. Even so, Smalljon or Dacey Mormont often seemed to shadow him the moment he stepped outside of his bedroom or his solar.

“I shall,” he promised, and his wife looked a bit relieved at that, beginning to help him lace up his doublet and fasten the rather substantial cloak around his shoulders. She retrieved his crown without a word from him and settled it among the auburn strands of his hair.
When she was finished, Robb gave her another quick kiss before summoning Grey Wind to follow him. Robb didn’t even need words anymore for Grey Wind to understand what he wanted of him, a fact that seemed to unnerve as many men as it impressed. Unsurprisingly, Dacey Mormont appeared at his side when he left his rooms and followed him out of the Great Keep.

When Robb arrived in the courtyard, it was full of activity; if he’d judged the timing well enough, the Skagosi would be nearly at the gate, and it was clear that enough people inside the walls were aware of their impending arrival. The Smalljon was not there, but like as not he’d gone outside the gate to relay Robb’s instructions; the Greatjon was present, however, along with most of his other lords bannermen. His mother was not there, which was well enough, since Robb would have sent her back inside if she’d been waiting. Arya, on the other hand, was standing in a far corner, as if she hoped that she could go unnoticed. Robb made his way to his little sister with a raised eyebrow.

“Go back inside, Arya.”

Arya crossed her arms stubbornly. “But I’ve never met someone from Skagos before!” she protested. “I want to see them.”

Neither Arya’s curiosity nor her stubbornness was in any way surprising, but they certainly were exasperating. “They’re just men, little sister,” he said with all the conviction that he could muster, for he’d never met a man of Skagos either. “And they might be dangerous. It’s not safe for you to be out here.”

Arya looked deeply insulted at that. “I’m not some helpless little girl.”

Robb reached down and ruffled Arya’s hair, which had only recently grown back into some semblance of a uniform length, though it was still as unkempt as ever.

“I know you’re not,” Robb told her sincerely, and it was true enough; she’d survived Lannister assassins and the woods of the riverlands, the Bloody Mummers and the arduous trek back to the north from Harrenhal. She was far from a helpless little girl, but she was still his sister. “And I promise that if these men mean us no harm, you can meet them later. But this could be a tricky situation, and I can’t be worrying about you while trying to deal with unknown clansmen. Please just heed me in this.”

Arya met his eyes with a stony stubbornness for a long beat, but then she sighed and looked away. “All right,” she relented unenthusiastically. “I’ll go back inside. But you’d better keep your promise!”

Robb breathed a sigh of relief as Arya jogged across the yard and disappeared back inside, shaking his head to himself as he went to take his place amongst his waiting lords, Grey Wind prowling behind him. He didn’t have to wait long before Smalljon Umber returned to the courtyard, this time accompanied by three unknown men.

All three of them were of a height with the Smalljon, or near enough as made no matter; where Robb had been used to seeing both the Umber men tower over nearly anyone who stood near them, Smalljon looked suddenly no more than average, giving Robb the impression that he’d walked into a land of giants. Smalljon looked nearly as discomfited by that fact as Robb felt.

“Your Grace,” he addressed politely, “may I present you with representatives of the Isle of Skagos. Gregard of House Stane.” The Smalljon indicated the man standing directly to his right, a man of at least fifty with a shaggy grey beard that covered more of his face than it revealed. “Harrik of House Magnar.” The second man was younger, probably twenty if he was a day, with dark brown hair and flinty grey eyes that were filled with suspicion. “And Thoregg of House Crowl.” The third man was
in his thirties, with hair and beard that were black as pitch and a huge scar bisecting the right side of his face. All three of them wore bulky coats made of skins and furs that made them look more bear than man. Robb stepped forward.

“Welcome to Winterfell, my lords,” he greeted. “May I ask what brings you here?”

The three men exchanged a wordless look, but it was the youngest one, the man from House Magnar, who was the one to speak.

“You send men to our shores,” he said haltingly, and with a thick accent, “to ask for the little prince. What we know is that Winterfell is burned by ironborn. We do not send the little prince into a trap.”

Whatever Robb had been expecting, that had not been it. He had been expecting warlike belligerence or demands, but what Harrik had said sounded more like fealty than savagery. And the words seemed proof that the news they’d gotten had been correct, that Rickon was still alive and with them. Robb felt slightly breathless at the realization.

“This is not a trap,” he assured them, locking gazes with all three of them. Nothing on their faces gave anything away. “The ironborn are gone. House Stark sits in Winterfell again.”

The three huddled close to each other, speaking in a harsh, guttural language that Robb belatedly realized must be the Old Tongue of the First Men. Robb had never heard it spoken before, hadn’t even realized that there were men who still spoke it. There was something utterly surreal about these men standing before him, as if they’d come from an entirely different world and not simply an island just off the coast of Westeros. Robb waited patiently for them to finish their conference, and it was Harrik that spoke once it had concluded.

“You have the little prince’s look,” he admitted grudgingly. “Red hair, kissed by fire. But where is your wolf?”

It struck Robb, then, that they fundamentally believed that he could be trying to deceive them, that he might be some enemy trying to obtain Rickon for his own ends. Rickon must have spoken to them about the Stark family’s wolves, and they must have seen Shaggydog for themselves. Robb wondered suddenly if he’d misjudged these Skagosi men completely, for any man would be lucky to have such staunch defenders as allies. These did not seem men who could be cannibals, still offering blood sacrifices to the gods. They were too honorable to be so savage, unless they were somehow both. Robb felt slightly dizzy at the thought.

“Grey Wind, come,” Robb called, more for the benefit of those around him than out of any actual necessity to say the words out loud. Grey Wind slunk out from behind him and stopped in front of the three Skagosi men. The surprise on their faces was plain, as if they hadn’t believed he truly was who he said he was until Grey Wind had appeared.

“Grey wolf, like little prince says,” murmured the old man from House Stane with a tone of complete wonderment, his words even harder to understand than Harrik’s had been. And then there was the ring of steel sliding out of a scabbard, and Robb’s hand went to the hilt of his sword immediately, several of the men around him taking a step forward before they aborted the movement as they watched Harrik Magnar lay his sword at Robb’s feet. The other two men followed suit.

“We give our apology,” said Harrik haltingly. “We do not trust unknown men at our shores. Any man may sew a direwolf banner and say he is a Stark man.”

That gave Robb pause. “Where are the men I sent?” he demanded, and Harrik looked slightly sheepish.
“They stay on Skagos,” he admitted. “If you are a liar, we kill them. But you are not a liar, so they live, and come back here with the little prince as you wished.” He said the words so casually that it could be nothing but unnerving. Robb tried not to let that show on his face.

“You may rise,” he said finally, and all three men rose to their feet and replaced their swords to their scabbards. “And we may get inside, out of this cold.”

The man with the scarred face laughed a big, booming laugh. “This is not cold. This is balmy like summer day on Skagos.”

The other two nodded their agreement. “You have a weirwood, yes?” Harrik prodded. “Let us go there. A man must tell the truth before the gods.”

Robb looked over at the Smalljon, who simply shrugged and nodded. Robb led the three men toward the godswood, trailed by half a dozen of his usual guards and Grey Wind besides. As soon as they reached the heart tree, all three of the Skagosi knelt before it and bowed their heads in silent prayer; Robb took a breath and knelt beside them, praying that this was not too good to be true, that he could truly go to his mother and tell her they would have Rickon back. After a few minutes in silence, Robb heard the Skagosi men begin to move; he shifted as well to seat himself on a rock beside the pool.

“Is Rickon all right?” was the first thing that Robb asked once they were settled, and Thoregg Crowl was nodding vigorously, a smile appearing on his face that somehow made him look even more frightening.

“He is good boy,” the black-haired man replied. “Very….” he trailed off, then looked at Harrik in question, murmuring something in the Old Tongue.

“Very energetic,” Harrik supplied after a moment, clearly the most versed of the three of them in the Common Tongue. “His Shaggydog is not so big as your Grey Wind, and he is not so well-behaved, either.”

That had been the truth of things even before Robb had left for war; Shaggydog had been the wildest of all their wolves, and none had been quite so well-behaved as Lady had been. Robb felt a pang of loss at the memory that she no longer lived, but the affirmation that Rickon and Shaggydog did gave him heart.

“We sent a raven,” Robb mentioned. “Why didn’t you respond?”

Harrik hesitated. “My father is Lord of Kingshouse and…how would you say? The great lord on Skagos, and he makes final decisions. We do not keep ravens, and my father does not read Common. He is very suspicious of strange letters from mainlanders. He calls a council of lords, takes some time for everyone to travel to Kingshouse. Not many horses on Skagos; we have no need of them, and they eat away too much of the unicorns’ grazing lands.”

Despite everything, that gave Robb pause. “There are truly unicorns on Skagos?” he asked breathlessly. “I thought that was a myth.”

Harrik shook his head. “Real unicorns,” he assured Robb, “but not like those on southron banners. Big, hairy things, and ugly. But they are rare, and magical, and we try to protect them.”

Robb wanted to ask everything about Skagos, wanted to know what was magical about unicorns, wanted to know if the Skagosi truly ate human flesh and sacrificed to the weirwoods, wanted to know if they truly still practiced the custom of the First Night and if they still could read the runes of
the Old Tongue. But he needed to know about Rickon and his men even more.

“What happened after your father called the council?” he prodded instead of slaking his curiosity.

“Many men argue. Some say we should not go to mainland. Some say we are bannermen of House Stark and we must go. We argue for days, and before we come to any decision, men arrive with Stark banners and ask if we know about little boy of five with woman and wolf, so we imprison them. We who speak Common the best come to Winterfell to find the truth of it, if ironmen are playing some trick to get to the little prince. We mean no disrespect, but many are fond of him. As Thoregg says, he is a good boy. We do not want him killed.”

“Nor do I,” Robb agreed hastily. “But my men? You haven’t mistreated them, have you?”

All three men looked slightly offended by the question. It was the grey-bearded man, Gregard, who answered.

“They have food, shelter, and furs to keep warm,” he assured Robb haughtily, and Robb decided it was best not to pursue that any further at the moment, lest he draw the conversation to an early conclusion by offending these strange men. It was then that something else struck him.

“Since you don’t use ravens…”

Harrik seemed to understand what he was trying to say without him even saying it. “Yes, we must ride back to Skagos and speak with my father in person,” he affirmed. “Even if we write a letter in the Old Tongue, my father does not trust it. He only trusts when a man looks him in the eye. You can send more of your own men with us if you like, but my father sends the little prince because of no piece of paper.”

Robb wasn’t certain whether to celebrate or despair at the news, for he had confirmation that Rickon was safe, but it would be another several moons before he would be back in Winterfell, and like as not, Robb would have already marched for Casterly Rock by then. As it was, he’d already sent a raven ahead to White Harbor to ask Wyman Manderly to ready ships and men to sail them, for it would be a long and perilous journey around the whole south of Westeros, and they’d have to avoid the southron fleets the whole way. He’d have asked Seagard for their ships instead, but he knew that there was no way that they would be able to make it out of Ironman’s Bay without an attack by the Greyjoys.

“I don’t suppose any of your men will remain to march south with my force,” he supplied helplessly after a moment, and Gregard snorted out a laugh.

“We go no further south than this,” he said with conviction, and it was no less than Robb had expected from them, though having kept Rickon safe was more than enough.

It was then that Robb heard a rustle of leaves, a susurration of sound that almost had the feel of a whispered word. Robb turned his head to look at the heart tree, and his eyes fell upon the carved face upon it. He’d looked upon the face so many times before, but something about it just then gave him a strange feeling. Had that always been the expression that had been carved there?

“Eassssstwatch,” came a whisper, and Robb turned again, as if expecting to see someone over his other shoulder, but the only people there were the expected ones, the three Skagosi men, his guards, and Grey Wind, who was eyeing the carved face upon the weirwood with an almost human look on his face. Robb turned to his three companions.

“Did you hear that?”
All three of them nodded vigorously. “It is a message from the gods,” Harrik said with perfect conviction, not seeming at all discomfited by the strange, disembodied voice. “If it is the gods’ will, we send men to Eastwatch.”

Robb stood up and made his way around the back of the weirwood tree, looking for some other figure, someone who had been responsible for the whispered word, but there was no one. He slipped into Grey Wind for just a moment, and he scented himself, the strange earthy, briny smell of the three Skagosi men, the familiar smells of his own guards, but nothing out of the ordinary. And there was no fear in Grey Wind, no apprehension.

Robb slid back into his own body and rubbed his arms, suddenly feeling the cold where he hadn’t felt it before. The old gods, Robb thought to himself with a shiver, and yet why had it sounded almost like Bran’s voice?

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Catelyn XII, in which Petyr Baelish realizes pretty darn quickly that Cat has no intention of marrying him and Catelyn realizes that killing Lysa and hiding Sansa are barely the tip of the iceberg of Littlefinger’s crimes.
Catelyn XII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Catelyn shifted in place, pulling her cloak more tightly around her body as her eyes darted toward the gate for the tenth time in as many minutes, unable to keep still for her eagerness. The snow was not falling that afternoon, but it was still bitter cold outside, and even bundled up as she was, Catelyn felt the chill. Robb had tried to convince her to remain inside, but Catelyn was having none of that; she would be in the courtyard to receive her daughter. She’d been half-tempted to try to convince Robb that she should be allowed in the party that had ridden out the gates an hour before to meet Yohn Royce’s party, but in the end had decided it better to save that capital for later, for she knew that Robb would not have agreed.

Neither Arya nor Robb seemed bothered by the cold at all, even though only Arya was nearly as bundled in furs as Catelyn herself was, and that had been achieved only under duress, for Catelyn had had to threaten her daughter with remaining inside if she didn’t agree. As it was, she’d only gotten Arya to agree to don the extra furs by giving in and allowing her to wear breeches instead of a dress, which was becoming a near-daily argument between them. Wolf blood, Ned had once called it, and he always spoke those words with a sadness that Catelyn was only now beginning to understand. It meant willfulness and rashness; it was what had caused the end of both Brandon and Lyanna, a fact that seemed only more poignant in the face of the betrothal she’d arranged for Arya. That seemed a lifetime ago, back when they’d still thought there was a chance of saving Ned, but if Catelyn could have nothing else, she would at least have her daughters back in Winterfell.

Edrick, at least, had remained inside with his nurse, not yet cognizant enough of the goings-on around him to feel upset that he was missing the excitement. Robb had been able to convince Roslin to remain inside as well, and at least this time Roslin seemed to have been content to allow Robb his protectiveness.

How long had they been waiting there in the courtyard for Sansa to arrive? It had felt like hours but had doubtless been mere minutes, and yet time was becoming a more and more nebulous thing with each passing day. They saw less and less of the sun, which hid behind thick blankets of clouds; it was no longer possible to tell the time of day from the position of the sun, not that it would have helped Catelyn then even if it had been visible in the sky.

I cannot count mere minutes on the movements of the sun, she reminded herself as patiently as she could, and even if I could, it would bring Sansa here no more quickly.

The impatience she felt for her daughter’s arrival rivaled the reluctance she’d felt in waiting for Petyr to arrive just a few days before. She’d wrestled with herself over what she wanted to say to him when he arrived, for part of her had still lingered on those feelings of childhood camaraderie, on her longstanding belief that his love for her had been something pure and innocent. Part of her had wanted to give Petyr the chance to explain himself, to tell her why he’d kept Sansa from her, to tell her that Lysa’s death had somehow been an accident that Sansa had misinterpreted as murder. But he’d lied to her before about the dagger; Catelyn didn’t doubt anymore that Petyr would have a clever explanation for everything, but she’d lost all faith in Petyr’s clever explanations.

Petyr Baelish wasn’t the same boy who’d chased Catelyn and her sister between the trees of the godswood, the three of them laughing in glee. Or mayhaps he was, for that was the boy who had kissed Catelyn the night her betrothal to Brandon Stark had been announced, the boy who had challenged Brandon to a duel he’d never had a chance of winning. What she saw now when she
looked back on those times was not innocent love but obsession and possessiveness, and any positive feelings she’d once held toward him were slowly being swallowed by all the new realizations.

In the end, her son had decided it for her when he’d declared his intentions to seize Petyr and his men as soon as they arrived to Winterfell, and it had been clear enough that it had been a demand from her king and not a request from her son, though she hadn’t been particularly keen to defy him. She wondered what Ned would think of their actions if he could be there to remark upon them, for if they had not precisely promised Petyr safe conduct, they had at least heavily implied it, and to seize him despite that was far from honorable. Would Ned have faulted them for choosing this course? But Ned was gone, and they were alive, and Catelyn had her family to protect.

*Family, Duty, Honor.* Those were the words of House Tully; honor came third, and family came first.

Petyr had come with less than fifty men, easy enough for them to subdue. Catelyn still remembered the look of betrayal on his face when Smalljon Umber had seized him and thrown him in irons.

“The men of the Vale will not stand for this!” he’d declared in outrage as the Smalljon had begun to drag him away. When that hadn’t produced the reaction that he’d expected, he’d turned his eyes onto Catelyn. “I have your daughter!”

That had been the moment that any warmth she might have felt for Petyr once, any warmth he might hope for from Catelyn again, had faded away. A true friend would have told her long ago of her daughter’s location or at the least brought Sansa along if he had been wary of sending sensitive news by raven. Petyr had done neither; he had kept Sansa behind and attempted to use her as a game piece when it was clear the game was not going his way.

“Yohn Royce has my daughter,” she’d told him then with a hiss, and the moment of panic that had passed through his grey-green eyes had given Catelyn a dark sort of satisfaction. “And you would be surprised what the men of the Vale will stand for.”

The memory of Petyr’s words remained sharp and bitter in Catelyn’s mind, and she tried her best to shake it away, tried her best to focus only on her daughter’s impending arrival. It was only when Catelyn had begun to wonder whether she might have to give in to her son’s wishes after all and go back inside to shield herself from the cold that the group finally began to ride through the gates. Hallis Mollen rode in first, next to Wendel Manderly and the others that Robb had sent ahead to meet the party on the road. Catelyn recognized the man who rode in after, if only vaguely; he was tall and broad-shouldered, and he still had a look of strength about him despite the fact that his hair and beard had all gone to grey, leaving no hint of what color they might have been before. Catelyn’s eyes darted from one face to the next, frantically searching for Sansa, and it was when she’d almost believed that this was all a ruse, that Sansa wasn’t even in their party, that she finally spotted her daughter. Her distinctive auburn hair was hidden beneath the hood of a heavy fur cloak, perhaps the only reason that Catelyn hadn’t spotted her immediately.

Yohn Royce had barely helped her down from her horse before Catelyn came to her daughter and threw her arms around Sansa with a desperate feeling of relief. Sansa clung to her just as tightly.

“Mother,” she breathed against Catelyn’s breast, and there was movement around them, Robb shaking Yohn Royce’s hand in thanks and other Vale lords riding through the gates, but Catelyn had nothing in her to pay attention to anyone but the girl in her arms. She was torn between the desire to continue to embrace Sansa and to look upon the girl’s face; eventually, the latter desire won out and she pulled back, pressing her hand against Sansa’s cheek and looking upon her daughter’s.

*Two years,* Catelyn thought with a feeling of numb disbelief, *two years of her life I’ve missed.* And
in some ways, Sansa looked the same as she had when she’d left, though she undoubtedly stood a few inches taller. But the change was most apparent in her eyes; even behind the sheen of gathering tears, Catelyn could see they were missing any hint of the innocent optimism they’d held when she’d left Winterfell for King’s Landing.

Arya stepped up next to them, shifting uncomfortably in place and biting her lip nervously. Sansa turned her eyes to her sister with a fond look, and that seemed to shatter whatever had been holding Arya back.

“Oh Sansa, I’m so sorry we quarreled!” Arya exclaimed finally, tears leaking from her eyes, and Sansa shook her head, her own tears beginning to fall.

“Do you think any of that even matters anymore?” she returned before throwing her arms around her sister, both girls clinging to each other and crying. Catelyn felt her own tears brimming in her eyes; her two daughters had ever been at odds in everything. Catelyn couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen them embrace each other with such warmth, if she ever had. When Arya finally stepped back, sniffling and wiping furiously at her face, Catelyn stepped forward and placed her hand on Sansa’s arm.

“Let us get out of this cold,” Catelyn suggested, and Arya lit up slightly at that.

“You haven’t met our baby brother yet!” she exclaimed after a moment, as though the realization had just hit her. A wealth of emotions passed over Sansa’s face at the words, a number of which Catelyn had a difficult time identifying, and most that she’d never before seen color her eldest daughter’s face.

“And I shall look forward to it,” Sansa assured her sister uncertainly after a moment. “But first I must needs speak with Robb and Mother.”

Catelyn felt something dark well up in her chest; she’d wanted only to focus on this moment with her daughter, not to be bothered by the memory of Petyr Baelish. She’d wanted at least a moment in which she could pretend that they were simply a family, not a dynasty embroiled in a war.

“We needn’t do that now,” she tried hopefully.

Sansa shook her head. “I want to,” she insisted with a look that was shy and brave both. “I need to.”

That, at least, was a sentiment that Catelyn could understand, for she too wanted this business with Petyr Baelish finished as soon as possible. And yet the look of resigned determination in Sansa’s eyes almost made Catelyn come undone. She is three and ten, she reminded herself with a yawning feeling of powerlessness. She should not know this kind of darkness.

“I’m not a baby, you know,” Arya interjected suddenly. “You can talk to me too.”

The smile that spread across Sansa’s face was almost enough to appease Catelyn’s worries, and she reached down and grasped her sister’s hands in hers.

“And I will, Arya; I promise,” Sansa said sincerely. “I am looking forward to talking with you very much. But later.”

“Fine,” Arya said before stomping away in a huff in the direction of the forge. Sansa watched her sister walk away with a look that was almost fond.

“It’s almost as if nothing has changed,” she remarked after a moment with a sense of melancholy that belied her years, and when she turned to look at Catelyn, there was something pleading in her eyes.
Catelyn wrapped her arm around her daughter’s shoulder. “Let’s get inside, sweetling. You can tell me when you’re ready.”

Catelyn saw the ruin of their home anew through her daughter’s eyes; though they’d made much progress in restoring Winterfell, it was still nowhere near what it had once been. The ruined stones of the First Keep had been cleared away, and some of what could be salvaged had been repurposed to repair the Great Hall and the Great Keep, but the half-ruined tower still stood testament to what had happened there. Most of the windows they passed were boarded over with planks of wood, and many of the walls still bore scorch marks, for rebuilding roofs and pipes and furniture had taken precedence over scrubbing the marks from the stone. And Sansa would perhaps be the only other member of her family who would truly feel the loss of the sept, for she had been the only one of the children who had visited with Catelyn with any regularity or enthusiasm. The smell of smoke still seemed to linger in some places, and yet Catelyn had gotten so used to it that she didn’t even think about it until she saw Sansa screw up her face in distaste.

Robb led them to his solar, and Sansa gave the door a sad look when they reached it. The door was a newly-constructed one, rough-hewn even compared to the usual northern lack of ostentatiousness, for most of the reconstruction had prioritized utility over beauty. There were no more carved direwolves except those that had survived the fires; everything was plain and utilitarian, lacking even the most cursory attempt toward embellishment. Sansa looked warily around the room.

“They told me, but I didn’t think…” she trailed off with a slightly choked sound. “All of Father’s things.”

The loss of most of the things in Ned’s solar hadn’t struck Catelyn near so viscerally, though seeing Robb sit where his father had once sat still left a strange feeling in her chest. What had struck Catelyn most had been the loss of everything in her own chambers, for that had been the space she had associated most strongly with him. She could remember him leaving the bed time and time again after they’d made love to open the window and feel the air, naked as his nameday and without an ounce of shyness, for he’d never been well-accustomed to the heat. She could remember waking in his arms, Ned having thrown off all the covers so they were bundled entirely atop her. All the original furniture had been destroyed, and one of the walls had had to be rebuilt; it scarce resembled her old chambers any more at all.

Robb wrapped his arms around Sansa without preamble, hugging his sister fiercely. “I know,” he confessed, his voice sounding as thick as hers had. “But at least you’re home now.” Robb pulled back and looked down at Sansa with desperation. “You cannot know how sorry I am that we could not be the ones to get you out of King’s Landing. I do not deserve your forgiveness for that, but I am asking for it anyway, sister.”

Sansa shook her head, wiping tears away. “I know you would have if you could have,” she whispered, and Robb pressed a kiss against her forehead before releasing her. Catelyn’s own chest felt thick with emotion at the sight, something she’d once been so uncertain she’d ever see again. In a few moons’ time, Rickon would be home as well, and Bran…she could only pray for some news of Bran.

It was only then that Sansa finally pulled down her hood and removed her cloak, and her auburn locks were a dull color except at the roots, where it was the same bright shade as Catelyn’s own. It was only then that she remembered what had happened; Sansa had had her hair dyed, for the bright Tully locks would have drawn too much attention to her, and the dye was only beginning to wash out. It was such a trivial thing, but something about that made Catelyn unbearably angry.
“Your husband is here as well,” Robb ventured carefully once they had all sat down, looking supremely uncomfortable. “He insists your marriage was unconsummated.”

Sansa flushed deeply. “It’s true,” she acknowledged, and a knot of tension that had been in Catelyn’s chest seemed to finally loosen.

“Good. If you both testify that the union was unconsummated, and since it was only entered into under duress, we should have no problem having it annulled, once this is all over.”

If we win, Catelyn added, though she did not say the words aloud. She had no doubt that if they lost this war, the Lannisters would have no reservations about using Sansa in any way they wished. Perhaps not with Tyrion, but Tywin Lannister doubtless had other schemes in mind.

“You haven’t hurt him, have you?”

The genuine concern Catelyn heard in her daughter’s voice surprised her enough that she could think of no response; Robb didn’t seem to have the same reservations.

“You aren’t telling me you want to remain Lannister’s wife?” Robb asked incredulously.

If Catelyn had had any doubts, they were dispelled by the horrified look on Sansa’s face at the suggestion.

“No,” she said demurely, face flushing bright red again. “But he’s not like the rest of them. He’s one of the only ones who ever stood up for me against—”

Sansa stopped mid-sentence, as if it pained her too much to speak of it. Catelyn felt a rush of rage in her chest, glad once again that Joffrey was dead, however it had happened. A moment of doubt seemed to flutter behind her son’s eyes.

“Sansa, it wasn’t you who…?”

Sansa, to her credit, didn’t look at all offended by the suggestion that she had murdered Joffrey, though she shook her head.

“It was him,” she said in a soft whisper, looking around nervously, as though she expected to be overheard. “Petyr and the Tyrells; they did it together. It was Lady Olenna; I can’t believe that Margaery would have had anything to do with it, even if Joffrey was…”

Sansa trailed off again, looking at Catelyn with desperate eyes, as if begging not to be made to say anymore. Catelyn reached for her daughter’s hand and was heartened when Sansa took it gratefully, as if Catelyn had tossed her a lifeline. It was a queer feeling, to feel both grateful toward Petyr Baelish and full of rage toward him. He had dispatched the boy who had had her husband killed, who had doubtless hurt her daughter, and yet he’d lied to her about Bran’s would-be assassin. He’d rescued Sansa from King’s Landing and yet he’d kept her to himself, not telling Catelyn he had her even when she’d written to him personally.

“There’s something else,” Sansa admitted finally. “Aunt Lysa said something strange, something he didn’t want her to say in front of me, right before he…” Sansa paused, swallowing thickly. “She said…she said he told her to put tears in Jon Arryn’s wine, and that he told her to write to you to say that the Lannisters killed him. They…they poisoned him too, didn’t they? Just like Petyr got Olenna Tyrell to poison Joffrey?”

It took a moment for the full implications of Sansa’s words to hit her, and when they did, the rage that Catelyn felt rising up in her chest was unlike anything she’d ever felt before. Everything that had
happened had begun with the death of Jon Arryn; the letter from Lysa had been the last and most persuasive reason that Catelyn had urged Ned to accept King Robert’s offer that he be his Hand. She’d trusted Lysa just like she’d trusted Petyr, and they’d both been playing her all along.

*Family, Duty, Honor.* Those were the Tully words, and Lysa had abandoned all three so easily. And yet Lysa had always been a weaker woman than Catelyn was, and she’d grown up with Petyr the same way Catelyn had. How easy would it have been for him to manipulate her? And she’d paid for it, without a doubt; she was as dead as Ned was.

Robb seemed to have realized the implications of his sister’s words, too; it was plain enough from the way that his eyes narrowed with the same cold rage that Catelyn herself felt.

“Petyr Baelish will die for this,” Robb vowed, his jaw set with determination.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XVI, in which the day of Petyr Baelish's trial dawns...unexpectedly.
The day of Petyr Baelish’s trial dawned as dark and dreary as all the previous days had, and Robb rose from his bed before Roslin had even stirred. He could scarce make out more than her silhouette through the darkness, though under the mound of furs piled on their bed, there wasn’t much to see in any case. He dressed in darkness, in clothes he’d set out the night before knowing he’d rise early. They were some of his finest garments, for all the northern lords who were in Winterfell would be in attendance along with the group of Vale lords who had traveled with Yohn Royce, a handful of other lords and one lady by the name of Anya Waynwood, a formidable woman who gave no doubt that she belonged in the company of these powerful men.

Once Robb was dressed and left his chambers, he reached out his mind for Grey Wind and summoned his wolf to him. It was something he found himself doing with increasing regularity, and it somehow became easier each time. He scarce needed the protection, but Grey Wind provided an extra air of intimidation that Robb knew would serve him very well that day.

He visited Sansa’s chambers first, although it was still very early. She was awake and dressed the same as he was, just as Robb had expected, and she didn’t look as though she’d slept any better than he had. She, too, wore the grey and white of their house, and she looked regal if a bit nervous. It was difficult to remind himself that his sister was still only three and ten, especially after all the tales she’d told him over the preceding days. She would be the main witness to testify at Baelish’s trial, and as Robb looked at his little sister’s face, he found himself wishing that he hadn’t insisted on the farce of a trial. Sansa didn’t deserve to go through this after everything, and what Robb hated most was the fact that he was the one forcing her to endure it. Robb had wanted to kill Petyr Baelish the moment he’d realized the implications of Sansa’s words, had wanted to rip the man apart with his bare hands. Robb found himself again glad that he was of the north, that men of the north dealt out justice with their own hands, for nothing would bring him more satisfaction than slicing through Petyr Baelish’s neck with his own sword.

After checking with Sansa, Robb reluctantly went down to the Great Hall to get some food, although he barely tasted anything he put into his mouth. Roslin appeared in the seat next to him halfway through his meal.

“You should have woken me,” she scolded as she sat, although there was no true malice in her tone. Roslin was many things, but she certainly didn’t have a malicious bone in her body, which wasn’t something that could be said about a good deal of her kinsmen. And yet despite her tone, just the sight of his wife brought a smile to Robb’s face, and for just a moment he forgot about the impending events of the day.

“You need your rest,” Robb pointed out to her and jerked his head in the direction of her belly, which had swelled enough now to give precisely no doubt of her condition. Knowing it was his child that was growing inside her gave him a feeling of satisfaction few other things ever had, but it certainly didn’t take away any of his worry for her. His mother and the maester’s worries about the slightness of her frame and the narrowness of her hips lingered heavy in the back of his mind, and the fact that Roslin herself seemed not at all worried about her fitness to birth the babe only made him worry twice as much, a measure for himself and another for her.

“I feel fine,” Roslin assured him as one of the serving women brought her some of the honeyed porridge that she’d most taken to since she’d gotten with child. “You need rest more than I do, I’d
It wasn’t a wager that Robb would be willing to take. He wondered if he looked as much like death as he felt. Robb felt as though he hadn’t slept well since the war had begun, and it was only because his mind and body needed to remain sharp that he continued to try for sleep despite the myriad of pressing concerns that kept him up at night.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Robb admitted sheepishly after a moment, and the look that Roslin gave him in response was something as close to patronizing as Robb had ever seen from her, as if she meant to say, *you haven’t been able to sleep since the moment I met you.* And the accusation certainly wouldn’t have been far off from the truth had she given it voice.

“I know,” she admitted after a moment, her words kinder than her eyes had been. Robb immediately felt guilty.

“I didn’t keep you up, did I?”

Roslin shook her head, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Not you,” she assured him, her hand moving almost unconsciously to rest upon her belly. “This little one wouldn’t leave me alone.”

Robb felt a smile coming to his lips despite himself, despite the looming unpleasantness of the day. It had seemed almost magical, the first time Roslin had placed his hand upon her belly and he’d felt his child move within her. But that memory brought upon its heels a feeling of despair, for Robb also remembered riding away from his mother the same way he was due to ride away from his wife within a matter of days. He reached over and placed his hand upon her belly with a sigh.

“I wish that I wasn’t going to miss all of this,” he confessed quietly, and Roslin gave him a kind look, her smaller hand coming to rest atop his own.

“As do I,” she admitted, her thumb brushing comfortingly along the back of his hand. “But your father was away for your birth, was he not? And I can’t imagine that you were much bothered.”

Robb could see immediately what she was trying to do, for his mother had done much the same to try to reassure him when he’d ridden away from Riverrun more than a year before. He sincerely hoped he’d never have to ride away like this again. Robb turned his hand palm up and laced his fingers through hers. Roslin looked at him for a long moment, and whatever she saw on his face made her expression soften.

“We shall make another when you return,” she told him confidently, “and you can be there every moment if that’s what you want.”

Robb looked at her then and couldn’t help but remember the woman he’d met all those moons prior, the woman who had been so timid and uncertain. He remembered Roslin pacing the length of their tent crying when her moonblood had come, convinced that he’d die before he ever got her with child. That girl was so far removed from the woman who sat before him now that Robb could scarce believe that they were both the same person. If anything, *he* had now become the one brimming with worry and uncertainty while Roslin seemed filled with a perfect sense of conviction that he’d return unharmed and everything would be all right. Robb couldn’t help but grin.

“You’re so certain we’ll have a second child?” he pressed teasingly. Roslin blushed, though she did not shy away.

“I believe our chances are quite good,” she said with a demure smile that did not at all match the
topic of conversation, and it was all Robb could do to keep from snorting. He may not have gotten
his wife with child on their wedding night, but that they’d managed it in less than half a year was
certainly a promising indication. And Robb didn’t see himself wanting Roslin any less, certainly not
any time soon.

Before Robb could tease his wife any further, the sound of a man clearing his throat came from
behind him. Robb turned his head, and Roslin’s hand slipped away from his. The Smalljon stood off
to Robb’s side, a somewhat guilty look upon his face. “My apologies, Your Grace, but there is a
matter that requires your urgent attention.”

Robb felt a rumble of annoyance in his chest at that, at the one idyllic moment he’d managed to find
being snatched away from him so quickly. Grey Wind growled next to him in response, and the
Smalljon flinched a little at the sound. He’d seen what Grey Wind could do, Robb realized, and he
wasn’t used to that anger being directed at him. Robb brushed his hand over the wolf’s head in an
attempt to calm him, feeling immediately guilty for his anger. Smalljon Umber wasn’t the sort to
bother him with something trivial, and with a moment of reflection, Robb knew it to be so. He sighed
and pushed away the remainder of his food, Roslin shooting a worried look in his direction as he
stood. She wisely remained silent.

Robb was surprised when the Smalljon led him outside of the Great Hall; the snow was falling
outside in light flurries, though it wasn’t yet cold enough to preclude being outside. The Smalljon’s
expression was grim.

“Petyr Baelish is dead,” he said finally, stone-faced and emotionless. For a few seconds, Robb
thought he must have heard the words wrong.

“What?” he demanded in disbelief, feeling as though he’d somehow left his mind inside with Roslin,
that it hadn’t quite caught up with his body.

“The guards found him in his cell not twenty minutes ago. Hanged.”

Robb stared at him, feeling a strange sense of disbelief. “He killed himself?” he asked when he was
at last able to find the words. Something about it didn’t seem right.

“It appears that way,” the Smalljon conceded with a shrug of his shoulders. “Mayhaps he wasn’t
willing to face the trial.”

Would he do that? Robb couldn’t help but wonder. Robb had never met the man until he’d arrived at
Winterfell and Robb had had him seized. He’d scarce exchanged more than five words with the man
since he’d arrived, afraid that if he even tried to question Baelish, he’d kill the man himself before a
trial could ever commence. He knew Lord Baelish entirely from the stories of his sisters and his
mother.

But was Petyr Baelish that sort of coward? It seemed an impossible question to answer. The man
that Sansa’s stories had portrayed had been a man with a slippery tongue, one who would believe he
might be able to talk himself out of any sort of trouble. But even such a man as Littlefinger might
have realized that his situation was doomed.

“Who was guarding his cell?”

The Smalljon rattled off a few names, of the night guards and the morning ones, and somehow,
Robb barely knew any of them. It wasn’t uncommon, not with a force the size of the one that still
remained encamped in Winterfell and its environs, but it rankled him when he’d known nearly every
person who had come in and out of Winterfell when he’d been a boy to feel so blinded by the size of
his force now. Robb rubbed the bridge of his nose, already able to imagine what a headache this would be.

“Are they trustworthy?” he asked helplessly after a moment. “Did they see or hear anything?”

The Smalljon gave Robb a look, one as close to defiant from the man as Robb had seen since he’d been crowned, as if to ask whether Robb thought he would be so stupid as to station untrustworthy men outside the cell of one of their most important prisoners. He didn’t even grace the first question with a response.

“They all reported that they didn’t see or hear anything out of the ordinary,” the Smalljon reported dispassionately. “There’s a window, but it’s too small for anyone larger than a child to fit through. That’s what you were thinking, weren’t you?”

Robb shook his head helplessly, glad that the Smalljon had had the sense to save this announcement until they were away from the rest of Robb’s men. There were still a spattering of men moving back and forth across the courtyard, but no one was paying them any particular mind.

“I don’t know what I’m thinking,” Robb admitted with a sigh. “Just…show me to his cell.”

Petyr Baelish’s cell wasn’t precisely a cell but rather a room in the lowest floor of the First Keep, one of the only ones that had survived the destruction. The door was open and several of the guards stood in the doorway, all uttering excuses as soon as Robb appeared before them. Robb held up a hand to silence them and went inside.

The room was sparse, as they’d intended, furnished only with a small bed, a table, and a single chair. The chair lay toppled beneath Baelish’s feet whilst the man himself was pressed against the wall, a torn bed sheet knotted around his neck. His face was a ghastly shade of purple, and the odor in the room seemed to indicate that he had evacuated his bowels when he’d died. Robb grimaced despite himself, stepping into the room to look more closely.

It took him a long minute to reason out exactly how the man had done it. One of the boards had been pried away from the outside edge of the window and the bed sheet knotted around it. When he’d kicked the chair away, the board had remained too large to make it through the window, had been enough to support the man’s weight. A larger man wouldn’t have been able to manage it, Robb thought to himself. Even a man Robb’s height would have had a difficult time accomplishing the task; an Umber-sized man would have snapped the board entirely.

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, his mother was standing behind him, and Robb felt a momentary flash of panic. He made his way toward her.

“Mother, you shouldn’t see this,” he started to say, but she shook her head, staring at her childhood friend with a sense of detached interest. Robb watched as she tilted her head to the side, as if that would help her to see the scene more clearly. Robb looked at her, then back at Littlefinger’s discolored face.

“Good riddance,” she intoned finally, coldly, and something about her tone sent a chill down Robb’s spine, the kind he hadn’t felt even out in the falling snow. Robb stepped in front of his mother, though he truly wasn’t large enough to block her view.

“We don’t know yet what happened here, Mother,” he found himself saying suddenly, anything to break the odd tension in the room. “It mightn’t be what it looks like. Mayhaps it was—”

Catelyn’s blue eyes were cold and merciless when they met his. “What does it matter?” she asked
dispassionately. “He’s dead.” She paused, pursing her lips as she glanced at the man’s body again. “This is better than he deserved.”

But worse than a beheading, which would be quick and nearly painless, Robb couldn’t help but think, and mayhaps that is precisely what someone wanted.

Robb didn’t know Petyr Baelish, didn’t know if the man would be like to take his own life, but something about it all seemed odd to him, like a weirwood with green leaves and black bark. In the dark, it might look normal, but when exposed to the light of day, it would be clear enough that something was wrong about it. And something felt wrong about this, tasted wrong against his tongue. The rumors about Petyr Baelish had run rampant in the castle, and the reasons he’d been held prisoner hadn’t been anything of a secret. He’d killed Jon Arryn and he’d brought Ned Stark south, lured Robb’s father to his death, he’d heard some say. A dozen men within the walls of Winterfell had like as not loved his father well enough to want to exact vengeance for themselves, would have seen a simple beheading as too easy. They might have even thought Littlefinger would have a chance of talking his way out of his execution. Eddard Stark wouldn’t have stood for it, wouldn’t have condoned it or accepted it, for all that it had been done in his name.

Mayhaps it is nothing more than what it seems, Robb thought to himself hopefully, desperately. He could not begin a hunt through Winterfell for possible perpetrators, for there simply wasn’t time before they had to set out south, and the last thing he needed to do was agitate the men against him right before he was about to force them to march further from their homes yet again. And yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that his father would have done, would have found a way to bring the guilty parties to justice, for murder for noble reasons was still murder. The guards would have been in on it, Robb knew, and if he started with them he could find out everyone who had been a party to this. His father would have done it, Robb knew, wouldn’t have compromised honor and justice just because it would be more convenient for his war.

Your father compromised honor and justice every day he had Jon Snow inside these walls, said a traitorous voice inside Robb’s head, one that sounded uncomfortably like Prince Joffrey’s. Robb remembered Joffrey picking a fight with him just outside in the yard. How had that been only two years prior? It seemed impossible, and yet somehow it was true.

If only Joffrey had known that Jon was the prince, and he was the bastard, Robb thought uncharitably, though the thought didn’t bring him the satisfaction he’d hoped it would. Joffrey was dead, and one of his murderers was right in front of Robb. It would be Littlefinger’s just comeuppance if he was killed and his murderers walked free, unimpuned. What had his mother said? Good riddance.

Making a decision, Robb turned back to the Smalljon. “Cut him down,” he ordered evenly. “Have his body prepared to be sent back to his home.”

“His family is dead,” Catelyn remarked after a moment, flatly. Robb shrugged.

“Then whoever takes over his property can figure out what to do with him. I will not have him within the walls of Winterfell for any longer than necessary.”

Robb saw his mother nod in approval. “I am ready to be quit of Petyr Baelish,” she admitted, and then she turned and left without another word.

Robb turned back to Littlefinger’s corpse, watching as they cut him down and laid his body upon the ground, watching until they had carried him away. It felt hollow, somehow, strange and unsettling that this man who had wreaked so much havoc upon their lives was a man he knew almost nothing about save for stories. Robb did not feel triumphant at his death the way he’d expected to, felt a hazy
sense that he was watching this all through someone else’s eyes.

Grey Wind appeared beside Robb then, poking his cold, wet nose against Robb’s hand. Robb scratched him absently behind the ears.

You know what happened, don’t you? Robb couldn’t help but wonder as he looked into Grey Wind’s yellow eyes. Grey Wind always seemed to know when there was danger afoot, but mayhaps if there was no danger to Robb or his family, his wolf cared not at all. Grey Wind licked his hand.

Suicide or murder, it makes no matter, Robb told himself firmly as he looked upon the scene, the toppled chair and torn bed sheets. Petyr Baelish is dead, and Tywin Lannister is my worry now.

Robb turned away and Grey Wind followed until they were both outside again. Tiny snowflakes danced in the air around them as Robb turned and looked up at the First Keep one more time. Still half-ruined, it was far from a distinguished place for a man to die. Nothing about Littlefinger’s death had been distinguished, certainly not the way a clean beheading would have been.

Good riddance, Robb thought once more, and then he walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XVII, in which I time skip to Robb arriving at Casterly Rock, because ain’t nobody got time for wandering around the riverlands right now.
Grey Wind was the first to know someone was approaching. When he stopped abruptly at the front of the column, everyone else in Robb’s party halted instinctively, for the men who had accompanied Robb’s force through the mountains had long before learned to trust the wolf’s instincts. The men in Robb’s personal guard immediately circled around him to protect him from whatever unseen danger might be approaching, and Robb slipped into Grey Wind’s mind as easily as he slipped into a tunic. It had grown easier after the first time, so easy now that he scarce had to concentrate at all.

Men were approaching from the west, no more than a pack of them, with horses, the prey that was not prey, for he was not allowed to hunt them. The hooves of the horses crunched in the snow, the smell of the men familiar and yet not. He remembered this place, for he’d been here before in these mountains. He’d killed men at the base of these mountains, ripped into their throats with his teeth and tasted their blood. The smells were of this place and they were of home, too; they were salt and man-sweat, leather and dirt and snow.

He took off in the direction of the men, his paws sinking into the cold of untouched snow, which men and horses had not yet trodden down. The cold wind whipped through his fur, and he felt alive, like chasing prey. He ran and ran, following the scent and sound of men, until finally he was upon them, and he let out a howl of triumph as they came into sight. Some of the men had come with their large pack through the mountains, and some he hadn’t seen or smelled for some time, not since they had left the large man-rock surrounded by the rivers. But the big man he knew; the big man was a friend of the pack, too.

“Robb.”

Robb snapped back to himself at the sound of his name, and it was only then that he realized that he must have nearly slumped off his horse, because the Smalljon’s hand on the back of his tunic seemed to be the only thing keeping him upright. Jon’s horse was so close beside his that their legs were touching, and his friend was giving him a scolding look.

“You should really dismount before you do that,” the Smalljon said disapprovingly. “I’m not going to be the one who tells your family that you died falling off a horse before you ever got to a battle.”

Robb gave Jon Umber a sheepish look at that and sat himself back upright on his horse. The others were watching him with half-wary, half-adoring eyes, but that had been the way of things since they’d first set out from Riverrun and ventured through the mountains. Every day, Robb found his connection with Grey Wind growing easier, and sometimes he slipped, telling the men things only Grey Wind could know, talking about smells and sounds that none of them could hear. No one had said the word ‘warg’ to his face, but he’d heard it uttered behind his back half a hundred times.

“They think you’re magic,” Olyvar had told him one night as he’d been cleaning off Robb’s armor, which thus far hadn’t seen use on this campaign. “And how could Tywin Lannister possibly win against magic?”

It was a delicate line that Robb was walking, he knew; so long as he still commanded the respect of the men, they might forgive or even praise his oddities, but there was a small divide between respect and fear, and it would be easy for men to fear the things they didn’t understand. The northmen were the least wary, but he’d left many of them behind to defend the north. He had no doubts that
Howland Reed and his crannogmen would be able to hold the Neck, but he’d learned the hard way how vulnerable they could be to attacks from the sea, and Jon’s warnings about what was coming down from the far north sometimes made him wake up in a cold sweat.

The largest part of the northmen he’d brought south had been men from the hills, who’d appeared at Winterfell not long before the first big storm of the winter had hit, not long before Robb had set out on this new southron campaign. The Valemen who had joined them at Riverrun made up much of the remainder of their force, but Robb had done his best to integrate lords and common soldiers from the north, the riverlands, and the Vale into both forces he’d sent marching south. For if they were all part of the campaign, the glory would belong to all of them—as would the defeat, if it came down to that.

But what Grey Wind had found was the first good sign they’d had in some time. The first sign of anything, really, for they’d been picking their way through snowy mountain passes for nearly a turn of the moon. They’d been quicker the last time they’d slunk through these hills, but even though the snow here was quite milder than it had been in the north when Robb had left it more than two moons prior, it still made an already difficult march even more arduous. They’d lost more men than Robb would have liked, to cold and accidents both, and the few warhorses they’d brought along weren’t faring much better. They’d had to put a half dozen of them down after they’d broken a leg; the sure-footed garrons of the mountain clans and the Valemen were better suited for the push along rocky inclines, though they would serve less well when it came to battle than the larger, more powerful destriers.

“It’s your father,” Robb told the Smalljon matter-of-factly, “returning with our scouts.”

The look that passed across the Smalljon’s face could be nothing other than relief, and a cheer went up from the men around them, for they all knew as well as Robb did what that meant. The mission of the force led by the Greatjon and Yohn Royce had been easier than their own, but that did not mean that it had been without its perils. They were to have followed the Tumblestone into the hills before coming around to Ashemark and marching down to meet the River Road to Casterly Rock. Robb had chosen the Greatjon as one of the leaders of that contingent because he’d marched that way with Robb already when they’d returned to Riverrun from Ashemark before, and the Greatjon was perfectly suited to the task of making an unbelievable amount of commotion whilst he made his way to his target. Robb had tasked him with doing the same as a distraction for their attack on Moat Cailin; the Greatjon was known well enough for being a loud, boisterous man that Robb had to hope Tywin Lannister wouldn’t suspect it was a ruse. In the best possible scenario, he would believe that Robb was a green boy whose early victories had been more luck than skill, would believe that he’d finally shown his lack of experience in handing command to Greatjon Umber.

The trick had worked once on the ironmen at Moat Cailin; Robb could only pull the same trick so many times, but he only needed it to work once more to win this war. Tywin Lannister was the key; they already had Jaime in custody at Riverrun and Tywin had made a grave miscalculation in taking the chance of Tyrion falling into the hands of his enemy. With Tywin gone, the Lannisters would be no more than Cersei trying to prop up a small and illegitimate boy, and Robb had to believe that the Tyrells had enough instinct for self-preservation to turn tail and run when it was clear the Lannisters were defeated.

The Greatjon arrived with all the fanfare that Robb would have expected of him, Grey Wind loping ahead of the small group. “What took you lads so long?” the Greatjon called out in a booming voice as soon as he was close enough that he seemed to believe they would hear him. “We’ve been here a week already! We started building siege engines just to pass the time!”

Robb snorted. The siege engines were a nice touch, and they hadn’t been part of his instructions to
them. But if Tywin did come to break their siege, better if his scouts believed they’d truly dug in for one, and a battering ram and a few trebuchets would go a long way toward that aim. Robb waited until their group was close enough that he didn’t have to shout to respond.

“You got to follow the river and the road most of the way,” he reminded the Greatjon patiently. “We’ve been picking our way through snowy mountains.”

Greatjon Umber laughed a big, booming laugh. “What are you, some soft southron lasses?”

More than half of Robb’s personal guard was made up of men from the south, and the better part of them bristled at the perceived slight. Robb had to fight the urge not to sigh, for it wasn’t the Greatjon’s way to care about the possibility of hurt feelings.

“Everything has gone to plan, then?” he asked instead. The Greatjon’s smile said it all.

“The Imp took the castle from the inside, just as he promised. If you’re up for a bit of a trek, I can get you there before nightfall.”

Robb nodded and instructed the men to stay behind in the hills and try to find a spot to make camp that was wide enough for all of them and still as hidden as possible. Their plan relied entirely on the mountain force remaining hidden in the mountains, and if they failed at that, the weeks of marching through them would all be for naught. He brought only his personal guard with him as he came up beside the Greatjon, and they followed him back in the direction in which he’d come.

“There are sentries at every entrance to Lannisport, and we have guards patrolling the city,” the Greatjon reported as they made their way down the side of the hills toward Casterly Rock. “We’ve set up siege lines around the castle, and Wyman’s ships are barricading the bay.” The Greatjon gave him a wink. “Of course, the ships resupplied the castle when they smuggled our men in, but Tywin doesn’t know that, does he?”

That hadn’t been a part of the plan, either. “Isn’t that dangerous? What if the Redwyne fleet comes up from the Arbor?” Robb couldn’t help but ask, not terribly keen on the feeling that all these decisions had been made without him. But he’d needed to go with the mountain force; they’d needed Grey Wind, or they’d never have made it through.

The Greatjon seemed unable to stop grinning. “They’re a bit busy at the moment,” he remarked slyly. “Seems the ironborn have decided to start raiding up and down the Mander, and when the Redwyne fleet came to pursue, they snuck around and attacked Oldtown instead. If I know anything about Reachmen, it’s that they’ll defend their own before they’ll ever come help the Rock.”

Robb felt plainly stunned by the report. They’d gotten no news during their weeks in the mountains, and in some ways, it seemed as though time had stopped. And yet it hadn’t, not truly; Robb and his men had simply been in the dark whilst everything happened around them.

“Well at least we know what happened to the ironborn,” Robb remarked slowly, shaking his head to himself. For the first time, the Greatjon looked less than triumphant.

“There’s some other news about that, too,” he finally admitted. “Rickard’s men managed to take the Dreadfort.”

That was welcome, if unexpected, news. “How?” Robb asked in disbelief. He’d expected them to have to abandon the siege; as it was, Robb and his men had scarce gotten out of Winterfell before a huge storm had hit, and even northmen couldn’t have been expected to hold up a siege through a blizzard.
“The visibility was low because of the storm, and they used it to their advantage. Had a few men scale the walls and dispatch the sentries, and then they opened the gates for the rest of the force.” The Greatjon rode beside Robb in silence, and his tone was more somber than Robb would have expected when reporting such a victory. It was clear enough that not all the news was good news.

“Bolton’s bastard?” he pressed.

“Dead,” the Greatjon affirmed. “For true this time. They rescued Rodrik’s girl and the two Frey boys.” He paused and looked at Robb again with uncertain eyes. “Theon Greyjoy was there, too. I’d see that boy punished for what he did, same as you would, but what Bolton’s bastard did to him was going too far.”

Something about the gravity of the Greatjon’s tone made Robb shiver. He remembered what he’d heard about the Lady Donella Hornwood, how Bolton’s bastard had locked her in a tower and starved her until she’d eaten her own fingers. Robb wanted Theon punished, just as the Greatjon said, although the desire to beat Theon to a bloody pulp with his bare hands had receded a little when he’d found out that Theon hadn’t killed Bran and Rickon, nor had he burned Winterfell. And yet none of that would have happened if it hadn’t been for Theon’s betrayal—and for all Robb knew, Bran was dead when he would have otherwise been safe behind Winterfell’s walls.

“Is he dead?”

The Greatjon hesitated again. “Might be better if he was,” he remarked finally. “Ramsay Snow has spent these past moons taking little pieces of him. Skin, fingers, toes.” He paused. “Cock.”

One of the men riding behind them made a gagging noise at the word, and Robb felt that too, that visceral feeling of horror and disgust. He tried to imagine it, what had been done to Theon, tried to figure out if it was enough to make up for the other man’s betrayal. And yet all he could see in his mind was the Theon that he knew, smiling and making off-color jokes, making a pass at any woman he remotely believed might have him.

“Gods be good,” Robb breathed, unable to think of any other response. The Greatjon just nodded gravely.

“The Dreadfort’s maester was of the opinion that he was like to die from infection within the fortnight, according to Rickard’s letter,” he remarked finally. “Like as not, he’s dead already. If not, a beheading would be a mercy for him right now, I’d think.”

Robb nodded silently in agreement, and he was of a mind to give Theon that if he didn’t die from his wounds now. Not as a punishment, as he’d previously thought, but as an act of mercy. Theon had wronged his family, and grievously, but no one deserved what had been done to him. Whatever feeling of triumph Robb had experienced at arriving to Casterly Rock to find that everything was going as he had planned seemed to be entirely gone. They made the rest of the trip in silence.

When the Rock came into view, Robb scarce managed to hold back his gasp at the sight of it; it was thrice as high as the Wall, if he had to guess, with the main structure of the castle perched at the very top, so high up that it appeared no more than a child’s toy. Robb had always believed that Winterfell was near-impossible to siege, but compared to Casterly Rock, Winterfell may very well have been a snow castle. It was good, he reflected, that they’d set up a blockade in the bay, even if it was just for show; there would be no way to besiege the castle except to starve them out, if the siege were a true endeavor. Even the largest trebuchets they could build likely couldn’t strike more than two-thirds of the way up.

_Tywin Lannister will have to believe I’ve lost my wits to besiege this castle_, Robb thought in
dumbfounded awe as he stared up at it.

The siege camp when they reached it was as orderly as Robb could have ever hoped for, and the scouts that the Greatjon had posted were attentive, coming to greet them long before they reached the outskirts of the camp. It wasn’t the first time and would not be the last that Robb felt glad for all the good men he had around him, for Rickard Karstark and his good thinking at the Dreadfort, for Brynden Tully and his success defending Riverrun, for the Greatjon and Yohn Royce and their ability to organize men. Robb may have been the one to conceive of many of their plans, but without good men to execute them, even the best plans could amount to nothing.

Those who saw Robb as they rode through the camp called out to him and cheered; Robb took a few moments to greet as many of them as he could manage, for men would more readily follow a man that they knew than some lord or king who hid in his castle. Robb’s father had taught him that lesson every day that he’d invited a Winterfell man to his table and talked with him like a friend, and that was not a lesson Robb was like to forget. Ned Stark had forged the loyalty of the northmen, and Robb had reaped its benefits; he was not keen to ruin all his father had created, nor was he like to forget his father’s lessons.

The Greatjon accompanied them only as far as the main entrance to the Rock, an enormous natural cavern that looked nothing like the entrance to a castle. “I do hope you’ll forgive me, Your Grace, but there’s only so much Lannister a man can handle in a single week, and I’ve already had my fill,” he announced, his tone somehow both good-natured and condescending in the same breath. “I’d sooner go back to my men than spend another minute in this castle with the Lannister dwarf.”

Robb certainly knew what the older man meant. Tyrion Lannister had been indispensable to him and this entire mission, and yet that hadn’t made the man any less aggravating. When he’d confessed to Robb that he could sneak a whole contingent of men in by sea, through a set of tunnels he’d had connected from the drainage system into a nearby cave, Robb had been almost certain that the whole thing must be some sort of jape, that there could be a secret way into Casterly Rock about which Tywin Lannister had no knowledge.

“The one mistake my father always made was underestimating me,” Tyrion had explained when Robb had expressed his skepticism. “That and never noticing that his son and daughter were fucking, but I suppose no one is perfect.” Robb could just see Tyrion in his memory pouring himself another cup of wine as he’d explained. “He assigned me the most menial task he could find and expected me to balk and refuse. Instead I got the drains in Casterly Rock running better than they had in a hundred years, and I included a little something for myself.”

That something had been the tunnel where they’d planned to ferry the men in, on small boats with dark hulls and muffled oars. Part of Robb had scarce believed that it could work, and at the same time he’d staked his whole plan on it, on Tyrion Lannister’s belief that he could predict his father’s reactions. That Tyrion had been proved right thus far likely made him even more insufferable, and Robb did not doubt that the Greatjon would not abide that.

“You have my leave to go,” Robb told the man kindly, and he watched as father and son exchanged a short nod before the Greatjon turned his horse and rode back the way that he’d come. Robb wondered if the two would rather have dismounted and embraced, but they did not.

The steps were wide enough for twenty men ahorse, and Robb was thankful for that, for the prospect of climbing thousands of steps to reach the castle proper was not at all a welcome one. Lit torches lined all the walls, but they were spaced far enough from each other to leave much of the cavern in flickering shadow. Robb’s mind raced as he took in his surroundings, imagining how they would mount a successful siege of the castle if that had been their true intent. He imagined men trying to lug
a battering ram up all these steps to the main gates, imagined how easy it would be for a few dozen archers to hold the tunnel against them. Or could the Rock be scaled somehow the way it was sometimes said that wildlings would climb the Wall? It seemed implausible that a true attempt at a traditional siege could be successful if the castle were well-provisioned; he couldn’t see how they could possibly convince Tywin Lannister that the siege was real.

For that was the plan, had been the entire reason for all of the Greatjon’s siege lines and trebuchets and Robb’s reserve forces in the mountain. Tyrion Lannister had been certain that his father would come to break the siege, that he would come himself; and yet if Robb had ever seen Casterly Rock with his own eyes, he would not have believed the Imp so readily. The descriptions had done the place no justice; it was a greater fortress than Robb could have possibly imagined.

If Tywin did come to break the feigned siege, Robb’s mountain force was ready to ride out and smash them from behind, and Tywin wouldn’t be able to count on support from inside the castle, as they had already taken it by stealth. And yet it might almost be better if Tywin did not come, for then Robb could claim that his siege had worked, that he’d taken an unassailable castle by siege, and any myths about his supposed magic could only grow. If Robb did not desire fear from his own men, he certainly did from the enemy.

They ascended about two-thirds of the way a horse before they reached what was possibly the strangest stables that Robb had ever seen, built into the side of an open cavern where everything flattened out. Stableboys were there to take their horses, and the remainder of the trek they had to make on foot. The cavern narrowed there, wide enough that men could walk perhaps five abreast, and there were only a few feet of clearance above the Smalljon’s head where there had been a few hundred feet further below. The passage became more ornate there, too; the steps became tiled stairs instead of the rough-hewn stone that had taken them up to the stables, and each landing had a large lion carved into the floors. Frescoes covered the walls of men fighting lions, lions fighting lions, men fighting men. Every few feet, a small alcove was carved into the stone, each one of which held a carved lion covered in gold-leaf.

Robb’s senses felt on complete overload by the time they finally reached the top, Grey Wind padding along beside him. Tyrion was in the foyer to greet them, dressed in all his Lannister finery, looking more the man Robb had met for the first time at Winterfell than the one they had apprehended on his way to the Wall.

“Your Grace, my lords,” he greeted with a sweeping bow, then turned to Dacey and gave her a more exaggerated bow. “My lady.” Robb felt Dacey bristle beside him, although she did nod curtly back at him. “Welcome to Casterly Rock. Please partake of my bread and salt, and then I imagine you will want all my news.”

Several servants stepped forward with offerings of bread and bowls of salt, and Robb took some impatiently. “The Greatjon has already filled us in on much and more of what’s happened whilst we’ve been on the march,” he informed Tyrion Lannister curtly, and the Imp merely chuckled.

“But how, when the Great Oaf knows little and less of the news that’s come in the last few days, since he refuses to come to the castle again?”

It seemed to be a physical effort for the Smalljon to hold himself back from a retort at that, though he did remain silent. Robb took a purposeful bite of his bread just to show Tyrion that he’d done it.

“Let us discuss it, then.”

Robb followed Tyrion to his solar, trailed by the Smalljon, Dacey, and Grey Wind. His guards remained outside the doors, giving suspicious looks to Tyrion’s own guards while Grey Wind
followed him inside. For all that the Imp had delivered on his promises so far, Robb was not like to trust him completely, and Grey Wind would certainly be enough to deter most men from any attempts to harm his person.

“We have the maester under guard to ensure he doesn’t send off any unwelcome messages,” Tyrion remarked only after he’d poured them both a cup of wine, seeming entirely unperturbed by Grey Wind’s presence even though Robb’s wolf was half again as large as the dwarf. “But I did have him send off a message to Harrenhal to inform my father that the enemy has put the castle under siege and that we are running quite low on provisions and will not be able to hold out for long.” Tyrion paused, toying with his wine cup for a moment as he thought. “And before you ask, I dictated the message myself, though I made the maester write it in his own hand, so there is no chance that he snuck in some carefully-worded message.”

The Blackfish had been forced to abandon Harrenhal in order to have enough troops to keep Tywin from approaching Riverrun any more closely, so there was no chance that he hadn’t received the message. Even if the man was not at Harrenhal himself, doubtless he was close enough that a rider could be sent to him. And slipping in the fact that the castle was supposedly low on provisions was a nice touch, one with which Robb could not have found fault.

“Is he coming?” Robb asked with a raised eyebrow and a feeling of skepticism. Tyrion held up a scroll with a triumphant grin.

“Your great uncle has just sent a bird saying that his scouts have spied my father’s troops changing direction. He is coming.”

Tyrion sounded sure enough that it was difficult to doubt him, and yet Robb did anyway.

“How can you be so certain?”

The Imp’s smile only grew wider at that. “My father is a cunning man,” he admitted reluctantly, “but the two things that cause him to lose all sense are the preservation of his family name and his legacy. You’re jeopardizing both, and he can’t stand for that. A boy of six and ten and hoard of northern savages taking Casterly Rock by siege? No. He will come to break the siege, and he’ll come himself.”

Robb noticed that Tyrion did not say that Tywin would lead the men himself, for Tywin was too cautious a man to place himself in the van. He’d lead from the rear if he was anywhere, and that was precisely where Robb wanted him. If Tywin was in the rear, Robb would have every chance of meeting the man in battle himself. And Tywin doubtless had more battle experience than Robb did, but the man was also near sixty, and Robb had Grey Wind by his side in addition to all his guards. He had to believe that would be enough to tip the scales if they met in the field.

“What if the Tyrells join him?”

That had always been Robb’s greatest worry in conceiving of this plan, for if the Tyrells marched to Tywin’s aid, Robb’s forces would be so outnumbered that it would be near-impossible to perform the encirclement maneuver he’d planned. Tyrion just snorted and took another sip of his wine.

“With ironborn raiding all over the Reach and the stormlands in chaos, I tend to doubt it.”

“The stormlands?” Robb echoed in confusion. He’d sent his small force of stormlander men ahead to try to recruit as many men of the stormlands as they could manage, but the paltry force he’d had shouldn’t have been large enough to trouble the Tyrells, and they would scarce have had time to reach the stormlands, let alone rally enough men to be more than a fly for the Tyrells to swat away.
“Oh, you haven’t heard?” Tyrion asked blithely, although he knew clearly that Robb had not. “My father’s goons cannot even properly murder an infant. Aegon Targaryen yet lives, and he’s taken Tarth, Rain House, Griffin’s Roost, and Storm’s End and raised Targaryen banners above his castles.”

Robb stared at Tyrion for a long minute, as if waiting for the man to admit that the words were no more than a jape, but Tyrion did no such thing. Robb blinked.

“They killed him when he was an infant,” he provided finally. Tyrion waved his hand as if it was of no consequence to him.

“They killed the wrong infant, evidently,” he posited. “Or we are poised to be a part of the greatest mummer’s farce the Seven Kingdoms has ever seen.” Tyrion drained his cup, then poured himself another. Robb had scarce touched his own. “But there have been tales of dragons reborn in the east, and if this boy shows up on dragonback, I hope you understand that I will find myself compelled to declare for a new king. And you should as well.”

Robb gave the man a dry look. “I have no interest in who sits the Iron Throne, so long as it is not a Lannister,” he said sharply, although that wasn’t strictly the truth. At a time, he’d been quite certain that Jon should have been the one to sit it, and yet if this man was who he said, then he had more rights to the throne than Jon could hope to claim, even if he’d wanted to.

He would be Jon’s half-brother, Robb realized all at once with a sharp feeling of pain in his chest. He’d so long believed himself Jon’s brother only to have that proven false; the idea that he could be so easily usurped by some stranger calling himself Aegon Targaryen made Robb feel suddenly very angry.

“I would settle for your father dead and your bastard nephew deposed,” declared Robb scathingly. “If he wants the Iron Throne, he is welcome to it after that, and any of the lords paramount who’d like to kneel to him are welcome to do so. I would be glad enough to return to Winterfell and meet my child.”

Something strange passed across Tyrion’s face.

“Oh, your child,” he breathed, taking a sip of his wine, and Robb felt as though someone had poured ice water into his veins at Tyrion’s tone. Roslin was not due for another turn of the moon, and yet it wasn’t out of the question that something awful had happened or that she’d delivered early. The child would not be like to survive if it was born that early, not in the north in the throes of winter. At his last correspondence with Roslin when he’d been at Riverrun, she had still been perfectly healthy despite the storm that had ravaged the area around Winterfell for the better part of a fortnight just after Robb’s force had departed, but near a turn of the moon had passed since then.

“Do you know something?”

“Only that there is nothing to know about that,” Tyrion remarked slowly, carefully. “I’ll find you your wife’s letter with all her assurances that she is fine if it will make you feel better.” He paused, considering the wine in front of him as if uncertain whether or not he should take another sip. “But her letter had other tidings.”

Robb wondered if he would ever stop receiving bad news from the north. “Tell me.”

Tyrion hesitated, which Robb had long ago learned was not like him. “A raven appeared at Winterfell not a week ago, with talk of an attack at the Wall,” he said finally, and Robb swore for a moment that his heart stopped.
“The Others?” His voice was scarce more than a whisper, and Tyrion looked at him like he was a child with an overactive imagination.

“Yes, with snarks and grumpkins and riding giant ice spiders,” he returned sardonically. “No. It was men, as most attackers are. Except, of course, for the giant pack of wolves that has been attacking my father’s men in the riverlands.” Tyrion’s eyes flickered over at Grey Wind. “I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

Robb wasn’t particularly concerned with answering Tyrion’s questions about Arya’s wolf or what his sister had been doing with her. He ignored the question.

“What kind of men? Wildlings?”

Tyrion shook his head. “A mutiny, they said,” he responded uneasily. “Your wife has already sent more men to Castle Black to help restore order but…” Tyrion shook his head. “I’m sorry. It appears that your brother was seriously wounded, mayhaps dead. No one seemed certain. Your wife promised to send word once they know.”

It took a moment for Tyrion’s words to sink in, and when they did, Robb thoroughly rejected them. Jon cannot be dead, Robb thought with a disoriented sort of conviction, not from something so simple as men, not when we’ve just found out that monsters are real. But mayhaps that was the crux of it, he reflected with the bitter taste of bile in the back of his throat. Mayhaps men were the true monsters. Robb shivered at the thought despite the warmth of the room, and his gaze trailed over to Grey Wind, who had curled himself in front of the fire.

“Ghost is alive,” he said finally, numbly, and Tyrion gave him an odd look. “His wolf. Grey Wind would know if he was dead.”

And Robb had used that rationale before, he remembered. He’d known that Summer and Shaggydog lived, and part of him had refused to believe that Bran and Rickon could be dead. Even now, when Grey Wind could no longer sense Summer, hadn’t been able to for some time, Robb still clung onto the belief that Bran was alive somewhere. He’d been proven right before; he could only hope that it would be true again.

Chapter End Notes

To head off the Aegon questions before anyone has the chance to ask them: I spent a great deal of time trying to decide what to do with Aegon in the absence of Tyrion's influence. Eventually, I decided that, even without Tyrion’s goading, the only viable path for Aegon and Jon Connington, if they didn't want to lose their entire military force (who could not get to Meereen via ship due to the Yunkish blockade and refused to march down the Demon Road) was to decide to come to Westeros regardless. The alternative was for Aegon to wait around in Essos for Daenerys to march or try to follow her around like a little puppy, which I must admit I find fairly boring, narratively speaking. For both reasons, I decided to retain Aegon's "taking the stormlands" plotline regardless of the changes I made in Tyrion's arc.

Up next: Jon III (SO CALM DOWN GUYS, JON HAS CHAPTERS), in which Jon has some...erm...slightly psychedelic experiences? XD
He was flying. The wind was rushing over his body, whistling past his ears and across his face. The smell of salt filled his nose, and it was a scent he remembered, if only distantly. He’d been to the sea before, had visited the seaside city a few times when he’d been a boy. He remembered the briny smell, the sand between his toes, the laughter of his brothers and sisters. His brothers were here, too, flying beside him, rushing through the air as they danced around each other the same way he and his red-haired brother had chased each other around on that beach during those childhood trips. They spun and whirled through the air with a sense of innocent playfulness, of freedom.

He remembered what it was like not to be free, remembered being confined and chained and trapped. That would never happen to him again, for he would not let it. He would kill any man who tried to chain him again.

He turned and glided through the air, circling back around to where he’d roosted. The floating hunks of wood the men had built rested upon the water, for men could not fly as he could, had to glide across the water in these wooden boxes that caught the wind the same way his wings did, and yet they could not take to the air. He’d traveled in one once, too, when he’d been too young to fly long distances. His mother had been with him, then, when he’d been small enough to sit upon her arm. But they weren’t moving now. They were sitting next to the shore with the fabrics furled, but he knew what he would see if they were unfurled. Some giant creature with a strange head and ten long arms the likes of which he’d never seen before. He knew horses and lions and cats and dogs, but he’d never seen anything like that.

A kraken, he thought suddenly, unbidden. He turned to look behind him abruptly, suspiciously. It was as though a man had spoken to him, but men could not fly, and the men were too far below him for him to hear their words. He glided around in a circle, trying to find the source of the voice that had spoken the strange words, and yet they seemed to have come from within his own head. He’d never had a thought like that before.

The pain was overwhelming, blazing through his belly, his shoulder, his ribs, a stinging, sharp agony that seemed to throb along with the beating of his heart. A loud noise met his ears and he winced away from it, unquestionably the sound of someone screaming. It was only belatedly that he recognized that the screams were his own.

“My lord, please,” a voice pleaded, and he felt something dimly, a hand against his shoulder. “My lord…Jon…you need to calm down, please.”

He recognized the voice, but he couldn’t place it. Nothing seemed to penetrate through the haze of pain, which was unlike anything he’d ever felt before. The cool hand was salvation against his feverish skin, and he thought mayhaps the screams had stopped. Something cool brushed across his brow.

“That’s good. Drink this.”

I shouldn’t, he thought haltingly, it could easily be poison. And yet when something was placed against his lips, he swallowed, and soon the pain was gone.

His ears were so attuned to the sound of anyone approaching that he heard the men long before they
came to the entrance of the man-cave. His fur stood on end, ready to attack anyone who dared come near his pack-brother. The smell of blood was heavy in the air, blood and man-sweat and strange scents that were familiar and yet not familiar at all.

The noise boomed in his ears, one he’d come to recognize. Men used it to announce their presence to each other before entering, and he stood, waiting for the man to greet the newcomer. This man was a good one, wasn’t part of his pack but had the smell of his pack-brother upon him. This man was trusted, but he knew nothing about the newcomer, knew not whether he was friend or foe. He would not let any men with their metal claws near his pack-brother, not ever again. He had been guarding his pack-brother for some time, though he had no concept of how long it had been, for he could not see the sun inside the pile of man-rock, didn’t know how many times it had gotten dark and then light again. All he knew was that he was hungry, ravenous, but he would not leave his pack-brother undefended to go hunt.

The good man touched his head as if to calm him, but he would not be calmed. The obstruction was moved and a man stood there, one he had seen before. And yet men he had seen many times before had been the ones who had attacked his pack-brother with their metal claws. This man had a metal claw, too, though he couldn’t see the glint of silver, for it was hidden away. But he had seen it before, had seen men pull their metal claws out from hiding, and he recognized the holder. He stepped forward, in front of the good man, and bared his teeth at the newcomer. The new man took a visible step back from him, and the good man’s hand was on his head again. The two men exchanged some man-sounds, and the man removed the metal claw from his waist. The new man handed it to another, who took it out of sight.

It was only then that he stepped aside to let the newcomer enter, though the scent of fear on the man was sharp and strong in his nostrils. That was good. Men should be afraid of him. If they were afraid of him, they would be afraid to hurt his pack-brother again.

The newcomer made his way to his pack-brother. Blood seeped through strips of cloth on his pack-brother’s chest, his furless flesh even pinker than usual and slick with moisture. The new man sat beside his pack-brother and he followed, ready to attack the moment he saw another metal claw appear. But what the new man pulled out was only some strange paste, something that smelled of the forest.

When the man pulled away the strip of cloth, the smell of blood grew stronger. He growled warningly at the man, but the good man came to him then, rubbing him behind the ears and making soft man-sounds he almost recognized. His pack-brother trusted this man, so he would trust him, too.

He watched and waited as the second man spread some of the forest-paste upon his pack-brother’s wounds, his pack-brother making a little whimpering noise in his sleep. Only the good man’s hand on his head kept him from growling at the man with his strange forest-paste, but he understood now what this was. This was some strange man thing he didn’t understand, but the new man must be helping his pack-brother, otherwise the good man would not allow it. And still he stood vigil the whole time, keeping alert for any danger from this man. He watched as his pack-brother was turned on his side, as more forest-paste was spread onto his back before his wounds were covered again.

The second man left after that, and he jumped up next to his pack-brother, prodding the man with his nose. His pack-brother did not wake. He laid down next to the sleeping body, close enough that no man could get to his pack-brother without coming past him first, and he finally let his eyes fall closed.

Jon opened his eyes. The dark room around him was lit by a flickering fire, and his mouth was dry and sticky, like he hadn’t had a drink in days. He tried to sit up to get himself a cup of water, and that
was when the pain struck him, shooting up his whole torso. He hissed and sunk back down against his mattress, and someone was beside his bed within moments, a familiar face swimming within his vision. It took a beat for his eyes to focus past the pain, and for a long moment he wondered if he might vomit. Dark eyes looked down at him in concern.

“Seven hells, Jon,” the other man said in a near-reverent whisper. “You scared us there for a bit.”

Jon had no idea what Satin was speaking about, but he dimly realized that it must have something to do with the pain he felt, with the fact that it hurt even to move. One side of Jon’s body was warmer than the other, he belatedly realized, and it was only then that he noticed that Ghost was pressed tight against his side, looking at him with penetrating red eyes. He couldn’t remember the last time Ghost had been in his bed. Not since he’d been a pup, Jon wagered.

“Water,” he managed to croak out eventually, and Satin scrambled to obey, nearly tripping over his own feet, and Jon found a tiny smile tugging at the edges of his mouth at the sight. Satin had always been eager to please, but he’d never been near as intuitive about what Jon needed as Edd had always been. The familiar feeling of warmth Jon felt at the thought grounded him through all the strangeness as Satin brought him a cup of water and helped him to drink some. Jon had already learned his lesson about trying to sit up, so he didn’t attempt it a second time. Instead, he simply let Satin tilt his head up just enough that he didn’t choke. Nothing about the realization of how difficult it was to move was in any way comforting.

“What happened?” Jon asked once he had drunk his fill of water, which was an endeavor that took several long minutes, even though he hadn’t swallowed even a full cup. He remembered Tormund’s people coming south through the Wall, remembered receiving the news from Cotter Pyke about Hardhome, and then…what? Everything seemed hazy after that.

Satin’s expression was stricken. “You don’t remember?” he choked out finally, his voice scarce more than a whisper. The gravity of his tone gave Jon pause, and he searched his memories desperately, trying to recall what had happened after he’d met with his men. But it was like trying to grasp wisps of smoke between his fingers, and every time he tried, they simply kept swirling away. What Jon remembered instead was odd. He remembered flying over the ocean, remembered ships with black sails docked along a rocky coast. But that had just been a dream, hadn’t it? Why couldn’t he remember anything useful?

And abruptly, he remembered a slash of pain across his neck, and he lifted a sluggish hand, groping around until he somehow found his own neck. There was a bandage there, he realized dimly as his fingers felt their way along it.

For the Watch. The words came to him suddenly, without warning, and he shivered as it all rushed back. Wick had been the first one, slashing at him with the dagger. It had barely grazed him, Jon remembered, but blood had welled forth from the wound all the same. He’d disarmed the other man, but when he’d tried to grab for Longclaw, his fingers had been too stiff and uncomfortable for him to manage to unsheathe it in time. He remembered the next blow, right into his stomach. He’d thought it had been a punch at first, until Bowen’s hand had pulled away and he’d realized there was a dagger imbedded in his belly. Somehow, that part felt more like a dream than the flying had. Jon’s mouth suddenly felt dryer than before he’d had a drink.

“Why?” he breathed out disbelievingly, hand moving instead to his torso. He was shirtless, he realized, bandages decorating his front in what seemed a totally haphazard pattern. When his hand touched one of them, he couldn’t help but wince in pain. “What were they thinking?”

Satin shook his head helplessly, his big dark eyes glittering almost as though tears would fall from them at any moment. For all that men might have expected Satin to be weak, the boy had always had
a certain steely resolve about him, and to see him so close to tears was almost more striking than feeling the array of bandages beneath his fingertips.

“I don’t know,” Satin admitted finally, sadly. “It was only a handful of them, my lord. Most of the men are loyal to you. I don’t know how they expected to get away with…”

Jon looked over at Ghost, who was eyeing him with a strangely penetrating expression, and suddenly he knew. They hadn’t expected to get away with their lives, for even with all the men that Jon had sent to man the other castles, there remained hundreds of free folk and dozens of Robb’s sworn men in and around Castle Black. But the difference was that Jon had locked Ghost away in his rooms since Tormund’s men had crossed, thinking it was the boar that was putting Ghost so on edge. But it wasn’t, was it? Jon asked silently. Ghost’s eyes seemed strangely accusing.

Jon slept then woke, slept then woke again what seemed half a hundred times in the following days. When he slept, he ran with Ghost through the forest, but when he woke his wolf was by his side more oft than not, and sometimes he dreamed those dreams of flying, of ships and rocks and a castle he didn’t recognize. You know nothing, Jon Snow, Ygritte said as she stared into his eyes, and then her eyes became bluer, and her face was Robb’s instead. You’re not a bastard, you never were, Robb told him with a desperate hopefulness, and then the blue of his eyes became the blue of a winter rose, nestled in the ice of the Wall. A wolf came to the base of the Wall and howled, and a girl with silvery hair and violet eyes walked up behind the wolf and plucked the rose out of a chink in the ice, tucking the flower behind her ear and walking away.

He woke sometimes to a man of the free folk rubbing salve into his wounds, Satin holding his hand as he gritted his teeth against the pain and squeezed his steward’s fingers hard enough that he was surprised that he didn’t break them. Other times he woke to Satin beside his bed, giving him water and bread softened with broth that he could scarce keep down. Clydas came and against Satin’s protests and read Jon a letter from Eastwatch detailing an overland expedition to Hardhome, of giants and free folk and Skagosi who had appeared there with strange explanations about the will of the gods a turn of the moon prior.

It was three days before he could get out of bed for long enough to even make it to his chamberpot, four before he could walk more than a few feet at a time, and even then, he could only do so while leaning heavily on one of his men, often Satin but sometimes Tormund and sometimes Leathers, who helpfully translated an offer from Wun Wun to carry him, an offer Jon refused with all the courtesy he could manage. Bad enough to be seen as weak without being carried around like a child, he told himself through every aching step.

Only when he was certain that he could arrive without collapsing did he make his way to the ice cells where Bowen Marsh and his co-conspirators sat. Even seeing the man in chains, Jon felt a shiver go down his spine, one he wasn’t certain was solely due to the cold. The wound in his belly throbbed in sympathy at the memory.

“Why?” was all that he could manage, and Marsh’s resulting expression held no regret.

“I kept silent when you invited your brother here to kill a rival king and plant his own men here,” the steward told him coldly. “I kept silent when you killed his assassin to keep it quiet and called it ‘justice.’”

Jon had known from the moment he’d seen Stannis’ body that that day would come back to haunt him, but he’d always thought the threat would come from Stannis’ men. He’d never thought to look within, at least not for this level of treachery.

“Stannis’ death was the work of a lone assassin,” Jon returned, though the moment the words left his
lips, he knew he needn’t have bothered. The steward simply scoffed.

“I would have to be a fool to trust the words of an oathbreaker like you,” he hissed in response. “I couldn’t stand by any longer while you swelled our ranks with men and savages who refuse to take our vows, when your priority became saving men we’ve been fighting for thousands of years at the risk of our own. You’ve betrayed everything the Watch stands for, boy, and you’re asking the rest of us to do it, too.”

_You know nothing_, Jon wanted to tell the man as he stared at him blankly. _We are the shield that guards the realms of men, and the free folk are men just like we are_. How had the Watch forgotten their purpose so completely, and how could none of them see their folly? Bowen Marsh had been at Castle Black when the wights had awakened and attacked Lord Commander Mormont, and yet he still thought the wildlings the enemy. If even the men at Castle Black could not be made to believe, how could anyone?

Jon clenched his sword hand, feeling the rough unevenness of his burned palm sliding against the inside of his glove. He thought of all the men they’d lost at the Fist of the First Men, thought of the stories the survivors had told of what had happened there. He thought of the news of Hardhome, of destruction and dead things in the water, of desperate men eating their own dead. He thought of bringing Othor’s body back to Castle Black and then seeing him rise again, thought of Tormund forced to kill his own son after he’d risen. He thought of the dead bodies that still lay just a few feet away in another cell as they waited to see if the corpses would rise again the same way.

Looking into Bowen Marsh’s eyes then, it all suddenly seemed so hopeless. Satin had told it true that most men at Castle Black seemed to have remained loyal to him, but for how long? How long would they spend fighting amongst themselves, decimating their own numbers whilst the dead only grew more numerous? How could they ever hope to fight such a force with the paltry, ever-diminishing number of the Watch and a few hundred northmen? Even a huge number of the free folk that had crossed weren’t in anything near fighting shape. Without the Wall, Jon wasn’t certain they’d stand a chance, and they couldn’t patrol every inch of the Wall all the time, not even with Jon’s struggle to restore all the abandoned forts along its length.

All he could do was pray that half the stories of the Wall were true, that it truly was imbued with magic that kept the Others from crossing. For Jon was certain that nothing short of magic could save them now.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Catelyn XIII, in which Catelyn has to confront her feelings about hearing that Jon Snow is not dead. And also about the fact that Rickon may or may not be the little boy she remembers.
Catelyn XIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was warm. Warmer than it was anywhere in Winterfell excepting her own chambers, which once repaired were again the warmest in the castle. Catelyn looked around the space, at the panes of glass that made up the newly-constructed glass gardens. They were less than half the size that they’d been before the destruction, which wasn’t much space at all. But half the size was certainly better than nothing, and with the weather worsening every week, they weren’t like to get a chance to restore them any further than this. As it was, the construction had happened in fits and starts, in the scant hours and days between the snows. The snow that had gathered inside before the roof had been completed was only just then starting to melt and give way to the ground beneath it, and they still had to clear away the last remnants of blackened plants that had died when exposed to the elements.

Once, the glass gardens had been hope, a small oasis of salvation in the harshness of the north. Once, they had meant life for the people in Winterfell and all the smallfolk that had gathered in the winter town. But it would take months before their newly-planted crops would have any significant yield, and it had always been a struggle to feed all those in Winterfell and its environs, even in a mild winter and with the glass gardens at their previous size. And if what the maesters had predicted was true, this winter would not be a mild one, nor a short one like the last had been. And if what Jon Snow had told Robb was correct, if the Others truly had returned to the world, this could be the Long Night come again.

The thought made Catelyn shiver despite the moist, cloying warmth in the enclosed space, heated by the hot springs directly beneath them. It was said that a generation of men were born and died during the Long Night, having never seen the sun, and the idea that that could be the fate of her youngest son chilled her to the bone. Edrick had certainly seen the sun before winter had come in earnest, and they were still lucky enough that some days the sun would appear for an hour or two. But Edrick would be too young to remember these days, and like as not the sun would disappear before he made his first lingering memory. Robb’s child might be one of the first to be born in darkness, to grow up in darkness and die in darkness. And in a harsh winter with low food reserves, the babes would be some of the first to perish, despite their best attempts to save them.

They could flee south, of course, but the war was in the south, and if the Long Night had truly come anew, fleeing south would do little and less to save them. All it would accomplish would be to buy them time until winter truly came for them all, and given the choice, Catelyn would rather die within the walls of Winterfell. For good or for ill, the north had become her home, and she was not keen to leave it again.

The door opened behind her, and Catelyn turned at the rush of wind that accompanied the new arrival. Hallis Mollen ducked his head at her when she noticed him.

“Forgive me for intruding, my lady, but there was a bird, and I thought you might wish to go check its contents.”

So many things had changed since the day they’d gotten the news of Jon Arryn’s death that it was sometimes a comfort to Catelyn to notice all the things that had stayed the same, and Hal Mollen had certainly been one of them. He had, since Catelyn had known him, been a straightforward man with little artifice, and he had always been dependable and loyal. He was the sort of northman Catelyn would hold up as an example of the type of men one might find above the Neck.
“I would, thank you,” she told him gently, for she had been eagerly awaiting news from the south since the moment Robb had set out from Winterfell more than three moons prior. The last news they’d gotten had been that Robb had arrived to Casterly Rock without incident. It was some of the most truthful news they’d been able to receive by raven, for even if it had been intercepted by the enemy, it had contained no information that they shouldn’t have already known, for the Greatjon’s force had done much more to let everyone in the vicinity know of his movements, and for all the enemy would know, Robb had been with him. But their next raven was bound to be the most consequential of them, for it would be the one that would tell them of victory or defeat, of life or death. And the bird that had just arrived might have been the one with that news.

“Would you like me to escort you, my lady?”

The question made Catelyn smile. “I think I know my way back,” she assured him, trying to force a small smile to her face so he would realize the words were a jape and not a rebuke. “Please feel free to return to your duties.”

Hal gave another slight bow and then he was gone, a second rush of cool air accompanying his departure. Catelyn looked around the space one more time, trying to feel uplifted by its completion instead of simply daunted by the immensity of the task they had before them. She didn’t quite succeed.

It was bitter cold outside, though not near as cold as it would get if some of the northmen could be believed, but the snow had at least stopped during the night. The trees of the godswood and Winterfell’s walls blocked out most of the wind, but Catelyn could still hear it whistling against the stone of the towers to let her know that it hadn’t abated in the time she’d been inside the glass gardens. It would be quicker to head in the direction of the North Gate, but instead Catelyn took the path toward the godswood, wrapping her cloak more tightly around herself in order to try to ward off the chill. She picked her way between ancient trees, listening for the familiar sounds of another presence, but she found the tracks in the snow first, paw prints and three sets of boot prints, one small enough to be that of a child. She tentatively began following until she heard the familiar sound of voices, but she stopped just outside the clearing to observe them.

Her eyes fell on Rickon first, the same way they always did. His auburn hair was long now, past his shoulders and in a tangle of wild waves he’d scarce let her touch with a brush. He’d spent most of his days since he’d returned to Winterfell wandering between the trees of the godswood, though Catelyn at least contented herself with the realization that he was so bundled in furs that he looked near twice as wide as he truly was, though that had been none of her doing. He wasn’t her little boy anymore, at least not the same one she’d left behind when she’d departed Winterfell those years ago. If she’d thought him wild then, he was unquestionably wilder now, more wolf than boy, she’d heard several men saying. Most days he refused to even speak the Common Tongue, preferring secret exchanges with Harrik Magnar in the Old Tongue or whispered conversations with Osha.

It had been a difficult truth to come to terms with, that the little boy that she’d loved and left was irrevocably changed. All her children were, but perhaps Rickon most of all, and she still remembered the stab of pain she’d felt in her chest when she’d first embraced him when he’d come through the gates only to have him push her away within seconds. “Where is Bran?” he’d asked angrily, looking at all of them with suspicious eyes. “I want Bran.”

Catelyn had tried to prepare herself for the possibility that her little boy would be angry and even for the possibility that he may not know her. After all, she couldn’t help but recall when she’d left Winterfell for a turn of the moon to visit Castle Black and Edrick had scarce known her upon her return. Rickon hadn’t been near as young as Edrick had been when she’d left him, but he’d been away from her for so much longer, and he was certainly old enough to be angry at her for having
abandoned him. And yet even having prepared herself for the possibility had made it no easier when he’d pushed her away.

It hadn’t even been surprising that he’d asked for Bran, for he’d watched them all ride away from him one by one until only Bran had remained. She’d gotten most of the story of what had transpired after Robb had gone from the wildling woman, Osha, the story of how they’d hidden down in the crypts, how they’d fled Winterfell after Bolton’s bastard had burned it. It was only from her that Catelyn knew that Bran’s party had headed to the northwest while Rickon and Osha had headed northeast, but that news meant little and less when Robb had already had every castle in the north send out men to search for Bran and come up with nothing. And since the weather had turned, it would be near impossible to send out more search parties, would be even worse in the western mountains than it was in Winterfell’s environs.

Rickon seemed to think that a betrayal, too, that they hadn’t been able to locate Bran, although it was difficult to say for certain since her son rarely deigned to say a word to her. And yet despite all that, despite how much Rickon might hate and resent her, she couldn’t help but feel relieved that he was home.

Osha was the one to notice her first, and she tapped Rickon on the shoulder. “Your mother is here,” she remarked when he looked to her, and she at least spoke the Common Tongue. Catelyn was fairly certain that her presence was the only reason that Rickon hadn’t abandoned using it entirely. “Why don’t you go give her a hug?”

It wasn’t the woman’s first attempt to get Rickon to bond with her again, as if Osha could sense how much it pained her to have her little boy so distant from her. The attempts were appreciated if ultimately futile, for Rickon’s resentment of Catelyn seemed enough to override even his respect for Osha. And yet even expecting the disinterested look on Rickon’s face made it no less painful.

“That’s all right,” Catelyn assured him with a forced smile. “I don’t need you to give me anything you’re not ready for, sweetling. I simply wanted to know if you needed anything.”

What she really wanted was for her son to come inside instead of risking a chill wandering around the godswood all day, but she’d quickly learned the futility of that request. And she certainly wasn’t keen to press the issue, either, not when Rickon had his wolf by his side. Shaggydog already towered over her son, and unlike Grey Wind, he was just as like to attack her as he was to lick her hand.

Rickon didn’t respond to her at all, instead just stared at her with a dark expression. Harrik said something to him in the Old Tongue, and Rickon’s eyes flicked in the Skagosi man’s direction with a look of annoyance. “We’re fine,” Rickon told her sullenly after a moment. “Go away.”

Osha gave Catelyn a sympathetic look, but Catelyn refused to crumple under her son’s rejection, refused to accept the woman’s pity. Instead she squared her shoulders and tried to keep her disappointment from her face.

“Come inside if you get too cold,” she told them as evenly as she could manage, and although Rickon didn’t respond to her, the Skagosi man gave her a little tip of his head in acknowledgement. But considering that Harrik could be buried in a drift of snow taller than himself and still insist he didn’t feel the cold, she doubted they’d be back inside until Rickon began complaining that he was hungry. Food was the only thing that brought Rickon reliably back indoors.

Catelyn found Roslin in the lord’s solar, just as she’d expected. Barely a fortnight from when she was due, the girl remained standing behind the desk despite the chair that sat just behind her, as if she’d forgotten entirely that the thing was there. Robb would scold her if he were here, Catelyn
thought fondly to herself as she watched Roslin rifling through the papers on the desk, plainly searching for a specific one. Catelyn cleared her throat to get her good-daughter’s attention, and Roslin’s eyes shot up in surprise at the sound.

“Oh, I didn’t hear you come in!” Roslin exclaimed, flustered, though the girl had at least gotten comfortable enough with Catelyn in the past few moons to drop some of her usual formality in private. “How are the glass gardens?”

“Small, but they should serve,” Catelyn admitted. “I was told there was a bird?”

The girl nodded distractedly. “Two, in fact. Though it’s a wonder that even one of them made it through with the dreadful weather we’ve had recently.”

Catelyn was inclined to agree. It had snowed more oft than not since Robb had departed, and she had to presume that for every message they received, half again as many were lost in the snows. But it did them no good to dwell on every bird that was lost.

“From Robb?” Catelyn pressed hopefully, but she knew even before Roslin answered that neither of the messages were. Catelyn frowned. “Why don’t we sit and discuss them?”

Roslin looked back at the chair behind her as if remembering its existence, and she lowered herself down into it with a somewhat abashed look. “No news from the south, I’m afraid. No, the first letter was from Lord Karstark at the Dreadfort.” Roslin paused, pursing her lips as if considering what to say next. “Theon Greyjoy has died of an infected wound.”

“Good,” Catelyn heard herself saying without a thought, but even upon further consideration, she found that the opinion held. They may have found that Theon Greyjoy had not murdered her boys nor burned Winterfell, but he had still betrayed them, and nothing that had happened afterward would have occurred were it not for that initial betrayal. Roslin had been horrified when they’d gotten the news of all that had been inflicted upon the Greyjoy boy, but Catelyn had only felt a sense of grim satisfaction. “And the second letter?”

Roslin shifted uncomfortably in her chair, looking nearly as apprehensive as Catelyn had ever seen her. She hesitated for so long that Catelyn was near certain that she would have to pry the news out of her good-daughter.

“It’s from Lord Commander Snow,” she admitted finally, nervously, and for a long moment, Catelyn wasn’t certain why the girl was so hesitant. And then she remembered that to the rest of the world, Jon Snow was still the bastard son of Ned Stark, that no matter the massive revelation that Lord Reed’s news had brought for her and Robb, the world outside of them remained unchanged.

And that was the crux of it, Catelyn thought, the reason that even the truth of who had sired Jon Snow hadn’t at all removed the ire she felt toward him. Because even if Ned had never broken their marriage vows, not even once, it didn’t change the fact that he’d dishonored her by calling Jon his son and bringing the boy into their home, and it didn’t change the fact that everyone still viewed him that way now. It didn’t take away the years she’d spent resenting his presence, the way he’d walked around Winterfell looking every bit a Stark while Ned’s trueborn sons had all been unmistakably Tully. It didn’t change her fear that the northmen might believe that Jon, with the Stark look, fit at Winterfell while her own sons would only be viewed as outsiders.

And above and apart from all of that, the truth somehow made it all worse, the realization that every day that Ned had allowed Jon to remain in their home, he’d placed all of them in grave danger. That somehow, he’d valued Jon more than he’d ever valued her or their children. And despite all that, Catelyn found that she was relieved that he was not dead, if not for her own sake, then for Robb’s.
“He’s all right, then?” she pressed, and Roslin nodded tentatively, as if she expected the answer might anger Catelyn.

“Alive, at least,” she agreed placidly, “but his letter brings other ill tidings. They’ve sent a force out from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea to mount a rescue operation, but they believe thousands have been slain beyond the Wall, and he seems to suspect there will be few survivors. And every person who has died beyond the Wall…”

“…is another enemy soldier,” Catelyn continued for her with a sense of dim unreality. For Robb had told her of Jon’s warnings, and Robb had certainly been convinced of the gravity of the situation, but it was still difficult for her to believe that the stories were any more than stories. And yet at the same time, she was perfectly aware of the possible consequences of her disbelief. Her son fought their enemies to the south whilst badly outnumbered, and Jon Snow looked to be in near the same position in the north, though Jon could at least count on the Wall as a significant advantage. Winterfell was caught in the middle, and if either of them failed to beat back the enemy, it could very well be the end of them. Between that and the impending throes of winter, it painted a very bleak picture for the north.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XVIII, a very boring chapter in which nothing important happens. Just kidding, yo - it's the motherfucking battle at Casterly Rock! Hold onto your butts, y'all!
Robb XVIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Waiting was the hardest part. Robb sat mounted on his horse as he listened to the distant sounds of warhorns, desperately wanting to be out in the fray, to at least be somewhere where he could see what was happening below. But the warhorns were not his, or at least not the ones that would signal his unit, his scouts waiting at the top of the ridge to signal them to ride forth. Timing, Robb knew, would be everything in this battle. If his men descended from the mountains too early, they would be unable to encircle the Lannister force, but if they descended too late, their force could easily be decimated by the larger Lannister army. But the knowledge made the waiting no easier, and even Grey Wind could sense it, at attention beside Robb’s mount with his fur standing on end.

Robb could hear the first volley of arrows fall if only from the screams of dying horses, killed right beneath their riders. It was impossible to tell from where he sat whether the falling horses and men were his own or the enemy’s, for a dying man sounded the same whether he wore grey or red. They were his own men, like as not, and that thought was a grim one, though Robb ultimately knew their sacrifice was necessary. Tywin would only advance far enough to be encircled if he believed he’d caught the besieging force unawares, and his predawn attack was indication enough that their deception had fooled him. But deception though it was, their own lines had not been formed up, and the precious minutes that it would take even for fully-armored men to assemble from their tents and hiding places would cost them dozens of lives, if not a fair hundred, and that was before the fighting would begin in earnest.

And yet the predawn attack would be Tywin’s undoing as much as he’d believed it his boon, for the relative darkness made it easier for Robb to conceal his men in the mountain pass, made it less likely they’d be spotted. Robb was fairly confident that none of the Lannister scouts had determined their position, for Tywin was a commander too cautious to fall into an obvious trap, even if he realized that he had half again as many men as Robb himself could boast.

Robb shifted in his saddle, then forced himself still when his horse moved nervously beneath him. They had had this plan in place for many moons, had followed it nearly to the letter, and everything was somehow falling into place. It certainly would not do for him to ruin it at the last moment because he couldn’t manage to remain patient and steady in his saddle.

The sound of men clashing against men came next, of metal against metal, and yet even so, Robb knew that it would not be near time yet. Their scouts had estimated over forty thousand men, and even if all of them charged forth with all their strength, it would take a significant amount of time to move all those men far enough that Robb’s force could come around behind them. His men would fight, and they would begin falling back toward the base of the Rock and toward Lannisport as though they were losing. They wouldn’t even have to feign losing, nor falling back if Robb wagered correctly. His force was smaller, especially without their mountain reinforcements, but there were Valemen and northmen fighting below, and they would at least be like to have the advantage on the snowy terrain over men from the south. But that advantage could only hold for so long, and Tywin Lannister would know that. In fact, Robb was counting on it.

The sounds of fighting raged on for what could have been minutes or hours, but even periodic reports sent down by the scouts at the top of the hill could only give Robb a scant picture of what was going on below. Tywin’s standard remained in the rear and their lines were holding, the first report said. Then the lines were breaking, just as Robb had instructed, the center falling back first so
as to better engulf the Lannisters from all sides. Tywin’s rear force was maintaining its position, still maintaining its position, and only when Robb was beginning to despair that the whole gambit would be for naught, that his force would be decimated for true, the warhorn blew.

It wasn’t even precisely a charge, couldn’t be with them having to pick their way down the makeshift mountain trail, but even with their slow advance, the Lannister force did not have time to make an about face to escape. Robb saw that plainly the moment the battle came into view, as his men poured out of the mountain pass and fanned out along Tywin’s rear flank. Shouted orders were lost in the din as men and horses screamed and died, but Robb’s men had their orders and he had confidence they would follow them.

A company of blood-spattered men charged his position, but half a dozen of Robb’s guards were in front of him before they ever reached him. Smalljon’s sword clanged hard against that of an enemy who hadn’t been prepared for the force of the swing of a man of Umber’s size nor one who was fresh, and he lost his seat at the first strike, crashing to the ground before the Smalljon engaged with another man. Dacey Mormont’s sword clanged off a man’s armor and Patrek Mallister struck another man’s horse right in the neck, the animal falling and crushing the man as a spurt of red blood covered everything in close range.

A Lannister man got through, but Robb was ready, wheeled his horse around and brought his sword up in enough time to block the blow before it landed. The man shifted and came in for another strike but Robb parried that swing, then a third, eyes searching for a gap in the man’s defense. Before he could find it, the Smalljon felled the man with a blow from behind, and Robb just managed to guide his own mount out of the way before the man crashed down atop him. Robb turned to look for the next foe, but the first wave of attackers had fallen, the majority of the Lannister men still trying to form up ranks, trying to figure out whether they should charge or turn to face the foes behind them. In the thick of it, Robb could not see, but he had to hope that the flanks of his besieging force had held and were closing in on the Lannisters from the side.

Robb’s eyes scanned the landscape before him, watching as men crossed swords and died all around him, searching for Tywin’s standard. It had been long enough since Robb’s last proper battle on open ground that he’d nearly forgotten the chaos, though, nearly forgotten the way that all men began to look the same in the heat of battle, covered in blood and mud. Some of the foes wore Lannister red, but those were only the knights and highborn warriors, and most of the lowborn fighters had only whatever they’d managed to cobble together. Robb turned his head and continued to search, for Tywin Lannister should have been easy to pick out even without his standard.

Eventually, Robb spotted the familiar lion standard, and he could see Tywin ahorse in brilliant red armor. He wondered if Tywin had realized yet that he’d been surrounded. Robb guided his horse next to the Smalljon’s and pointed in Tywin’s direction.

“There!” he yelled in hopes of being heard over the tumult. And he was, because Smalljon was shouting orders then, the words booming through his helm, and they were advancing. They hit a second wave of men as they tried to spearhead their way through. They had been mounted, but half had already lost their horses and were scrambling to fight on the ground whilst all of Robb’s guard had thus far managed to remain ahorse. His mounted men cut easily through the men afoot whilst Grey Wind went first for one of the horses, snapping at the animal’s leg. The horse screamed as its leg crumpled beneath it, and the man screamed as it fell.

“Robb!”

Robb turned in the direction of the exclamation, expecting to be confronted by an unseen foe riding for him, but it was just Olyvar carrying Robb’s own royal standard. Robb wasn’t certain what
had made Olyvar scream his name, not at first, not until he saw the wooden shaft sticking out of his shoulder, through a tiny gap in his armor. Robb blinked.

*That’s queer,* he thought to himself, *I didn’t even feel it.* He didn’t feel it still, felt as though the arrow was impaling someone else’s body and not his own. The Smalljon dispatched the man he was fighting with ease and rode back to meet them. He raised his visor.

“We need to fall back!” he yelled with a pointed look at Robb, and Robb felt a moment of panic at the words. He couldn’t fall back, for the loss of morale at seeing their king felled in battle could be the thing that would cost them a battle that should by all accounts be theirs. He was about to insist that he could continue on, but when he tried to move his arm, it remained stubbornly unresponsive, though the pain still did not come. Robb’s mind raced.

“Send me back with ten men and ride on!” he ordered finally, glancing toward Olyvar. “Olyvar, take the royal standard and follow Grey Wind!”

Robb could scarce see even Olyvar’s eyes through the opening in his helm, but with even that little to go on, Robb could still see the boy’s worry. “Ten men isn’t enough!” the Smalljon protested, but Robb held up a hand, the one that still worked. Where had his sword gone? Robb wasn’t certain.

“Do as I say for once. Follow Grey Wind!”

Smalljon stared at Robb for a long moment, as if thinking of protesting, before he turned and began shouting orders again. He was quick and efficient at splitting their men, and Dacey Mormont grabbed at Robb’s reins, turning his horse in an about face. The smaller force of men formed a circle around him as Smalljon’s group went forth, and within less than a minute, all Robb could see when he turned to look over his shoulder was the direwolf of House Stark, the men they’d parted from having disappeared in the crush of bodies. They weaved their way through his own force, all moving the opposite direction, and Robb felt a moment of frantic disappointment.

“Help me off my horse!” he commanded as soon as they were out of the main thrust of the battle, certain that he could come down without being trampled. Time was of the essence, and backtracking had cost them too much already.

“Your Grace—” Dacey began to protest, but Robb silenced her, trying not to feel frustrated. These were the type of guards he wanted, he reminded himself with as much conviction as he could muster, the type who prioritized his life over their own. These were the type of guards that gave his mother and his wife peace of mind.

“Help me down before I fall.”

Dacey scrambled off her horse, then, clearly mistaking Robb’s meaning, just as Robb had intended. She and Lucas Blackwood helped Robb down, and he made them guide him to sit against a large rock. “Guard me, and don’t let anyone interrupt me,” Robb said in his most authoritative voice, staring Dacey Mormont right in the eye. “Not a maester, not a field medic, no one. Do you understand me?”

From the way Dacey’s eyes widened, Robb could see that she did.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was in the thick of it, surrounded by screams and blood and man-sweat. He came up alongside a horse that spooked immediately when it saw him, rearing up on its hind legs and throwing off the man who rode on its back. A man slashed in his direction with his metal claw, but he dodged out of its way, clamping his jaws around the leg of the man’s horse. It worked the same way it always did, the horse crumpling and the man on its back
falling, crushed beneath the larger animal’s weight. The taste of blood was sharp and salty against his tongue.

Another metal claw slashed in his direction, but the big man was there, his own silver claw clanging against the other. A horse staggered backward when he bared his teeth, for these horses were not the same as the ones who had traveled the mountains with him, who had grown used to him. These horses knew other horses, knew men with metal suits and metal claws, but as many cowered before him as stood their ground. The man on the back of this horse did not fall when the horse staggered, but the big man felled him with his claw.

The man holding the large stick was not far away, the stick with the beast that was not a beast sitting atop it. It had the look of a beast, but it did not move and did not breathe, the same way the nervous man carried the stick with a wolf that was not a wolf. His prey would be beneath the beast that was not a true beast, he knew, and he slipped between two horses as he loped toward it. One man jabbed a metal claw in his direction, but he was too quick for it, and the claw buried itself instead in the body of another horse, its blood and insides spilling out. The smell of blood made his mouth water, but he did not linger, ducking between men with a single focus in mind. His prey. The beast that was not a beast, some creature he did not know. All the rest of these men were nothing, only obstacles between him and his ultimate prey.

Metal claws clanged against other metal claws, cracked against wood and scraped over men’s strange metal suits. The big man was behind him somewhere, he knew, for even through the press of all the bodies, he could smell him, the scent that had become nearly as familiar as his pack-brother’s own. The big man spent many hours by his pack-brother’s side, he knew, always guarded his pack-brother when he slunk off to hunt.

His prey was close. Blood stained his muzzle already, but he was eager to sink his teeth into the man’s flesh. A man afoot ran wildly in his direction, and he jumped sideways out of the way, sinking his teeth into the man’s leg as he tried to turn for a second attack. This man wore metal only on his chest, so his teeth sunk through the strange layer of flesh the man wore atop his own furless skin and he tasted blood. He clamped his jaw down and shook his head, the man crashing into the ground. His body crashed into the feet of a horse, which careened into the ground as well.

The big man caught up to him, along with the others, and they fought the men as men did, with metal claws and not teeth, clearing more bodies out of the way. The beast that was not a beast was atop the large stick and close enough now that he had to look up to be able to see it, only two lines of men between him and it. They had circled his prey and were protecting it, as a pack protects its cubs.

He lunged forward toward the legs of the closest horse, snapping his jaws at it. It staggered three steps backward, and all the other horses reacted, trying to stumble out of the way before their large bodies crashed into each other. The big man took advantage of the moment of confusion and buried his metal claw into the hide of one of the horses with a spurt of blood.

His prey was there, just behind the lines of men. One of the horses crashed into a second as it fell, and then three horses were falling in a pile, men and horses trying to untangle themselves from a mess of limbs and mud and blood. It was hard for them to move in their metal suits, he saw, and the struggle was lasting too long. It was his opening.

He surged through them, lunging straight for his prey. He would not be playing this time, would not be snapping and trying to frighten this horse. He was there to kill man and horse both. He lunged toward the horse’s leg, but the man astride the animal jabbed at him with the metal claw, and he had to jump back and out of the way at the last second, before he could sink his teeth into the horse’s flesh. A man rushed at him from behind and he dodged, but then the big man was there, and metal
claw met metal claw.

He turned back to his prey and lunged for the horse’s leg again. The metal claw came down once more and he had to retreat. He could feel his fur standing up on end, wanting nothing more than to close his jaws around the flesh of man and horse both, to rip them both to pieces. He circled the horse and lunged forward, jumping back just as the man’s claw came toward him. He went for a back leg instead, lunging and retreating, and man and horse turned to try another thrust. But before the horse could finish its turn, he darted for the front leg and closed his jaw around it and 

rugged.

Man and horse went down, finally, the man’s leg crushed beneath the weight of the larger beast. He’d dropped his long metal claw, but suddenly the man had another one in his grasp, short but still shiny. The horse was struggling on the ground unable to get its legs under it, the man trying to push himself out from under the struggling animal.

He circled the two creatures, looking for some place to sink his teeth into the man’s flesh. But the man wore a metal suit and even a metal cover on his head, and he knew his teeth would not penetrate it. He lunged forward and closed his teeth around a piece of the metal head cover, shaking his head to try to pull the thing off. The man’s arms scrambled, tiny metal claw slashing in his direction, but it was the frantic struggle of prey that was about to die, and the claw missed him with every blind swipe. He shook his head harder, but the metal cover would not come free. The man’s body jerked back and forth as he shook him and still the metal cover stayed in place, the man struggling to get himself free from the horse and from the attack.

And then there was a crack that he could hear beneath all the screams of man and horse, and his prey fell still. He dropped the man’s head as the horse struggled once more to stand up from the mud, then crumpled to the ground again. The man still did not move.

The big man was off his horse, on the ground next to the slain prey. The big man managed to remove the strange metal cover, and his prey lay dead in the mud, head turned at an odd angle. The stick that carried the beast that was not a beast was broken, and the beast had been trampled and smeared with mud.

Robb opened his eyes, and then there was pain, pain so bad that he nearly screamed. He gritted his teeth tightly to force back the urge, looking up to see his men surrounding him in a circle, his men and Dacey Mormont, their swords out and ready to defend him if necessary.

He called out Dacey’s name and she turned, sheathing her sword immediately and coming to him. The others filled in the gap she’d left with an almost instinctive movement as she retreated and came to kneel by his side. Robb’s shoulder was throbbing with pain as he steeled himself to speak.

“You can take me back to camp now,” he offered tiredly, and she was looking at him with a hopeful expression. He decided to answer her unspoken question. “Tywin Lannister is dead.”

Several of the men guarding him turned and exchanged a look, as if they weren’t certain whether they should take his words as truth and celebrate or take his words as truth and cower in fear from him. Robb was becoming quite accustomed to the reaction. But Dacey didn’t question him further, and within moments she and his men were helping him to stand. Any attempt to move his arm was agony, so it took three of them to help him back on his horse, but he was more than able to guide his mount with just his legs and one hand on the reins. Robb breathed slowly through the pain, trying not to look at the arrow that still extended from his shoulder, trying not to think of the way it had pierced fully through his flesh.

He was back at camp with a medic cutting away the fletchings from the shaft of the arrow when Olyvar appeared at the entrance to the tent, armor stained with blood but apparently unharmed. Grey
Wind padded in casually, fur matted down in patches with blood and mud, his muzzle stained red. The wolf slunk to his side and Robb reached out instinctively, Grey Wind lapping at his hand with the innocence of a pup. Robb turned to the medic.

“Leave it for now,” he commanded through gritted teeth once the end of the arrow had been cut away. “I’ll call you back in a moment.”

Olyvar was the one to protest, pulling off his helm and regarding Robb with a disbelieving expression. “Your Grace—” he began, but Robb shook his head.

“It’s not even bleeding,” he reassured his squire with a false sense of bravado, because it scarcely was. He still wore all his armor, unable to remove it before they’d pulled out the arrow, but the wooden shaft seemed to have plugged up the hole when it had embedded itself there, for his shoulder felt no stickier than the rest of his sweat-soaked body. “Give me your report.”

Olyvar hesitated, clearly torn between pressing him about his well-being and following the order of his king. In the end, the latter desire won out.

“Lannister men began surrendering in droves when Tywin fell.”

Robb smiled despite the stinging pain of his wound. That had been precisely his hope, and exactly the reason he’d commanded Olyvar to remain on the field with his own direwolf standard. The fewer men who had known that he himself had been felled in battle, the better. And a significant portion of his men knew well enough to know that if Grey Wind was on the field, Robb was there as well.

And a surrender would be better than a complete slaughter, he knew, for surrender meant that some of the Lannister men may swear fealty to Tyron and join their cause. With the north, the riverlands, the Vale, and the westerlands united under him, Robb undoubtedly had the advantage, especially with the stormlands in chaos as they were. But the man who called himself Aegon Targaryen was a worry that would have to keep until later.

“Are any of the men still fighting?”

Olyvar hesitated, as though he thought Robb would jump up off of his cot to subdue the stragglers himself. “Some scattered fighting along the right flank, near the gates of Lannisport,” he admitted finally. “Lord Royce seemed to have it well in hand.”

It was plain from Olyvar’s expression that that was not the only bad news. “What aren’t you telling me, Olyvar?” Robb pressed, feeling almost as though he was trying to pry news from a recalcitrant child. Olyvar looked even more worried than usual.

“Some of the Lannister men,” he began after a long pause, “said there’s been talk of dragons.”

Dracones. It was the second time Robb had heard that talk recently, and the thought sent a chill down his spine. If men thought Grey Wind a terrifying beast, Robb knew his wolf would be nothing compared to a full-grown dragon, had they truly come again.

“In the east,” Robb remarked as calmly as he could manage. “I’ve heard the talk.”

Olyvar shook his head vehemently. “Not in the east,” he insisted. “Here. In Westeros.”

That could certainly be ill news, Robb knew. Aegon the Conqueror had taken nearly the whole of Westeros with dragons, and even the united armies of half the Seven Kingdoms would be nothing against a wall of dragon fire; the Field of Fire had proven that beyond doubt. But if this new Aegon truly had come on the back of dragons, the conqueror come again, Robb was keen to let the man
know that he was not his enemy. Aegon was more than welcome to the Iron Throne, and the men of the north knew enough to respect the decision Torrhen Stark had made three centuries prior. Robb would surrender his own crown in a moment if it was a choice between his crown and his people’s lives.

“Aegon?” he ventured, but Olyvar shook his head.

“Not Aegon,” he explained. “Rhaegar’s sister. Daenerys. They say she’s taken Dragonstone and has three dragons.”

That truly sent a jolt through Robb’s body. A Targaryen come from the east, establishing herself on Dragonstone with three dragons. It was a queer repeat of a history Robb had heard told all his childhood, and he knew how that story ended.

“How is it that we’ve gone from having no Targaryens in Westeros to having three?” he breathed with a shake of his head. Olyvar gave him an odd look.

“Three?” he echoed. “Who is the third?”

Robb felt a moment of panic as he realized what he’d said. They’d given him milk of the poppy, just a bit, before the medic had begun preparing to remove the arrow from his shoulder. Had it possibly made him lose his senses so completely as to forget that Olyvar knew nothing about Jon? He’d never had milk of the poppy before, so he couldn’t be certain.

“Two,” he amended hastily. “I meant two.”

Before Olyvar could think anything else of the comment, Robb called the medic back in and let him continue his work, and for good or for ill, that seemed to take all of Olyvar’s attention. Robb felt the blood gush from his wound as soon as the arrow was removed, and Olyvar helped them hurriedly remove his armor to staunch the bleeding. The pain was still there, but duller, though Robb began to feel a bit lightheaded by the time they’d managed to staunch the flow. He felt half-dazed and almost in a dream when the Smalljon entered his tent sometime later, after they’d already stitched up both his wounds.

The Smalljon was even bloodier than Olyvar had been, bloodier even than Grey Wind was. His wolf did not seem to care that his coat was matted with blood and mud as he slept on undeterred in the corner, and Smalljon seemed equally unconcerned about his own state. Robb didn’t miss the way his gaze trailed up and down Robb’s body, as if to check whether he had any further injuries.

“We’ve rounded up most of the prisoners, and we’re clearing away the dead,” the Smalljon reported in a no-nonsense tone. “Ser Addam Marbrand was slain in the fighting. Shall we have his body sent back to Ashemark?”

Robb remembered the recalcitrant lord of Ashemark and how utterly unhelpful the man had been when they’d stormed the castle all those moons before. Robb certainly could not blame him, of course, for he couldn’t imagine he would be at all conciliatory if he’d been there when the ironborn had stormed Winterfell. He wondered absentely if the man had other sons to succeed him.

“See it done,” he agreed absently. “What else?”

The Smalljon’s expression was pensive. “What shall be done with Lord Tywin’s body?”

That was a thing that, somehow, Robb had not taken the time to consider. He’d spent so much time considering so many contingencies and contingencies to his contingencies, but he’d never thought through what would happen after he’d won. There was a part of him that had been brimming with
confidence about the possibility of victory and another, larger part of him that had scarce believed it even possible, that had felt as though thinking through the aftermath was too great a challenge to the gods.

They could not mount Tywin’s head upon the city walls, no matter how badly Robb wanted to do so; that much, at least, was plain. There were undoubtedly those in Lannisport who despised Tywin as much as he did, but there would be those in the city who would love him, and it certainly wouldn’t endear anyone to the new Lord of the Rock if the city thought he would bend his knee to a king who would mount the previous lord’s head on a pike. Part of him wanted the man to suffer, but of course that would be impossible, for he was already dead. When Robb had been Grey Wind, he had looked forward to sinking his teeth into Tywin’s flesh, ripping out his throat and watching the blood flow free, but in the end, he’d died too easily, his neck broken in the wolf’s struggle to remove his helm. It was almost too benign, too simple a death for a man who had had a hand in so much destruction.

“Summon Lord Tyrion,” Robb decided finally. “Have him deal with it.”

The Smalljon snorted in amusement and agreed, and then he was gone. Robb attempted to get up and get properly dressed, to at least give the appearance to his men that he was unharmed, but the moment he tried, Grey Wind was awake and at the entrance to his tent, growling every time Robb made even the most cursory move toward leaving. Eventually Robb dozed, and when he woke it was dark and Tyrion Lannister had come to his tent.

“I hear I am officially the Lord of the Rock now,” the little man remarked smugly as he entered. Robb rubbed his eyes, his shoulder aching, his mind feeling strange and sluggish. “You have my thanks.”

Robb would never become accustomed to that, to the other man talking about his father’s death with such cavalier disregard. When Robb’s own father had died, he’d felt no glee at becoming the Lord of Winterfell, would have given back his title and his sword and anything that was asked of him just to have his father back. But his father had not been Tywin Lannister.

“I hope you will forgive my saying so, but I will be glad to be quit of this place,” Robb said finally when he could think of nothing else. Tyrion snorted and crossed to the table, pouring himself a glass of wine and drinking it down. He poured himself another.

“I hope you will forgive my saying so, but I don’t believe you’re going anywhere for a bit,” Tyrion remarked in a somewhat bemused tone, and Robb was about to insist that he was fine before he looked down and saw the blood that had soaked through his bandage. He blinked at it dimly. “Mayhaps I should send our maester down to you?”

Robb wasn’t certain if it was a jape or a legitimate offer. It was often difficult to distinguish with Tyrion, and it was a bit more difficult when combatting blood loss and milk of the poppy both. Though if the way his shoulder felt was any indication, the latter had worn off considerably whilst he’d dozed.

“It’s a minor wound. I shall be back on my feet within days.”

And then what? There were two Targaryens, three dragons, a Tyrell army and a Lannister bastard still on his plate. The ironborn reavers would have to be put down if the Tyrells could not manage to destroy them, elsewise they were like to return for a second attempt to pillage the north or the riverlands. And Dorne was still a question without an answer, for they were nominally loyal to the bastard king and yet Robb had yet to spot a single Dornish soldier across the battlefield. And looming over all of it was the threat from the north whose power Robb could not even dream of
quantifying.

Tyrion simply shrugged, supremely unconcerned by the state of Robb’s injury. “Well, I merely came to collect my dear father’s body and offer my congratulations.”

The comment was a confusing one to his muddled mind. “Congratulations?” he echoed. “For killing your father?”

Tyrion toasted him with his wine cup before taking another large sip. “For that I am forever in your debt,” he acknowledged. “But my congratulations are for **becoming** a father, not killing one.”

It took a long moment for the words to organize themselves in Robb’s mind, for him to realize what Tyrion was saying. The man pulled a scroll from his pocket, and Robb could see the broken direwolf seal. His chest felt tight with emotion, fear and excitement and sadness all at once. Robb took it numbly from his hand.

“Rodrik Stark. Such an obsessively northern name,” Tyrion remarked blithely. “May you prove to be a better father than Tywin Lannister was. Now if you will excuse me, I must make arrangements to have my father interred so I may piss on his grave. A happy day for all.”

Tyrion downed the last of his cup before depositing it back on the table with more force than necessary and then he was gone, leaving Robb feeling off-balance and disoriented as he watched the other man leave.

Chapter End Notes

The first person to identify which historical Westerosi battle this most resembles gets a hilarious anecdote about the writing process for this story. ;P

Up next: Robb XIX, in which...DRAGONS!
Robb XIX

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Dragons_. To say the word was one thing, but to see them flying into view overhead was another thing entirely. There were shouts and exclamations even from the most hardened men, and that was how Robb had known that the dragons had arrived. Having expected them made their appearance no less awe-inspiring.

The missive had come not three days after the battle had been concluded. They’d still been counting the dead, cleaning up bodies and securing oaths of fealty from those who had surrendered, and although Robb had been up and out of bed, the maester had strapped his arm into a sling and soundly bid him not to try to use it too much if he ever wanted to swing a sword again. Tyrion Lannister’s face, when he’d brought the letter, had been grim.

“Daenerys of the House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Queen of Meereen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Protector of the Realm, Lady of the Seven Kingdoms, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons bids us swear her fealty and support her claim to the throne,” Tyrion had told him, the first bit read entirely off the scroll in front of him. Had it not been for the dragons, Robb might have scoffed and dismissed the summons entirely.

_She is not the rightful queen of anything, at least not this side of the Narrow Sea_, Robb couldn’t help but think to himself. She must know of Aegon, and then there was Jon as well. If it came to be a matter of claims, she was even further down the line of succession than she knew. And yet Renly had made a claim on the throne above his elder brother, and he hadn’t even had dragons at his back. Aegon the Conqueror hadn’t had a claim on the Seven Kingdoms at all, but he had taken them all the same.

Robb watched the three dragons circle overhead, wondering what this strange queen’s play would be. Robb had chosen to remain in the camp with his men rather than retreat to the relative comfort of the castle, but this queen would not know that. He wondered if she would land at the base of the Rock and look for him there or if she would have the discerning eye from the air to be able to tell which tent was the royal pavilion and guess at his location.

The largest of the three dragons was the one that began to descend, a huge black creature, and as it came lower and lower, Robb could see a figure on the dragon’s back, mounted between its large spines. Even the largest dragon was not near the size of Balerion the Black Dread, not if the stories Robb had heard in childhood had been anything near the truth, but it was huge all the same. Robb could hear the nervous whinnies of horses and the chatter of men as he watched the black dragon circle then finally touch down in a space between the tents.

The woman who slid off the dragon’s back was small, almost absurdly so, though perhaps the contrast was enhanced by the sheer size of her mount. Her hair was silver-gold, barely touching her shoulders but decorated with a series of small braids. When she looked up at him, Robb saw that her eyes were a shocking shade of violet.

But the most striking thing about her, Robb realized, was that she had come _alone_, without a single warrior beside her. She wore no sword and carried no bow and had landed herself directly in the center of what could be an enemy encampment with seemingly no hesitation, no fear. That spoke volumes of the confidence she had in the power of her dragons, and knowing what Aegon the
Conqueror had accomplished with his three dragons, Robb could guess that her confidence was not misplaced. A more fearful man would bow before her then, crown or no, would swear fealty to her as she had demanded. Even the Greatjon, who had been the first to declare that he would bend the knee to no king but the King in the North, could not blame Robb if he bent the knee to this girl right then and swore her fealty, for he was in Robb’s camp seeing the same spectacle Robb himself was.

But Robb had thought this through, had done nothing but consider how he would handle this dragon queen when she came. He thought about each of the kingdoms that were now beneath him, thought of the Lannister boy sitting on the Iron Throne and the threat from the north, of Aegon Targaryen and of Jon and of Howland Reed’s story of the three Kingsguard who had guarded Jon with their lives, who had not been guarding the queen nor this girl once she had been born. And Robb had come to a firm conclusion about how he must handle this interaction.

The black dragon spread its wings and with a great gust of wind took off into the sky to join the two others. That left the silver-haired girl standing alone, looking little more than a child, certainly not the great queen that her many titles would imply. Was this what people saw when they looked at me and saw only a boy? Robb couldn’t help but wonder as he looked upon the girl. She would be younger even than Robb himself was, had been born at the end of Robert’s Rebellion. She would be Jon’s aunt and yet Jon was several moons her elder.

Robb stood in place and let the girl make her way to him. Her gown was red and her cloak black, and the bells she wore braided into her hair tinkled as she walked. Though Robb was not an unreasonably tall man himself, the Targaryen queen scarce reached his shoulder when she stopped in front of him. Still, she was not cowed.

“Your Grace,” Robb greeted with a small inclination of his head, and she did not miss the inadequacy of his obeisance. Her violet eyes narrowed as they fell upon him.

“You will not kneel to me, then,” she said shortly. It was not a question, and there was power behind her words despite her small stature and pretty face.

“No, Your Grace, I regret to tell you that I will not.” Robb said the words as diplomatically as possible, mindful of the three dragons that still danced in the sky overhead, mindful of the realization that they could burn him and his entire army to ash within minutes. All he could hope was that this girl was not her father’s daughter, for Robb had not forgotten the way the Mad King had roasted Robb’s grandfather to death inside his own armor. “But you are welcome to ask the Lord of the Westerlands to swear his fealty.”

It was plain that the offer confused her, though she recovered quickly. “Forgive me, for I am but a young girl and know little of the ways of war,” she said with such insincerity that it was a trial not to laugh, “but you won a great victory here some days past, did you not? Is the Lord of the Westerlands not now your vassal?”

He’s soon to be yours, Robb thought wryly, for Tyrion Lannister had been very plain about the fact that his allegiance extended no further than the appearance of a dragon at his walls. Robb chose his words carefully.

“I have no claim to the Iron Throne, nor do I have any wish to take it,” he assured her slowly. “I shan’t bow to you now, but neither shall I forbid the other lords from joining your cause should they wish it.”

It was easier to let go of the other kingdoms than Robb had expected it would be. But Robb had never wanted a kingdom, had never wanted to be the king of anything. All he had wanted was to save his father, then to avenge him, but dragons had a way of making all political maneuvering
utterly meaningless if the dragons all belonged to one side.

The small queen caught on to his implications immediately. “You say you shall not bow to me now,” she pointed out. “If not now, then when?”

Robb gave the girl a grim half-smile. “Come inside, and we can discuss it further."

If he’d expected a protest from her, she didn’t give it, followed him to his pavilion without complaint. When his guards pulled open the flap of the tent for them, it only underscored the way she had come entirely without guards of her own and how utterly cavalier she was about it. Grey Wind was not in Robb’s tent, and that said enough to Robb about whether or not this girl could be a threat. His wolf seemed always to know when there was danger afoot.

Olyvar scrambled to pour them both cups of wine before he retreated to give them privacy. Robb twirled the goblet by its stem as he considered precisely what to say to her.

“The northern lords have vowed to never kneel to another southron ruler,” he admitted finally. “Northmen respect loyalty above all. Loyalty and strength.”

The girl raised an eyebrow. “I have three dragons,” she reminded him pointedly, her tone almost petulant. She had expected to walk in and plow over Robb as though it was nothing, he realized, and the recognition that that would not be the case had left her sullen. Robb took a deep breath.

“I am not your advisor, Your Grace, so you have no reason to listen to me.” He paused, thoughtful. “But if I were, I would ask you to get on your dragon and fly north. Go to Castle Black and speak with my brother Jon Snow. Ask him what he has seen north of the Wall. Ask him about Hardhome and about all the men, women, and children who died there.”

The news from Jon had been equal parts invigorating and horrifying, as it seemed most things were now. Good news never came without a price, and Jon’s confirmation that he was injured but very much alive was somewhat soured by the thought of how outmanned they were. The Wall truly was all that stood between them and utter destruction, and that much had become clear. But fire killed wights, and if anything could destroy them in droves, it would be creatures that could breathe fire.

Daenerys was skeptical, but Robb had been prepared for that. She looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“Why should I fly north when my throne is here in the south?”

Robb had expected the protest and he had an argument ready for her. “If you do not find his words compelling, you can easily fly back south and take King's Landing in a day with your dragons. If what I say has no merit, the most you shall lose is a few days’ travel.”

Robb could tell that the queen was considering it. “And what shall I gain?”

Robb smiled. “If you and your dragons can save my people, the north is yours,” he told her. “I will swear you my fealty, and gladly.”

“Save your people from what?”

Robb had expected that question too, had thought over the merits of trying to convince her. She would mayhaps be more prone to believe than most anyone else who had not seen it for themselves, for they had all been told that dragons were gone from the world, and now she had three. But her disbelief and scorn were not a chance that Robb was willing to take.
“You may not believe me if I told you,” he remarked evenly. “Let the men who have seen it for themselves tell you and see then if you are not convinced.”

The queen sat back in her chair and seemed to consider his words. She was silent for a long minute before she seemed to come to a conclusion.

“I must consult with my advisors before making such a move,” she said, her expression sharp and uncompromising. “Make no mistake; the only reason I am here negotiating with you and not killing you is because Ser Barristan thought very highly of your father and hopes the son will live up to the example.”

That hit Robb with a jolt of surprise. None of them had known, nor even suspected, that Ser Barristan had decided to support this queen. Robb wondered if she knew what she had in Ser Barristan, wondered if she knew how many minds his presence by her side could change. Dragons could win her fear and even respect, but many men all over the Seven Kingdoms still sung of the deeds of Barristan the Bold, and he could win her their loyalty.

“And what shall you do?” she asked him before he’d recovered. Robb scrambled for an answer.

“I shall march back home,” he told her finally, and she looked at him as though he was speaking some queer foreign tongue she did not understand.

“After all this?” she asked disbelievingly. “You take the westerlands and then make an about-face and march for home?”

Robb had once thought to try to turn to the Tyrells next, to find some way to remove the Lannisters from power in King’s Landing, but two Targaryens and three dragons had changed the game entirely. That and the news of Hardhome, of the thousands who had been slaughtered there.

“I told you, I have no interest in the Iron Throne,” he reminded her. “Most of my foes are dead, and I have no doubt that you shall rain fire and blood upon the pretenders who now hold your throne.”

The fact that he’d referred to it as her throne seemed to please her, though she didn’t say so. “You shall leave the south to me to take on my own? I believe we have common cause against the Lannister pretender.”

Robb took a deep breath.

“With all due respect, Your Grace, you do not need me,” he told her as diplomatically as he could manage. “As you said, you have three dragons. You say you have landed on our shores with multiple armies at your back. The Lord of the Westerlands will declare for you and commit his men to your cause, and mayhaps the Vale and the riverlands will as well. Many of my men have not been home in several years. I have a newborn son I’ve never seen and a brother I had believed to be dead and haven’t seen since before the war began. Should you decide not to help us, I have to hope that I can return home in time to save them.”

Or at least see them one last time before we all perish, he added silently to himself. It was a grim thought. The mention of his family seemed to move her, for her expression turned sad for a moment before she changed the subject.

“What do you know of the Dornish?”

It wasn’t the question that Robb had expected. “I know that they’ve made common cause with Elia’s son,” he remarked after a moment, “Your nephew.”
Daenerys’ face turned sour. “My nephew,” she repeated dully.

She didn’t sound at all convinced, and Robb could not blame her. It seemed that Tyrion Lannister was not the only one to have doubts about the fanciful story of the boy’s faked death. *Mayhaps the dragons aren’t the only reason she feels she should push her own claim,* Robb thought as he looked upon her. She changed the subject again.

“I hear that you have a beast of your own,” she remarked suddenly. “A wolf?”

Robb glanced over at the corner where Grey Wind usually slept, once again noting the wolf’s absence. He tried not to show how much the change in topic confused him. He certainly didn’t seem to be following this girl’s leaps of logic.

“A direwolf, Your Grace,” he told her finally. “Grey Wind.”

The Targaryen queen looked thoughtful at that, far more than his response seemed to merit.

“Do you have other wolves or just the one?”

There seemed to be no harm in satisfying her curiosity, so Robb did. “There were six in the litter, Your Grace. Each of my siblings got one,” he told her slowly. *Each of my siblings, and my cousin. Your nephew, your true nephew,* he couldn’t help but add, though he had the sense not to say it aloud. Let Jon decide for himself whether he wanted to disclose the truth to her. It was not Robb’s place to make those decisions for him.

Daenerys sat back in her chair, looking into her wine cup but not drinking from it, and Robb couldn’t help but wonder if she was wary of the possibility of poison. Her dragon couldn’t save her from that, although if her letter told it true, she had two Essosi armies who might have something to say if she died on a diplomatic mission. Robb couldn’t help but wonder if there would be anyone out there who would consider it worth the gamble to ensure the girl’s death.

“How does your wolf treat your siblings?” she inquired finally, the words spoken with such a deliberate air of casualness that it was clear that they were of great import. Robb frowned.

“My wolf likes those who are dear to me, Your Grace,” he told her carefully, searching her face for some clue as to the reasons behind this line of questioning. Her violet eyes gave nothing away. “He is wary of most others. But he will not attack anyone unless they are a threat to me.”

Daenerys tapped her chin thoughtfully. “What about your lady mother?” she asked then, just as deliberately. “She lives still, does she not? Does your wolf treat your mother the same way he would treat your siblings?”

Robb understood, finally, what this girl seemed to be getting at, and something about it brought an uncomfortable feeling to his chest.

“He protects her when I ask him to guard her,” he admitted slowly. “But he doesn’t guard her on instinct. The only time he did was when she carried my newest brother in her womb. It was the same with my wife, before we set out on campaign.” Robb watched her expression, saw the bit of confidence that seemed to flood into her eyes at that. “Mayhaps he simply sensed an innocent in need of protection. Or mayhaps…”

“Mayhaps he sensed a child of Stark blood in their wombs,” she finished for him without hesitation, and Robb nodded slowly at the sense of satisfaction that now flooded her features.
Up next: Daenerys I, in which Jon meets his auntie and tries to use his powers of persuasion to convince her that there is a giant ice zombie army marching right for them. We'll see how that goes.
For most of Dany’s life, Westeros had been nothing more than an apocryphal story she’d been told, a place she’d been almost unable to believe existed in truth. It had been a place filtered through the eyes of Viserys, and the closer she’d come to hitting the shores, the more she’d wondered how much of what he’d told her had been accurate and how much had been exaggeration and mistruth. It wasn’t until she had gotten on the ship to cross the Narrow Sea that she had finally asked Ser Barristan to tell her more about her mother and father, more about the Starks and the Lannisters, the Baratheons and the Arryns, the Tullys and the Martells.

But as much as Westeros had been some apocryphal tale to her, the Wall had been even less than that, a story within a story, a tale within a tale. It had been the sort of thing her mind had been unable to imagine, and yet the moment she saw it, she remembered it as though she’d been there before. As the wind rushed past her ears and she looked down at it from above, she remembered standing beneath the giant wall of ice, remembered the things she’d seen in Qarth. She could almost taste the shade of the evening against her tongue, except that this wasn’t a dream or a vision.

And yet this giant wall of ice didn’t seem like a thing that should exist in the world, no more than her dragons did. It seemed strange and otherworldly, like something from a storybook, the landscape around it covered in blankets of white. The falling snow seemed to melt before it ever hit her, and she could feel the warmth of Drogon even through the chill in the air.

Castle Black was not a castle at all, Dany realized as she approached, didn’t even have a gate. It was a mismatched collection of towers and outbuildings, none of which appeared to be in good condition. She wasn’t certain of the threat that Robb Stark had bid her to come to the Wall to combat, but the one thing of which she was certain was that this didn’t look like a fort manned with a force that could combat a threat of any significant size. As Drogon circled to land, Dany saw black-clad figures emerging from the buildings, and though she could not make them out with any clarity, she had no doubt they would be looking up at her in awe and disbelief.

I don’t belong here, Dany thought suddenly, feeling a chill despite the warmth of Drogon’s flesh beneath her. My dragons do not belong here. This was not the warm grass of the Dothraki Sea nor the searing desert of the Grey Waste, was not even the temperate climate of Meereen or Volantis. The snows in the south had been mild and had barely blanketed the ground, but here winter was a force in and of itself, some of the snow drifts piling up feet high along the base of the Wall mere meters from the furthest flung buildings of Castle Black. This place was ice, and she was fire, and she felt an immediate sense of discomfort the closer she came to the ground.

Drogon touched down as one of the men separated himself from the mass of black. Daenerys stilled in place, too stunned to even begin to think of dismounting. For the man was coming straight toward her, no fear and no apprehension as he walked up beside her dragon. The most striking part, she thought as she watched numbly, was that the dragon simply let him.

One leather-clad hand reached up, and it was only then that Dany realized he meant to help her to the ground. She scrambled to take his hand, feeling odd and off-balance as the man helped her down with the same nonchalance he might have used to help a lady dismount a horse.

It was only when her boots were on solid ground, crunching into the snow beneath her, that she got a proper look at the man. He was tall, though not near as tall as Drogo had been, and beneath his
heavy fur cloak, she guessed he would be much slimmer. He had a long face, dark hair, and eyes that
looked black as pitch though might have been grey in better light, she thought. Scars littered one side
of his face surrounding his eye.

“Your Grace,” the man acknowledged once he seemed certain that she was on solid footing, and he
let her hand fall from his, kneeling before her, though the movement seemed a laborious one. He
moved like an old man, she thought, though by his face he could not be more than twenty.

Daenerys had sent word ahead on Ser Barristan’s advice, for he had been afraid that to simply appear
on a dragon might cause panic. She would have been plenty happy to send a shock of proper fear
through these men, but for this man to know her and bow to her immediately seemed to give
credence to her Hand’s advice.

“Lord Commander Snow?” she inquired as he rose with even more palpable strain than it had taken
him to kneel. The man nodded. “You don’t look much like your brother,” she couldn’t help but
remark as she regarded his face a second time. The laugh that bubbled up from the man’s throat
sounded bitter.

“He takes after his mother,” the Lord Commander remarked darkly after a beat, and for a moment,
Dany wondered at the sharpness of his tone. Of course, she realized then. Snow. A bastard of the
north. It was one of the many things a Westerosi-raised woman would know by instinct, and yet
Dany had to search her mind for the memory of when that had been taught to her in her childhood, a
tale of a distant land she’d not visited since her birth and yet now meant to rule. These were the sorts
of blunders she could ill afford.

She changed the subject, hoping the Lord Commander had not noticed her moment of ignorance.
“Your brother bid me come here to save the north,” she intoned slowly. “So I ask you now: to save
the north from what?”

Jon Snow’s already somber face turned even grimmer. “I’d ask you to follow me, Your Grace,” he
said in lieu of answering, and Dany began to feel annoyance brimming in her chest. So many of the
freed slaves in Essos had supported her because she’d saved them, so she had instinctively
understood the wisdom in Robb Stark’s request, but she was beginning to feel as though the brothers
were doing no more than playing games with her. She was half-tempted to get back
on Drogon’s back and fly straight back south, but Drogon chose that moment to move away before
taking off into the sky again. She shot her dragon a displeased look, then repressed it, for the last
thing she needed this man to know was that she had less than perfect control of her dragons.

With some effort, she held in her annoyance as she followed the black-clad man through the drifts of
snow. When he offered her his hand, she took it, for it was much more difficult to walk through the
thick blankets of snow than it had been in the south, much more difficult than she’d have expected.
The Lord Commander seemed to have no trouble with the snow, though his movements were
labored and tentative. Dany eyed him for a long moment as they walked.

“Are you injured, my lord?”

He grimaced in response. “Healing,” he admitted gruffly. “More slowly than I’d like.”

It seemed obvious that he didn’t intend to provide any more clarity on the topic, and Dany had no
mind to push it. Instead, she walked silently beside him, trying to remain oblivious to the stares of the
many black-clad men who milled around the castle compound. Most of those who had stopped and
stared quickly got to appearing busy at no more than a simple look from the Lord Commander.

He led her to the base of the Wall, where it loomed tall above them, then into a corridor she hadn’t
noticed, one which led them into the bowels of the structure itself. Away from Drogon and his warmth, Dany felt the cold sharply, and the thought of descending inside the depths of the Wall gave her a looming sense of unease. Jon Snow gave her a look that seemed to indicate that he sensed her unhappiness, though he said nothing aloud.

He lit a torch before he guided her through the ice-lined corridor, and Dany tugged her cloak more tightly around herself, the eerie feeling seeming to chill her more than the temperature of the air. There were two guards outside of what Dany realized was a door set into the ice, and the idea that there could be a room behind it was a queer one.

“I’ll need this opened,” he remarked to one of the guards, and Dany watched as the two men set about it. Jon held his torch close to the lock for a minute, and Daenerys wasn’t certain why until she realized that ice had frozen it shut. Even when one of the guards was able to insert the key, the hinges were frozen tightly enough that both guards had to join their strength to try to wrench it open. The Lord Commander did not lend his aid, and Dany couldn’t help but wonder whether it was his position or his injury that kept him from doing so.

After a few minutes, the door was finally open, and whatever Dany had expected, it was not what she saw. The room beyond the door was tiny, short enough that Dany could scarce have stood upright in it if she had walked inside, and a man Jon Snow’s height would have had to crouch. Two men in ragged furs lay chained on the floor, though neither of them stirred when the door was opened.

_Not men, Dany realized suddenly, corpses._

Both men looked as though they had frozen to death, and the time they’d spent in the cell after having perished had likely helped add to their appearance. Their flesh, or what was revealed of it, was pale and bloodless, having turned a grotesque shade of blue. Icicles had formed in their beards, in their hair and eyebrows, and both men’s eyes stared blankly at nothing in particular. Dany shot Jon Snow a look, suddenly very wary.

“Your brother bid me here to look at corpses?” she demanded, annoyed and uneasy in equal measure. All three men exchanged a look.

“They are not corpses,” the Lord Commander said gravely into the silence. “Or at the least, they are not just corpses.” He paused, circumspect. “Come nightfall, they will rise and try to attack anything living within range.”

The chains suddenly made sense, although the words seemed no more than some fanciful story. Her skepticism must have come across, for the look the Lord Commander gave her was almost indulgent.

“I suspect you should like to see for yourself, to be certain that I am not spinning some tale,” he said grimly. “But you may want to come inside to wait for nightfall. While we wait, I can tell you the state of things north of the Wall.” The man grimaced to himself. “It’s not favorable.”

She might have laughed if not for the seriousness of his expression. Instead, she watched as he bid the guards to close the corpses back into their cell and followed him back out into the open. The further they got from the ice cells, the less uneasy Dany felt, although she still felt the briskness of the cold. The Lord Commander led her toward one of the smaller buildings, and when they entered, she saw that the walls were lined with swords and axes and leftover bits of armor. A giant mound of white fur lay beneath the forge.

*His wolf,* Daenerys realized as the mass of fur moved, and a pair of unnerving red eyes regarded her
with almost humanlike intelligence. After a few moments, the animal seemed to decide she was unimportant and lowered his head onto his paws again as though to go to sleep. It was impossible to tell when it was lying down how large the wolf would be at full height, but Dany found herself thinking that it would likely be near as tall as a horse. Nothing compared to the size of a dragon, and yet it could be a fearsome beast all the same. *Mayhaps that was why he wasn’t so easily cowed by the sight of Drogon,* she reasoned to herself.

He led her into the room behind the armory, which was modest and sparsely furnished. A steward was inside already preparing mulled wine over the fire, and Dany thought the figure an uncommonly tall woman at first, all pale skin and dark ringlets of hair. But when he turned from the fire to take their cloaks, she saw the barest hints of stubble against his jaw and realized he was a man. He hung both their cloaks near the fire to dry them out before pouring them both a cup of wine and retreating without a word.

Daenerys pulled off her gloves, pressing her chilled hands against the warmth of the cup. She waited patiently until the Lord Commander had taken a sip of his own wine before she took a sip of her own. The warmth of it seemed to flow through her whole body, though that only further highlighted how cold she’d been outside.

“They fall still during the day,” the Lord Commander said suddenly, as though their conversation near the corpses had never truly halted, “and rise only at night. But the days are becoming shorter, and I fear we won’t have much break from them, given enough time.”

Daenerys regarded the man carefully, uncertain quite how to respond. She’d hatched dragons and met warlocks, had had visions and seen blood magic manifest in the world, and even so, she was not certain she believed the man’s proclamations.

“How many of them are there?”

Jon Snow shrugged. “Hundreds,” he answered finally. “Thousands. More every day. If we don’t burn the bodies, every person who dies rises eventually, and thousands have died beyond the Wall. Some rise immediately and some take longer, but they always rise.”

His solemn tone made Dany shiver despite the warmth of the fire and the wine cup in her hand. “What about the Wall?”

Jon shook his head with a forlorn expression. “They rise on this side of the Wall just as well as on the far side,” he told her. “The lands nearest the Wall are thinly peopled, but if the phenomenon spreads further south…I don’t see how we could hold them back forever. We may beat them back for a time, but we can’t burn every corpse, and the more of us they kill, the more their numbers swell. The Wall has kept the Others back, at least for now, but it doesn't seem to impede their reach.”

The Others. The Long Night. They were tales she’d heard told much the same way that Viserys had always told her of Westeros, and once they’d all seemed equally distant. And yet now she sat at the base of the Wall, Westeros unmistakably real beneath her feet. Was this what Moqorro had meant, when he had hailed her *Azor Ahai?* She’d dismissed it as strange religious fervor bolstered by fear and awe of her dragons, but *Azor Ahai* was said to be the hero that would fight against the darkness, and what was the threat that Jon Snow had just described if not darkness? The corpses lay still in the daylight, he’d said, and as the days grew shorter, as the hours of darkness grew longer, the threat grew greater. But she had no hero’s sword—no sword at all, in fact.

“What is it you ask of me, then?”
Jon Snow’s expression became even more troubled.

“Fire is the only thing we know for certain can kill the wights,” he told her finally. He pulled off his glove and showed her his palm, which was covered in a mess of burn scars. “I’ve slain one myself. But unless the whole of the Seven Kingdoms comes together, I’d venture to say that they outnumber us by some measure. We may be able to burn them one by one, but like as not, they’d overwhelm us before we could manage it with just torches and oil. Dragonglass can kill the Others, and mayhaps Valyrian steel can as well, but there is only one Valyrian steel sword on the Wall and not enough dragonglass weapons even to arm all of our men. Fire on a large scale is the only thing that would give us a fighting chance.”

He didn’t have to spell it out for her any more clearly than that. “My dragons,” she said, and he nodded slowly, seeming to be searching her features to see how she’d taken the revelation. “And what of the Others? Do you think dragonfire can destroy them as well?”

The Lord Commander shrugged. “We know little and less of the Others,” he admitted. “But what we do know is they are magic. How can a few hundred mortal men hope to stand against magic?”

Before she could formulate the answer, there was a soft knock at the door, and the curly-haired steward poked his head inside once the Lord Commander called him in.

“It will be dark soon, my lord,” he informed them politely, and Dany knew well enough what that meant. She abandoned her cup of wine and slid her hands back inside her gloves, watching as the Lord Commander covered his burned hand once again. He handed her cloak to her and took his own, and they set out. The large, white wolf stood up without even a word from its master as they left the room, and it was as large as Dany had expected, near as tall as she herself was.

The second trip to the ice cell was no more pleasant than the first. The sky had already been grey and dark when Dany had arrived, but it had gotten darker then, leaving no doubt that it was near nightfall. The wind had picked up while they’d been inside, pelting them with falling snow, and Dany had to pull up her hood to try to shield her face from it. Since the wind and snow was such that no torch was like to remain lit, they had to follow the steward’s lantern and white of the wolf’s fur as he led the way, seeming somehow to know precisely where they were heading.

The door was easier to open this time than the last, and the two men who stood guard were the same. The curly-haired steward remained with them, holding his lantern whilst Jon held a torch, but when they opened the door, the two figures within remained still. Dany shot Jon Snow a look.

“Soon,” he promised eerily, and there they stood in the flickering light, the five of them and the wolf, silent and waiting.

When it first happened, Dany almost thought that she’d imagined it. It began slowly, just the twitch of a finger, then an arm. With sluggish, jerky movements, the two corpses began to rise until one of them was on its feet, eyes sunken deep into his bloodless face, beard decorated with tiny chunks of ice. She could tell the moment it realized they were there, when its strange, lifeless eyes turned to them. It came forward slowly, rigidly, reaching out one spindly hand in their direction. Dany took an instinctive step back.

The creature reached the end of the give of the chains that bound it, but still it struggled, as if not understanding that it was restrained, and the second corpse was beside it seconds later, its face sunken and starved. The white wolf bared its teeth in a silent growl, and the Lord Commander placed a calming hand upon the beast’s head.

Dany watched the corpses continue to struggle against the restriction, hands reaching out as if to
grasp them if only they could come a little closer. She sucked in a long breath then exhaled slowly.

“You say there are thousands of these things?” she intoned. The Lord Commander nodded.

“At least. Tens of thousands. Mayhaps hundreds of thousands.”

Daenerys turned toward the man, trying to block out the half-human groans from the reanimated corpses.

“What would you have me do?”

The Lord Commander took his time in answering.

“I would not presume to tell you what to do, Your Grace,” he said finally, deferentially. “That is for you to decide.”

His brother had said much the same, she remembered. While Dany found herself glad for the obeisance, it was ultimately unhelpful. She tried again.

“If I were yours to command, just one of your men who happened to have three dragons, what would you bid me do?”

Jon Snow looked very stricken all of a sudden, as if the mere idea behind the question was ludicrous to him. A bastard-born boy has like as not never been able to contemplate the idea of giving an order to a queen, she thought. It took a beat for him to regain his composure.

“I would bid you fly north of the Wall and search them out,” he admitted finally, almost reluctantly. “Be cautious and remain on dragonback, but burn those you find. Determine if dragonfire truly can destroy the Others, for that is the only way the threat will ever be done away with. Only when the Others are gone, when they cannot reanimate any more corpses, will we truly be safe again.”

Daenerys stood silently and considered the man’s words. Robb Stark would not fight her, she was certain, and if he was correct in his assessment, many of his allies would bend the knee to her the moment they saw her dragons. The Lannister dwarf had already done so, and without hesitation. Aegon already had the stormlands well in hand and Dorne as well, a feat she was certain she herself would not have been able to manage without bloodshed, not after Quentyn. By all rights, she should be attacking the crownlands and the Reach, should be taking back the throne that rightfully belonged to her family. She had no need to fly alone amongst tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of enemies, to risk her life when she could fly back south and take the throne with relative ease.

And yet if the man stood before her was correct, it would only be a matter of time before these things began appearing further south, and every man, woman, and child who succumbed to the harshness of winter would return as an enemy. It would only be a matter of time before they began killing the people who counted on their rulers for protection, and tens of thousands could become hundreds of thousands, and hundreds of thousands could become a million. How long would it take before even three dragons would not be enough to stem the tide? The Iron Throne would still be there if she let the Lannister boy sit upon it awhile longer; if she left them to fend for themselves, the north might not. In the face of that, her choice seemed obvious.

“Then that is what I shall do,” she told the Lord Commander finally, and his surprise was almost a palpable thing.

“Are you certain, Your Grace?” he asked, as if unwilling to believe what he’d heard. She gave him a serious look.
“Sitting the Iron Throne means little and less if all my subjects are dead,” she remarked carefully. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon IV, in which Jon has yet another terrible, horrible, very bad, no good day. Oh, and Dany's day is pretty darn bad as well.
More than a fortnight had passed since the little, silver-haired queen had arrived at Castle Black, and they’d fallen into somewhat of a routine. They’d devised a plan for her to scout different areas north of the Wall, and she departed on dragonback each night, burning the wights where she found them. Each morning she returned and gave Jon a report whilst they broke their fast together. Some days she sent a raven south to check in with her men, and when she received replies, she was even surprisingly forthcoming with him about the state of the war. She would sleep the majority of the day, usually until Jon sent Satin to her to wake her for the evening meal, and then they would begin the cycle all over again.

There had been something comforting about the routine if not about the queen’s findings, for she always reported small bands of wights, all of which were easily dispatched by her dragon. She’d been all across the Haunted Forest, as far as the Frostfangs and even the Frozen Shore, and yet she had not had a word to say about the Others. Her impatience was nearly a palpable force, and Jon almost couldn’t blame her. Half a hundred walking corpses appearing at a time must have seemed nothing on dragonback with two more dragons flanking her; on the ground, even just that many meant death if you dropped your torch. The Fist of the First Men was testament to that, and Hardhome doubly so.

But Daenerys Targaryen didn’t know any of the men who had been slain on the Fist, was not nearly as moved as Jon had felt when Tormund had told her of his own battles against the dead, of having to slay his own son when he’d risen again. She had wed a Dothraki khal, knew something of men who were called savages by other men, so in that she mayhaps had more sympathy for the free folk than most. And yet even so, it was clear to Jon that whatever conviction had convinced her to remain had beenwaning every day, and Jon had been counting the days until she would give up and abandon them to their own defense. He tried to reassure himself that any time she spent there might be just enough; even if she was only killing the dead things in groups of twenty or fifty at a time, in the end that would be several hundred dead things that would not be there to attack them when the time came.

The absence of the Others clearly made the Targaryen queen doubt that they truly existed, but to Jon, it meant something else. Each night, he dreamt of cold mists and crackling ice and cawing ravens, and each morning he woke feeling as though he had slept scarce at all. He found Ghost in his bed nearly every morning unless his wolf had gone out hunting, and that only made him feel more apprehensive, though he was grateful for the wolf’s warmth at night.

Morning dawned with stinging wind and bitter cold, and for the first time, the queen did not return. Jon was up before dawn that day, as he often was, for dawn had begun to come later and later as the nights swallowed up the days. Even Satin had not woken yet, so Jon tended the fire and warmed his
own water to wash as well as he could without a proper bath, for he somehow managed to sweat in the night despite the chill that permeated the stone walls around him.

He made his way to the top of the Wall and checked in with the men patrolling there if only because he could, for there was a stubborn part of him that was still reveling in being able to be out of bed with some degree of regularity. It had been near two moons and yet Satin and Clydas still hovered over him as though he was infirm, and Ghost now stuck so close to Jon that the wolf would bump into him at times if he stopped too abruptly. He would bare his teeth at anyone who so much as raised their voice at Jon, and most men had learned better than to come any closer than three paces. He didn’t seem to mind the presence of the Targaryen queen, but mayhaps that was because she was the least imposing of anyone at Castle Black, if possibly the most dangerous.

*Or mayhaps it is because he knows she is of your blood,* said a voice inside Jon’s mind, one he had tried very hard to think away. No one would have ever been able to guess it, looking at the two of them, for there was no similarity Jon could find between himself and his father’s sister. His hair was dark where hers was silvery pale; her eyes were striking violet while his were so dark they were almost black. She was impatient and tempestuous and almost vibrant with life whilst Jon himself felt anything but. She had the conviction and confidence of a woman who could rule a kingdom, and Jon had never felt less capable of even commanding the Night’s Watch. Every part of him ached with the cold, and he sometimes wondered if he’d been meant to die that day from a dagger to the stomach.

The men atop the Wall had nothing to report when Jon came upon them that morning. Sometimes, with as dark as it was, the dragons were close enough that they’d be able to see the glow of their fires over the horizon as they burned the dead, and the men told stories of it as though they’d seen great dragon combat themselves, as though they’d just witnessed the Field of Fire come again. But that night, all had been silent, they’d reported, and they’d seen nothing.

Jon did not begin to become worried until after he’d broken his fast and there had still been no word of her or her dragons; he’d gone to the top of the Wall once more and borrowed a spyglass, but looking in every direction had showed him no sign of them. His first thought had been to send someone after her, in the direction she’d gone, or even to go himself, but he’d reluctantly had to accept that would be no more than folly.

*If the dragons cannot defend themselves against the Others, then what chance do men have of rescuing them?* he wondered helplessly.

But still he’d gone back to his rooms and begun going through their records, trying to figure out precisely how many men they had, how many they could spare for a rescue operation. They’d lost some men to the cold, as was inevitable, and they’d lost half again as many horses, and winter had scarce even fallen upon them yet. Castle Black was not Winterfell, and they did not have the luxury of the hot springs beneath to warm their walls. Jon couldn’t help but wonder how many of the smallfolk had died in the winter town during the last winter, even after they’d come to Winterfell for refuge. Jon had been too small to have any recollection of that winter, but he had to imagine that it had been more than any of them would have liked.

He looked up as Satin came in to the room.

“Has she returned?” he demanded hopefully. Jon could tell before Satin even answered that she hadn’t.

“No, my lord,” he responded regretfully. “We haven’t had any sign yet.” Instead, he held up a jar that was all too familiar. Jon rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“Can’t we dispense with that yet?”
Satin gave him a wry smile. “Clydas says that it’s supposed to help soften the scar tissue so they heal better and give you less trouble later,” the steward reminded him. It was far from the first time they’d had this conversation. “So mayhaps you should just lie down and let me have my way.”

Jon gave the man an unamused look, and Satin grinned. “I can do *that*, too, of course, but you really should allow me to use the salve first,” he said cheekily. Satin still wasn’t especially one for combat, though he’d grown to be a fair enough hand with a bow, but this was a sphere he was more than familiar with, and it showed. He’d had no hesitation in letting Jon know that he would be open to more of that sort of thing, though his offers were always playful and easily brushed off as japes. And, Jon noticed, he was never brazen enough to make them in front of the men.

Jon abruptly remembered the feel of Satin’s mouth around his cock, the skillful way the other boy had taken the whole length of him as though it was nothing. He’d nearly refrained from making Satin his steward for fear of leading the boy on, but the idea of what might befall him if left to his own devices was horrifying enough to override that. After all, not all the men of the Watch were anywhere near honorable, and they all knew Satin had been a whore in Oldtown. Only knowing he reported directly to the Lord Commander kept Satin safe, Jon suspected, though Jon had heard his share of whispered speculation about Satin sharing his bed. As it was, the closest Satin had ever come to properly sharing his bed had been sitting vigil over him when he’d been half dead.

Jon couldn’t help but wonder what Lord Stark would have thought of him if he could see him now. He’d always thought himself the one stain on the man’s honor, but now he knew that Ned Stark had likely never touched a woman besides his wife, at least not after he’d married. Jon had made a vow and already broken it in more ways that he could have imagined, if not in the letter than at least in spirit. Ygritte was dead, which was in some ways a blessing, but Satin was not, and looking at him every day only roundedly reminded Jon of his failures. Satin seemed to have no such compunctions about the whole thing.

“Fine,” Jon agreed finally, though reluctantly, for he knew he’d be getting an earful from Clydas if he put up a fight. He’d long ago learned which fights were worth pursuing and which were futile, and this one wasn’t worth his time. *It shouldn’t take long*, he thought to himself, *and mayhaps the Targaryen girl will return before it’s done.*

They climbed the stairs toward Jon’s bedroom out of necessity, for Jon had already learned the folly of trying to do this without lying down. Ghost, who had been sleeping in the corner, popped his head up and gave Satin a long look, then deemed the man safe and settled his head back down on his paws. Jon stripped off his layers until his torso was bare, and Satin’s eyes roved over his body, though to his credit all his early playfulness was gone.

“They look to be healing well, my lord,” he commented after a minute of observation. “Why don’t you lie down and I’ll get your back first?”

Jon lay down wordlessly, burying his head in his arms and waiting. He felt the mattress dip as Satin sat down beside him, and then gentle hands coated with the liniment Clydas had prepared touched against one of his scars. The wounds had healed already, but he would be lying if he insisted that the scars they’d left behind didn’t pain him or cause him any discomfort, but he’d gotten so used to the feeling that even Satin’s fingers pressing right against them was little more than a vague annoyance. The liniment had a heavy, herbal scent to it that Jon had also gotten quite used to, for his quarters smelled of it now more oft than not.

Satin was gentle and efficient as he massaged the salve in just the way Clydas had showed him, and the familiar scent and familiar movements were soothing in some strange way. It wasn’t until he heard Satin’s voice that Jon realized he’d begun to doze a little.
“You can turn over now. And be careful where you lie down. I’d rather not have to wash the sheets again.”

Jon snorted at the comment, though it was probably less than Edd might have complained if he’d been in the same position. Jon made certain when he turned over to lie on the cloth Satin had set down and threw his arm over his eyes. He’d found it was always easier if he didn’t look at what Satin was doing, for simply trying to ignore it seemed to make the pain less.

Satin went for the cut across his neck first, as he always did, the routine of it having become rather reassuring by that point. The scent seemed to waft into his nostrils with each gentle movement of Satin’s hands, first upon his neck and then moving onto his torso, where the newly-healed cuts remained pink and tender.

When he opened his eyes, he was flying. Huge groves of trees sped past beneath him, and the ground was white and cold but far below. A dark trail in the snow marked their path for anyone who might follow them, but his eyes were sharp and he circled his mother and his brother, making certain that nothing would come near. Animals scurried away from them, from their sight or their scent he wasn’t certain, but the walking meat did not fear them the same way, and it was the walking meat he watched for. The walking meat and the cold things that came with them, neither man nor animal, wholly unlike anything he’d seen before.

He saw nothing, no threats, and he circled again until his mother and brother came into sight once more. Both were afoot, for his brother’s wing was injured, and his mother could not fly without his brother. He called out to them, and the returning cry from his brother was weak but there. He was still moving, even if he was moving along the ground, even if he was slow. Blood trickled from his wounds, then hissed and smoked as it hit the white beneath them. Any predator could follow the trail of blood his brother had left. He had not feared predators, but that had been before. That had been before the walking meat, before the cold things. He’d never felt anything but warm before, even with all the white around him, not until the cold things had come.

He circled again, but there was no sign of the cold things or the dead things. There was only snow and trees and his brother and his mother, treading slowly along the ground. He could see the tall wall in the distance, not like the walls of his old lair but a wall made of cold. It felt as much like the cold things as anything he’d ever felt, except he’d been there many times and it had not hurt him, had not hurt his brothers or his mother.

He cried out once more, and his brother answered weakly. Blood seeped from his wound, steamed as it hit the ground. The ice wall was close, which meant that the men were close. The normal men, not the dead ones or the cold ones but the ones who could help his mother. He circled again.

Jon sat up in bed, his chest heaving as though he’d run for miles, flesh sticky with sweat. His eyes darted around the room in a panic, trying to remember where he was, who he was. I was flying, Jon thought numbly to himself, scarce able to catch his breath. He remembered that feeling from somewhere at the edges of his consciousness, knew what it was like to fly, knew what it was like not to be a man. He’d run with Ghost in his dreams before, but this was different, felt different.

I was a dragon, he realized dimly, heart hammering in his chest.

He just barely managed to make it to his chamberpot before his breakfast made a reappearance. Only dimly did he hear the sound of the door opening, and then Satin was on his knees beside him, holding back his hair as he heaved a second time. It was then that Jon realized he was trembling, his skin clammy with sweat. He only sat back when he was certain his stomach would not rebel a third time, and Satin nearly had to catch him to keep him from tumbling over. He met the boy’s worried eyes.
“What happened?” he managed after a moment, his voice heavy and raw in his throat. His steward looked at him strangely.

“You dozed off and I thought it best to let you sleep,” Satin admitted slowly, his expression searching. “It seems I was wrong. Should I fetch Clydas?”

And what would I tell him? Jon wondered in a state of near-hysteria. Should I tell him that I am the son of Rhaegar Targaryen and I just flew in the body of a dragon? The mere idea seemed preposterous. Jon shivered, and Satin grabbed one of the furs from the bed, wrapping it around his shoulders. Jon fought to regain control of himself.

“I’m fine,” he told Satin with confidence he did not feel. “It was simply…” Jon hesitated, searching for an explanation that would make sense. “…a nightmare.”

Satin’s skepticism at the explanation was obvious, though Jon found himself glad that Satin did not voice it. The sour taste of vomit lingered in Jon’s mouth.

“I’ll need you to saddle my horse, and I’ll need a small group of men to accompany me. Twenty should suffice.”

Satin appeared slightly alarmed. “I’m not certain that’s—” he began, but that was when they heard it. The sound of the horn reverberating through the walls, one single, long blast. They both waited a long minute to hear if there would be a second blast, though Jon already knew there wouldn’t be. The queen and the dragons had been near the Wall, and no one and nothing else had been near.

“The queen has returned,” Jon declared with confidence then, and that was the first time he’d ever seen Satin look frightened of him.

Satin readied his horse in silence, a silence that felt doubly profound in the midst of all the chatter around them from the rest of the men. The room was rife with speculation, for all had managed to learn that the dragon queen had returned, and yet she had not flown over the Wall on her dragon the way she usually did. The nervous energy in the stables was almost overwhelming, a feeling that Jon tried very hard to ignore. His head pounded with the remnants of his dream, and he already knew too well what he would find beyond the Wall. Ghost followed behind his mount, silent as always.

As soon as they were through the gate, Jon saw it, the one dragon circling in the air like a carrion crow circling around a carcass, and something about the thought chilled Jon to the bone. Death is in the air, he couldn’t help but think as he looked out as far as he could see, but there remained only one dragon in flight. Green and bronze, Jon noted, and the queen’s dragon was on the ground, bleeding in the snow, though they still could not see the pair in the distance. The cream-colored dragon was nowhere to be seen, and that gave Jon an immediate sense of foreboding.

He led his men in the direction of where the dragon was circling and set a fast pace. It was already past midday, and the sun would be going down sooner than they would like. It would serve none of them well to be caught out past the Wall after dark, not with whatever it was that had done such damage to the dragons.

It seemed a lifetime before the large black dragon came into sight. He looked different on the ground than he had from the air, Jon couldn’t help but note, one of his wings hanging awkwardly from his side, dragging through the snow. Blood still seeped from a wound there, and it seemed to smoke as it hit the snow, as if the dragon’s blood was fire itself.

Jon urged his mount forward, toward the queen, ignoring the whispered comments between his men. Whatever excitement they’d had riding beyond the Wall to see what had happened had quickly
morphed into apprehension, and it was clear that they had realized what Jon had already known. Whatever it was that had done such damage to the huge beast was not the sort of creature any of them wanted to encounter.

Jon slowed only when he came up beside the Targaryen queen. She’d never looked less a queen than she did in that moment, Jon thought as his gaze fell upon her. Her hair was mussed, her little braids all askew, and she smelled of smoke and ash. One arm of her coat had been entirely burned away, the skin beneath looking scalded, as though she’d poured a pot of boiling water upon it. Jon dismounted, and he felt Ghost only a few paces behind him, undeterred by the proximity of the wounded dragon.

“Are you all right?” The look Daenerys gave him was as sharp as Valyrian steel, as though she couldn’t fathom what would possess him to even ask. Jon sighed, knowing. “We need to get back before it gets dark,” he said instead. He had a thousand questions, but most of those could wait until the Wall was comfortably between them and everything on the other side. Daenerys looked stricken.

“I can’t leave him,” she said helplessly, looking back at her injured dragon. The large black beast released a pitiful noise, and Jon felt for her in that moment. Something had obviously happened to the third dragon, something awful, and Jon was not surprised that she wasn’t particularly keen to let the same happen to her own mount.

“We’ll have archers atop the Wall with fires and dragonglass arrows,” he tried to assure her. “If he stays near the Wall, we will do our best to protect him. But remaining here is an invitation for death.”

“How could he possibly understand that?” she demanded. “Drogon prefers the wilds. He dislikes men.”

Jon looked up at the dragon in the sky, remembering the beast’s mind. It was different than being in Ghost had ever been, for Ghost lacked human concepts, thought of packs and man-sounds and metal claws. But the dragon’s mind had been nothing like that, had had a sharp intelligence that the direwolf lacked. It wasn’t quite human, but it was so much closer.

_They understand more than you think_, Jon almost said before he stopped himself. That would invite questions, the sort he would not be keen to answer. He stared up at the green figure in the air.

_We can protect you all if you remain close to the Wall_, Jon thought listlessly as he eyed the dragon, and suddenly the great green beast turned to him, flying lower, closer, almost as if it had heard. Jon blinked.

_You are one of us._

The voice seemed to come from nowhere and yet from everywhere at once, was as loud as if someone had blown a horn directly into his ear, though he didn’t hear it with his ears. It was neither male nor female but something else entirely, unlike any voice he’d ever heard before. He wasn’t even truly certain that he’d heard it as much as he’d _felt_ it, as though the thought had emanated from his own mind. A searing pain shot through his head, and his hand shot up instinctively, pressing against his temple. The pounding that had been in his head since he’d woken grew even more pronounced, and the world swayed before he righted himself.

“Are you all right?” Daenerys asked him suddenly, the same question he’d asked her just moments before. The absurdity of the question was unmistakable.

“We need to go,” he said by way of deflection. “You’re injured. We’ll ride back together.”
The look she gave him was perfectly skeptical. “I sat ahorse until nearly the very moment I gave
birth to my son. I don’t need both arms to guide a horse,” she told him haughtily. She looked him up
and down. “You’re the one who looks as though you need the help.”

The worst part about it was that she wasn’t wrong, and Jon wasn’t above leveraging it to get her
back to Castle Black. “Fine. You can guide the horse, just get on,” he allowed, rubbing his temple to
try to assuage the throbbing pain there. He studiously avoided looking at the dragon, lest he hear the
voice again. It struck Jon dimly, through the mounting pain, that this was the first he’d heard of
the queen’s son. He wondered where the boy was, how he felt about being separated from his mother
for so long.

Daenerys mounted first, and skillfully, even without the aid of her injured arm. Jon waited until she
was settled and mounted up behind her, and pressed up against her body as he was, the smell of
smoke and burnt wool was even stronger. It did little to ease the throbbing of Jon’s head as Daenerys
prodded the horse to move. The rest of the force followed behind, still murmuring amongst
themselves.

“They have weapons colder than ice,” the queen said suddenly, unprompted, fear and grief warring
for supremacy in her tone. “Swords and throwing spears. It’s as though they knew I would come, as
though they were lying in wait for me. They killed Viserion. We barely got away.”

That was precisely what Jon had feared. His vision swayed again, and he was suddenly very glad he
was not the one guiding their mount. For a moment, he thought he might vomit again, but eventually
the feeling subsided.

“What happened to your arm?” he managed to ask.

“I was trying to help Drogon,” she explained slowly. “His blood is boiling hot. Dragons are fire
made flesh, they say.”

It was, and Jon had seen it, seen the way it had smoked as it seeped out of Drogon’s wounds. The
blood had been black against the white of the snow. Fire and blood, he thought to himself. Ice and
fire.

*If dragons could not beat the Others, what could?* Jon wondered helplessly, and this time, there was
no answer forthcoming.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Daenerys II, in which Jon Snow knows at least one thing...and thankfully so
does someone else, elsewise the world would probably be doomed.
Daenerys hissed as the old man in the black cloak unwrapped her arm, revealing the scalded flesh underneath. He’d had to pick the bits of burned wool and leather from where it had stuck into her damaged flesh when she’d returned to Castle Black four days prior before he’d applied the poultice and wrapped it the first time, she remembered. That had been much more painful than this now was, Dany tried to tell herself as the raw, red flesh of her forearm was once again revealed to the air, although the distance from the event made it difficult to recall the pain from that time. The only thing she could focus on was the pain right then, and it was excruciating.

*I am the blood of the dragon*, Dany told herself as she gritted her teeth whilst the Night’s Watch man cleaned the burn to keep away the risk of infection. *I have endured worse than this.*

For she certainly had, had endured far worse than a scalded arm. She was healing, albeit slowly, and so was Drogon. He’d managed to make it over the Wall just a few hours ago, as if he somehow understood that the Wall was the only thing protecting him from the horrors that lay on the opposite side. Dany had gone up to the top of the Wall every night since they’d returned, eyes searching for his large, hulking shape down on the ground, terrified that the Others would come back to finish what they’d begun. And yet there had been no sign of them nor the cloud of cold that came along with them.

Dany shivered unconsciously at the memory. The things haunted her dreams whenever she tried to sleep, the tall, gaunt, blue-skinned things she somehow hadn’t been able to conceive had truly existed, not until she had seen them with her own eyes. They had been beautiful, almost ethereal, and looking at them, it had seemed near impossible to believe that they could be responsible for such destruction. She’d thought nothing of it when she’d come across the group of walking corpses, for it had been just like every other night, a small band of them that had not even the barest hope of being a menace to her dragons.

But then the cold had come, the deepest cold she’d ever felt, as if she had fallen into an icy river. All three of her dragons had shrieked in pain and fear, and then the Others had arrived.

Dany forced her mind away from it, away from Viserion’s shrieks as he’d fallen from the air, as he’d died. *Another one of my children dead and gone, and it is all my fault,* she thought with despair. She’d failed to see the threat of Mirri Maz Duur the same way she’d failed to see this, failed to believe it. She’d thought Robb Stark and his brother had mayhaps blown the threat entirely out of proportion, simply fearing a thing too grotesque for them to comprehend. She’d believed that they could be easily dispatched in a few more days, that she could fly back south and take her rightful throne.

She didn’t believe that any longer, knew it wouldn’t be so easy. Drogon still could not fly but the shortest distances, and traveling before her arm was better healed seemed a sure invitation for infection. She knew better than most how easily infection could take even the strongest of men from the world.

Daenerys thanked the old man once he’d wrapped her arm again and pulled her cloak around herself, making her way outside once more. The snow was not falling, but the sky was still grey with clouds that seemed to threaten that it might begin again at any moment. The snow was still thick on the ground, but some of the Night’s Watch men had shoveled out the paths between the buildings. Even
still, the ground was frozen, and she had to be careful with each step lest she slip and fall. She made her way back toward the King’s Tower only out of habit, for she had nothing to do at Castle Black now but check on Drogon and wait for her own wound to heal, and neither was helped along by her attentions. She could search out the Lord Commander, but he had been even more agitated than she had been since she’d returned to Castle Black, and being in his company seemed to do neither of them any good.

A long blast of a horn sounded from atop the Wall, and Dany turned toward the sound almost instinctively. She knew the sound, for they’d blown the horn to signal her return every time she’d come back from patrolling north of the Wall, but she’d never heard them blow it at any other time since she’d been there. After a beat, the horn blew a second time. Curious, Dany changed direction, making her way toward the gate.

Jon Snow was there before she even arrived, waiting for the cage to carry men down from the top of the Wall. There was a steely resolve about him, Dany thought, and he looked better than he had in many days, the dark circles beneath his eyes marginally less pronounced than they had been. His white wolf stood sentinel beside him, as always.

“What is it?” she asked curiously once she had reached him. The Lord Commander glanced distractedly at her.

“We used to do two blasts for wildlings,” he explained patiently after a moment. “The free folk. But most everyone who could make it south of the Wall has already crossed. I can’t imagine anyone is still alive out there. It’s been quite some time since we’ve heard two blasts.”

The cage rattled down the height of the Wall, Jon Snow’s eyes following its progress with an air of impatience. Men had gathered around them, swords and bows and crossbows in hand. They were plainly ready for a fight, if there was to be one. Jon Snow began questioning the man who arrived before he’d even stepped out of the cage.

“Men of the free folk?” he demanded immediately, and the man hesitated for a moment before answering.

“We’re not certain what it is, m’lord,” he admitted finally. “I ain’t never seen nothin’ like it before. It ain’t rangers returning, that’s for certain, and it ain’t dead.”

The Lord Commander’s impatience was obvious despite his rather deliberate stillness, and the man shifted uncomfortably under his annoyed gaze. “It was a little boy on a sledge, looked like,” he explained finally. “But it ain’t pulled by no horses. It’s pulled by a great big wolf, just like yours.”

There was a moment of silence so deep and profound that it felt almost as if the world had stopped moving, as if everyone had stopped breathing. And then the Lord Commander took off running, toward the tunnel through the base of the Wall. Everyone stood in shock for a moment before men began rushing after him, murmurs of confusion rippling through the air. Frowning, Daenerys followed, though she did not run, not trusting herself not to fall on the icy ground.

By the time she reached the other end of the tunnel, everyone had stopped, murmuring to themselves at the seeming realization that there was no danger. Even Jon Snow had stopped outside the gate, body rigid as a board. The first thing that Dany noticed was that his ever-present companion was not at his side.

She gazed out over the snowy landscape until she saw it. The men had told it true, for there was what looked like a pile of furs atop a sledge, a large, grey wolf pulling the sled toward them deliberately. The Lord Commander’s white wolf was running through the snow toward them,
looking more an excited pup than a fearsome direwolf. Daenerys came up beside Jon Snow.

“Bran,” the man said suddenly, unprompted. “My…brother. We hadn’t heard word of him in so long, that we thought…”

He trailed off uncertainly, but Daenerys had no trouble imagining what they must have thought. Once the Lord Commander had mentioned it, Dany imagined she could see just the edges of auburn hair amongst the pile of furs, the same color as Robb Stark’s had been. Jon Snow had been strange from the beginning whenever he’d spoken of his family. That must be the way of it, for a bastard, she thought to herself as the wolf pulled the sledge closer, Jon Snow’s white direwolf dashing along beside with unmistakable excitement.

Jon remained chillingly still until boy and wolf were mere feet away; by that moment, it seemed almost as though he was unable to hold himself back any longer, and he jogged the last few feet to his brother’s side, dropping to his knees beside the sled in the snow. The grey wolf dropped the lead from his mouth, and then the two wolves were upon each other, nipping playfully at each other’s flanks like long lost brothers. They were brothers too, she realized as she watched them rejoice at being reunited.

Is this what family is meant to be? Dany couldn’t help but wonder as she watched the two reunions, man and boy and wolf and wolf. She could never imagine Viserys having nearly so much affection for her as Jon obviously held for his little half-brother, not even as much as Ghost felt for his grey brother.

Dany hung back, feeling almost an intruder upon the scene as the Lord Commander found his brother amongst the pile of furs, reaching down and gathering the boy up into his arms almost as if he were nothing more than a doll. The boy couldn’t have been more than ten, mayhaps even younger than that, she realized with a dim sense of fascination, for most of his bulk came from the blankets of furs and his thick clothing. Beneath he seemed to be a skinny boy, spindly and half-starved, and no wonder. She couldn’t fathom how a boy so small and frail had managed to survive just the cold, let alone all the other things that were out there.

There was movement between them, and it took a few moments before she realized that the boy seemed to be struggling in his brother’s arms, trying to push him away. She took a step forward, a feeling of concern bubbling up in her chest. She was close enough to hear their words, just barely.

“There’s no time, Jon,” the boy said in a tone too grave for his tiny body. He had Robb Stark’s blue eyes as well, Dany couldn’t help but notice, but there was a fathomless emptiness in them that was nothing like his brother’s. “The Others are headed for Eastwatch. They’re going to take down the Wall.”

The words made Dany shiver, remembering the gaunt, horrifying, beautiful creatures. The words should have been a jape, the fancy of a child, but the boy sounded deadly serious.

“They can’t—” Jon began to protest, but his brother interrupted him.

“They have a dragon now,” he proclaimed eerily, knowingly. “They can.”

The boy looked past Jon’s body and straight into her eyes, and Daenerys couldn’t help but feel as though he knew her, though he’d obviously been in the woods for many moons, though he was no more than a small boy. She took a step forward, then another, as if in a trance, unable to stop herself, unable to process the full implications of the boy’s words. And Jon looked back at her then, too, a helpless pleading in his dark eyes. She knew what he was asking even without him having spoken.
“Drogon is too injured,” she said numbly, the words nearly catching in her throat. “I can’t take him.”

The image of Viserion falling from the sky hit her once again, creamy-gold and red blood spraying from smoking wounds. She’d seen him fall, of course, had known that the Others could make the dead walk again. She’d never fathomed, somehow, that they could do the same for a dragon. Her chest hurt.

“Rhaegal?” Jon prodded softly, a hopeful note in his voice. Dany shook her head.

“No,” she intoned meekly, parroting back words she’d learned before, almost without thought. “No man has ever been known to ride more than one dragon. Even Aegon the Conqueror himself never dared mount Vhagar or Meraxes.”

Jon stared at her, his eyes pleading for her to somehow help them, and Dany felt completely adrift, absolutely powerless. It was as if her gaze was locked to his, and suddenly she saw her own helpless panic reflected back at her.

“You have to do it, Jon,” the boy said suddenly, and both their gazes snapped back to him, breaking the moment. “You have to take Rhaegal.”

The boy spoke with a sense of confidence that belied his years, spoke as though he already knew everything about her and her dragons despite the fact that she’d never seen this boy before in her life. Something about this felt unreal, more unreal than the House of the Undying or Quaithe’s mysterious appearances before her, in places she never should have been.

“I can’t—” Jon began to protest, but the little boy would not let him.

“You can,” he said with a certainty, blue eyes knowing, seeming to pierce into his brother’s like spears of ice. “I’ve seen it. You know who your father was.”

A queer look passed between the two brothers, and they fell into an uncomfortable silence. When neither of them moved to break it, Daenerys spoke up.

“His father was Ned Stark, the same as yours.”

The eerie blue orbs now focused themselves on Dany, and she almost felt compelled to take a step back.

“No,” the boy intoned with a chilling certainty. “His father was Rhaegar Targaryen.”

Some of the men stood close enough to hear the words, and they reacted before Dany could even manage to come to grips with what had been said. The gasps and whispers flowed over her like a stream, but none of it seemed real. There was nothing Targaryen about the man who knelt in the snow beside the auburn-haired boy, not his dark hair nor dark eyes nor solemn face. He was nothing like Viserys, the only other member of her family she’d ever known.

“Bran—” the Lord Commander began to protest, but the little boy interrupted him yet again.

“No, Jon; you must. You must, or we will all perish. It’s the only way.”

Something about the words seemed to have gotten through to the man, for he stood suddenly, turning to his men. Dany turned too, saw the myriad of looks upon all their faces, suspicion and awe and mistrust all mingled together. Jon Snow acted admirably as though he saw none of it.

“We need to get him back inside,” he said in an authoritative tone, so different than the pleading one
he’d just used with the little boy. The boy interrupted again.

“Summer can bring me,” he assured them placidly. “You need to go, Jon. Now.”

Jon Snow ran his hand through his hair, exasperation becoming clear. But the conviction in the little boy’s tone was sharp enough that somehow even Dany felt certain that he had some idea what he was talking about. The Lord Commander turned away and made his way back through the gate at a brisk pace, and after a moment, Dany made to follow him. His long stride was too quick for her, and he was much more accustomed to the frozen ground, so she quickly fell behind, scurrying along as fast as she could to catch up with him. She didn’t manage it until he reached the edge of the castle compound, eyes gazing up to the sky. Dany stopped beside him, breathing hard.

“I don’t know where Rhaegal is, Jon.” The mere statement felt absurd, as though she was accepting everything that the strange little boy had said, despite how absolutely ludicrous it all sounded. Jon Snow wasn’t the first man to claim to be Rhaegar’s son, and Dany had no more confidence in his claim than she had in Aegon’s. But Aegon at least had the Targaryen look and her brother’s friend by his side; Jon Snow had nothing, nothing more than the word of a half-starved, wild-looking boy on a sled.

Jon Snow closed his eyes, pulling in a slow, deep breath. When he opened them again, there was a calmness about him that seemed to have manifested out of nothing.

“He’s just to the southwest,” the man said with an impossible confidence. “He’s on his way here now.”

There was no way that Jon could know that, and yet he sounded so certain. Dany turned her eyes to the sky, wondering if she’d simply missed the dragon’s approaching shape in the distance, but the sky was the same dark tumble of clouds it had been when she’d last looked and there was not so much as a bird in sight, let alone a dragon. And yet somehow, Jon seemed to know what even Dany herself could not.

Could it be true? she wondered with a dim sense of unreality. Could he truly be my brother’s son? She felt anger bubbling up in her chest.

“How could you not tell me?” she hissed furiously. “I’ve been here for weeks. You’ve had ample opportunity.”

The guilty look in the man’s eyes should have brought her satisfaction, and yet it did not.

“I don’t intend to take your throne,” he assured her in lieu of answering the question she’d asked. “I don’t want it. I swore a vow to wear no crowns, and I mean to keep it. I didn’t see why it would matter who sired me.”

The words made her even angrier.

“What about Aegon?”

Somehow, Aegon had slipped her mind entirely and not for the first time either. For he was a pretender, she was certain of it. The mummer’s dragon riding in alongside his griffin. Kraken and dark flame, lion and griffin, the sun’s son and the mummer’s dragon. Trust none of them. Quentyn Martell had already proven his treachery, had tried to steal away one of her dragons, and he had died screaming, and Victarion Greyjoy had swooped into Meereen as if a savior only to
prove his misguided thirst for a dragon of his own. The others she kept close but never would she be such a fool as to trust a single one of them.

“What about Aegon?” she returned, and the look of confusion was clear upon Jon Snow’s face. But abruptly, he looked up to the sky, as if he’d forgotten the topic of conversation entirely.

“Rhaegal is here.”

And he was right. The green dragon had come into sight as if he’d been called, the same way Jon Snow’s direwolf sometimes appeared suddenly out of nowhere, without a single word from his master. He has power, Dany realized all of a sudden. And mayhaps it is greater than mine. The thought chilled her to the bone, chilled her near as much as the Others had done. The huff of wind from the dragon’s wings was familiar as he came to land just before them, and Dany felt a sudden rush of apprehension. So focused had she been on the words of the little Stark boy that she hadn’t even begun to think through what was about to happen.

Quentyn Martell had believed he could steal away one of her dragons, and his confidence had proved fatal. Rhaegal had even been the one to burn him alive. And Victarion Greyjoy had fared no better, magical horn or no. Jon Snow took a step toward the dragon, who was eyeing them both with a far too intelligent expression. Dany caught Jon by the sleeve.

“You can’t simply presume to mount a dragon,” she insisted when he stopped and turned to face her. “The last two men who tried to tame Rhaegal were burned alive.”

Jon stared at her for a long minute, dark eyes deep and fathomless, and then he slipped his arm out of her grasp and took another step forward. Dany felt her heart clenching in her chest, fear and apprehension alive within her. Is he so bold? she wondered helplessly. Or is he mad as Ser Barristan says my father was, as Viserys was?

Dany remembered the day she’d first ridden Drogon, the chaos in Daznak’s Pit. Remembered the way the dragon had fought her, the men who had been trying to kill him. Remembered the heft of the whip in her hand and Drogon’s defiance.

But Rhaegal was nothing like that, reminded her nothing of the chaos and strife of that encounter. He sat still, almost unnaturally so, as Jon Snow approached him until he was close enough to touch. Dany watched with mixed horror and fascination as the man reached his hand forward and placed it upon the dragon’s snout, waiting for Rhaegal to turn his fury upon the Lord Commander, waiting to see Jon Snow go up in flames. But Rhaegal did not, and Jon took another step forward, until he was so close that his forehead was pressing against the dragon’s scales.

There was something solemn about the moment, something strange in the silence, as though man and beast had suddenly become one. She didn’t know how long she stood there and watched them, Jon Snow simply standing with his forehead pressed against the side of Rhaegal’s snout, but after what seemed a long time, Jon stepped back.

Rhaegal flattened himself down onto his stomach, and Dany blinked in disbelief as Jon stepped around Rhaegal’s side and climbed atop his back as easily as if he were mounting a horse. Was it meant to be so easy? she wondered dully. Jon may not have had the Valyrian look, but he appeared in full control of himself in that moment, every bit the dragonrider he now was. It seemed unfair, almost; none of this had come easily to her, and yet it fell into Jon Snow’s lap as if it were nothing.

“Take care of Bran,” Jon said suddenly, from nowhere, a grave note in his voice. And her sudden rush of bitterness toward Jon Snow fled as it struck her what he meant by the words. He knew the danger of what he was about to face, and he knew there was a good chance he would never come
back. There was a good chance that Dany might lose another of her children. Her chest felt thick with emotion as she nodded, and Jon gave her a forced smile before the dragon took off into the air. Dany stayed and watched the dragon’s disappearing form as long as she could see it, unable to avoid the realization that it might be the last time she’d lay eyes upon either of them.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon V, in which Jon Snow really wishes he knew something, because he has very limited time to figure shit out.
Since I’ve been getting a lot of comments about it, and it’s actually relevant to this chapter. The "Night King" is an invention of the TV show, and there has currently been no mention of him or any overlord of the Others in the books. As such, I have decided not to feature the Night King in this story.

Flying on dragonback was different than he’d imagined, different even than when he’d experienced it in his dreams. For in his dreams, he had been Rhaegal, and the dragon had tough scales and large wings perfectly made for flight. Men were not meant to fly, Jon thought to himself as he gritted his teeth, pressing his face as close to the dragon’s neck as he could. The wind seemed to slice against every inch of his exposed flesh, which was thankfully limited by his heavy clothing, but he hadn’t had the sense to change to a hooded cloak or a muffler to shield his face from the bite of it. He hadn’t had the sense to do much of anything, for everything had happened in such a rush that he’d had no time to think about any of it. He remembered Bran’s grave words, the frightening expression in his eyes when he’d spoken. Ten years old still, but Bran had sounded older than Maester Aemon and yet somehow looked younger than when Jon had last seen him.

The exposed flesh of Jon’s face ached from the icy winds and yet he was sweltering in his winter clothing and struggling to hold on the whole way. Daenerys had made it look so terribly easy, rode upon her dragon’s back with a grace and nonchalance that was nothing like what Jon was experiencing. His mind raced and his head throbbed, and his heart was beating faster than he’d ever thought possible.

How am I meant to stop them when I’ve no concept of what I’m doing? he wondered helplessly. Daenerys had been unable to do so with three dragons and the gods only knew how much more practice riding on dragonback, and Jon had one and was scarce able to hold on. Rhaegal had no desire to keep flying east, had no desire to go near the things that had murdered his brother. Fighting the dragon’s desire to turn away left Jon’s head pounding, sweat beading at his hairline and dripping down his face. It should have been easier for him, would have been easier if Rhaegal had been Ghost, but Rhaegal was nothing like Ghost at all. Slipping into Ghost’s mind felt like slipping on a warm pair of stockings, but slipping into Rhaegal’s felt like trying to pull on a pair of shoes meant for a child.

Suddenly, feverishly, Jon wished Sam were there beside him; Sam would have pulled out some book or some long-ago read nugget of knowledge, would have told him all about skinchanging and dragonriding, would have made it all somehow deceptively simple. Instead, Jon was left adrift, for all he’d had were childhood tales of Aegon the Conqueror and the Dance of the Dragons and Aemon’s book, which had told him an awful lot about the names of every Targaryen dragon and absolutely nothing practical about riding one.

Jon gripped more tightly.

He was lucky he didn’t have to navigate, not truly, for riding a dragon was nothing like riding a horse, and even that had been a skill he’d had to learn. There was no Hullen to teach him the proper
seat, no reigns to guide Rhaegal’s movements, and he doubted that digging in his heels would be more than a minor annoyance to the dragon. He wasn’t even certain how the dragon knew where he wanted it to go, nor how he kept Rhaegal on course despite the unease he could feel as strongly as if it were his own, and perhaps some of it was. All Jon needed was to fly east, to follow the length of the Wall; anything more complicated than that would have been folly to even attempt.

*What was I thinking, jumping on the back of a dragon as if I had any idea what I was doing?* Jon wondered helplessly as he pressed himself against the dragon’s warm flesh. *What was Bran thinking in asking me to?* As if just because Rhaegar Targaryen had ostensibly sired him, it suddenly meant he had been imbued with a wealth of secret Targaryen knowledge of dragons.

But, as usual, Jon knew nothing.

It was less than two hundred miles from Castle Black to Eastwatch, and yet even at the speed of a dragon, the darkness had begun to fall before he’d ever reached the easternmost castle. Jon watched the encroaching gloom with dismay, remembering the desperate certainty in Bran’s eyes as he’d pleaded with Jon to go. The Wall was going to fall, Jon realized with chilling conviction, and he was not going to get there in time to stop it. As if he even had the slightest idea how.

He felt the cold before he saw anything. It was a clamping, overwhelming feeling, as if he’d suddenly fallen through the ice into a frozen lake, a cold sharp enough that even the close proximity of the dragon did nothing to dispel it. Rhaegal released a high, angry shriek, as if the cold itself was painful. Jon shivered, sweat creeping freezing paths down his face.

The destruction was obvious even from a distance, striking enough that Jon’s breath caught in his throat. Only the sharp white of the ice stood out in the darkness, beyond which was an abyss of blackness Jon realized must have been the sea, for he could feel the brininess in his nostrils. And yet between the white barrier of the Wall and the dark void of the sea, there was a gap where the Wall disappeared only to be replaced by huge piles of icy rubble. Dark shapes scrambled over the jagged mounds of ice, half obscured by a strange white mist that seemed to hover in the air around them. There was no sign of any of the structures that must have once stood there.

Jon sucked in a sharp breath as Rhaegal circled even without his direction, feeling as out of his depth as he’d ever felt. The dragon could breathe fire that would kill the wights; it was the reason Robb had entreated Daenerys Targaryen to bring her dragons north in the first place. And yet Jon knew no more about commanding a dragon to breathe fire than he knew about guiding one, and he’d never felt more helpless than he did flying circles around the scene below, watching the wights spill into the Seven Kingdoms unimpeded whilst he had the weapon that could defeat them and absolutely no concept of how to utilize it. Daenerys gave her dragon commands in High Valyrian, Jon managed to recall, but the Targaryen blood in his own veins had taught him no more of High Valyrian than it had taught him of dragonriding. Maester Luwin had taught them a little when they’d had lessons, but Jon had been more interested in hearing the tales of Ser Duncan the Tall and Ryam Redwyne, and in that moment he couldn’t seem to recall a word of it.

*How do I get you to breathe fire?* Jon wondered helplessly, and as if the dragon had heard him, he opened his great maw and a blaze of flame shot forth, orange-yellow shot through with veins of green. Jon felt the heat rise toward him even as the flames shot down, and then there was the too-familiar sizzle of burning flesh as the wights perished. Some scrambled about in flames for a few seconds before they collapsed while some seemed to disintegrate in the blink of an eye, but all stopped moving within seconds after the fire had rained down upon them.

Jon felt a moment of dizzying, impossible triumph. Rhaegal had dispatched more wights in seconds than a group of his men could manage in five times as long, and he’d done it without a single human
casualty. For the first time, Jon felt as though he might not fail. He needed only to turn south, to stem
the flow of the dead before they could get any closer to civilization.

Rhaegal turned south and exhaled another blaze of flames, and wights screamed and died beneath
them. It was near impossible to count how many there were, for they were no more than a mass of
bodies swaying in the darkness, but the further Jon flew, the more of them he saw, and Jon knew
there had to be thousands, for the trail of them went on for what seemed like miles.

And then Jon saw the giants. At first, he thought them wights, not at all a comforting thought, but
then there was a huge swing of flame through the air, and he saw that one of the giants held a full
tree he was using as a makeshift torch. There were at least a half dozen of them, Jon realized with
wary excitement, another two who wielded giant torches that illuminated their faces as they swung
them about, trying to light as many wights aflame as they could. Those without a torch picked up the
dead things one by one, ripping them in half as they scrabbled at the giants’ legs. It would not kill
the wights, Jon knew, but there was only so much damage that could be wrought by a legless torso.

There were men on the ground too, Jon realized, live ones fighting to stem the tide of the dead,
retreating in the face of the superior numbers of the enemy. Jon could pick them out by their torches
as they fought and burned as many as they could. There couldn’t have been more than fifty men, and
likely less than that, but it seemed a miracle when Jon had imagined that all at the castle must have
perished when the Wall had fallen. It was a reassuring sign, but it also meant that Jon could not rain
fire indiscriminately down upon the mass of flesh below for fear of burning men, living men.

He turned back north, far enough that he was certain the men fighting at the front of the column
would not be caught in the flames, and Rhaegal breathed forth a new burst of flame. The guttural
noise that erupted from the mouths of the giants could be mistaken as nothing but what it was, a
cheer of excitement as they realized reinforcements had arrived. Rhaegal turned and Jon saw it then,
the big lumbering shape of a giant among the mass of dark flesh, and with a sudden rush of shock,
Jon realized that this one was not alive. He directed Rhaegal’s fire at the area where the dead giant
walked again, until he and all the wights around him had fallen to burning ash on the ground.

*How long can Rhaegal keep this up?* Jon wondered, his lack of knowledge striking him
anew. *Could he burn thousands before morning came, before he tired?*

Something whizzed past Jon’s head and he jerked abruptly, feeling and hearing the near miss of
it. Rhaegal turned, though whether from Jon’s movement or just his shift in attention, he wasn’t
certain. And it was then that Jon saw it, the tall, gaunt figure that stood on the ground, almost bright
enough in the darkness that it seemed to be glowing, illuminating everything around it. It held a
longbow in its hand, on its back a quiver of arrows that shined like an icicle illuminated by sunlight,
though the night around the creature was black as pitch. It had the look of a man, almost, and at the
same time it did not resemble a man at all.

Jon had never felt a chill so deep, so profound. He somehow could not tear his eyes away, his breath
fogging up in front of his face.

Jon pressed closer to the thing, and it was a struggle all the while, every part of Rhaegal seeming to
fight him in the attempt. He pressed against the beast’s mind only to feel a recoil, and his head began
throbbing anew. He tasted a sudden stickiness of blood against his lips, but
somehow Rhaegal pressed forward, shrieking in displeasure the closer they came to the thing. It
reached one long, spindly arm back and grasped an arrow, fitted it into the bow.

Rhaegal breathed fire in its direction, and Jon’s breaths came in short, heavy gasps. The column of
flame disappeared, and so intently had Jon been staring into it that it seemed to take unbelievably
long for his eyes to adjust again to the darkness. When they finally did, the Other stood there,
undeterred and wholly unharmed. The arrow was gone from the thing’s bow, though Jon had not seen it fly. He felt something in his chest crumple.

“Again!” he yelled, as though it would do any good. But it seemed as though the dragon caught on anyway, for Rhaegal breathed out another stream of fire, training the flames onto the creature for as long as he could manage, until Rhaegal faltered in the sky and sank several feet in a sharp, jerky movement. Jon scarce managed to hold on, and when he could snap his attention back to where the creature had been, it was gone, leaving only a white mist in its wake.

Jon’s eyes darted around, searching for the thing, unable to believe that it was simply gone. Had the fire killed it? he wondered frantically, and it seemed it must be so, for the glowing aura around its long, emaciated limbs had stood too stark in the blackness for Jon to miss it if it remained. And yet it left behind no charred corpse, no remnant of itself but the wisps of white mist. Could it be so easy? He felt raw and breathless and overwhelmed.

There was a loud shriek of sound behind them, and Rhaegal turned to face the noise, letting out an answering scream that sounded like grief against Jon’s ears. Somehow, Jon knew what he would see before he saw it, and yet it still seemed to snatch any remaining breath from his lungs.

The dragon looked no different than it had when Jon had last seen it, cream scales that stood out sharp in the darkness. He did not look dead, but that was not a thought that Jon could cling to with any hope, for the dead would scarce decompose quickly in this cold. Most chillingly, the dragon’s eyes were an icy blue. Had they always been blue? Jon mused dully. He didn’t think so.

Viserion was upon them in seconds, faster than he had any right to be. A shock of blue-white flame shot from his mouth, and Rhaegal only just managed to dodge out of the way. Jon felt the rush of flame just beside him, and it was hot and cold all at once, like holding his hand against a block of ice for too long. He and Robb had done that when they were boys, had competed for who could press their hand against the ice for the longest, until it had felt like it was burning them. The memory made the moment strange and dreamlike, like his mind was somewhere his body was not.

He tried to guide Rhaegal back around so that he could breathe fire toward his brother, but the other dragon was faster, and it was all that Rhaegal could do to dodge another streak of flame. Even if Jon had had perfect control over the dragon, he wasn’t certain he could have done anything then against Rhaegal’s instincts, for the dragon seemed to be reacting fully on reflex, barely able to stay out of the streams of Viserion’s flames. It seemed at each time he was able to dodge, Viserion was breathing fire at them again, leaving not even a second between for a counterattack. With a normal enemy, Jon might be able to hope they would tire eventually and give him an opening, but this was not swordplay, and it was with a moment of sinking panic that Jon remembered the other dragon was not alive. Viserion would not tire, he realized, may never run out of breath or flame.

Rhaegal seemed to realize it too, whether on his own or through Jon’s influence, Jon could not say. For all of a sudden, Rhaegal stopped dodging and instead turned north, flying forward with all the speed he could muster. It took all of Jon’s focus simply not to fall off, and yet even without looking he somehow knew that Viserion was right behind them, pursuing them with mindless focus. A column of flame narrowly missed them, and Rhaegal jerked out of the way, letting out an angry cry of protest.

Jon’s mind raced, panic hovering at the edges of his consciousness. It was clear enough that Rhaegal could do nothing to combat his brother, not unless Jon found some other sort of advantage. Viserion was faster and had no need for sleep or food, and Rhaegal was already beginning to tire; that much was painfully clear. And with every moment that passed, every moment that Rhaegal fled and the dead thing pursued, Viserion’s advantage would grow greater.
We’re going to die. Jon realized it with a dim sense of unreality, that all they were doing now was delaying the inevitability of their demise. If they could not fight back, if they could manage nothing more than to flee, Rhaegal would eventually make a mistake, would eventually move too slowly to miss a streak of the ice-hot flame, and they would both burn away to nothing. He and Rhaegal were the last, best hope against the dead, and it seemed they would not be enough. He’d known the moment he’d seated himself on Rhaegal’s back that this mission might be the death of him, but somehow the reality of it was unfathomable, for knowing it hadn’t been the same as accepting it.

Jon’s eyes scanned the landscape around them, searching for something, anything that could help them, but Rhaegal was moving too fast and the night was too dark for him to make out much of anything below. It was just the whir of dark shapes that must have been trees, white expanses of plains and the roll of hills. Occasionally something would move below, something dead or alive Jon could not even hazard a guess, but nothing seemed to be a hidden savior, a trick or ploy that could give them the upper hand somehow.

I did this, Jon thought to himself with despair as flames licked against his back, so close that he was surprised his clothes were not set aflame. If I had not sent the dragons north of the Wall, none of this would have happened. Bran had hailed him some last hope of humanity with a desperate sort of certainty in his voice, but Jon had been the one to create the very problem he was now trying unsuccessfully to solve.

And yet on the heels of the despair came a desperate sort of conviction. If they were to die there, he might as well give the rest of the living the best chance possible, and that was to bring down as many of the dead things as he could along the way. Daenerys had one more dragon, a larger, more powerful dragon and much more experience riding on one. If Jon could do nothing else, he could give her a chance to do what he could not once Drogon was healed enough to fly.

Jon pressed his mind against Rhaegal’s with more force than he ever had with either wolf or dragon. Turn back, he thought with all his might, and Rhaegal recoiled against him, the dragon’s every instinct telling him to continue to flee. Jon pressed harder, his head throbbing in pain. Rhaegal turned back.

Jon gasped from the effort, sweat sticking all his clothing to his body as he clung to the dragon’s back. Viserion shrieked and pursued once more as they raced back in the direction they had come. Jon knew they were close when the cold came again, his whole body trembling with it, feeling drained and lifeless although he’d done nothing but sit upon Rhaegal’s back. The swarm came into view, black against the pale bluish-white of the snow. The sight gave Jon a brief swell of determination, and he pressed forward, desperate and guilty all at once as he drove Rhaegal toward them with mindless focus.

Rhaegal dove down, until he was just barely above the mass of dead bodies, and then the silvery-hot flame shot toward them. Rhaegal dodged and the flames only just missed him, engulfing the wights instead. The brisk jerk of movement was too quick for Jon to see the result, but when Rhaegal swooped back around, Jon saw that Viserion’s flame had decimated the wights just as well as Rhaegal’s had. Jon’s heart fluttered a staccato beat in his chest.

Rhaegal seemed to understand precisely what Jon wanted, looping close to the amassed horde of moving bodies and then dodging out of the way at the last moment, letting Viserion do the work of killing them, saving Rhaegal’s own fire and strength to continue to dodge. There was a mindlessness about the way Viserion pursued them, Jon realized then, for the other dragon seemed not to notice that he was becoming a weapon used against his own side. There was an intelligence about Rhaegal’s understanding of Jon’s plan that seemed to have been stripped away
from Viserion when he’d died, and it made no matter how many times Jon and Rhaegal pulled the same trick; Viserion continued to fall for it.

Wights died by the dozen, and dozens became hundreds, and hundreds became thousands. Jon watched them fall with grim satisfaction even as he felt Rhaegal become more exhausted, more sluggish beneath him. Rhaegal would fall, Jon realized, and soon, but there would be thousands fewer walking dead things come morning. He had to pray that he’d done enough to give Daenerys and Drogon a fighting chance when the time came.

It was inevitable, and so when it happened, Jon could not find it in him to even be surprised. Rhaegal screamed in pain as the flames caught him, his tail or wing or underbelly Jon was not certain. The dragon jerked, then fell a dozen feet, and Jon prepared himself for the impact, knowing the fall would likely kill him.

The impact never came, Jon breathing hard as Rhaegal managed to right himself just barely before they hit the ground, shooting up toward the sky once again. But if Rhaegal was injured, it would only be a matter of time, and Jon knew it well enough. Viserion and Rhaegal danced through the sky, each shot of icy-hot flames seeming to lick closer to him than the last, and Rhaegal was only dodging them, mindlessly trying to avoid the attacks, the plan entirely abandoned in his panicked press for survival. Jon closed his eyes, saying a quiet prayer as he prepared for the end.

And suddenly, it was silent. Jon opened his eyes, breathing hard as he glanced behind him. The dragon was gone, and so was the mass of walking dead men beneath them, leaving only a heavy white mist in their wake as the first rays of sunshine splayed themselves across the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Daenerys III, in which Bran Stark is really goddamned confusing and strange.
It was only when Rhaegal’s shape was no longer visible in the distance that Dany made her way back toward Castle Black, feeling restless and helpless, uncertain of what to do with herself. She wandered aimlessly for a few minutes, her thoughts in shambles, before she remembered Jon’s plea before he’d left, and she detoured toward some of the Night’s Watch men, finding one she’d recognized who had followed them out beyond the Wall. There seemed to be remarkably little work getting done, Daenerys thought to herself as she questioned them about where she could find Bran Stark.

She eventually found the boy in the rooms behind the armory, the same place Jon kept his own chambers. She’d never seen his bedroom, but the boy was in the rooms just above the Lord Commander’s solar, so Dany imagined that she must be in Jon Snow’s own chambers. They were as sparsely furnished as the downstairs was, a lucky thing with two large wolves prowling around inside the room, seeming as agitated as Dany herself felt. The grey wolf was near as tall as Ghost was, though he was as thin and gaunt as his master.

“Summer,” said a voice suddenly, snapping her attention away from the two wolves. Her eyes shot to the little boy who sat upright in the bed, auburn hair a mess of long tangles and snags. He was even skinnier than Dany had first realized, and it was obvious with him in only a shirt and tunic, both of which were desperately oversized for him.

“What?” she asked, confused. The little boy’s smile was half-hearted but charming.

“The wolf. His name is Summer,” Bran explained after a moment, like he was the elder and she some errant child who needed the world explained to her. Dany felt a moment of offense before she pushed it back forcefully. He’s just a little boy, she reminded herself with some effort, unable to help thinking of her own son, the son who had never lived, thinking of who he’d have been in a few years if he’d been allowed to grow. She swallowed thickly and made her way to the boy’s side, sitting herself gingerly upon the edge of the bed, atop the pile of furs that covered his legs.

“It’s nice to meet you, Bran,” she said as gently as she could manage. “I’m—”

A smile touched the edge of the boy’s lips. “I know who you are,” he told her with an eerie look in his eyes, and Dany’s lips snapped shut. Something in the air felt charged, as though lightning had just struck, and it wasn’t the first time she’d felt this strangeness. Quaithe had spoken to her with the same knowing air, but she’d spoken all in riddles and nonsense.

The door opened, and Dany turned and looked behind her to see the curly-haired steward enter the room. He called himself Satin, she couldn’t help but remember, and something about that made her frown. Satin was a fabric, not a man’s name, but she was not keen to begin that argument. The man came to the side of the bed, and it was only then that Dany noticed a bowl of soup sat on it, looking nearly full. Satin frowned at the boy.

“You need to eat,” he said with all the air of a scolding mother. The boy’s eyes focused on him, no anger or annoyance in them.

“I did, a little,” he conceded. “I’m not hungry.”
Dany couldn’t believe that, not from the look of him. He looked barely alive, his flesh pale and papery-thin, his arms scarce more than sticks. His face was gaunt and sunken, and the tangled mess of hair upon his head only served to emphasize it further.

“How did you survive out there alone?” she couldn’t help but ask then, for it was the persistent mystery nigging at the edge of her consciousness, the one that had been plaguing her since the moment the boy arrived at the gate. That he had survived alone in the wilds was a remarkable thing in and of itself, even before one took into account the horrible things that lurked in those woods. The tiny smile touched the boy’s face once more.

“Summer brought back meat sometimes, and I’d cook it when I could get a fire going,” he told her with a warm look in the direction of his wolf. “Game is scarce out there now. But I wasn’t alone, at least not until—”

The boy stopped suddenly, his expression shuttered, as though he’d just been forced to recall something awful. He blinked once, twice, and then the placid expression was back.

“I’m tired,” he declared suddenly, with all the petulance of a boy his age. “I just want to sleep.”

Satin looked at him with a pinched expression. “Do you need help to lie down?”

The question was a queer one, for Bran Stark was painfully thin and obviously weak, but even so, simply lying down in bed must have been within his grasp. The boy shook his head.

“I can manage,” he told Satin, and as if to show the man, he planted his hands against the mattress, using his arm strength to lift his backside and push himself further down the bed. His legs followed the movement sluggishly, dead weight beneath the furs, and it was only then that Dany realized that the boy had no use of his legs. The shock rippled through her like a heavy stone into a pool, and it seemed perfectly impossible that this tiny, skeletal boy could have survived the winter and the dead both without even the ability to walk. Satin watched until the boy was settled down beneath the furs before grabbing the barely-emptied bowl. He glanced at the wolves, who continued to pace in agitation across the length of the room.

“Should I let them out?”

Bran glanced listlessly at the two direwolves. “That may be best,” he conceded before closing his eyes and going still, by all accounts appearing to have fallen asleep in a moment. Dany almost wouldn’t have doubted it; the boy looked exhausted, all gaunt limbs and purple-black bruises beneath his eyes. She stood and followed the steward out as he carefully opened the door for her and the wolves both. Once he’d let the wolves out of the outer door, she turned to him.

“Is he all right?”

Satin shrugged. “It’s a miracle he’s alive at all,” he told her, which was a sentiment she certainly shared. “I’d say he’ll benefit a great deal from rest and warmth, which have likely been in short supply for him. He’s lucky he didn’t lose any limbs to frostbite.”

Dany couldn’t help but concur. There were enough men at Castle Black missing tips of ears and noses for her to have quickly learned the perils of frostbite. A fair few were even missing fingers, and certainly a greater number had lost a toe or two. She glanced back at the door, and Satin followed her gaze.

“I’d say we’re best to let him sleep for now, Your Grace,” he told her as politely as he could, although there was a firmness to his voice that told her he might be willing to argue it with her if she
decided otherwise. In the end, she thought it best not to fight him, so she sought out Drogon where he’d taken refuge in the woods, feeling more exposed than she had in a long while. One of her dragons dead, another flown off, and the last too injured to defend her if needed. Not for the first time, Dany lamented that she did not carry a sword nor have any skill at arms. She returned before it was dark, knowing well the perils that darkness brought, and the thought of what Jon must be doing then made her heart beat faster.

The steward was in the room with Bran when she returned to check on him, but the first thing she noticed was that the boy was twitching in his sleep, pupils darting rapidly behind his eyes. He remained silent, but his body was rigid, and there was no doubt in her mind that whatever he was dreaming, it could not be pleasant. She turned to Satin.

“You aren’t going to wake him?” she demanded with a raised eyebrow, and Satin shook his head, not taking his eyes off the sleeping boy.

“He’s not sleeping,” Satin declared knowingly, his tone eerie and ominous. Daenerys shivered at the words despite not truly understanding why. She knew she should demand an explanation, but somehow the mere idea of doing so was unsettling. Instead, she sat vigil by the boy’s bed throughout the night the same way she’d stood vigil over Drogon for several preceding nights, wondering if somehow the boy would perish as he slept. She wondered if Jon had gotten to Eastwatch, if this little boy had even spoken true.

When Bran finally opened his eyes in the morning, he seemed no less tired than he’d been before, and he seemed not at all surprised to see her sitting beside his bed. He blinked at her sleepily for a moment before he pushed himself up to a seated position once again, something she was surprised to see he could even accomplish with his spindly arms. She fought the desire to help him rise.

“Could you open the door?” he inquired after a moment. “The wolves are back.”

Daenerys felt strange as she stood up to check, disbelief and trust warring within her. Bran spoke in the same knowing tone Jon had used when he’d predicted Rhaegal’s arrival, and when Daenerys let herself out of the Lord Commander’s rooms and to the front door of the armory, the two wolves came bounding inside, just as Bran had promised. Curiosity tickling the edges of her consciousness, she followed them back up to Bran, letting the animals inside. The grey wolf jumped up onto the bed, licking unabashedly at the boy’s face. Bran bore it with grace.

“How do you know?” she demanded, and Bran’s face was irritatingly tranquil in the face of her frustration.
“I know,” he said simply, and promptly ignored her in favor of his breakfast. He passed scraps to each of the wolves, first one and then the other, the most boyish gesture she’d seen from him since he’d arrived.

Dany wanted to ask the boy more, but he went back to sleep almost immediately after he’d finished eating, or whatever it was that he was doing whilst lying down in bed with his eyes closed. Eventually, she accepted that she needed sleep as well, and she reluctantly returned to her own rooms, though sleep was a long time in coming. She tossed and turned, wondering at the fate of Jon Snow and the fate of Rhaegal, wondering at the strange little boy and the two wolves that stalked protectively around him. She thought about the brother she’d known only from stories, first from Viserys and then from Ser Barristan, thought about Aegon and Jon Snow and the three dragons that were her children, now only two.

She somehow fell asleep after some time, though she had no concept of how long she’d been awake. The dark was already approaching when she opened her eyes, and she was ravenous. She returned to the man Clydas to check and bind her burned arm and ate supper in a daze before she returned to the Lord Commander’s chambers, to the Stark boy who lay within. The boy was burrowed beneath the furs much the same way he’d been when she’d left that morning, such that she wasn’t certain that he’d moved at all. Satin looked up as she entered.

“Has he been sleeping this whole time?” she inquired with a furrowed brow. The steward shook his head.

“He sat up and ate a little around midday,” the man said dully, sitting in a chair in the corner and watching the boy with a sharp gaze. It was as though Satin could not stand to be close to the boy and yet was reluctant to leave his side all the same. She understood the sentiment. Jon Snow had asked her to watch over Bran, and yet there was something queer about him, something that made her want to run from his presence. She looked at him, feeling frustrated and helpless.

“How can we just sit here and wait?” she demanded suddenly to no one in particular.

“I’m open to suggestions about what we can do instead, Your Grace,” he said without the slightest bit of enthusiasm. “We could send a group of men on horseback to Eastwatch, but it would take us near a week to get there in the best circumstances. By the time we get there, like as not the enemy will be long gone south, and we’d be leaving this portion of the Wall entirely undefended.”

The response was perfectly frustrating. “And what if Jon and Rhaegal fall?” she demanded. “How will we know? Shall we just sit around until we’re swarmed by dead men?”

Satin shrugged. “He’ll tell us,” he proclaimed with grim confidence, tipping his head in the direction of the bed. Daenerys followed Satin’s gaze, eyes falling again upon the small Stark boy.

“‘Yes, but how will he know?”

Satin hesitated then opened his mouth to respond. And yet before he could get a word out, there was a noise, a low, whining cry from one of the wolves. Both their eyes shot in the direction of the wolves, and Dany watched as Summer jumped up onto the bed, whining pitifully as he nudged Bran with his nose. Ghost stalked back and forth along the length of the bed, silent but agitated. Dany looked at Satin, and then the steward was up out of his seat, coming to the side of the bed.

“Bran?” he intoned softly, but the boy did not stir at all in response. The wolf continued to whine. Frowning, Daenerys stepped forward as well, making her way around the side of the bed. Bran’s face looked pale and bloodless, and Dany fought for a long moment to remember if he’d been so
pale when she’d seen him just hours prior. She reached out her hand, pressing it against his forehead, which was cool and clammy to the touch.

“Something’s wrong,” she said with conviction.

That was when it started, Bran’s body shaking, thrashing beneath the furs as though he was being tortured, though the boy did not make a sound. Satin was on him in a second, shaking him by the shoulders as if trying to rouse him from a dream, but the boy’s body moved unabated, jerking against Satin’s hold. Satin quickly seemed to realize that waking Bran would be a fruitless endeavor.

“Stay with him,” Satin told her briskly. “I’ll go fetch Clydas.”

Before Dany could say anything, could even process what was occurring, Satin was up and out of the room, leaving her with the small boy twitching on the bed. Dany watched helplessly as he struggled against some unseen force, not certain what to do to help him.

And then she saw the blood, slipping from his nose in first a trickle, then a stream. That spurred Dany into action as she grasped the boy, fighting to sit him up against the pillows as a huge volume of blood poured forth from his nose, so much she was afraid he might drown in it. She scrambled for something to stem the flow, holding his struggling body in one arm whilst pressing a sheet against his face as delicately as she could manage, worried she’d break his nose in the attempt to help him.

By the time Satin returned with the hunched old man who had been tending to Dany’s burns, the boy’s shaking had stopped and the bleeding seemed to have slowed. Still, she was certain the whole scene must have looked a fright when the two of them came upon it, for the blood had stained the sheet through, and her hands and dress were covered in it. Clydas took one look at them and turned back to Satin.

“Fetch us some water and then find Borroq,” he said, rolling up his sleeves and making his way to the bed. Satin left wordlessly, following the command as easily as if it had been given by the Lord Commander himself. Like as not, he knew what the consequences would be if Jon somehow managed to survive only to return to see his brother dead. His brother, or whatever relation this boy truly was to him if Eddard Stark was not Jon’s father for true.

Dany shifted out of the way as best as she could, helping Clydas prop Bran up against the pillows. Still, the boy showed no sign of stirring.

“Who is Borroq?” she asked as Clydas pulled away the sheet to inspect the bloodied face beneath.

“A maester?”

She thought not even as she asked it, for if there had been a maester in residence at Castle Black, there would have been no reason for Clydas to be minding the ravens and tending to the wounded. Daenerys may not have grown up in Westeros, but she knew well what the job of a maester was.

“Not a maester,” he dismissed distractedly. “A skinchanger.”

The word gave her a queer feeling that she could not quite identify. “A what?”

Clydas turned his gaze to her with a critical expression, one that made Daenerys feel quite stupid. “Skinchangers are men who can share the skin of an animal, Your Grace,” he explained politely, although she could feel him judging her ignorance. Dany refused to let the silent condemnation get to her, refused to let it show on her face. Satin took that moment to reappear with a bowl of water and a clean cloth before departing again. The distraction was enough to allow Daenerys to get her bearings.
“What help could a skinchanger provide? What’s wrong with him?” she asked, although she already felt as though she knew the answer. Summer had moved to the side of the bed, as if understanding that the humans were trying to help his master, and Ghost still prowled the length of the room, as if poised to attack any visible threat that might appear. She thought of the way that Ghost would appear by Jon’s side suddenly without being called, thought of the way Jon had known already where Rhaegal was before he’d ever come into sight.

“I do not know, Your Grace,” Clydas said, seeming to have no problem admitting his own ignorance as he began to wipe the blood from Bran’s pale face. The blood seemed to have finally stopped dripping from his nose, though he still looked more dead than alive. “But mayhaps Borroq will. This boy is a skinchanger if I’ve ever seen one, and I’ve seen too uncomfortably many in recent memory.”

This is not a power they revere, Dany realized suddenly, seeing the sharp look in the old man’s pinkish eyes. This is a power they fear and revile. That revelation surprised her not at all, for men regarded her dragons with much the same disquiet. She wondered what the men of the Night’s Watch thought of being led by a man with such queer power over a wolf, if that made them respect him or fear him.

Clydas had wiped away most of the blood from Bran’s face by the time the door opened again, although the borrowed shirt he wore was likely stained beyond repair. Borroq was a broad, hulking man with a flat, squished face and heavy jowls that combined to make him one of the ugliest men Dany had ever seen. The contrast was only made starker as he stood beside Satin’s undeniable, almost feminine beauty.

Borroq took one look at Bran before stepping forward, pressing his fingers beneath the boy’s nose as if to test whether or not he was breathing. Dany had had her doubts as well, though she was close enough to see the tiny rise and fall of his chest beneath his bloodied shirt. After a beat, Borroq pulled his hand back and shook his head to himself.

“He was having fits and bleeding all over just a few minutes ago,” Satin told Borroq when the man appeared poised to say nothing. “Have you ever seen something like this before?”

Borroq snorted. “Aye, I’ve seen it, crow,” he admitted with annoyance. “When some damn fool tries to share a skin with something that doesn’t want to share. Or when the animal whose skin you’re sharing dies. It does strange things to some men, to die in another skin or to fight to claim a beast too strong for them.”

Daenerys fought to hold back a shiver, unable to help but feel uneasy curiosity about what it would feel like to die in one body only to wake in another. “Will he wake up?” she asked breathlessly, and the skinchanger regarded her with only half as much contempt as he regarded the Night’s Watch men.

“Don’t know,” he told her, as though he couldn’t care less about the boy’s fate. “Depends how strong he is. And this one doesn’t look strong enough to lift a feather.”

That sounded true as anything Daenerys had ever heard. The boy was skin and bones even before this episode, and he’d grown even paler since, a fact only emphasized by the bright stain of red across his chest. His breathing was low and barely there. If she were truthful with herself, she’d have said that the boy seemed halfway to dead already.

What were you trying to do? Daenerys wondered desperately as she looked upon the unconscious boy. As before, Bran did not stir.
Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon VI, in which Jon has a plan. Or maybe a suicide mission. Really, it's difficult to tell.
It was easy to find the living men amongst the remains of the battle, for they were the only ones left moving in the great sea of charred bodies. The wights and the Others had all disappeared into the mist when dawn had broken, but the charred remains of the wights Viserion’s fire and the men’s torches had destroyed remained scattered along the snowy landscape, men and giants picking through them in a dazed sort of incomprehension. Rhaegal was flagging, and it would be clear enough even without any obvious connection to the dragon, for he flew in a jerky, directionless way, as if he had trouble remaining aloft.

Jon guided the dragon to land near the men, his body feeling shaky and overwrought as he slid down off Rhaegal’s back. The world swayed a bit as his feet touched the ground, as if his body could not quite fathom standing again. But after a moment he righted himself, bracing his hand against the scales of the dragon’s side. He moved slowly, sluggishly, his hands skimming along the dragon’s hide.

“Let me check you over,” Jon said softly, uncertain if the words truly had any effect on the dragon. It was clear enough that Rhaegal could sense his intentions, but whether speaking the words aloud made any difference, Jon could not tell. But Rhaegal turned and snapped at him, large, gnarled teeth bared in Jon’s direction, and that was a clear enough message for Jon. He took a step back, and then Rhaegal was moving, taking off into the sky with uncoordinated movements. Jon watched the dragon take off into the distance, running a hand over his face as though to clear away the fog of exhaustion. “I understand. I wouldn’t be so happy if I were you, either.”

In fact, Jon would be furious, and he knew that as well as he knew anything. Ygritte may have told him he knew nothing, but now he knew this, knew what it was to bend a creature to his will. He’d been inside Ghost, but never with the same intentionality, had always felt as though he was no more than a passenger riding along inside the direwolf’s body and following Ghost’s own drives. But Rhaegal had been terrified and angry, and Jon had forced him to turn back anyway. Jon couldn’t help but wonder if this was the same way a horse felt when a man rode it into battle or if horses simply weren’t intelligent enough to truly comprehend what they were riding into when they went off to war. But Rhaegal had understood precisely what he had been flying into, and he had wanted no part of it.

“Where does he go?”

The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.

“Where does he go?”

The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.

“The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.

“Where does he go?”

The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.

“Where does he go?”

The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.

“Where does he go?”

The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.

“Where does he go?”

The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.

“Where does he go?”

The voice snapped Jon out of his thoughts, and he rounded on the man who had suddenly appeared beside him while he had been distracted. He was not a Night’s Watch man, and that was clear enough; he towered nearly a foot taller than Jon and wore heavy furs of grey and brown, his black beard long and shaggy. There was a smear of ash across his face that made a grotesque picture with a long, ugly scar that marred it, and he spoke with the thick, heavy accent of one who primarily spoke the Old Tongue. Jon might have guessed him to be a Thenn, but he didn’t have the look of one.
hadn’t, and his confusion must have shown on his face because the man elaborated without being asked. “You have the Stark look about you.”

The words struck Jon like a knife through the heart, made his chest ache with despair, the affirmation from this stranger of the one thing he’d always wanted to be but somehow still could not. He felt less a Stark today than he ever had, his flesh still warm with the lingering heat of Rhaegal’s body pressed against his. Jon cleared his throat forcefully.

“My apologies, but I don’t know who you are,” Jon said, doing his best to hide his misgivings behind his courtesies, although like as not this man cared not a whit about courtesies. The man looked pleased with himself all of a sudden, unkempt and dirty from battle as he was, and he puffed out his chest with pride.

“They call me Thoregg of House Crowl,” the man declared, his voice thick and difficult to understand. A Skagosi, Jon realized as he heard the name, and he looked the man over with a new sense of understanding. The Skagosi had appeared at Eastwatch unexpectedly and with strange, unfathomable explanations, had joined the giants in trying to rescue the survivors who had taken refuge at Hardhome, and after that Jon had heard nothing.

“You are among those who went on the rescue mission to Hardhome,” Jon remarked after a moment, feeling dazed and unsteady all over again. It must have been more than just an imagining, too, because suddenly the other man’s hand was clamping down upon his arm, as if to keep him from falling.

“Come with me, Jon Snow,” Thoregg said then. “The men make camp, and you need rest. I tell you on the way.”

The tale was as grim as Jon had expected, and yet that did not make hearing it any easier. The Skagosi man told of the harrowing overland trek to Hardhome only to find it abandoned, the bay filled with destroyed bits of ships and the land covered in abandoned tents and fire pits long gone cold, everything half-buried in snow. Jon had a strong suspicion about what had happened to all those men, and apparently Thoregg did too.

“If I guess right, we kill many of those men last night,” Thoregg said as they reached the makeshift camp the men had made. They were surprisingly well-provisioned for men who had just fled the Wall, and Jon told them so. Thoregg smiled widely, but the smile softened the harsh look of his face not at all. “It is not a surprise,” he told Jon seriously. “The gods warn us the dead are coming. We gather our supplies and leave before they get here.”


“They talk through the birds,” he explained as though it was the most reasonable thing in the world. “They warn us, and we prepare to leave.”

Indeed, there seemed to be enough tents for everyone in the camp and even some extras besides, and Jon tried not to think of what that meant, tried not to think of how many men had perished in the previous night’s battle. Two men were cooking something over the fire whilst others milled about, setting up the remaining tents, gathering firewood, patching up wounds, and doing the other miscellaneous tasks that needed done. The camp was surprisingly orderly for what Jon had come to expect from the haphazard way of the men from beyond the Wall, and he wondered if he had the Skagosi to thank for that. There were less than a hundred men in the camp, all told, and fewer than one in five wore the black of the Night’s Watch. All the rest were free folk and Skagosi and close to a dozen giants. It was a paltry force, but the sight of the shaggy-pelted giants gave him some hope if the events of the night had not.
Thoregg sat Jon down by one of the fires and gave him water and a cloth to wipe off his own face, which Jon was surprised to find was covered in blood that must have been his own. He remembered tasting the blood against his lips and only belatedly did he realize it must have been something so benign as a nosebleed.

Jon ate whatever the men put in front of him, the camp strangely quiet for all its activity. There was an air of doom about them, as if they could all sense how hopeless the coming battle would be, and yet it meant a great deal that none of the men seemed to have considered running. Jon wondered if they had all realized, when morning had come and the dead dragon had not been defeated, that even a dragon on their own side seemed not enough to turn the tide of battle. He wondered if they’d been hopeful when he’d arrived only to have all their hopes dashed by the time the first rays of dawn had hit the sky.

Jon slept fitfully, then woke, and all too soon the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon, the night falling upon them far too quickly. The men were all arming themselves, gathering torches and the few dragonglass spears and daggers they had, and Jon stared at Longclaw, which had remained sheathed, useless, at his hip the previous night. He pulled the blade a few inches out of its scabbard, looking upon the distinctive ripples of the Valyrian steel.

*I found one account of the Long Night that spoke of the last hero slaying Others with a blade of dragonsteel,* Sam had told him so many moons before. *Supposedly they could not stand against it.* And suddenly, Jon knew what he must do.

The wights were numerous, but in the most expansive view they were nothing. They were mindless, scrabbling creatures with no sense of intelligence, would be easy to beat back if not for the sheer number of them. Even the dragon had been easily tricked, could be made into a weapon against its own side, and the Others themselves had made no moves to interfere, if they’d even been able to.

But the Others were sophisticated, had arms and armor and knew how to use both. The Others were the force that could raise the dead and make them wights; that much was true enough in every source that Jon had ever heard, from Sam’s books to Old Nan’s terrifying bedtime stories from his childhood. Focusing on destroying the wights was only a stopgap measure, for the Others would simply raise more, their power limited only by the number of living beings in the world. Jon had let himself be distracted by the specter of the dragon, by the sheer number of wights and the disparity between them and the men who fought them.

But to let himself be distracted by the wights would be folly; the Others were the true threat. If Jon could kill the Others, the enemy would once more become finite, and though the odds were heavily against them, they were a foe that could be defeated. Mayhaps it would not be by Jon himself and the mismatched band of men and giants outside of Eastwatch, for they could still be easily overwhelmed, but he had to hope that the men further south would understand well enough to learn to combat the threat in time to save themselves.

He would need Rhaegal as much as he would need to act alone, and he had to hope that there would be an early respite from Viserion’s attacks as there had been the previous night, elsewise all his formulated plans would be for naught. He could give Longclaw over to one of the other men, one of the best fighters amongst those who remained, but there would be no guarantee that they’d be able to find the Others amongst the giant mass of wights. But from the air, Jon would be able to spot them easily, would be able to find them and dispatch them.

But that was only if Rhaegal would return and had gotten back to some semblance of fighting shape, and there had been no sign of the dragon all day. Jon frowned and looked at the slowly-darkening sky, searching it for the familiar shape of an approaching dragon, but there was nothing in the sky.
save a scattered flock of birds. It struck Jon again that Rhaegal had been injured, though he had no idea how badly or even where the source of the injury had been.

Taking a deep breath, Jon closed his eyes, blocking out the noises around him and searching his consciousness for the brush of another. Rhaegal’s presence was not as familiar as Ghost’s, which Jon could usually find in seconds, but after a long minute he felt the dragon’s presence as clearly as if it were his own body. He called Rhaegal the same way he would call Ghost, felt an angry recoil. And then Rhaegal reluctantly came.

*I’m sorry*, Jon thought with a pang of guilt, *but you’re our only hope.*

That seemed no consolation to Rhaegal at all when the dragon finally appeared, vicious and angry. The whispers and gasps among the men seemed inhumanly loud against Jon’s ears as Rhaegal touched down near their camp, releasing a low, dangerous noise. Thoregg appeared beside Jon then, clapping a hand against his arm.

“Kill as many as you can,” he told Jon, seeming not at all discomfited by the proximity of the dragon. “We do the same.”

Jon shook his head. “Do you have dragonglass?” he asked instead, and Thoregg nodded, pulling out a blade made of the now-familiar black stone. “Focus on the Others. Get your best fighters to go after any of them you can find.”

Jon needn’t worry he’d have to explain himself further than that, for despite the Skagosi man’s clearly shaky grasp of the Common Tongue, he seemed to understand perfectly the implications of that. With a single sharp nod, he turned back to his own men, shouting what Jon guessed must have been orders in the Old Tongue. One of the giants said something back in a booming, guttural tone, and Jon had to trust that they could handle themselves, because it was too near to darkness already, and Jon knew nothing of how this would work. Would the Others appear the same way they’d disappeared, as soon as the darkness fell? Would they even appear in the same place, or would the whole force be far off by now, somewhere to the south and near a proper settlement? Jon had no idea, and he and Rhaegal would be the only ones who would be able to locate the army if they appeared somewhere far off, having the advantage of an aerial view.

Rhaegal gave Jon a sharp, angry look when Jon approached him, and Jon was terrified for a moment that he might find himself engulfed by dragonflame. But Rhaegal sat still before him, for all that he appeared unhappy about it. Jon pulled off a glove and placed a hand against the dragon’s snout, feeling the warmth of the scales beneath his bare palm.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, out loud this time, more for his own benefit than Rhaegal’s. “I know how much I’m asking of you. But you’ll be dead too, and your brother and your mother, if we don’t do something.”

Rhaegal seemed to understand the sentiment if not the words, for Jon could feel the dragon relaxing a little beneath his touch, although he couldn’t figure out quite how he knew that. It was as though he felt it in his very bones, and for the first time since Rhaegal had flattened himself out for Jon to mount him the previous afternoon, Jon felt as though he and the dragon understood each other somehow. His blood seemed to sing with it, his body feeling hot and cold all at once. Jon put his glove back on and waited for Rhaegal to do the same as he had before, to allow Jon to climb atop his back.

Flying was less terrifying the second time. Mayhaps it was that Jon simply knew what to expect, or mayhaps it was the feeling that Rhaegal was no longer fighting him, but whatever the reason, it was freeing in a way it hadn’t been before. He felt a shaky sort of hopefulness and a grim sense of resignation all at once as the dragon circled the field of the previous night’s battle, the sun nearly
gone from the sky.

The fog rolled in first, faster than any Jon had ever seen, blanketing the area so thickly that it wasn’t long before Jon could no longer see the ground at all. With the mist came the cold, no less jarring than it had been the last time Jon had felt it, and he shivered despite any attempt to hold it at bay. All of a sudden, there were figures in the mist, appearing as though from nowhere, and the fighting began.

Jon guided Rhaegal around again, but Viserion was nowhere in sight, and Jon breathed a sigh of relief. All he needed was a brief respite from the dragon, long enough to spot some of the Others on the ground, long enough for Jon to kill a few of them. He didn’t know how many there were, didn’t know how many he’d have to fight, but killing even one would be better than killing none.

There was a shriek of sound from behind them, and Jon’s heart fell. But Rhaegal was prepared that time, whipped around with a speed that Jon didn’t know the dragon possessed and turned on his brother, exhaling a burst of flame in Viserion’s direction. The creature avoided the flames, just barely, and Jon felt a brief moment of elation. It wasn’t much, but it was better by far than they’d done the previous night.

Viserion shot flames in their direction then, and Rhaegal dodged, countering with his own burst of fire. Jon felt dizzy as the two dragons danced around each other in the sky, darting and dodging and attacking and missing, and all Jon could do was hold on and pray that Viserion would be the first to make a mistake.

And that was when it happened. Jon knew it the moment that it did, that Rhaegal’s turn had been too slow, that they were right in the path of where Viserion would breathe his flame. Time seemed to stop, and Jon’s mind was screaming for Rhaegal to get out of the way, feeling the desperate realization that they were about to be engulfed in flame.

And yet they weren’t. Viserion’s body jerked with a strange, otherworldly movement, and he fell hard as a stone, wings flailing desperately, as though the dragon had forgotten how to fly. Jon had no idea what had just happened, but he was not one to question good fortune. He urged Rhaegal forward.

“Go!” he screamed, and Rhaegal went, diving down after his falling brother and shooting flames in his direction. Viserion let out a horrifying sound, almost like a human scream, and then he righted himself, shooting back up into the sky as if nothing had happened. Rhaegal dodged Viserion’s blue-white flames again, and Jon blinked, confused and breathless as he wondered what had just happened, wondered if Rhaegal’s own flames had hit their mark, wondered if that had been the source of Viserion’s cry. But then Viserion was attacking again, and Rhaegal was dodging, and there was no time to wonder what had happened.

Until Viserion stopped in mid-air again, though this time he didn’t fall, continuing to move his wings to keep himself aloft. His body jerked strangely, as if fighting against invisible chains, and Jon understood not at all what was happening, but he knew it was his only chance. Rhaegal attacked, diving forward and foregoing the flames entirely, aiming straight for his dead brother. Jon felt frantic and terrified, wondering only at the last moment if this had been some previously unseen intelligence from the dead thing, if it was some sort of trap—

Rhaegal’s teeth sunk into Viserion’s neck and tugged, ripping through flesh and throwing his brother back through the air. Silver-blue blood shot forth from the wounds, and Rhaegal cried out as it hit him, though whether the blood was hot or cold, Jon could not have guessed. Jon waited for the counter-attack, waited for the other dragon to fight back, but there was nothing.
And then Viserion was falling again. Rhaegal pursued, engulfing his dead brother in flames, and the smoking, steaming carcass hit the ground with a resounding *boom*, right into the thick of the wights.

Rhaegal circled, and Jon sucked in a long, harsh breath, fighting to keep his eyes on the still-smoking carcass, waiting for it to wake again, waiting for it to take to the air. But Viserion was a hunk of dead, unmoving flesh, and all the things around him had fallen to the flames when he’d died. Jon blinked, then blinked again, but somehow it seemed to be true. The dragon was dead.

An unearthly-white arrow whizzed past Jon, deathly close, and Jon remembered that he had no time to celebrate. Rhaegal whirled around, and one of the Others was there, bow in hand and pulling another arrow out of its quiver. Its armor gleamed oddly even in the darkness, and the sight sent a familiar shiver through Jon’s body. The thing was on a ridge, Jon realized, away from the mass of walking dead men, and his mind raced for a moment, wondering if he should unleash Rhaegal’s flames upon the creature again. Had that killed the one they had attacked the previous night? Was this the same one? Jon had no idea.

He guided Rhaegal around out of the thick of the fighting and as near to the Other as he dared, far along the ridge as he could go. Rhaegal touched down to the ground and Jon was scrambling off the dragon’s back with as little coordination as he’d ever had. He pressed one hand against the hilt of his sword, the other against Rhaegal’s side.

“Burn them all,” he told the dragon, and then Rhaegal was off with a huge gust of wind and Jon was racing in the direction of the Other, following its eerie glow through the darkness. His feet sunk into the snow, his movements jerky and uneven, and a milky-white arrow missed him only because he stumbled, barely managing to catch himself with his hands before he fell face-first into the snow.

The Other was upon him, his bow abandoned for a sword, long and thin and blue-pale in the night as it swung toward him. Jon rolled out of the way, his fingers scrambling again for Longclaw slung across his back. Abruptly, he remembered reaching for it just after Wick had taken a dagger to his throat, remembered clumsy fingers unable to grab it, but this time his fingers closed around the hilt and Jon managed a clumsy parry. The sound when sword met sword was unlike anything he’d ever heard before, ice cracking and a bell ringing and the shriek of something dying all at once. The cold seemed to shoot through his sword all the way to the hilt, sharp and harsh enough that he felt it even through his glove. He barely managed to keep his grip, the scars on his palm throbbing dully.

Jon turned and thrust, but the creature moved with an impossible grace, every motion feather-light and serene, like dancing rather than fighting. The ice-white sword caught his with another ear-splitting sound, and Jon saw the Other properly for the first time. He’d expected it to be some deformed, malicious creature, but it was strangely mesmerizing. Its armor rippled, first pale as milk and then black as pitch, then every color in between, and Jon could not look away.

Jon barely dodged the creature’s next strike, and he came back to himself, stunned and overwhelmed. Their blades met again, then again in a dance, but Jon saw no weaknesses in this creature no matter how long he looked for an opening. This was not like fighting a man in the training yard, was not like fighting a man at all, and each clang of Valyrian steel against razor-sharp crystal seemed to burn his ears, and he was beginning to tire. Jon was starting to wonder at the wisdom of having dismounted the dragon at all. Fire blazed upon the field below them, lighting up the sky with brilliance as creatures burned and died below.

*If I’m to die here, let me take even just one of them with me,* Jon thought desperately as the Other’s blade just barely missed him, the air itself seeming to freeze upon his skin.

Something small and black was suddenly between them, right against the creature’s face, and with
numb disbelief Jon realized it was a bird, going straight for the Other’s glowing blue eyes. The creature flailed, trying to shoo the bird away from, and Jon saw his chance.

He struck, his blade searching out the creature’s neck, thin and exposed from under his rippling, iridescent armor. The Valyrian steel slid through the thing’s neck like a knife through butter, the wound hissing and smoking as Drogon’s blood had when it had dripped from the dragon’s wounds. Jon twisted, then wrenched the sword out, the Other’s long, elegant fingers reaching up toward the wound as an inhuman sound wrenched free from its lips. The thing seemed to be melting, not just its milk-pale body but its armor as well, rivulets of shining blue blood streaking down its chest, then its legs. The wound in its neck smoked and then its body was falling to the ground, and within seconds all that remained was bones in a soupy, blue-pale pool. The liquid turned to mist, until all that remained were the crystalline bones, pale as milkglass, and moments later they were gone as well.

Jon remembered how to breathe all of a sudden, sharp, cold air rushing into his lungs, and his eyes searched around him, looking for the bird that had come to his rescue. It had been no ordinary bird, had been a skinchanger if it had been anything.

Or mayhaps it is the gods, said a voice inside his head, half-crazed and exhausted, and Jon stumbled across the snow, feet sinking deep into the drifts as he found his way to the edge of the ridge. Fire blazed in his vision, dead things stumbling about in flames before they fell upon the snow. The Other was easy to spot in the mass of deadness, ethereal and glowing blue-white. A giant stood in the mass of wights, dead things clinging to its legs, and it held something that looked no larger than a fork in its huge hand. It thrust the shaft toward the Other, and Jon watched as the creature melted before his eyes, another burst of flame lighting up the landscape around them.

A spear with a dragonglass spearhead, Jon realized as the Other melted and died. The giant picked up one of the wights as though it were a doll, throwing it with considerable force far into the distance. Someone else was fighting with one of the Others, dodging its blows and looking for an opening of his own. Fire rained down from the heavens again.

We’re winning, Jon realized suddenly, with a desperate feeling of disbelief. And then he was laughing, laughing so hard he was crying, and still the tears seemed to freeze upon his cheeks, a chilling reminder that they hadn’t won, not yet. Jon tightened his grip around the hilt of his sword, searching for a way down from the ridge, ready to join the fight again.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon VII, in which Jon returns to Castle Black victorious(?), and Auntie Dany has some things to say...probably ones Jon won't like.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Castle Black from the air was a trifling, disconnected sprawl of half-ruined buildings, but Jon had never been happier to see anything in his life. For all its desolation and disrepair, for all the horrors he’d seen and experienced within its confines, it somehow still managed to give Jon the feeling of home, something he’d never thought to feel anywhere but within the walls of Winterfell. He wanted nothing more than to collapse between the sheets of his own bed and sleep for a year or ten, for he was sore and bruised and filthy all over, and he was desperately tired of sitting on dragonback. It turned out that sitting astride a dragon was nothing like sitting astride a horse, for muscles in his thighs he’d never even known existed seemed to be strained from the effort, and he was half certain there wasn’t an inch of his body that wasn’t somehow burned, bruised, or sliced open.

It had taken three nights of hard battle to vanquish all the Others, and Jon had remained at Eastwatch an extra day just to make certain it was true, that more of them wouldn’t rise again the moment the sun had set. He’d flown north of the Wall as far as he’d dared, looking for any sign of those who might remain, but there had been seemingly nothing to find. Even so, Jon had set the men at Eastwatch to whatever fortification they could manage; if more of the Others came, like as not they’d try to breach the Wall at Eastwatch, too, and the bottleneck alone might be enough to stop them.

No more than fifty men had lived to tell the tale of what had happened there, fewer than a dozen of whom wore the black of the Night’s Watch. So few men had seen that it seemed impossible that anyone who had not been there would believe, certainly not when the threat seemed no longer to be bearing down upon them. This time, it would not take another eight thousand years for men to forget the threat of the Others; that much was all but certain.

But that was a problem to be tackled another day, one of many that had been zipping back and forth in Jon’s overtired brain, none of them able to find any purchase. He needed proper rest before he could even begin to search for solutions; that much was plain.

Jon spotted her immediately once Rhaegal had begun to descend, silvery hair bright against the dark of her cloak. He took a deep breath, steeling himself for the upcoming conversation with the queen. He wondered if it would be too much to ask for her to let him sleep before they spoke; somehow, he doubted his aunt would have patience for that.

His aunt. It was strange to think of her that way, for although he’d known it since before she’d ever set foot upon the ground at Castle Black, it had been different when she hadn’t known, had been easier to pretend it wasn’t true. Without Robb or Lady Catelyn around, it was easy enough to remain nothing more than the bastard son of Eddard Stark, for no one else knew it not to be so. There had been times that even Jon himself had managed to forget, but seeing Daenerys’ face brought it all back in a rush.

She knew; she knew, and there was no chance that she would not insist upon discussing it. His assurance that he had had no interest in her throne had plainly not been enough to placate her, would be even truer now, he was certain. For just a week ago, she had been able to boast three dragons that would have bolstered her claim on the Iron Throne, even over any other Targaryen, even in the face of the ruling of the Great Council of 101. Now she had only one, and Jon had one as well—though even if he had desired the throne, he remembered enough of the tales of the Dance of the Dragons to not want to repeat its horrors. He’d danced with dragons already, and it was not an experience he
had any desire to repeat. He could only hope that the queen would believe him in that.

All too soon, Rhaegal’s feet touched upon the ground, and Jon had no choice but to dismount. The dragon had already taken off into the sky again when Jon finally looked upon Daenerys’ face, and her expression chilled him to the bone.

“What is it?” he demanded, exhausted and exasperated and terrified. “Has something happened?” Her resulting frown gave him no reassurance.

“Too much,” she told him gravely. “But best if you don’t hear it from me.”

He followed her reluctantly to his own chambers, and he shouldn’t have been surprised to find Bran within, sitting upon his own bed and bundled in furs. He was cleaner than he’d been when he’d come upon Castle Black days before, and someone had even managed to brush out his hair. But he looked impossibly dwarfed in the confines of Jon’s bed, the bulk of furs seeming almost to overwhelm him. And yet despite everything, or mayhaps because of everything, Jon could not help but step forward and throw his arms around the boy. Bran hesitated for a moment before he lifted his own arms and wrapped them around Jon’s back.

“They’re not dead, Jon,” Bran intoned, voice quiet and sad against his ear. The words sent a chill down Jon’s spine, almost as if the Others had suddenly entered the room with them. He pulled back and looked at Bran, searching the boy’s expression. Bran’s face was oddly blank.

“How could you know that?” he demanded, for no part of him wanted to believe those words even though it was the exact thing he’d feared, the exact reason he’d remained at Eastwatch an extra night after they’d managed to dispatch every one of the Others they could find and burn every last wight in sight. A part of him desperately wished for Bran to admit the words were an ill-timed jape, but he did not.

“The same way I knew you could ride the dragon,” Bran said evenly, his expression far too grave for a boy of ten years. Something about that made Jon’s chest hurt, and he clenched his burned hand, still in its glove. “I saw it.”

Ordinarily, Jon might have thought such words to be a fancy of a boy, but it was hard to deny that Bran seemed to know things he had no business knowing. It was clear enough that the little boy that he’d left behind when he’d ridden away from Winterfell was not the same one who was looking at him now.

“He’s telling the truth, Jon,” the queen put in after a moment, something strangely nervous in her voice, uncharacteristic for her. “He knew all the details of your battle at Eastwatch, knew precisely when you’d be returning. Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

Her voice was shaky but somehow firm, as if she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around everything that had occurred, a sentiment with which Jon could easily sympathize. He might have asked still, unwilling to believe it to be true, but the moment he met Bran’s eyes, he suddenly knew.

“Viserion, the bird…that was you,” Jon intoned breathlessly, the truth of it washing over him like a wave. Bran nodded solemnly.

“We both had a part to play,” he agreed. “And your part isn’t over yet.”

The words were unavoidably grave. Jon flexed his hand again, apprehensive.

“If they’re not dead, where are they?”
“Sleeping,” Bran answered with dull certainty. “As they were before they returned. But one day, they will wake up again.”

That answer told Jon little and less, and the frustration of that bubbled up in his chest.

“How long will they sleep, then?”

His annoyance must have shown through in his voice, for Bran looked a little sheepish at that. And for one moment, Jon saw the child in Bran, the one who had delighted in climbing the walls of Winterfell, the little boy who had always had a kind word for everyone.

“Ten years…a hundred years…a thousand years. I can’t say,” he admitted. “I wish I could, but that’s not how this works.” Bran paused, drawing in a long breath. “But they will rise again one day, Jon. That much I know. And we must be ready when it happens.”

Jon’s mind felt full to bursting, as though he couldn’t possibly contain another thought within it.

“How?” he asked vaguely, the whole conversation beginning to feel a bit surreal. “How can we possibly make certain that people a thousand years from now will be ready? It’s been eight thousand years since the last time the Others came, and everyone forgot.”

Bran’s eyes trailed past Jon, and he and the queen seemed to have a lengthy, wordless exchange. After a long minute of silence, Daenerys cleared her throat.

“Let’s speak downstairs, Jon,” she said in lieu of answering, and Jon nearly wanted to argue with her just for the sake of it, no matter how petulant a reaction it might be. But Jon had done his best since the queen had arrived to try to show her respect, conscious first of her dragons and then of the threat he knew she might see in him, so he begrudgingly followed her downstairs to his solar. She hesitated not at all before she spoke.

“I need you to leave the Night’s Watch.”

At first, Jon was certain that he must have misheard, but then he remembered that Robb had tried to ask the same thing of him. Yet Robb’s plea had been part of a plot to declare him king, and that would have been precisely the opposite of what Daenerys must have wanted. Everything about the request confused him.

“Mayhaps you’re unclear about our vows, Your Grace, but men of the Night’s Watch serve for life,” he told her as evenly as he could manage. “The only thing that would release me from my vows is my death.”

“Or a royal decree,” the silver-haired girl put in with a raised eyebrow, and Jon stared at her blankly.

“You’re serious,” he breathed in muted disbelief, too exhausted still to wrap his mind around her motives. She should see him as a threat, should have a vested interest in making sure he kept his vows rather than asking him to break them. “Why would you even want that?”

Daenerys looked at him like he was a particularly stupid dog. “He says the Others will come back,” she reminded him with exaggerated patience. “And what if there are no Targaryens left when that happens? No one to control the dragons, no one to stop them?”

It took a minute for the meaning of her words to strike him, and the realization left him speechless. She was asking him to break his vows not to take the throne but instead to sire children, to father a brood of dragon-blooded babes for the sole purpose of having a reserve army of dragonriders. The thought alone seemed unfathomable, for he’d given up on the thought of children so long ago that he wasn’t even able to imagine himself a father. And what Daenerys was asking of him was even worse
than that, for she was asking him not only to father children but to create weapons.

“Why me?” he asked numbly. “Why not Aegon?”

Daenerys threw her hands up in the air in frustration, pacing the length of the room before rounding on him with a sharp expression in her violet eyes.

“The dragons don’t like him, Jon!” she hissed, her expression wild and uncontrolled. “It doesn’t prove anything—not all Targaryens have been dragonriders, even when there were more dragons in the world, but…what if he’s not who he says he is? Or even if he is my brother’s first son, what if this means his children wouldn’t be able to control the dragons either? Your bloodline is proven; his is not. It was all I could do to keep Rhaegal from burning him alive.”

Having spent the past days with Rhaegal, Jon doubted the truth of the words not at all. And Jon couldn’t help but remember when she’d told him that Rhaegal had burned the last two men who had tried to tame him, so like as not, it wasn’t an unfounded fear.

Jon knew his displeasure must have shown on his face from how disappointed the queen suddenly looked. “Is this an order, Your Grace?” he asked finally.

“I had hoped it wouldn’t have to be. Are you so keen to freeze and die up here?” she asked him in disbelief. “Your son will be a king.”

That confused Jon no less than the rest of the conversation had. “What about your son?” he demanded. “You said—”

But he realized his misstep before he’d even finished speaking the words, for it was obvious what had happened from the way that the queen’s face fell. “I’m sorry,” he breathed, feeling immensely guilty, though he wasn’t sure if he had missed something, if there was any way he could have realized. She shook her head, her eyes damp.

“He never lived,” she admitted, and for a moment, she looked no more than a child. “And I’m barren. I can’t have any more children. So it has to be you, or it’s no one at all. Don’t you understand?”

Jon did, and that was the problem. The words had taken the legs out from beneath any argument he might have planned to make. He’d told Robb he needed to remain at Castle Black to combat the Others, but the Others were gone now, if only for the immediate future. How could he now argue that he needed to remain when he knew better than anyone that there would have been no chance of defeating them without the dragon?

The reality of it all came crashing down around him suddenly, and his exhaustion returned with such ferocity that he had to sit down for fear that he might otherwise collapse. He’d long ago come to terms with his lot in life, or at least he thought he had, and then Robb had come to him with fanciful tales and grand plans and upturned everything Jon had thought he’d known. He had been able to push it away then, and his reasons had been more than justified, but everything had changed again and Jon couldn’t help but feel that he wasn’t at all ready for it. He let his eyes flutter closed, took a long, deep breath as he forced himself to come to terms with it. When he opened them again, the queen was looking upon him with concern.

“May I at least bathe and sleep before we discuss this any further, Your Grace?” he inquired, a note of pleading in his voice. Daenerys looked startled.

“Of course. I should have realized.”
You should have, he almost agreed, but he stopped himself at the last moment, wondering if in fact she had, wondering if she'd purposely staged this conversation when he was off-balance so she knew he wouldn’t have been able to come up with an argument to combat it. He wondered if she was so conniving.

She left him to it, and Jon made his way to the baths in a daze, uncoordinated fingers scrambling with the fastenings of his clothing, all of which seemed unnecessarily cumbersome as soon as he was trying to strip it off. There were others using the baths when he got there, but they wisely thought better of saying anything to him, and they made themselves scarce once he arrived. He barely felt the water as he washed, couldn't even have said whether it was warm or cold as long as he felt clean, the remnants of the battle sloughing off of him in waves. He seemed to encounter a bruise every place he touched, and eventually he gave up on the bath, not entirely certain if he was truly clean or not.

Bran was still in his bed when he returned to his chambers, and both the wolves were in residence as well. Ghost came to him immediately, rubbing his head against Jon’s side until Jon pet him absentingly. Even the small movement was somehow comforting, gave him the last bit of strength he needed to manage what seemed the monumental effort of simply changing into his nightshirt. Bran watched him with eyes that were far too observant.

“I’m sure they can find another place for me,” he said when Jon came to the edge of the bed, but Jon was far too exhausted to care.

“Budge over,” he said instead, lifting up the blankets and furs and waiting for Bran to move to the side of the bed. For a moment, Jon had even managed to forget that Bran was crippled, at least until he watched the awkward way that the boy shuffled himself over. He felt a pang in his chest all over again, vividly remembered seeing Bran lying in his bed at Winterfell, pale and unconscious. He pushed the memory away with some effort and slid beneath the covers, burying his face in the pillow. He was just starting to drop off when Bran spoke.

“Everything will be okay, Jon,” he said out of nowhere, his voice so quiet that Jon thought at first he might have imagined it. He turned over to his side, looking up into Bran’s face.

“Will it?”

Bran nodded with a knowing expression. “She needs you,” he said simply. “You’ll make her better than she is.”

Jon shifted himself so that he could prop his head up on his arm, eyes trailing up and down Bran’s body, as if trying to glean what had changed about him. For if there was one thing that was clear, it was that the boy he’d left behind in Winterfell was not the same one who sat before Jon now.

“What happened to you beyond the Wall?” he inquired finally, unable to keep his curiosity to himself. Bran gave him a small, sad smile.

“Many things,” he said gravely, and Jon thought he would stop there, but after a moment he spoke again. “I killed Hodor. I killed Jojen and Meera Reed.”

Hearing the guilt in Bran’s voice made Jon’s chest ache, and he reached over for Bran’s hand, squeezing it in his own. Jon understood Bran’s meaning well, knew what it was to have the death of another on his conscience. Jon had more deaths on his conscience than he could count.

“I’m sure you didn’t mean to do any of that,” he reassured the boy, but Bran just gave him another half-hearted smile, and Jon could tell Bran didn’t believe him. But something else struck him about the words. “Jojen and Meera Reed? Their father—”
Bran nodded. “Told Robb and Mother the truth. We told him to.”

Jon felt remarkably off-balance again. “We? Who is ‘we’?”

Bran shrugged enigmatically. “It’s difficult to explain,” he said listlessly, sitting back against the pillows and closing his eyes. As Jon was wondering what he should say in return, his mind seemed finally to catch up with everything Bran had just said. He felt a sudden moment of panic.

“Gods, your mother,” Jon breathed, bolting upright in bed. It was almost as if he could feel the woman’s disapproving gaze upon him then, all the way from Winterfell. “We should send her a raven—”

Bran lay a hand upon Jon’s arm. “We’ve done it already, Jon,” Bran reassured him with far too much maturity. “Go to sleep. You can worry about it when you wake up.”

The words were the most welcome thing, mayhaps the only welcome thing, that Jon had heard since he had returned to Castle Black. Gingerly, he lay back down beneath the furs, trying to ignore his whirring thoughts, the aches in his body. He thought it would take a long time for him to fall asleep, but his exhaustion was back upon him in moments, and that was the last thought Jon had in quite some time.

Chapter End Notes

I have good news and bad news - by which I mean it's good news for me, but it might be bad news for you. ;) The good news is that I'm going on vacation (yay!). The bad news is that that means that there will most likely be a few weeks with no updates. I miiight be able to sneak out just one chapter while I'm gone, but I wouldn't count on it. Regular updates will resume when I return near the end of February.

Up next: Jon VIII, in which Jon Snow returns to Winterfell and all its ghosts.
Jon resolved to ride back to Winterfell, a decision that pleased Daenerys not at all.

“If you take Rhaegal, you can be back in a day, and we can make our way south,” she had pointed out to him when he’d told her of his intention to ride. Jon had known it, of course, and that had been precisely the problem. Jon wasn’t ready to ride into Winterfell on the back of a dragon, wasn’t ready to place himself at the gates of his childhood home and declare himself a Targaryen. Even worse, he wasn’t ready to accompany the queen south and hasten her ability to find him some wife from amongst the southron nobility, doubtless one that brought a useful alliance. He wasn’t prepared for any of it, would rather have remained Jon Snow, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, if he’d had his say. But one of the first things Jon had learned since Daenerys had been enlightened about his parentage was that he got very little say about anything, so he would take what little he could.

“We can’t bring the wolves on dragonback, Your Grace,” he’d pointed out, although that had been no more than a pretense, and like as not she’d known it as well as he had. Still, she hadn’t fought him, had simply thrown her hands in the air in exasperation.

“How many days’ ride is it to Winterfell?”

Jon knew his answer would please her little and less. “At least a fortnight, Your Grace,” he’d told her with both regret and relief. “Closer to three weeks, most like, with conditions as they are now.”

Daenerys had made her displeasure with the situation clear, though she hadn’t gone so far as to forbid it. Instead, she’d strutted angrily around Castle Black for half a day before reminding him that they still had a war to fight in the south and telling him she would meet him at Winterfell in three weeks’ time after she’d consulted with all her advisors in the south about the state of the war and what would be their best move going forward.

After she had flown off, Drogon’s wounds mostly healed, he and Bran had begun making plans for their own departure. They only needed one horse between them, but all the men that Robb had sent would ride down to Winterfell along with them, save a half-dozen who had declared their intention to remain behind and take their vows. That had been a surprise, though not nearly as much of a surprise as when Val had appeared the morning they were setting out to leave, horse saddled and saddlebags packed.

“I would ride with you to Winterfell,” she had told Jon in a tone that left no room for argument. Jon had blinked at her in surprise.

“Why?”

Val had stood up tall and proud, her beauty and strength both readily apparent in her stance. “Your kneeler king Stannis may have been a fool, but he had the right of one thing,” she’d told him in a severe tone. “Security for my people is best brokered through marriage. Mance will not bring our people together. I would ask your brother’s help in brokering a marriage for me with one of his lords.”

Jon had seen no reason to deny her, so she’d joined their party on the ride south. He’d half expected to have to protect her virtue from the men, but Val cared little and less for her virtue and also made it
very clear that she went to bed with a dagger, so it seemed that all the men knew well enough to leave her alone. Or if there were any men who had made the decision not to, they were the sort of men that she was pleased with, elsewise Jon expected he would have found them dead upon the morrow, or at the very least separated from their manhoods.

Bran was quiet nearly the entire ride down to Winterfell, which suited Jon well enough. Half the time, he sagged limp in the saddle against Jon’s body, and Jon couldn’t help but wonder where the boy had gone, wonder whether he was running with Summer or some other creature in the woods. Jon wouldn’t have begrudged him that, if that was what he wanted; half the time, Jon thought it might be better to retreat into Ghost’s mind, for Ghost had no concerns of marriages and politics, no concerns past hunting for food and protecting his pack. That simplicity would have been most welcome in the face of everything that had happened.

It did take near three weeks to Winterfell, precisely as Jon had predicted. Jon began to recognize the hills and the trees, the paths and the ruins, and he could not help but remember all the things that had happened in there, all the times he’d ridden with Robb through the wolfswood or accompanied Lord Stark on a hunt. It was queer to remember that his biggest concern in those days had been his bastard status and Lady Catelyn’s contempt, and yet Jon would have given anything to go back to those days, back to when things had been so simple. Jon had always thought that was what he’d wanted, a true name and freedom from the scorn of the word bastard, but it felt an empty thing now that Robb and Daenerys simply declared that he had it. He had long wanted to be Jon Stark, and yet he still was not; and worse, it felt hollow, for he’d done nothing to earn it. Nothing had changed, and yet everything had changed.

He didn’t feel the same relief when Winterfell came into sight that he’d felt when he’d returned to Castle Black, and that surprised him. For so long, Winterfell had been his home, even as he’d felt an outsider within it, but he felt more an outsider riding up to the north gate now than he ever had when he’d lived within its walls.

My mother was still a Stark, he tried to remind himself forcefully. I don’t belong here any less than I ever did.

And yet it felt different, and it made no matter what he tried to tell himself. Once, Jon had at least known that his father had resided within the castle’s walls, his father and his half-siblings. But Eddard Stark was dead and Robb was the Lord of Winterfell now, and Ned Stark was not his father, Robb not his brother, and neither ever had been.

Abruptly, a dream came back to him, the recurring nightmare of having to descend into Winterfell’s crypts and feeling unwelcome there, not Stark enough to be allowed in the hallowed space where lords and kings were interred. All of Winterfell was now the crypts, Jon couldn’t help but think, full of stern condemnation and ghosts, and he felt less welcome in its halls than he ever had.

They were still far from the imposing walls of Winterfell when Jon spotted the group riding out toward him carrying the direwolf banner; he shook Bran where the boy sat in front of him in the saddle, wondering if he would even wake. He was surprised when Bran did, felt the moment when his body stiffened with his return to consciousness.

“We’re almost there,” Jon told Bran, and the boy only made a noncommittal noise in response. Like as not, Bran had known already; Bran had a queer way of knowing most everything.

Jon recognized Hallis Mollen leading the troop of riders, and he felt a sudden sense of insidious disquiet. He’d known Hal Mollen since he’d been a boy, should have been glad to lay eyes upon him again, but all he could think of was whether the man knew, whether everyone in Winterfell now knew. Rhaegal was far out of sight, and Jon had made certain of that, but that did not mean that the
whole of the castle did not know.

“Don’t worry,” Bran murmured suddenly, as though he could read Jon’s thoughts, and Jon had no way to be sure that he couldn’t. “It will be fine.”

*It will be fine,* Jon repeated to himself, and yet despite everything, his heart was racing the same way it always did when he awoke from that dream. It seemed a silly thing, after facing dragons and the Others and an army of hostile wildlings attacking the Wall, but facing Winterfell and Lady Catelyn without Eddard Stark there to protect him suddenly felt terrifying.

Hal Mollen was, of course, oblivious to all Jon’s worries as he rode up to them with a grin. “Little Bran Stark,” he intoned when he reached them, “but not so little anymore. Your mother cannot wait to see you.”

Bran didn’t respond, but he must have at least favored the man with a smile, because Hal accepted it easily. He turned his attention to Jon, and he simply nodded his head. “Jon,” he greeted brusquely, and with much less warmth. It was no less than what Jon had expected, and yet still he felt a sense of dismay. Jon felt the uncertainty of dealing with a man who had known him only as a boy, and mayhaps Hal felt that, too. Or mayhaps he wondered why Jon was getting a warm welcome to Winterfell when deserters from the Night’s Watch had always gotten the sharp end of Lord Eddard’s blade.

They rode back in silence, although the same could not be said for the men who had accompanied them, whose animated conversations were a jarring backdrop to Jon’s own silent apprehension. They made their way through the looming North Gate, and Jon expected any moment to wake up in his bed back at Castle Black, heart pounding with the memory of the condemnation of the ghosts of Winterfell’s crypts. Instead, they arrived to the courtyard.

Men were waiting there, more of them than Jon would have expected. It wasn’t near the production it had been those years before when King Robert had ridden in, but it was more than just the handful Jon had thought to be there.

A man stepped up to Jon’s horse, and for a moment he thought him to be Smalljon Umber before he realized the man’s face was wrong, though the two could have been cousins. Jon realized immediately what the man meant to do when he reached his arms up, and Jon’s focus suddenly centered on nothing more than getting Bran off the horse. It was a cumbersome process, Bran’s legs dead weight beneath him, but Bran suffered the indignity the same way he had for the entirety of their trip.

Lady Catelyn was there the moment Bran was off the horse, and she was taking him from the tall, unknown man’s arms into her own. Bran was too large now for her to carry easily in her arms, but she seemed not to be bothered, slumping down into the snow in her skirts with not a whit of care for propriety and pulling Bran onto her lap, enfolding him in a tight embrace.

Jon felt his chest tighten at the sight. Would anyone ever be so glad to see him? Jon doubted it. He’d long lived with the fanciful hope that his own mother was out there somewhere and he would one day be reunited with her, but he knew now that that was nothing more than the wishful thinking of a child. His mother was dead, having scarce outlived his birth, and Jon felt a rush of sharp envy at the sight of Bran with his mother. He pushed it away with force and dismounted.

Jon’s feet had barely touched the ground when something slammed into his legs with near enough force to knock him over. He looked down to see a familiar mop of messy brown hair, and he couldn’t stop the sudden grin from finding its way to his face. He reached down to ruffle the girl’s hair and opened his mouth to speak, then stopped himself. *Little sister,* he’d almost said, but that wasn’t true.
She looked like him, but she was no more his sister than Robb was his brother.

“ Arya,” he greeted instead, and she looked up at him with a smile that was blinding in its intensity.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” she exclaimed, finally taking a small step away from him. “I wanted to visit you at Castle Black with Robb and Mother, but they wouldn’t let me.”

Jon couldn’t help but think how lucky it was she hadn’t with all the things that had happened in the few days they’d been at Castle Black, but he kept that thought to himself.

“I’m glad to see you,” Jon said instead, and that, at least, was true. For all that he felt about Winterfell, he was genuinely happy to see Arya safe and healthy.

There was a sudden growl off to their side, and they both turned in the direction of the sound to see Summer and Shaggydog rolling around in the snow, playfighting, Ghost prowling circles around them. Rickon stood nearby, looking much bigger than when Jon had last seen him and perfectly disgruntled to be there, and he said something Jon couldn’t understand to the large man who had helped Bran off his horse. The man responded in kind, and Rickon looked even more petulant. Jon took a step away from Arya and moved to Rickon.

“I didn’t know you could speak the Old Tongue,” he told the boy, and Rickon’s eyes lit up suddenly, as if he was gratified that Jon had even recognized it.

“I learned when I was on Skagos,” he told Jon with excitement. “Do you speak it?”

Rickon’s enthusiasm was so infectious that Jon couldn’t help but smile in response. “I learned a few words, but nowhere near as much as you,” he told Rickon patiently. “Who’s your friend?”

Rickon stood up taller, suddenly feeling very important. “His name is Harrik. His father is Lord Magnar of Kingshouse,” he proclaimed with a deep sense of pride. “Did you know that ‘magnar’ means ‘lord’ in the Old Tongue? So saying ‘Lord Magnar’ is like saying ‘Lord Lord.’ It’s silly.”

“It is silly,” he agreed. “You’ve grown up so much. You were only a baby the last time I saw you.”

Rickon grinned, pleased at the compliment. “I’m not the baby anymore. Little Ned is the baby,” he told Jon proudly, but after a moment, his face turned solemn. “We heard you might have been dead.”

He paused, looking aggrieved. “I’m glad you’re not dead.”

And then he ran forward, throwing himself at Jon’s legs with strength that rivaled Arya’s, squeezing him tightly for a long second before he pulled back. The little boy then turned and ran away without a word, and Shaggydog gave up his wrestling with his brothers and followed. Arya snorted next to Jon.

“That’s better than most of us get from him,” she remarked, although there was a fondness in her tone as she said it. “He won’t even hug mother unless Harrik tells him to.”

Despite his better instincts, Jon felt a moment of vindictive triumph as he looked over at Lady Catelyn, still sat in the snow like a little girl, talking into Bran’s ear. *Your son likes me better than he likes you,* a part of Jon wanted to say, and he immediately felt ashamed at the thought.

Sansa stepped up next, and the sight of her was a queer one, for she looked every bit the Lady Catelyn in miniature, more than she had when Jon had last seen her. Her hair was braided and carefully set, and she was dressed impeccably in a warm winter gown. *Always the lady,* Jon thought, *always waiting patiently for her turn.* Jon was surprised when she stepped forward and
wrapped her arms around him as well, although her embrace was gentle and restrained next to the
reception he’d gotten from Arya and Rickon.

*When was the last time Sansa embraced me like one of the family?* he wondered dully as he brought
his arms up to return the hold. Most like it had been when she had been no more than a babe, before
she’d learned from her mother that she was meant to hate him. *My half-brother,* she’d always been
careful to call him, almost as soon as she’d learned how to talk. He wondered if she was glad that he
was, in truth, even less than that, had been relegated to no more than a cousin.

She pulled back and gave him a soft smile. “Welcome home,” she said softly, and the words stopped
Jon in his tracks, not at all what he’d expected from her. *This isn’t my home,* he almost said, and then
he stopped himself. Castle Black could no longer be his home, no more than Winterfell could be. But
then where was his home meant to be now? The Red Keep, once they took it? Or Dragonstone,
even? Did Daenerys mean him to be her heir, if something happened to her before he’d sired the
children she demanded? He realized he had no idea.

“Well?” he responded instead, mind abuzz with uncertainty. Sansa glanced worriedly over her
shoulder.

“I should go help Mother with Bran,” she declared, and when Jon followed her gaze, he saw
that Harrik Magnar was gathering up Bran into his arms again, and Hal Mollen was helping Lady
Catelyn back to her feet. They turned away and made their way to the keep without a word, and
despite everything, Jon felt pained. He thought he’d stopped hoping for her not to despise him,
but apparently he had not. Sansa squeezed his hand. “We’ll talk later, all right?”

The words were unexpectedly sincere, and Jon nodded mutely, watching Sansa scurry away with all
the dignity a lady could manage in a dress in the snow. The group in the courtyard had mostly
dispersed save for grooms who were still rounding up the remainder of the horses. Jon turned back to
Arya.

“Don’t look at me,” she said, throwing up her hands in the air. “Everyone is being weird.” She gave
him a pointed look, as if to say, *You’d better not be weird, too.* Jon barely managed to hold in a
laugh.

“You need to meet the babies!” she exclaimed suddenly, and Jon stared at her for a long moment. Of
the two girls with whom he’d been raised, Arya was not the one he’d have expected to sound excited
about babies. Arya was right; everyone was suddenly strange, and nothing was how it had been.

“All right,” he agreed, “lead the way.”

Jon could see the marks of the destruction Winterfell had suffered in the boarded-up windows and
rough-hewn doors. The First Keep was all but gone, he couldn’t help but note before he followed
Arya inside. Few of the people inside the castle were ones that Jon knew, which seemed both a
blessing and a curse. She stopped him outside of the rooms that Jon realized had once belonged to
her father.

“I think Rodrik is probably sleeping, but I bet we can sneak in and have a look at him,” she said
mischievously, and Jon gave her a confused look. “Robb’s baby. Robb hasn’t even met him yet.
He’ll be so angry you get to meet him first.”

The last letters he’d exchanged with Winterfell hadn’t made mention of Robb’s baby, so the news of
it hit Jon with the force of a brick. He and Robb were of an age, and they’d done near everything
together for most of their lives, at least until Jon had departed for Castle Black. They’d learned at
bow and sword together, had learned to ride horses together, had learned histories and houses and
sigils together. It was somehow unfathomable that Robb already had a child when the mere idea of siring one seemed too foreign a concept for Jon to even contemplate. But Arya was putting her finger to her lips and letting them into the rooms, and Jon had no time to consider it any further.

The room was dark, but Arya navigated it as though she’d done it half a hundred times before, and Jon had no choice but to follow. He’d never been in these rooms before, couldn’t recall even seeing Lord Stark come from these rooms much. His place had been unquestionably with Lady Stark, and that had been one place Jon had been absolutely forbidden to tread.

Jon pushed the thought away and followed Arya into the bedroom. There was a woman sitting in the corner, sewing by candlelight, one that Jon did not recognize. She put her finger to her lips when she saw them, and Arya nodded, dragging Jon behind her toward a cradle not far away.

It was too dark to make out much, but the babe was a tiny thing, couldn’t have been more than a few moons old. His eyes were closed, and the hair upon his head was so fine that he appeared nearly bald, and it was difficult to fathom that it was actually Robb’s child sleeping before him. Jon couldn’t help but wonder what Robb would feel when he saw the babe, for Jon himself felt nothing special. Arya seemed to understand.

“He’s pretty boring,” she admitted in a whisper. “All he does is sleep and eat and poop. Ned is better. He walks and talks and everything.”

The woman made a shushing noise. “If you wake him up, your mother won’t be pleased,” she said, and Jon looked over at her again. Suddenly, he missed Old Nan fiercely, missed her stern manner and frightening tales. Jon grabbed Arya by the sleeve and tugged her away.

“They don’t have a nursery for him?” he asked when they were back out in the hall. Arya shrugged.

“Winterfell’s too full right now,” she explained. “And I think Ros is lonely with Robb gone. I’m sure they’ll move the baby when he gets back.” She smirked, and Jon stared at her in disbelief. She was far too young to be thinking about those sorts of things.

“Arya!”

“What?” she demanded with a snigger. “I know how babies are made. And they’re not particularly quiet about it, either. Half the castle knows what they’re doing and when they’re doing it.”

Jon just shook his head, wondering if this was how the adults had all once felt, trying to reign Arya in when he and Robb had wanted nothing more than to encourage her. He and Robb were both men grown now, and Jon felt it more acutely than ever in the castle with Arya and Robb’s new baby, more than he’d felt it even when he’d become Lord Commander. He remembered playing at swords with Robb, remembered covering himself in flour and scaring his younger siblings in the crypts by pretending to be a ghost, but those memories were vague and unsettled, felt as though they’d happened to someone else entirely.

Arya led Jon to one of the rooms that Jon vaguely remembered had once been Rickon’s nursery, and Bran’s and Arya’s before that. There was a young woman inside, another one that Jon did not recognize. Arya made quick work of dismissing the girl.

“You can go,” Arya announced seriously. “We’ll watch him for now.”

“Of course, m’lady,” the girl said with a delicate curtsy, and then she left. Jon was surprised at how quickly the girl listened even to Arya’s direction. Had they been trusted with the babies when they’d
been no more than children themselves? Jon couldn’t quite recall.

“Ned, come here and meet your brother,” Arya called, and that was when Jon saw the little boy, sitting on the floor with a stack of blocks. Jon watched as the little boy stacked them four high, then knocked them over with a giggle. “I told you about Jon, that he was coming home. Do you remember?”

The toddler quirked his head in their direction and then pushed himself to his feet with uncoordinated movements, grabbing one of the blocks and toddling over to them. He handed the block over to Jon with slobbery fingers, and Jon had no choice but to take it.

“Jon,” the little boy agreed with a nod, and then he walked back to his blocks. He picked up another and walked it over to them, and it was only then that Jon realized that this was, in some way, acceptance from the little boy, that he was trying to share his toys. Jon took the second slimy block in his hand, unable to help the smile that found its way to his features.

“Thank you,” he told Edrick with as much seriousness as he could muster, one block in each hand. Edrick beamed at him and returned to his pile to retrieve a third. He shared Arya’s coloring, Jon saw, and his own, and that realization tugged at something in Jon’s chest.

“I remember when you were that small,” Jon remarked after a moment, reaching down to accept the gift of a third block from the little boy. He managed to juggle two of them in one hand. “He looks quite a bit like you used to, actually.”

Arya opened her mouth to respond, but someone behind them responded first.

“He looks even more like you did at that age.”

Jon spun around at the familiar voice and immediately felt an urge to make excuses for his presence, like he was a trespasser who was not wanted there. Once, Jon would have apologized and made himself scarce, but this time he forced himself not to. He was not a child any longer, and he would be gone from Winterfell soon enough. He would not scurry away from Lady Catelyn like a frightened child.

And yet Lady Catelyn’s face was not angry as she looked upon him, he realized, and it belatedly struck him that she’d even acknowledged a similarity between him and her son, something he couldn’t have imagined her doing all those years ago, back when he’d called Winterfell home. The realization left him speechless, but Lady Catelyn seemed unbothered by his lack of response.

“It’s time for his lunch and his nap,” she explained into the silence. “Come along, sweetling.”

Edrick ignored his mother and brought Jon a fourth block instead. Jon took it into his hand with some effort, feeling tense and uncertain, wondering if the woman would take it as a slight. She simply sighed softly.

“I’m serious, Ned,” she said in a scolding tone. “You can play with your brother and sister later.”

Jon truly was struck speechless that time, and for a long second, he forgot how to breathe. Lady Catelyn had never referred to Jon as her children’s brother when they’d been growing up, not once; that she would do it now, when she knew it to be a lie, was almost too much for him to bear. Jon watched breathlessly as Edrick finally dropped his blocks and toddled over to his mother.

“Up,” he demanded, holding his arms in the air, and Catelyn reached down and gathered him in her arms. She turned to leave, and then she stopped abruptly, as though she’d forgotten something. Reluctantly, she turned back toward them.
“Jon.” She said the word laboriously, as though forcing the single syllable out of her mouth was almost too much effort for her. “I owe you a debt of gratitude for bringing my son back to me.”

Jon stared at her for a long second, half wondering if this truly was a dream. “I didn’t do anything, Lady Stark,” he heard himself saying, as though through a fog. “He found his way back all on his own.”

She pursed her lips, as if the response was not what she wanted to hear. “All the same, thank you,” she said with unfailing courtesy. Jon fumbled, wondering what it was that she wanted from him.

“You’re welcome,” was all he managed to say, his voice breathless and tense. She nodded sharply in acknowledgement, and then she was gone. Jon exhaled deeply, as though a large boulder had been lifted from his chest. He turned to Arya.

“Wow,” she breathed out, plainly stunned. All Jon could do was nod.

“Yeah.”

Arya looked up at him. “Has she ever been so kind to you?” she asked with a confused look, and it took Jon a moment to respond. ‘Kind’ would not have been the first word Jon would have used to describe the exchange, for Lady Catelyn had looked the entire time as though even speaking the words had been no less than torture for her. But Jon supposed that she had been treating him kindly, in her own way.

“Not that I recall,” he admitted, although at Castle Black, she’d been…something. If not kind, at least understanding.

Arya made a face. “Not to me, either,” she told him. “She even lets me wear trousers now.”

Jon looked down at her, but she wasn’t wearing trousers then. Perhaps she’d considered Jon’s arrival at Winterfell an occasion special enough to warrant a skirt, if only a plain one.

Jon thought back over the previous years, over the way that everything had spiraled out of control. It had all started that day that Robert Baratheon had ridden through the gates of Winterfell, and it hadn’t stopped since. Eddard Stark hadn’t just protected Jon, but he’d protected all of them from the truth of the horrors that lay beyond the safe walls of Winterfell.

“A lot has changed since your father died,” Jon remarked finally, his throat tight with emotion.

Arya hit him, and hard.

“Shut up, dummy,” she hissed at him. “He was your father, too. I don’t care what anyone says. Even Mother says you’re our brother. So stop being stupid.”

Jon’s chest tightened with emotion, but this time, it wasn’t grief or anger or envy. Everything in front of him was suddenly blurry and unfocused, and Jon blinked to try to banish the tears that threatened to fall. He wondered if Arya had known how badly he’d needed to hear those words, how much they meant to him. He reached down and ruffled her hair.

“Thanks, little sister,” he told her sincerely, and she threw her arms around him and buried her face against his stomach.
Up next: Daenerys IV, in which Daenerys has come to some conclusions following her time in the south. As usual, Jon probably isn't going to like them.
All right, y’all - the shenanigans I did to post a chapter from crappy hotel internet meant I didn't update the date properly, so the previous chapter didn't actually show up at the top of the main page when it was updated. If that's how you keep track of new chapters, then you may have missed it when it was posted. If you don't remember reading Jon's return to Winterfell, you probably want to backtrack one chapter and read that before proceeding with this one.

Winterfell was larger and grander than Daenerys had expected. It wasn’t grand in the way of Casterly Rock, of Storm’s End or of Dragonstone, but the sprawling complex of walls and buildings was a formidable thing, and the godwood that grew within its walls was so grand that it could have held a small castle just within its confines. It had a double curtain wall with a moat between, and most curiously, Daenerys saw, the moat was not frozen the way all the surrounding landscape was, the way near every river she’d seen since she’d moved north of the Neck had been. And unlike any other castle she’d seen in Westeros, Winterfell was a sprawl of open courtyards, buildings connected only by covered walkways.

Winterfell was a strange place, Daenerys couldn’t help but think to herself, strange and different, and yet nothing about that surprised her. Jon Snow and Robb Stark were both strange and different from most men she’d previously known, and they’d both been raised within its walls.

Like as not, the main courtyard was large enough for Drogon to land without damaging any of the structures, but mayhaps that was not the impression she wanted to leave on these people, for they still knew not the contents of the letter she had tucked up into her sleeve. Even larger a detriment was the scurry of people moving back and forth through it with a sense of obvious haste, doubtless having spotted her in the air. Daenerys had grown used to this, and the sight of it was nothing short of amusing; with riders approaching, a castle had time to make preparations, to change into their finest clothing and get all the people in order to give off their most favorable impression. But when she approached on dragonback, they had no time to prepare, and Daenerys couldn’t help but think that that gave her a truer view of a place.

She landed her dragon near a hundred yards from Winterfell’s looming gate, retrieved her bags and then let him fly off. It had never stopped feeling strange to walk into a place unaccompanied and unarmed, and like as not it never would. But Jon Snow was within those walls, and she had the letter tucked up into her sleeve; if there was anywhere she’d ever have the promise of safe conduct, even without the looming threat of a dragon, it would be within the walls of Winterfell.

The gate had already been opened for her by the time she arrived, and it was an anticlimactic thing to walk into Winterfell’s courtyard entirely without fanfare. There were no more than two dozen people in the courtyard, among them a girl who looked not much older than Daenerys herself, a small child, and two wolves. Summer she recognized; the large, shaggy black wolf she did not. One person was conspicuously absent, though if Summer had reached Winterfell, Jon Snow had as well. As he should have, she added to herself. He’d said three weeks, and it had been near a moon’s turn since she’d departed Castle Black.
The girl stepped forward and dropped into a low curtsy. “Your Grace,” she greeted politely, head bowed. “Welcome to Winterfell.”

The girl was pretty in her own plain sort of way, chestnut brown hair braided carefully over her shoulder. She was no taller than Dany herself was, clad in a heavy, grey fur cloak that made her look bulkier than she must have been in truth. She looked slightly harried, as though she’d had to run to the courtyard to greet Daenerys.

Dany waited until the girl rose. “Lady Roslin, I presume?”

The girl nodded with a shy sort of uncertainty. “Yes, Your Grace,” she affirmed softly. Daenerys gave her a gentle smile to try to put her at ease. The girl, after all, was far from her enemy.

“I’ve come straight from your husband’s camp,” she told Roslin Stark, fishing inside her sleeve for the scroll she’d secreted there. She handed the paper over. “I come bearing a letter from him.”

Dany knew what the letter said, though she had not read it herself, nor stood vigil over Robb Stark as he’d written it. He’d promised her that he’d forsake his crown and pledge his fealty to her if she’d brought her dragons north, and he’d made good on the pledge. He’d even gone so far as to hand over his crown to her as a gesture of his fealty, the same way his ancestor once had to hers.

The way Roslin Stark’s eyes lit up at the words was unmistakable; where Daenerys had thought her plain before, the happy glow certainly made her pretty. She is in love, Dany realized as she looked at the girl, whose face was flushed not entirely from the cold. It had been an arranged match, Dany knew, an exchange for soldiers much the same way her own marriage to Drogo had been. But she loved Robb Stark wholly and completely, and the realization brought a strange feeling to Dany’s chest. She wondered if she’d ever feel that way for a man again, if she was even capable anymore.

“You have my thanks, Your Grace,” the girl said, all perfect courtesy, and then she hesitated. “Is he…?”

Dany gave Roslin a soft look. “No more than five days’ march to the south, by his estimate,” she reassured Roslin, and the girl looked relieved. “I shall let you read it all for yourself.”

Roslin nodded, cradling the letter in her hands as though it were a most treasured object. “You have my thanks for the news, Your Grace,” she said softly. “We have already had rooms prepared for you, at Jon’s direction, if you would like to retire after your trip?”

The words brought Jon’s absence from the courtyard into even starker relief. “Actually, I must needs have words with Jon,” Dany said, looking around the courtyard once more, as if he might appear from behind someone else. “If you could direct me to where he is?”

Roslin hesitated for a moment. “I’m not certain,” she admitted reluctantly. “I think he may be in the godswood at the moment. I can have someone fetch him and send him to you, if you’d like.”

Dany shook her head, impatient. “I’ll seek him out there, if you don’t mind.”

Roslin Stark looked a bit out of sorts at that. “As it pleases Your Grace,” she murmured, as though on instinct. “But the godswood here is a bit difficult to navigate if you’re unfamiliar with it. If you give me a moment, I can find someone to guide you—”

“I can do it!” came a sudden voice, and Daenerys turned in the direction from which it had come, at first seeing nothing. It was only then that she looked down and saw the boy, no more than five years old if she’d had to guess. He had long, shaggy auburn hair and blue eyes that marked him, without a
doubt, as a relative of Robb Stark. The large black direwolf that towered over the little boy only served to confirm it.

“But Rickon—” the girl began to protest, but the little boy stuck his chin out obstinately.

“He’s probably at the heart tree, but if he’s not, Summer and Shaggy will find him quicker than anyone else,” he argued, a stubborn fire in his blue eyes. Daenerys could not help the smile that found its way to her lips.

“I’m sure he’ll make a fine guide,” she told Roslin with a little smile, and Roslin bowed her head deferentially.

“Of course, Your Grace,” she agreed. “We’ll have your things brought to your rooms.”

Daenerys handed her bags over to one of the men and followed the little boy, the two wolves preceding them toward the entrance to the godswood. “So you must be Rickon Stark,” she said genially as she fell into step beside him. He nodded.

“And you’re Daenerys Targaryen,” he returned knowingly, looking quite pleased with himself for the knowledge. It had been dark and grey in the courtyard, the blanket of clouds lying heavy in the sky, but it was even darker once they entered the godswood, the trees broad and old and providing a thick canopy between them and the sky. “What’s it like to ride a dragon?” the boy asked suddenly, his voice heavy with excitement, as though he couldn’t manage to hold the thought in. “I tried to ask Jon, but he wouldn’t tell me anything. We haven’t even seen his dragon.”

*His dragon.* She still misliked the sound of the words, the ripple of emotion it caused to cascade through her chest. She had walked into the fire and birthed three dragons, had nursed them at her own breast, had raised them and cared for them when they had been too small to hunt for themselves. All three dragons had been *her* dragons, and now one was dead and another lost to her.

She forced the thought away. “It’s very windy,” she told Rickon evenly, the blandest response she could think of. “Dragons can fly very fast.”

Rickon nodded seriously, as though she’d imparted some very secret knowledge. “I rode a unicorn on Skagos,” he told her finally, a frown turning his expression sour. “I don’t know why people think so well of unicorns. They’re awful.”

Daenerys was saved from having to opine about unicorns when they turned the corner and her gaze fell upon the great weirwood tree, with its white bark and shock of red leaves. It was the first time Daenerys had seen a weirwood up close, the first time she’d seen one of the carved faces she’d heard of in stories, sap leaking from its eyes like lines of bloody tears. There was a large pool beside the tree, the red leaves standing stark in the reflection in the water. A man was knelt before the tree with his head bowed, and Daenerys had spent enough time in Jon Snow’s company that she would have recognized him anywhere, even from behind.

The serenity of the scene was broken immediately by Rickon’s voice. “Jon!” the little boy called impatiently. “The queen is here.”

It took a moment for Jon to shift in his spot, and there was a stiffness to his movements that gave Daenerys the feeling that he’d been knelt there for quite some time. Little bits of ice had crystallized upon the edges of the fur of his cloak and the tips of his dark hair, and when he finally faced them, Daenerys swore that his lips were tinged faintly blue.

“How long have you been out here?” Dany asked with a frown, and Jon looked around the clearing,
as if it would somehow provide an answer. He ran a gloved hand over his face.

“I’m not certain. What time is it?”

He looked truly perplexed by the question, and that alone told Dany that it had been a long time indeed. It would have been easy enough to lose a perception of time beneath the canopy of trees, she thought, where whatever meager daylight that had managed to make its way through the clouds had no hope of reaching. She knew he followed the old gods, but she’d seen no hint of it in him before, had had no indication that he had been so devout. She hadn’t thought to find Jon at religious observance like this, had never once seen him at prayer before. But there was no weirwood at Castle Black, she reminded herself, feeling strangely off-balance.

“It’s past midday,” the little boy told Jon in a slightly scolding tone. “You missed lunch. I was going to come get you but Ros told me not to bother you.”

That surprised Dany a little to hear. Apparently Robb Stark’s meek little wife wasn’t quite so meek after all.

“We have much and more to speak of, Jon,” Dany told him without preamble. “But I’d greatly prefer to do it inside, before we all freeze to death.”

Jon snapped back from confused to deferential in no more than the blink of an eye. “Of course, Your Grace,” he said seriously. “Has anyone shown you to your rooms yet?”

Dany shook her head. “I came straight here once I arrived.”

Jon looked slightly guilty at that, and he turned to Rickon. “Rickon, could you please go to the kitchens and ask them to have food brought to the queen’s rooms?”

Far from looking put-out by the request, the little boy looked excited, as though he’d been given a very vital task. “Summer, Shaggy, let’s go!” he called, and then he was running back the way they’d come, the two wolves bounding along after him through the trees. Daenerys watched them disappear with a thoughtful look.

“There certainly are an awful lot of Starks,” she couldn’t help but comment. Jon’s answer was a slightly sour smile.

“More and more every day,” he acknowledged grimly, and then he motioned in the direction the boy and the wolves had gone. “Let me show you to your rooms, and then we can speak.”

He led her through the godswood then through the castle with a deep sense of familiarity. He would, she knew, for he’d grown up within the walls of Winterfell, had grown up being called the bastard son of Eddard Stark. Eddard Stark, one of the men who had helped to overthrow her father, though not the man who had ultimately killed him. Her brother had run away with Eddard Stark’s sister. Her father had killed his father and his brother. Her brother and Eddard Stark’s sister had come together and created the man who stood before her now. It was all more complicated than it had been in the stories Viserys had told her when she had been a girl, where they had been the villainous usurpers and her father the innocent victim.

The rooms they’d given her were grander than she’d have expected, too. A thick, fur rug covered much of the stone floor and a line of windows covered the wall, though all the windows had been boarded up against the elements outside. The fireplace was a huge, imposing presence along one wall, a fire already crackling delightfully in the hearth. Jon pulled out a chair for her and poured her a cup of ale.
“Our apologies about the windows,” he told her as he handed her the cup. “Rebuilding is difficult to accomplish in the winter.”

He apologized as if he’d had anything to do with it, although she knew he’d been at Castle Black until just a turn of the moon before. She sipped her ale and waited for the servants to arrive with the food Jon had requested, porridge and spiced venison and freshly-baked bread still warm from the oven. Dany hadn’t eaten since morning, but it sounded as though Jon had not eaten all day, and yet he still only picked listlessly at his food, taking no more than an absent bite here or there.

She watched him for a long minute, turning her words over in her head. She’d gone over what she meant to say at least half a hundred times already, had even gone so far as to discuss it with Robb Stark, and yet still she felt at a loss. How was she to speak to him about matters of political importance when he acted as though she was dragging him away from the Night’s Watch kicking and screaming, as though what she’d asked of him was no better than a death sentence? She took a deep breath.

“I’ve had conversations with all my advisors about how we should proceed,” she began carefully, and it had taken her nearly a turn of the moon to make the rounds between all of them. She’d been to Dragonstone and Storm’s End, Runestone and Riverrun, Casterly Rock and Robb Stark’s camp, and they’d all had much and more to say to her.

“What would you have me do now, Your Grace?”

There was a petulance about the question, as though Jon was no more than a little boy being forced to eat beets against his will. And yet he’d been a good leader at Castle Black and a good fighter besides, and his insights had been valuable enough. She tried to remember that in the face of his sullen countenance.

“We must be married,” she said finally, seriously, and she watched as Jon’s face went through a series of expressions, from surprise to annoyance to resignation. “Anything else will be too confusing for everyone. Then it becomes a matter of claims, and as you have not failed to note, your claim is better than mine.”

It seemed to take a long minute for Jon to process the words, but when he finally did speak, his tone was even and infuriatingly reasonable. “Only if we could prove that my parents were married, which we can’t,” he pointed out. “And regardless, Aegon’s claim is better than both of ours.”

Dany stared at her nephew for a long moment, as if she could somehow discern whether he truly was real. She’d met many a man who had been desperate for power, who had been willing to bribe and cheat and betray in pursuit of that power; never before had she met a man so desperate to avoid a crown when he’d had it laid upon his head. It was equal parts impressive and infuriating, as was his fixation on Aegon.

“If he is even my brother’s son at all,” she put in.

Jon didn’t seem particularly keen to have that argument with her again. “I thought you planned to marry me off to some noble family to bear you some heirs,” he remarked darkly, and Dany just sighed.

“Multiple marriages aren’t unheard of within the Targaryen line, Jon,” she reminded him patiently. “Even your father had two wives.”

Jon rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair. “And look how that turned out for him.”
Dany understood his bitterness better than most anyone could. What Rhaegar had done had doomed him to a life of being called bastard, had set off a chain of events that had started the war that had left her to grow up terrified, poor and alone in a foreign land with no one save Viserys for company for much of her life. She couldn’t claim to understand why her brother had done what he had, for he’d been slain before either of them had even been born, but it would not do to dwell on the past.

*If I look back, I am lost,* she thought, and took another deep breath.

“Well, your second marriage will be done with my knowledge and consent, which considerably changes things,” she said sternly. “And it’s best if we were married before we go south, to provide a united front.”

Jon clenched and unclenched his hand a few times, as if trying to decide whether he wanted to strike her. “Fine,” he breathed out finally, sounding equal parts annoyed and defeated. She eyed him for a long moment before speaking again.

“What has you so wroth?”

Jon looked at her as though he thought her mad. He stood up, mayhaps unable to endure being seated for a moment longer, and paced the length of the room once before rounding on her. “Suddenly having my whole life decided for me,” he started angrily, “being treated like a pawn in someone else’s game—”

Daenerys felt rage bubbling up in her chest, too; she stood before she even thought about it, her chair scratching angrily along the stone.

“You’ve now discovered the plight of noble women everywhere,” she hissed, fixing him with an angry expression. “I was sold to a man I’d never met, with whom I shared no common language, when I was three and ten. I sold myself again to a vile, awful man who had owned slaves, who had only given them up because I had dragons, for the sake of peace.”

Jon’s previous anger seemed to deflate at her words, and he sank back down into his chair, looking defeated. “I’m sorry,” he said after a moment, sounding chastened. “That was unfair of me.”

Dany nodded and sat back down as well.

“Yes, it was,” she agreed sharply. “And since you’re tired of me deciding things for you, I don’t suppose you want to hear that I’d planned to have the wedding here, so you could be surrounded by your family. I’d asked Lord Stark to wed us, but feel free to make your own arrangements, as it pleases you.”

Jon looked startled by the words, as if he couldn’t quite process them. “Thank you,” he said finally, softly. “That was kind of you.”

Dany nodded again and took a sip of her ale, in an attempt to show that she was wholly unaffected by his reaction. She’d expected his confusion about the prospect of multiple marriages, had even expected to have to fight him on it, but she hadn’t been quite prepared for him to act as though having to marry her was some sort of punishment. Jon took a sip of his ale as well, seemingly trying to settle his nerves.

“What do you plan to do about Aegon?” he finally asked. “I know you don’t believe he is who he says he is, but…some people will believe, surely? And if it comes to a matter of claims…”

Daenerys was entirely tired of speaking about Aegon, speaking to Aegon, or, in fact, even thinking about Aegon. She’d been at Storm’s End near a week negotiating the terms of a deal
with them, and Arianne Martell had been even worse than Aegon, having never been willing to give an inch. Part of Dany had wanted to burn Storm’s End to the ground with both of them inside it rather than have to speak to them for a moment longer, but eventually they’d managed to come to an agreement.

“We have dragons,” she reminded him, suddenly feeling exhausted by the whole thing. “Aegon is set to marry Arianne Martell, and I’ve agreed that my heir will marry one of their children. Their daughter will be queen, and their grandchild will sit the Iron Throne. If he is who he says he is, then all the better for the bloodline.”

Jon looked none too pleased by that. “Are we truly planning marriages before these children are even born?” he inquired disbelievingly. She gave him an unamused look.

“Would you rather a rebellion from Dorne? They’re the only ones Aegon the Conqueror couldn’t subdue with dragons, or had you forgotten? Over a hundred years of bloody war with Dorne, and only marriage brought them into the realm.” Dany paused, waiting for him to take that in. “Rhaegal killed a Dornish prince, and they’re not like to forget that.”

Jon looked troubled at that, but he did not argue.

“When shall our wedding be, then?” he asked instead, apparently having resigned himself to it.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb XX, in which Robb returns to Winterfell, reunites with his family, and meets his son for the first time.
Robb saw the riders approaching before he ever set eyes upon the walls of Winterfell, and he thought that he’d never seen a happier sight. The ride down to the westerlands for the battle had been long and grueling, but the return trip, even considering the fact that they’d been able to take the road instead of the treacherous crawl through the mountain passes, had seemed entirely too long. He had been eager to return to Riverrun to see the truth of his mother’s health and the health of his baby brother near two years prior, but this was an entirely different feeling, a nervous, fluttery excitement in his chest.

*I shall finally meet my son,* Robb thought with an air of disbelief, for it seemed impossible that something he’d spent so long imagining could finally be happening. And it wasn’t just his son, either, for Bran and Rickon were there beyond the walls of Winterfell, alive and impossibly safe, and that they were no more than a half hour’s ride away was unbearable. Robb turned to the Smalljon.

“I’m going to ride ahead,” he announced, and the Smalljon spluttered in disbelief, shaking his head.

“Let me at least send a guard with you,” he urged, and Robb couldn’t help the smile that found its way to his lips. He doubted he would be in much danger so close to Winterfell, but it was no harm to indulge the older man’s caution. No man could question Smalljon Umber’s dedication to keeping Robb safe.

“Well, make certain they’re men who can ride,” Robb told him with a rakish smile. “I don't intend to wait for stragglers.”

Smalljon was efficient about it, as he always was, rounded up a half dozen of Robb’s personal guard, and within minutes they were off, racing across the snow-covered landscape toward the riders that had been sent out to greet them. Robb felt almost a boy again, racing horses with Jon as Hullen cautioned them not to overtire their mounts. He remembered how freeing that had felt, how badly he’d wanted to race away from Winterfell, to go on an adventure with Jon that would be worthy of a song. Now, he wanted nothing more than to be home, to be within Winterfell’s walls and never to leave again.

Hal Mollen was laughing as Robb and his group rode up. “Eager to be home, are you?” he teased, and Robb could do nothing but grin.

“You have no idea,” Robb said as he reigned up next to the older man. “Will you ride ahead with us or go on to greet the rest of our party?”

Their party was smaller than it had been when they’d departed Moat Cailin, for many of the lords had chosen to return to their castles along the way, to return to their homes and families, and Robb could not begrudge them that. Those lords who stayed with him would remain at least for the wedding, Robb wagered, and whatever meager feast could be put together before they’d ride on to their own holdfasts. And many of the smallfolk had come back with them—too many, Robb feared, for the battered husk that had once been the winter town to adequately house, and too many for them to feed through the end of the winter. Their only hope was for Jon and Daenerys to end the war quickly with their dragons, and Robb had had a great deal to say to the queen about that, about the dire need to secure the resources of the Reach. A failure to do so would mean a loss of luxuries for the rest of the south; for the north, it would mean death.
“You ride on ahead, lad; we’ll take care of the rest,” Hal said with an affable smile, and Robb could not help but smile back. They must have already gotten the news about his decision to declare fealty to Daenerys Targaryen, and the loss of the title king seemed to have sucked a great deal of the formality out of so many of his interactions. Robb the Lord of Winterfell was a man with whom his men could share a jape and a cup of ale; Robb the king was not. Handing over his crown to Daenerys Targaryen had been one of the easiest things that Robb had ever done.

He took Hal’s words as direction, and he urged his small group forward once more, racing down the road toward Winterfell. The sight of the imposing stone walls caused a blossom of happiness in his chest, but in the same moment, he felt the sharp bite of grief, so sudden and so fierce that he almost reigned his horse to a stop. The war was over, at least for the north, and somehow his family was all safe inside the walls of Winterfell. Even Bran, who Robb had thought dead until mere days before, was somehow alive and well, and that only brought into starker contrast the one person who wasn’t with them. The war was over and everything was going back to normal, and yet it struck Robb again, as if for the first time, that nothing would ever be normal again.

Robby slowed his horse to a trot, and some of his men outpaced him until they realized he’d reigned in and fell in beside him. The Smalljon gave Robb a questioning look, but Robb just shook his head, his chest suddenly tight with emotion.

He rode through the gates of Winterfell with much less elation than he’d imagined. He saw Roslin first, waiting for him in the courtyard, but when he dismounted he went first to his mother instead. He threw his arms around her and buried his face in her hair for a moment, feeling a rush of emotion bubble up anew. His eyes stung with unshed tears, and when he pulled back, his mother looked at him with a concerned expression.

“I half expected him to be waiting here for me when I arrived,” Robb confessed to her, his voice scarce more than a whisper. Catelyn gave him a wan smile and pressed her hand against his cheek, wiping away a tear that threatened to fall, and he knew that she understood precisely what he felt.

A loud yip caught Robb’s attention, then, and he turned instinctively toward the noise to glimpse a sight he’d once never thought to see again. Four furry shapes tumbled about in the snow, Grey Wind and Shaggydog seeming closer to actual fighting than playfighting. Another absence suddenly struck Robb acutely; he turned to Arya, who stood a few feet away, looking at the scene with a smile.

“We should have looked for Nymeria,” he told her with an air of regret. “I’m sorry.”

Arya shook her head and turned upon him with a wobbly smile. “She’s happier where she is,” she told him in a tone far too grown up for her age, and she threw herself at him, enfolding him in a hug.

The next few minutes were a blur of hugs and chatter and tears, and Robb would have been hard-pressed to remember who he’d embraced next after that. There was Roslin and Rickon, Sansa and even Bran, for someone had gone through the trouble to carry a chair out for him so he could await Robb’s return. His mother had even let Edrick out into the snow, and Robb knelt down before his brother, looking the little boy in the face.

“I know it’s been a long time, but do you remember me?” he asked his brother with a small smile, and the little boy eyed him for a long minute, brow furrowed in confusion.

“Robb?” he tried after a moment, and Robb felt his heart clench with emotions; Edrick had scarce been able to manage an approximation of his name when Robb had left, but now the word was fully-formed. Robb strongly suspected the boy had been coached, but he didn’t care; he picked his baby brother up and spun him around in a circle, Edrick giggling delightedly while their mother winced as
though Robb might drop him, the same way she always had. It felt remarkably just as home should.

And yet the absences were jarring, and not just his father’s absence, which he’d known and yet still somehow been unprepared for. There were others he’d expected to be standing there to greet him, but there was no sign of Jon or Daenerys Targaryen, and Robb had seen neither tail nor scale of either of the dragons. He thought for a moment to ask his mother before he stopped himself; his wife was the lady of the castle now, and the last thing he would seek to do would be to make her feel as though he didn’t regard her as such. He turned to Roslin instead, Edrick settled upon his hip.

“Where are Jon and the queen?” he asked Roslin carefully, and her expression turned somewhat troubled.

“They’re about somewhere,” she said vaguely. “Shall I have someone fetch them for you?”

The idea of that seemed silly, as though it would be an admission that he felt somehow affronted that neither had been waiting breathlessly for his return. Robb shook his head.

“I’ll find them after,” he remarked as casually as he could. “But there is someone I’d like to meet.”

Roslin flushed daintily, and it struck Robb how much he’d missed something so simple as that, the pretty way her cheeks would pink sometimes under intense scrutiny. “He’ll be asleep still, but I can bring you to him,” she said nervously, and Robb leaned over to settle Edrick back down onto his feet before stepping over to his wife and pressing a kiss against the crown of her head.

“Lead the way.”

Robb was surprised when Roslin led him back to their own chambers rather than the chambers that had been his own siblings’ nursery when they’d been small. Their bedchamber looked almost entirely unchanged, save for the fact that there was a woman he didn’t know sitting in the corner and a tiny cradle newly added to the room. Roslin dismissed the nurse immediately, and the girl curtsied and scurried away.

The room was dark as the babe slept, but the nurse had had a candle lit, and it was just enough light for Robb to navigate his way through the room without tripping. He made his way to the edge of the cradle, his heart pounding a staccato rhythm in his chest, stronger even than when he’d charged into battle against Tywin Lannister’s own force. He stopped at the cradle’s edge, gazing down at his son.

“My son, Robb thought again with a feeling of awe and disbelief, for it seemed near impossible that this tiny babe could be his son, that he could even have a son. The babe was mostly covered in blankets, but his tiny fist was clenched just in front of his face, as though he’d just had his thumb in his mouth. His hair was dark, not auburn as Robb’s own was, and he seemed impossibly tiny, as if the smallest touch might break him. Edrick had been this small the first time Robb had seen him, Robb realized numbly, had looked much the same as Rodrik did now.

Robb’s silence seemed to have unnerved Roslin, for she stepped up beside him, speaking in a voice scarce above a whisper. “I hope that the name is all right,” she breathed softly, uncertainly. “I realized after you left that we never discussed…”

They hadn’t, somehow, in the midst of all that had been happening, and it struck Robb only then that he hadn’t reassured Roslin in his letters, hadn’t known that she had even needed to be reassured. He turned to her and wound his arm around her waist, pulling her into his embrace.

“Everything is perfect,” he assured her softly, pressing his lips to her forehead. He pulled back enough to regard her face in the dimness, pressed his hand against her chin to lift her gaze to meet his
“You’re both still well?”

She nodded slowly. “Maester Rhodry says he’s growing well. Everything is as it ought to be.”

The letter he’d received from her when they’d stopped at Riverrun had confirmed as much, but Robb was glad to have it confirmed again, for he knew how easily these things could change when a babe was still small, especially with winter upon them. Winterfell provided them with some measure of protection, but babes died even in summer, even within castle walls.

“And you?” he pressed uncertainly. For all that his mother and his wife had both birthed a babe in the past two years, Robb still knew remarkably little about childbirth, about how long it took a woman to recover from it. He’d missed Edrick’s and Rodrik’s births both, and by the time he’d returned, all had seemed resolved.

“I’m well,” she promised him. “His birth was…easier than I feared it might be.” She stopped for a moment, hesitated. “And I have the nursery ready for him to be moved now that you’re back. I…I recall what we spoke of before you left.”

Absurdly, Robb didn’t—until suddenly, he did. It was too dark for him to tell, but he could swear that his wife was blushing again, and a huge grin split across his face.

“You’re so eager to begin trying for another?” he prodded teasingly, thumb brushing along her lower lip, slightly chapped from the cold. She lowered her eyes, looking embarrassed.

“Well, of course…we don’t need to right away,” she dismissed quickly. “I know you must be tired from your journey—”

Robb surged forward and pressed his lips against hers to silence the words. The sensations were familiar, although it had been close to a year already since the last time his lips had touched hers. Her smaller frame slotted against his just as perfectly as it had always done, and it felt almost as though no time at all had passed—and at the same time, it felt as though it had been an eternity, and his body was starving for her, like he’d been without food for weeks and someone had just presented him with a buffet. He would have taken her right there and then, and gladly, had it not been for their son asleep mere inches away. With some effort, he pulled away from her, breathless, and she leaned forward and rested her head against his chest, as though that was the only thing holding her up.

“If we’re careful, mayhaps you can hold him without waking him,” she posited after a long, silent moment as they both waited for their breathing to return to normal. Robb considered it for a long minute before shaking his head.

“Best not,” he told her with regret. “If I can hold him, I fear I’ll not be leaving these rooms for quite some time, and I must needs find Jon.”

Roslin nodded against him, understanding. “You’re most like to find him in the godswood or the crypts, I’d think,” she said in a knowing tone. He pulled back so he could look down upon his wife’s face once more in the dim, flickering light.

“I know you didn’t know him before, but…how does he seem?” He asked the question cautiously, half-frightened for the answer. She seemed to mull over her response for a long minute.

“Sad,” she admitted finally. “Solemn. Like the weight of the whole world is upon him.”

Robb found a wry smile touching the edges of his mouth despite himself, sad and pleased all in one moment. “He’s more like my father than I think even he realizes,” Robb said softly, finger playing upon the fabric at Roslin’s shoulder. “Far more than I am.”
It was with regret that he finally left his chambers, left his wife and his son for a later moment. His mind searched out Grey Wind by instinct, and he found the wolf in the godwood, racing between the trees with his three brothers. He swore Grey Wind felt precisely what Robb himself did, glee at being reunited mingled with despair at the knowledge of what was lost. But it was clear enough within moments that Jon was not in the godwood, for Grey Wind did not catch Jon’s scent.

Robb made his way to the crypts instead. Everything was icy and frozen outside, the light of the day already dying, but it was clear enough that the crypts had seen recent visitors, for there was no fight to get the door open, the hinges having had no time to freeze again since they’d been moved last. Robb knew already where he’d find Jon.

His aunt’s statue was an anomaly in the crypt, something Robb had never much considered during childhood. In those years, the crypts had been a place to play that had something of a forbidden aspect to it, a place to scare his younger siblings with tales of ghosts and monsters. The statues within had been something distant, for he’d never known a single one of them alive. He’d known that Lord Rickard had been his grandfather, that Brandon had been his uncle and Lyanna his aunt, but they had been remote figures who had perished before he’d ever had a chance to meet them.

But they hovered heavy in his life now, long dead as they were, Brandon’s dalliances and Lyanna’s secrets. Brandon was not simply some legend of his father’s older brother who had been murdered by the Mad King but a man who had been betrothed to Robb’s own mother, who had had flaws and fathered a bastard. And Lyanna was even more than that, had not been the hapless victim of her own story but the willing participant, if Howland Reed’s suspicions held true, the father to a prince and the start of a deception.

Eddard Stark still had no statue, though it had been more than a year since his bones had been interred. Their stonemasons were fewer than they had been, for many and more had come to fight alongside Robb himself, and those who had remained had been more focused on repairing the castle walls. Walls were the difference between life and death in the winter; Robb knew his father would be no more dead if he had to wait for his statue, and yet still it galled him to see Eddard Stark’s tomb plain and unadorned next to his own father and siblings.

*Mayhaps Jon can sit for a stonemason,* Robb thought as he stepped up beside the man. *He looks more and more like Father every day.*

And he did. Even in the dark of the crypts, lit only by their two lanterns, it was clear as a summer’s day. Jon’s face was his father’s face the way Robb remembered him from childhood, albeit with a few extra scars. Robb wondered if Lyanna’s stone likeness was accurate, wondered what she’d looked like when she’d been flesh and blood instead of simply cold grey stone. If she’d resembled his father as closely as Robb suspected she had, he couldn’t help but feel that Rhaegar had left little of himself in his son. But he’d left the part that counted, his dragon blood, and that had been what had saved them all.

“I thought I’d come up here and we’d fight the northern foe together, but it appears you won the war single-handedly before I could ever reach you,” Robb remarked after a moment, staring at Lyanna’s stone likeness in the flickering light of their lanterns. It felt remarkably the same as it had with Stannis and the wildlings, only this was starker, one dragon against an army. Jon shook his head.

“I didn’t do it single-handedly,” he demurred. “The giants helped, and the free folk and the Night’s Watch and the Skagosi.” He paused, hesitated, then looked over at Robb. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to the courtyard to greet you.”

He sounded genuinely aggrieved, and Robb couldn’t help but wonder at the reason. *Most like some*
nonsense about my mother, he thought darkly.

“My mother hasn’t been awful to you, has she?”

Jon hesitated again, then shook his head slowly. “No,” he said, his voice strangely uncertain. “She’s been…kind, almost. More than I’d have expected. I believe she may have even come close to complementing me once or twice.”

That fear assuaged, they fell silent, and Robb found it uncharacteristically difficult to find words. Once, he could have spoken to Jon about anything with ease, but adulthood and time and their parents’ secrets had changed things, had taken away some of the ease of a shared childhood. And Robb couldn’t help but think that Roslin had been right, that Jon looked like a man who had been told he’d been sentenced to death rather than kingship. But as a man who had experienced kingship, Robb wasn’t certain the two were as far removed as he’d once have thought.

Robb stared at Lyanna’s statue, at his father’s unadorned tomb. He reached forward, brushing his fingers along his aunt’s stone cheek. It was cold, unyielding.

“I’m sorry that she couldn’t have lived,” he found himself saying with a feeling of genuine sadness. “I’m sorry that your father couldn’t have lived, that you didn’t have the life you deserved.”

Jon shook his head with a vehemence that surprised Robb.

“Rhaegar Targaryen may have sired me, but he was not my father,” Jon declared with conviction, bitterness and anger warring within his tone. “Eddard Stark was my father, in all the ways that counted.”

Robb felt tears stinging at his eyes, and he threw his arm around Jon’s shoulders, pulling his brother against him in an awkward, sideways embrace.

“And you will always be my brother,” he promised, the words thick and heavy in his throat. “You will always be welcome here, until the day that I die. And if I die before you, I’ll make certain my son knows there will always be a place for you here, as long as you wish it.”

Jon laughed a wet laugh and wiped his face whilst Robb did his best to pretend he didn’t notice that Jon had been crying.

“You’d best not die for a long time, Stark,” he said, jabbing Robb hard in the ribs. Robb turned and poked him back, feeling all of ten years old again.

“Only if you promise the same,” he returned, and Jon laughed again as Robb caught him right where he was ticklish. And suddenly, they were boys again, playing in the crypts as though nothing had changed, and for just a moment all was well.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Robb, XXI, in which I write a chapter that contains three different characters named “Jon” in the same scene, because clearly I don’t think things through.
Robb had only been back in Winterfell a day when he discovered that Jon’s wasn’t the only impending wedding with which he’d have to contend. The situation should have been expected, for Robb had already known that Jon had ordered the remaining wildlings be allowed to settle south of the Wall, and yet somehow, when Jon had come to him with the proposition, he’d still been entirely taken aback.

“Wildlings are just men and women and children, no different than the rest of us,” Jon had argued when he’d realized that Robb had had some reservations about the request. “They just had the misfortune to be born on the wrong side of the Wall.”

Robb had expected it to be a struggle. He’d expected to have to find some lesser lord and offer the man all sorts of bribes and concessions in order to get him to agree to a marriage with a wildling. But Val had been nothing like what Robb had expected. She was tall and fair-haired and absolutely beautiful, quite possibly one of the most beautiful women that Robb had ever had the fortune to lay eyes upon. Even so, he’d expected her to be uncouth and uncivilized and savage, and yet the woman that Robb had met knew her courtesies. Robb couldn’t have gotten Arya to perform the role quite so well, and his sister had grown up her first nine years in the greatest castle in the north.

“Is this truly what you wish?” Robb had asked her when all the introductions had finally been through. “To be wed to one of my bannermen?”

Val’s jaw had been set, her blue-grey eyes cold steel. “I wish for safety for my people,” she’d told him resolutely. “If marrying one of your lords helps to ensure that, then that is what I want.”

Robb had had to readjust all the plans he’d begun to make in his head, began to run through all the unmarried lords and firstborn sons of lords he could think of. When his first thought had been to try to find the most prestigious minor lord who might agree to the match, his thoughts had instead turned to the greatest houses he could think of within his lands.

A man of one of the mountain clans or a Skagosi would be easiest, like as not, for their ways would be closest to what Val had known and they would be least like to be offended should Val’s courtesies not extend any further than the first few meetings. But neither choice would be one influential enough to even begin to change minds, and such a match was not like to be a useful one. There was Galbart Glover, twice widowed with no sons, but Robb had come to suspect that Lord Glover had long since accepted that his brother was to be his heir, and his brother’s son after him.

Galbart was an option, certainly, but a house situated even further north would be better if Robb could manage it. The northernmost territories would be closest to where the bulk of the wildlings would likely be settled, and it was also where the prejudices lay thickest. If he could get one of the northernmost houses to agree to wed a son to a wildling woman, the example could have far-reaching consequences for all.

Harrion Karstark was the heir to Karhold and still unwed, Robb recalled, though he knew little and less of Harrion Karstark. The man had been captured early in the war, and even once he’d been released, he’d been with Robett Glover’s force at Harrenhal. He’d gone on to the siege of the Dreadfort near as soon as they’d reached Winterfell, then back to Karhold after that. Robb
couldn’t recall if he’d had more than two conversations with the man, didn’t know if he’d be like to agree to such a match. But Lord Rickard he did know, and the man was not the sort to be amenable to such a suggestion.

Abruptly, the answer had hit Robb with the ferocity of a crossbow bolt.

“I have some ideas,” he’d told them finally. “My first suggestion would be Smalljon Umber.”

Robb knew Jon Umber, both father and son, better than he knew most. The Smalljon could be made to see the sense in it if Robb explained it to him, and he’d wager that being asked to wed a beautiful woman would be no hardship to his friend. The Greatjon would be more difficult to convince, but he knew that if he could convince the son, the father would follow.

Jon had nodded approvingly at the suggestion. “Last Hearth is one of the closest castles to the Wall, and the people in their lands are those with some of the deepest enmity toward the free folk. Such a marriage could send a particularly strong message,” he’d told Val quietly. After a beat, he’d turned to look to Robb. “Will they agree?”

Robb had felt fairly confident, but he wasn’t keen to get all their hopes up. “They may take some convincing,” he’d admitted, and Val had pursed her lips prettily.

“It pleased your kneeler King Stannis to fashion me a princess, though I am not,” she said with some disdain. “If your…Smalljon would be pleased to wed a princess, I am happy to play that part for him.”

She’d do better not to call any of them ‘kneelers,’ Robb had found himself thinking, though a dislike of Stannis Baratheon was just as like to play well with the Umbers. They took their gods seriously, and Stannis Baratheon had made a mockery of them. Even with Stannis long dead, the north remembered.

“That’s good,” Robb had found himself agreeing. “And you’re certainly comely enough. That will make up for a lot, with most men.”

But Val hadn’t looked nearly as pleased by Robb’s acquiescence as he’d have expected. “Your Smalljon,” she’d begun tentatively, “he isn’t…?”

Val had trailed off, as if even she had had the sense to know that her words might not be well-received. Robb had no idea what she had meant to ask, but Jon had seemed to understand immediately.

“Small?” he’d filled in knowingly. “Gods no. He’s a great warrior, Val. Just the type of man who could steal you away in the night, were he wont to do so. Your people won’t think you weak if you wed him.”

The Greatjon’s reaction was fairly in line with what Robb had expected of him.

“You expect my son to marry what?” he demanded in a large, booming voice, one Robb swore the whole of Winterfell would be able to hear, even with the door to his solar firmly shut. The Greatjon stood with such vehemence that he sent his chair clattering to the ground, though his son sat much more calmly beside him.

“Her name is Val, my lord,” Jon intoned evenly from where he was seated at Robb’s right, with the air of a man who was used to soothing frayed tempers. “She’s a lovely girl.”

Jon’s placid tone only seemed to make the Greatjon even angrier. “Is this some sort of jape?” he
demanded, looking back and forth between Robb and Jon. With both of them seated, Greatjon Umber towered like a giant above them, and even with all he knew of the Greatjon, Robb was hard-pressed not to be intimidated.

“No, my lord,” Robb ensured the man, trying to mimic his brother’s calm confidence. “It’s merely an offer, and one that you’re both free to refuse.” Robb paused, looking over at his friend, then back at the Greatjon. “But I’d encourage you not to dismiss it outright.”

The Greatjon appeared as though that was precisely what he wanted to do. “You want my son to marry some… savage?” he demanded angrily. “You expect that she’ll be the lady of Last Hearth some day? Are you out of your mind?”

Robb felt Jon bristle beside him, but Robb knew the Greatjon well enough not to be fazed by anything he said. It mattered little what the Greatjon said; what mattered more was what he eventually did, and Robb intended to do all he could to ensure that what the man did was precisely what Robb hoped he’d do.

“I’ve only met her briefly, my lord,” Robb said, all courtesy in the face of the Greatjon’s outburst. “My brother could speak to her character more accurately than I could. But she seemed intelligent and very capable. And she’s very beautiful. If you’re imagining some savage, she’s not that.”

The Smalljon perked up a bit at that. “How beautiful?” he asked then, just as unaffected by his father’s outrage. A sly smile found its way to his face. “More beautiful than your own wife? More beautiful than the queen?”

Robb knew then that he had got them. He couldn’t help the quiet laugh that bubbled up from inside his chest. “That’s a very rude question,” Robb pointed out, still laughing, but there was a twinkle of amusement in the Smalljon’s grey eyes as they met Robb’s own. “Why don’t you meet her and judge for yourself?”

As though understanding that the conversation had taken a turn, and not in his favor, the Greatjon reached down and grabbed his chair, setting it back down on its legs. He settled himself heavily into it once more.

“I mislike this,” he said gravely, and Robb leaned forward in his own seat, meeting the older man’s eyes. His own tone turned serious once more.

“Well with all due respect, my lord, you’ll have to deal with it one way or another. Would you rather integrate them into your lands to be farmers and laborers or would you rather be contending with raiders for the rest of your days? If we don’t accept them into our lands, then they have no choice but to attack us and steal from us to survive.”

Jon seemed to take that as his moment to speak.

“They’re only men, my lord,” he said gently. “Men and women and children. Some of them are bound to commit crimes, but men have been committing crimes south of the Wall for thousands of years. If they want to live south of the Wall, then they’re subject to our laws, and I’ve made that perfectly clear to them. But if we leave them desperate and cold and hungry...you must know what that does to a man.”

The Greatjon opened his mouth, as though to protest again, but his son reached over and placed a hand on his father’s arm. Surprisingly, the Greatjon stilled.

“Father,” the Smalljon probed gently, as though approaching some feral beast. “I’ll meet her.” He
turned back to Robb, directing his attention back to him. “I can’t promise anything more than that.”

Robb smiled, nodded his head. The Smalljon had been guarding him for near two years already, and as well as Robb had grown to know the Smalljon, the Smalljon had grown to know him. He had to believe that the man didn’t think so little of him to believe that he’d resign him to a wife who would be a punishment after the years of leal service.

“I don’t expect anything more than that,” he assured his friend, and the Smalljon nodded, managing to get his father to leave with him, still muttering protests under his breath. Like as not, he knew his father well enough to know that continued argument would only lead down a darker path for them all. The Greatjon must have known it as well; he was missing enough fingers to be able to attest to that.

Jon sighed and slouched down in his chair as soon as the two Umber men had left. “That wasn’t encouraging,” he said dully, but Robb just smiled, reaching over to clasp Jon’s arm briefly. He poured his brother another cup of ale and slid it across the table to him.

“Really? I thought it went quite well.”

Jon stared at him as if wondering whether or not he’d gone mad whilst in the south. “You can’t be serious,” he breathed out, and Robb shook his head.

“The Greatjon will yell and argue and be boisterous, but the Smalljon will see her and be convinced, and he’ll sway his father,” Robb said, feeling a supreme sort of confidence in his chest. The Greatjon was a loud man, and an opinionated one, but he was not at all stupid. Once his temper had run its course, it was usually a simple enough thing to bring him around to the most sensible course of action. “You’ll see.”

Jon shook his head disbelievingly, and he took a long drink of his ale. “I’m glad that you’re so confident,” he remarked blithely, and Robb took another moment to observe his brother. Jon was pale and sallow and harried, somehow even more so than when they’d spoken the previous day in the crypts, and less than a full day had passed since then. Robb gave him a pointed look.

“Someone has to be,” he declared. “You look like a man walking to his death.”

Jon laughed, a low, ragged sound, and he scrubbed a hand across his exhausted-looking face. “I feel like it, most days,” he admitted softly, shaking his head to himself as though he were entirely lost. “What do I do, Robb?”

Robb knew what Jon was feeling, knew what it was to be told to wear a crown and be a king without having any idea how to do so. He would be the last person to tell Jon that he should be happy to be marrying a beautiful woman, riding a dragon and claiming a kingdom.

“Marry your queen,” Robb told him finally, gently. “Secure the Reach. Get us all food so we don’t starve to death up here.”

The words were harsh but they were true, and Robb knew that Jon understood it as well as he did. Jon released a soft, resigned sigh.

“My queen?” he repeated dully. “My aunt by blood.”

It was far less egregious than most Targaryen incest had been, where marriage between brothers and sisters had been common. Neither of them had known that time, for the last Targaryen siblings who had been wed had died before either of them had been cognizant enough of the world to make sense of what marriage even meant. The stories of brother wedding sister had been no more than stories to
them, nothing they might have been able to imagine happening in their own lives. The Targaryens, too, had been a thing of stories, a relic of a bygone era, until they had not been.

“Wasn’t there a Stark who married his niece in recent memory?” Robb pressed vaguely. He thought he’d remembered that from his studies when they’d been children, but Jon had always been better at remembering those sorts of details than he.

“Two of them,” Jon agreed unhappily. “But they were half-nieces.”

That certainly removed a bit of the force from Robb’s argument. He tried again. “Does it matter?” he pressed instead. “It’s not as though you grew up together.” He paused, regarded Jon’s long face, so like their father’s. “Is she awful?”

Jon looked a bit startled by the question. “No,” he admitted finally. “She’s…fine. A bit stubborn, I suppose.”

Robb snorted. “Whereas you have always been the most level-headed and accommodating of men,” he said, raising an eyebrow at Jon.

Jon’s expression hardened, then relented. “All right,” he agreed gently. “Your point is well-taken.”

Robb did not know Daenerys Targaryen well at all, but he did know Jon, knew that Jon would not forget about the plight of the north. And for the first time in longer than he could remember, Robb felt optimistic about the future, about the likelihood of peace and the prospect that the north might possibly find a way to survive the coming winter.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Daenerys V, in which Jon and Daenerys are wed and Dany tries to figure out if she’s made a terrible mistake with this marriage.
Daenerys V

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daenerys’ third wedding was nothing like her first two. They held it in Winterfell’s godswood, and the ceremony lacked all the pageantry of her wedding in Meereen and all the orgiastic violence of her wedding outside Pentos. It was cold and quiet and solemn, the way lit only by lanterns beneath the dark canopy of trees. There was a seriousness in Jon, and in all the witnesses, and it was clear that this was not just a wedding but a religious ceremony for these people. Bran Stark’s eyes watched her most closely, eerie and knowing.

Missandei had sewn her maiden’s cloak, though she was anything but a maiden, had begun sewing it before they’d ever left Volantis. Daenerys had come to the shores of Westeros twice widowed, and Missandei was a sharp enough girl to have figured what that meant. And she knew the customs of different cultures as well as she knew all their languages.

It was short, simple, and over in minutes. They knelt before the heart tree together, and Jon seemed to be genuinely praying whilst Dany merely knelt silently, knowing little of these people or their gods, until he’d helped her back to her feet, unfastened her cloak, and replaced it with his own. The whole thing had seemed somewhat of a farce, to remove one Targaryen cloak only to replace it with another, sewn sloppily and hastily by Robb’s mother and sister in the mere days before the wedding, but if Daenerys had learned nothing else, it was that it paid to respect ceremony even when she found it fickle. She’d learned the lesson well in Meereen.

The feast was sparse but the men merrier, the solemn faces she’d seen in the godswood replaced by jolly men asking for more ale and dancing in merriment. She danced with all the men who asked, though she knew not the steps of any of the dances, but the drunker the men became, the less anyone seemed to be bothered by that. She danced with Robb Stark and Olyvar Frey and two Jons Umber, father and son, and everyone laughed and drank and sang in increasingly awful voices.

The only one who seemed untouched by all the joviality was her new husband. He danced only one, perfunctory dance with her and had turned down offers from all the other women who had approached him, and neither did he drink more than the occasional sip of his ale. The food was not plentiful, but every dish came to them first, and Jon waved away more of them than he accepted.

She’d understood Jon’s hesitance, had tried to be patient about it, but his anger and reluctance seemed to have abated none since she’d told him of her conviction that they should wed. Tyrion Lannister had convinced her, had argued for the rationality of the decision, had even argued personally for the worth of Jon Snow, now Targaryen. And yet the man who was sat beside her did not have the look of a man who could rule a kingdom by her side, did not seem a man who would be capable of much of anything. Have I made a mistake? she couldn’t help but wonder as she watched him pick listlessly at his food.

But she couldn’t think like that, and she knew it. If I look back, I am lost, she reminded herself with firm conviction. She would simply make the best of the situation, as she had many times before. And it wasn’t half so bad a situation, if she could look at it from a certain angle. They had two dragons with riders they could take into battle, and she had a man who could give her heirs that would be of her own blood, to ensure she would not be the last of her line. And though Jon didn’t have the appeal of Daario, he was comely enough for certain.

Dany was speaking with one of Robb Stark’s bannermen when she noticed the former King in the
North coming up to her new husband’s side and speaking quietly into his ear. Jon grimaced at whatever the other man told him, but there was a warmth between the two that she could not help but note, the way that Robb clasped Jon on the shoulder as the two spoke in quiet tones. It was impossible not to notice the way that Robb Stark still referred to the other man as “brother” despite the fact that he was not, just as it was unmistakable the way Jon would flinch whenever anyone called him by the name Targaryen.

That Jon would rather wear the name Stark than Targaryen must have been plain to any in the room, and he hadn’t been able to get the cloak of red and black off his shoulders quick enough, she thought as he stood from the seat which he had vacated no more than a handful of times since the feast had begun. She’d thought Jon would be off to have some conversation with those he still considered family over her but was surprised when he made his way through the crowd to find her. It was even more surprising when he slipped up behind her and placed a hand upon her waist, the most he’d ever touched her save when he’d had to do so. He had to lean down to speak in her ear, and the tips of his dark hair tickled her neck when he did so. The man with whom she’d been speaking ducked his head and disappeared into the crowd without a word.

“If you’d like to avoid a bedding ceremony, we should slip away now,” Jon said quietly, his hot breath flowing over the shell of her ear. “Robb has promised to cover our escape.”

Dany turned around to regard her new husband’s face. She was not so keen to avoid the ceremony as he appeared to be, for the whole business seemed strange and exciting to her, a sentiment it was clear Jon did not share. Dany was not ashamed of her nakedness, nor was she a stranger to the ribald comments of men; to be stripped nude by a group of gruff northmen and carried to her bedchamber seemed more amusing than dreadful. Still, with her new husband so skittish, it seemed better to give into what he wanted. Daenerys reached forward and placed her hand into his larger one.

“Lead the way,” she urged, and he clasped her hand lightly and awkwardly, as though uncertain what to do with it. They made their way to her chambers, which she supposed was expected; she still hadn’t the vaguest idea where Jon even slept, though she’d been in Winterfell now a week. He’d done his best to avoid her for the majority of the time they’d been in residence together, meeting with her only when she’d bid him to join her to discuss the specifics of their future plans. He was entirely too insightful and knowledgeable about the history and military strengths and weaknesses of different Westerosi lords to be a man who truly had no interest in politics, but his reluctance told an entirely different story.

A fire already roared in her chambers, and someone had set out a tray of small foods that could easily be eaten with one’s fingers. Reluctant though he was, Jon had never been a man to forget his courtesies, and he poured her a cup of ale nearly as soon as he had closed the door behind them. She wasn’t certain if she was imagining the way his hand shook slightly when he handed her the cup, and it only then struck her that he’d been a man of the Night’s Watch since he’d been no more than a child. Dany had been a child, too, when she had wed for the first time, but Jon had had no such experience. Her heart skittered in her chest as she looked into her nephew and husband’s eyes.

“Have you done this before?” she asked as delicately as she could manage. The question seemed to startle him. His eyes widened, then shuttered.

“I’ve done this before,” he confirmed solemnly.

*Mayhaps you’ve been doing it the wrong way, then,* she almost said, for he spoke of it with all the enthusiasm with which a soldier spoke of cleaning out the latrine. She’d known that with Drogo in the beginning and with Hizdahr before he’d been killed, known what it was to simply wait for it to be over, but Jon had never before been wed and was a man besides. He’d had no reason to bed a
woman out of duty, no reason to simply suffer through it.

She set down her cup without taking a sip, reached up to the fastenings of the hastily-sewn wedding cloak that had been placed over her shoulders. The thing fluttered to the floor in a crumple of heavy wool, leaving her in only her wedding gown. It was fur-lined and made with thick wool, but it had been sewn in the style of the free cities, didn’t have all the complicated lacings down the back the way most Westerosi gowns did. It was easy enough to work her way through the front laces, until she had loosened it enough that she could simply pull her arms out of the sleeves and let the thing fall to the floor. Jon steadfastly kept his eyes upon her face, looking at her as though she were mad.

*Mayhaps I should have played the demure maid,* she thought then, though she doubted she could have accomplished it even if she’d so desired. And Jon knew well enough that she had been twice wed and twice widowed and that she had given birth besides. It would be a fragile farce to play the part of some untouched maiden.

“Am I so horrible that you can’t even bear to look upon my body?” she asked after a moment, only half in jest. Jon flushed, and his gaze flicked down at her naked body then snapped up to her face again, as though he was no more than a boy who had been caught peeping at women in the baths.

“That’s not it at all,” he assured her, sounding slightly breathless. Dany took a step toward him.

“Are you certain you’ve done this before?” she pressed with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m certain,” he assured her immediately, sounding almost annoyed at the question. “Just never like this.”

Like what, Daenerys was not certain, for he elaborated no further than that. She nearly wished that she *had* pushed for the bedding ceremony, which would at least have gotten them both out of their clothes, as Jon looked as though he had no intention of disrobing. They could certainly manage without, she knew, for only one specific part of him needed to be unlaced in order to complete the consummation, but that was far from what she wanted.

*Will this be the remainder of my life?* she wondered sadly. *Resigned to a marriage with a man who not only does not love me but does not even desire me?* With Hizdahr, she’d had the latter, at least, though bedding him had been a chore rather than a delight.

Dany forced the thought away and brought her hands to the fastenings of Jon’s doublet. “May I?” she asked finally, tentatively, and Jon gritted his teeth and nodded.

Dany worked her fingers through the laces slowly, part of her frightened that he might object if she made any sudden movements. The awful thing had laces at the neck and laces at the wrists, too, near twice as many as it had taken to remove her own garments. The laces were pulled as tight as they could go, and even so, the clothing was still too large for Jon’s frame; like as not, it was his brother’s, Stark white and grey. Jon was taller but far slighter in the shoulders than Robb Stark was, so the material came off his shoulders easily once she had gotten it undone, but beneath that was still his undertunic, though that at least did not need to be unlaced. He gritted his teeth as she got him disrobed but complied when she moved to pull the garment over his head.

She wondered immediately upon seeing him if the consummation hadn’t been the reason for his apprehension. Dany had seen the scars on his face; they were plain for anyone with eyes to see, spoke silently of battles fought, for he’d never told her a single thing in words. And yet she hadn’t even begun to imagine what she’d see when he was disrobed, a mass of ugly scars across his chest, thick, red, and puckered, half-healed skin stretching across the flesh of his abdomen. A scar slashed across half his throat, one she’d never noticed before, and it struck her only then that she’d never
seen him without *something*, a fur-lined collar or a gorget or a high-necked tunic. Most of the Dothraki she’d known didn’t have half as many scars as Jon did, and many of them were twice his age. The only man she could think of with more scars across his belly was Strong Belwas, but these were far worse than the superficial slices the eunuch had allowed all his enemies.

Almost without thinking, she reached up to touch, but Jon caught her arm, faster than she’d ever seen him move. His grip on her wrist was tight, warning, and his eyes were dark and stormy.

“Don’t,” he breathed sharply, and then he was kissing her, sudden and unexpected. Mayhaps it was just to keep her from touching or to keep her from *asking*, but Dany found that she cared not at all. He held her wrist with just enough force to be nearly painful, and his kiss was harsh, demanding in a way that made her loins ache.

*Yes*, she thought to herself in triumph. *This is a man who can be king.*

She’d had her doubts before that, and they had been many. Jon was sharp and more intelligent than he seemed to give himself credit for, was tall and gallant with a dragon and a Valyrian steel sword slung across his back, but he could also be timid and reluctant and sullen. But Daenerys also knew better than to believe that she could call herself queen over *two* claimants who called themselves her brother’s sons, not without calling one of them king. Not until that moment had she been certain that Jon had it in him.

But he did, and it was suddenly plain. There was a fire in him, something he seemed to fight to keep hidden, but she felt it from him then as he kissed her. *We are the blood of the dragon,* she told herself as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

Any reluctance Jon had had before being disrobed seemed entirely gone then; he kissed her with a sense of near-desperation, like a drowning man fighting for air. He certainly hadn’t seemed to have lied, either, for he kissed like a man who was well-versed in it, well-versed in the ways of love. He backed her toward the bedroom without breaking their mouths from one another, laid her down across the furs with a gentleness that was a surprising contrast to the harshness of his kisses.

His breeches he removed on his own, and Dany watched the movements of his hands upon the laces with muted interest. His fingers were long and slender, and untangling the knot in the laces took longer than it might have for another man, for neither of his hands was particularly dexterous. She’d seen him most often with gloves, but the burn scars on his right hand she’d at least seen before, and it was clear enough then that they made his fingers clumsy and stiff. She didn’t make the mistake of offering to help, knowing the way men often preferred to muddle through these things themselves, and finally his breeches were unlaced and pushed down his legs, leaving him in only his smallclothes.

His legs were less scarred than his torso, though nowhere near unmarred. A pinkish pucker of skin upon his calf spoke of an arrow wound, and there was a scar upon his thigh, more faded, like as not from some childhood mishap. Jon’s body was a canvas of wounds and scars, and Daenerys could scarce imagine the tales that lay behind them.

She knew better than to ask, lest it break whatever fragile truce had formed between them.

Beneath all the half-healed scars, his body was not at all unattractive. He was not so tall and broad as Drogo, nor was he so slender as Hizdahr; instead, he was somewhere in between, lithe but muscular, dusky brown nipples stark against his pale skin. And when he shed his smallclothes, she could not help but notice that she had no cause for complaint there, either, nor did he seem so unmoved by her nudity as she might have thought.
That, at least, was encouraging, that Jon’s body desired her more than his mind seemed to. It meant that mayhaps this was not a lost cause, that there was hope that one day Jon might see her as more than the woman who had forced him into a marriage he didn’t want, into a role he had no desire to inhabit.

Jon’s weight was warm and heavy above her when he climbed onto the bed with her, carefully pulling one of the furs atop them before he was kissing her again, wordless and stoic, no less than what she had come to expect from him. There would be no proclamations of undying devotion from her nephew and husband, she couldn’t help but believe; she would not be the moon of his life and he not her sun and stars, but she felt hope in the press of his body that they could be something.

She shuddered when he touched her with his hand, his fingers cold against the warm flush of her loins. His fingers prodded experimentally at her there, and she was already embarrassingly wet and wanting; it had been so many moons since she’d been touched this way that she suspected that even the plainest, most average of men might have aroused a reaction in her, and Jon was not that. If he would smile, he might even be called beautiful, scars and all, but Daenerys could not recall ever having seen him smile.

He gathered her own slickness on his fingers and touched her with the practiced swipes of a man who knew how to satisfy a woman, and Dany could not help but groan, closing her eyes and spreading her legs further for him, canting her hips against his hand almost unconsciously. Part of her was afraid to open her eyes, for better to imagine his pale cheeks flushed with pleasure than to open her eyes to the very likely reality of his grim, stoic face as he touched her with nothing more than duty in mind.

But this is not duty, a voice inside her said, and that only inflamed her passion further. For he had no duty to please her in bed, could have taken her without preamble the way Hizdahr had on their wedding night. Jon had clearly not lied when he’d said he’d bedded a woman before, and thus he must have known she was slick enough, relaxed enough that she could accommodate his girth inside of her. But he did not move to do so, instead touched her and listened to her moans and adjusted his movements accordingly. He was surprisingly obliging, surprisingly perceptive to what she craved, without even a word from her, helping her to find her pleasure.

No one could have said the boy raised as the bastard of Winterfell did not know how to treat a woman with courtesy.

She found her peak surprisingly quickly under his ministrations, shuddering and whimpering in helpless pleasure. No, she thought to herself as he slotted his body above her, parting her legs with a gentle movement, mayhaps this was not a mistake after all.

He waited for her nod before he pressed himself inside her, and she was so slick and wanting that he buried himself to the hilt easily. The feeling of fullness was comforting, a long-missed sensation, and she could not help but roll her hips against him, winding one of her legs around his body as if to pull him impossibly deeper inside of her. Jon seemed startled for a moment, faltered and stilled, but then he was moving, and it felt gloriously, amazingly perfect.

Everything seemed to stop then, the whole world focusing in on the core of her pleasure. Nothing else mattered, not whether her husband would ever love her or whether they would be able to rule the realm well; all that mattered was the feeling of him moving within her, the feeling of fullness and completion.

He finished almost soundlessly, going rigid against her as he emptied himself inside her body. They were both sweating despite the coolness of the room, a chill that could not quite be dispelled by the
fire, and even despite the sticky discomfort, she felt the loss when he pulled away, careful never to put the full weight of his body atop her. Ever courteous, he pulled the furs so they blanketed her, his own body only half covered as he closed his eyes, slowly catching his breath. Despite the furs, she was somehow still cold, the few inches of distance between them seeming an insurmountable canyon.

But Daenerys had never been one to give in to her fears. *If I look back, I am lost*, she told herself again, and she moved over slightly, just enough that she could rest her head against Jon’s chest. She held her breath, afraid that the smallest of movements would frighten him away like a skittish colt, but after a long, uncomfortable minute, he sighed and wrapped his arm around her, and Daenerys finally relaxed.

*Mayhaps this was not a mistake after all*, she told herself again, and she almost, *almost* believed it.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon IX, in which Jon and Dany finally go south to secure Jon a wife.
Even in winter, Highgarden was beautiful. The three rings of white stone that made up Highgarden’s outer walls were near-indistinguishable from the snow when seen from above, making the whole thing look no more than an enormous snow castle, the likes of which Jon and Robb could never have hoped to build even when they’d been at their most ambitious. Drifts of snow decorated the giant briar labyrinth between the outer and middle walls, and bits of green somehow managed to poke their way up through the large blankets of snow that covered what must have once been gigantic beds of flowers, the last stubborn attempts of summer to fight away the inescapable truth of winter. Half a dozen fountains within the inner-wall had frozen over like giant ponds, and the bright red leaves of the castle’s three weirwoods stood out against the mostly-bare trees that decorated the remainder of the godswood.

Daenerys guided Drogon down toward one of the flower beds already flattened with snow, and so Jon had no choice but to guide Rhaegal to follow, for how foolish would he look if he chose to politely land outside the outermost wall when Daenerys felt herself entitled to land right within the confines of the courtyard? It was not how Jon would have chosen to do it, but there were a great many things about the current state of affairs that were far from what Jon would have wished.

A flock of very chilly looking servants ran out to greet them once they had dismounted, the looks of fear and apprehension unmistakable upon their faces. Jon knew precisely what they must have felt, remembered the first time he’d laid eyes upon Daenerys’ dragons. They were a thing so unfathomable that no story could do them justice, the sort of creature mere mortal men could scarce wrap their minds around. Even now, Jon had a difficult time believing that any of this was real.

A man awaited them in the covered courtyard just outside the tall, elaborate front door. Though Jon had never met Willas Tyrell, he had not a doubt in his mind that that was the identity of the man who awaited their arrival. He was broad-shouldered but slender and stood near Jon’s own height, although Jon couldn’t help but think the man would doubtless be taller should he be able to stand up straight. His dark green doublet was brocade silk emblazoned with what must have been hundreds of little golden roses, his hair a tumble of barely-tamed brown curls, unkempt from the weather. In one hand, he clutched a cane that was nearly too fine to seem functional, its lacquered length carved with intricate, thorned branches. The metal contraption that bracketed one of his legs was equally intricate, embossed with flowers and vines and tiny butterflies. He dipped his head deeply upon their approach.

“Your Graces,” he greeted politely. “I hope you do not begrudge me not coming further out to greet you, nor for failing to kneel in your presence. I’m afraid my leg does not do well walking upon the snow, nor does it bend easily.”

Daenerys gave him her gentlest, most innocent smile, but Jon knew very well the shrewdness that lay beneath it.

“Not at all, my lord,” she assured him sweetly. “What is it that ails you?”

Willas’ smile was somewhat sheepish. “An unfortunate tourney accident many years ago now,” he told her with the ease of a man who had clearly brushed it away many times. “I have long ago learned to live with the inconvenience. The maesters once said I would never walk again, so I can only consider myself fortunate.”
Jon knew the story just as near everyone in the realm did, and he knew very well that Daenerys did too, for he’d been the one to tell her in one of their many consultations before they’d set off on the journey south. In fact, Daenerys knew everything about the Tyrells and the Reach that any of their information could have provided.

*She is expecting him to underestimate her,* Jon realized dimly as servants opened the doors for them and they followed Willas Tyrell inside. Daenerys kept a carefully sedate pace to match Willas’ limp, and Jon did the same.

“I expect you’d like to rest following your journey,” he remarked once they were inside, but Daenerys simply shook her head and gave the man another vague smile.

“I believe the matters at hand are quite urgent,” she said brightly. “We’d do best to get the discussions out of the way early so we can retire without worry.”

Willas Tyrell seemed surprised by her answer, and that, Jon guessed, was precisely her aim. The man recovered quickly.

“As it pleases Your Grace,” he agreed without preamble. “Let us retire to my solar.”

It was his father’s solar if it was anything, Jon couldn’t help but think as Willas led them to the lavishly furnished space, for Mace Tyrell remained Lord of Highgarden though he was not in residence. He had returned to the capital, from their latest news, the moment he’d realized that dragon banners above Storm’s End had later spelled real dragons. The Tyrells were nothing if not keen in their instinct for self-preservation, a fact that had seemed to please Daenerys much and more.

“They should be easy to sway to our side, then,” she’d told him confidently when he’d expressed the sentiment to her, and Jon wondered whether the prediction would prove true.

The servants poured them all goblets of wine as soon as they sat, fine Arbor gold in finely-wrought golden goblets, and they scuttled about placing trays of pastries and dried figs and candied walnuts. It was richer and finer than anything that remained in the north, and that only strengthened Jon’s resolve that Robb had spoken true. He needed to secure the Reach to keep the north from starvation, and it would be best to let Daenerys do the talking lest he give away how desperately he needed them. If she could make Willas Tyrell believe he needed them more than they needed him, the man would be like to agree to anything. He wondered how much her ravens had revealed to him about what she meant to ask.

Willas Tyrell eyed Jon as though he had no idea what to make of him or his silence, a fact that surprised Jon not at all. All the correspondence with Highgarden had been from Daenerys, but it was clear enough from Willas’ expression that he found it strange that Jon was allowing her to take the lead. Like as not, that confusion would serve them well also. Willas turned to Daenerys uncertainly.

“I shall not be coy, Your Grace,” he told her in a clear voice. “You know well our plight from our letters.”

She did, and Jon did as well, for she’d handed all of them over to him to read himself. Willas had written them in his own hand and not left it to the maester to write, for the loopy signature at the bottom had matched the remainder of the text, and he had told a grave tale indeed. The Redwyne fleet had been ordered to Blackwater Bay after the destruction of the Royal Fleet during Stannis Baratheon’s attempt to take the city, and the ironborn had taken the opportunity to begin attacking the Reach. They’d taken the Shield Islands and begun raiding up and down the Mander, and by the time the Redwyne fleet had come around the south of Dorne to pursue, they’d managed to slip around to Oldtown and wreak a not inconsiderable amount of havoc there.
And when they’d met in open battle upon the sea, it had been no less than an unmitigated disaster. Though the Redwyne ships had outnumbered the Greyjoys more than two to one, no one could doubt the skill of the ironborn upon the sea. They’d attacked at night through thick fogs that had hovered upon the surface of the water, seeming always to know the locations of their enemies as though through some sort of sorcery. They’d boarded and seized Redwyne ships and then used them as confederates to attack the others that had remained. There had even been talk of krakens rising up out of the sea, and once Jon might have called that impossible; he was no longer quite so certain.
The Redwyne fleet was decimated, and among what remained, it was difficult to know friend from foe, for a ship that flew the cluster of grapes upon its sails could easily be either.

“The ships that remain to us are not sufficient to fight the ironborn,” Willas told them matter-of-factly, “and they scarce remain on land long enough for us to meet them in a proper battle. They burn, pillage, and leave before we have any chance to combat them, and though my brother Garlan has done his best to track them along the coasts, as I’m certain you know, ships travel faster than armies.”

A slow smile spread across Daenerys’ face. “And so you ask our aid, though your sister is married to the bastard who sits the throne that rightly belongs to my family,” she said succinctly, a dangerous sparkle in her violet eyes. Despite her tiny stature, Willas Tyrell seemed intimidated.

“A boy of nine,” he said uncertainly. “The marriage is unconsummated, and he is, as you say, a bastard.” Willas Tyrell’s gaze flicked uncertainly to Jon, as though seeking to guess whether he, raised in the guise of a bastard himself, would be offended by the characterization. “As such, the marriage was entered into upon false pretenses. An annulment should be easy enough to secure.”

Jon very much doubted that the Tyrells had not been aware of the illegitimacy of Cersei Lannister’s children when they’d bid a daughter of their house marry either son, but he was wise enough not to say it aloud. It had been politically expedient to believe the crown’s assertions that they were trueborn when the Lannisters had been in power; with their power quickly waning, the political calculation had changed.

Daenerys sat back in her chair, looking pleased as a cat that had caught a prize. “We had been hoping you would say that,” she remarked slowly, “for my husband the King has need of a wife.”

That seemed truly to confuse Willas Tyrell, and it struck Jon as well, though not for the same reasons. The King, he thought dully as the words buzzed through his mind. Not the ‘king consort’ or ‘prince consort’ but well and truly the King of the Seven Kingdoms. He hadn’t, until that very moment, thought that Daenerys’ intention. He hoped his surprise did not show upon his face.

It took a long minute for Willas to get a handle on his thoughts. “Forgive me if I am mistaken, Your Grace,” he prefaced delicately, glancing toward Jon once more, “but I had thought that the two of you had been wed.”

“We have,” she informed him blithely. “But as my only son died stillborn and I can bear no more children, we must needs find another woman to bear his babes.” Daenerys said the words with careful detachment, as if she spoke of someone else entirely. “As your sister has already been the Queen, mayhaps that will help ease the transition for the people.”

And it certainly did no harm that the Tyrells could boast more men than several of the other kingdoms combined, and they had suffered comparably few losses. Mace Tyrell had been more than conservative in committing his troops to the Lannister cause. And since they also boasted the majority of the food and their lands had seen little to no battle, Jon could guess that their stores would be plentiful. Willas Tyrell blinked at them.
“So you shall make my sister Queen anew, and you and your dragons shall take care of our foes,” he remarked slowly, as if he thought the whole proposal too good to be true. “And what is it that you shall want in return?”

Another smile touched the corner of Daenerys’ lips. “Your loyalty, of course,” she said with a piercing expression. “Your troops, should we have need of them in the future.” She paused, waited for him to take that in. “And your generosity. The other kingdoms have suffered much and more in this war, and winter is here. We should require you to sell some of your food to those areas that have suffered the most, and for a fair price.”

Willas’ expression was placid, then, as if he’d expected nothing less.

“I must needs get in contact with my father,” he told them finally, his tone measured. “For although I am doing my best approximation of playing at being lord, my father is the true lord of this castle.” He gave them a soft, sardonic smile. “And as you doubtless understand, with correspondence of such a…sensitive nature, we cannot simply send a raven. I shall need time to get my message to him and time for my family to safely get out of the capital.”

“I shall leave you to make your preparations, then. And I think we should like to retire now.”

Willas nodded. “Of course,” he agreed. “Would you prefer one room or two?”

Jon opened his mouth to request two, for the castle was certainly large enough to accommodate them both, but Daenerys answered before he could.

“One would be fine,” she told him genially.

A servant led them to the rooms that had already been prepared, Willas making his apologies once more about his leg. The rooms were large and nearly overpowering in their excess, with tall vaulted ceilings and heavy, patterned Myrish rugs decorating the floor. One wall had a huge bank of windows from floor to ceiling overlooking what must have been a garden, now blanketed with a thick layer of snow. Gauzy, floral-patterned drapes framed the windows along with panels of Myrish lace, and every remaining wall bore at least one painting of beautiful meadows and gardens. Cold clung to the glass panes of the windows, but the fire crackling in the hearth kept the room warm enough.

Jon hesitated to check the bedroom, but he was certain that it would be equally grand, feather mattresses and silk sheets and beautifully carved armoires. As it was, even the table and chairs in the solar were carved with intricate patterns of roses and vines, and everything about the room made Jon feel nothing short of overwhelmed. Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face, because Daenerys’ expression fell when her eyes finally met his.

“What have I done now?” she asked with obvious exasperation. Jon rubbed his eyes, trying to find his composure.

“You’ve done nothing wrong,” he assured her as gently as he could. “I simply…did not realize that we would be sharing rooms, that’s all.” And there was more embroidery in one single room than there was in the entire Great Keep at Winterfell, but he doubted she would understand why he found that so unsettling.

Daenerys’ face set. “I thought it best not to show any discord between us,” she told him matter-of-factly, “most especially when we are telling them that you require a second wife.”

It was a perfectly sensible response, and Jon was hard-pressed to reason out why he hadn’t thought
of it himself. He constantly felt as though time was shooting forward at the speed of a dragon, and he was stumbling along on foot, fighting an impossible battle to keep up. Daenerys looked at Jon for a long moment before releasing a deep sigh.

“You’ve made it more than clear that you’re unhappy to be wed to me,” she intoned slowly, carefully, as though weaving her way through a mass of blades, “but I don’t intend to remain celibate for the rest of my days.”

None of what she’d said was what Jon had expected to hear, and it brought a strange feeling of disquiet to his chest. Their marriage had been political, entirely so, a way to circumvent factions and arguments about claims. There was no love between them, and he’d seen the consummation of their marriage as nothing more than a duty that needed done. Ygritte had delighted in coupling with him beneath the furs, but highborn ladies were a different thing entirely, wed for alliances and heirs, and they could create none of the latter with their coupling. He hadn’t thought a highborn lady to want that simply for the sake of it, no more than he’d ever thought to be wed to a highborn lady, to a queen.

She paused, leaning her hip against the edge of the delicately carved table as she seemed to gather her thoughts. The curve of her deep red gown clung to her breasts, curled around her hips in a swirl of damask wool.

“I could take a lover if you prefer,” she reasoned finally. “I’ve done so before. But I imagine that will cause unnecessary problems at court that we’d rather avoid.”

And that was the first time that Jon noticed it, the hurt in her violet eyes, hidden behind the steely set of her face. She’s just a girl, he realized suddenly, guiltily. Six and ten, even younger than I am. It was easy to forget sometimes, for she rode a dragon and spoke with all the authority of a queen, but beneath all that, she was still just a girl, and he’d treated her monstrously. He’d treated her like a burden thrust upon him, the same way the world had seen him for most of his life, a child no one had wanted. He’d treated her no better than Catelyn Stark had treated him, all those years at Winterfell.

Jon took a breath, released it. He stretched out his hand.

“Come here,” he said as gently as he could manage, and to her credit, she came. He almost thought she wouldn’t, that mayhaps he’d already pushed her further than she could bear. Jon took her small hand into his and held it gently, the same way he had on the day they’d wed, and it felt near as strange now as it had then. He’d been inside her, and yet even this felt a strange sort of intrusion.

“I do not know how to do this,” he confessed to her finally. “You may have been in exile, but you were raised knowing you were the daughter of a king. You have been a princess of the Iron Throne and a khaleesi of the Dothraki and a queen in Meereen. I have been called a bastard since the day I was born. No one wants to wed a bastard. No one wants to call a bastard a king. I don’t know how to do this.”

Daenerys gave him a soft look, and she squeezed his hand gently. “Well you are not a bastard, you are wed, and you are the king. So you must needs learn.”

Jon could not help the soft, ragged laugh that escaped his lips. “You make it sound so simple.”

She smiled and took a step forward, so close that she was nearly in his arms, and she pressed a hand against his chest.

“It’s not simple at all,” she confessed seriously. “Ruling is a difficult, trying thing. I have made mistakes, and you shall too.” Her hand slid up along the fabric of his tunic, until she had cupped his
jaw, and he had no choice but to meet her eyes again. “This part, though? It shouldn't be difficult.”

It shouldn't, he realized, but he was making it so. She was a beautiful woman, and she was his wife, and he could not get her with child. And even if he could, their child would not be a bastard, would be called prince or princess and be next in line to the throne. She was intelligent and thoughtful, and bedding her hadn't been quite the chore it could have been.

This part should not be difficult, he repeated to himself, and he leaned down and kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Daenerys VI, in which Daenerys might not have things quite as figured out as she'd thought.
Daenerys VI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With nothing to be done at Highgarden save wait for news of the expected Tyrell exodus from the capital, Jon and Daenerys set off to check in with their other allies and forces. The snow had begun to fall again, which was far from convenient for flying, but Drogon’s flesh was hot enough that snowflakes seemed to melt before they ever hit her body, though nothing could be done for the wind. Jon may have known little of flying, but he’d been raised in the inhospitable north, and he knew much and more of the sharp bite of a strong wind. He lent her a muffler to cover her face, which helped some, but even so, Dany spent much of her ride east with her face tucked as close to Drogon’s body as possible.

Their first destination was Maidenpool, where Ser Barristan and her Unsullied had surrounded and entrapped Randyll Tarly’s forces and barricaded the way for any remaining Lannister troops in the riverlands that may have been trying to make their way to the capital. Both endeavors were somewhat of a farce when their forces held the bulk of the riverlands and the westerlands and they were in negotiations with the Lord Paramount of the Reach. But if only due to the ease and speed of the movement on dragonback, no news of their visit with the Tyrells had yet reached King’s Landing or its environs, and none of them thought it wise to disclose their plans to Tarly’s force, not until negotiations with his liege lord had been finalized.

Jon was especially hostile about the whole thing, but Dany found she was no longer surprised by her husband’s moods. Happiness scarce ever seemed to be one of them; worry and melancholy and even anger were far more common for him, and she tried not to begrudge him for it, much as she sometimes wanted to.

Though Daenerys was nowhere near as ignorant in the ways of war as she often attempted to pretend, she truly was lost listening to Jon and Ser Barristan discuss the state of their military campaign. The broad strokes of it made sense to her, of course; Lord Tarly was fully encircled within the town of Maidenpool, outnumbered and outmaneuvered, and Brynden Tully’s forces were chasing the last vestiges of Lannister troops through the riverlands, to be smashed upon the base of the mountains if they fled west and against her line of Unsullied and ranging Dothraki if they fled south. But the specifics of it all, of siege lines and troop movements, feints and surges, were all lost on her. Ser Barristan, at least, seemed impressed by the breadth and depth of Jon’s military knowledge, which told Dany much and more of how astute her new husband was.

Dany waited until they were ensconced in their tent for the night to tell him her plans for where to head next.

“Casterly Rock?” he echoed in confusion at her pronouncement. “Not Storm’s End? Not to Aegon?”

The question surprised her little and less, and not only because Storm’s End would be a shorter trip than Casterly Rock. Jon’s endless refrain of what about Aegon had become tired enough to be tedious and oft spoken enough that Dany had come to expect it around every corner. It was not a surprise, she supposed; mayhaps Jon still believed Aegon his half-brother, for he had never seemed terribly convinced by her declarations to the contrary.

Jon was a logical man, knew as well as she did the absolute improbability of the story of swapped infants, but that seemed not to sway him. But what else could she say? A shadowbinder from Asshai
warned me of a mummer’s dragon seemed an unlikely argument to bear fruit with him. She could even hear his rebuttal in her head without him needing to speak it at all. What if I am the mummer’s dragon? she could almost hear him asking. *Masquerading as a trueborn Targaryen when I’m in truth no more than a bastard?*

Young Brandon Stark could have shed light on all of it, she suspected, for he seemed always to know more than any boy his age could possibly know or even understand. But if he knew it, he’d said nothing, at least not when she was present, and Jon had given no hint of secret knowledge, only of reluctance and insecurity. Bran Stark’s motives were about as clear as the sky in the middle of a blizzard.

“We have already made our deals with Aegon,” Daenerys reminded him, taking the clearer path in declining to mention Aegon’s dubious parentage at all. “We have no need to meet with him again at this time.” And it certainly didn’t hurt that she didn’t like him, either, although Dany knew better than to mention that to her new husband.

“We have already made our deals with Tyrion Lannister as well, have we not?” he pointed out with a raised eyebrow, and Dany had to admit that he’d gotten her there. Her nephew was anything but a fool. Dany sighed.

“You’re the military man, Jon,” she reminded him gently. “So once we secure the Tyrells and defeat the ironborn, what is our next move?”

Jon looked at her as though he didn’t quite understand the question, nor from whence it had come. “All that’s left is the crownlands,” he told her finally, regarding her with a perplexed expression. “King’s Landing.”

Dany pulled out a chair and sat across from him. “And who sits upon the throne in King’s Landing?”

Jon blinked owlishly at her. “Tommen Lannister,” he said slowly.

“A boy of what? Nine? And who is like to be making the decisions?”

Jon sat back in his chair, comprehension dawning. “His mother, like as not,” he reasoned. “You think Tyrion Lannister will tell you how to best kill his family?”

She shook her head. “I think he will tell us how to take King’s Landing *without* killing his family,” she told him honestly. “I have no desire to kill children. It is not their fault that they were born bastards, nor that their parents lied to them their whole lives.”

Something passed across Jon’s face at that, something that, for the first time, looked like approval.

“He has given your brother good advice, just as he has given me.”

Jon regarded her with a raised eyebrow. “And what good advice has he given you?” he asked distrustfully. Dany had to fight not to roll her eyes at the skepticism in his question.

“Well, he told me to take you as my husband. Though mayhaps that wasn’t good advice at all,” she couldn’t help but add, feeling frustrated to have Jon fighting back against her at every turn. Jon looked stunned at the news.

“Tyrion told you to wed me?” he returned, wholly ignoring the second half of her statement as though she had not spoken the words at all. Dany gave him a long-suffering look. It was not even a
particularly astute sort of advice, in the end; many an uncle had wed a niece, or a cousin a cousin, in order to bring together two branches of a line with competing claims. Between Aegon and Jon, the choice had been perfectly clear.

“He told me you were a good man, with a good heart. He also said you would make a good king.”

Jon clenched and unclenched his right hand in that nervous way he did whenever he was uncomfortable or troubled, as if testing his scarred flesh to make certain it still moved. Dany still did not know her new husband as well as she might have liked, but she knew him well enough to know when he needed her silence. She took a delicate sip of her wine as he seemed to mull over her response.

“Okay,” he breathed out after a protracted silence. “We shall go to Casterly Rock.”

When they landed at the base of the Rock, it was plain that Jon was impressed. “It’s higher even than the Wall,” he remarked to her as he helped her off Drogon’s back, and she was certain that she wasn’t mistaken at the tiny note of almost childlike glee in his voice at the realization. She wondered if he would be nearly so glad when he realized how many steps they would have to climb to reach the castle. Mayhaps best for both their temperaments, Dany had no chance to find out, for two very harassed looking stableboys met them at the base of the cavern that led up to the castle. And no wonder, Dany thought to herself; they must have hurried down to the base of the Rock with all their might, for an arrival on dragonback would have given them little advance warning. Jon seemed incredulous about the whole thing.

“Horses to take us up to the castle?” he asked skeptically, and Dany could not help but honor him with a slow smirk.

“Unless you’re keen to climb all the steps on foot? We’ll wait for you at the top,” she offered sweetly. Jon’s resulting expression was unamused as he mounted his horse.

Jon was a good rider; it was something that Daenerys had noticed the first time she’d seen him astride a horse. He was comfortable in the saddle, rode with the ease of a man who had grown up riding. His skill at riding certainly would not have been able to match that of any single Dothraki warrior, but Dany had yet to meet a man of any other race who could rival the Dothraki in sheer skill in the saddle.

They rode to the stable built into the rock walls a bit more than halfway up, and Dany could not help but notice the way Jon looked around at everything with an expression of mute disbelief in his eyes. It was at such times that it was easiest to remember that Jon had never left the north before she’d brought him south with her, easiest to remember how little of the world Jon had seen. Dany had ruled from atop a pyramid in Meereen, had seen the beauty of Qarth and the red temple of Volantis, but until they’d arrived to Highgarden, the grandest castle Jon had ever laid eyes upon had been Winterfell. Dany tried to remember how she had felt the first time she’d seen even the sealord’s palace in Braavos, how grand it had seemed after a life of running and hiding, and so she allowed him to take in the golden lions and intricate mosaics of the remainder of the path in silence.

Someone must have sent word up, because Tyrion Lannister was there to greet them when they arrived at the top. He was, Dany reflected, one of the ugliest men she had ever had the misfortune of meeting. He had stubby, misshapen legs, two-toned hair and eyes set into a face that looked to be rudely carved by a stonemason who had had only the vaguest idea of what looks a human should possess. The scars upon his face made Jon’s look no more than insignificant scratches, and the mutilated remains of his nose only made his face all the more grotesque.
He gave them both an exaggerated bow.

“Your Graces,” he said with more theatrics than sincerity. “What an unexpected surprise. I trust that your wedding has gone as planned?”

Jon’s face turned sour, then neutral, and when he didn’t respond, Dany moved to do so in his stead.

“We have more pressing matters to discuss than the specifics of our wedding.” Daenerys said with a sharp smile, and for all that Tyrion Lannister may have been, he was not an idiot. His gaze flicked over to Jon, then back to her, and the affable smile was back on his face.

“Of course,” he agreed. “If you would prefer, we can retire to my solar to discuss them.”

Tyrion walked through the walls of Casterly Rock as though he’d been meant to be lord all his life, with no indication that he was any different than any other high lord in the realm. Daenerys knew the truth, of course, knew that Tyrion sat in his father’s seat by the grace of Robb Stark as well as her own, and more than once she had considered the merits of having him removed. But Tyrion’s healthy fear and respect for her dragons seemed genuine enough, and she had told it true when she’d said to Jon that the man, despite being a Lannister, had served them both true.

A servant poured all three of them a cup of wine, but only Tyrion drank. “I suspect I know why you are here,” he said after a moment, settling himself into his chair, and Daenerys could not help but smirk. That was one thing that she appreciated about Tyrion Lannister; if nothing else, he knew how to get directly to the point.

“Once we defeat the ironborn, we will have every kingdom save the crownlands,” she said with more confidence than she felt. She hadn’t told Jon, nor had she any intention of telling Tyrion Lannister, that the ironborn might not be so easily dispatched as they both believed. But that would be a matter for another day. “Your sister has no support and enemies all around her. She has no choice but to surrender.”

Tyrion’s resulting smile was sharp, bitter. “If she were logical, she’d have no choice but to surrender, you mean,” he corrected wryly. “But my sweet sister is not the shrewd mind she believes herself to be. It may be that she will burn the city down before she will surrender.”

Tyrion said the words flatly, dispassionately, and there was no doubt in Dany’s mind that he believed precisely what he was saying, and Jon seemed to as well.

“Or force us to,” Jon pointed out darkly. Tyrion and Jon’s eyes met, and for the first time since they had arrived to Casterly Rock, Daenerys got the sense that these two men had met before. She knew they had, of course; Tyrion had told her as much when he’d made the suggestion that they wed, but Jon had treated Tyrion with no more or less warmth than he’d treated Willas Tyrell. It wasn’t until that very moment that Dany saw the two men, saw something of a kinship between them. They understood each other, she realized, in a way she understood neither of them.

“Yes,” Tyrion agreed after another long sip of his wine. “That is another option she would find most pleasing.”

Jon looked quite as horrified by Tyrion’s words as Dany herself felt. “Even though we’d be killing her and her son in the process?”

Tyrion refilled his cup of wine, held up the jug for both of them, but she and Jon both shook their heads. Neither of them had touched their cups for more than a perfunctory sip. Tyrion simply shrugged.
“There may be another way,” he admitted slowly. “A way to get inside the city by stealth. As Robb Stark might tell you, I am somewhat of an expert in that.”

It was precisely the sort of thing Dany had been hoping and expecting to hear, but Jon was more suspicious. “And what is it that you would want in return for your helpful advice?” Jon asked suspiciously, crossing his arms across his chest. A lesser man might have cowered beneath Jon’s obvious displeasure, but Tyrion did not.

“You surely would not suggest that I would not do such a good deed only out of fealty to my liege?”

Even if not for the insincerity dripping from Tyrion’s tone, Dany already had a good idea of what he wanted. She glanced sidelong at Jon.

“He wants his brother,” she declared with confidence, and Tyrion’s expression faltered a bit, as though unhappy to be found out so easily. “And…the children, am I right? You want all of them spared?”

Tyrion recovered quickly. “The children at least,” he admitted softly. “I am aware that Jaime may be…too much to request.”

Dany sat back in her chair, pleased to have guessed his motives so transparently. “The children are pretenders to our throne,” she reminded him. “Why should I spare them?”

Tyrion appeared nervous for the first time since they had walked through the door. “They are innocent,” he said helplessly. “And…they are bastards. They’re no threat to your throne. Robert’s claim to the throne was through his Targaryen blood, and as I’m sure you’re aware, Tommen and Myrcella have none.”

Dany let Tyrion stew in the silence for a moment before letting a smile find its way to her face. “I shall consider it,” she agreed finally, laboriously, as though she had not already decided. “Tell me your plan.”

It was all details after that, logistics and timelines and more military matters that Jon and Tyrion knew better than she. Daenerys walked out of Tyrion’s solar feeling triumphant, feeling as though everything was coming together. A servant met them outside to escort them to their rooms, but Jon bid her to wait at the end of the hall with all the lordly conceit she’d never once seen from him.

When the servant was out of earshot, Jon turned to her, eyes blazing. “Am I meant to be your King, or am I simply some set piece in your mummer’s farce?” he demanded, expression twisted in frustration. Dany felt wrong-footed, not at all certain how to respond.

“What?” was all she managed to say, and that seemed to make Jon even angrier.

“You walked into that room knowing precisely what Tyrion would ask, knowing precisely what you planned to agree to, and you never once considered discussing it with me beforehand?” he demanded sharply, and although his voice was pitched low enough so as not to be overheard, the force of his anger was so overpowering that Dany almost took a step back. Jon was better at politics than he gave himself credit for, she couldn’t help but think, because she’d gotten no inkling of his anger at her before they’d left the room.

Daenerys shook her head helplessly, not certain what to say, and Jon stood there fuming, clenching and unclenching his fist spasmodically, and for a moment she thought he might strike her. But
instead, he stormed off down the hallway toward the servant who had been meant to show them to their rooms. Daenerys watched as he put on a neutral expression.

“May I trouble you to find separate chambers for myself and the Queen?” he inquired genially. “I’m often up for part of the night, and it would aggrieve me to deny my wife her rest.”

The servant was obviously flustered by the request, but she recovered quickly. “Of course, Your Grace,” she said with a deep curtsy. “I’ll see it done.”

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon X, in which defeating Euron Greyjoy is nowhere near as easy as just cruising up and burning a few ships.
The snow and hail were falling down in torrents, in sharp spikes that felt like tiny knives against his skin. It had come suddenly, without warning, black, billowing clouds rolling in above them as though through sorcery. When they had set off from Highgarden, the skies had been clear—or at least as clear as they had been since winter had set in earnest—but the closer they had come to the coast, the closer they had come to where the last reports had placed the ironborn fleet, the more the weather had turned. It was as if the skies themselves had seen them coming and had repudiated them, bid them to turn back as they refused to listen.

*Or mayhaps it is not the skies that have repudiated us, but Euron Greyjoy himself, Jon could not help but think, and the thought was raw and sharp and unsettling. That had been an unwelcome surprise from his wife, when she had come to him just days before they’d planned to set out for the battle, the day they’d received the news that the Tyrells had gotten clear of the capital and regrouped at Bitterbridge.*

She’d found him in the yard at Highgarden training with a sword—not that he thought himself like to use one in the upcoming battle—and stopped behind him, waiting for a break in his movements. “Euron Greyjoy may not be as easy a foe to defeat as you might believe,” she’d told him, as if the words were nothing, as if it had not been a thing he’d have preferred to have known days or weeks or moons before, but if he had learned nothing else, he had learned that that was the way of things with his wife, that she had her secrets and she guarded them jealously.

It was only then that she’d told him the story of Victarion Greyjoy and the horn he’d called the Dragonbinder, of a red priest and of blood magic and of the ways the man had sought to take a dragon of his own. Rhaegal had been the one to kill him, Jon had found out then, but not before it had seemed very possible the hellhorn might change the dragon’s allegiance for true.

“How many men has Rhaegal killed?” was what he had somehow found himself asking, too stunned by all the talk of mysticism and horns. Jon had found a horn of his own, once, in the wilds north of the Wall, but when he’d blown it nothing had happened; no sound had even erupted from the thing.

Daenerys had leveled him with a serious look in her piercing violet eyes. “Certainly every man who attempted to mount him,” she told him coolly, “until you.”

That had brought a whole wealth of questions to Jon’s mind, most of them unanswerable. Had Rhaegal repudiated them for their insufficient Valyrian blood? Had the horn simply not worked at all, or had the sorcery simply not been strong enough to overcome bloodlines? Or had Rhaegal, somehow, already known Jon would be his rider? Was that how it was all meant to work? Jon had read all he had been able to get his hands on from Aemon’s collection, everything he could find about Targaryens and dragons, and all those books answered his questions not at all.

“So you believe that if Victarion Greyjoy had access to sorcery, his brother will as well?”

Daenerys’ eyes, when they met his, had been deadly serious. “I am all but certain of it.”

And as the storm grew stronger and more violent the closer they came to the fleet, the more certain of it Jon too became. It was near impossible not to think of the Others, of the sharp winds and biting cold they brought with them. Jon could scarce see Daenerys and Drogon through the curtains of
falling hail and snow, the black of the dragon’s scales seeming to melt into the dark of the sky.

_Mayhaps we should not do this_, Jon thought, and not for the first time. Daenerys had come to Westeros with three dragons, and now they had two; if one of them fell, would a single dragon be enough to hold the peace? And if both fell? Would the realm once again fall into years of bloody war they could ill afford with winter already upon them? Would everything Jon had done to push back the Others prove to be for naught, from nothing more consequential than the petty struggles of men?

But even if Jon wanted to get word to his wife that they should retreat, there was no chance Daenerys would hear him through the roar of the storm. That was their disadvantage in the air; armies could follow banners and warhorns and drums, could follow commanders and formations and tactics, but all they could rely upon was sight of each other, and Daenerys knew little and less of tactics. And yet even a traditional army or navy would have trouble in these conditions, Jon knew, for how far would the sound of a drum carry through these winds? Would men have any hopes of seeing banners? He thought not.

It was some distance off the coast that they finally came across the fleet, a mixed group of black-sailed ships flying the kraken banner and blue-sailed ships bearing the bunches of Redwyne grapes. All the true Redwyne ships had already been pulled back, so those that sailed the seas now were certain to be confederate ships, boarded and stolen by the Greyjoys. And yet even so, Willas Tyrell had told them he had reason to suspect hostages remained upon the Redwyne ships; Euron Greyjoy, it was said, was not a man who was known to kill his foes outright but rather a man who might just as easily torture them or subject them to unimaginable blood magic rituals.

But if Euron Greyjoy truly had had a part in calling forth the storm, it seemed ill-advised, and Jon saw it immediately. The sea was wild, with huge swells that tossed the ships this way and that, and even in the mere seconds since the ships had come into view, several looked close to capsizing.

_Mayhaps Daenerys was wrong_, Jon thought suddenly, hopefully. _Mayhaps this shall be easier than we thought._

And it was then that he saw it, something long and dark and flying through the sky at alarming speed. For a moment, he thought he must have imagined it, for it was difficult enough to see anything through the dark and the wind and the falling snow. When it suddenly struck Jon what it was, it was nearly too late.

“Daenerys!” he screamed, but the wind swallowed his voice before it could possibly have any chance of reaching her. Jon urged Rhaegal forward, racing toward the black blur of Drogon’s shape, determined that he could at least save her if Drogon fell—

And then at the last moment, Drogon swayed, and the bolt flew past his body uselessly. Jon’s heart was racing, the sound of his breathing somehow louder even than the roar of the hail and the sea as he watched Drogon right himself. Had not a scorpion bolt been what had felled Rhaenys and Meraxes in Dorne? Euron Greyjoy would have known that just as easily as Jon had been able to recall it, and the thought of that terrified him. Jon turned his attention back to the ships, blinking the wet blurs of melted snow out of his eyes, searching frantically for the ship that had shot the projectile.

Another flew, and Jon spotted it. The ship was red against the waves, red as spilled blood floating upon the roiling sea. It was _Silence_, he knew, and Euron Greyjoy would be captaining the ship.

Yet this scorpion bolt flew in entirely the wrong direction, was not near enough to either of them to be any sort of threat. Jon wondered if Daenerys had seen it too, had seen the ship from which the shot had originated. She was closer, could get in proximity to burn it before he could, and if they
burned the ship, they would burn the scorpion as well.

But suddenly, the trajectory of the bolt changed midair, as though a man had plucked it out of the sky and simply turned it, and it was racing straight for Drogon’s body again. Jon felt another frantic moment of panic. Had Daenerys seen it? Would she be able to move out of its way in time?

She did, by what looked like mere inches from Jon’s vantage point. Had Jon had any doubts about the use of sorcery, they were gone in that moment. He had seen the trajectory of the bolt change midair, easier than even an experienced rider could change the direction of a horse, and through wailing winds and snow as well. But if all this was the work of some sorcery Euron Greyjoy had managed to harness, why the storm? The swirling winds limited the ships as much as it limited them in the air, if not even more so. Was Euron Greyjoy so bold as to believe that he could harness the power of the sea, that the rest of his fleet could as well?

In the end, it made no matter what had brought the storm or why; the storm had come, and they all would have to contend with it, just as they would have to contend with the scorpion. And that was what it was, what it had to be from the size of the bolts it shot. Daenerys was closer to the ship from which the bolts had originated, but she and Drogon were also clearly their target, and it was obvious enough why. Drogon was the larger dragon, the more fearsome of the two on sight, and the easier target.

And though she was closer, the wisest decision would be for her to stay far away from the ship, not to make herself even easier prey. Would Daenerys know that? She had not been schooled in the art of military tactics, but surely that would be obvious enough even to her. Or would it? Terrifyingly, Jon had no idea, had no idea whether her temper would get the better of her. And so Jon did the only thing he could see to do—he made a beeline for the red-hulled *Silence*, knowing their only chance was to burn it before one of the bolts hit true.

Rhaegal pushed headfirst into the wind, which stung on the exposed parts of Jon’s face and whistled loud in his ears. He could feel it from Rhaegal, could feel the force of the effort that the dragon needed to combat the rush of the wind. He was flying slower than he’d grown used to, felt as though he was trying to run through sand, each beat of Rhaegal’s wings seeming only to push him a few yards forward whilst the wind pushed him a few feet back. They were too slow, dangerously slow, so slow that if the ironborn manning the weapon spotted them, it would be all too simple to turn their focus onto him. But the ship was so close, so tantalizingly close through the curtains of falling snow. Jon did not see the wave, but Rhaegal did, his shriek nearly lost in the wind as the sea rose up higher than it had any right to do. Rhaegal jerked out of the way of the huge surge of salt water, but even so, Jon felt the crash of it against the dragon’s belly as if it were his own, felt the spray of seawater against his face, soaking him thoroughly through, even beneath his leathers. He blinked against the sting of salt in his eyes, struggling to find his sight again, and when he finally did, Rhaegal had flown further into the air, further away from the swell of the sea. Two of the ships had capsized from the force of the wave, but the red-hulled ship remained, rested untouched atop the roiling ocean.

*Mayhaps we do not have to act at all,* Jon thought ironically as he pushed wet hair out of his face. *Mayhaps the sea will swallow them without any intervention at all from us. Mayhaps all we need to do is dodge for long enough for them to sink themselves.*

It was a fool’s hope, and Jon knew it; the dragons would tire from flying against the wind, from dodging projectiles driven as much by sorcery as by the aim of the weapon. But could they outlast the onslaught anyway? How many bolts could they have? But Jon stopped himself. Their weapons may have been finite, but he knew not the limits of their sorcery, and Jon had long before learned not to underestimate the mystical. He needed to burn the ship.
Jon made a second attempt at it, pushing forth with Rhaegal, through the wind and the snow toward the waterline, toward the ships. He expected the swell of water that time, anticipated it with enough time to dodge out of the way, around the far side of the ship. And it was there in his sight, enticingly close. Rhaegal opened the great maw of his mouth.

The sail caught fire first, and within moments, a rush of flames engulfed the tall, single mast. It burned faster than any fire Jon had ever seen, undeterred by the snow or the sea beneath it, so hot that the mast cracked under the pressure of it, crashing hard against the hull of the ship. Everything was aflame faster than it had any right to be, men screaming and burning and rushing for the sides of the ship, trying to jump overboard. Few of them made it, more of them seeming to melt into the deck like piles of human soup, skin liquefying as their bodies collapsed.

*These are men,* Jon realized anew, dazed and overwhelmed at the sight of them falling one after another. *Living men.*

It was nothing compared to the number of wights he’d burned at Eastwatch, and yet it was so much more horrific, measures more horrific than when they’d dropped the barrels of burning pitch off the Wall atop Mance Rayder’s army. The men’s bodies melted with the ease of metal in a blacksmith’s forge, and then the massive galley was sinking into the sea. It couldn’t have taken more than three minutes until the water had somehow swallowed up the ship in a swirling mass of burning boards and liquefied bodies.

The sky began to clear and the snow began to let up, and still Jon Snow shivered, turning Rhaegal to search out Drogon’s form.

It was not difficult to find the large black dragon, swooping through the sky. Even as Jon watched, Daenerys guided the dragon low, breathing a column of fire, black shot through with red, wider and more constant than any flame Jon had ever seen. One ship caught fire, then two, then four. The wreckage of half a dozen ships already floated in the water around them, and the heavy, acrid odor of burning flesh tickled the back of Jon’s throat so thickly he thought for a moment he might vomit. Three bunches of grapes caught fire, their masts collapsing in burning heaps upon their decks. Jon watched in horror as one of the ships cleaved in half from the flaming heap of the broken mast.

*They are defeated,* Jon wanted to scream as Daenerys burned another ship, then two. *And the Redwyne ships may still hold hostages upon their decks.* And it was not something Daenerys would not know, either; they’d discussed it at length, had discussed the possibility of rescuing any Redwyne sailors if they yet lived. And yet Daenerys seemed to have disregarded every word of that as men screamed and died, as their flesh melted off their bones under the onslaught of Drogon’s flame.

The snow had slowed to gentle flurries, beside which were swirling flecks of ash, of burnt wood and human flesh dancing on light winds. The ash stuck to Jon’s soaked body, coating him in the remnants of the dead.

By the time that Jon had landed upon the shore, the snow had stopped entirely and the sea had calmed, the wind all but nonexistent. Jon could hear the crackling fire of ships still burning off the shore, could hear the gentle lap of the waves against the sand and the slightly harsher crash of water against the rocks, but the waves rolling in were anything but calm. Bodies were already beginning to pile upon the shore with each rolling wave, some charred beyond recognition whilst the skin of others had melted off their bones as easily as the wax of a candle, sloughing off in chunks of human flesh and muscle so numerous that it was impossible to tell which flesh belonged to which body. The smell was so heavy in the air that it was all Jon could do to keep himself from retching.

*These are men,* Jon’s mind reminded him again, his blood feeling frozen in his veins. *Men whose*
bodies we could never identify, whose remains will never be brought home to their mothers and wives and children. The ironborn favored burial at sea, Jon recalled, but what of any of the Redwyne men who might have been hostages, who had been burned all the same? The Lannisters had murdered Eddard Stark with impunity, but even they had had the decency to send his bones home to Winterfell. There was a thick, hollow feeling in his chest at the thought.

It seemed as though Jon watched the bodies begin to pile up upon the shore for a long time before he heard footsteps behind him, crunching through the slushy mixture of sand and snow that littered the beach. Jon did not turn to greet the new presence, but that seemed to deter Daenerys not at all.

“What happened out there?” she demanded angrily once she had reached him. “Were you of the impression that we had only one foe to fight in that battle?”

The words made Jon suddenly, unbearably angry. He turned upon Daenerys with one sharp movement.

“I was of the impression that there might have been hostages on the Redwyne ships!” he exclaimed, his blood pumping an angry rhythm in his veins, so strong and so fierce that he could feel the pulse of it in his neck. He clenched his fist, unclenched it. “We could have rescued them, could have rounded up the remaining ships and taken the ironborn prisoner.”

Daenerys stared at him with a disbelieving look, a streak of soot smeared across her cheek, her hair wild and disheveled from flight. She had never been more beautiful nor more infuriating to him than she was in that moment.

“And what if Euron Greyjoy was using his ship as a decoy and had instead secreted himself away on another ship?” she asked him, her voice cool and even. “What if he had shared the secrets of his sorcery with others? What if there were more horns or artifacts they had in their possession that they planned to use against us? We could not take that chance. I thought we had agreed.”

Jon had thought that they had agreed, too, but his impression of their final conversation had been different, and devastatingly so. How wrongly could this battle had gone if it had been more evenly matched, with the two of them operating under such different assumptions?

“So you decided to unnecessarily slaughter hundreds of men, some of whom were our allies, on supposition?” he countered furiously. Dany’s stony gaze turned disappointed, and that infuriated Jon even more.

“This is war,” she reminded him with the temerity of a girl who had never been in the thick of a battle, on the ground and in danger and never knowing if the next slice of a sword or swing of a morningstar might be the one that ended your life for good. “They were in open rebellion. Aegon and his sisters burned their foes on the Field of Fire, and no one north of the Red Mountains opposed them again. Why would our foes back down if they don’t believe we have the courage to unleash the full force of our dragons against them?”

This is just a game to her, Jon realized dimly as he stared at his wife, at the utter lack of remorse or misgiving in her expression. They were on a beach surrounded by burned and melted bodies, and it was almost as though they weren’t human to her, as though she had no concept that she’d done any more than burn a few dozen ships. Jon was no stranger to the casualties of war, but what Daenerys had done here had been all but slaughter, killing men who were already defeated, who’d had no hope of fighting back.

Jon had thought that he was beginning to know her, and suddenly he felt as though he no longer knew her at all. How could this be the same woman who had flown all the way to Casterly Rock in
order to try to find a way to save the Lannister children, who had prioritized their lives over the seizure of King’s Landing? How were they more innocent than the hostages that might very well have been below the decks of the Redwyne ships?

*You will make her better than she is,* Bran had told him. And yet how could he, when she wouldn’t listen to a word he said?

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon XI, in which Jon learns a potentially dangerous secret and must decide what kind of man, and what kind of king, he intends to be.
When King’s Landing fell, it fell in less than an hour, entirely without battles and with almost no bloodshed, and in the end, Jon had had no part in it. The capital of Westeros, the site upon which Aegon the Conqueror had landed with three dragons and begun his conquest, the towering walls and imposing red stone castle that stood atop Aegon’s High Hill, and all it had taken was a few dozen Unsullied soldiers and a man who knew the Red Keep exceptionally well. Maegor the Cruel had once declared that only the blood of the dragon would ever know the secrets of the Red Keep, but in the end, he and Daenerys had known nothing.

It all seemed an anticlimax, after Mance and Eastwatch and the Greyjoy fleet, seemed nothing more than farce and play acting, the way he and Robb had done as children. He had once been able to call out that he was Aemon the Dragonknight and Robb Ser Duncan the Tall, but that had not made it so—and yet, all it had taken was the capture of a woman, a small boy, and half a dozen Lannister loyalists, and the city was theirs. They could raise a banner above the Red Keep, a red dragon on black, and suddenly the city was theirs and the royal Baratheon dynasty was ended near as soon as it had begun. The deposed boy king was a Lannister, and a bastard one at that, Shireen Baratheon had disappeared into the fog of war, and Aegon now held Storm’s End. House Baratheon was all but gone, and what an irony that was—the dynasty born of a supposed bastard brother of Aegon the Conqueror himself, and now an entirely new Aegon held their seat.

There was the bastard boy hidden away in Winterfell, of course, but Jon had no plans to enlighten his wife to that truth. Winterfell had once hidden away a bastard of royal blood from the wrath of the crown; if there was one thing about which Jon was resolved, it was that Winterfell would do so again.

*You’ll make her better than she is.* That was what Bran had said to him, not all that long ago, and he’d said it with such conviction that Jon had a difficult time disbelieving him. But was he making Dany better, or was he simply preventing her from being worse? It was a distinction without a difference, but still it seemed to mean the world to Jon.

King’s Landing had been no more than a symbol, little more important than the red dragon banners he now called his own or the Iron Throne itself. He who held the capital held the throne, and even without allies, Cersei Lannister had been able to hail her son king while they had held the city. But no more. They flew into King’s Landing on dragonback to let the smallfolk see them, and the whole exercise made Jon only a little sick to his stomach. He wondered what Eddard Stark would say to see him that day, swathed in Targaryen colors and sigils, riding on a dragon and calling himself king.

Jon knew he could soon walk right into the throne room and sit himself down upon the Iron Throne, but he still did not feel like a king. He felt like the same bastard boy he’d always been, swathed in red and black for some mummer’s show. Ever since he’d been a boy, Jon had dreamt of being Lord of Winterfell, not truly understanding what that meant, not understanding that Robb and all his siblings would have had to die for there to be even the slimmest chance of it happening. *This* was not what he had dreamt of, walking like a stranger through serpentine halls, men and women scurrying out of his path as though he had the pox and they needed to avoid him lest it was catching.

Confined to Maegor’s Holdfast until Ser Barristan and his men had finished sweeping the keep to ensure their safety certainly didn’t have the taste of victory, either. It tasted of trickery and cowardice, was nothing like the stories of noble knights and conquering heroes he and Robb had grown up on.
The king’s chambers made the feeling even worse, for they were still filled with the boy Tommen’s things, children’s books and painted dolls and what Jon could only guess were cat toys.

So instead he left his chambers and wandered the halls, past statues and paintings and tapestries, past patrolling Unsullied soldiers who spoke back and forth in tongues Jon did not recognize. He found a room filled with dusty old portraits of dead Targaryens, none of whom looked even the slightest bit like him, a ballroom, and several sets of apartments, all of which appeared hastily vacated.

It was inside the third set of apartments into which he’d wandered that he found a figure he didn’t recognize, rifling through things upon a shelf. Jon halted, reaching up to grip the hilt of his sword. “What are you doing here?”

The figure turned slowly, lazily, as though the whole thing had been a farce, as though he had been waiting for Jon all along. The man was stout and wore a heavy brown roughspun robe, a cowl pulled up to obscure his face in shadow. He wore cracked, mudcaked boots and reeked strongly enough of sweat that Jon could smell it clear across the room. He looked anything but a man who belonged in the most secure part of the Red Keep.

“What are you?” Jon prodded when the intruder did not answer his first question. The man looked up, gaze seeming to linger upon Jon’s grip on the hilt of his sword, though Jon could not have said for certain with the man’s face cloaked in shadow as it was. Eventually, he reached up and lowered his cowl.

The man beneath was round-faced and plump, his head smooth as the shell of an egg. His eyes trailed away from Jon’s sword finally, a slow, obsequious smile appearing upon his face. “I have the honor of being the Master of Whisperers,” the man said with a deep, exaggerated bow. “Our mutual friend Tyrion Lannister enlisted me to aid you in getting your soldiers into the Red Keep.”

And he had, Jon knew, and done it well. They’d been stationed down Rosby Road, waiting for the Targaryen banner to be raised above the Red Keep, their signal that the Lannister boy and his mother had been subdued and the gates would be open to the bulk of their armies. Jon had expected a much longer wait, hadn’t taken kindly to Dany’s impatient pacing as they stood beside their waiting dragons. But what did it say about Varys, Jon wondered, that he would so easily betray the crown he’d been meant to serve? Had been betraying them from the first, too, if the story of Aegon’s escape from the city as a babe had been the truth.

The thought stopped him in his tracks, and abruptly, Jon realized the precarious situation in which he found himself. He took a long, slow breath, mind racing as he tried to figure out the best way to handle the situation.

“Tell me about Aegon,” he said finally, slowly, his heart beating faster than the hooves of a galloping horse as he realized the man who stood in front of him was mayhaps the only man in the realm who could tell him the truth about Aegon. Varys’ expression was placid.

“Ah, your dear half-brother,” he breathed airily. But Jon had no patience for games, not about this.

“Is he?” he demanded sharply, and Varys stared at him for a long moment, as though he hadn’t expected the harshness of the response. Jon wasn’t certain if he was imagining the way the eunuch’s eyes flicked once more to the hilt of his sword, the white wolf, the last bit of garb he seemed permitted to wear that spoke of his Stark heritage. As it was, Ghost remained at Winterfell for the time being, and when he’d left the wolf behind, he’d felt almost as though he’d left a part of himself behind as well.
Varys was silent for a long minute, and Jon wondered if he was weighing the wisdom of lying versus the chances that Jon might gut him at any moment. That was a thing that Jon still had not grown used to, that the moment the name Targaryen had been thrust upon him, everyone had suddenly treated him as though they expected he might have Aerys’ madness, that he might murder any of them without even the flimsiest of cause. He wondered if his father—if Rhaegar—had been seen the same way, wondered how easy it might have been to do something mad when everyone had already regarded him as though he might very well be.

“Regrettably...no,” Varys finally admitted, softly and reluctantly. “I didn’t believe it truly mattered, not at the time. All he needed was the name, the look, the education...better if he’s not truly a Targaryen, even. Then we could wipe out the madness in the royal line altogether.”

The words washed over Jon like a river, confirming everything he’d feared and dashing everything he’d hoped, all at once. In the deepest recesses of his mind, Jon had hoped, hoped desperately and truly that he did have a brother, that he might be something more to someone than cousin and nephew and hot-blooded stallion to breed little dragon-blooded heirs. And yet there was something about Varys’ tone, something he couldn’t quite identify—but as soon as he thought it, the Master of Whisperers was speaking anew, and it slipped away like water through his fingers.

“Prince Viserys was already...an unfortunately unhinged child, even at seven,” he told Jon with an insincere tut-tut. “I suspected he would be unfit to rule, which is why I sought to groom Aegon. But I never could have imagined this outcome. Who would ever have thought that dragons would be born again and Lord Eddard Stark would be harboring the true Targaryen heir?”

Something of the confession rested thick and sour in the room, though whether the man’s callous calculation or something else, Jon was not certain. Every part of Jon bristled at the scheme, at the subterfuge and dishonesty. The boy Eddard Stark had raised should never have accepted such—or should he? Jon had long thought his father a paragon of truth and virtue, but even Eddard Stark had not been immune to lies and deceit. He gritted his teeth tightly.

“Does Aegon know?”

For a moment, Varys looked truly aggrieved, but the bright flame of emotion flitted out of his eyes as soon as it had appeared. “He doesn’t,” Varys admitted reluctantly. “He believes himself the son of Rhaegar.”

Jon felt rage rising up in his chest at Varys’ admission, felt every bit of the anger he’d forced down when he’d realized he’d been lied to all of his whole life rising to the surface. And suddenly, he wondered if Varys’ hadn’t been wrong to look to his sword and fear his retaliation, because for the briefest of moments, Jon wondered what it would be like to cut the pudgy bald man in half. Ned Stark had lied to keep his nephew safe; the man who stood before Jon then had lied only to place his chosen candidate upon the throne, and he’d caught up an innocent boy in the process. The whole thing made Jon sick.

Jon clenched his sword hand, then unclenched it, pushing back his urge to kill the man who stood before him.

“I think it’s best you leave the city, Lord Varys.” The voice came from Jon’s mouth, but he scarce recognized it as his own, cool and sharp and angry. “Preferably before the Queen arrives to question you about this matter.”

For the first time, the Master of Whisperers appeared confused. “Your Grace?” he pressed. Jon took a deep, steadying breath, then a second. He didn’t speak until he was certain he could do so without screaming.
“I don’t know you, Lord Varys, but I don’t believe you to be stupid,” Jon said finally, carefully. “You’re the one person who can shed light on Aegon’s true identity. Without your testimony, it can remain...nebulous.” Saying the words felt wrong against his tongue, didn’t feel like him at all. “Isn’t that best for everyone? Dorne is bound to us because they believe he’s Elia’s son, and because his descendants will sit the Iron Throne. And if you lie and say he is Aegon Targaryen for true, then he is the heir without question. The realm will fall back into war and the bloodlines, the dragons...all we’ve done for that cause will be for naught.”

Whether the man knew of the Others, whether he believed in the scope of the threat could not be said from his expression. Not a single man south of the Gift had seen the Others, nor even a wight; none of them had any reason to believe that their insistence of the importance of dragons was anything more than a Targaryen play for power. Jon’s hope of proving it to the men of the south had been dashed within moments of thinking of it, for the wights they had kept in the ice cells had somehow disappeared entirely along with the destruction of the Others, as though their return to long slumber had brought their mindless creations with them. Jon could have traveled north of the Wall, a last desperate attempt to find some stray wight that might still walk, but that plan had been too foolhardy for any of them to consider it, even just for a moment. They had only two dragons now, and not a single egg; if the enemy lingered still in the wilds beyond the Wall, it would be too dangerous to chance the loss of one of the two living dragons for a gambit that may not even pay off.

Varys stared at Jon for a long, unbroken minute, all his obsequiousness gone. His eyes were sharp and intelligent, and for the first time since Jon had stumbled upon this man, it did not seem impossible that he could be the Master of Whisperers who had survived through four kings and lived to tell the tale of it. He seemed to mull something over in his mind, and when the long silence ended, he appeared to come to a conclusion—though what that conclusion was, Jon couldn’t have said.

“As you say, Your Grace,” the man agreed finally, placidly, falling into another deep, exaggerated bow. He pulled up his cowl once more and shuffled diminutively past Jon, and when Jon turned around, the man was already gone.

Jon couldn’t have said how long he’d been standing there in the empty room when one of the Unsullied appeared at the door, and Daenerys wasn’t long after him. She stared at Jon as though he’d grown a second head.

“What are you doing in here?” she demanded, perplexed. “We’ve been searching for you for the better part of an hour.”

Jon wasn’t certain what he was doing there, either, knew only that he couldn’t bear to return to Tommen Lannister’s room with all of Tommen Lannister’s things, knew he wasn’t ready to leave the room and admit that everything that had just happened inside it was true. Jon hardened himself and turned to his wife, giving her his blandest smile.

“I was tired of being cooped up in my room,” he told her finally, and it was not a lie. Daenerys looked horrified.

“And you didn’t think that dangerous?”

She didn’t even know the half of how dangerous it was, but Jon saw no wisdom in admitting that to her. “Half a dozen Unsullied saw me leave, and they didn’t try to stop me,” he pointed out, and Dany gave him a long-suffering sigh.

“Well of course they didn’t,” she remarked with a slightly bemused expression. “You’re the King.”
That was well and true enough, Jon supposed; Daenerys’ Unsullied soldiers were good for a great many things, but defying their rulers, even for their own good, was not one of them. And now that peace was coming, their presence in Westeros was sure to be very difficult to rationalize to the greater part of the Westerosi-born population—and that was to say nothing of the tens of thousands of Dothraki. Though those would be problems for a later time.

Daenerys seemed not at all fazed by Jon’s lack of response.

“You haven’t seen Lord Varys in your wanderings through the castle, have you? He helped our soldiers in, but he disappeared as soon as the thing was done. And I have some questions I’d like to ask him.”

_I’m certain you do_, Jon thought coldly, feeling tense and bristly and angry all of a sudden. This was his last chance, Jon realized, his last opportunity to tell Daenerys the truth without making her think he’d betrayed her by keeping it from her. Lord Stark had always taught him that truth and honor were paramount—but Eddard Stark had spent the better part of his life hiding what may have been the most dangerous secret in the realm, hiding his dishonesty under the cloak of his honest reputation. This was Jon’s moment to decide, he knew, to decide which man was his father, Ned Stark or Rhaegar Targaryen. Was he loyal to one father’s sister and the truth she wanted to know, or was he the son of Eddard Stark, who would keep a dangerous secret to protect an innocent boy who’d had no choice in what had happened to him, no choice of who his true parents were?

Daenerys had said more than once that she did not desire to kill children, but it was clear enough that she did not see Aegon as a child in this, was clear enough that she had no love for the boy. She had slaughtered ships full of men, traitors and hostages both, on merely the suspicion that they might be a future threat. Aegon was a threat, too, but a threat that Daenerys currently believed she had contained. The truth could change all that; the truth could doom Aegon to a fiery death, charred hunks of meat sloughing off his bones the way it had from ironborn and reachmen alike.

In the end, it wasn’t even a struggle. _Words are wind_, he told himself as he took a deep, steadying breath.

“I haven’t seen him,” Jon lied, and it wasn’t the least bit difficult.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon XII, in which Jon finally sits his butt on the Iron Throne and meets his Tyrell bride.
The first time Jon sat the Iron Throne was the day the Tyrells rode back into the city. It had been a matter of contention from the beginning, who would sit the throne and when, for two Targaryen rulers who meant to rule together could not both sit themselves upon the same seat at the same time, and the sheer size of the throne made it impossible to place another beside it easily. Jon had ceded the honor to Daenerys for the first weeks, for he had no patience for sitting court for hours, and though Daenerys seemed to like it little more than he did, she at least was more practiced at it, having sat court for many moons in Meereen. He would have easily ceded the right to her again, but his wife had been insistent.

“Margaery Tyrell is to be your future bride,” Daenerys had reminded him the night before, having waited until their coupling had finished before raising the point with him. Daenerys, Jon had quickly learned, was not above using her beauty and her body to get what she wanted from him. “It is only right that you should sit the throne to greet her.”

It had been hard enough to argue with his mind in a haze of post-coital pleasure, even harder because he knew it to be the truth. Jon may have never meant to be king of anything, but he was far from ignorant about the importance of the trappings of power. The Tyrells had agreed to their alliance at the promise of marrying a king; they could easily balk or ask for further concessions if it looked as though Margaery Tyrell was to marry no more than a figurehead.

And so upon the throne Jon sat, Daenerys upon the steps by his feet, looking not at all as though the position beneath him was of any consequence to her. She held her head high, hair carefully set into delicate braids, her beautiful black gown tumbling down the steps beneath them. All of the court was there, all of them who hadn’t fled the city or been arrested as Lannister loyalists, and even in just the space of a few weeks, the room looked much different than it had when Jon had first set foot in it. The skulls of the perished dragons of old ringed the hall, the giant skull of Balerion hovering behind their throne, a persistent warning.

Mace Tyrell had pulled his men back only as far as Bitterbridge to await word that they’d taken the city, and their haste to return to King’s Landing had been almost palpable, as if Mace Tyrell wanted to make certain to have the deed done before anyone could change their minds, eager to show the certainty of his loyalty to the Targaryen cause. The exchange of platitudes with his soon-to-be good-father was almost painful, the man rushing to remind them nearly once every minute that he had remained loyal to the Targaryen cause until the very end of Robert’s Rebellion, that he would have certainly supported Jon had he known Rhaegar’s trueborn heir lived.

It was a dance of lies that Jon hated, for he knew as well as all in the room must have that every word was a lie. Mace Tyrell was a man who supported whatever cause he believed most advantageous; had he truly been a loyalist to the Targaryen cause, it would have been simple enough for him to find Daenerys and her brother across the Narrow Sea and help fund their return to the throne, something he’d made no move to do. And yet Jon had to pretend that he believed the man’s lies, had to utter his own baseless platitudes in response.

It was getting easier every day, and yet Jon still hated it.

The man’s two children shared their eldest brother’s temperament more than they shared their father’s, Jon was at least pleased to note. He’d never met Margaery Tyrell, but the girl was
pretty enough—not nearly as beautiful as Daenerys was, but somehow, Jon found that he preferred her plainer brown hair and wide brown eyes over his aunt’s silver-gold hair and striking violet eyes. And Margaery Tyrell was clear enough a woman who understood her own beauty and knew how to use it, for though it remained winter, her gown draped low across her chest and bared her shoulders, and the fur shawl around her arms seemed more for decoration than for warmth, though the girl showed no signs of feeling the cold.

She stepped forward only when addressed directly, dropping into a low and practiced curtsy. “It is a great honor to stand in the presence of a true Targaryen king and queen,” she told them without insincerity, and for a moment, Jon couldn’t help but wonder if she, unlike her father, truly believed every word she said. Her expression was kind but inscrutable.

Loras Tyrell was, if anything, even more beautiful than his sister. He had the same brown curls, which tumbled into his eyes in a way that looked entirely careless, as though his beauty was an effortless thing in contrast to his sister’s carefully arranged facade. He was slender of frame, but he had a capable air about him, and even if Jon had not known him to be a warrior from reputation, it would have been clear in the way he held himself. He wore his sword like a man who knew well how to wield one, looked as at home in the white armor and cloak of the Kingsguard as his sister looked in her carefully-crafted gown.

The whole thing had been pre-arranged and carefully negotiated, and Jon knew the part he needed to play, knew that the farce needed to play out in front of an audience. This is kingship, he reminded himself with steely resolve and then spoke.

“Step forward, Ser Loras,” he beckoned, and Margaery Tyrell moved back with an easy deference in favor of her brother. The man stepped forward with his head held high, though there was no easy kindness about his expression the way that there had been in his sister’s face, so similar to his own. “You pledged your sword to a different king, and so now I offer you a choice. If you so choose, you may leave the Kingsguard without penalty.”

Jon knew what Loras Tyrell would say long before he said it, long before he’d ever walked into the room. The man unsheathed his sword and knelt at the base of the Iron Throne, placing the blade before them.

“I humbly offer you my sword and my life, and I would serve in your Kingsguard as long as you would let me, Your Grace, be it another minute or for life.”

It was precisely the sort of thing Jon might have expected someone to say in one of the songs he’d heard as a boy, and now it rang false, rang of insincerity and pageantry more than it rang of any sort of truth. But Loras Tyrell was known to be a capable warrior, and it had all been part of the bargain, had all been prearranged.

“Please rise, Ser. We would be honored for you to hold a place in our Kingsguard.”

Their little performance had scarce ended when Daenerys began to speak. “We would humbly request a private audience with Lady Margaery,” she said suddenly from her spot at Jon’s feet, and Jon could see a small smile turning up the corners of her mouth. “I shall, of course, be present to ensure the lady’s honor remains unbesmirched until her wedding day.”

Jon shot a sharp look in his wife’s direction, though he tried his best to keep his expression neutral. This was something he misliked in her, that she seemed always intent to spring surprising decisions upon him without even consulting him first. She was tempestuous, impulsive, too often put emotions before logic, and it was clear from the look on Mace Tyrell’s face that he hadn’t been expecting the request, either. Margaery herself looked a bit more composed.
“Of course, Your Grace,” she said with another easy curtsy. “It would be my honor.”

Jon reached down to help his wife to her feet before standing himself, meeting her eyes and giving her a pointed look. Dany all but rolled her eyes at him, and neither of them said anything. Jon was glad to rise from the throne, at the least; it was an uncomfortable seat, and each movement had had to be taken with care, lest he prick himself on one of the blades.

Mace Tyrell was whispering frantically to his daughter as they made their way down the many steps to the base of the throne, but she all but pushed him away when they had reached the bottom, plastering a wide smile onto her face. For just a moment, Jon found himself longing for his humble chambers at Castle Black, for the cold and the snow and the knowledge that this bit of politics, at least, was something he might have avoided.

He offered the girl his arm.

Margaery was shorter than he was by some measure, but she was not nearly so petite as Daenerys was; up close, her skin was impossibly smooth and unblemished, her chestnut curls falling in a cascade down her back. Jon looked back at Daenerys, uncertain what to do, but Ser Loras stepped up to take her by the arm, and somehow all was settled. Jon led them to his solar, Loras remaining outside to guard the door.

Daenerys, unsurprisingly, wasted no time. She went out of her way to pour a cup of wine for the other girl, speaking as soon as she’d placed it on the table in front of where Margaery had sat.

“So tell me,” she said conversationally, sliding into a seat across from Margaery, “how is it that a woman manages to marry three times and still be a maid?”

Jon supposed he should have been shocked, but very few things that Daenerys did or said shocked him any longer. The sensible move to consolidate her power would have been for her to allow Jon to remain in the Night’s Watch, but instead she had done the opposite; she had been the one to arrange this marriage, so somehow it seemed perfectly reasonable that she would be the most skeptical about the match. And yet still, he found himself affronted on the girl’s behalf.

“Daenerys—” he began to object, but Margaery Tyrell shook her head, the genial smile never slipping from her face.

“No, it’s quite all right, Your Grace,” she assured him gently, an easy complacency in her tone as she turned her smile upon Daenerys. “Lord Renly was...not chiefly interested in women, truth be told. I thought I could interest him enough at least to perform his marital duties, but...well, mayhaps if the war had been won and things had calmed down, he would have seen the necessity of an heir and tried harder. But of course, I can never know the truth of that supposition. Joffrey died at our wedding feast, as you know. And Tommen was still a boy of nine when our marriage was annulled.”

She must have expected the question, for her answer was perfectly composed, and she looked not at all flustered at being asked to deliver it. Jon looked back and forth between his wife and his soon-to-be wife, at a loss about how to approach the conversation if Daenerys were to object. She had been the one to suggest the match, yes, but it would surprise him little and less if she were to break the betrothal suddenly in this very room without consulting him at all.

And yet Daenerys seemed satisfied enough by the girl’s carefully-rehearsed answer, and Jon was as well. He cared not a whit if Margaery Tyrell was a maid. Better even if she wasn’t; the second marriage, like his first, was to be a political one, not a marriage born of love. Better if she had lost her maidenhead to a man she had chosen and not one forced upon her. Daenerys sat back in her seat, regarding the other girl with a careful eye.
“Is it true your brother was Lord Renly’s lover?” she asked suddenly, entirely without preamble. *That* was not what Jon had been expecting from her, and it was clear enough that it was not what Margaery had been expecting either, because for the first time since Jon had set eyes upon her, the girl looked flustered.

“I—” she began, then faltered, eyes darting over at him helplessly. Jon shot Daenerys a warning look, then opened his mouth to rescue the girl, but Daenerys managed to speak first.

“I see no shame in it, Lady Margaery,” Daenerys assured her with a soft smile, one Jon had long learned to read as the one she used when trying to put someone at ease. It was difficult to tell from Margaery Tyrell’s face whether it had worked. “I’ve bedded a woman myself.”

Somehow, inexplicably, Daenerys had managed to say something even more outrageous than before. *Were the words even truth?* he couldn't help but wonder. *Or were they some calculated ploy in order to gain the other girl’s trust?*

Margaery seemed neither shocked not truly appeased. “My brother loved Lord Renly very deeply, Your Grace,” she admitted finally, the words circumspect. “Why do you ask?”

“My nephew Aegon’s forces currently hold Storm’s End,” she prefaced slowly, and Jon shot her another look, one she pointedly ignored. “I’m of a mind to let him keep it, as the only trueborn Baratheon left is Lady Shireen, and she has disappeared along with her mother. Would your brother have objection to that?”

The question was as bizarre as the first had been, and it was clear from Margaery Tyrell’s face that she thought so as well. Daenerys’ tone made it only more so; she said the words as if the thing had been decided on a whim, as if it hadn’t taken her days of painstaking negotiations before Arianne Martell had agreed to forfeit her claim to Sunspear in exchange for her future child’s place on the throne. As if Daenerys hadn’t wanted nothing more than to take the Baratheon fortress away from Aegon entirely, only to be forced to concede that the only way to rout him out would be to make Storm’s End another Harrenhal. *That*, at least, had been a measure too far for her—if only *just*.

“I don’t imagine so, Your Grace. As you say, Renly had no heirs.”

Daenerys’ smile slowly returned. “Your brother seems to have inspired a great deal of love, Lady Margaery, in the Reach and the stormlands both,” she began, a sly smile beneath the compliment. “His support could be very helpful for my nephew, as well as his practical knowledge of the keep and its lands. Aegon is headed here for the wedding, and if your brother consents, I’d like to send him to Storm’s End for a time.”

And as soon as she said it, Jon suddenly knew his wife’s play. It would separate brother and sister for a time, prevent the Tyrells from implanting themselves in every aspect of their lives the way the Lannisters had once served to do with the Baratheons, and to their peril. And at the same time, it would serve to keep Aegon in check, for Aegon would not dare let harm come to the Queen’s brother, nor would the Queen’s brother allow him to act against them. It was a power play just to show them all that she could do it, on him as much as it was on everyone else. And it was clear from Margaery’s expression that she, too, saw it for what it was.

“I am…uncertain if he would thank you for that, Your Grace,” Margaery said as carefully as she could manage. “Being at Storm’s End without Lord Renly may be…difficult for him.”

Daenerys’ compassionate expression would have seemed to most anyone to be perfectly sincere. “Which is why I am of a mind to have you ask him if he is willing. I’d rather not have him think it is a royal order.”
Which meant, of course, that that was precisely what it was, and one that they would not be able to refuse. And still, the game had to be played. Margaery Tyrell, if she knew anything, appeared to know that.

“That is very kind of you, Your Grace.”

Everything after that was vague platitudes and pleasantries before Lady Margaery excused herself, citing fatigue from her journey. Jon smiled vaguely and summoned a servant to show her to her chambers, and he dismissed Ser Loras from outside the door as well. Like as not, he had heard everything that had been said within—and like as not Daenerys had meant for that. When they were gone, Jon rounded on his wife.

“Would you like me to marry her, or is she simply here for you to intimidate her?” he couldn’t help but ask, feeling the annoyance he’d been trying to hold back bubbling slowly to the surface. Daenerys gave him a vague smile and acted politely as though she hadn’t even heard the question.

“I like her,” she said evenly, sitting back in her chair and taking a sip of her wine. “She’s courteous, clever, and very beautiful.”

Jon could not help but remember what Daenerys had revealed just moments before, and suddenly he felt very uncomfortable about it all. “It sounds as though you would like to marry her,” he remarked blithely, drinking down some of his own wine. The day was not even half over, but Jon was already exhausted by all of it. Daenerys tilted her head at him, as though he was some strange creature she’d never seen before.

“I’ve never met a man so oddly reluctant to bed beautiful women,” she remarked finally, curiously. “Mayhaps she’ll find you’re more like her first husband than she expects. Ser Loras is also quite beautiful, is he not?”

He was, and more like Satin than Jon’s mind had been ready to come to terms with. Satin’s hair had been dark where Loras’ was light and sun-kissed, but they both had those same effortless curls and effeminate faces. And at the same time, neither man was particularly feminine, for Satin had learned to shoot a longbow better than most any man at Castle Black, and tales of Ser Loras’ skill at arms preceded him. The memory of Satin was odd and bittersweet; he’d treated the boy monstrously and had done everything he could to make up for it afterward. Satin had offered, but Jon should never have agreed, should never have taken advantage. I’ve had worse, Satin had told him, and the memory of those words still haunted Jon sometimes in his dreams.

“I don’t want to bed Ser Loras,” Jon insisted sharply, and Daenerys snorted into her wine cup.

“Pity. I’d like to see that.”

It was difficult to tell whether the words were a jape, but Jon supposed that it mattered little and less. He was to marry the girl, and that much was decided. And Daenerys had been right; she was courteous and clever and beautiful, but there was something about her that was all artifice, and Jon had no idea at all what might lay beneath. Aegon the Conqueror had wed two women as well, one for love and one for duty, or so the stories had always said.

But I shall wed one for duty and one more for duty, Jon thought to himself wryly as he drank down the rest of his wine, uncertain whether he wanted to laugh or weep at the thought.

Chapter End Notes
Up next: A mystery POV - so mysterious, in fact, it even surprised me as an author, because I hadn't ever planned to write outside of the four main POVs. Get your guesses in now, folks! If you guess correctly, you get...literally nothing more than the satisfaction of being right. But that's better than nothing, I guess? ;P
Some of the (very heavily edited) dialogue is taken directly from *ASoS*, Jaime V. Betcha thought I was done stealing dialogue directly from GRRM, didn't you?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He squinted as the door to his cell opened, light from a lantern flashing bright against his eyes, temporarily blinding him. It was a routine that he’d repeated every day—had it been every day? he’d lost track—and yet he’d never learned to simply close his eyes against the blinding light, for it was the only chance he had to see another human face, even if it was the ugly little face of the turnkey who enjoyed nothing better than teasing and taunting him with all sorts of gruesome tales, so many and so varied that he wasn’t certain which were truth and which were lies. But even that was preferable to the days and days of nothingness in his windowless dark cell, with only his chains and bucket of waste to keep him company.

The only thing he knew for certain was that winter had come, for it had long ago become so cold and damp in his cell that he’d wondered if he might freeze to death until they gave him a few threadbare blankets, at least affirmation that his death would have been inconvenient for them. During the early days, he’d been able to hear the Tumblestone rushing outside the walls of his cell, but the river must have frozen many moons before, because it seemed a very long time since he had heard anything but silence, save for when someone came to offer him little, bland meals and clean out his bucket.

“Kingslayer.”

The word and the condescension were familiar, but the voice was not. Jaime blinked a few times, as if to will his eyes to adjust to the light, but they took their own sweet time as always. It seemed an eternity before his eyes were able to focus on the figure that stood near the doorway, garbed in fine wool of red and blue, not the familiar brown roughspun of the turnkey who had been Jaime’s only companion for longer than he could recall. Had it been two years already? Longer? He wasn’t entirely certain. The fine clothes told Jaime the man was a lord as well as his haughty voice did, and Jaime blinked again, fighting to focus on the face. The man had auburn hair and a full but carefully-trimmed beard to match.

Jaime was almost too shocked to speak.

“Lord Tully,” he greeted with a crooked smile. He attempted a tone of blasé unconcern, but his voice was a rough croak from disuse, and the effect wasn’t quite what he’d have hoped. If he was lucky, mayhaps the dumb trout had not noticed. “You should have told me you were coming. I would have changed into something more fitting to receive a lord of your station.”

Even a man as stupid as Edmure Tully could not have missed the sarcasm dripping from his tone, but the man gave no indication of it. They’d at least given Jaime warmer clothes when his cell had first begun to ache with biting cold, his old clothing having nearly rotted off his body by that point. But that had been many moons ago, an even those garments were in fairly abysmal shape, and the rest of him was no better. His beard was coarse and tangled, his hair falling down his back in greasy clumps, and he was so filthy now that he wasn’t even certain he could recall what it had been like to
“It’s your lucky day, Kingslayer,” Edmure Tully told him as though he had not spoken at all. “The King and Queen have requested your presence in King’s Landing.”

The words brought Jaime no comfort, nor did the smirk that rested upon Edmure Tully’s lips, for that told him clearly enough that the meeting with the King and the Queen would not be a pleasant one for him. The last he’d heard, Joffrey had been the king and poised to wed Sansa Stark, but if Edmure Tully was looking at him with that self-satisfied smirk, it was clear that that was no longer the case. The turnkey had told him more than once that Joffrey had died, though Jaime had never known whether he should believe the words. It had mattered little, in the end; when it had become clear that the news of Joffrey’s ostensible death hadn’t moved him, his jailers had stopped delighting in telling him the tale.

It was more than possible, now, that his entire family was dead, but he didn’t feel the pang in his chest he’d expected. The longer he’d been in Riverrun’s dungeons, the more and more he’d begun to suspect that he’d have to resign himself to that. And if Cersei was dead, he was ready enough to resign himself to his own death as well. There was a strange acceptance there, suddenly, to know Cersei was dead and he was soon to join her. He held up his shackled wrists, attached to his shackled ankles with a chain short enough that he could neither stand nor lie down in anything but the fetal position.

“Well you’ll need to take these off, unless you plan on carrying me all the way to King’s Landing.”

It was strangely easy to say the words, strangely easy with the calm acceptance of his fate. He resolved that he was not going to ask for information, that he wouldn’t give Edmure Tully the satisfaction.

Jaime watched with grim disinterest as the familiar turnkey appeared from behind Edmure with keys to unchain his wrists from his ankles, his ankles from the bolt into the wall, although they did not go so far as to unshackle his wrists or his ankles from each other. A half dozen armed men stood behind Edmure, Jaime realized as he shakily forced himself to his feet, needing to brace himself against the wall in order to stand on shaky legs. It was flattering that they still believed the guards and the shackles necessary when his muscle had wasted away to the point that he wasn’t certain he could fight off a kitten, not any longer. Mayhaps that was all he had left to cling onto, with his family surely slain, that even now he still inspired enough fear to warrant such a substantial guard.

The trip up the stairs from the dungeons was painful at best, but he ignored the sniggers from the Tully men as he stumbled up the stairs, both from the too-short length of chain that still bound his ankles and the jelly-like feeling of his legs, too long unused to be functional for much. Eventually, one of the men, whether through pity or mere annoyance, took him by the elbow and half-dragged him up the stairs.

Edmure Tully had come apparently only to gloat, because he allowed his men to deal with Jaime from there. Jaime’s head hurt as they made their way through the castle, the light and people and colors all too much for him all of a sudden. People stopped to stare as he passed, but Jaime held his head high, pretending he didn’t see them staring at the Kingslayer brought so low. If he was going to be brought to King’s Landing for Robb Stark to sit in judgment of him, he was going to do so with his head held high. If Cersei was dead, he was ready to join her without regret.

They allowed him to bathe after a fashion, but there was only so much that could be done about the filth in which he’d lived for so long. The servants who attended him, cutting away most of his tangled hair and wild beard, pointedly ignored his every question, but it was no less than what Jaime had come to expect.
He was surprised when a wrinkled, grey-haired maester came to attend him.

“And what has caused them to suddenly have such a deep concern for my physical well-being?” he inquired with a raised eyebrow as the old man began examining him, his too-skinny arms and protruding ribs. The maester did not answer him, but it made no matter; Jaime may not have had his brother’s intellect, but it was clear enough what the action signified. If they cared for his physical condition, it suggested that they meant to ransom him and not to kill him. And that meant that things may not be as dire as smug-faced Edmure Tully had led him to believe. Mayhaps even Cersei could be—but no, Jaime could not let himself hope.

And yet—

“Who is ransoming me?” he demanded, unable to keep the hope from bubbling up into his chest. Would his father have ever agreed to a truce with Robb Stark? Would Cersei? The former, somehow, seemed more likely than the latter. His father, at least, knew how to be pragmatic when it suited him. “My father?”

The old man stared at Jaime as though he was speaking some foreign tongue that the maester had never before heard, and Jaime had to fight not to scream. His voice was still hoarse, raspy from disuse, but surely he was understandable. He glared at the man, though he doubted it had any effect, not with him in chains.

“Did I stutter?” he spat out in annoyance, and that seemed to bring the maester back to himself.

“No, Ser,” the man responded gently, the title an unexpected courtesy, so much more than he’d received from anyone since the moment he’d been locked away in the dungeon cells. “I simply didn’t realize that you knew so little.”

The words said nothing, and yet they told Jaime everything. He felt his heart sink.

“My father is dead.” He mouthed the words slowly, feeling as though his mouth was filled with cotton, and his head as well. “Are they all dead? All my kin?”

The maester looked so sympathetic that Jaime wanted desperately to punch the old man in the face. “Your brother yet lives,” he said gently, and then his expression turned strange, uncomfortable. “And the children,” he added awkwardly.

Tyrion. The children. Which meant that Cersei was—

Jaime forced the thought away. “The children?” he echoed disbelievingly. “All of them?”

The maester looked wrong-footed again. “The younger ones,” he amended slowly. “They are awaiting your arrival in King’s Landing.”

That didn’t seem to make any sense, but Jaime did not care. The children were nothing, meant nothing without Cersei. Nothing had any meaning without Cersei. That Tyrion was alive should have felt more of a consolation than it did.

Jaime asked no more questions for the duration, finding that he had no particular interest in the answers. They gave him new clothes of fair enough quality, and most importantly they were clean, but suddenly all that meant very little. Just a turn of the moon prior, Jaime would have been thankful for even just that much, would have been thankful for a bath and for even this bit of freedom, but somehow it had been better when he hadn’t known all that had happened outside of his cell, when he’d only suspected.
They replaced his shackles near as soon as he’d bathed and been changed, bundled him unceremoniously into a wagon as though he were no more than a sack of grain. He saw neither hide nor hair of Edmure Tully; the man had indeed been down to his cell only to gloat, and that much had become perfectly plain.

The road was long and bumpy, much more than Jaime had ever realized during all the times he’d ridden the Kingsroad on horseback, for he had no means now of bracing himself against the clatter of the wagon’s wheels. Jaime saw little on his trip through the riverlands; they kept him shackled in the covered wagon most of the time, and some nights he even slept there, never seeing a single tree nor blade of grass. Every so often, they would offer him the dubious dignity of a tent for the night, though whether the thin pallet or the pile of blankets within the wagon was less comfortable, it was difficult to say. Twice he was even able to sleep in an inn, or what remained of one, both structures half burned and in obvious disrepair. The glimpses Jaime did get were more oft than not blackened remnants of burnt crops peeking through blankets of snow, burnt out homes, and dead trees, some of which had been touched by the same black remnants of flames.

Jaime was never able to suppress his shudder at the sight. Lannister men did this, an insidious voice inside his head reminded him. You killed Aerys to keep him from burning a city, and your father’s men burned an entire kingdom.

Jaime studiously ignored the voice, but he could not stop himself from looking whenever he had a chance, desperate to see something outside the darkness of his wagon as he was repulsed by what he saw. Some days they came across bands of wandering holy men, cutting down hanging corpses and digging graves for them, and once or twice their party had even stopped to help, Jaime remaining relegated to the wagon to hear their conversation through the walls. The smell of death and burnt flesh was everywhere, and most nights brought the forlorn howling of packs of roving wolves. Wolves seemed to populate every forest, an awful contagion that certainly made Jaime feel ill.

Somehow, through all of it, Jaime still knew when they were approaching King’s Landing. The city smelled of filth and shit from miles away; it was easy enough to forget when cloistered up in the castle, but any ride through Flea Bottom was a sharp reminder of how disgusting the city could be. But at least Jaime no longer smelled burnt flesh and burnt trees, and nothing of that made any sense at all. Was there no battle for King’s Landing? he wondered helplessly, suddenly wishing that he’d asked more questions. It couldn’t be that they had ceded the capital without battle, could it? Jaime scrambled around as best as he could within the confines of his shackles, hoping to get a glimpse through a crack, but what little he could see told him nothing, or near enough as made no matter.

They didn’t offer him the dignity of another bath or change of clothes once he arrived at the Red Keep, but Jaime had expected no less; Robb Stark was no more than a boy, like as not would have thrived on that sort of petty power play, to show everyone the spectacle of the Kingslayer in such a sorry state. Cersei may have been dead, as may his father, but if Jaime had anything left, it was his pride, and he let the guards march him to the all-too-familiar throne room with his head held high.

But nothing within the halls of the castle was what he’d expected. Armored guards wandered the halls, but some wore queer foreign armor and held long spears. Their spiked helms reminded Jaime of something, something he was certain he ought to have known, ought to have remembered, but for the moment his mind remained blank.

The court was present in full splendor in the hall, just as Jaime had expected; the better for everyone to see his disgrace. He refused to meet any of their eyes, refused to see any of them, as though if he ignored all their faces, they could not see him either. He kept his eyes studiously forward—and that was when he noticed them, the giant dragon skulls that newly adorned the hall. For a moment, Jaime felt as though he’d fallen into the past, as though he was seven and ten again. Torches flickered
behind the skull of Balerion the Black Dread, filling the dead holes where the dragon’s eyes had once been, as though the dragon lived once again.

The guards stopped Jaime at the base of the dais that held the throne, and Jaime finally looked up, eyes trailing to the figure seated upon it—a figure it was immediately apparent was not Robb Stark. Suddenly, inexplicably, Jaime’s heart began to beat faster.

The girl couldn’t have been more than six and ten, short, silvery hair pinned in small braids to her head. Her long, black dress spilled down the steps, intricate red embroidery decorating the seams, and if that was not enough indication of who the girl was, her violet eyes were certainly enough to cement the realization. The silence seemed suddenly very loud, and he could hear screams in his ears, the screams of Rhaella Targaryen as her husband the king had raped her and Jaime had stood vigil by the door, letting it happen. If he was not mistaken, that had in all likelihood been the night this girl had been conceived, in a bed of blood and pain.

“Ser Jaime Lannister,” began a herald who stood beside the base of the throne, “you stand in the presence of Daenerys Stormborn of the House Targaryen, the First of Her Name, the Unburnt, Queen of the Andals, the Rhoynar and the First Men, Queen of Meereen, Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea, Protector of the Realm, Lady Regnant of the Seven Kingdoms, Breaker of Chains and Mother of Dragons.”

Mother of Dragons. It had to be a figure of speech; he was certain of it. Except—except how did a girl who had fled across the Narrow Sea as an infant find herself upon the Iron Throne if not for dragons? Did it matter? He was to die here, surely; had it been Robb Stark on the Throne, there may have been some possibility that a misguided sense of honor would have spared Jaime’s life, but this girl, whose father he’d killed, would surely see him slain.

Jaime said nothing, for there was nothing to say, nothing that he could see that would spare his life. Not that he was even certain he would want his life spared.

“Ser Jaime,” she greeted, looking down upon him with a small smirk turning up the edges of her lips. “How nice to make your acquaintance at last.”

It was a jape, and surely so—and for once Jaime found himself without a single cutting response, his tongue having entirely failed him. Instead he stared up into the girl’s all-too-familiar face, remembering Aerys’ eyes as he’d died. Somehow, his silence seemed to please the girl, for the smile on her face grew even larger.

“Tell me about my father,” she said slowly, evenly, and she couldn’t have made a more surprising utterance if she’d tried. Whatever else it did, the words seemed to shock his silence out of him.

“Tell you about your father?” he echoed in stricken disbelief. “And what would you like to know about him, Your Grace? Would you like to hear the way that he roasted men in their own armor, the way their breastplates turned cherry red and filled this hall with the smell of burning flesh? Would you like to hear the way he made your mother cry as he raped her, as he covered her body with scratches and bite marks and made us stand outside and guard him?”

The Targaryen girl’s violet eyes were cold as steel, but the men and women around him had begun whispering to one another and shifting in discomfort. Even just out of the corner of his eyes, Jaime could see them squirming, desperate and uncomfortable. That gave Jaime a strange sort of thrill.

“Yes,” she agreed dispassionately. “That is what I would like to hear. Is that why you slew him?”
Jaime stared at the girl blankly, feeling suddenly wrong-footed. What was the meaning of this farce? Why did she want this to play out in front of all of the court? Was she mad, too? Would it be better to answer her or to refuse? Did any of it matter anymore after all these years?

Jaime frowned, then found his words.

“Aerys had been losing his grip on sanity for a many years, long before I ever came to be a member of his Kingsguard—or mayhaps he never had much of a grip on it at all,” Jaime said with a pointed look at the girl, “though many believe that Duskendale was what truly turned the tide with him. The war somehow seemed to make it worse. After the royal forces lost the Battle of the Bells, your father finally realized that Robert was no mere outlaw lord to be crushed at whim, that this was a war he might indeed lose.”

Jaime said the words slowly, carefully, looking up at the girl as if to gauge her reaction. Her face remained stony, expressionless.

“Prince Rhaegar returned from the south and persuaded his father to swallow his pride and summon my father. But no raven returned from Casterly Rock, and that made your father even more afraid.”

The room had turned quiet, every man and woman inside hanging onto his every word, and Jaime felt rage bubbling up in his chest. None of them had wanted to hear what he would have had to say all those years ago; they had all been quick to brand him Kingslayer and sneer at him behind his back, and now, suddenly, they wanted to listen? Well, Jaime would be sure to give them a tale they had no hope of ever putting out of their minds. The words began to tumble out of his mouth in an unstoppable flood.

“He saw traitors everywhere, and his Master of Whisperers was always there to point out any he might have missed. So His Grace commanded his alchemists to place caches of wildfire all over King’s Landing. Beneath Baelor’s Sept and the hovels of Flea Bottom, under stables and storehouses, at all seven gates, even in the cellars of the Red Keep itself.”

There was a new wave of gasps that made its way through the room, and Jaime relished in them, feeling a sense of desperate vindication. I saved you from Targaryen madness, he wanted to scream, and now you have welcomed it back into your halls.

“Everything was done in the utmost secrecy by a handful of master pyromancers. They did not even trust their own acolytes to help. The queen’s eyes had been closed for years, and Rhaegar was busy marshaling an army. But Aerys’s new mace-and-dagger Hand was not utterly stupid, and with the pyromancers coming and going night and day, he became suspicious. Chelsted, that was his name, Lord Chelsted.” Jaime paused, letting the memories form in his mind, the details half-forgotten but the fear and tension still as sharp as if it had just happened. “I’d thought the man craven, but the day he confronted Aerys he found some courage somewhere. He did all he could to dissuade him. He reasoned, he jested, he threatened, and finally he begged. When that failed he took off his chain of office and flung it down on the floor.”

Jaime looked up at the girl queen again, but her face remained motionless.

“Aerys burnt him alive for that, and hung his chain about the neck of Rossart, his favorite pyromancer. The man who had cooked Lord Rickard Stark in his own armor in this very room. And all the time, I stood by the foot of this very throne in my white plate, still as a corpse, guarding my liege and all his sweet secrets. So I heard it all. The traitors want my city, I heard him tell Rossart, but I’ll give them naught but ashes. Let Robert be king over charred bones and cooked meat. Aerys meant to have the greatest funeral pyre of them all. Though if truth be told, I do not believe he truly expected to die. Like Aerion Brightfire before him, your father thought the fire
would transform him…that he would rise again, reborn as a dragon, and turn all his enemies to ash.”

The whispers began again, breaking the rapt silence. Good, Jaime thought vindictively, let them remember the Targaryen madness. Even not knowing the full extent of it, it seemed unbelievable that so many could have forgotten Aerys’ reign of terror when not even twenty years had passed since his death. If nothing else, they’d certainly had no difficulty remembering Jaime’s own part in it.

“Ned Stark was racing south with Robert’s van, but my father’s forces reached the city first. Pycelle convinced the king that his Warden of the West had come to defend him, so he opened the gates. It fell to me to hold the Red Keep, but I knew we were lost. I sent to Aerys asking his leave to make terms. My man came back with a royal command. ‘Bring me your father’s head, if you are no traitor.’ Aerys would have no yielding. Lord Rossart was with him, my messenger said. I knew what that meant.

“When I came on Rossart, he was dressed as a common man-at-arms, hurrying to a postern gate. I slew him first. Then I slew Aerys, before he could find someone else to carry his message to the pyromancers. Days later, I hunted down the others and slew them as well. Belis offered me gold, and Garigus wept for mercy. Well, a sword’s more merciful than fire, but I don’t think Garigus much appreciated the kindness I showed him.”

Jaime gave the girl a smirk, hoping that it would unsettle her, but she seemed entirely immune. She let the silence linger on for a beat too long.

“Do you recall where this wildfire was concealed?” she asked finally, when she seemed to realize that he had finished his tale. Jaime did, and intimately, remembered watching Aerys and Rossart pour over maps of where Aerys wished to have the caches placed. Many a time he’d thought to find the stuff and dispose of it himself, but how did one dispose of wildfire? He dared not ask a pyromancer, for they were a vicious and untrustworthy lot; if Aerys’s reign had taught him nothing else, it was that.

“Why?” he hissed angrily. “Would you like to use them yourself, just like your father?”

The girl did not take the bait as he might have hoped. “I should like to have it destroyed, or at least moved somewhere where it could do less damage to the city if it was inadvertently set off,” she told him evenly. “You would have my sincerest gratitude for the help you have rendered in saving the city once again.”

That was certainly not the response Jaime had expected, and it left him scrambling for words for a few seconds.

“Enough to grant me my life?” he finally ventured, if only to see if he could. She smiled again slowly, coldly.

“Your life is yours, Ser,” she told him evenly. “Your brother has already paid your ransom, and handsomely.”

Suddenly, Jaime was acutely aware as to why she was doing this so openly, so visibly. She was granting him very public mercy, and if he refused to help her, the whole of the realm would hold him responsible for any and all ills, most especially the death of any man to wildfire.

And yet the Targaryen girl was not finished.

“You are to return to Casterly Rock with your two remaining children under the following
conditions: you are not permitted to hold lands or titles, nor are you permitted to leave the westerlands. None of you shall be allowed to marry or sire children without my leave.” Daenerys Targaryen paused, a self-satisfied smile touching the corners of her lips. “I shall not suffer any more pretenders to my throne.”

It was only with those words that the contours of what had happened truly began to strike him; if Tyrion had ransomed him, if his father had perished, then that made Tyrion the Lord of Casterly Rock. He wondered how much his father would hate that, for as long as Jaime had been a member of the Kingsguard, his father had been trying to get him to leave it, to take his place as Tywin’s heir. Never had his father truly believed that Tyrion should sit his seat one day.

“You aren’t afraid that my presence at the Rock will undermine my brother’s rule there?” Jaime ventured quietly, once the shock had worn off.

It wasn’t an unreasonable concern; declared criminal or not, Jaime was still Tywin Lannister’s eldest son, and his son who looked the part of a high lord much more than his dwarf brother did. There would be those who would seek to overthrow Tyrion and install Jaime in what they saw as his rightful place, even if Jaime had no interest in sitting his father’s seat.

The girl seemed entirely unconcerned by the prospect.

“If he can’t bring his bannermen to heel, I’m more than happy to raise another westerman to his seat instead and execute the whole lot of you,” she said in an offhand manner, as if she had no doubt she could do just that, and with ease. “How he accomplishes it is none of my concern, but in the interest of the continued survival of you and your children, I’d suggest you do everything you can to help him with that task.”

Jaime wondered if the girl believed the children were a way to sway him, if she thought he had one whit of concern for them with Cersei dead in the ground. They were sweet enough children, Tommen and Myrcella, but they had never truly been his, even if they’d been born of his seed. Cersei had seen to that. And yet, they were all he had left of her now, the last living bit of the only woman he’d ever loved. And Tyrion…

Jaime had knelt before a king and been forgiven for his crimes once before; surely, for their sake, he could do it again. Slowly, laboriously, and horribly encumbered by his shackles, Jaime Lannister lowered himself to his knees before the Iron Throne.

“I shall help you find and destroy the caches of wildfire, Your Grace,” he said with his best mask of contrition. And if she set them off instead, it made no matter; Jaime had saved King’s Landing once from a danger they hadn’t known, but this time they were walking willingly into the arms of a Targaryen. If they were so cavalier about it, then Jaime would be glad to let them all burn.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon XIII, in which Jon Snow obviously has a very enjoyable time at the large spectacle that is his southron wedding.
Margaery Tyrell was radiant on the day of their wedding, precisely the sort of bride any man might have hoped for. Her brown curls were gathered into a sweeping style that piled atop her head and cascaded down her back both, with a few curls left free to frame the sides of her pale face. Her gown was long and gold and patterned with brocade roses and small accents of green around the hem and the bodice, which served admirably to emphasize the small swell of her breasts.

But everything about this wedding was larger and grander than anything Jon would have been able to conjure up even in his wildest imaginings. Jon had never even entered a sept before the day of his wedding, not even the tiny one that had stood within the walls of Winterfell, and the Great Sept of Baelor was a grand structure down to the smallest of corners. The majestic, sweeping walls of white marble and the crystal-topped towers gave way inside to windows and hanging balls of colored, leaded glass. In a godswood, they needed nothing more than a single heart tree for their prayers, but the sept had everything, marble and gold and crystal, statues and carvings and picture windows of pigmented beveled glass. His wedding to Daenerys had been easier to take somehow, a muted affair it had been by necessity and furthermore encompassed within the familiar trappings of Winterfell.

Despite the winter, it seemed that half the nobles in the neighboring kingdoms had found a way to make it to the capital for the festivities, to see the wedding or in hopes of catching a glimpse of their dragons, Jon was not certain. With the eyes of half the realm upon him, it was easy to long for the time when he’d been called bastard, when he’d been able to be invisible and unremarkable, though as a boy, he’d wished to be anything but.

Margaery Tyrell was beautiful and elegant and everything a man could have asked for in a wife, and yet still nothing felt right, like everything was some mummer’s show, everything from the way Margaery walked to the way she smiled shyly at him when she stepped before him to the way her cheeks flushed slightly when the septon bid them to kiss. She fluttered around their wedding feast making easy conversation with everyone, even Aegon with his sullen expression and the stony silence at his table. Aegon, who had arrived to the capital near a week before the wedding and who Jon had done his best to avoid, not knowing how to pretend to be a brother to a boy he knew was no relation of his, a boy who could never be Robb or Bran or Rickon or even little Ned, even if they had shared the same blood. He’d kept every interaction with Aegon as short as he could manage, somehow afraid that even a few minutes in Aegon’s presence would be enough to betray everything he knew, as if Aegon would be able to detect the difference between suspicion and certainty simply by looking into his eyes.

Margaery had no such misgivings, and she mingled with Aegon as well as she did with her father’s own bannermen. The whole business seemed to amuse Daenerys greatly, and she waited until one of the breaks during which Margaery had left the high table to lean over to speak quietly in Jon’s ear. “You’d do well to keep her happy,” she whispered with a small smile. “She could be a great asset to us.”

Jon shot Daenerys an unamused look. It wasn’t that she was wrong, not at all; Margaery had been in the capital for many moons, knew well the politics of the court at King’s Landing, a quagmire that held no particular appeal for Jon. But something about the way that Daenerys said it was incredibly off-putting; he scarce knew the girl and had no particular love for her, but Daenerys spoke of her as
though she were no more than a game piece to be played across the board.

“You do know that she is a person and not just a political tool for you to take advantage of until she’s outlived her usefulness, don’t you?” he asked in exasperation. Dany gave him an unimpressed look in return, as if to say, Is she?

And that, too, was not wrong. Everything about Margaery Tyrell seemed carefully constructed, from her meticulously set curls to her pleasing manner to the way her every word seemed rehearsed, as though she’d practiced it half a hundred times in front of a mirror before she ever spoke it in public. Margaery Tyrell was pleasing because Margaery Tyrell had been taught to be pleasing, and nothing about that sat right with Jon.

One for duty and one more for duty, Jon thought again as he watched Margaery tip her head back in a gentle, amused laugh at something that had been said to her, covering her mouth with ladylike concern.

There seemed no way to avoid the bedding ceremony this time, much as Jon would have liked to do so. He hated everything about it, couldn’t handle all the unfamiliar hands brushing across his bare flesh, couldn’t stand the way the girls gasped and whispered about his scars and the great victories he must have won to get them. If only they’d known that few of his scars had been earned in great victories, or even victories at all. Most had been won by betrayals this way and that, were shame and not honor, disgrace and not triumph.

It was mayhaps even more aggravating that from what Jon could see, Margaery seemed to take the whole thing in stride, flushing prettily and yet not shrinking away, giggling and providing shy, half-hearted ripostes in response to the men’s bawdy jests. It seemed artificial as the rest of her, manufactured demure innocence so convincing that somehow, the men relented to allow her to remain in her shift rather than disrobing her completely. It did little to conceal her, truly, the fabric sheer enough that he could see every inch of her anyway. She was not displeasing to look at, and yet the sight of her once they’d been shuffled unceremoniously into the bedchamber left a sour taste in his mouth. The guests had not gone so far as to bundle them beneath the blankets, which was mayhaps a blessing in its own way, for the first thing Jon did upon the door closing behind them was to pour himself a cup of wine. Almost as an afterthought, he poured a second one for Margaery, reaching out to hand it to her. She accepted the cup with a slight dip of her head.

“Thank you,” she said sweetly, taking a tiny sip, all courtesy. And yet when Jon looked into her brown eyes, they were searching his, sharp and calculating, as if trying to reason out the best way to approach him. When she noticed him watching her in return, she flushed and made a move to cover herself with her arms. Almost before he realized what he was doing, Jon reached forward and caught her arm, and Margaery looked up at him in confused surprise. Jon cleared his throat, suddenly embarrassed.

“My lady,” he began, but that sounded not quite right. She was his wife now, or nearly so; those pleasantries were too much for their bedchamber. He tried again. “Margaery. Stop.”

Margaery’s brow furrowed in obvious confusion, her eyes searching his face once more, as if looking for a clue as to what he wanted. “Stop…?” she ventured helplessly, and Jon sighed, carefully releasing her arm and giving her an apologetic look, trying to gather his thoughts into words.

“I don’t care if you’re a maiden or not,” he told her finally, bluntly. “I don’t need you to act like some demure, nervous bride—not unless that’s who you truly are. Politics is already full of so many lies and deceptions and people wearing masks that they think you want to see. I won’t have it in my own marriage bed. Please.”
It was plain from Margaery’s expression that he’d surprised her, and it was the realest thing Jon had seen from her since the first day she’d arrived back in the capital and Daenerys had managed to unsettle her with unexpected questions and requests. It was the first time in weeks that Jon felt he was seeing something of the truth of who Margaery Tyrell might be, beneath all the carefully-choreographed pleasantries. Jon had no idea who his new wife was, despite dozens of shared meals and walks around the courtyard when the weather had not been too awful. He could not say, still, whether he would like his new wife, but he was determined that he would at least know her.

After a lengthy pause, Margaery appeared to come to some sort of conclusion, and everything about her seemed to change all of a sudden, from the set of her shoulders to the expression on her face, and Jon felt the knot in his chest loosen for the first time in longer than he could remember.

“I’ve been taught to wear a mask all my life, Your Grace,” she told him honestly, though a tiny smile quirked the edge of her mouth as she spoke, as if to soften the impact of her words. “All highborn ladies are. I’m afraid it won’t be such a simple thing to stop.”

The honesty was somehow unexpected after everything, though the words were not the most reassuring. Margaery put down her cup on the table, taking a step toward him, and for the first time since they’d entered the room, Jon was acutely aware of the fact that he was entirely unclothed and she was not. She placed a hand against the exposed skin of his chest, her earlier shyness having fled completely.

“But we’re also taught to please and obey our husbands,” she told him evenly, her serious tone belied by her almost mischievous expression, “so I vow to do my best.”

The room felt hot all of a sudden, almost cloyingly so.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, slightly breathless. “To please your husband?”

Margaery’s smile grew. “Well, I should hope that my husband would please me in return.”

Despite everything, Jon found himself laughing, for outside of the room such a pronouncement would have been near unheard of, far too controversial an utterance for a proper court lady, let alone a queen. And yet they sounded not at all out of place from Margaery’s lips, good-natured and playful and so very reassuring.

“Mayhaps I need someone to give me a reason to,” he admitted after a moment, and Margaery raised her eyebrow and gave him a pointed look, as if to say, What about Daenerys? Jon’s marriage to his aunt had given him many things, but a reason to laugh had rarely been one of them. Margaery seemed to have the sense not to give the sentiment voice.

“I shall do my best, then,” she said instead, and then she was kissing him. Margaery’s lips were warm and soft, softer than they had any right to be with the biting cold outside. They were smooth against his own chapped ones, gentle yet forceful. Her mouth tasted of honey and candied fruits and all the sweets he’d scarce touched at the feast, and suddenly he felt as though he was experiencing
the whole of it all over again through her body, and the second time was much more enjoyable than the first had been.

Maiden or no, it was clear enough that this was not Margaery’s first time sharing a kiss with another, and she had the confidence to lead him, reaching up and cupping his cheek with her small, soft hand as she stepped closer so that their bodies were ever-so-slightly touching. Jon could feel the brush of her gauzy shift against his skin, could feel the radiating warmth of her body against his. Whatever misgivings Jon may have had about the marriage, about love and duty and obligation, his body began to stir, responding to her warmth and her kisses. When she finally pulled back, her lips were pink and swollen, and the slight flush to her cheeks was genuine.

“Shall we retire to bed?” she inquired with an inviting expression, and it was all Jon could do to nod.

Margaery plucked the cup of wine from his grasp and placed it on the table next to hers before grasping him by the hand, her touch light and coaxing. She led him toward the bed and he followed until they were both flat upon the mattress, and then they were kissing again. It was different than any other encounter Jon had ever had, somehow; it lacked the newness, the nervous excitement of his time with Ygritte, the desperate anger of his encounter with Satin, and even the demanding hedonism of his marriage to Daenerys. Their kisses were soft and unhurried, the desire building in a slow, steady tempo until Jon craved more than just her lips.

Jon broke their kiss to remove Margaery’s shift at last, and she was before him in all her glory, the expanses of creamy pale skin and the gentle swell of her small but shapely breasts, accented by the dark pink blush of her nipples. Jon sat up and pulled Margaery into his lap, his mouth finding its way to the pink of her nipple, taking one of them into his mouth. Margaery released a soft murmur of appreciation, canting her hips against him, and he could feel the moist warmth of her cunt against his cock. He was acutely aware of how easily he could slide himself inside her slick heat, but he suddenly wanted more than that, wanted to taste her against his tongue, wanted to feel her shudder under his ministrations. And so he laid back and guided her until she was straddling his face, until his tongue could find the slickness between her legs.

“Oh,” Margaery gasped, gripping onto the headboard as if to keep herself from collapsing into a heap upon the bed sheets. The musky smell of her was in Jon’s nostrils, the heady taste of her against his tongue as he explored her with his mouth, his heart beating too-loud in his ears. He gripped her around the hips, and it took her only the briefest of moments to get the message, shifting her body until his tongue was touching her precisely how she liked. There was no shyness about her, then, as she ground her hips against his mouth, gripping the headboard and moaning with sweet abandon. Her every moan made Jon’s cock throb harder, and there was more than one moment in which he wondered whether he might spill himself right then, untouched.

And then Margaery was moaning more loudly and gripping the headboard so tightly her knuckles had gone white, her cunt clenching around him. Jon could scarce make himself wait until her climax had passed before he slid out from under her, until he was sitting and she was in his lap once more, and he gripped her hips and pulled her down onto his cock. He slid inside her easily, and she was slick and warm and inviting as she whimpered and buried her face against his neck, pliant as he thrust up into her body from below. She gripped him tightly around the neck, fighting to catch her breath for a long minute before she seemed to come back to herself and began moving her hips against his.

It took a minute and a few tries before they were able to coordinate their movements, and then Margaery was kissing him again, heedless of the way his lips and his chin were slick with her juices. And Jon found himself helpless beneath her mouth, the confident feeling of her lips moving
against his, of her hips grinding out a provocative rhythm against him until he spilled his seed inside of her.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Jon XIV, in which I write a trashy, time-skip epilogue because I'm just that kind of basic gal.
Epilogue: Jon XIV

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon woke to a mouth around his cock. The silk sheets were cool and slippery against his naked skin, the breeze flowing in through the bank of open windows, bringing with it the soft aroma of flowers and the song of the birds. The light of the sun streamed in, warming his cheeks and pressing against his eyelids, as if trying to urge him to open his eyes.

But Jon refused the sun’s summons, preferring to remain where he was, in the hazy world between sleep and wakefulness. The moment was too perfect to break, and Jon languished in it, languished in the familiar tongue tracing teasing patterns along his flesh, the intent to titillate and tease. It would not bring him to his peak, and she knew it, her movements feather-light and not enough to satiate. Even on a beautiful spring morning such as this, Jon’s patience would only last so long, and she knew that too.

Eventually, he opened his eyes. His wife was uncovered and naked as her nameday, not an ounce of modesty in her as the silk sheets spilled half off the bed. Her chestnut curls fell into a tumble against his thigh, and her small, smooth hand curled around the base of him, tongue dancing little patterns upon his hardness. Jon tugged at Margaery’s hair lightly, gently, and she released him from her mouth immediately, a wicked smile upon her lips as she turned her eyes to him. Jon took her by the hand and pulled her up to the head of the bed, flipping them over so he was atop her.

Margaery laughed, a soft, musical sound and parted her legs without a word from him, joining her ankles behind his back and all but pulling him inside her. She was still slick from when they’d last made love just hours before, and he slid inside her body easily, Margaery moaning unselfconsciously as he seated himself within her. And then they were kissing, mouths cottony from sleep, but neither of them cared, hadn’t in a very long time. His fingers skimmed her belly, where the once smooth skin was now lined with the marks she’d gotten from carrying their babes, and she laughed against his mouth, ticklish.

It didn’t take long before the leisurely pace was abandoned, for he was hard and aching and she seemed no less eager, rolling her hips against him to urge him on. Beads of sweat gathered between their joined bodies, until they were both slick with it, slipping against each other and sticking to the smoothness of the bed sheets. Their lovemaking was passionate, frenzied, and it wasn’t long before he was spilling himself inside of her, gasping and panting against her lips.

He rested his face in the crook of her neck for a long minute, both of them catching their breaths, before he pulled back and placed a gentle kiss against her lips.

“Good morning,” he breathed softly, his voice still rough and groggy from sleep. She smiled, sinking back into the sheets and stretching her arms above her head.

“Good morning,” she returned, releasing a gentle noise as he pulled away from her, rolling over to rest his head upon the pillow beside her. Already, the gentle breeze from outside was cooling the sweat that had beaded against his skin, and Jon turned his head to stare at the latticework of hanging vines and flowers that stood outside the bank of windows. Purples and pinks and golds peeked through the green leaves, and beyond the latticework of foliage were long, rolling fields of green grass and even more blooming flowers. Margaery rolled onto her side and pressed her hand against his chest, carefully avoiding the scars that crisscrossed it. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”
It was, in its own way, but Jon could not help but think that he missed the blankets of pristine snow that would cover the landscape in the mornings before horses and men would trod upon it, the clusters of grey-blue clouds hovering heavy in the sky. Highgarden in the full splendor of spring certainly was a sight to behold, and Margaery seemed to come alive within it even more than she ever had in King’s Landing. But it was his wife’s home and not his, and still he could not feel at home within it.

And yet they needed Highgarden as much as they needed spring, needed the food that came from both. The winter had been long, too long after the war that had ravaged so much of the countryside. Many had died in the throes of winter, and Jon knew well enough that without the Reach, the casualties would have been even worse.

Jon hummed in vague agreement and pulled Margaery in for another kiss, wrapping his arm around her and holding her there against him. She sighed in contentment and laid her head against his chest.

“Are you ready?” she asked him after a few minutes of silence, broken only by the birdsong. Jon snorted.

“Ready for what? Sansa and Willas are the ones who are to wed today, not us.”

Margaery smiled and turned over onto her stomach, regarding him with a raised eyebrow. “Yes, they are,” she agreed gently. “But you despise these things.”

Jon did, and both his wives well knew it. After two weddings of his own and half a hundred banquets in the past few years, Jon had only grown to despise the whole practice even more than he ever had. Winter and limited food had long kept most of the ceremonies at bay, but it seemed that the moment spring had begun to come, there had been a feast and festival for even the flimsiest of occasions, and Jon had never felt at home in any of them. Margaery and Daenerys both thrived in the midst of a social gathering, but even after so many years sitting the Iron Throne, Jon still felt an outsider, had never gotten used to the superficial platitudes nearly every court event seemed to require. Jon had found it easier to fly Rhaegal through blizzards carrying shipments of food when the roads had been impassible than he did to exchange pleasantries with southron lords at a feast, even taking into account how much he had to soothe the dragon’s temper at being forced to fly through the snow carrying heavy loads.

It had been different in the north, he was certain—or mayhaps it had only seemed so, when he’d been a child and Lord Stark had been the one managing all the politics. But Robb was Lord Stark now, with a wife and three boys of his own, and the north of Jon’s childhood might well have been a dream of another man entirely.

“It’s nice to see my family,” Jon conceded finally, and Margaery gave him a wry look, not at all offended by his lack of praise for her home. It was one of the things that Jon had quickly learned to value in his second wife; for all that she was a master of artifice in public, she could be incredibly frank in private and that encouraged him to be as well.

“Yes, did your brother tell you that Lady Roslin is with child again?” she asked, reaching past him to the plate of fruit that had been left on the table from the previous night. She popped a grape into her mouth. “We must catch up.”

Jon scarce managed to avoid rolling his eyes. “It’s not a race,” he reminded her with a raised eyebrow, and Margaery grinned at him again, licking a stray bit of juice off her finger.

“You should tell that to Rickon. He maintains that we’ve cheated.”
Jon snorted and did roll his eyes that time; Rickon was two and ten already and heavily maintained that he detested being dragged south with the Stark wedding party, that he’d rather have remained behind in Winterfell with Arya and Bran. It had been Lady Catelyn’s decision to bring Rickon south with them for the wedding, as far as Jon could tell, but he wasn’t certain if her attempts to find her son a betrothal in the south would bear fruit. She’d be more like to find a betrothal for little Ned, though he was only eight, for his personality made a much more pleasing match that a southron lord might envision for his daughter. Rickon would be better suited to a woman of the free folk, if he wed at all, but somehow Jon doubted that Lady Catelyn would even suffer such an idea.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“How is it that we cheated, precisely?” Jon asked skeptically. Margaery reached over him again and picked another grape off the bunch.

“I didn’t have a choice,” she had hissed to him after her third cup of ale. “They arranged a marriage for me to some stupid Frey boy and never once asked me what I wanted.”

Jon had wished that he could have said something to console his sister, but in the end, she had had the right of it. It had turned out that being king meant little and less in the end, when he hadn’t even been able to protect his sister from a marriage she desperately hadn’t wanted. But there had been enough grumbling from the other kingdoms already that Jon had been overly solicitous of the north, with his northern looks and northern gods, and the prolonged winter had only frayed their tempers even worse, as though the north had been responsible for inflicting the weather upon them. Jon sometimes thought that Margaery was the only one holding the southron lords in check, for she often accomplished more diplomacy over the course of dinner than Jon and Daenerys could accomplish in a year—Margaery, and the ever-present threat of the dragons.

Robb had been able to make Lord Frey agree to send his son to Winterfell rather than to make Arya live at the Twins, but the rest had all been politics, and it seemed that even high lords and kings could not eschew all politics simply because they desired it. Winterfell gave Arya the upper hand, allowed her to avoid her husband more oft than not, but it was a small consolation when her mother seemed intent to let Bran do whatever he desired. And yet, Jon could not say he would be shocked if they found Elmar Frey dead in some mysterious accident soon or late, and he still could not say for certain whether their marriage had ever been consummated.

The door opened suddenly and without warning, and Jon grasped for the discarded sheet, pulling it up to cover his nakedness. He knew already who it would be, for no one else at Highgarden would be presumptuous enough to walk into their bedchamber without even a knock. And within seconds, Jon heard the expected patter of tiny, running feet, and twin heads of brown curls appeared at the edge of the bed. Margaery stood up and fetched a robe, watching as Daeron climbed atop the bed before reaching down to help his twin sister. Margaery returned as their eldest son joined the twins
Daenerys stood by the door, already dressed for the day in a long, clinging gown of silk and samite. Her silver hair now fell down nearly to her waist, and some maid had already had it arranged in an intricate pattern of braids for the wedding. She looked beautiful, every bit the composed queen, a stark contrast to Margaery in her robe with her tousled curls.

Jon looked at Daenerys where she stood by the door, but she just shook her head, quirking it in Aemon’s direction where he sat, his expression sullen.

Aemon had been their firstborn and in some ways the most contentious of their children; Jon’s suggestion that they name their son Eddard had not gotten far with Daenerys, who had insisted that their heir must bear a traditional Targaryen name. It was only after much consternation that they’d eventually agreed upon Aemon. The twins had come two years later, all Tyrell curls and sunny dispositions, even when they’d been no more than babes. That they too would receive Valyrian names had been without question.

“What’s wrong, sweetling?” Margaery asked, reaching over to ruffle Aemon’s dark curls. Aemon moved away from Margaery’s touch; six years old and already he was too old for his mother’s affections. He crossed his arms across his chest.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Margaery asked, reaching over to ruffle Aemon’s dark curls. Aemon moved away from Margaery’s touch; six years old and already he was too old for his mother’s affections. He crossed his arms across his chest.

“Do I really have to wed Aemma?” he asked finally, his expression petulant. When Jon met Daenerys’ gaze, she raised an eyebrow at him, as if to say, He got this from you.

There had been some years during which Jon had begun to believe they may never have to honor the betrothal Daenerys had made before Aemon had even been born. Margaery had given birth to all three of their children before they’d even gotten word that Arianne had been with child, and she’d been so ill during most of it that the maesters had been half-convinced that the child may never live to be born. Aemma had lived, but barely, had been so tiny and pale when she’d been born that many had whispered that she wouldn’t survive her first year. The girl had survived, but it had been three years and there was no word of a second babe from them, no indication that Arianne would ever bear a son to inherit Storm’s End. There were whispers of discord in their marriage, but Jon cared little and less for court gossip as long as the truth of Aegon’s parentage did not come out.

And yet that, too, was a close thing. The children Margaery had born Jon had no hint of Targaryen in their looks; the twins were all messy brown curls and wide brown eyes and Aemon bore Jon’s own dark hair and dark eyes, though Daenerys sometimes swore Aemon’s eyes looked indigo in a certain light. But they had placed a dragon’s egg in each of their cradles, as was Targaryen tradition, and all the eggs had thus far hatched. Aemon had already mounted his dragon, a red and grey beast he’d named Arghurys, and thus no one dared doubt the truth of his lineage or the strength of his dragon blood. But the egg they’d placed in Aemma’s cradle had never hatched, and though she’d inherited Aegon’s violet eyes and silver hair, the whispers followed them all through court every time they visited from Storm’s End.

“I hope you don’t speak that way in front of Aemma,” Margaery said to their son, her voice all sweet scolding. “You’ll make her feel badly if you do.”

Aemon might have been sullen and serious, even at six, but he’d never been cruel. He lowered his eyes at his mother’s words, ashamed.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” he said immediately, looking abashed that he’d even asked the question. Margaery glanced at Jon over Aemon’s head, giving him a conspiratorial smile.

“And anyway, why shouldn’t you want to marry Aemma?” she pressed instead, barely fighting back
a smile that threatened to sneak forth. “She’s very beautiful. If she doesn’t believe you’re serious, she’ll let someone else snatch her up first.”

Aemma was all of three years old, so Jon very much doubted that she would let herself be seduced by some other boy, but Aemon’s dark eyes widened in shocked offense.

“She wouldn’t!” he protested, positively scandalized. Even Jon had to fight back a laugh then.

“Of course she would,” Margery told their son with absolute seriousness. “She’ll be one of the most beautiful ladies in all the realm once she’s grown, just as beautiful as Dany. Hundreds of men will come seeking her hand if you tell her you don’t want to marry her. Isn’t that right?”

Aemon turned his eyes to Jon, as though begging his father to tell him that what his mother had said was not true. It was all Jon could do to keep a straight face. “Thousands,” he managed to confirm with a solemn nod, and Aemon’s expression became even more horrified.

“But she’s mine!”

Margaery looked very self-satisfied. “I thought you didn’t want to marry her,” she remarked blithely, and Aemon blinked, his dark eyes deep and thoughtful and suddenly more mature than his six years.

“But…one day I’ll be king, right?” he asked finally, knowingly. Margaery gave him a soft look.

“That’s right, sweetling,” she agreed. “And when you’re king, the people will be counting on you to make sure the realm is safe and peaceful. And if you want to make sure it’s peaceful even after you’re gone, you’ll need to make sure there’s someone to be king after you, won’t you? To do that, you’ll need to get married—and if you want Aemma to marry you, you need to treat her kindly and with courtesy.”

Aemon sat back and pursed his lips, clearly mulling over his mother’s proclamations. The twins seemed not at all touched by the profound discussion.

“Who am I going to wed?” Daena demanded with earnest eyes. Margaery and Daenerys both opened their mouths to answer the question at once, and so Jon spoke up before either of them had a chance.

“We haven’t decided yet,” he told her gently, reaching out to grasp her hand and giving both his wives a sharp look, as if daring either of them to say anything different. In truth, the twins had been somewhat of a controversial topic between the three of them, too, for Dany thought it best they wed each other for the sake of the bloodline, and Margaery wanted them both to marry into prominent families for the alliances. If Jon had had his way, both the twins would be able to marry for love, but he’d long learned that it was rare that he ever got his way—somehow even rarer an occasion now that he was King than it ever had been before.

Margaery gave Jon an unamused look before turning back to Aemon. “Why don’t you take your brother and sister and find Aemma then, so you can tell her that her dress for the wedding is pretty?” she probed. Aemon looked perplexed by the suggestion.

“What if her dress isn’t pretty?” he asked seriously, and even Daenerys hid a smile behind her hand.

“Tell her anyway,” Jon suggested helpfully. “Girls appreciate that sort of thing.”

Aemon looked thoughtful for a long minute before he nodded, jumping off the bed and helping his brother and sister down. Dany made sure to send them with their nurse before coming back into the room and closing the door, walking over to sit in the spot at the edge of the bed that Aemon had
vacated.

“That was deftly handled,” she said coolly, smoothing out her dress across her lap once she sat. “I thought we might have a full meltdown.”

That explained, then, why Daenerys had brought the children in, for Margaery had always been quicker to talk one of them out of a temper tantrum than either he or Dany were. Margaery had an easy way with children that neither of them quite shared, but it was rare for Dany to admit she needed anything from Margaery.

Jon’s two wives were forever at odds, had been since near the moment that Jon and Margaery had been wed. Daenerys had arranged the wedding, and yet that did not mean that she had any love for the other woman. She pushed Jon to Margaery’s bed as often as she was angry he didn’t share hers, her desire for more heirs ever weighing against her feelings of anger and jealousy. What made it all worse was when Daenerys had fallen with child before Margaery ever had; they’d thought it a miracle at first, had thought that all of Daenerys’ fears about her barren womb had been wrong. And yet she had lost that child in the womb, and again the second. The third she’d carried to term only for the boy to be stillborn, but the timing had been right for Dany to nurse the twins from her own breast, a task Margaery preferred to leave to a wet nurse. Jon had begged Dany to stop trying, but even the barest of hope seemed to outweigh the horrible consequences, and she’d refused to give up, even after two more babes lost after fewer than three moons in the womb.

“Thank you,” Margaery said brightly, admirably pretending that she heard none of the anger and resentment that rested beneath Daenerys’ words. Margaery had been good at that from the start, never missing anyone’s intentions but playing at such sweetness that most did not see the intelligence that lay beneath. Daenerys knew it, and yet Margaery’s stubborn kindness made it more difficult for Daenerys to pick a fight, even when she clearly wanted to do so. It had always been that way with Margaery, since near the moment they’d been wed; Margaery had always found a way to make everything so easy for him, so easy for everyone around her. She had always made it easy to love her, easy to enjoy her presence, whilst things with Daenerys were ever more of a struggle.

Daenerys released a noncommittal hum and then reached forward, parting the folds of Margaery’s robe and reaching beneath without even the barest request for permission. Jon watched in confusion as she cupped Margaery’s breast beneath her robe.

“Have you bled yet?” Daenerys asked without preamble, and Jon felt his breath stop in his chest, having not even realized that was a possibility. It had been four years since the twins, and Jon had been all but convinced that there would not be another child. Three was a good number, he’d told himself time and again, and yet he hadn’t realized until that moment how overjoyed he’d have been for another babe. He’d never thought to be a father, never realized how much he’d love his children until they were there, beautiful and perfect in his arms.

“Not yet, no,” Margaery confirmed, no indication in her tone that she found Daenerys’ hand on her breast anything out of the ordinary. Jon felt his heart flutter.

“Another babe?” he couldn’t help but ask, breathless. Margaery had made a jape about it just minutes before, but he hadn’t thought—

Margaery reached over and clasped his hand in hers. “It’s too early to tell, my love,” she told him with a gentle squeeze of his hand, her expression all soft apology.

And with that, Jon’s moment of glee caught in his throat, replaced by a swell of dread. He’d felt it when Aemon had been born, and again with the twins, remembered where all this had started. These were not simply children Dany had asked him to sire, but weapons against the Others;
the Targaryens and their dragons were the last bastion against the dead, for so few left in the world knew the true scope of the threat, and even fewer of them believed. Mayhaps it would not be their children who fought the next war, but it would be their children, or their children after them.

I love my children, Jon tried to assure himself, but the words felt empty and hollow in his head, for they were all still too young and innocent to know their true purpose in the wars that were to come. Someday he would have to tell them, and how would he do that? How would he tell them they were weapon as much as person, that they’d have to jealously guard dragons and power in order to keep humanity from destruction, whether in fifty years or five thousand? How was he to tell them that they could not make the same mistakes of their forebears, to forget the truth of the threat and destroy their own, letting dragons fade from the world?

Winter is coming, the voice of Eddard Stark reminded him. And they know nothing, said Ygritte’s voice in rejoinder, and Jon Snow shivered in memory of the biting cold.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all of you who have followed this story, which was a lengthier and more epic fanfiction than I ever thought I had in me. All of your interesting discussions, insights, and perspectives have been a delight for me in posting this story.

For those of you who are curious about my future fanfiction endeavors: I do have several ideas percolating, but currently all of them are only half-formed and/or awful, so there are no guarantees that I will actually end up writing any of them! xD In any case, any other multi-chapter story I might write will almost certainly have to wait until after Season 8 is finished airing at the very least, but after that...well, mayhaps. Keep your eyes peeled, I suppose. ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!