The Prince That Didn't Come
by IGotNothin

Summary

On a normal winter day, Hot Pie happily delivered two meat pies and a jug of ale to a waiting table. There was no interruption from his ordinary work. No happy reunion, no thrilling tales, and no missing Stark girls to steal his food and change the world. There was nothing but another group of hungry mouths to feed.

Or Arya Stark does not visit the Crossroads Inn, and the world of ice and fire is changed forever.

Notes

In this story, Arya didn't visit Hot Pie, and didn't know that Jon Snow was alive. She went South, as she planned to, and a "prophecy" went unfulfilled.
Arya I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Red Keep

Arya Stark

She wasn’t there.

When Winter came for House Stark, she was nowhere to be found. When the snows fell and the white winds blew, her pack was months away. She was in the South, the cold fingers of a gilded glove wrapped tight around a golden queen’s golden throat.

The Kingslayer was dead on the road somewhere with a wound in his heart, his face skinned, and his hand stripped and buried. His sword was pinned to her side, a foreign weight, but a necessary one. His armor - heavy and uncomfortable - covered her shoulders. His face cloaked her own, and his golden hair ran down her skull.

“Do you know why I’m doing this?” she asked, as a pair of green eyes bulged and reddened. The Kingslayer’s face twisted uncomfortably as she spoke, but that was expected. Wearing a foreign face had never been all too comfortable.

While she stared, Cersei Lannister gasped and gurgled. Even that was more than she deserved.

“Because you’re the woman who sparked it all,” she said, because it was completely true.

Because Cersei was the reason Sansa was married to Ramsay Bolton. Because she was the reason Jon was dead at the wall, betrayed and forgotten while the world moved on. Because Cersei was the reason her mother was a corpse in a river, her throat gaping like the opening to the Narrow Sea. Because she was the reason Robb had his head replaced with a wolf. Because she was the reason Bran and Rickon were dead and gone, and Winterfell with them. Because she was the reason an honorable man had been snuffed out before his time. Because she was the reason Arya Stark had to die young.

Had Cersei done something else – had anyone done something else – Ned Stark’s head would have remained on his shoulders. Arya Stark would have been home in Winterfell before her first moon blood. She would not have grown up amongst rats, fleas, and assassins. She would not have been forced to eat raw pigeons, bugs, and whatever scraps Tywin’s men would throw at her. She would not have been beaten, dragged through the mud, and left blinded and scared on the streets of a foreign land. She would have grown up a Stark. She would have grown up.

Cersei gurgled something that was almost a word, but wasn’t. A long time ago, she might have relented and let the dying woman speak. Instead, a gilded glove pressed harder into a windpipe. Cersei shut up.

“I want you to know that I’ve waited for this.” Her every word came paired with the Kingslayer’s inflections, and she loved it more than she ever thought she would. It made Cersei wince with every word, and that was sweeter than any cake. “I’ve said your name every night for years, waiting for today. Soon, I’ll never have to say it again. You’re the last one left, you know. The only one.”
Ilyn Payne hadn’t even screamed when she found him. He tried to fight her, of course, but she was quick. *Quick as a snake. Calm as still water. Fear cuts deeper than swords.*

She wasn’t afraid now. Not in the moment. While Cersei gasped and choked, she felt invincible. Like a woman blessed.

Afterwards was when the fear settled in. After she’d killed Ilyn Payne. After she’d burned the Mountain. After she’d killed the Waif. After she’d killed Walder Frey and all the Frey heirs. After she’d killed Meryn Trant and Polliver and the guard at Harrenhall and the fat little stable boy who’d just been trying to save himself. That was when the fear set in, when the deed was already done. Everything before that was easy. It was only after that she could sit down with her head in her hands and think about what her father would have thought, her mother, and how disappointed Jon and Robb would have been to see her use their lessons for *this.*

But Cersei Lannister was different, she thought, she hoped, she prayed. This woman was evil and cruel. This was the woman had her father killed, who killed Lady for nothing, and who still convinced Sansa to be her stupid pawn. Cersei Lannister deserved it.

They all deserved it. That was the point of the list. The point of her *prayer.*

“I want you to know that it was me,” she whispered into Cersei’s ear. And then, her free hand went to her own face, the fake skin was peeling, and the ghost of Arya Stark was staring down at the first and last name on her list. “I want you to know that.”

She had been afraid that Cersei wouldn’t recognize her. That, over the years, the Queen of Westeros had overlooked her enough that she had forgotten the one threat that mattered.

A whisper escaped Cersei’s throat. A soft sound, like wind through a weirwood or like the rush of the sea’s breeze on Braavos. It was barely audible. Had Arya been standing another inch away, she would never have heard it.

But Arya was near, and so she heard Cersei Lannister whisper, “Lyanna?” as the light left her bright green eyes.

Arya stared until her own eyes were red and wet.

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The list was done.

Six years after her father’s head landed on the Sept of Baelor, it was all avenged. The Red Wedding, the Sept of Baelor, and – from what she heard as she walked the streets to the Red Keep – even the Bolton's sacking of Winterfell. The Boltons were gone, the Freys were gone, and now the Lannisters. Three Great Houses reduced to rubble, and two by her own hand.

She should have felt happy. She should have run through the streets, cheering and singing, and declaring to the world that “Arya Stark is going home!”

But the world didn’t work like that. It hadn’t since the Hound killed Mycah, and Father killed Lady.

Maybe she was supposed to be happy, but she didn't feel it. Instead, she still felt as if Meryn Trant had caught her in the chest with the same blade that killed Syrio, and had left a gaping hole that could never be filled, no matter how much she tried.
Father was dead. Mother was dead. Robb was dead. Bran was dead. Rickon was dead. Jon was dead. Even Sansa, who had smiled and celebrated with the Lannisters as their father knelt on the stairs of the Sept – even she no longer bore their name.

It was just Arya left. The last of the Starks.

She walked through the streets of Kings Landing to the sound of tolling bells.

The gold cloaks were running about like sheep without a shepherd. The peasants were celebrating in the streets, drinking, laughing, and not caring to shy too far away from the strange girl with the sword at her belt.

They would have been scared, if they knew. They would have run away screaming. But she was in her own clothes again, rather than the Kingslayer’s. Her hands were washed clean of blood, and her Needle was sharp and silver, not dull and red.

She kept her eyes forward, and the world ignored her. They shouldn’t have. They should have run.

There were ravens flying overhead. Black ones flying out to all the lords and all the ladies of the realm. They were the signs of her triumph. She should have smiled at the sight of their freedom, drank in the swell of cheering as the smallfolk celebrated their flight.

Instead, she focused her eyes on the white ones that were flying in the wrong direction. In truth, they should not have been flying at all. It had already been winter when Arya left Braavos. These birds should have long since finished their flight.

With the sight of those birds came the discovery of others. She could hear a few in the crowd reacting to it, shouting and pointing as the birds flew by.

_Three things_, she thought. _Three things you did not know._

“They’re flying the wrong way! See there, they should be heading from the Keep, not to.” One.

“Ain’t all of them heading to. That one’s just flying about, isn’t he?” Two.

“Those ones don’t even have letters!” Three. All three accounted for.

_I can go back to the House now_, she thought, and immediately hated herself for thinking it.

There was one that landed near her. She reached out - _swift as a deer, quiet as a shadow_ – and caught the bird in her bare hand. It struggled, desperate to escape, but Arya’s grip was strong. The bird stayed until the bird calmed. From there, it was easy work to strip the letter from its leg.

She had to strain her eyes to read it. The ink muddled and the words were especially sloppy. That was strange in itself. Most times, the maesters with weak hands would make their servants pen the notes in their stead. Or, at least, that was what Maester Lewin told her when she asked.

It was a lucky thing, she supposed, that Jon’s handwriting had been just as poor, or she wouldn’t have been able to read it at all.

Another oddity: there was no greeting tied to the letter. Just a quick message, clearly rushed by whoever had been penning it, before it was strapped to a shoddy bird and set off to fly.

_Winterfell has fallen_, it read. _The Walkers move South. Use dragonglass, fire, valyrian steel._ _Nothing else works._
And then, at the bottom,

*Jon Snow.*

And the heart, that Arya thought broken, pounded.

Chapter End Notes

If I continue this (no promises), we'll see what happened in Winterfell with the Night King, while Arya was finishing her list down South. We'll see a world where the Night King lasts for more than one episode, and where the Azor Ahai prophecy makes a bit more sense in the show narrative. I'm going to try to hit some of the same narrative beats (but not all), but without the weird direction the show takes to get there. This will almost certainly be the shortest chapter, since I'm treating it as a prologue of sorts.

I'm also going to try to merge the personality of characters between shows and the books. That's why Arya's a little less insane-murderer-who-takes-pride-in-feeding-a-man-his-child and who instead feels empty after her killings and is generally just a traumatized kid. It's a characterization I personally like a little better.
For the second time in living memory, all of Winterfell was on fire.

The castle, where all the Starks were born and raised, was no more than a pile of corpses and rock. The gates of Winterfell was nothing but rubble. Even the Godswood, where his father had prayed and where Bran had first learned to climb, was burning.

There were wights everywhere. Ashen rotting carcasses that were wandering through his home, like it was their own crypts. This place, where Jon had spent his formative years beside brothers, sisters, and friends, was now a land for corpses. A feast for the ice crows that flew beneath them, pecking at Rhaegal’s belly and trying to fly into his eyes.

He didn’t know if Dany got away. For all the life in him, he couldn’t bring himself to turn back and check. If she was dead, he didn’t know what he would do.

*Move on,* he thought. *You would move on, because you swore to. You did it after Father. You did it after Ygritte. You did it after Arya and Robb and Rickon. Because love is the death of duty, and the boy was supposed to die long ago.*

He imagined that few, if any, others would escape. The castle was surrounded. The Night King had his reserves circling the gates, looking for any stragglers hoping to desert the army of the dead. Anyone who thought to escape would be a corpse come dawn.

That was, if the dawn ever came. The sun had set on Winterfell. If Old Nan’s stories were to be believed, it would not rise again. Winter had come, and Winter had swallowed it whole.

Sansa was calling his name, but Jon couldn’t hear her. He couldn’t hear anything over the sound of Rhaegal’s anguished roars and the bitter bite of the wind against his ears.

They were flying faster than they ever had before. They didn’t need to – the Night King wasn’t chasing them, because he knew he didn’t have to – but Jon felt like he needed this. He had to leave Winterfell behind, had to get away before the battle he left behind dragged him back in.

He hadn’t been this afraid since he woke up on his desk, gasping and growling and hissing at the sight of the new scars that adorned his chest. There had been nothing before that. Like waking from a dreamless sleep, except emptier. Like part of himself had been left behind in a land of nothingness, and there was nothing he could do to bring it back. He wondered if the wights saw nothing, too. If Sam and Gilly and Little Sam wouldn’t have to suffer.
Gods, he hoped so.

So far as he knew, the only survivors of that slaughter were on his dragon’s back. The Hound, who’d clung to the dragon’s leg while the beast flew away. Sansa, the sole survivor of Father and Lady Stark’s line. The forge boy, Gendry, who had nearly given his life saving Sansa from Varys’ corpse in the crypts. Tyrion, who had been beside Sansa, fighting with all his might to survive the dead, and nearly failing at that. Beric Dondarrion, who was bloody and injured, but somehow still living. Five others, whose names he never had the chance to learn. A Mormont bannerman, a Stark soldier, a Karstark man, a Reed from Greywater Watch, and a Cerwyn. Everyone else was dead.

They hadn’t been ready. The archers had been overwhelmed by the mass of men. The dothraki inside Winterfell’s walls hadn’t the mobility they needed after the castle filled. The unsullied had fought well, but even they crumbled under the weight. The trebuchets had gone next, once the fire reached inside the walls. Everything had gone then.

And now it was just them. Ten men left of an army of 10,000. Ten survivors of the greatest massacre in Westerosi history.

He flexed the fingers of his burnt hand against Rhaegal’s ridges. The dragon let out another roar – loud enough to shake the world.

Jon understood. He felt it too.

He wondered if the dragon knew where he wanted to go, when he didn’t know himself. Should they stop at Moat Cailin? Greywater Watch? White Harbor? Dragonstone might have been safest, but it was too far. He wasn’t sure how far the dragons could fly without stopping, and he didn’t want to find out.

They needed a defensible position. They needed a place where Jon could settle in and find a way to gather a new army. They needed a chance.

Mayhaps a place higher than a crow could fly. Higher than all but this crow.

He thought the word, and the dragon obeyed him. To the Vale of Arryn, they went.

There was an army there waiting for them. Littlefinger – traitorous cretin that he was – had taken the Vale’s troops with him to seek support in the weeks before the Night King’s attack. Now, Winterfell had fallen, and there was the Vale’s army – whole and happy, while Jon’s burned.

Rhaegal landed in front of the Eyrie. Jon hadn’t been sure how Lord Robin Arryn would have responded to a giant peering into his castle’s windows, and he didn’t want to find out. Instead, he landed in front of the winding stairs that led into Lord Arryn’s castle.

The boy was there to greet them. He was cloaked in the light blue robes of his House and bearing a mewling white falcon on his outstretched arm. It squawked as soon as it saw the dragon, eyes wide as dinner plates, and quickly took to the air and back to the castle. Lord Arryn reached for it, but the bird knew better than Littlefinger how dangerous a dragon could be.

Speaking of the vermin, Baelish was watching them from Lord Arryn’s right. Bronze Yohn Royce was to the left, glaring daggers at the two, while offering looks of sympathy to the battered riders on the dragon’s back.

Thousands of troops surrounded them – more than 20,000 troops untouched by war. They should have been in the North. They might have won, if they had. Now, the Night King’s army was stronger than it had been, and the living’s chances of winning the war had grown drastically.
He slid off of his dragon’s back as soon as the others had. One of Lord Arryn’s advisors was welcoming them, but Jon had no interest in petty greetings. As soon as his bloody feet struck the ground, he was charging forward with Longclaw in hand.

The world came alive with the sound of swords drawing, but Jon Snow had never been known for his caution. He had his sword at Littlefinger’s throat before Robin Arryn could even scramble away. He hardly bothered to spare the boy a second look.

“Give me one reason I shouldn’t kill you right here,” he demanded. Spittle flew from his mouth and struck Baelish’s face.

“Ah, you’ll have to provide more-” Littlefinger said, but Jon didn’t care for meaningless platitudes. He forced his sword forward until the blade drew blood. Baelish’s eyes grew wider than the carcass that had once been Winterfell.

“Your Grace-” said Bronze Yohn.

“I’m not a King,” Jon spat. For many reasons, really. He’d knelt, for one. Like Torrhen Stark before him, he had been handed a crown and tossed it away. He had knelt for a Queen he believed in – a Queen that he thought would save the world.

It hadn’t even mattered. She was dead. He’d seen her on the ground, while Drogon flew aimlessly overhead. Somewhere in Winterfell, there was a wight with shining silver hair next to a blue-flamed red-scaled dragon. It had to be true. No one could have survived the hell he’d seen. No one.

*And now her watch is over.* Except, it wasn’t. Because her watch began again when the blue came in her eyes, and now she marched onto the South. At least she was reacquainted with her second dragon. At least in death, they could be together.

“Jon,” Sansa said. Whatever she said next, he could barely hear over the sound of the blood rushing in his ears.

A hand reached for his own, and he let it drag him down. Suddenly, Longclaw was the weight of the tens of thousands of men he’d left behind. The weight of the tens of thousands of wights that would be chasing him now. They would stop at nothing, until every member of the living had traded their eyes for blue.

He thought of the bodies of all those they hadn’t burned chasing him. Daenerys, Davos, Jorah Mormont, little Lyanna, Sam, Gilly, Little Sam, Theon, and even Bran. He wondered if Bran’s corpse would walk, or if it too would have to drag itself through snow and mud at the Night King’s beck and call.

He thought of those down South, who had died without the Northern rights. Robb, his father, Lady Stark, Arya. He wondered if she ever used that Needle he had given her before she disappeared, if she hadn’t used it to take at least one of the Lannisters with her. He hoped so. If he could have given her any gift, at least that was the one. Justice. Vengeance. Retribution for all the Lannisters’ sins.

He thought of all of them bearing down on his sword and dragging him down with them. Longclaw slid from his fingers, and Jon slid to his knees.

There were hands on his shoulders and hands at his back, but all he could sense was his dragon
falling to the ground beside him.

That’s right, Jon thought. You lost your brother today too, didn’t you?

As if the dragon could read his thoughts, it let out a pitiful sort of cry. A mourning roar, to let the world know that Viserion was gone and Drogon with him.

Rhaegal was the last one left. Jon was too. 8,000 years of the Night’s Watch, and Jon was the last living man.

He choked on air and spit alike, while Rhaegal choked on fire.

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After he had calmed, they had ushered him into the council meeting and into the Lord’s chair. Lord Arryn sat beside him, his eyes still wide and his body still trembling, but the boy was at least brave enough to be there. Jon had half thought him cowardly enough to flee to King’s Landing. He still wouldn’t have been safe, but the boy had no way of knowing that.

Tyrion and Littlefinger were glaring daggers at each other from across the table. Jon did not care why. Petty arguments didn’t matter anymore. The dead were marching South, and they needed to focus before the world crumbled around them.

“Your Grace,” said Bronze Yohn, though Jon was no King, “we need to know what happened in Winterfell.”

Jon stared at him, and then at the members of his own party. Sansa, whose pretty dress was torn and bloodied. Beric, who was missing a few fingers and whose face was covered in dirt and blood. The smith, whose hammer was smashed to pieces, and how did that even happen? The Hound, whose fresh burns told the story. The Karstark, who had blood streaming down his face from a gash in the head. The Mormont, whose eye had been left behind in Winterfell. The Umber, who bore a knife wound in the shoulder and left behind his sword. The Reed and the Cerwyn both, who had fallen asleep on the castle floors and who no one could rouse. He looked back at Bronze Yohn and said, “The dead came.”

“Yes, but what happened?” pressed Lord Arryn. There was a crooked smile on his face, like a little boy waiting for a story from his wet nurse. As if there hadn’t been a war, where real people died, and real blood was shed.

“They overran the walls,” Sansa said. “Our archers did their best, but there weren’t enough arrows.”

“20,000,” the forger said to himself.

Bronze Yohn blinked. “What did you say, boy?”

Gendry jolted as dozens of eyes converged on him. Pale cheeks went red, as he said, “We made 20,000 arrows.”

Littlefinger’s eyes went to Sansa. When she nodded, the rat could hardly smother the flash of concern that came across his face. For just a moment, there was some humanity in those treacherous eyes of his. Just enough that Jon wanted to tear them out and feed them to him, because why should he live when Sam was dead, when Dany was gone, when Davos was a corpse in the night.
“How bad were your archers?” Lord Arryn asked, childish and insolent as a summer child could be. They had all been summer children, once.

This time, it was the Hound who leant forward. His lips fell back into a snarl, not unlike that of the wolf Jon had left behind him. And, oh gods, Ghost was still there. Ghost was gone, and Ghost was a wight, and Jon had just left him there to die.

That was one of the few deaths he understood completely. He’d felt it when his wolf had died. Like a knife stabbing into his heart for the tenth time, except this hurt far worse than that. It hurt like staring into Olly’s eyes, as the boy clutched a dagger. It hurt like riding North while his favorite little sister rode south and his favorite brother stayed put. It hurt like killing Qhorin Halfhand and breaking his vows to keep a promise. Most of all, it hurt like dying. All over again. This time, he didn’t think there would be a revival.

Sansa’s hand went to his shoulder, but it did nothing. It meant nothing. Ghost was dead, and Jon had done nothing.

The Hound either didn’t see his sudden panic, or the man simply didn’t care. “How bad are yours?”

Lord Arryn turned back to Littlefinger for assurance. When it did not come, he looked to Bronze Yohn, and then to the Hound. None particularly cared to answer for him.

“The best in the land,” Lord Arryn finally said. “They could hit a bird’s eye from hundreds of leagues away. A dragon from thousands. If they stood below the Eyrie, they could kill a man through the moon door with only a second’s glance.”

“How many of the fuckers can they hit with one arrow?”

It was Bronze Yohn’s turn to look askance. “What do you mean, Clegane?”

“With 20,000 arrows, they’d best be able to kill 10 with each, or you’ll be shit out of luck.”

The Lords of the Vale exchanged weary glances. Some disbelieving, some furious, and others outright shocked.

The temperature in the room was a thousand degrees hotter. Jon’s cloak was growing tighter around his neck.

Littlefinger leant forward, brows raised and lips pursed in false skepticism. “Lord Clegane, do you truly believe this council so foolish to believe that there are 200,000 corpses wandering the North?” He looked about the room, accompanied by the sound of scoffs and grunts. “These are all mere mummer’s tales, my Lord.”

The Hound laughed, a brutal and horrible burst of a laugh that drove the room back to silence. It reminded Jon of sword striking shield and sabatons stomping on stone. It reminded him of war, of death, of his little brother dead in the Godswood with the Night King’s sword impaled in his heart.

Gods, the sound of ice crackling in the air was still just as loud in his ears, and the smell of burning corpses still clung to him like a cloak. When he shut his eyes, the sight of Sansa’s sworn sword legless and screaming, as she reached for her blue-eyed squire, danced before his eyes. The sight of Tormund, ripped apart by four different wights, but carrying on the charge, because they needed him to. Even little Lyanna Mormont, blue-eyed and wandering around the corpse of a giant.

The Hound, his face as gruesome as Grey Worm’s carcass, snarled. “There aren’t 200,000 corpses,
you dumb cunt.” He leant forward, his snarl quickly reshaping into a sneer. “You ought to have swordsmen too. And they’ll need to kill another hundred thousand, won’t they? Hope your swordsmen are as good as your archers.”

“Is this true?” Bronze Yohn looked to Jon, but it was Tyrion who answered him.

“It is true, my Lord, though I hardly would have believed it myself. Winterfell is gone, razed to the ground like a fresh Harrenhall.”

“How can this be? There were no ravens about a fire!” cried the castle’s maester, a man as thin and stubborn as every other maester Jon had the good fortune to meet. He wondered if Maester Aemon would have been as unconvinced as this one, had the man not manned the walls. He wondered if this was the sort of man Sam had dealt with in the Citadel when he’d tried, and failed, to show them the truth. He wondered if Sam had been as frustrated as he was.

“Maester…” Tyrion trailed off.

“Coleman.”

“Well, Maester Coleman, we happen to have ridden in on a dragon.” Tyrion waved his arms to the window, where, far below them, a tired green dragon was sleeping off the day’s trials. “I suppose none of those chains of yours refer to physics, but a dragon’s wings are generally larger than a bird’s. They happen to fly a good deal faster, which I can attest to from experience. We outflew a great many pigeons on our way here.”

“Regardless-” the maester began, but Jon was tired of waiting.

“The Night King is coming.” he snapped. He was already at his wit’s end, and this game of theirs was draining him even more. Before long, he thought he might join the Cerwyn and the Reed on the floor. “He destroyed Winterfell, and he’ll destroy you. If we don’t start working now, there won’t be a chance.”

Bronze Yohn gazed thoughtfully at him, but the maester was already shaking his head. “The Eyrie is impregnable, my Lord.”

“Give me ten good men,” Tyrion muttered.

“My Lord,” Beric said, as if the man hadn’t spoken, “the enemy has gained control of a dragon.”

“A dragon?” Lord Arryn shrieked. A long time ago, Jon might have laughed at the look on his face, but that was a thousand years ago, before the man killed the boy and laughter fled the land. Now, he simply stared with eyes as dead as Olly’s own bulging red set.

“Possibly two,” Sansa said. She was staring at Baelish when she said it. She hardly even blinked.

To Tyrion’s credit, he held his tongue and turned to the table, head in his short, fat fingers. Jon had nearly forgotten that Daenerys had been his Queen too, and for much longer than she had been his.

Do you regret it too, he wanted to ask. Leaving?

But Jon said nothing, and the silence hung like Olly, swaying in the ever-present wind as the world crumbled around them.

He saw candles flickering on the walls, lighting the backs of many a famed knight. They stood strong in all their armor, in their fancy suits and cloaks, as if any of that would protect them. Like
any of them could survive dragon fire and ice, the living dead and the dying living, the fire and the ash that fell with snow, like snow, was snow.

“Say these rumors are true,” Baelish said, breaking the choking silence that had overtaken them. He sounded, for a brief moment, like he believed them. Jon doubted it very much. “And a dragon comes to break down our walls. What are we to do about it?”

There was a beat. A moment of silence that choked him like dying had. Air that couldn’t enter his lungs, and smoke filling them instead.

“Fight,” Sansa said, finally, simply, uselessly. “We fight.”

There was a knock on the door, jolting them all out of a trance of sorrow, loss, and pain. It was then that a servant came to beg permission for his Lordship’s attention, and his Grace’s too. Ravens from Winterfell. Tens of them, dozens of them. Ravens white and black, some lettered and some not. Birds with ill tidings. Dark wings, dark words, he said, but what of the white?

And finally, Jon Snow opened his mouth. “It means Winter is coming.”

Somewhere below them, Rhaegal roared. Somewhere behind them, Drogon did too.

Jon didn’t hear any of them. All he heard was the sound of ice crackling.

Ice laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Just so you guys know, I’ll also be making slight corrections for things that make absolutely no sense narratively (their front line was unsupported cavalry and trebuchets. What) but nothing too major, besides one big change I’ll be carrying over from the books to the show. The fact that Bran is the only Stark warg was very disappointing. Thankfully, I don’t have a budget, so warging will be present here.

Also, huge thanks for all the comments! They really inspired me to keep working on this thing, so thanks to all of you who kudos'd, commented, or just read it!
Chapter Notes

Yeah, I think I’m going to mold canon into my own liking here and borrow a bit from the book and the show. So, Arya’s time in the Riverlands was like the books with the only main deviation being that it was Tywin that arrived to claim it, not Roose.

Chapter Three: Another Prayer Answered

Off the Kingsroad

Arya Stark

She held the missive tight in the palm of her hand for three days and four nights. She held it while she slept, while she rode, while she ate, and while she made water. She held it, because it was the only hint she had that her brother still lived – even if it was only the ramblings of a pretender.

She had long ago heard of the wall, of her brother’s treacherous men, and of the knives that pierced through to his heart and left her friendless for the fourth time in as many years. Alone in the world, again.

The lone wolf dies, her father had said, but the pack survives.

She had been foolish enough to believe it then, but clearly, her father had been mistaken. Robb had died at their mother’s side with his wife there to keep him company. Bran and Rickon had died together, twin casualties to the Bolton’s treachery. Jon had died amongst his brothers, a victim of his own pack.

It was only Sansa and Arya left, and Arya had not heard a word of Sansa until she reached the gates of King’s Landing and heard a whisper from a serving girl that Lady Sansa had requested the bones of a “Ser Dontos Hollard” to be sent up to Winterfell a half-moon prior to Arya’s arrival. It was a tacked-on section to a missive begging for men and armor and some strange mineral they called “dragonglass”.

Arya didn’t know what dragonglass was or how to find it, but, if Jon’s letter spoke true, she still had another weapon they could use. It hung heavy from her hip, strapped to a scabbard that she had stolen on her way south. She had not known its name, nor did she know where the Kingslayer had found a blade made from valyrian steel. So far as she knew, the Lannisters had lost their ancestral sword centuries before even Tywin Lannister had been born. She wondered who he had killed to take it. She wondered if he even remembered.

She wanted to give the sword a name, but every time she tried, the Hound’s voice rung in her ears, calling her a bloody cunt for even considering it. She rolled her eyes at it, but still, she finally decided to leave it unnamed and did her best to ignore the stolen blade at her side.

Her horse – a tired and dying stallion she had bought for a silver from a farmer – was near collapse
by the time she reached Harrenhal. Arya hadn’t meant to stop there. Once, she had sworn never to step foot in that place again, but between the rough terrain, the frozen rain, the sticky mud, the slush and snow that already reached Arya’s knees, the old gods had been kind enough to let them last this long. If she pressed on to the Eyrie, like she meant to, the horse would die and so would she.

No, Arya hadn’t the choice. She led the horse through a hole in Harren’s once-mighty gates and tried not to think of a little grey mouse girl who had wooden teeth, or the weasel that became an angry ghost. In this place, she tried not to think of a lot of things.

It was hard. Every time she looked at the walls, she thought of the guardsman she had killed. The first innocent. When she passed by the grounds, where a great metal cage had once stood, she thought of Gendry and All-for-Joffrey and the Tickler and was there gold hidden in the village? Silver, gems? Was there food? Where was the Lightning Lord? Which of the village folk had supported him? When he rode off, where did he go? How many men were with him? How many knights, bowmen, how many men-at-arms? How many were horsed? How many were wounded? How many? What banners did they fly? Was there gold hidden in the village? Silver, gems? Where was the Lightning Lord? How many were with him? Her heart quickened, and her hands shook, and she could not help but remember wooden teeth.

But this time, her teeth were made of iron and steel. This time, there were two swords at her belt – one was Stark grey, and the other was Lannister red like the banners that flew when Tywin Lannister rescued Gendry from the Tickler. When he rescued them both from the Tickler.

There were no good memories here, not at all, but not all of them were bad. The moment Tywin saved Gendry was the happiest she had been since she was 11 years old. She didn’t feel that way again until-

More ravens flew overhead. White and black and grey. There carried no messages with them. The pretender-Jon had not even known how to send off a bird. The real Jon had.

She wanted to cry, but direwolves were not supposed to cry. They barked and the growled and they howled, but they never wept. Arya Stark was a direwolf. The last direwolf, ever since Sansa became a lion and Jon Snow died on the wall. She wiped dry eyes as she tied her horse inside the castle onto an exposed slab of steel. She didn’t feel that way again.

She wanted to howl, but howling was for the Night Wolf, not the day girl. Howling was for hunts, pack, and forests, not an empty castle headed by a man she had barely even met.

Arya walked by the ruins of the keep, where once Tywin Lannister had tricked Nan the Cupbearer and Nan the Cupbearer tricked him in turn. That made her smile with a few too many teeth.

Snow was falling around her in clumps like ashes from a fire. It clung to her hair, to her cloak, to the leather armor she had not parted with since she left King’s Landing the second time around. It even clung to Needle and the Kingslayer’s sword. It snowed harder than it had in Winterfell all those years ago.

She hadn’t seen Winterfell since. If it was truly fallen, she might never reach it again.

No, Jon is dead and Winterfell stands, she thought, though she prayed otherwise. The pretender lies.

She ought to sleep, she knew, but it eluded her. It had been hard to sleep since reached Westeros, and harder still since she found the missive. Or, perhaps, since she finished her list. She had
nothing to whisper now, nothing to pray for.

“Joffrey,” she whispered to the empty air. The only Godswood had been lost long ago to dragon fire and none had ever chanced to plant another. “Chiswyck, Ser Gregor, Queen Cersei, Ser Amory, Ser Ilyn, Polliver, Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, the Tickler, Meryn Trant, Weese. Valar morghulis.” She laughed. And now you all did.

The old gods had answered her prayers, but now she had nothing. No family, no friends, no anything. Her family was dead, Gendry had left her behind, and the Faceless Men would kill her on sight. There was nothing to do and nowhere to go. But there must always be a Stark in Winterfell, and so there she went. If she had to die there, she would die there. At least she would die a Stark in Winterfell. At least she would die as her father would have wanted it, like Lyanna never could.

She stumbled across a place where once a bull had made claws for lions. It had always been warmer there – a room heated by the light of a dozen fires – but now the forge had frozen. The ground was slick with ice and from the ceiling hung a dozen icicles, but Arya didn’t mind. She sat on a frozen wall all the same. She was from Winterfell, where cold was a constant friend and warmth only came when the stupid fat King came to ruin her life and drag her South.

She didn’t mean to, but she fell asleep like that, thinking of the days gone by.

As Arya slept, the Night Wolf hunted. Tracked, feasted, and led a pack a thousand strong. A pack like Arya’s had been when it still lived. She howled loud, and her pack answered the cry with haste, but the Night Wolf was always ready to listen between the howls for sounds far from there, where the snow was thickest and she knew her brothers stayed. The silent did not answer her cry, and though that was to be expected, neither howl nor scent reached her senses. Just as it had been when her sister went quiet, and her brother in the far North, and her brother by the water, and her brother on the island. Gone were the cries of any but her new pack.

Wolves did not cry, but the Night Wolf howled until the sun rose.

When Arya Stark finally came back to herself that night, it was to a different sort of howling. The sort that shook the castle walls and knocked snow off of stone ledges. A howl that had Arya trembling, and the melted stone walls recalling a terrible fate.

She found tracks in the snow, where she had kicked and clawed in her sleep. None provided an answer for the terrible sound. She stumbled to her feet and scrambled out of the forge.

The great black dragon that sored overhead was like a figure out of history. Balerion the Black Dread come again with Aegon the Conquerer to burn Harrenhal, because the first time had not been enough to keep Harren’s evil away. Only this time, Robb hadn’t knelt and her father had fought, and he was coming to kill the Stark too.

She had heard the stories, of course. The Mhysa off in Meereen, who had brought to life three stone dragons and brought magic back to the world. The Faceless Men had spoken of her often, as did the Braavosi sailors and merchants.

“She freed the slaves,” a courtesan had told her once, when she had been the beggar, Blind Beth. “Killed the masters too. So far as I know, she’s a friend to the Free Cities.”

The Faceless Men worried of her dragons, but Arya had always liked to imagine Visenya Targaryen sitting atop her dragon, saving the smallfolk and freeing the slaves, just as this Mhysa was doing in Essos. A great stone dragon, come to save Westeros from Cersei’s evils and Tommen’s cruelty. Of course, in all that time she had never imagined seeing the dragons herself.
She was supposed to be leagues away, where the dragon could do her no harm. She had never imagined how terrifying it was.

As the dragon came closer, it grew larger and larger. Where once, it had flown high enough to mimic the birds, it was growing larger than the keep. Larger than one or two of the skulls Arya had hidden in when she still had only a single name. She wondered how it even flew with a body so massive.

Though, even she had to admit after the dragon came to the ground beyond the castle gates, it was still smaller than Balerion’s skull. She had never met a creature larger. Even the Titan had not compared.

Of course, the size of the beast still had her stumbling back into the forge. Arya was not so stupid as to doubt the strength of a dragon. The signs of danger danced all around her, from the melted stone walls to the quiet of the castle, brought on by Harren’s curse. Their breath could bring death and magic, and Arya had thought herself done with both.

She felt the ground shake as the dragon settled outside the gates, and she smelled the scents that it brought with it. Death, fire, and burning corpses that stunk like rotten pork. She had smelt far too many corpses to misrecognize it now.

There were voices – many – that carried over to her once the dragon had settled. Voices that sent her reaching for one of the faces that she carried. Still, she was hesitant to use it. The Many-Faced God did not like when the faces were used without the gift to be wrought, and Arya did not yet know if these riders were meant to have it.

She tried to stay quiet, and clung to the shadows as the Faceless had taught her, but she thought that her heart might give her away if discovered. It beat like a smith’s hammer on a metal plate. If the dragon did not smell her, the riders would surely hear. If they could not hear, then surely, they would see the way she trembled, the way her teeth chattered. Surely, they would see her pale skin against the darkness!

Had she been lucky, they would have avoided her entirely. They might have gone straight to the keep, ignored the side buildings along the way, and instead focused on staying warm for the night.

But Arya had not been lucky for too many years; a bloodied rider stumbled into the forge.

She felt like Weasel again when she saw him. Quiet little Weasel, too scared to say a thing, while she played with her wooden teeth. She didn’t notice a single thing about him, not the banner he carried, nor the sigil he donned, nor the Northern features adorning his face. In that moment, she had lost the wolf, and it only came back when the man’s eyes darted to the Kingslayer’s sword at her side, as he hollered, “Lannister girl! Over here!”

She cursed the stupid lion pommel as she reached for Needle, but her hand stilled on the hilt. It may have been too late to preserve her location, but not too late to save herself. If she played this carefully, she could still survive this. She just needed to be clever. Careful.

Instead of drawing Needle, she unsheathed the Kingslayer’s sword. Before the Dragon Queen’s man could say another word, she slipped behind him – quick as a snake – and drew the sword across his throat. He tensed as she growled, “Don’t touch for that sword.”

“Your Queen will be sorry,” he said, raising his hands high. “When the Walkers come-”

“Over here!” another voice screamed.
Arya cursed herself and dragged the soldier deeper into the forge.

She had only moved a few steps, before another soldier strode into the room. He was a fair skinned man with hair as blonde as Cersei’s was when Arya choked her life away. He was older than most, wrinkled and stressed, and probably as injured as any Arya had seen in this place. He was armored, but the metal plate bore no sigils. Like the soldier Arya had in her grasp, he was drenched in black blood and red, walking with a heavy limp, and somehow looking more tired than even Arya felt.

As his eyes settled on her, his mouth set into a deep frown. “Stay your blade, young one. We mean you no harm.”


“I don’t doubt it,” the soldier answered. “But you have the wrong idea of us. You should ask your captive who he serves.”

“House Hornwood serves House Stark,” said the first without her prompting. He was shaking, she realized. Afraid of death. She had almost forgotten how the Westerosi feared it.

Still, Arya jolted. “Of Winterfell?”

“Is there another House Stark?” he said, as if Arya had suddenly sprouted fur and wings.

“Calm yourself, Hornwood. No need to rile the girl,” the second said. His eyes turned to Arya, studying her face like an ordinary man would study a sword. “You are among friends here.”

He was no liar. Too many years of playing the Game of Faces had taught her that. Whatever he was, he was honest, and that was enough for Arya to release her captive.

As soon as the Kingslayer’s throat was gone from this throat, the Hornwood reached for his sword. Arya was quicker. She had it drawn from his sheath as quick as a snake.

“Forgive my friend,” the second man said, though Arya was done with games.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Jorah the Andal,” he answered quickly, “son of Jeor Mormont.”

Arya had been away from Winterfell for too many years to remember the rules of heraldry, but she remembered Jeor Mormont. The Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch when Jon was still just a recruit. The Old Bear, they called him, and Jon had spoken of him near-every night before he left. An honorable man. A just man. A true Northerner. She may not have known his son, but she knew Jeor well enough. If Jon could trust Jeor, then she could trust Jorah. Or, at least, she could trust that he wouldn’t be outwardly cruel.

“Have you heard what happened in the North?” she asked. “To Winterfell?”

Mormont shook his head. “I cannot say I heard it, but I did see it. Winterfell is gone, my lady.”

Her heart beat faster than a little bird’s wings. She didn’t even notice the insult. “And Jon Snow?”

“I cannot say.” The pity in his eyes told her that he knew exactly who she was, and he knew exactly why that comment would hurt her so much. She slumped, mouthing her prayer to herself as he said, “Few escaped that fight.”

A lie. Or, rather, an exaggeration. Very few escaped the fight. The dragon riders. Only the dragon
riders.

She shut her eyes and summoned Mercy, because Mercy did not care about Jon Snow any more than Arya cared about Cersei Lannister. She felt humor bubble up in her chest as the mummer took hold, and she felt it die away just as quickly. Jon Snow had lived again and died again, because Arya Stark had been too obsessed with her prayers to go North. She should have taken care of Ramsay before Cersei. She should have gone to the Wall.

She abandoned her closest brother, because she had been too stupid to consider that the rumors of his death were lies. The Game should have made her realize. She should have paid attention.

Mercy tried to smile and jape, but Arry and the wolf-bitch had no time for japes and fun. Arry was still angry about their father, and the wolf-bitch was trying to name all the Freys and the Boltons and the Lannisters, while Arya stood staring at Jorah the Andal with wide, unresponsive eyes.

“Come,” Jorah the Andal said. “I have someone you should meet.”

A thousand different people in one lost little girl walked forward, while Arya Stark tried to remember what it was like to be No One. She couldn’t. She wouldn’t.

#

The Dragon Queen was everything Arya had expected her to be. Long silver hair, bright violet eyes, and skin as pale as snow. She was a lithe, tall woman, who was dressed in fine clothes that would have looked better had they not been torn and bloodied.

She stood beside her dragon, tending to a dozen different wounds that wracked the creature’s body. There were holes in its wings, its stomach, and even in one of its eyes that had been cut and carved. It lay on the ground, twitching and hissing with every touch. Great fumes of smoke burst through its nostrils whenever the Dragon Queen poked or prodded.

She was speaking to it in High Valyrian, obviously intending to keep her murmurs private. To anyone else, her words would have been meaningless, but Arya had spent years with the Faceless Men. She spoke High Valyrian as well as she spoke the Braavosi tongue.

“You did well,” the Mhysa said, softly. “Rest now, will you? Let your eyes fall and let your wings rest. We will need our strength come morning, and, as soon as we can, we will pay him back with fire—”

“Khaleesi,” Jorah the Andal called, before the Mhysa could finish her threat, “I bring a friend who begs our attention.”

Arya begged for nothing, but she said nothing to the contrary. No need to insult the Queen while she stood next to a living, breathing dragon. Especially if its next breath could be in Arya’s direction.

Arya Stark – the original Arya Stark of Winterfell – begged her to try to get closer, to pet it, to feel its scales under her fingers. Weasel and Nan warned her to stay back, and Arry asked her to memorize every fine detail of the beast, because Gendry had always been interested in dragon fire, and he thought he could forge valyrian steel with it, and should they not try to find him again so that he and the dragon could help Jon too?

She ignored them all, and said, rather stupidly, “You’re the Dragon Queen.”

The Mhysa looked up at her finally. Her eyes were rimmed red and the bags under them were as
thick as Jorah’s. The two clearly hadn’t slept in days and it was wearing them down. Arya was glad. If Jon was dead, they deserved to die too. They all did.

“Who is this?” The Dragon Queen asked. “She looks…”

Before Arya could say a word, Jorah answered for her, “This is the Lady Arya Stark, daughter of Eddard Stark and Catelyn Tully and—” He stared pointedly at his Queen. “—sister to Jon Snow.”

Arya gnawed at her bottom lip as the Dragon Queen’s eyes raked over her. Nobody had called her by that name since she had first reached the House of Black and White, since she had disappointed the Faceless Men again and again, and “Did No One do this, or did Arya Stark?”

No one, she had said. I am No One.

It was a lie, and nobody believed it. Not Arya, not the Waif, not the Faceless, and not the Braavosi. Nobody believed it, and it was right not to. Not when she had Needle, the Night Wolf, her memories, and her face.

Yet, even though Arya was back and those lies were behind her, it was still the strangest thing to hear that name again. It might have made her heart stop, had it not already been beating faster than a direwolf’s tail.

“I heard you dead,” said the Dragon Queen.

Her hand went to her stomach, where two scars stood out against her skin. She said, “You’ll find I’m not so easy to kill.”

“Nor am I.” The Dragon Queen offered her a shadow of a smile, before it crumbled like Harrenhal. “Where have you been all this time, Lady Stark?”

I’m not a lady, she wanted to say. Instead, she bit her lip and said, “Surviving.”

She could have told her about fleeing King’s Landing with the dragons’ help, about killing the stable-boy and disappointing her father, Yoren and the Night’s Watch party, about Harrenhal and the Brotherhood, about the Hound and the Vale, about Essos and the Braavosi who never ceased their talk of the Breaker of Chains, of Daenerys Targaryen.

But the years had made her wary. Just as she did not trust Cersei when the Queen rode into Winterfell’s gates, Arya did not trust this Mother of Dragons as she promised fire to a dragon. She did not trust her with her deepest secrets: the ones that involved faces and killings and names that still clung to her like limbs instead of cloaks. There was no way of telling what this woman would do if she did. Ever since the Twins, few trusted the Starks, and fewer still trusted a Faceless Stark. Nobody did, really.

“Your brother always used to talk about you,” the Dragon Queen said.

“Good things, I hope,” she said, though she knew that they were. She and Jon had always been each other’s favorites. It used to drive her mother mad, but none of that mattered when Jon was mussing her hair and calling her little sister. When he did that, all the trouble fled her and all fears too.

But she had new ways to hold back fear. She had learned them with blood and with steel.

Fear cuts deeper than swords.
“He loved you,” the Queen whispered.

“How did you know him?” Arya asked.

“He was-” the Dragon Queen’s voice broke, then, and suddenly Arya’s caution broke. Anyone who cared for Jon was a friend to Arya. “We were close.”

“You loved him.” Arya may not have seen love much in her life, but she knew it well enough from Sansa’s songs when they were children. Gallant knights falling for ladies, men of the Night’s Watch who clung to their vows despite womanly temptation, and Kings marrying beautiful auburn Queens after whisking them away from dreary frozen Hells. The wistful look in the Targaryen’s eyes were signs enough of a love that Arya had never even hoped to have.

_We did_, Arry reminded her. She did her best to smother him.

Daenerys nodded, oblivious to the turmoil inside the wolf. “I’m sorry to say, but I cannot say know where he has gone.”

“If he survived,” Jorah the Andal added, unhelpfully.

“He did,” Arya said. Starks were hardly easy to kill, though many tried. It had taken a war to kill Robb and Mother, an army of gold cloaks to take Father, a traitor for Bran and Rickon, and Arya, Sansa, and Jon had survived everything else. They were a dangerous pack, and a tough one at that. Almost as tough as- “The Walkers. Were they real?”

Jorah nodded. “Very much so. They attacked Winterfell not a half-moon past. Tens of thousands of men died on the barricades. This is all that we have left. We’ve been flying ever since.”

“And Jon,” Arya said. “He’s left too.”

“And Jon,” Daenerys agreed.

“Then why are you sitting here? We need to find him. We can’t just wait-”

“Drogon is hurt,” Jorah said. “The Khaleesi-”

“Would also like to see Jon Snow again.” Daenerys’ voice was heated enough to melt the snow. “If what she says is true, he lives. We need to find him again. Drogon can still fly, if we need him to.”

Jorah remained hesitant, but still, he nodded. “As you wish, my Queen. I will rally the men.”

“See that you do.” She looked at Arya, a smile gracing her regal face. She reminded Arya of the Targaryens of old, before the dragons shrunk and shriveled. Visenya, Rhaenys, and even Aegon the Conquerer stared out from her eyes. “We will ride again by sundown.”

The Dragon Queen did not lie. By dusk, Arya was clinging to the spine of a dragon and trying not to make sick at the feeling.

Its scales were hot, like burning coals in a fire pit. She was thankful she wore gloves, else she thought its heat might have burned through her skin. Snow fell around them, but it did not last on Drogon’s back. All around them, steamed snow rose into the frozen air, only to freeze again into a bitter cold powder that plunged into their faces. It made it hard to breathe and harder still to think. Arya imagined that it might have been worse in the air.

She tried not to think of the magic curdling beneath her fingers. She tried not to think of Maester
Lewin’s lectures on the dangers of dragons and how thankful she should be that they did not live. She tried not to think of Harrenhal’s walls, or the Tragedy at Summerhall. She tried not to think of the Faceless Men, and how staunchly anti-magic they had been after the first gift in Valyria.

Instead, she thought of how exciting it was to ride on a dragon’s back. She thought of all the men and women who would have died to be in her place, and the many that did. She thought of Torrhen Stark kneeling before this beast, and now his descendant was ready to ride it. She thought of the skulls in King’s Landing and how they had saved her life. She thought of Jon, she thought of Gendry, and she thought of her father. She might have saved him, if she rode this creature that day. She might have saved everyone.

The Dragon Queen did not have to say a word. The dragon just waved its wings and took to the sky.

For the first time in years, Arya Stark laughed a real laugh. On a dragon’s back, on her way to White Walkers, grumpkins, and a living Jon Snow, Arya laughed harder than she had when Aunt Lysa died, than when she threw food at Sansa’s face, than when she and Mycah fought with stick swords before Joffrey ruined everything.

For once, Nan, Weasel, Arry, Beth, and Cat were quiet, while Arya breathed in snow and laugh. It was her first good day in a long while. It would be the only one for quite a while still.
The Vale was a flurry of men and women, all completely dedicated to preparing for the fight to come. The elderly, the young, and the middle aged alike all worked as one on smithing, fighting, and serving the few in charge of the war efforts. Boys and girls as young as ten were training in the courtyard, fighting each other with sticks and tourney swords as the Arryn’s Master of Swords watched on. The women fought beside them, most unhappy with the arrangement, but willing to do their duty nonetheless.

Despite their efforts, however, not everything was in place. There was precious little dragonglass to be seen anywhere near. More was coming. Jon Snow had left a few nights prior, hoping to procure much-needed material from Dragonstone. He returned regularly, carrying a dozen men with him on each flight and returning with satchels and coats filled with stones and half-fashioned weapons. Beric Dondarrion, the Hound, and the surviving Stark bannermen went with him, while Tyrion and the rest of Rhaegal’s riders remained behind.

There was much work to be done besides smithing and gathering, and Tyrion found himself at the helm of it all, surrounded by Sansa Stark, Littlefinger, a legion of knights, and the Lords and Ladies of the Vale. It was as unwelcoming a coalition as he could have imagined.

There, in the corner, sat Lady Anya Waynwood, and beside her, a boy of 16. Beside him, men from House Waxley, House Redfort, House Ruthermount, House Sunderland, House Grafton, House Corbray, House Upcliff, House Hersy, and even the much-maligned House Hunter. A dozen other sigils adorned the banners and shields of varying Lords and Ladies, but Tyrion did not care to recognize them.

Sansa had greeted each with a smile and a nod as befit a woman of her station. Tyrion thought it thoughtful, but otherwise futile. There were more important things to attend to than meaningless platitudes of recognition. Unfortunately, one of those important issues glared at him from Robin Arryn’s table: the map of the Vale.

It was a dreadful map, indeed. There were more friendly pieces than they had in Winterfell, but the sheer number of ice-blue chips on the table was staggering. They had been forced to stack them like papers, else the pieces would fall off the table and roll down to the moon door. Even while closed, that door still haunted every man and woman in the room, with the exception of a single half-man.

Once, he had been terrified of this room, and rightfully so. He had glared down the moon door, while Robin screamed and Bronn fought, thinking of just how wet his pants would grow as he fell to the cliffs below. Now, as he stared through the window at the gathering storm, he found himself far more comfortable in the air. The further he was from the wights, the happier he was.
Of course, logically, he knew that the tower would likely be as safe as a wolf in the lion’s den, if
the Walkers had gained another dragon. Viserion had been dangerous enough in the enemy’s
hands, but if Drogon had truly joined their cause, the war was all but lost. One burst of fire would
leave this impregnable base as pregnant as Harrenhal.

He had made a genuine attempt to convince Lord Arryn to fall back to King’s Landing, but the boy
was obstinate. For the first time since they had arrived, he saw Lysa Arryn’s madness etched
across the boy’s face. Twitches, wrinkles, and a sort of wroth that Tyrion had not seen since Cersei
screamed at the gold cloaks as Joffrey twitched and died. Tyrion was lucky enough that the moon
door had not opened halfway through Robin Arryn’s shouts, or the boy might have had him thrown
through.

Oh, how he wished his brother was there in his place! Jaime might have been hated across the
realm, but what he lacked in love, he earned in respect. One look at him, and Robin would have
found his spine suddenly liquefied.

But his brother was gone, and there was work to be done. Complaining would do nothing to change
that.

So, he worked. Tyrion stood on a chair before the map, while all the other lords sat, and tried
desperately to force the stubborn Vale commanders to listen to a stunted dwarf. Somewhere, in one
of the Seven Hells, heard his lord father laughing.

“King’s Landing is far more defensible than the Eyrie,” he explained, “and there are hundreds of
thousands of men and women we could recruit to join our cause.”

“And without the dragonglass, they all die,” Lady Anya Waynwood said with a grimace. “We can
hardly arm them all.”

“If they die, they add to the enemy’s numbers.” Her son, a knight by the name of Morton, said.
The boy had a remarkable habit of stating the obvious.

“So, we get more!” Tyrion snapped. “There is hardly a shortage on Dragonstone. We should have
another fortnight before they reach us. If we add men to the mines, we can have a mountain of it.”

“Lannister,” said Royce Coldwater, “do you truly mean to send hundreds of thousands of untrained
smallfolk into this fight? They would all be killed come nightfall, and we would face an army with
twice our numbers, and each new wight would have weapons we provide for them.”

“Aye. I say we stay here, where the men are safe and the risk is smaller,” Harlan Hunter said,
much to Tyrion’s ire. He would have preferred the elder brother, Gilwood Hunter, but Gilwood had
spent the past moon predisposed with a sudden sickness that seemed suspicious to all those with
eyes, and the middle brother, Eustace Hunter, had fallen from the roof of Longbow Hall only a
fortnight prior. As such, they had been left to deal with the most simple of the Hunters and were
all the worse for it.

“My lords,” Lady Sansa said, though she was not meant to have voice at this table. She had argued
for hours to simply share a seat, before finally receiving Robin Arryn’s endorsement when he had
been sufficiently distracted by his falcon. “Tyrion is right. What should we do if the Walkers
bypass the Eyrie and head straight for King’s Landing?”

Harlan laughed and waved a glass of Dornish wine about the room. “We die a bit quicker!”

“Ser Harlan,” Lord Robin said, sharply.
“My apologies, my lord.” Harlan dropped into a deep bow, spilling half his cup in the progress. “I simply find issue with listening to the battle plans of women and half-men, one who has never fought in a war, and the other who slept through both of his.”

Tyrion was prepared to protest, but Sansa was quicker. “Lord Tyrion is Hand of the Queen,” Sansa said, though she spoke Daenerys’ title with great disdain. “He fought valiantly in the Battle of the Blackwater, and he served Winterfell well against the White Walkers. He deserves your respect, Ser Harlan, Lord Arryn.”

“Not my Queen,” said Harlan. “So far as I know, my Queen wears a lion, not a dragon.”

Fortunately, Lord Robin nodded to Tyrion and ignored the Hunter boy. “I remember when I was a boy,” he said, as if he was not still, “Tyrion Lannister managed to trick all of the most valiant Knights of the Vale with only a cutthroat and his wits.” His warm eyes levelled on Tyrion. For the first time, he actually looked the lord he was meant to be, back straight, eyes focused, and lips set in a stern line. He looked like Jon Arryn for a moment, but younger and far more personable than the old Hand had been. The moment broke as he offered Tyrion a gap-toothed smile. “I would still like to hear about the jackass and the honey comb before this all is done.”

Tyrion shot him a half-grin and a warm laugh. He had not expected that level of welcome from the boy, but he appreciated it well enough. “I’ll see too it then. If we survive, that is.”

His voice went cold. A familiar madness wormed into his eyes. “I have waited eight years, Lannister. I would prefer not any longer.”

“Unfortunately, might be we must, my lord,” said Yohn Royce of Runestone. “We still have many plans to make.”

Lord Robin sighed and hung his head, looking once again like a forlorn child. For a moment, Tyrion was reminded of the boy’s namesake. It seemed as if he had taken after him more than any of them had though. The madness, the want for bloodshed, and the childishness were all long-lasting marks of his time with Robert Baratheon. Perhaps his mother had been right to take him from King’s Landing.

“Yes, of course,” the boy-lord said, waving an arm. “Go on then.”

Tyrion nodded. When he spoke, he was careful not to look at the boy. “As we were saying, we will need to defend King’s Landing if we are to save the whole of the realm. If we stay here, we risk their number doubling.”

“But-”

“Must I remind you all that they have a dragon? You may feel safe behind the walls of this castle now, but walls did not prevent Visenya Targaryen from conquering the whole of the Vale, did it?” He gazed over a series of uncomfortable faces. Some flinched away, while others watched him as if they had never heard the stories of Aegon the Conquerer and his dragon-riding sisters.

Sometimes, Tyrion wondered if children learned anything east of Casterly Rock. As if to provide further evidence for their lack of education, not all were convinced by his argument.

“The Arryns of old fell because they lacked adequate defense. We have a dragon of our own now. We can handle another,” argued Symond Templeton of Ninestars, who should have known better. He had heard first-hand the tale of Jon Snow’s battles in Winterfell. He knew just how badly they had ended, and he knew just how badly Daenerys’ battles had ended.
“And should the dragon die, they take him,” Sansa answered, far more amicably than Tyrion could have. “If we lose Rhaegal, we lose the war.”

“Besides,” Tyrion said, “we have one dragon, and they have two. I stopped considering myself a betting man many years ago, but-”

“When one knight is the better rider, has the better horse, and holds the stronger lance, you do not bet on the other,” said Littlefinger with a confidence that bordered on smugness. His self-satisfied grin never failed to make Tyrion wroth. Even when Littlefinger agreed with him, he was insufferable.

“Yes,” Sansa said, amicably, if only to keep Tyrion from strangling the man, “but, unfortunately, none of us will be there to collect our winnings if the Walkers win.”

Lord Robin put his head in his hands and hummed. No doubt, he was yearning for the days when things were as easy as it had been when he still suckled at his mother’s teat. The world was more complicated now. Decisions made were life-changing. A single wrong decision could damn an army. Robb Stark had learned that well at the Twins, and Ned Stark at the Sept. Even Tyrion had learned it when he stood above the Blackwater, foolish enough to trust his own men in the heat of battle. The world was a complicated one, and they all suffered for it.

Although, admittedly, this fight was simpler than most. For once, there was no grey. They either would win or die. There was no moral quandary, as there had been in the War of Five Kings, when Tyrion knew that the Starks had the right to be wroth. In this fight, the living were right and the dead were wrong, and nothing else mattered. Here, every person was an ally and every man a soldier. It was better that way, he thought. In the wars before, every man had an agenda, every woman had a plot, and Varys’ little birds flew about the realm without shame.

But Varys and his birds were dead now. A wight had driven a knife through his chest and left him to bleed and die, and Tyrion had done nothing to stop it.

Tyrion liked to think that, of all the wights in that crypt, it was Ned Stark that had done it, or Rickard, perhaps. Someone who deserved the chance. In death, the honorable man need not be so honorable. In death, an inability to play the Game did not mean one could not win. In death, even Ned Stark could sit the throne. Even Rhaegar Targaryen could exact his vengeance on the realm that had wronged him. Perhaps the Ned or Rickard managed to find justice in their second life.

Or, far more likely, neither had the chance. Ned Stark had been killed with valyrian steel, and Rickard’s bones were naught but dust and ash. Neither corpse would ever walk the world again. They were lucky. Surely, Varys would rather be dead than a mindless mummer of a man. Surely, they all would. Bran, Brienne, Podrick the Squire, Jorah Mormont, and all the others that were marching on them now. Surely, they would rather be corpses than combatants.

Tyrion stared down at the map, again. The Lords of the Vale were arguing about something or another, but their words flooded over him without ever truly sinking in. Hundreds of bright blue chips glared at him from the table, while the blood rushed in his ears. Too many to kill. Too many, and too little dragonglass to face them with.

The only way to win the war was to beat the generals, and they all knew it. The wights were a distraction – the entire army, a mere pawn in the grand scheme of things. If they could kill a single Walker, they would actually have a chance to win this bloody game.

Regardless, they would need fire and dragonglass, though he did not know if dragonglass would even effect the Walkers. The fire, he knew, only worked on the wights. Bran Stark had attested to
that before the Night King had taken his head. He had warned Tyrion, in the night before the battle, when all seemed lost, because it truly was.

“Today, thousands die,” the boy had told him, those cold eyes staring through Tyrion and off into a world that he could not comprehend. The boy continued on, as if he had not been there at all. “Today, memory dies. You must make it worth it.”

Thousands had died, and so had the realm’s memory. There was only one way to fulfil his duty to the dead. If they wished to kill the Night King, they would need more valyrian steel. Too many of the known swords had been lost in the Battle of Winterfell. They needed more.

“Jaime Lannister,” he said finally, mindless to whatever debate the lords and ladies were having in his mental absence. None of them mattered enough to mind. “He has a valyrian steel sword. I believe my enchanting nephew called it Widow’s Wail.”

Sansa grew stiff, but the Lords of the Vale seemed interested enough, if the eager smiles on their faces meant anything. They only had a dozen valyrian steel weapons in the Eyrie, most the property of lesser lords and ladies who refused to hand the blades off to better trained soldiers. In all likelihood, half of the blades would be lost before the Night King even landed. Wonderful.

“Do you know how we could reach him?” asked Lady Anya, whose son carried a valyrian dagger of his own at his belt.

Tyrion shook his head. He had sent over a dozen missives to King’s Landing already, and none had been answered. The only letter they had received was a short message proclaiming the Queen’s death, writing by a failed maester that Tyrion had never met. Tyrion thought that as likely as the thought that someday he would grow 20 feet taller and his lord father would return to life to hand him a crown and Joffrey’s sword.

“I do not know,” he said. For all he knew, Jaime had run head-first into the Army of the Dead. For all he knew, his brother was marching on King’s Landing with Daenerys, Varys, Brienne, Pod, and Theon, while Tyrion stood on his chair and did nothing of note.

“That doesn’t sound very helpful then,” Harlan said, because in every council, there had to be at least one insufferable fool.

“Nor is your commentary,” Tyrion said, not unkindly. “So please do keep it to yourself. I fear you are wasting valuable air every time you open your mouth, and the air does seem quite thin in the Eyrie.” He smiled, then. Courtly insults had always had a peculiar way of lightening his mood.

“No one asked for you either, imp,” Harlan said, as if that insult was fresh and new. As if it was just the right tool for knocking down a man who had learned to wear his weakness like armor.

He wondered if Jon Snow had learned that trick in his time. If, perhaps, a Lannister had done good by the Starks, if only that once. He hoped so. Any act that would spit on the Lannister name was an act he would love to perform.

But that was a question that could wait. For now, he had a boy to insult. “Ah, yes,” Tyrion said. “Quite wise, my lord. Very clever to hope to dismiss one of the few survivors of a White Walker attack. Please, enlighten me with the curiosities you have seen from the Army of the Dead, and your brilliant strategies in coping with them.”

“That is enough!” Yohn Royce said. “We have a war to fight already, and no need to add more enemies to the fold!”
Tyrion ignored him in favor of the Hunter boy. “Do tell us, my lord. We are all on the edge of our seats.”

“Take care not to fall from it then,” Edmund Waxley, a fat man with braids running through a mottled beard, japed. As he laughed, all three of his chins danced and jostled. Several other voices joined him, and Tyrion smiled at each.

The dwarf stepped back on his seat, and nodded gracefully. “I do so appreciate the advice, my lord. I would also advise you to invest in a second chair, perchance yours will break beneath your girth.”

Yohn Royce slammed a hand on the table, his face twisted with wroth. It matched Waxley’s well. “Lord Tyrion!”

In spite of Royce’s fury, the Lord of the Vale was laughing, so Tyrion went on. “It seems you may have been misnomered, Lord Royce. Rather than bronze, it seems your face can appear quite red at times.”

“Tyrion!” his once-wife cried, finally bringing the japes to an end.

“My apologies, my lady,” Tyrion said, with all the charm that a mutilated dwarf could muster. He eyed Harlan and grinned. “I was merely jesting with friends, was I not?” Three furious faces stared back at him, and several of the unnamed lords with them. Tyrion smiled at each one, wide and bright and welcoming. “We should be back to it, then. What were we talking about? My dearest brother, perhaps?”

“They say they found his armor by his sister’s side,” Littlefinger said. “If Cersei is dead, he may very well be with her.”

Tyrion scoffed. If they expected him to break down in tears at the reminder of the Queen’s false demise, they were sorely mistaken. “If my sweet sister is dead, he may very well have done it himself. I cannot imagine he would enjoy wandering about in a white cloak after killing two of his charges.”

“Quite the honorable man,” scoffed Baelish.

“As far as I remember, you had a hand in your lord’s death, as well, Lord Baelish. Of course, it must be forgiven. It is very easy to forget that the Small Council serves at the Hand’s pleasure, is it not?”

To Littlefinger’s credit, he simply smiled. “And the Hand is meant to serve the King. When the King and the Hand disagree, it can get rather messy, don’t you agree?”

“No one is questioning anyone’s honor,” Anya Waynwood said, with little patience. “We have a war to plan, and I would rather get to it before my eyes turn blue, if it would please my lords.”

Tyrion nodded his head respectfully. “As you wish, my lady. As I was saying, my dear brother has a valyrian steel sword in his possession. So should any of your men come across a tall fellow with a golden hand, I would advise you to try not to kill him.”

“We could always take the sword,” Harlan said, just to be the irritating wretch he was. “Wouldn’t be hard to take from a cripple, would it?”

“If you think you could defeat even a one-handed Jaime Lannister in a melee, I encourage you to try it, Ser Hunter. Mayhaps you could even best the Night King by nightfall. If you have the skill, do show us. I do so love a good tourney. Until that day, however, I do encourage you to allow the
rest of us to debate a different strategy.” He studied the boy for a moment more, before his eyes fell
to the empty scabbard by his side. “To speak of family swords, where is your own, Ser Hunter? I
had heard that the Hunters all took great pride in their blade, do you not? What is it you call it?”

Harlan’s cheeks blushed red, but his voice held steady. “Arrowfall remains where it belongs at my
lord brother’s side. Where is it I can you find yours, Lannister?”

“Can we get on with it?” Robin Arryn snapped, his humor finally eroded. Evidently, the reminder
of the stakes of their fight had been more than enough to eradicate what remained of the boy’s
patience.

And, as the Lord of the Vale commanded, they did. They talked for hours and hours about nothing
at all and about everything. About strategy, about a standing point of attack, about where to put
their damned trebuchets – an argument that lasted well over an hour. When Lord Ruthermount
recommended putting them directly behind the front lines, Tyrion was prepared to slap the man.
He did slap his own face into Robin Arryn’s map. Many ice-blue chips fell to the moon door
below.

The endless debates only ended when Jon Snow returned with another shipment of dragonglass.
Robin had a peculiar obsession with the shards, and a much more understandable one for the
dragon, so the meetings typically ended whenever one of the two arrived. Tyrion could only
imagine how he would react when the full shipments from Dragonstone finally reached them. He
thought that the boy might bathe in them.

He watched Robin race down the steps, the many lords and ladies of the Vale blanketing him as he
went. All were eager to escape the council, and Tyrion could hardly blame them. If he had to listen
to one more comment about the dothraki charge, he would welcome a return to the sky cells.

Only a few of the massive crowd remained behind: Sansa Stark, Peter Baelish, Tyrion, and the
ever-present Yohn Royce. The rest left in a whirlwind of armor and shiny blue cloaks.

As soon as they had left, Baelish made for Sansa, who rejected his presence with a surprising
grace. Tyrion had never expected to see such courtly wisdom in a woman so young. Cersei had not
been anywhere near so proper at such an age. She had always preferred swordplay with Jaime,
wandering the forest with her lady friends, or leaving dung on Tyrion’s clothes.

Now, she was dead. Wiped from the world with all her children, leaving behind a legacy of piss
and cruelty. Perhaps Sansa had been right to turn to court over the yard.

The thought of his sister stung deeper than he imagined it would. Once, he had thought that he
hated his sister. Once, he had even promised ashes in her mouth and happiness eroded. He had
promised her of Lannisters and debts, of fire and blood.

Yet, I do not hate her, he thought. I cannot hate any of them. Not Jaime, or Tysha, or Cersei, or
Shae. Not even Father.

Tywin had been a monster – that much was undeniable – but Tyrion was too. In a way, he thought
his once-wife might also have been. How else would she know how to handle Littlefinger as well
as she did? He watched her dance around him, her obvious distaste wiped from her face and instead
replaced by the practiced look that discontented of the southern ladies. He wondered if she had
learned it from the Tyrells, or if that was another gift from his sweet sister.

“Lord Baelish,” she greeted with the practiced southern tone.
“Lady Sansa,” he answered, pleasantly. “I was in the mood for a bit of tea. I was wondering if you would not mind-”

“That would be lovely, Lord Baelish, but I am afraid I will have to decline. Lord Tyrion and I will need to meet with my brother before he sets off again. He never stays very long.”

“Ahh, of course,” Littlefinger said. Though his tone remained pleasant, there was an undercurrent of displeasure that made Tyrion laugh into his wine. “Do meet with me as soon as you are able.”

“My lord, we have had many opportunities to speak. Should you wish, I shall be available at every meet of this council.”

Baelish struggled to hide a grimace, and Tyrion struggled to hide his laugh. “I fear that what I have to discuss would be better suited to a more private setting.”

Sansa feigned surprise. “Oh, I am sorry to hear that, Lord Baelish. Sadly, whatever it is, it will have to wait until after the battle. Should we survive that long, that is.”

“Oh of course, my lady. I imagine a great many things are on hold until then.”

Sansa took a sip of her wine – a Dornish red that the late Lady Arryn had tucked away a few moons prior to her death. Fortunately for them all, a servant of the Arryns had alerted them of the barrels after Rhaegal’s fourth flight to Dragonstone. Most of the wine was gone now, only few nights later, and yet none of the barrels had left this quarrelsome room. It spoke of something that Tyrion did not quite care to extrapolate.

“Lord Tyrion,” Sansa cried, once her cup was finished. “Would you spare an hour to explain the revised strategy for the left flank before we speak with my brother? I find myself confused about the cavalry charge.”

Tyrion had to smother a smile. She had learned the Game well, hadn’t she? She could even dismiss a man with grace. “Certainly, Lady Sansa. As you wish.”

He waved her towards the table, if only to test her. Neither of them very much wanted to remain in this room, but it would be uncourtly to invite her to his quarters directly. Thankfully, she was wise enough to reject that distasteful proposal.

“Would you mind showing me on the maps in your solar? I find those are simpler to digest. I do not have much a mind for maps or strategy, as I am sure you must know.”

“Of course, my Lady.” Tyrion nodded. He wondered if, somewhere, Tywin Lannister was regretting their match. They worked too well together for the old lion to pair.

They retreated to their solar together, leaving an amused Yohn Royce and an unamused Littlefinger in their stead. Somewhere beneath them, Jon Snow was handing off bags of dragonglass to Eyrie riders. Somewhere in the mines of Dragonstone, the Hound and Beric Dondarrion were slaving away with pickaxes and cloths. Somewhere in the castle, Beric’s smith was fashioning spears, swords, and arrowheads that would serve them well in the wars to come. But, there, at the top of the castle, overlooking cliffs wrought with trenches, trebuchets, scorpions, and pits filled with firewood, Tyrion and his once-wife sat in his solar and drank together.

Sansa sat at his table, staring into the emptiness of his walls, while Tyrion sipped a glass of Arbor ale he had smuggled from the kitchens. It was hard to keep from whoring in times like these, and harder still to keep from drinking. He had managed the former well enough, but the latter was much more difficult an urge to evade.
Once – a thousand years ago – he and Sansa had been alone together like this. He was drunken, and she was drinking. She had lain on his bed, wiping tears from her eyes as she readied herself to give her maidenhead away to a bitter drunken fool of a dwarf, while he had stared at her like a dog in heat. She must have been terrified, and she certainly looked it. Wide-eyed, shaking, and looking anywhere but at her lord husband. Surely, she had wished that the candles were blown away.

If the gods truly were real, then the Mother had been kind to them both when she gave him guidance that day. When She stilled his hands and averted his eyes, so that he could do, for the first time in too many years, what was honorable and right. His son would never be Lord of Winterfell, it was true, but at least he had not defiled this woman. At least he had done that right. At least one Stark evaded an awful fate by Lannister hands.

“Do you remember that night?” he asked, wistfully.

He did not have to explain himself. Sansa knew without asking. She offered him a shaky smile, and said, “You were kind to me.”

“I kept my cock in my pants,” Tyrion said. “That was not kindness. It would have been kind if I refused my father and let you go.”

Her gaze escaped his, averted to the missive in her palm. She had scarcely released since the Battle of Winterfell, and she dared not show it to another man. The Hound had asked her about it once before, but she refused to answer him, and no one else presumed to ask once he had stormed off. If Sansa could dissuade a Clegane, who were they to know whatever she cared to hide?

Tyrion had caught sight of the letter once, but only for a second. Whatever the message was, it was written a shaky scrawl that looked more like the ramblings of a drunken man than Sansa’s painstakingly perfect penmanship.

He wondered if it was Jon’s. The two seemed close, after all. Closer than a baseborn boy and a highborn girl were meant to be. Or, perhaps it was Loras Tyrell’s. Before their marriage, Sansa had seemed particularly close to the lad. Perhaps she had never been able to bring herself to let him go.

But Sansa was smarter than that. She had to be, if she survived this long.

“You were kinder than most,” she said, simply. She fiddled with her missive again, and her hand slipped free of their cloth coverings. Tyrion was painfully aware of the lines of scars that ran across her arms wherever the skin showed. In the North, they had not seen much of her marks, but in the relative warmth of the Eyrie, her sleeves were far shorter and her scars more evident.

“I am sorry to hear of what happened between you and the Bolton bastard,” he said.

She deflect as easily as he had. “And I am sorry for what happened between you and Joffrey. I never should have left you there. You were good.” She refused to meet his eyes, but Tyrion didn’t mind.

“I was still your captor,” he said. “A warden can gild his walls and offer each man flowers and bronze spoons with each meal, but that does not make him any less of a warden.”

“You were a prisoner as much as me. I saw how Joffrey was with you.” Finally, she caught his gaze. Her eyes were soft, like pillows in a brothel, and kind as Tysha’s had been all those many years ago. This time, it was he who averted his eyes. “He did not need to do those things. Mock you like that.”

Tyrion strolled over to the window and gazed out at the valleys below. Jon Snow’s dragon –
Rhaegal – was basking in the few rays of light that emerged between the storm clouds. It did nothing else. When Jon did not will it, the dragon did not move. It did not eat, did not sleep, did not do much of anything. He felt a strange kindship with the poor beast. His mother had gone before her time too.

“We have all had hard times,” he said. “And we have all shared in our suffering.”

“They say your sister is dead,” Sansa said. It was obvious that she was smothering a smile for his sake. Tyrion hardly blamed her. When he first heard the news, there had been laughter between his sobs.

“As I said, we have all shared in our suffering. I fear we share our grief, as well.” Unlike Sansa, he had no smile to suppress. “We have both lost a sister.”

Sansa frowned. “My sister lives.”

“Have you seen her?” He did not mean to be so cruel, but the realm had long since proven its cruelty, and Tyrion had sworn that he would keep lies from his tongue. Even if the woman he had sworn it to was truly gone, it was an oath that he refused to break.

“Brienne of Tarth has,” Sansa said.

Tyrion nodded. He would not question Brienne’s honor as he would have others. He had heard tale of her from Jaime, and he had seen her valor as they escaped Winterfell. Had Brienne of Tarth not perished, the rest of them would have. He owed that woman his life.

Still, it was a surprising revelation. Tyrion had thought the Stark girl long dead. He had thought her killed after the capture of Ned Stark. Missing or dead, it would lead to the same outcome. A high-born girl on the streets of King’s Landing did not last long, no matter how stubborn the girl. Sansa herself had nearly been proof of that, all those many years ago.

“How long ago did Lady Brienne see her?” he asked. Sansa looked askance. She neglected to answer, so Tyrion went on, “Your sister may have survived a long while, but there is no guarantee she survived any longer than that. For all you know, she might have died years ago. Perhaps, she even marches toward us as we speak.”

He thought that Sansa might have snapped at him for that, but instead, she smiled. “They said that about Bran and Rickon. I even heard talk of Jon dying.”

“And all three of your mother’s sons are dead now,” he said. “From what I heard, even Jon Snow died on the Wall.”

“He did, and he survived. Even before him, two of us survived the Battle of Winterfell. Two of us survived our father’s capture. Two of us survived the burning of Winterfell.” She smiled. “We Starks are a resilient people, Tyrion. And if I know my sister, she is more Stark than I ever was.” There was a grim pleasure on his once-wife’s face. She did not doubt herself for a moment, and it showed.

“So, you say,” Tyrion said, agreeably.

And yet, despite his words, he believed her. Somehow, he believed that a highborn girl had survived on the streets of King’s Landing, all alone at one and ten with naught but the clothes on her back to keep her company. Somehow, he believed that she had survived seven years since, when so many had fallen and died around her with more experience, more support, and far more skill. Somehow, he believed that she had not perished in the North as the Army of the Dead walked
south. Somehow, he believed it. Perhaps if the Stark girl survived, Jaime had too.

Chapter End Notes

The Sansa & Tyrion scene was not planned. I’m starting to understand why GRRM likes the gardening method. However, based on the fact that I’m currently planning the end of this fic, I absolutely do not understand how he uses it. I’m four chapters in, and I have absolutely derailed my original planned ending. Whoops x4
Drogon was in agony. A bitter agony that burned hotter than his flames. He weakened more with each league they crossed as the wind tore at the holes the wights had torn through his scales.

More than anything, Dany wanted to stop, wanted to give him the chance to rest and recover, but there was no time. The Army of the Dead was marching, and she needed to find allies if she wished for anyone to survive it. They needed to get to Dragonstone, and Drogon would need to keep flying until they did.

The only measurable benefit of being in the air again was that Jon’s sister seemed to relax more with every beat of Drogon’s wings. She was still tense, of course – everyone was tense when they first rode – but she was no longer passing wary glares at the ruins behind them. Instead, she simply watched the trees and rivers that passed by the second.

Her other companions did not find the flight so freeing. The unsullied did not fear the air, like the Stark soldiers seemed to, but even they preferred to keep their feet in the dirt than the skies. The Starks largely said nothing, beyond the typical whines and screams whenever Drogon first flew. Dany knew why. It would hardly do for a man to cower where a woman did not, and men like these would do anything to prove themselves superior to her.

But, while they were sick in the air, Dany shut her eyes and flew. It was always a good feeling, cutting through the air above the trees and the grasses, the castle and the mountains, above the rivers and the streams, and the roads she had dedicated her life to conquering. Her ancestors had forged this realm, and there she was, flying above it all, intent to take it back. There was no greater feeling in the world. No matter how sick it made the Stark and unsullied soldiers, no matter how much Jorah complained, and no matter how much the Stark girl shook, Dany would not trade her place for any.

*This* was the ancient seat of the Targaryen House. A dragon’s back, high in the air, where the blood of the dragon belonged.

When she flew, she could forget the ones she left behind her. The dead, the betrayers, the forgotten, her two lost sons – one dead and one gone. She could leave them all behind as she cut through clouds and bathed in the glow of the dying sun.

Unfortunately, the flight was not meant to last. No matter how far she wanted to fly, she could not
risk overexerting her dragon. Drogon needed to land before he exhausted himself fell from the sky, and he needed a full night’s rest before the morrow. So, with great displeasure, Dany led him to a clearing far from Harrenhal and whatever strange influence the castle had over Jon’s sister.

As soon as Drogon’s claws touched the frozen soil, all three of the Stark soldiers scrambled off of his back. The unsullied went after, slower and far more methodical, but each of the six still eager to escape to solid ground. Even Jorah, though he had flown on Drogon’s back before, fell to the ground as soon as the chance was afforded. The only two who did not immediately rush to escape Drogon was Dany herself, and Jon’s littlest sister.

The woman was clinging to Drogon’s spines, her face a blank canvas that betrayed nothing. The only sign that she was even conscious was her limbs shaking like leaves in a storm. She stared at Dany, and even her eyes were empty.

“When I was a girl, I always wanted to ride a dragon,” she said. Her voice did not shake the way her limbs did. It appeared the only emotion the girl did express was the involuntary.

Dany offered her a fraction of a smile. She would have given more, but the rest of her smile had died with Grey Worm and Missandei in Winterfell, or lied in whichever corner of the realm Rhaegal now resided. “As did I.”

She offered the girl a hand, and Arya stared at it for a long while, before she reluctantly accepted. Drogon bent for them, and Dany led her back to the ground, where she stood on shaky legs. The Stark soldiers were quick to try to help, but Arya waved all three of them off.

“I am perfectly fine,” she told them.

“As you say, milady,” one of the Stark soldiers acquiesced. His eyes went to Dany, but it only lasted for a fraction of a second, before they darted back to Arya. He clearly had more he wanted to ask, but something stilled his tongue. They had all been rather quiet since they found their lady in Harrenhal.

“We sleep here for the night,” Dany commanded. “Drogon needs rest.”

The Stark men did not wait to strip themselves of their armor and their arms. Swords clattered to the ground, just as they had in Winterfell, as the blood piled and the snows gathered, and hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children stormed the fallen gates.

Arya stared distastefully at her men. She settled down against a tree far from the rest of the group, but left her armor on and her swords still strapped to her side.

“I can keep watch,” she said. Her voice was still controlled, but she spoke quicker than she ought to.

There was much about this woman that Dany did not yet understand. Fortunately, she supposed this was as good an opportunity as any to learn.

“I will as well,” she said. “The rest of you may rest. We can find food come morning.”

“Khaleesi,” Jorah began, but Dany was quick to interrupt. She did not need him to betray her true purpose, nor did she need him to mention the fact that she had not kept watch since the early says of the Red Waste.

“Sleep, Ser Jorah. You can serve me better with rest.”
Jorah stared at her for a moment more, his brows drawn close in his confusion. Finally, his eyes flickered to Arya, and he nodded his head to Dany. “As you wish, Khaleesi.”

The ten of them laid against Drogon’s side. Some crawled under his wings, cradling him for warmth and shelter, as they had every night since Winterfell. The others remained out in the open air, still touching his red-hot scales, but not willing to stay too close.

Sleeping too far from the dragon would mean a cold night, indeed, and all of them had already born witness to winter’s wrath. None was particularly eager to provoke the cold any more than they already had.

Arya had not yet learned that lesson. She stayed back against the trees instead, watching Dany with mistrusting eyes. Her weak hand stayed on the hilt of her smaller sword – the one that did not bear that repulsive lion as a pommel – at all times. Dany wondered if she slept with the blade in her palm, or if her hands preferred to fall to a dagger instead.

For her part, Dany stayed by Drogon’s side as the men fell into the throes of sleep. She pet at his scales, whispered her assurances, and promised her vengeance until the moon was higher and the men surely asleep. Some took longer than others to find comfort in the cold snows, and so Dany waited hours until their bodies finally slumped. Only then did she cross the field to Arya’s side.

The girl eyed her warily as Dany settled beside her. She was trembling by then, and violently so. Her teeth were chattering enough that Dany thought she might shatter them. Even a Stark could feel the bitter winds if they were not dressed for the climate, and Arya was certainly not. Her worn leather armor did little to protect her from the cold with all the rips and thinning from moons spent in the wilds. She should have been huddling by the dragon, not wasting away in her own corner of the world in weather like this. The poor girl was as stubborn as Jon could be whenever he needed something of Dany.

“I was curious about how you found yourself in Harrenhal,” Dany said, as she settled in. She did not give the girl a choice in the matter. “It does not seem the sort of place one would choose to travel.”

Arya studied her with an unresponsive countenance. She looked up to the sky, at the flakes of snow that fell in clumps around them, and shook her head. “No,” she said. “It wasn’t.”

“How did you make it then?”

Arya’s tired eyes scanned her, suspicious as ever, but at least her hand pulled away from her sword. Finally, after too long, she sighed and hung her head. There was pain in her voice, but nothing to be seen on her face. “I was returning from King’s Landing. I was hoping to return to Winterfell.”

The reminder of Arya’s home was an unwelcome one. There were too many bad memories for Dany to bear. Grey Worm choking on his own staff, Missandei losing her head to a giant, Viserion falling, and losing both of her armies to a force that she should not have hoped to defeat. She could still see the bloodshed whenever she closed her eyes and an icy blue face, smirking at her from a bed of dragonfire, clutching a javelin made of ice in one hand and a sword in the other. It was like staring into the jaws of death and praying that they would not bite.

As a child, Dany had been raised beneath the light of the Seven. She knew well that staring at the Night King was staring at the Stranger himself.

“I am sorry,” she said, hoping to betray nothing of her inner turmoil. “You will have to wait longer to see it.” If she ever could at all. As far as Dany knew, Winterfell was overrun. If ever they
managed to defeat the White Walkers, the castle would still never be the same.

At that, Arya only laughed. When she spoke, it was a bitter voice that left her. “I was one and ten when I left Winterfell. I can wait a few moons more.”

Dany’s laugh was only a bit more genuine. “That is what I said to your brother when he asked me to come North.”

Just as it had before, the girl’s walls broke down at the mention of Jon. For a moment – barely even long enough to be seen – there was a girl of one and ten hidden beneath that mask, desperate to see the man – the boy – that she had not seen since the end of the summer. For a moment, she was alive again. A girl with hopes and dreams and wants and wishes, and Dany could see herself through those sightless eyes. Then, Arya caught control of her face again, and the blank mask was all that stood.

“You ignored King’s Landing. Why?” she said, though it clearly pained her not to speak of Jon. Dany wondered why she even bothered to hide her affections when they were so remarkably obvious. “I heard you wanted to be Queen.”

Dany bristled at that. “I am the Queen, whether or not I wear the crown or sit a throne. I was born to defend the people of my realm and all those that I have freed. I cannot defend those people, if the true threat is not vanquished until I sit upon a throne of iron. When Jon told me of the threat to the North, I offered your people my aid, and I am truly sorry that it was not enough to stop their Army from advancing.”

She watched Arya, hopeful for any reaction beyond the standard nothingness that was her only expression. The only hint that the girl even breathed was the way she chewed at her lip as she thought.

Finally, she looked at Dany and said, “You did a favor for my people.” Before Dany could protest that no, she did it for them all, Arya stopped her. “I did not do it for you, but I can return the favor. Cersei Lannister is dead, and her brother with her.”

Dany’s heart might have stopped. It was too good to be believed. While she was fighting in the North, the war had been won in the South. The Lannisters – the family that had torn apart hers until there was nothing left but two scared little children – were dead. All but one were gone from the world, and the last survivor was on her side.

Uncle, she thought. Father. Brother. Mother. Nephew. Niece. You are avenged. The usurper is dead, and all his House. The betrayer is dead, and all his blood. We have won.

She scrambled to her feet. “How can you know this?”

At that, Arya offered her a shadow of a smile. Instead of falling to the smaller blade, her weak hand went instead to the lion’s pommel. “This sword was the Kingslayer’s once. I took it from him.” At that, she drew the blade. It was a slow draw and a quiet one. Had the girl wished, she could have killed Dany with it, and the others would never have awoken. Instead, she let the blade fall into her palms, showcasing the red and black streaks that rippled through valyrian steel.

“This was my father’s sword once,” Arya said. She, too, could not tear her eyes away from the sword. “I could tell as soon as I saw it. The Lannisters killed him with it and reforged it, but it is ours again. I took it back.”

Dany felt that she could hardly breathe. This mere child had gifted her vengeance. Where Dany had
fought for decades to earn the chance to slay her lifelong foes, this Stark girl had done it when she could not. She had brought Dany a gift that she could never repay.

And to think I wanted the Starks dead. The thought felt like a noose around her neck. It had only been a few years prior when she had wanted for Ned Stark’s head. When she had her husband’s promise to burn their castles to the ground, to rape and kill them all. This woman had been a child then, and Dany would have watched her die. She would have watched Drogo tear her head free from her body, or perhaps keep her as a slave for the khalasar.

She felt lost. She felt sick. She felt like screaming and laughing and crying all at once. She wanted to lay down in the snow and sleep, but her heart was racing, and Drogon was still in pain, and the Stark girl was staring at her expectantly, and she had no idea what to say.

“This-” her voice broke. Her voice had never broken before. “I cannot repay you.”

“Yes,” Arya said, sheathing the sword again, “you can. My brother.”

“I will take you to him,” Dany promised, ready to swear it by her heart and her soul, by her last dragon and her lost dragon, by the blood of the family she had lost before she even knew what she had.

But the girl was shaking her head. “He can’t know.”

Dany paused, her mirth shattering in the time it took her to process the request. “What?”

“I do not want him to know.” For the first time since Jorah found her in Harrenhal, Arya looked all-too-vulnerable. “He must still think me a child, playing with sticks and stones. He can’t know what I am now.”

She had to struggle to somber herself. “Jon is a good man. He would-”

“I know he’s a good man. He always was.” Her hand went to the smaller sword again. She shut her eyes and took a long breath as a wave of indifference overtook her. “That is why he can’t know.”

Dany had not known what she expected of Jon’s little sister – besides perhaps being dead – but this was certainly not it. The way Jon described her, she was a fierce little thing. Warm, full of life, and eager to play swords with her older brothers. If he was to be believed, Arya had been the only one to see the brother in the bastard. They loved each other more than Dany could have ever hoped to love Viserys. She had been jealous of it, once, when he had talked of his littlest sister. Now, she could only think that Arya reminded her of the unsullied soldiers. They shared the same blank stares that reminded her of the path they had each taken. Hurt and loss and suffering on an unimaginable scale, the sort that killed any love or affection in a person, and just left them as dead inside as the wights.

But Grey Worm had recovered. He had fallen in love in the midst of war, after all he had suffered and lost. Perhaps if she could help Arya too, she could bring a great gift to Jon Snow.

“What happened to you?” Dany asked, though she knew it was hardly a fair question. Had any asked it of her, she would have declined to answer. The years had not been kind to any of the Great Houses of Westeros, and the Starks and the Targaryens had surely suffered the most.

But Arya did not shy away from the question as Dany might have expected. Instead, she met the Queen’s eyes. “War,” she said, gesturing to those sleeping against Drogon. “Same as happened to all of us.”
She was not wrong. War was as much a part of them now as blood and bone. Dany had been a mere infant when the usurper’s war decimated her family. She had barely been a woman grown when Viserys sold her off to the Dothraki, and she had only aged a few moons when she founded a khalasar of her own. Her dragons had been babes when she started her first wars, and now she was yet another soldier in the Great War.

“Fire and Blood” were her family’s words, and she had never forgotten them. Perhaps Arya had learned the meaning too in the midst of her own wars.

“Where have you been all these years, Ar-” She trailed off, not knowing what title to use for the girl. She was not close enough for Arya, not distant enough for Stark, and not willing to salt the wound of the Lady of Winterfell.

Arya smiled at her. It was a hollow grin that sent shivers down Dany’s spine. “Learning.”

“From who?”

“No one.” This time, the grin was real.

The phrase struck Dany as strangely familiar, but the exact reason why escaped her. It was an odd answer, and the girl looked far too smug for it to be some passing quip. There was meaning behind this jab, and Dany felt an unusual need to find it.

There was something else that struck her about the way the girl spoke. “Have you been to the Free Cities?”

Arya’s face did not move, but Dany could see the anger in her eyes. “Why do you ask?”

“I have known many from the Free Cities. My handmaiden. Daario, my-” She cleared her throat. “-advisor. Illyrio Mopatis. I even lived in Pentos and Braavos for a time. You share their tongue.”

The girl did not seem pleased. “My dancing master was from Braavos.”

Dany paused, unsure. This girl, of all people, did not seem the sort to enjoy dancing. She seemed more likely to enjoy rolling in a pit of fire than dancing before a throne at a wedding. Hesitantly, she asked, “Do you enjoy dancing?”

At that, Arya smiled. Warmth spread across her face like fire across the trenches. “My sister and I used to dance together often. Our septa, the kindly woman she was, used to instruct us on dancing, singing, music, and needlework.” Her face changed, a small smile forming where once only grey had been. Dany could not help but smile in response. “I miss it,” Arya said. “Sansa and Septa Mordane, Jeyne Pool and Theon Greyjoy, even Bran.” She laughed. “It’s funny. I always hated Bran. Now I just wish to see him again.”

Dany frowned. “Bran is-”

Arya scowled. “Dead, I know. I was not completely unaware of Westerosi news.” She chewed on her lower lip and said, “And what of you, Daenerys Targaryen? Who have you lost, while you were waiting to come home?”

The question came without warning, and Dany was not ready. A thousand images flashed before her eyes. Viserys burning alive as his crown swallowed him whole. Drogo staring off into nothing, as he sucked aimlessly for air that would not come. Doreah screaming, mercy, mercy, mercy. Please, Khaleesi! Viserion falling from the air, and it was Dany’s fault; she should have known better; she should have done something; she should not have listened to Tyrion. Jorah leaving, once
in disgrace and once with an infection that was sure to kill him, and they both knew it. Daario watching with a song on his lips as her ships carried her across a sea that was far from narrow. Grey Worm falling amidst a storm of corpses, and Missandei dying somewhere that Dany could not see.

*I cannot save them all,* Dany thought. *In truth, I can save none.*

Once, Kinvara had called her the Prince who was Promised, Azor Ahai, but she knew now that it was a lie. If Dany could not stop Mirri Maz Duur or the Sons of the Harpy, and if she could not stop the Night King when he was weaker, how was she meant to save the world after he had conquered Winterfell? After he had marched south with one of Dany’s dragons — while one was injured, and the other was alive, *he had to be* — coming to claim the rest of the North and the realm.

Whoever Azor Ahai was, she hoped he would be ready, because the rest of them were not. She hoped Lightbringer was forged and complete, and she hoped whoever the Prince was, he was near. They would need him. Soon.

But thoughts of the prophecy could come later. For now, Dany had a Stark girl to answer. “My home,” she said. “I lost Westeros before I ever truly knew it.”

“Where did you grow up?” Arya asked, clearly more out of curiosity than the probing questions that Dany used.

“It was nice,” she answered, softly. She did not know if Arya would appreciate it, but she liked keeping herself gentle around a girl as small as she. “In Braavos, we had a big house with a red door. There was a lemon tree outside my window surrounded by great grass fields. A knight watched over us, but sickness took him when I was young. That was when we left for Pentos.”

Arya stared at her for a long while. It took time, but slowly there came an expression to her face, and it was one that Dany did not wish to see in the eyes of a girl as young as this Stark. Mistrust. Mislike. A cold anger like a sword made of ice, and a stare that could outlast dragonfire.

Her teeth left the lip that she had been gnawing on, and instead, Arya frowned. “A lie,” she said, simply.

Dany frowned. “What?”

But the girl said nothing. Instead, her eyes went back to her boots, and she resumed her chewing. Dany had half a mind to find her stray pieces of bark, so that at least she would cease ripping her lips bloody.

“What do you mean?” she asked again. “That was the truth.”

Arya’s blank stare broke again, leaving only the saddest look in her dark eyes. For a moment, Dany could imagine her as a true child, again. One without swords and without blood on her hands and blood in her stare. When she spoke, her voice shook. “Knights are not protectors.”

*Ah,* Dany thought, *that explains it.*

This was a girl whose life had been torn apart by people who called themselves honorable and just. Dany had seen people like her too many times before. One could not spend time with slaves and slavers without knowing the despair that Arya Stark must have felt, watching the Usurper King tear apart her family.

Gods, Dany had been a girl like her. She too had not trusted most Westerosi lords as a child, and
she too had been rewarded for her mistrust. They both survived.

There was a lot of herself that she could see in Arya Stark. The loss, the learned fury, the fierceness that ran like fire in her blood. She hoped Arya’s story would be happier, but she already doubted it. The chance for happiness had passed them both by long ago.

“Which-”

“Ah!” Arya hummed, holding up a single finger. “It’s my turn.” She sombered, as she slowly asked, “My brother. Jon. Was he well?”

“He was,” Dany lied. The last time she had seen Jon Snow, he was covered in blood, brain, and bone. He was on the ground – long having lost Rhaegal somewhere in the fighting – and waving his blade at a dozen surrounding wights. Everything in Dany had driven her towards him, but she had a duty. She needed to protect his brother. She needed to end the Night King once and for all.

*And I failed. Twice. Azor Ahai would not have failed.*

Arya only frowned. “Before the battle, I mean. How was he?”

“He was well,” Dany said, again, though she knew it to be a lie. He had been stressed, near panic, and halfway to despair before the Night King had even reached them. Tyrion’s plan to ally with Cersei had doomed them all, and Dany thought that Jon might have been the first to see it, because, in the days prior to the battle, he certainly acted as if the end had come.

Arya breathed out an unhappy sigh. It was her only reaction, besides another, “You lie.”

It seemed she was done with games then, because her face morphed back into the grey slate, and she refused to answer any more of Dany’s questions. The dragon in her itched to know more, screamed at her to press her advantage and use her rank to compel the girl to speak, but the woman side stilled her tongue.

Dany was a good liar, to be true – she would never have claimed the unsullied otherwise – but there was nothing suspicious about calling her lie for what it was. Anyone in all the seven kingdoms could have known that Jon Snow would not have fared well before the battle. Rumors of his death were prevalent through all the seven kingdoms, and Dany knew all-too well how true those rumors were.

Besides, it was not Dany’s place to rage at the girl that had brought her nothing but boons. Had it not been for Arya, Dany might never have known of the demise of House Lannister.

“Come,” Dany said, after she had finally ceased her questioning. “It is late. I will wake Jorah and the unsullied, and we may rest.”

Arya shook her head. “I would stay awake.”

Dany shook her head. “You need rest. We have a long day ahead of us, and we must be prepared. I do not need you falling from my dragon’s back.”

“Nor do I need to. That does not mean I need to sleep,” she said, though the dark lines under her eyes disagreed.

“Sleep, Arya Stark,” Dany said, slipping into the voice of a woman much her elder and much fiercer. “That is an order from your Queen.”
The girl only laughed. “I have no queen. I serve one man, and you are not He.” A smile crossed her face. Again, it did not touch her eyes. “Valar morghulis.”

The exhaustion fled from Dany’s eyes. She had already begun to walk back to Drogon, but now her attention was piqued. She spun back to face the girl, who met Dany’s eyes with an intensity unmatched by any.

No, she thought. That is not true. Jon Snow has that same stare.

“That is High Valyrian!” Dany said. “Where did you learn to speak-”

But Arya only shook her head. “The proper response is valar dohaeris.”

Arya grinned then, and leaned back against her tree. She was not relaxed, not completely. Dany did not know if this girl even knew how to relax. At the very least, her shoulders slumped and smile made her look calmer.

Still, Dany could not ignore that her hand was on the hilt of one of her swords, and her feet were flat on the ground. If she needed to, she could leap into a fight at any moment. If she wanted to, she could start one.

“When we reach Dragonstone,” Dany said. “We will speak.”

Arya looked hesitant, but she did nod.

Dany left the girl where she was, and set about to shake Jorah awake. She could not speak with him yet – not while the Stark girl still watched – but she would come morning. There was something strange about Jon’s little sister, and it was Dany’s duty to know what.

As soon as I reach Dragonstone, I will, she told herself, as she slid into sleep.

There were too many things to do.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I lean more into book canon than I mean to sometimes.
(It’s just so much better)
Arya spent several years in Braavos, not a mere two years of sweeping. I don’t make the rules.
(I do)

Revision Note- Turns out I accidentally left in the notes from the word document at the bottom of the last two chapters, so sorry about any spoilers you guys got. I'll try to keep an eye out for that from now on.
Two days, the scouts said. Two days and it would all be over. One way or another.

Rhaegal must have felt his tension, just as Jon could feel his. Heart-wrenching, blood-boiling terror radiating through both of them. The same sort he felt in Winterfell, and the same sort he felt in Hardhome, and the same sort he felt as his brothers plunged daggers into his chest for the Watch.

The Watch was gone. Jon was all that was left. The 999th Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch would be its last. Edd died in Winterfell, and the Watch died with him, and the Wall died with him.

8,000 years, the Walkers had sat behind the Wall. 8,000 years, they had waited and waited and waited, until Jeor Mormont and Jon Snow took their places on the Wall. 8,000 years and it all ended with him.

Why couldn’t they have waited another 80? They could have stalled until Jon was old and dying, or perhaps old and dead. He would not have lost his blood brothers, his black brothers, and even his home. He would not have had to deal with the wildling invasions or Mance Rayder or Stannis or any of it. He would not have scars on his chest and a piece of himself that felt far too empty where his heart had been. He could have grown and died a dutiful, honorable man.

Instead, he grew and died staring into the eyes of his own brothers, and he grew with a soul that was missing a piece. Not gone – not completely – but emptier than it had been.

Some of his life would have been the same, he knew, even had the Walkers not returned. Jon would still have gone to the Wall. Father still would have died in King’s Landing, and Robb in the Twins, and Lady Stark with him, and Rickon in Winterfell, and Arya wherever she was.

Aemon Targaryen had warned him many years ago about putting love before duty, and he had been foolish enough to forget his council. He thought the boy in him dead, but the boy remained, hidden beneath the cloak of the man, but thriving all the same. He cared too much for his sister – had gone back to save her from the crypts when he should have been fighting. They lost Winterfell and they lost Bran, because Jon was too much of a child to do what was hard.

Rhaegal let out a roar that shook the waters beneath them, and Jon was unhappily reminded of everything else they had lost, too.

“We’ll find her,” he whispered to the dragon. He didn’t like to talk much when he was flying, but he thought that Rhaegal needed to hear this as much as he did. “If she escaped, we find her, you hear? We do.”

Rhaegal answered him with yet another earth-shattering roar. This one, at least, felt far less
mournful and much, much more vengeful.

“I know,” he said. The dragon need not to have said a thing, and he still would have known. They both missed her. They missed her, and they missed all those they had left behind in a slaughter.

“Your Grace?” Corban, the Cerwyn man, exclaimed. It was hard to hear him over the rushing winds, the roaring dragon, and the growing hailstorm. If he said anything next, Jon did not hear him.

“We land soon,” he shouted. “Tell the others!”

He had no way of knowing if Corban answered. He was too focused on directing his dragon to waste time straining to hear the man. If he needed to be heard, Corban could shout as he had. If he did not, then he did not need to be heard.

It was surprisingly difficult to navigate a dragon through storm clouds. When Jon had heard the stories as a boy, he had thought it easy. If Aegon, Rhaenys, Visenya, Maegor, and all the Targaryens could conquer kingdoms with them, then a simple flight through clouds should have been no more difficult than walking through a godswood. But the Targaryens had far more experience flying than he did, and that was clear to see.

Rhaegal shook in the storm. As hail rained from around him, it battered his wings and his body, leaving him flinching with every strike. It was worse for his riders. Where the hail bounced painfully but harmlessly off of his scales, the riders did not fare quite so well. They were struck at all times, eyes squeezed shut and fists clenched tight around his spine as the wind and hail rippled at them.

The White Walkers were still two days away from the Eyrie, and they were already bringing storm this fierce to Dragonstone. He wondered how the living had survived Winterfell at all.

He guided Rhaegal higher, at least hoping to avoid the worst of the strikes. When they were lower, the hail hit harder. When they were higher, it formed around them in the storm clouds, and only ever let up if he soared above them. Unfortunately, when he did, he could not see down to the castle he was meant to find. If he drove them further than they were meant to go, they might find only open ocean to great them for days.

He could not risk it. There was no time to waste. He only dared venture close to the clouds, but never above and never inside. Not when one mistake could mean the deaths of millions.

Eight years ago, he might have laughed at that. What was a bastard boy doing riding a dragon and contemplating his role in the survival of millions? All he wanted was to join the Watch, to escape Winterfell to find some sort of glory for Ned Stark’s bastard boy.

Well, I have the glory, I escaped Winterfell, and I am no happier for it.

A glob of hail struck dangerously close to his leg, and Rhaegal let out another woeful cry. Jon wanted to pet his scales, to reassure him, but he was too frightened of falling to remove his hand from the dragon’s spines. If he fell, who would protect the castle from Viserion and Drogon? Who would rescue Sansa if the battle turned too bloody? Who would kill the Night King, if not the one man who knew him best?

He could see Dragonstone in the distance. They were still too far to spot their welcoming party or the dragonglass they carried with them. In truth, it was hard to see even the castle through the storm. But it was enough of a sight that Jon could guide Rhaegal down, further to the island and
one step closer to a night in a warm bed and a warm cloak.

This would be their last shipment, and Jon had never been more thankful. His body was beyond sore – both from the hail storms and weeks of flying without much rest. There was no time to risk relaxing when the fate of the world rested on his shoulders. The Eyrie still did not have enough weaponry to keep them safe in the Long Night, and, according to Tyrion, they likely never would. Even the Eyrie’s Master at Arms had been instructing his men to wait until the front line fell, and then to claim their blades.

“Most of the glass is needed for arrows,” the man had warned them. “So your asses best be ready to move as soon as the man ahead of you goes.”

It was not a thing they had to resort to in Winterfell, but it still brought back the memories of lying in the dirt as the wights surrounded him, some clutching dragonglass blades that were once held by living men. Living men that he had sent off into battle. Their blood was on his hands. Their loss was his own.

This time, he would not lose. He couldn’t. If they lost in the Eyrie, the odds would be insurmountable. They had to win. And to win, they needed dragonglass.

They landed on the rough shores of the island, where a party filled with the Eyrie’s youngest children came to greet them. They had sent them off here, where the food was limited but the threat was minimized. It was a better solution than the crypts. At least on Dragonstone, Stannis had already burned their dead.

He waited until his own party had dismounted before he slid form Rhaegal’s neck. The dragon collapsed in the sands, exhausted, while the children dragged bags filled with dragonglass to them. Soon, they would be tied around his chest and stuffed on the riders’ belts. Soon, Jon would be back in Dragonstone, though he would rather have been a thousand leagues away.

“One more flight,” Jon promised Rhaegal. He put a hand on the dragon’s nose, and smiled as it let out a contented sigh. “Tomorrow we rest. And the day after.” They could not risk a weary dragon when the fate of the Eyrie rested on Rhaegal and Jon beating back Drogon and Viserion.

The hail was still coming, but Jon paid it little mind even as it struck him upside the head. The clumps were not big enough to truly hurt him yet. Instead, he turned to one of the children – a short girl with a face like a rat’s – and gestured back to the dragon. “Get him water and meat,” he said. As she ran off, he turned to another. “Get the miners. Tell them this is the last flight.”

He waited for a quarter of an hour for the Hound and his men to return from the mines. Most were covered in shining black shards and the ash of shattered stone. By dusk on the morrow, they would be covered in blood and guts and perhaps rotting flesh if they fell by a Walker’s hand. Perhaps the children would starve on Dragonstone beyond the reach of gods, men, and death. Perhaps this would be the last any heard from the Eyrie, and perhaps this was the last moment of hope in all of their existence.
He had thought the same in Winterfell and, for most, it was true. He had survived only by the
grace of his dragon. Only by sacrificing everything and everyone around.

_I went back to Sansa, he thought. I went back to the crypt, and I screamed, and I saved her. We all
did._

As soon as the men arrived – the Hound grumbling and cursing, and Beric Dondarrion looking
tired as ever – he ordered them onto Rhaegal’s back. He, himself, took his place on the dragon’s
neck. It refused to listen to any others, no matter how much he tried to convince it to. The last time
he offered it a different rider, it had nearly burnt the man alive. It even rejected Sansa, though they
shared the same blood, and Tyrion. Only Jon. Only ever Jon.

He wanted to wave goodbye to the children, but he did not have the strength. The past half-moon
had drained him of all the will that he once had. _The War_ had drained him. Even before Winterfell,
he had been dead on his feet. Now, they ached as if he had walked a million leagues in a hundred
hours. Now, they felt like the skin had been carved away, like a single Bolton had survived their
battle and put him to the rack. Now, they burned like the touch of the Walkers, like the wall would
burn his skin if he leant on it too long.

But it was not only his feet that ached. No, not at all. His chest still burned, and it would never stop
burning. It had burned since a brother had first plunged a dagger through him, and it burned just as
well now. It never stopped, and he doubted it ever would. It was a fire that would rage long after
his feet had earned their rest.

“Can we fucking get on with it?” the Hound barked in his ear when he had lingered too long in
place. “I’m not wasting my last hours with some cunt and his fucking dragon.”

Jon relented. He always did. They took to the air faster than an arrow could shoot from a bow. Hail
continued to fall around them, but hail could hardly hurt less than the brands on his chest or the
hole in his heart. It could hardly hurt less than knowing all those who had fallen from him, for him,
because of him.

_No more_, he thought, though the battle inched closer. He was already sweating, even as he forced
the dragon faster and faster, bringing more wind with it, he felt nothing but a burdensome heat. _We
win or we die at dusk on the morrow._

According to the scouts, the Army of the Dead chased the dragon. Every time he flew off, their
army would follow in whichever direction he went. If he wanted to, he could fly North and lead
them back through the wall. He could cage them in, shield his men. Only, if he did, the two of
them would die in the North and three dragons would move South again. They would be doomed
before they had even begun to fight. It would be a lost cause, and he knew a lost cause when he
saw one.

_This_.

No, they needed to make a stand. He couldn’t doubt this now. He knew that. _He knew that!_

But every time Jon thought of heading off to battle, he saw Sam – his brother and his best friend –
screaming under a pile of wights. That was the last time he’d seen them. Even before then, they
hadn’t had the chance to talk since the preparation for the battle began. Every time they tried,
Gendry would haul Sam off for some talk or another of weapons and new properties of dragonglass
and arrows. And now, Sam was dead, and he would never share another minute with the brother he
swore his vows next to; the brother he chose.
He saw Gilly and Little Sam overrun as he dragged Sansa out of the crypts, as Theon lay dead on
the ground only a short distance away, as the Night King laughed over his brother’s broken body.
He saw frozen arms raising high, and he saw mountains of men rising to their feet. He saw death
incarnate, and he saw him rise.

Jon shut his eyes and let Rhaegal guide them back down. Had he been in control, they would never
have landed. They would have flown past the Eyrie, flown past Riverrun, flown past Lannisport.
They would have flown past Westeros and into the lands in the West, where all who went did not
come home, but where all who went did not have to face the Night King. But Jon did not guide
Rhaegal. Instead, his hands moved of their own accord, pulling back when he would have driven
forward to order the beast West.

He wondered when he had turned craven. At Hardhome? At Castle Black? In Winterfell, once and
then again?

No, he was no craven. He had faced many battles in his life, and he had run from none.

You have run from most, he thought. From the Starks when he had been a mere green boy, from the
Watch when Ned Stark lost his head, from the true North when the Night King had first greeted
him and began a war, from Castle Black on the day he first earned the chance, from Winterfell
when the Walkers came. You always run.

He swore to himself that he would not – that he would stand his ground through thick and thin,
even as the world bore down on him, but Jon knew well how much a lie it was. If it all went wrong
again, he would do whatever needed to be done if it meant victory for the living. The red woman
had made it clear that he was the only one who could, and it had been she who had defied death
herself in Castle Black. But she had said the same to Stannis, and he did not know what to think.

When they landed, Sansa was there to greet them. She helped Jon down, pulled him into the castle,
and had him in his rooms before he even knew they had moved. She guided him through his solar,
onto his Arryn-blue bed, and suddenly he felt not unlike the boy who had woken on his desk,
sucking in air because he thought that he never would again. Sucking in air, because it felt as if
there was nothing else to do.

“Breathe,” she told him, her voice scarcely above than a whisper. “You’re safe here.”

“Am I?” he snapped, panting like a dog in heat. She pulled back, and, for a moment, he didn’t care.
“There’s a war coming for us, Sansa, and we can’t win it. We don’t have the men, or the
dragonglass, or the strength! Tell me Sansa, how am I supposed to kill that thing? How are any of
us?”

He put his head in his hands as his shoulders sagged. A thousand pounds of weight tugged him
down, and he felt like he would fall below the castle before the night was done. In all likelihood, he
would fall beside it on the morrow.

“Jon,” she whispered, but said nothing more.

“I’m tired of fighting,” he said, softer than before but still hard enough to make her flinch.

“I know,” his sister said. She put a hand on his back, and it was all Jon could do not to pull away.
He didn’t want comfort. He didn’t want anything. “After this is all over, we never have to fight
again.”

At that, he only laughed. “We will,” he said, resigned. “You know we will. We’ll fight for
Daenerys, we’ll fight to take back Winterfell, we’ll fight every other fight there is.” *You’ll be fighting their battles forever.*

He’d fought for the Watch first, but now it was gone. He fought for the wildlings then, but now it was gone. He’d fought for Winterfell, but now it was gone. Now, he was a corpse that fought for the living. Now, the dead marched.

“We fight for us,” Sansa insisted. “For our family, for ourselves. Once we’re all safe—”

He laughed. A hysterical sound, more like a pained wheeze than a genuine show of humor. “When is that, Sansa? Father’s dead, your mother’s dead, Robb’s dead, Arya’s dead, Rickon’s dead, Bran’s dead.” He slumped, hands coursing through his hair, and brow sweating like a pig in heat. "How long before it’s us?”

“If we give in now, not long at all.” She shifted, settling down to sit on his bed beside him. She went to hug him and, as much as Jon wanted to push her away, he settled into her hold. Her arms were too weak to embrace him like Tormund used to, and the two weren’t close enough for it to be anything like the hug he’d given Arya when he saw her last – the last time he ever would, when they were both young and green and stupid – but it was enough to ground him. It was enough to remind him that, while he had lost most of what he had, some things still remained. His sister still lived. His heart still beat. There was still a war to be won, and there was still a chance. “We’re the last of the Starks, Jon. We need to honor that.”

“I’m not a Stark,” Jon said, though they both knew was hardly an argument at all.

“You are the King in the North.”

“I knelt.” *I am Torrhen come again, only Torrhen had the right.*

“Do you really think they care?” She gestured to the window, and when Jon chanced a glance, he saw the few surviving Stark men practicing with dragonglass blades in the yard. The weather was still terrible, but they fought nonetheless, all except the Corban, who had been recruited to aid the miners in dragging more material to the smith. All of them were doing their duties, while Jon sat, wallowing in his own self-pity as his men readied themselves for war. “You’re a Stark, Jon. You may not share our name, but you have our father’s blood and you have his sense of honor. They would never have crowned you otherwise. They all did.”

“I didn’t want to be King,” he mumbled, more to himself than to her. “I didn’t want any of it.”

“And I wanted to be Queen,” she said with a bit of bite. “I wanted to marry Joffrey and have his children, and I wanted Arya to be a little lady in little dresses, and I wanted to stay in King’s Landing when Father told us to leave.” A ghost of a smile flashed across her face. It was a smile tinged with sorrow that he would hardly have known had he not lived his own tragedies and worn that same smile. “We don’t always get what we want, Jon. Sometimes, what we want is not what is best for us. Sometimes what we should have is what hurts us the most.”

He knew that. He had learned that lesson a long time ago, when he wanted to ride after Robb, before honor drove him back. He wanted to be Robb’s soldier. To defend a family that he had never truly been a member of. Sam had been there to pull him back to what was right. He had learned the lesson a thousand times after, and it seemed that he was still learning it, a lifetime later.

He wondered if, 8,000 years ago, the Last Hero had not had these same thoughts. Had he sat beside his sister, mourning his losses while the Army of the Dead drew nearer? Had he survived past the end of all things, only to find another doomed night a fortnight away? Had he been ready to die
when the time came?

“I’m tired, Sansa,” he said. A bone-deep sort of tired that left him wanting to lay down on this bed and never wake again.

He did not need to clarify what he meant for her. She knew it as well as he did. “After the War is done, you can sleep as long as you like, but right now, we have a duty to our people. Your Dragon Queen is dead, Jon. They look to you. The King in the North.”

He heard the rest, but it was a single word that caught his ears. Duty. It always came back to that, didn’t it? Every time he threw some crown away, another came to take its place. Another responsibility he never asked for. Another burden.

“She isn’t dead,” he said.

Sansa clearly doubted him, but said nothing of it. Instead, she asked, softly. “Where do you think she is now?”

Rhaegal made no sound, but Jon felt his sorrow anyway. A tempered sorrow, surely, not unlike he had felt the first time he had ridden him, when he first realized the extent of a rider’s connection with his dragon. It reached out to him, plunged weeks of sorrow into his mind, and reminded him incessantly of the death of his brother. An agony that had nearly driven Jon to his knees when he first felt it. The pain had not since ebbed, but it had not worsened either. Not even after the battle.

He could explain none of that to Sansa, though. Even if she had accepted his resurrections, Bran’s visions, and Jon’s shattered connection with Ghost, she would not understand this. He should not have been able to connect this well with a dragon he had only known for the span of a single moon. It would raise questions that he could not answer. It would make him question things he did not want to question.

“She isn’t dead,” he said, simply. His eyes went back to the window, to the skies. The storm clouds were black as night, while the sun sunk in the sky.

“Then I hope she gets here by dusk tomorrow,” Sansa said. “For all our sakes.”

Yes, Jon thought. I do too.

But as dawn came on the morrow, nothing happened. As it settled into dusk only a few hours later, the skies were not marred by the presence of a great black dragon. Dany did not appear in the air, and new fighters did not come to join their ranks.

As the Army of the Dead marched on the Eyrie, Dany did not come to save them. No one would.

Chapter End Notes

Not the most eventful chapter, but I feel like Jon Snow needed a bit of a break before he has to face the Walkers again. He needed the chance to recollect himself, I think, and it also gave me an excuse to flesh out Sansa a little bit more. Next chapter we’ll be back in the Riverlands with Dany, Arya, Jorah, and the gang.

Thanks for all the reviews and comments! If any of you guys have any questions, be sure to let me know. It's been a lot of fun answering!
Chapter Seven: Cold and Skinned

Saltpans

Jorah Mormont

The dragon did not so much land as he crashed. His wings were folded against his sides to protect them from the battering hail, claws stretched out to smooth a terrible landing. Each of his riders were thrown from their places, either into each other or off of his back as soon as his feet touched frozen soil. He screamed a horrible scream, the sort one was only meant to hear on the battlefield or at a dothraki wedding.

If flying had been terrible before, now it was a living hell. It was worst for Jorah and the Starks. *Bears and wolves are not meant to fly,* Jorah thought as he tumbled off the tail. His shoulder struck rock, but thankfully did not break. He was lucky.

The riders, who had not been dislodged, scrambled from his back, as Drogon thrashed and scrambled in the dirt. Hail still fell around them and still smashed into each of Drogon’s many wounds. He had sustained many injuries in his fight against the dead, debilitating wounds that hampered flight and made him slow. Their journey to Dragonstone was more than enough proof of that. The *khaleesi* was tending to each as best as she could, but even the Mother of Dragons did not always know how to care for a dragon when it was hurt. Many years ago, she had not even known how to feed them.

It felt like they were back at the start. They were in the Red Waste again, when the dragons were miniscule and the hope had all but fled them.

Before the battle, Drogon would have taken two, perhaps three days to reach the island. But it had been a fortnight, and still, they traveled. Jorah doubted they would make it much further, especially as the Army of the Dead marched through day and through night.

As the *khaleesi* tended to her dragon’s wounds, the rest of them tended to their own. Red Rat had been thrown onto his injured arm, off the dragon’s back, and it had begun to bleed again. One of the Stark men – whose name Jorah did not care to recall – tended to it as best he could, but none of them were prepared for this journey. They had no bandages, no wine, and no flint with which to start a fire. The wound had already begun to blacken two nights prior. Now, it was all but certain it would fester.

He was half-tempted to leave a man to his fate, but Jorah was no fool. He knew well what his Queen had done for him, when his own infection had claimed his arm. She had shown mercy. Now, it was time for that boon to be repaid.

He would never be able to repay the boy who saved him. It was a reminder that would haunt him for all the rest of his days.
He said nothing to Red Rat, and he said nothing to the Starks as they picked mud and bits of branch out of the wound. There was no fault in trying, even if Jorah would not be the one.

Beyond their many injuries, the riders’ armor was in terrible state, and it only made the journey more trying. Between the weather and the battle, every man wore dented armor, torn clothing, and cloaks soaked beyond use. He was at least thankful they had landed in a village. He was not certain that they could have survived much longer without shelter. Sleet and hail the size of his fist was falling all around them, and it was only a matter of time before it struck a man in the wrong spot and knocked them from the sky.

He did not take notice of anything in the village beyond the first cabin he could spot. As soon as he saw it, he waved the men forward. There was no need to take no notice of the blood splattered on its walls, or the shattered wood frame where once there had been a door. No, there was no need to notice any those things. The entirety of the realm was rife with them.

The Stark men were the first to rush into the cabin, while Jorah and the unsullied remained behind with their Queen. Ned Stark’s daughter was caught between, wanting to follow the Starks, but unwilling to leave the khaleesi behind in the process. He imagined that it must have been a difficult decision; everything was when one neglected to sleep the night prior.

Eventually, Lady Stark fled into the safety of the cabin, her feet light and soundless even with the ground frozen and wet. It was difficult not to resent that, but she did not know their Queen as well as he did. She did not know what they had to lose.

It took well over an hour before they could convince the khaleesi to leave Drogon’s side, but after enough prodding, she followed. They left him under trees, where at least the branches could shield him from the weather. She had wanted to stay with him still, but Jorah had been insistent.

“We cannot fight if you succumb to sickness,” he had told her. “If you stay out here in this weather, that is what will happen. Do you wish to abandon him, khaleesi?”

“Of course not!”

“Then come, and you may return to him once this storm has passed.”

It would not pass, and they both knew it. The Walkers brought the storm, and the Walkers would be marching south. Still, his Queen followed all the same.

By the time they reached the cabin, it was difficult to see through the storm and the darkness. Jorah pointedly ignored the many signs of a raid – shattered wood, broken glass, and blood splattered all around the town – and instead led his queen inside. He had to duck his head to enter, and he remained hunched once he passed the door.

The inside of the cabin was just as devastated as the outside. Here, the blood splattered everywhere. Brown blood, dried blood, black blood, blood that stained the walls and the floor and the ceiling. It coated the fireplace, the broken chairs, and even the rotted remains that sat in the corners. Most of the meat had fallen from the bones, some pieces eaten already and others too rotten for even the maggots and the flies. The bones sat still, staring aimlessly with their mouths fallen open in perpetual terror.

The khaleesi would not sleep tonight. She never did after sights like these.

Jorah would. Jorah would sleep soundly.

The Stark men were gathered around the fireplace, where rotten wood and broken bits of the
wooden wall had been carefully lain and burnt. Ned Stark’s daughter sat with them, her cloak stripped and drying on one of the shattered chairs. Her leather armor remained on her person, but much of it had been torn and frayed during their flight. When he looked too closely, he could spot far too many scars on skin that was far too young to bear them. She and the *khaleesi* were much alike in that regard, though Lady Stark wore more.

The Stark men spoke loudly and jubilantly, though Jorah thought there was nothing to be jubilant about. They were the sole survivors of the end of all things, the last and only to escape Winterfell, and there was nothing happy about that. He would have preferred to walk in and see them sulk than to see them laugh and jape about wars gone by.

But it was the happy wars they spoke of, not the battles for the living. Instead, they talked of fighting for the King of the North, before the Young Wolf lost his head and long after the bear of Mormont left the shores of Westeros. They spoke of battles against the Lannisters, of bathing in Bolton blood. They spoke of victories well told. None dared mention the losses that were not. One of them – Wilas, a Winterfell boy who had been too young to fight alongside the Young Wolf – was singing a tale of imprisoning the Kingslayer and dozens of Lannister men.

Lady Stark was among them, but she did not laugh. When they spoke of the Young Wolf’s victories, she would nod her head and plaster a false smile on her pale face. It turned slightly more honest when they spoke of the Kingslayer, but only just.

Once, Jorah might have been as the Stark men were, foolish enough to believe that it was a true smile. But Jorah had spent eight years at his *khaleesi*’s side, and he had long sense trained himself to tell the honest from the pretenders. He noticed the twitch in her eye as she smiled, the emptiness in her gaze, the way she stared into the flames instead of at her men. Lies, surely, but he supposed that it was a fair thing to lie about. He would not have enjoyed discussing his father’s death either, or his niece’s. He had not been forced to listen to the stories by men who sung their praises joyfully, despite the ache in his heart that still lived too many years later.

This is cruel, he thought, as he led his *khaleesi* to sit beside the girl. He hoped it would bring her comfort, but she did not react outwardly to their presence, nor could he sense any signs of displeasure from the girl. She seemed too enraptured in the story of her brother’s first battle to notice.

“So, there we was,” one of the Stark men, Rodrick, said, throwing his hands about as he spoke, “standing atop the mighty Kingslayer, and there we was about to slit his neck, when this wolf – big as a horse! –leaped in front of us! We knew what it was, but none of us had seen it, see? Not ‘til that battle, we didn’t. It was growling at us and snappin’ like a dog, but as soon as King Robb got there, it just stopped. He told us he wanted the Kingslayer tied, you see. Wanted him a hostage. They was gonna trade him for you, m’lady.”

At that, Lady Stark shook her head. “I’m not a lady.”

*Her aunt said that once too,* Jorah thought. *When she was a child, and I was young, she said that, too.*

They two even looked alive. It was how he had recognized her in Harrenhal, though many years had passed since he visited Lyanna in Winterfell. She was a Northern beauty, a wild wolf, and a chained mouse all in one. She and this new Stark girl both had the Northern look. The long face, the dark hair, the wild look in their eyes. The resemblance was eerie. It was as if Lyanna had leapt forward 20 years and welcomed herself, unbidden, to a new and terrible world.

He hoped to speak of it to her later, but he dared not in the company of strangers. His memories of
his time in the North never ceased to depress.

Rodrick went on as if his lady had not spoken. “He had us haul the Kingslayer all the way back to camp, had us drag him through the corpses and the dung! Never in me life did I think I’d be dragging the Kingslayer through a pile of –” Something made him pause. Whatever he was going to say, he took one look at the Queen and held his tongue.

But the khaleesi had spent too long with the dothraki, Tyrion Lannister, and Daario and his degenerate ilk to care for propriety. She was not the same girl she was when Jorah had first met her, and he did not know if he was to be pleased with that or not. As it was, his Queen waved the Stark man on. “It seems an interesting story,” she said with a laugh. “I would like to hear the rest.”

Rodrick did as she bid, but he seemed much less excitable as he did. “We dragged him about. Got him to a horse and sent him back to camp. Just as Ki- just as Robb said.”

The youngest of the Stark men – the one who had found Lady Stark in the smithy – spoke up next. “What was he like? I never had the chance to meet him.”

Rodrick scowled. “Do your ears work, boy? I never spoke with the man. He was always on with the war council. Busy man, he was.”

“What of you, Stark?” the khaleesi said, suddenly. “I assume you knew your brother.”

Lady Stark did not exactly look like she wished to speak, but she still offered a nod. “He was a good man. Never cared if I was dirty or messy or playing swords with Bran and Rickon,” she said. “When I left for King’s Landing, one of my brothers was hurt. Bran. I was by his bedside with my mother, and Robb came. He told me not to worry, said he’d keep him safe. Said I needed to be good down South, or he’d let Bran have all my things. Said Bran would be mad at him if he made him wear all my dresses.” It was hard to imagine this girl in dresses or playing games with her brothers, but he supposed that all woman were girls before the world showed its teeth. “He used to help me steal tourney swords from the yard. They were too heavy for me, but he still helped. Said he wanted to see the look on Sansa’s face when she found me with it.”

The khaleesi looked wistful, but Lady Stark did not react at all. Her eyes were just as sightless as they had been before, as if the memories were playing back, and she was just a child again in a city now-destroyed.

“When’d you last see him?” the third Stark man, Branden, asked.

“When I left for King’s landing,” she said, softly. Once more, her eye twitched.

“Where were you all this time, anyway?” Branden went on. “When you heard…”

“The Eyrie for a while.” Another twitch. “The Hound had me captive. Wanted to trade me for gold.” This time, there was nothing. Only her blank stare.

He felt a burst of pity for the girl – no one deserved Clegane’s company for long – but it was quickly tempered by the question of “Why would the Hound take you to the Eyrie?”

“My aunt was there,” Lady Stark said, easily. “He thought she might pay.”

“Did she?” the young Wilas asked. It earned him a cuff upside the head.

“Course she didn’t, you bloody fool. Else she would’ve been in Winterfell by now, wouldn’t she’ve?”
“Why is that?” Jorah asked. “The Tullys do not seem the sort to turn away family.”

Next to him, he felt the _khaleesi_ tense beneath his fingers. She must have heard the disbelief in his voice, or felt the suspicion emanating from him. She had grown to respect his instinct as much as she did the rest of him. It was one of the things that make him love her so.

“We got there after she died,” the girl said.

“But why not the Twins? All the realms must have known about the wedding. Why would Clegane not take you there? Surely Robb Stark would pay more than your aunt.”

Finally, an expression crossed her face: a scowl. “I can’t speak for dogs.” She spat it with a fury that Jorah had not expected. “The Hound never explained a thing to me.”

But Jorah was unconvinced. He nodded to the holes in her armor, and to the ones in her skin, and said, “Is Clegane the one that gave you those scars?”

Lady Stark only glared. Her hands went to her stomach, though he had not breathed a word of wounds there. The only ones he could see were the marks on her shoulders, on her back, and on the bits of skin that stuck between the threads in her armor. There were no such marks on her stomach. Strange.

“Harrenhal gave me these.” Her eye twitched and nothing else moved. She had trained herself well, it seemed, but not well enough. “The Lannisters.”

It was Rodrick’s turn to question. “The Lannisters really did have you, then, m’lady? We always thought it was a lie, we did.”

Lady Stark looked back into the fire. Whatever secrets it held, Jorah could not see. “For a little while,” she said. “They didn’t know it was me.”

“How did you escape?”

At that, Lady Stark’s face solidified back into the empty slab it had been since they first found her in Harrenhal. “I had friends,” she said, softly. “They helped me.”

Before Jorah could ask anything more, Wilas spoke. “What was it like at Harrenhal? I heard tell it was bad. Real bad. Harren made the stones with the blood of his victims, they said. Said he used magic, bathed it with blood.”

Lady Stark’s laugh was a cold, dark laugh that sounded more a snarl of a wolf than any expression of humor. It chilled Jorah to the core. “Aye,” she said. “It is bathed in blood.”

The _khaleesi_ watched the girl thoughtfully, unable to hide the interest from her face. No doubt, Lady Stark noticed, but she said nothing of it. She continued to stare into the dying flames, as if it held all the answers to the world’s secrets. As if it could explain to her how to stop the Walkers, to claim the throne, to bring peace to a war-riddled realm.

But the _khaleesi_ was not content in letting the questions go unanswered. “You told me yesterday we would speak together. Now as fine a time as any. What sort of place-”

Another scowl marred Lady Stark’s face. “No,” she answered, quickly. “I said when we reach Dragonstone. This is Saltpans, not Dragonstone.”
It was the khaleesi’s turn to scowl, but she did not fight the girl. There was no point. Already, it was clear to see that she was stubborn, and willful too. She would not bend easily, and there was no point pushing farther if it meant she might snap.

“So be it,” she said instead.

And so it was. The talk continued for only another hour, before the watch was again divided. They japed and sung, they shared stories of days go by, and they all did their best not to think of the days ahead. It was dark and it was cold, but they were Northerners and unsullied, and they liked it well enough. Only their Queen seemed to shy from the bitter cold. She, whose dragon-blood had always run hot, had been forced by the fire to keep her skin was shaking off from her bones. While she warmed with heat, the rest of them warmed with laughs and wishes for wine.

It was a good night. Perhaps the last good night.

This night, Lady Stark took the sole ownership of first watch, the second went to the unsullied soldiers Grim Dog and Spearman, and the third was left to Jorah. None complained about this place or vied for the watch. They were all too exhausted to argue amongst themselves. Those not assigned to watch slept within minutes of setting down their heads. Only the khaleesi roamed the room still, and Lady Stark with her. Jorah wanted to stay with them, but, as had been case the the night before, as soon as he set aside his sword, his eyes closed of their own accord. The battle had taken much from him, as they all had. Whether it was a fight against the dothraki, the Westerosi, or the gods and harbingers of death themselves, he could not hold back sleep after what he had seen. He needed it like a Frey needed wives.

So, it was. He slept soundly, a dreamless sleep that came so rarely on days like these. When Grim Dog came to shake him from his sleep, Jorah willingly rose. There were duties still to be done, and they were best done while the world rested.

He moved over to the other end of the room, away from the fire’s tiring warmth. Let the bitter chill keep him alert. He would not fail his Queen that night.

He found himself hovering over Lady Stark as he readied himself for the watch. She was away from the others and away from the fire. Instead of keeping warm, she curled by the door, wrapped in her wet cloak as she kicked aimlessly at the air around her. Her jaw was snapping in her sleep, he noticed, and if he listened carefully, he could hear growling and mad snarling like the rabid ravings of a wild dog.

But the Queen was not watching the sleeping wolf. Instead, she had her eyes on Jorah. She beckoned to him, and he followed without question.

“All night and all of last,” she said, “She sleeps strangely. Like Jon.”

“She does,” Jorah said, trying to ignore the barbs in his soul at the latter phrase. She never knew what she did or why it hurt. He could not fault her for it. At least, now, he had a distraction.

This development piqued his interest as much as any of Lady Stark’s quirks. Jorah was a son of the North, and he knew the stories well enough. Stories of Gaven Greywolf, of Garth the Greenhand, and a Warg King in Sea Dragon Point. Stories of wildlings who could spy from the skies, of dogs that would report back to men with words instead of snarls, of human eyes staring out from the face of a shadowcat. Stories, to be sure, but stories connected with the First Men, and stories connected with the Starks.

He tore his eyes away from his Queen and instead watched the girl. “Do you know what she
dreams of?"

But his khaleesi shook her head. “She simply growls and kicks. Jon aside, I have never seen anything of its like.”

_I have_, Jorah thought, but neglected to say. It was not the first thing he had hidden from his Queen, but he did not like to think of the other. The mistake that had led to his exile, to his infection, to wasting away at the Citadel, while his Queen fought for her life and her throne.

But, despite his allegiance to this woman, he was a Northerner at heart. No matter how many years he had spent in exile, in disgrace, that was not something he could ignore. Jorah was a Northern man, and the secrets of the North were safe with him. They were not his to betray.

Her other secrets, however, were.

“But you were on guard with her yesterday. Did you speak with her, khaleesi?”

His Queen did not need to spend a moment remembering. “She speaks High Valyrian. I do not know how.” She frowned, a deep-seated frown that was unbecoming from a face so handsome. “She told me that all men must die and all men must serve. Do you know of these sayings?”

“I do not know them,” he said. “I speak the common and the dothraki tongues, khaleesi. I do not speak yours. Few do.”

His Queen hummed. “High Valyrian is not a common tongue,” she agreed. “Where could she have learned it?”

“Not in Harrenhal,” Jorah answered. “And not in the Eyrie either.”

“There is something wrong about her. She has a Braavosi tongue and carries a Braavosi hip, but the Braavosi speak Bastard Valyrian, not the words of Old Valyria.”

“Perhaps she worked with the Red Priestesses.”

But, before he was even done speaking, she was shaking her head. “It was familiar,” she said. “I’ve heard it before.”

He did not need to press her into remembering. In truth, he did not need to do anything. As he stood in that cabin over the resting bodies of men that had been willing to die with him, all that was required of him was to wait. So, as he was wont to, he simply gazed at his khaleesi. She was still as beautiful as that first day he had met her, and he doubted that would ever change. This was the woman he was proud to serve. She was beautiful enough, proud enough, smart enough to answer this for herself. She did not need his support. She did not need anything.

And yet she would have all of him all the same. It was one of the few thoughts that could still make him smile.

She must have stood for a quarter of an hour watching Lady Stark writhe and bark on the floor. Her mouth was set in a thin line, leaving only pale pink lips visible in the dim lighting. The fire still crackled on. He hoped it comforted her. She always did like fire. It was in her blood just as the bear was in his.

Finally, as the moon began to sink and his shift was nearly done, her lips spread into a smile: a sad looking smile that hardly reached her eyes, but a smile nonetheless. He loved it all the same.
“Missandei,” she said. “When we first met, she said it to me. *Valar morghulis.*

And his smile slipped as the panic set in.

He had spent too long in the Free Cities not to know the words, not to know their power. His *khaleesi* was beautiful and strong, but she was nothing against the men who wielded magic like swords. Men who could kill with a stone or a clip or nothing at all. Men who brought death and destruction in their wake whenever one could afford their cost. Men who used death like other men used air.

Even had he not spoken, the *khaleesi* would have known his answer by the way his back snapped taunt. His hand fell to his sword, as if he needed to protect himself from the mere thought. His eyes darted to the girl on the ground, mouth empty of all water, and fingers trembling on the hilt of his blade.

*Valar morghulis*, he thought. *The Braavosi tongue.*

His heart thudded in his chest, faster than it had when he had first cast his eyes upon three infant dragons, faster than it had when the assassin had nearly claimed his Queen’s life, faster than when he had been banished from Westeros and Essos alike.

They had lost to the Night King not a fortnight before, and suffered a cost higher than any man could bear, but even an Army of the Dead did not scare him as much as this. The Dead could be killed. He had done it himself. The Faceless Men, however, could not. No one could kill them. No one could harm them. It would be like killing the Stranger himself.

There was no mercy with these men. There was nothing.

And if he was right, this girl kicking and growling on the ground was a Braavosi who knew those words, who brandished them like weapons in the dead of the night. She must not have known that anyone in their party would know the phrase.

Mocking them, then. Of course, she was.

He shut his eyes and prayed to the Old Gods and the New that their names were not the ones bought. He shut his eyes and prayed in vain. The gods had never been kind. Not once.

“*Khaleesi,*” he whispered, “do you trust me?”

She stared at him for hardly a second, before she said, “Yes.”

It was a thought that warmed his heart, chipping away at the frost that had overtaken it by the presence of this girl. But it was not enough to completely defrost it, nor was it enough to truly make him smile. For Jorah had spent too many years in hateful exile, left only with the rage of a thousand suns, all directed against the very man who had damned him to this life. He had slummed in the Free Cities, served for a dozen different bands of sellswords, and spent time in each of the Cities that he never wanted to see. He had heard tell of his father’s own exile to the Wall, of the deaths of his family on the fields of battle for *that damnable Stark’s* son. He had heard of the disgrace he had been to them even in the end.

And there he stood, staring aimlessly at the face of the daughter of the man who had damned him. He wanted to feel some sort of gratification from it. Of knowing that that proud lord’s legacy was as wretched and disgraced as his own. He wanted to laugh at the sight, and he wanted to keep laughing until the White Walkers tore out his throat and skinned him of his fur.
But this sight brought him no pleasure and he had forgiven Ned Stark many years ago. All this wrouth was a fresh burst of pity that he had never dreamt to feel. His daughter dead before she had ever become a woman. His sons and daughters slaughtered in his own home, and his home a haven for beasts and Walkers. And now, Lyanna Stark’s corpse defiled and stolen. Torn from their crypts and worn by some thoughtless cretin in a vain effort to trick the Queen of Dragons.

He turned to his Queen, sympathetic as always but not nearly as kind, and whispered, “Arya Stark is dead, khaleesi.”

Dead in some unmarked grave in King’s Landing. Just as they had always said. I am sorry, Lord Stark. I truly am.

“What?” his Queen asked.

“Your brother died for this face,” Jorah said, “and she him. Look well, khaleesi. It is past time you learn of the Faceless Men.”

Chapter End Notes

Did you think that Lyanna thing was a one-off? Nope! Our boy Jorah thinks Arya literally skinned a 24-year-old corpse and wore its face. Jorah’s an observant guy with a lot of experience under his belt, but he’s not the, er, most careful thinking advisor in Dany’s retinue (see going back to Dany and trying to touch her after he found out he had greyscale).

Anyway, we’ll be breaking the usual format for a bit and returning to Saltpans next chapter. Things are about to get interesting for both storylines, and I’d rather not interrupt either in the middle of their conflicts. So be ready for some more Dany, Jorah, Arya, Unsullied, and Starks.
Arya woke with the taste of blood in her mouth. She moved to wipe it from her maw, but her hands were not paws, and her maw was just a jaw. All she managed to do was slap herself in the face.

Her eyes were still blurred with sleep, but such blindness no longer scared her. Sight was a gift. Gifts could be taken, and gifts could be returned. Jaqen and his Waif had taken great pains to teach her those lessons, and she would be remiss to let them slip now.

So, while her eyes adjusted to the light and the waking world, she neglected to look at it and focused instead with her ears and her nose. It was good practice, she thought, and she was never one to go a day without practice. There were too many skills to lose.

Whafts of fire and blood, ash and smoke clogged her nostrils, while her ears noticed two sets of feet stomping over to her, louder than the crackling of the fire or the occasional *thuds* as hail struck wood. One was lighter and one far heavier, joined by the clattering of metal plating. They stopped only an inch from her. Though Arya had not even rolled over yet, she knew exactly who it was.

“Who are you?” Jorah’s voice was low like Jaqen’s but he had a tongue far closer to Jon Snow’s. He did not mean to say it, but, for once, it was her training that damned her. An involuntary reflex, no more controlled than breathing or screaming. “No one,” she said, thoughtlessly.

With her mind still numb from sleep, she half-thought he would strike her, as he always did. Beat at her with that bloody stick of his until the face and the identity were wiped away, leaving nothing and no one staring back. She thought that he would call her a liar, like a girl of one-and-ten had screamed in an inn a thousand years ago. But Jaqen was not there, and that bloody stick of his was hundreds of leagues away.

*No one at all,* she would have gone on to say, had her mind not finally caught up with her mouth.

Instead, silence claimed the room. Smothered it in a shadow of empty sound. Hail striking the rooftop. Fire crackling on. Breathing all around her. If she listened carefully enough, a single heartbeat picking up its pace as an unsullied shifted his weight.

A hand went to a sword, and Jorah Mormont whispered for the Dragon Queen to run. It was more than enough warning to break the sudden peace. It was more than enough to shatter it to pieces and stomp on its ashes.

And then there was chaos.

Arya had her hand on Needle before the Mormont man could even move. She considered the
Kingslayer’s sword, but this was a small place and Needle was better suited for those. She leapt, her feet scrambling for purchase on the damp wooden ground. A lesser woman might have slipped and fallen, but Arya was a water dancer. Water dancers did not fall.

Sansa would have been impressed with her Needlework that day. She had extraordinary control of the thin stick between her fingers. It cut through the air, sowed through cloth and skin alike, and even managed to craft such a pretty sight with bright red thread. By the time she was done, Jorah Mormont was clutching at a wound in his arm, one of the unsullied – Dragontail, she thought his name was – was crumpled on the ground, staring without sight into the bitter flames. Wilas had thrown himself at her in the fighting too, and he nursed a hole in his neck that was dangerously close to an artery. She hadn’t nicked it, of course, though it was a close thing. She had been careful about that. She was always careful.

But, no matter how skilled she was with her Needle, even the First Sword of Braavos could not defeat men with better armor, greater numbers, and, regrettably, better steel. While Arya had shied away from the Kingslayer’s sword, Jorah was not so hesitant to use his own. Valyrian Steel deflected castle-forged, and then three sets of hands came to drag Arya back.

Still, she fought. Even after Needle was taken – again – she used knives and daggers. She carried ten in all, strapped to her arms and her legs and her boots, and she had all ten stolen from her. Another unsullied died in the fighting. He caught a knife to the eye and did not live to tell the tale. The other three fought valiantly. Even Red Rat, the injured one, managed to pin her left arm before she could carve away his neck. Thankfully, her weak arm was still useful. Before they could pin that, too, she had her hand wrapped around the hilt of the Kingslayer’s sword. She plunged it forward, smacking Red Rat’s wound with the flat of the blade. There was no need to cut. Not if she could incapacitate him otherwise. He did not scream as she expected him to, but his grip did weaken just enough for her to slip free.

She needed to get away before they could regroup, but she could not yet flee. In the fighting, Needle had been kicked across the room, towards the Dragon Queen and her bear. She could not leave it behind again. Not when it had saved her from King’s Landing, from Polliver, from Jaqen, and No One. Not when it was all she had left from Jon.

Would she find him now that the Dragon Queen had turned on her? Would she ever see him again?

Yes, she thought, I will.

Whether it meant fighting White Walkers, grumpkins, snarks, krakens, dragons, and lions, Arya would see him again. She would survive this. She had to.

She had never been more thankful for her training than she was as she slipped through the cabin. It was still too dark for them to track her easily, and by the time she was on her feet, she had already been at an advantage. She made her way through their ranks, ducking and dodging swords and daggers alike, gliding like water through a stream.

Swift as a deer, she reminded herself. Quiet as shadow. Fear cuts deeper than swords.

The Dragon Queen was screaming something, but Arya paid her no mind. She was no fighter. The way she held herself, the way her knees stayed locked as she stood – no, Daenerys Targaryen may have been the mother to dragons, but she was not a fighter of men. That was a job for her dragon, for her unsullied, for the Mormont bear that stood by her side.

Daenerys tried to reach for the sword. Arya was quicker. By the time the Dragon Queen had
alerted her soldiers to the threat, Arya was already holding Needle. She ducked past the soldiers and pushed on.

She needed to find a horse somewhere, but where? They had let her old horse free in Harrenhal, and she hadn’t the coin to buy another. Even if she did, the village was deserted. It would be leagues still until she found any sign of life, let alone horses. With the Walkers coming, it was no option. She would be dead before she reached Darry.

A ship, then. She would need a ship.

Could she captain a ship? One did not live in Braavos without learning the basics of seafaring, but that did not mean she could complete their duties on her lonesome. She needed a crew.

A smaller ship, perhaps? Or even a skiff, if it could sail faster than she could walk.

She did not think of the dragon. Not while she was running for her life, naked of her knives, and dressed in only a sopping cloak and the clothes she had brought with her from King’s Landing. She slid on the wet soil and suffered several blows from the hail, before she noticed the true threat standing only a few feet away.

The dragon was even more terrifying in the black of night. His massive body blended into the darkness, a shadow made of scales. That would have masked him completely if not for the glowing red light burning in his eyes, and the orange glow that emanated from his many wounds. He watched her as she ran, his breath coming in heavy huffs that brought heaps of smoke with them. The creature growled, low and loud. A mouth that was larger than Arya’s entire body opened wide. Inside, through his many valyrian-sharp teeth, she could see a bed of flame waiting for a purpose.

She took another step forward, and a roar like a Braavosi sea horn tore free of the beast. Arya stepped back, pulled her hands away from her swords. She knelt in the wet, frozen dirt until the others came to find her.

It was Daenerys who came first. Perhaps she feared for her dragon, or perhaps she knew that the beast would find Arya there. Perhaps she had planned that from the start.

Arya cursed herself. She was getting sloppy. She had given this pampered princess the chance to outwit her, to move faster than she could. She should not have slept, as she did, in the company of strangers and traitors. The Waif had taken great care to beat those mistakes out of her, and yet there she was again, making the same mistakes she had made as a girl of one-and-ten. She was eight-and-ten now. She was supposed to be better.

What sort of fool was she, if she had not learned at all?

“Give me one reason I should not have my dragon burn you alive,” Daenerys Targaryen said, as she approached. There was fire in her voice and confidence in her steps that Arya had not expected from her.

Arya chewed on her lip – another habit forgotten and restored. She did not move her eyes away from the dragon. “I imagine my brother would-”

“We know what you are,” Daenerys’ shadow said. His sword was at the ready, behind his queen’s back, but the dragon did not hiss. The beast was intelligent then. Once, she might have had a thousand questions to ask, but now, she simply stared in shock.

You know it better than me, Arya thought to answer, but she kept her mouth shut. She may not have fully known who Arya Stark was yet – she had spent too many years in other people’s skins and
wearing other people’s names to know that – but she knew it better than them. She was Arya Stark of Winterfell, daughter of Stark and Tully, sister to Stark and Snow, and enemy of lions and towers and flayed men across the realm.

“Tell me, what is a Faceless Man doing on this side of the Narrow Sea?” the old bear said, a hint of a growl in his broken voice.

Panic swelled in her chest, but the Mountain and the Faceless had taught her how to handle panic. She let slip the bonds that held Arya Stark in place, and let No One come to the fold, with its steel faces and easy lies. Her expressions folded back, emptiness returning where once there had been fear. *Fear cuts deeper than swords.*

“Going home,” she said, honestly. She knew well that she could not lie here. Daenerys had been miserable at the Game of Faces, as she had expected, but Jorah had been surprisingly proficient. He had picked up on the Harrenhal lie, and that had hardly even been a lie. No, she would need to be careful. Otherwise, she would be a feast for a dragon.

“To Braavos?” Jorah snapped.

Daenerys held out a hand, silencing the man. Her eyes focused solely on Arya, narrow and filled with a fiery fury. “Where is home, assassin?” She spat the word like once an insurance salesman had spat a poisoned coin.

“Winterfell.”

There was no pity on her face this time. “Winterfell is gone.”

“And yet there must always be a Stark in Winterfell,” Arya insisted.

“Then go,” Jorah said. “The Dead will welcome you.”

Her hand fell to the hilt of her sword, earning another growl from the waiting dragon. Slowly, Arya pulled it back and let the hand slip below her hip. There was no need to tempt a creature that seemed to want to burn her alive.

“Jorah,” Daenerys chastised. Still, she did not look at him. Her eyes were filled with dragonfire, and Arya was careful not to avert her own. “Why did you take this face?”

Arya blinked. “What face?”

“The face of Lyanna Stark,” the Queen said. Her words dripped from her tongue like venom from a snake’s tooth.

“Lyanna?” Arya asked, bewildered. Her aunt had been dead for years before she was even born. Buried in the crypts beneath Winterfell, where now the dead roamed and the walls burned, and Lyanna probably did walk the realm again. “Why would I steal-”

Arya shifted her weight between her two shaking knees. Once, they had been stiff and motionless, and the Faceless Men had taught her to stand without them and to live without them and to kill without them. Once – for scarcely a moon – she had learned to live like Bran. She never wanted to feel that way again, and yet, as they shook, she did.
“We took your eyes and gave them back,” Jaqen had told her, three years before she escaped them and their House. “Next, we will take your ears, and you will walk in silence. You will give us your legs and crawl. You will be no one’s daughter, no one’s wife, no one’s mother. Your name will be a lie, and the very face you wear will not be your own.”

In that, the Faceless Man did not lie. She had not known it then. She thought it was a game, because *we never stop playing*, but it wasn’t. It wasn’t, and Arya’s legs were trembling again, but she wore her own face, and her name was true., so perhaps it was a lie after all.

It was those thoughts that held her together when she realized that her lip still bled and her legs still shook, even after all the effort they put into stilling them.

*I am still me*, she thought. *I am still a direwolf with teeth of bone, claws of steel, and a long metal Needle hanging at my side.*

She was near-panic, she realized suddenly. No One had slipped away, and Arya stood in its place with Arya’s stupid expressions and Arya’s stupid habits. A child playing at being a warrior. She cursed herself, but for the life of her, she could not draw back No One’s apathy and No One’s composure.

Arya Stark was an angry girl. She had grown of age in a war, raised in a place where every man wanted her dead or captured or worse. She had watched her family fall around her, her friends, her allies. She had been beaten and enslaved and stabbed, and she had survived it all with the sole hope of finding her way back home. Yet, now, when she was so close to her goal, she had hit another wall. Another secret let slip, another standing between her and filling this hole in her heart.

*It will never be filled.*

“Why did you take it?” the Dragon Queen repeated again, hotter now.

But Arya was Arya, and No One had fled her. This woman had accused her of skinning her own aunt, of defacing her family’s name. Instead of the unassuming mask Daenerys had watched before, the face of a woman wrought with wroth gazed back.

“I took nothing,” Arya said, letting only a hint of her fury fill her voice. “I am Arya Stark of Winterfell-”

“You are a Faceless Man of Braavos,” Jorah said, as stubborn as he was stupid.

She did not know how he had learned that, but Arya did not have the time to care. “I am a Stark of Winterfell,” she said, again, “and I am not a Faceless Man.”

“Yet you speak their words, wear their tongue, and hang a Braavosi sword at your hip.” With the tip of his own blade, he gestured to Needle, sheathed at her side. As she sat, the hilt dug into her side, but Arya hardly cared.

“Needle,” she said, but none of them cared to hear it.

There were Stark men standing behind Daenerys and Jorah, and neither dared to do a thing. Men who had bragged about serving her brother, spoke so highly of her father, and wished her half-brother well, but none of them thought to help Arya. No one had. Not a single living man since she left the Hound to die.

“I left the Faceless,” she hissed. “They tried to kill me for it.”
“Very convenient,” Daenerys said, “that you would do it right as the Starks reclaimed Winterfell.”

“How convenient,” Arya answered, “that you would come to Westeros right as the Walkers came.”

“Quite inconvenient actually. Many died. Many died because of you, too.” The Dragon Queen turned to Jorah. “She was not after me, or we would have been dead already. There were too many opportunities. Even if there were not, I doubt she would not have known we were coming.” A spattering of relief began to form in the hole in Arya’s chest, but Daenerys was quick to smother it. “But it cannot be said if she intends to harm Jon, or if she is who she says she is.”

I am, Arya wanted to say. Instead, she bit down on her tongue. She did not need to appear too defensive yet. Not when the Dragon Queen was standing unsteady on a long string of rope, waiting to see where the wind would push her.

The two surviving Stark men muttered about themselves, while Jorah Mormont shook his head. “There is no way to tell, khaleesi.”

“There is.” Finally, Daenerys looked away from her. Her eyes went to the surviving unsullied. “Grim Dog.”

The unsullied moved without delay. With him came Red Rat and Spearman, each armed with Arya’s fallen knives. Grim Dog still wielded his spear, though parts of the wood had chipped and broken away in the fighting.

Arya was tempted to run – Arya was always tempted to run – but the sight of Drogon’s burning eyes kept her immobile. She did not know if the unsullied men intended to harm her, but she did know that the dragon did. She would very much rather die by spear than fire.

Fortunately, she was not to die that day. Instead of plunging his spear through her heart, the way that the Hound should have when he found her in the Riverlands, Grim Dog simply tore the cloak free from her back. The seams were already worn and loose. They ripped as soon as he put the slightest pressure on them.

The unsullied remained on guard as Grim Dog tore the tattered cloak into pieces. Daenerys watched over them, mindless of the weather and of the sight of a young woman on her knees in the snow, cloakless and freezing in the bitter winter winds.

“Are you leaving me to the Walkers?” Arya asked, as Grim Dog worked.

“It would be better if she did,” Jorah answered, before his queen could speak.

Grim Dog huffed, and the remaining unsullied marched forward. Arya did not fight them as they wrenched her hands behind her back. In this weather, and at this time of night, she might have been able to escape, but she could not beat three unsullied, two Starks, a Mormont, and a dragon. Even Jaqen would have surrendered in her place.

Jaqen would never have been in my place.

Her father had, though. Her father had been in this exact state once, a thousand years ago. Bound and scared and staring death in the face.

She shut her eyes and listened to the sounds of the night. It was easier than accepting the bonds being tied around her wrists, or the fact that her swords were being stripped from her sides. It was better to listen to the rushing of distant water, the faint sound of a million feet marching in the distance, the calls of wolves on the horizon.
She remembered a direwolf in chains. She remembered *multiple* direwolves in chains. She remembered Sansa screaming, Father proclaiming it dishonor, and a wolf’s head where a man’s should be.

Now, she wore chains of cloth, fur, and leather. Now, her head would decorate a spike on Dragonstone, and her sword would be a toothpick again.

She tugged at the strips holding her arms back and found them solid. Tight enough to sting, but loose enough that they would not tear easily. It would be difficult to escape, yet still a distinct possibility, if she could just get away from this dragon.

“What is this?” Arya demanded, though she was in no position to make demands.

Grim Dog forced her to her feet, while the other two unsullied each took one of her arms. They pulled her forward, back to the cabin, where the dragon did not bear any influence, even if he still watched from outside. Arya did not complain once.

“We need answers,” Daenerys said. “I know only one man who has them. We will sleep the night and keep warm for as long as we can, and then we ride for Dragonstone.”

*For Jon, Arya thought. He might have fled there, she said.*

So, Arya kept her lips tight as they hauled her back inside the cabin. She did nothing to fight them as Grim Dog took the Kingslayer’s sword and Daenerys took her Needle. She did not even argue as Daenerys remarked how strange the sword was, how long and how weightless it was. Did not say a thing as she strapped it to her own belt, looking as apologetic as a queen could be, though her apologies did not stop her from carrying Arya’s sword – and the sword of Jon, and Father and Syrio and Yoren and Jaqen and Gendry and the Hound and Lady Crane and everyone else who helped her along the way.

“We will return them when you prove yourself as Arya Stark,” the Dragon Queen said.

If she expected a response, she should not have taken Needle. She should have left it at Arya’s hip, because Needle was Arya Stark. It was home.

Needle was Winterfell and summer snows, yardwork and hot springs, Nymeria and horse rides through the Wolfswood. Needle was breaking her fasts with her brothers, staining her sister’s dress with a spoon and a glob of mud. Needle was climbing the broken tower with Bran and seeing who could go faster – it was always Bran, and then it wasn’t. Needle was Robb’s laughter as she ran from the yard for the fourth time that moon. Needle was Rickon, babbling stupidly from their mother’s arm, but reaching for her all the same. Needle was even Sansa, toiling away at her embroidery while Arya made faces from the corner. Most of all, Needle was Jon Snow, mussing her hair and calling her “little sister”, and handing her steel courage.

Daenerys had strapped Arya Stark to her belt, and she didn’t even know it.

“Who are you?” said the man with a thousand faces and one.

“No one,” she replied, and no one she stayed, and now no one lived again.

They sat her down beside the fire. For a moment, she was tempted to throw her hands into the burning wood, let the strips of cloak catch and burn. She would do what she must from there.

She did not. Instead she sat and stewed in her fury.
A captive again. She could hardly recall a time when she was not someone’s prisoner or another. This was one of the kinder captivities, of course. Her skin was unmarred, her muscles not too sore, and they didn’t even expect her to do any labor. She was simply tasked with sitting still, following them forward, and convincing Jon that she was who she was. She did not know how.

Would Jon believe her if she told him some long-forgotten story from their past? Would he know it was her, if she showed him Needle, if she spoke of Winterfell and Father and the Septa that never let her play with swords.

*I do not play with swords now either*, she thought, idly. Her hands still itched for Needle, but not to play. She was no girl playing the games of summer children. Not anymore.

“We ride at dawn,” Daenerys said, though her men were tired and wanting for food and drink and warmth.

The Stark men grumbled, but their eyes hardly left the captive by the fire. They were not stupid. Far from it. They were her father’s men, her brothers’ men, her sister’s men. When they learned who she was, they would be her men too.

And they betrayed her that night. Just as Harwin had all those years ago when he made to ransom her to Robb. Traitors and oathbreakers. Now, her father’s former sword rested on the hip of a captor, her sword on the hip of a conqueror, and none dared say a thing of it.

The Starks settled down to rest, but the unsullied held their guard. They were more assigned to the watch now. Three at a time, instead of one or two. None of them wasted time mourning their lost brother or aiding the injured Stark man. No, now, they had a charge to guard. Now, there was danger beyond a far-off army that might never have reached them. Now, a Faceless Man sat in their midst, and she had never even denied it.

If she could not deny it to a woman she had scarcely met, how was she to deny it to the brother that loved her most?

Long ago, before Braavos, before the Eyrie, before the Twins, late into the night before the Brotherhood marched against the Lannisters, she had asked Beric Dondarrion why they were so sure Robb still wanted her.

“My hair is messy,” she had said, “and my nails are broken and dirty, and my hands are better suited for a blacksmith.” And now, they were bloody too, and her sword was red and stolen, and there were still more eyes that she would shut forever before she saw the Red Woman again. Her skin bore more scars than she had ever counted. The holes in her stomach stretched deeper than she cared to think. Now, with her list of prayers done, she had nothing left to offer her brother. She was a killer, but vengeance had been dealt. If the war was won, and the Long Night ended, what use would Jon have for her? What would anyone want her for?

No, Jon would want her. He had to! He was the brother she missed most, and surely, he would miss her too! He loved her.

*But I am not Arya*, she thought to herself. *Arya hangs from a dragon’s hip. I am a wolf without claws, my limbs bound and my teeth filed. I am no one at all. Jon wants Arya, not me.*

She did not sleep again that night. She would not sleep until Dragonstone, and then not for a long while after.
A/N- Well, that was an incredibly uplifting chapter!
(this kid is beyond traumatized; someone please help her)

Anyway, we’re onto the Vale with a new POV! I think people who are looking at a
very specific tag on this work will be looking forward to this one!
Chapter Nine: Battle of the Eyrie (Part One)

The Eyrie

Gendry I

He worked hours undying. Long into the night and into morning and into night again. He worked until his arms were sore and coated in black smoke and dark ash, like the sort that had stained his skin in Winterfell.

Winterfell, Hot Pie had called it, and Hot Pie was not wrong.

He wondered if the boy was even alive anymore. Arry was dead – that much he knew for certain. Little girls didn’t survive long on their own. After she had abandoned the Hound, she wouldn’t have lasted long. No matter how strong Arry was – and Gendry would never be one to argue otherwise – she was dead. Dead and gone.

But Hot Pie was a survivor too. Hot Pie was in that inn of his, baking bread and pies, or whatever it was he liked to do. Gendry had never listened all too well when he spoke. Sometime after the fourth time the boy explained how to burn butter, he had learned to either sock him upside the ear or ignore him. Better to focus on the smithy than some baker’s boy.

Now, though, he yearned to hear the baker’s boy blabber on about butter once more. He wanted to see him trot about the smithy, touching everything and complaining about the heat and how badly his feet hurt from the walk. He yearned to turn and see Arry sitting on the table, swinging one of the freshly forged swords and complaining about the weight of them all.

“Nothing like Needle,” she would say, and he would just nod, and explain to her the differences between steel and dragonglass. That it was the only tool that could kill the Walkers and the wights alike, that the world depended on him forging it the perfect tools, or they would all be dead by morning, and that was only if morning ever came again. She would shrug again, like she always did, and say, “My sword’s still better” because she was an insufferable little twat.

It was funny, he thought. Even at the end of the world, while the dead marched on the living, he was thinking of her. Just another dead girl, but one that had always been far closer to him than any of the other wights could dream of getting.

The dragonglass shattered beneath his hammer. A swing too hard. It was a fragile material, and he had the hands of a blacksmith. He pushed himself away from the anvil, cursing a thousand times over with the ferocity of the bull he was marked for. His helmet was gone, but the bullheadedness remained. It always did.

Once, there might have been someone to remark upon his fit. Ser Davos the Onion Smuggler, Lady Arry the Annoying, Hot Pie the baker of hot pies, even the damned Hound. But the Hound was gone now, off to fight in a war that they could not win, and Davos, Arry, and Hot Pie must have been marching towards them as he hammered.
He cleared off the shattered glass and selected another smattering of pieces. He beat the fire harder, faster, stronger. They were almost out of time. He needed to finish this final shipment before the front lines crumbled under the first waves of the assault. Else, the lines behind them would have nothing to fight with, and the battle would be over before it started.

It already was, but it wasn’t for bastard boys to question the orders of their lords. Even if their lord was just a bastard boy himself.

Jon Snow was a good man, though. Not the ordinary sort of prick lords that holed themselves in their castles and watched the smallfolk starve and die by the hands of their lord’s own bannermen. He was a warrior king, and a good one at that. Far better than Gendry’s own royal hog of a father.

Gendry had followed him beyond the Wall, and Gendry had followed him into battle. It had not been a moon since, but already it felt like a lifetime ago. As he heated his next blade, he wondered if Jon Snow wasn’t panicked too.

It was difficult to tell when the dragonglass was ready for forging. Unlike steel, it did not glow red when it reached the proper temperature. No, dragonglass burned black no matter how hot the fires. It made forging difficult, even more than it already was under the pressure of a million lives weighing on his shoulders.

Outside, there were thousands of men readying for the fight of their lives. They were wild, screaming and hollering like wildlings on the march. He could hear them from the castle, and surely he would have heard them from across the Narrow Sea. Swords clambered against shields, echoing the sound of steel on wood for all the realm to hear. Men squealed and screamed, all at once, or sang their war songs together. All around the Vale, The Dornishman’s Wife, Wolf in the Night, and even The Last of the Giants rung loud and unclear from the voices of the soldiers. Never once did he hear the bard song that rang through Harrenhal day and night. Once, one of the bards had been forced to play for days undying, after he had sung one particular verse about Lord Tywin’s shiny skull. The Rains of Castamere went on and on for days and days, until the singer dropped dead over his lyre. Gendry had never been so grateful for a man’s death.

But it was the Starks and the Arryns who lorded over them now, and the Starks did not want to hear songs of Lannister victories. They wanted to hear songs of wolves and justice and the North Remembers. Gendry wasn’t sure know what it was supposed to remember, but Arry had always been good at holding grudges, so he supposed the rest of the North might be too.

Seven Hells, he had been away from her for years, and still her stupid list echoed through his head like his mother’s songs. He wondered if she’d still spoken it, right up until the end, or if she had left it behind like he would have left her behind. If her sense of justice had slipped away with the death of her brothers, with the Hound at her side.

No, she would have repeated it until the end. If she had made it through Harrenhal with those names on her tongue, then surely, she spat each and every one as some honorable knight ran her through in Saltpans. Surely, she’d asked his name as she slipped into another life. A better life. One that would actually deserve her.

This time, his hammer fell too softly to even dent the bloody glass.

_Stupid bull_, he heard her say. _I could’ve done that! Not much of a smith, are you?_  

This time, he drove his hammer through. With any more force, it might have cracked the anvil. As it was, he sent out a _thud_ loud enough to wake dragons from stone. More than loud enough to drown out the songs, and to send the other smiths stumbling back.
“Seven Hells, boy!” cried one of the other smiths.

“We don’t ‘ave limitless supplies, y’know,” another shouted.

Gendry tempered him with a wave of his hand and set down his hammer. He wasn’t focused enough for this. If he worked at it any longer, they would run out of the damned glasss entirely.

Jon wanted him to stay forging through the night, but lords never did understand the plight of the commonfolk. They did not understand sore muscles and aching hearts, and the things they could do to a smith’s hammer. Gendry would be better served on the battlefield than in a forge, wasting glass and mourning stupid dead girls. He left the smithy to the sounds of *The Night That Ended* and *The King Without Courage*, both sung in the same pitch at the same time by the same rowdy band of soldiers. Gendry had never missed Tom o’ Sevenstreams and Thoros of Myr more. At least they only ever sang one song at once.

The halls of the Eyrie were empty that night. The women and the men were on the battlefield in freshly woven breeches and broken bits of armor. The children that were old enough to fight joined them, and the rest had been sent off to Dragonstone, for at least the Army of the Dead could not swim. The dragon still could reach them, but the wights would stay back, and that had been enough cause to send them off. A lucky few had gone with them – those too old and injured to fight, like Beric Dondarrion, who had been ordered back to Dragonstone after Lord Harlan Hunter noticed that his right hand was missing most of its digits. The rest of them were on the battlefield, save for the cockless few left sweating in the smithy.

He wanted nothing more than a cask of ale to drink, but he needed to stay sober for this fight. Before long, he would be among the fighters, sweating and dying and fighting for the wrong side.

He wouldn’t survive it. He hadn’t meant to survive Winterfell either.

His laugh was a cold and broken thing. A laugh that carried corpses in its wake. Still, as he stared out of a crusted Eyrie window, out at the rolling hills and sharp cliffs leading to fortified valleys below, it tore from his mouth. For this was a sight he had not seen in Winterfell. He had never wished to.

A sea of wights stirred on the horizon. Where once there were fields of green, feasted on by cavalry and cattle alike, there was only a flood of grey. Rotting carcasses that roamed the lands, ready to spread their sickness across the realms of men. Grey faces missing eyes, noses, ears, and more. Grey bodies, some without limbs or bodies or even heads. This was a wave of death, coming to smother the living from the world. This was the gods’ way of punishing the lords, of paying them back for their cruelties. This was how the Seven answered Gendry’s prayers, when he had wished for vengeance in Harrenhal. He wished he’d never prayed at all. The gods were too cruel to deserve them.

Outside, the hail fell like bolts from a crossbow. The singing slowed to a trickle as more of it came down, striking helmetless men every which way. Before the battle ever even struck, there were corpses among their rank. Smashed skulls, bloodied grasses, and ice that rained. Already, he could see the men scurrying to find shelter, breaking rank to escape the sky’s anger. But soon, it would not simply be the sky moving to kill them. Soon, it would be the seas, and the fires, the land, and the cold.

Already, the cold burned hotter than heat.

As the Walkers drew nearer, his view grew duller and blacker, until the night had them fully engulfed before the sun had ever set. Through the dim torch lights, he thought he could see some
of the wights striking for the first time. Red overtook the land faster than lightning. Screams, shrieks, and cries of wars sung through the air.

He did not see the Walkers. He didn’t think he ever would. Not before he died.

He did not know how long he stood by the window, watching the light simmer to an end, but by the time he noticed his place, his legs were shaking from the exertion. He felt like he had run all the way from the beyond the wall, again, only this time there wasn’t hope. The Dragon Queen was dead, and no one was coming to save them.

The Seven had abandoned him. He thought of praying to the old gods, but they were all dead. Dead in the North with their trees and their crippled prophet.

Gods, why did everything strange have to revolve around the Starks? First Arry and her dreams, then Jon and his scars, and then Bran Stark with whatever it was that Bran Stark had.

Bran had pulled him aside the day before the battle, but the boy had said nothing of import. Simply warned him to watch for wolves without faces, whatever that was supposed to mean. The boy’s words were as clear as the waters in Blackwater Bay.

Or, perhaps, as clear as his view through all this darkness.

A few minutes after the wights struck their ranks, he finally moved from his station. He had left his hammer in the forge. He went to get that first. If he was going to be smashing every piece of glass that came his way, he was better served in the field than the smithy.

The heat of the smithy barely eased the bitter winter breeze, even with the castle cracks sealed tight and the windows shut. The other smiths did not spare him a glare, nor did the children who ran underfoot, carrying finished weapons to the soldiers in the fields. He nearly tripped as they ran by, and did suffer a few nicks to his hands. Damned kids never knew not to run with swords.

Thankfully, the intensity of the forge meant that there was no time to spare in questioning a single man. The war was at their doorstep, and they all knew the cost of failure. None bothered to wonder why the lead smith was retreating from the forge. None cared.

He imagined they all knew they would die, anyway. It didn’t matter much if a man died in the smoked forge or out in the open air.

Besides, why would they care about him? Gendry was an ordinary man. He believed in the Seven, same as anybody else, though he didn’t bow to profess his worthiness at every stage of the day. He was a fighter, but he wasn’t the warrior that Jon Snow was, and he wasn’t as bloodthirsty as Arry could be when the mood struck her. He liked to think that he was smart – at least compared to everyone else – but he wasn’t anything particularly special. He was just another man, another bastard boy from King’s Landing, and he took pride in that. He wasn’t his hog of a father. He was a man who had forged his own way in life with blood and grit and sweat.

But, when he left the Eyrie with a hammer in his hand and a dagger at his side, he wished, for the first time since the days shortly after Harrenhal, that he was some prissy lord sitting content in his castle while the rest of the world burned and froze and died. He wished that he really was a Stark, like Arry had begged him to be, and he could turn into a wolf and run off. He wished that he had the blood of the Targaryens, and he could ride on the back of a dragon and escape this place entirely.

But only Jon Snow had a dragon, and he wasn’t about to carry Gendry off to some safe place that
didn’t exist.

The dreams were stupid anyway. The lords were too stupid to run away. They were happy to sit atop the Eyrie, not realizing that a dragon the size of the Red Keep was coming for them with fire steaming from its nostrils. Gendry had spent too much time in Harrenhal to misunderstand what a dragon could do to a castle.

He felt a wave of despair as he stepped out from the supposed safety of the castle. The scent of ash and frozen air filled his nose. Gendry’s heart pulsed in tune with the beat of swords on bone. They had not reached this section yet, but they were coming. The Stranger was finally coming for him, after all those years of waiting.

He was in the back of the pack, where the artillery stood and where the Knights of the Vale had ordered the youngest of their squires to keep watch over the ones at the rear. It had been a good plan, Gendry thought. Squires were reasonably trained, and often honorable enough to hold their ground in the face of death. If they thought it was duty, it would often be done.

But they had forgotten one small detail. Though squires were trained soldiers, who aspired to be honorable and dutiful knights, they were, at heart, boys. They were still green in their horns and scared in their hearts.

And so fled the squires, and with them the thieves, the rapers, the boys who had never shed a drop of blood in their lives. None were on horseback. Horses could not be spared for smallfolk and boys. Instead, they fled on bare feet. They wouldn’t get far. They must have known that. The Walkers had horses and spiders, bears and dogs, wolves and dragons. Somewhere in that horde, even Jon Snow’s giant of a wolf ran free through the crowd.

But they were pinned between two cliffs, each 200 feet high and steeper than the Wall, and there was only one way to run. Back to the Eyrie. Back to the castle, where the dragon would surely strike. All those lords with their silk robes and their shiny valyrian swords would be dead before the last in the lines. He just hoped someone would find the swords in the wreckage. Good steel was always needed, and good valyrian steel was a rare thing to find.

The cravens fled past him, scrambling frantically over each other to get to the tower. Gendry let them go. Let them run, if they wanted. They would die all the same.

They were screaming something that he couldn’t make out above the roar of the fighting and the clash of sword on skin. Some pointed hysterically around them, above them, behind them, while others simply shoved him as they sprinted past. Most all he could see threw down their swords. Once, a stray helmet struck him in the chest as they went by. He hadn’t found who’d done it, but his chest ached for a while after.

Cowards and idiots, then. Only a fool would hide in a castle unarmed when the dead were marching on their walls. If that was their great plan, they had better odds fighting.

_Only a few survived Winterfell,_ he thought. _Eleven in all. No one has good odds here._

Death was certain. If these cowards wanted to face it with their asses front, that was their choice. Gendry would meet it with a hammer in his hand and a cry on his lips.

There would be at least another quarter hour before the wights broke to his line. For the time being, he would simply watch the men before him fall. He would wait until he faced those same men on the other side of the fight. Only, then, their eyes would be blue. And soon, his too.
Gods, if the Red God existed at all, maybe Gendry would have the chance to leech him. He certainly deserved it after this mess.

Whatever happened to the red woman, anyway? Wasn’t she supposed to stop this? Wasn’t someone?

He had little time to wonder. Before he could react, the men to his right began to scream and beat savagely at a figure he could not see. Hundreds of men reacted in unison, screaming and hollering, some cheering some mad cheer while the others cried their war cries. All struggling against a single man, like the fools they were.

“For the Eyrie!” one screamed into the night.

“The Vale!” said another.

“Fuck it!” said another. On any other day, that one might have made Gendry laugh.

Even his own despair could not stop him from shouting, “Hot Pie!” as loud as he could. No one heard it, and no one understood it, but it made him laugh a shadow of a laugh.

My last laugh, he thought. Maybe, in some other life, I’ll tell him about it. The Mother owes me that.

He tightened his grip on his hammer, and his laughter slipped away. He doubted it would ever come again.

A flicker of darkness flashed above his head. For a fraction of a second, the torch light did not guide his way. The light returned just as quickly as it had gone, but that did not comfort him. Not as the men to his left began to holler and slash. Gendry tried to move to help, but there were too many men to move. They were packed too tightly, like smallfolk asleep in an inn.

Another flicker of light drew his eyes to the sky. What he saw might have stilled his heart.

There, where the archers were supposed to be, and the barrels of pitch and oil and the burning logs, above the torches that lined the walls, and above the steep curve of the valley cliffs, stood an army of wights.

There were thousands of them. All were utterly silent on the peak of a cliffs. As he watched, a single one stepped forward and tumbled down. It made no sound as it fell. He did not see where it landed, but he heard the screams of his men. The screams of living facing death for the first time. The screams of the unprepared.

If I survive this, he thought, pushing back the terror from his heart, I will hear them forever.

He needn’t have worried. For, if even the impenetrable cliffs of the Eyrie could be dominated by these creatures, what hope was there? The Stranger was coming for them all.

As more men watched more wights fall, more men fled. Most stayed, of course. Most were smart enough. There was no safety behind walls, just as there was no safety beneath cliffs. But there were enough that fled. Enough that the battle grew as chaotic as Winterfell before it had ever even started.

Pitch and oil was falling from the castle walls, but it did nothing to stop the Walker assault. A dozen dead just gave way to two dozen more. If a section burned, they simply leapt on it and smothered it before it could catch more. The smell of burning rot filled Gendry’s nose, and he
already knew it would never wash out.

The lines broke faster than he had expected. Too many fleeing, he supposed. Too many cowards, ready to darn the world for a chance to have an extra quarter hour. They shoved past him, hollering and crying like little children – except even children did not cry like that. He could count on one hand the amount of times he’d seen Arry cry, and he, Arry, and Hot Pie had been through everything.

Arry was 11 years old then, and Arry hadn’t cried. Hot Pie, just a little older, and he’d mostly been strong too. If men grown could break down like this in the heat of battle, what hope was there?

Still, Gendry did not pray. The Seven had abandoned them long ago, when Gendry’s uncle forsook them and their justice. The old gods were dead. The Red God’s champion was a myth and a lie, and no other god had offered their aid. All of the world would suffer for it. They already had.

There was only one god there that day, and he wore ice as well as most men did cloaks. Soon, they all would.

I’m coming, Arry, he thought. We’re going home.

The first time he saw one of the Stranger’s men up close that day, it already had an iron knife through its eye. Maggots were chewing at its severed ear, while its single surviving eye rolled loosely in its socket. Skin hung from it like empty sacks, or else like string in places. It was missing most of its teeth, and showed bone in some spots along its limp skin and exposed muscle in either. Gendry might have been sick at the sight, if he hadn’t seen a thousand others just like it.

He swung his hammer, but another man’s dagger claimed the beast first. The second the dragonglass breached its skin, the creature fell like a stone. As Gendry watched, the eye rolled out from its face and onto the ground. A single piece of falling hail smashed it into the ground, splattering juice and blood all over Gendry’s boots.

He might have been sick, but he had not the time. With a hole now pushed through their defenses, more wights were breaking through. The artillery from the other lines did nothing to stop the assault, and the pitch and oil still being thrust from the wall only managed to spread the fire from the wights to the living. Where once there had been songs, the shrieks of burning men filled the air.

If the Winterfell had been a sea of death, this was a river. A current, stretching farther than he could see, loud and wroth, and the banks were made of fire that leapt and hungered for flesh. The death flooded in from the North, though the many valleys and gates, and pushed to the castle.

His first kill came as a wight leapt at the man next to him. One of Lord Hunter’s men, a scrawny boy who could not have been older than four and ten. His eyes were wide, his sword short, and his legs dripping wet. The wight was nearly a foot away from Gendry. It took nothing to drive his hammer through its skull.

It exploded in a shower of rotted blood and decaying brain. All over the poor boy’s face, it splattered. On any other day, Gendry might have offered to help him clean himself. Maybe he might have laughed a bit at the look on his bloodied face. This was not an ordinary day. He just turned his head and fought on.

In a strange sort of way, it reminded him of working in the smithy. There was technique to it, of course, but largely, the fight was simple. He just had to smash away at a predictable enemy. Like molding steel into shape, he smashed faces, shattered arms, and ripped apart hearts. In a way, it was easier than smithing. As soon as the dragonglass struck their insides, they would crumble and
die. He did not need to hammer away at them for hours, until his skin was coated in sweat and his muscles sore and tired. He just killed them and moved on. It was easy.

He’d never really thought dying would be so simple.

Somewhere above them, a dragon flew into the night. He didn’t care to watch. Jon Snow’s fight was Jon Snow’s fight. He was a good man, it was true, and Gendry would have happily fought for him on any other day – if not for honor than for Arry – but he couldn’t bring himself to care. Jon Snow was in better hands than any of them. If he wanted to get away, he need only turn tail and go. Lucky little lord, that one. Luckier than the rest of them.

For, while some of the living celebrated Jon’s flight with cheers and calls for fire, the wights reacted in their own way.

A single step stopped the celebrations. A single step stopped the fighting, if only for a second.

With a great and terrible stride that made all the valley rumble, the masses of wights above them took a single step forward. One step that drove a frozen dagger into Gendry’s heart.

And then another. And then another.

All those who noticed them made to flee the valley. All around him, swords fell and screams carried. Most hadn’t the chance. Thousands of bodies came crashing down from the skies before any could call a warning.

They did not flail their arms or pull on cloaks to slow their fall. They did not scream. No, these creatures did not fear the death they already had. They put their hands to their sides and fell like stones.

All around him, the corpses rained. Men beside him one moment exploded in a shower of blood and bone the next. The screams of the scared and the dying overtook the valley. Some merely died on impact. When the fallen wights pushed themselves onto broken legs and walked with their shattered skulls, more still fell. Those that could no longer walk simply dragged themselves forward, knives held between their rotted teeth.

One of the crippled creatures tried to catch Gendry by the leg, but he smashed its skull before it could tug. He had to pry its fingers away before he could move again.

Suddenly, as the corpses rained, the dragon-bait of a tower seemed far more alluring.

Because he didn’t want to die, and that overwrote everything else. He wanted to see Arry again, and Hot Pie and Master Mott and his mother with her bright yellow hair and his whoring pig of a father, but not like this. He wanted to meet them when he was old and wrinkled, not young and brutalized in a fight with the fate of the world at stake.

Arry will hate me if I die, he thought with surety. She would call him a stupid cowardly bull, and she would hate him even more if her brother and her sister died too.

He took another look at the battlefield, where hundreds of men had already crumpled and died. They were warriors, or young enough to be, not like the prissy lords in their tower. The highborn sat above in the clouds, and for the first time that fight, Gendry remembered one of the women that had taken shelter behind stone walls that overlooked the fight. Saved in Winterfell, only to die in the Eyrie. He wondered if she would have preferred it the other way ’round.

Unfortunately, he had little time to think of her. As soon as the thought sprouted, a bone-shaking
roar shattered it. It was a caw loud enough to scare gods and men alike. The ground shook, and too many men were thrown off their feet in the process. As they fell, the wights leapt forward and swallowed them whole.

A great blue streak of flames spewed overhead. With it came the shrieks of burning men who yearned as much to live as they did for the mercy of death. The dragon continued to roar and breathe its fire. No one was tall enough to stop it. All the giants died in Winterfell.

The dragon flew over Gendry’s head and, thankfully, did not spew another breath of fire. Instead, the beast went on past him, past the cowards, and past the trebuchets and catapults at his back.

Gendry’s hammer cut down a dozen more as the dragon continued its flight.

The last time he had been this close to the wights, he had gone back for Lady Stark, eager to rescue his friend’s sister. He hadn’t been able to do the same for Arry, and maybe, maybe, this could repay the debt.

It didn’t, of course. The debt he owed her from the Kingsroad, from Harrenhal, from the days after – they were debts he could never repay. At least saving Lady Sansa meant he was trying. At least, wherever she was, Arry could know he wasn’t going to forget.

In Winterfell, the last time, he had slammed on the door to the crypt with his hammer. He had killed a dozen wights, and screamed until Lady Stark’s face emerged from behind a great stone door. He pulled her by the arm, dragged her and the Lannister imp until they found Jon Snow and his dragon, and nearly died in the process.

This time, he didn’t think he would be so lucky. This time, Jon was flying.

The boy next to him caught a knife to the throat as Gendry crushed a duo of wights beneath his hammer. The boy was scarcely older than Hot Pie had been, and no taller either, though he wasn’t nearly as fat. His bright blue eyes caught Gendry’s as he choked on his own blood. Soon, those eyes would be brighter, like great blue stars.

Everyone would die today, he knew. Every last man, woman, lord, lady, and lordling in the Vale would be swallowed whole. The Stranger would swallow them, and his kingdom would stretch beyond the bounds of the seas before long.

Arry would kill him soon enough. She’d bring him back like Thoros did Beric, and she’d send him back to the Stranger with his skin peeled. He knew it like he knew his own name. Because he’d failed her. Despite all his efforts to fight beside her brother, to save his life even when his stupid plans sent them to the enemy’s yard and lost them a dragon, he had failed another of Arry’s family.

He was drenched in sweat, his muscles screamed from the exertion of days spent swinging a heavy hammer. All around him sang the songs of the Stranger, and all around him fell the Stranger’s gifts. Gendry beat down a wight, then another, then another, but they all kept coming. The tide was high, and this sea would not stop coming until they all drowned.

Where once there had been hundreds of men around him, there were a few dozen left. Soon, there would be none.

And all the while, though the blood and the mud and the rot, the wind rushed past his ears, whispering “I can be your family” though that chance was long past. Gone with Hot Pie at that inn, and Lommy on the Kingsroad. Gone with Arry to another world. Gone with the Hound when he swept her away. Gone with Gendry, because he had been fool enough to let her go.
He’d trusted the Brotherhood over her, and it had only earned him leeches.

His hammer collided with another wight’s head, and, for a moment, bright blue fire reflected off of the dragonglass. He did not want to think of it. He could hardly bear to turn and face it, but, as another wight fell by his hand, he forced his head to stare behind him.

The dead dragon flew over the high Eyrie tower, bright blue fire bursting from its decaying lips. Fire caught on the tower, stone crumbled, and, if Gendry squinted hard enough, he could see little figures falling from the windows.

And all he could think, as the bodies fell, was that somewhere in that castle, a prissy Northern lady was locked away in her furs and her silks, sipping wine and whispering well wishes to the smallfolk below.

Somewhere in the castle, his lady’s sister was going to burn.

And Gendry turned tail and ran.

Chapter End Notes

We'll be staying in the Eyrie for a while, next time with another new POV, because I can't stop myself.
Sansa I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Ten: Battle of the Eyrie (Part Two)

The Eyrie

Sansa Stark I

Once, in a distant time, more wound than memory, Sansa had been a prisoner in a battle like this.

Oh, she wore no shackles, of course. Only the most pristine silks and the finest of dresses, and the fancy gold that hung from her throat was the only hint of the heavy chains that weighed her down. She had been surrounded by the other ladies - all scared and lonely and singing the songs of honor and knights and princes and war.

But Sansa had been in war before, and she knew the costs better than those scared daughters of summer who huddled in Cersei’s chambers. She knew better than to sing the happy songs and whisper amongst the woman of war. She knew that knights had no honor, and princes no kindness. And she knew more than anyone the costs of war. But she did not face those costs directly. No, she never had. Most of the women of the Vale were out in the valleys, fighting with swords that they could scarcely carry, and there Sansa was, leaning partway out of a window as the dead marched.

The first time Sansa had seen the wights, they had been fleeing Winterfell with all due haste. She had scarcely had the chance to see them, hardly even had a moment for fear. Her entire system was afloat with the sort of rush that led men to warring even when they all knew it to be worthless. The same sort that led Jon to be so stupid in the Battle of the Bastards. The same sort that had washed over them, made them forget the corpses that lay buried in the crypts, as they lay the women and children there.

That place - those damnable crypts – had been the closest that Sansa had ever come to death. Even with Joffrey, with Ramsey, with Littlefinger, at least they all had need of her. They could not let her die with only an imp to keep her company, when all the realm needed Winterfell and she was its key.

But the wights did not care for Winterfell or keys. The wights did not care for woman or men, girls or boys, highborn or lowborn. They killed without care.

And so, Sansa sat in a castle again, protected and watched over, while the better women fought below. She carried no knives or swords, wore no armor, and hadn’t even a single blade of dragonglass on her person.

“She told them when they offered it. “I would be useless, with it or without. Give it to a fighter,” she’d said. “Someone who needs it more than a woman safe in her castle.”

They had left her alone after that.

Now, Tyrion sat beside her, staring out the window as Sansa’s heart beat and trembled, both watching as the sea of grey, stretching back farther than sight, overwhelmed their colors. The
torches were too dim to see by, but even in the faded light, they could see the undeniable and unwanted truth.

They were losing.

For, even through the veil of fog and darkness, she could see them falling back. The enemy’s forces were larger, faster, and more relentless than the living could hope to match. If this went on, there was little they could do to stop them. There was nothing they could do anyway.

Even Jon on his dragon was no match for that army. The valley was wider than his dragon could blow, and though its breaths burned bright in the dark of the night, it was not enough. Every place he passed by flooded over a second later.

*It will not be enough forever, and when it isn’t, here I will sit in Littlefinger’s castle, watching better men die.*

“Sansa,” said Littlefinger from the table, “there is no need to stress your heart over these things. Come, sit with me.”

*So we may die in each other’s arms?* Sansa thought, dryly. Instead of voicing her disgust at the thought, she turned a delighted smile on the man. “I would love to, Petyr, but I am oh-so-fascinated by the battle. How do you think my brother, Jon, will fare?” She needn’t have said his name, she realized, suddenly. He was the only brother left.

It took effort to blink back the tears. But, she heard Tyrion snicker at her side, and that was enough to light her heart a bit. And as he gave no outward sign to Baelish, she decided to let it be.

She was ever-thankful that Baelish, properly rebuffed, merely turned his attention to the dragonglass daggers lain out on the table before them. The daggers she had demanded go to the army. Daggers wasted.

It was a last defense, Tyrion had told her when he had lain the weapons down, but Sansa knew well that it was a lie. A defense this meagre would not protect them from the hordes of wights below. It was just another Ilyn Payne, standing by the back door again, her father’s sword in his hands, black with clotted blood. And there Littlefinger was – another Cersei – whispering sweet-nothings and muttering needless threats as the world closed in on them.

“Jon Snow is a clever man,” Baelish answered. “As clever as his father was, and a faster sword, too.”

Sansa frowned, but thankfully, he could not see. “Did you ever see my father fight, Lord Baelish?”

Baelish only laughed. “Only his brother, I fear, but I’ve heard tell of your father’s prowess in the Rebellion.”

“Enough to defeat Ser Arthur Dayne,” Tyrion said. “Jon Snow is a skilled warrior, I’m sure, but I very much doubt his sword is faster than Ned Stark’s.”

*It is,* Sansa thought, but she dare not say it. Her father’s sword had failed him in the end. Jon’s wouldn’t. Jon’s couldn’t.

“Even so,” Baelish said, “he rides on the back of a dragon. He is safer than any of us.”

She heard Tyrion mutter some comment about the safety of dragons, but it was too quiet to make out. Instead, Sansa studied the battlefield below.
The sight was grim. Unlike in Winterfell, where the men had been stationed inside the castle, with towers and walls the only obstacles for the walkers, this place was impregnable. The only path forward was through the fortified valleys, or by climbing a series of steep jagged impassable cliffs. Perhaps one or two men might scale the rock, as Robin had ordered his men to, but not an army. They had known that when they planned. Had placed thousands of bottles of oil, hundreds of logs to be burned and rolled, and a dozen men to use them all.

But there stood an army, and the fires hadn’t lit.

Oh, those on the roof of the Eyrie were setting fires well enough, and their trebuchets were serving them well, but it was not enough. Without a constant source of fire raining down from all sides, the Army of the Dead was gaining ground. Even had it not been for the army on the walls, it would have been hopeless. Now, as Sansa stared out, she felt a cold indifference bubbling in her heart. A sudden feeling that burnt through the walls she had so carefully crafted.

What did any of it matter in the end? What did propriety matter when the dead marched on them? What did it matter to treat with Petyr Baelish when their deaths were only a few hours away? She wasted so much of her life maintaining her courtly manners, when before her stood the only path it could have taken her: a path tread with blood and death.

She had learned to play the game of thrones, but what did the game matter in the end? All that time wasted on plots and treasons, and all three of them were there to witness the results. She only wished Cersei could have been there to see it. For the longest time, Sansa had hoped she would lay the final blow. Now, her hopes changed. Let her rotting grey fingers wrap around Cersei’s throat. Let her blue eyes be the last thing Cersei saw as she slipped into the worst of the seven hells. Perhaps then, a debt could be repaid.

“Tyrion,” she whispered, softly, “do you think your sister knows?”

She did not look to see the dwarf’s face, but she could feel his eyes burning into her back. His and Baelish’ both. She forced herself not to react to their stares.

After a moment that might have lasted a thousand years, Tyrion said, “I imagine so. I saw the Tarly boy by the ravens during Winterfell. If he was smart – and I know him to be – he would have let all the realm know.”

Sansa shut her eyes and pushed back the lasting flood of regret at the thought of Winterfell. Her home, where she had been born, had grown, had lived her childhood as a naïve girl with naïve dreams, was no more than a battle and a pile of rubble now. A loss, at that.

In all likelihood, she would never again see it whole. It was a thought that burned worse than fire.

“Does she think she’s won?” she asked, if only to cool the burn with poison.

Tyrion laughed, a bitter laugh. “Cersei always thinks she’s won. She’ll think it until the knife cuts her pretty little throat.” He paused, and then muttered to himself, “Until there are ashes in her mouth.”

From her vantage point, she saw nine – no, ten – wights step off from their ledges. The shrieks of the living reached even Sansa’s ears, and she was three stories in the air and a hundred feet away. The wights did not make a sound.

She wondered if Sweetrobin would hear them from his perch by the Moon Door. If he wasn’t watching his people freeze and die, burn alive, or simply die to the enemy’s knives. If he wasn’t
laughing through at the sight, because his mother’s madness had claimed him young.

No, Robin Arryn may have been a demon of a child, but he was not so cruel as that. He hadn’t been kind to her when she was in the Eyrie, but he hadn’t been a monster either. He was no Joffrey, no Ramsey, no Night King. He was just a boy. A misled boy with a mad woman for a mother. There were no songs for the mad children of mad mothers.

There would be no songs for any of them.

Outside, the corpses marched on. Outside, a dragon took to the sky to spread loop of fire. Outside, a blue mirror went with it.

Inside, Sansa was tired. Tired of waiting, tired of watching the men fight, and tired of the fighting itself.

Once, she had loved songs of war and knights and the Long Night that ended. She had been a stupid girl with stupid dreams. She had loved harps and knights, feasts and tourneys. She had loved Jeyne Poole and Septa Mordane and Joffrey, but hated her sister.

Once, there had been lemon cakes.

Now, there were no songs in the air. Not like before, when the soldiers were singing their war songs as they waited. No, now the only songs were only screams. There was nothing honorable in screams.

“Another battle,” Sansa said, “and here we are. Waiting again.”

Tyrion was just as grim as Sansa felt. “We should be out there.”

“Ah, but if all of us were in the fields, who would be the commanders?” Baelish asked, unhelpfully. “It would not do well for all the lords and ladies to die among the muck.”

And, finally, her courtly courtesies escaped her. “Is that why you fled Winterfell?” she demanded. “To escape the muck?”

She finally stepped away from the window, and turned to find the lord regent holding his palms high in the air. “Someone needed to defend the Vale in case of-”

“And that someone needed to be you? And the entire army of the Vale? Were Robin and the other lords incapable?”

“Lady Sansa-”

“Littlefinger,” Sansa said, shortly. “The world is ending. Might it not finally be time to quit this mummer’s show?”

But the act did not drop. “Lady Sansa, I meant no disrespect by leaving Winterfell. I simply meant to provide additional support if the castle fell.” He glanced back to the window, his narrow eyes widening as they caught sight of the dragons’ flight paths. She wondered, vaguely, if he had ever seen a second dragon before. The man had fled Winterfell as soon as Jon’s letter reached the gates. Until they reached the Eyrie, he had likely not even seen one. “Clearly, my strategy proved useful for us.”

Sansa could not stop her face from twitching. “It would not have been necessary if we had more men.”
“I did what was-”

But there was no more time to argue. In truth, there had never been. Every second they lived after
the Battle in Winterfell was another stolen. Stolen from the crypts, from the wights, from everyone
who had died in the fight, while she – useless stupid Sansa, who couldn’t even hold a dagger right
– survived.

But there was even less time than she had thought. For, one second, Sansa was glaring at
Littlefinger, ready to launch into another tirade, and the next, her head was wrapped in the legs of a
chair and the world was a blur.

The first thing that she was aware of was pain. A burning pain, like fire dancing its way across her
skin.

Her head swam, and her vision with it. Nothing was clear, and nothing was right. If she let herself,
she felt like she might fall out of the world entirely.

She was on her hands and her knees, she realized, vaguely. She was coughing. Too much. There
was copper in each cough, and it coated her tongue.

That wasn’t right. She liked lemons, not copper.

The world was covered in smoke and ash, and everywhere she looked had been painted with a
great blue brush. Fires burst all around her, swallowing anything in sight, and leaving dust
billowing through the air. Most of the bookshelves had fallen or burned, and parts of the wall had
crumbled in on themselves. She was surrounded by broken bricks and torn books, shattered
chandeliers, and silk curtains caught alight in bright blue flames.

Somewhere, on the edge of her consciousness, she recognized that her hand hurt. It felt worse than
when she touched a wight in the crypts. Worse than it did when she held a torch wrong. Worse
than it did when she had ridden on the back of Jon’s dragons, and pressed her hands against its
scales for hours undying.

Some part of her – some instinctual thing that she had never before known – forced her hand to
move before she even knew what was wrong. Forced her to roll atop her burning arm, hissing as it
came into contact with her chest. She didn’t know how long she stayed there, rolling, but
eventually, the pain eased. She had not been more relieved since Joffrey choked on his wine.

When she pushed herself back onto her knees, she found her arm scorched red and black, like a face
she had once kissed. She wondered if it would feel as rough as his cheek. She wondered if he was
alive somewhere, but she hadn’t the time to worry. Her hand had just been aflame.

She found that she could still bend her fingers, if she tried hard enough, but it was no easy thing.
Every twitch sent a bolt of pain straight to her spine. Every flex drove a scream from her lips and
forced the arm to flex even more.

There was nothing she could do about it now, so she wiped away the water in her eyes and forced
herself onto her feet.

“Tyrion?” she cried. “Lord Baelish?” When none answered, she dropped her eyes and whispered to
the last hope she had. “Jon?”

But Jon did not emerge from the shadows on his massive flying steed. Baelish did not rise from
beneath the wreckage to gloat. Tyrion did not emerge from anything. She was on her own. Alone in
this hell, where the fires burned hotter than the hot springs of Winterfell. More alone than she had
been in the days before Ser Dontos, when Arya was gone, Father was dead, and Robb was soon to be dead, too.

Past a few scattered lines of fire, the door had been thrown ajar by whatever it was that struck them. The dragon, Sansa thought, but she couldn’t be sure. Who knew what magic the White Walkers brought with them, and what forgotten tricks they carried with their swords.

Still, she hardly had time to ponder. She stumbled towards the door, intent to escape this tomb, if only for a few seconds more.

She tasted more copper, and wondered if she had bitten through her tongue. It was hard to tell. Everything hurt too much to say.

Outside, by the window, she heard a quaking *roar* that sent shivers down her aching spine. She wanted to run from the sound, but her shaking legs would not obey. If she could even walk at a solid pace, then surely the gods had blessed her. But, alas, the gods sent no gifts. She could not walk, let alone run or sprint. Even had she the strength, it had never been easy to run in dresses. Even the Northern sort.

She was about to escape the room when she saw it. There, in the corner, a flash of metal in the midst of burning wood. She gave one last look of longing at the door, before she turned her attention back to the window.

It took a great deal of effort, but she managed to limp her way back to the fire. Careful to avoid using her unburnt left hand, she stuck her right into the pile. With grit teeth and a great deal of effort, she managed to carry away some of the wood. It didn’t hurt as much as she thought it would, with the fires licking at her blemished skin. She wondered if that was a good thing or bad. Sansa had never had much a mind for medicine.

It did not take long to find Tyrion amidst the rubble. He was small, of course, but not so much so that he was impossible to find. His red skin clashed against the scatterings of the burning blue books and silk.

He was unconscious, but his leathers had protected him from the worst of the fires. She beat out the rest with her burnt hand, and dragged him away with her left. He was heavier than she thought he would be. She wondered if all dwarves were, or if it was just him. It was impossible to say. In the time they had been married, she never bothered to ask. His affliction was a shame to them both.

Now, she supposed it was the only reason he was alive. A bigger man would have weighed too much. He would have died in the rubble.

By the time she had dragged him to the door, she had already spotted Baelish in the wreckage. He was in the other corner, unconscious but breathing. A thin streak of blood ran down the side of his face, but the fires had not touched him, and he hardly seemed too injured. The only sign that he was in danger were the wooden chairs surrounding him, burying him. If the fires spread any further, he would be doomed. And, with the dragon sure to come around again, it was a clear reality. If she did not wake him, he would die. If she left him, he would die.

*He left Father to Joffrey,* she thought. *He left me with Ramsey, and Winterfell to the Walkers. He leaves everyone for his game.*

She stared at him, her eyes wetter than she would have liked. He was a cruel man, yes, but he had saved her before. From Joffrey, from King’s Landing, and he had given her shelter from those calling for her head. It had been for his own nefarious purposes, but what did it matter, when it was
the only reason she lived?

Still, she managed to control her aching throat enough to speak. Years of bitterness and smothered resentment bubbled to the surface of her being. Each word came as a croak, but each word was worth more than the last, so she suffered through it. “Sometimes, when I try to understand a person’s motives, I play a little game,” she said. Then, with each of Tyrion’s arms in her own, she made for the door.

She took care to shut it quickly behind them.

It took all the strength she had to pull Tyrion to the stairs. She hadn’t the faintest clue how she was meant to get him down. All the men who might have helped her were dying below, and the few left in the castle were not the sort to be hauling men back and forth. There was Lady Anya Waynwood, the weakened Lord Lyonel Corbray, thrice-wed and ailing Lord Horton Redfort, Ser Harlan Hunter, who was said to have poisoned both his brothers for a chance at their father’s seat, and even Robin Arryn, with his shaking syndrome and his madness. None were the sort she wanted with an injured Tyrion Lannister at her side. Either they would kill him outright, or they would leave them both for dead.

But how was she meant to drag him over the bridge? And where to from there?

“Please,” she breathed. She didn’t know why she said it, if it was a prayer to some god that had forgotten her, or if it was a simple request for Tyrion to rise again. He didn’t. Gods didn’t listen anymore. They died in the Trident with Lady.

But Sansa still lived. Through it all, she lived. And now? She wouldn’t leave him. Dying was sure to be a terrible thing, but dying alone would be worse.

She did not pray to the Seven. She did not beg her mother’s gods to save her from this place. She did not pray to her father’s, either. If they weren’t dead, then they had all abandoned her at one point or another. She would never forget staring out at the Heart Tree as Ramsey held her captive. She would never forget any of it.

Instead of praying, she moved. She pulled her once-husband down one step at a time, sweating and shaking, straining herself with every step. Tyrion did not move. But still, he breathed. It was the only reason she did not leave him and run. At times, she nearly did.

Her resolve held. She kept moving.

She was halfway down the stairs when the walls shook once more. A wave of heat passed over Sansa before she even knew what was happening. So startled was she that Tyrion slipped from her hold, and toppled down the curved stairs until his head lay flat against the wall. Still limp, though the sounds his body had made would have made a lesser woman scream.

Before she moved again, her burnt hand resting on the wall, she watched him for any signs of life. Was he breathing? Was he moving? Was he trembling?

He lay still, for a second – shorter than she thought, but longer than an eternity. And then, his tiny body shook, trembled, and breathed again.

Sansa let a sigh slip past her lips, and then she stormed down the stairs and gathered him again.

And as the walls shook and the castle screamed, she pushed on. She had to.

After all, at the end of the world, what else was there to do but run?
A/N- I thought Sansa could use some action for once. She didn’t really get as involved as some of the other characters did. Even Cersei saw more of battle than Sansa did, so I thought that it’d be fun to explore a different side of Sansa here.

We’ll be returning to Jon’s POV in the next chapter, so get ready for dragons.
Chapter Eleven: Battle of the Eyrie (Part Three)

The Eyrie

*Jon Snow*

The world was ending, and, in the midst of it all, Jon could only think one thing. *I should have given Longclaw to the Hound.* It hung uselessly by his hip, digging into his side as he directed Rhaegal forward. He should have sent it to the fight, let it be used for something more than a mummer’s prop. Here, high in the sky, it was nothing. In the Hound’s hands, it could have killed a Walker.

He had thought it as he flew off. Had seen the Cerwyn boy wandering about without a sword, and he’d considered handing it to him, but he couldn’t bring himself to part with it. The Old Bear had given him that sword. He hadn’t meant it for some Cerwyn boy; he’d meant it for Ned Stark’s bastard boy, the boy who would someday become the leader of the Watch. The man who would help topple the wall.

It was time to repay that debt. His second chance, his third chance, his last chance. For Bran. For Sam. For Edd. For Tormund. For Ygritte, who had only pushed South because of them. For Dany. For Drogon. For Viserion. For the Northerners, the dothraki, the unsullied, the ones dying below him today. For all the living, and all the dead, and all those who might someday be.

“Now,” he told the dragon, and it answered him with a roar, like the bellow of a horn in the Watch. But only one. Only a single blow.

_Twice more,* he thought. *This isn’t a ranger or a wildling. Twice more._

But the dragon’s roar did not again ring through the valley. Instead, a great burst of red-hot flames erupted from the creature’s mouth. A great wave of heat splashed over Jon like a sudden burst of rainfall. It didn’t hurt – not like ordinary fire did. Instead, it felt like stepping into a warm bath. He was bathing in Winterfell above the hot springs again, or perhaps clinging to a fiery woman in a cave beyond the Wall.

But those happy memories were behind him. In their place was dragonfire and a sea of ice below.

His dragon cut swaths through the horde of the dead. The reek of burning flesh came to claim the land about as much as the smoke claimed his sight, and the screams of the living his hearing. It had always been strange what battle did to the senses. Everything was as much the whole as it was the parts. Before the fight, he could see the strategy – tens of thousands of men lined up in order of experience and strength, while archers and pyromancers readied themselves for the fight.

And then, when he reached the battle, all his knowledge slipped away. There was only feel of hot scales on his fingers. The musky smell of his own sweat. The taste of salt and ash on his face.

As his senses were flooded, he could do no more than push forward. On the ground, he would have
been slashing everywhere, his sword in danger of biting friend and foe alike. A series of single combats, waiting for him to emerge the victor. Jon against a knight. Jon against a Bolton. Jon against another Bolton. Jon against a wight. It was always the same. One fight and then another. One slash and then another. On and on, until the battle was done, and he could breathe again.

But, on a dragon’s back, the fight was different. He could not lose himself as easily. There was no sword to swing, nor slash to dodge. There was no enemy to stare in the eyes as he cut the man down; no sword to swing as he passed his sentence.

No, on a dragon’s back, all that didn’t matter. The dragon was the executioner, and Jon the coward who could not swing his own sword. He could only watch and direct, as the hordes burned below.

*Lord Stark would be disappointed,* he thought. He was honorable. He was good. He was always just and kind, and he never went too far when the battle could be won without needless suffering, where Jon always pushed and pressed and lost.

But then, Lord Stark had faced men. Men with fears and minds of their own. He had never faced the Walkers. Even a Stark needed dishonor when his people were dead and gone.

*And besides,* Jon thought, clinging to the spines of his dragon as it let loose another torrent of flames, *I am not a Stark.*

He did not know the word that Dany used to order the fire, but he didn’t seem to need it. Rhaegal knew on his own. When they passed over the knights of the Vale, his fire stayed in his throat. But, as they crossed over the grey sea, the flames claimed the world again, and Jon flew above them all.

It was easy, up there, not to feel the true stakes of the battle. The Night King was coming, and the world was set to die, but what did it matter when he could fly? What did any of that matter compared to the feel of wind in his hair and the sight of human ants down below?

He finally understood why Torrhen Stark had knelt. The rest were fools. It was right to kneel. This was what happened to those who didn’t.

But all too soon, the joy of flying and burning ended. There was a blizzard in the distance, more devastating than this hail. It was difficult to see through, but, if he squinted, he could make out shadows dancing on the horizon. Ice spiders, giants, frozen wolves, and Walkers riding decaying horses. The spiders were the size of hounds, tall and unruly and lapping at the Walkers’ feet. The wolves trailed them, some as big as ponies – direwolves, surely.

He wondered if Ghost was in that pack. He couldn’t feel him anymore, not the way he used to. Even Rhaegar couldn’t fill the hole he’d left behind. One that seared deep in his heart, like no fire ever could.

Ghost should never have been in the field at all. He should have been in the crypts protecting Sansa. He should have been *safe.*

Now, he was a wight. Now, he walked the world alone, just as he had when Jon had abandoned him behind the Wall. Jon had failed him then, and failed him again. Now, Jon needed to lay the beast to rest, the way he had never wanted to.

*I was supposed to die with him.* The world felt bleaker all of a sudden. Like the air had been sucked from his lungs and frozen. *I was supposed to die with his fur under my fingers and his heart beating besides mine.*

It was a wrong that needed to be set right. He could not stop until Ghost was freed from the Night
King’s grip, and the living could go on, unaccosted by the forces of ice and cold and death.

If that was his role, then he would fulfill it. There was still fire burning through his mouth from his rebirth, dripping ash and heat whenever he so much as flicked his tongue. He would use that fire. He would burn the Night King himself. He had to.

If he squinted enough, he could see the creature. A mere dot against a pitch black sky, but Viserion’s bright scales stood out against the dark snow. As he grew closer, Jon could make out more of the beast’s look. The giant wings, the blue fire bursting in its throat like flames from a forge, and the bright blue eyes that were colder than ice.

The Arryns wore blue, too. Robin Arryn had called it a sign from the gods. A message to the living that their victory would soon be at hand.

“Blue defeats blue,” Arryn had said, “Mother always said I was stronger than the usurpers!”

“They have a dragon,” Jon had reminded him, but the boy waved him off all the same.

“I do not fear dragons,” he said with a smile. “My father helped kill them all!”

It was not so.

As Jon took further to the sky, and Rhaegal’s blooms of fire came to an abrupt halt, Viserion reached the battle.

He was just as decrepit as he had been when Jon saw him last. Scales torn and missing, slashes cut through his throat, and fire bursting out from the wounds. His wings had sprouted pits and cuts, making its flight ragged and frenzied, but the creature flew on nonetheless. The Night King sat on his back, the creature’s bright eyes tracking Jon’s every movement. His thin lips had spread into a shadow of a smile, another arrogant jab in the midst of another certain victory. A look of triumph, though he had not yet even reached the fighting.

Jon screamed into the wind, but neither the beast nor his rider heard. He was a whisp of wind amidst a great storm. A single fleck of warm air in a blizzard. Had he not been riding on the back of a creature of magic and R’hllor, the Night King might have never noticed him at all.

Or, perhaps, he would. It had been Jon that had slayed a Walker beyond the Wall, and Jon who had chased the Night King into the godswood. It was Jon that the creature had studied twice before, as it raised an army from the corpses of its enemy. It knew as well as he did that they were mortal foes.

Jon just hoped that he would be the last foe that creature could face. If he wasn’t, there were terrible times to come for all the realms of man. He was its shield. He was its sword in the darkness. Its watcher on the walls, except the true Wall had come crumbling down, and all that was left was a scorched hole in the earth.

As he watched, Viserion let loose a flood of flame, mindless of the damage he caused to his own army. His fire burned brighter than any Jon had ever seen. Blue flames that licked and burned hotter than red. Its bursts were focused in a forced stream, where Rhaegal preferred a scattered blast of flame. Its every breath brought with him the death that he had been reborn from, like a gift to the Walkers for returning it to life.

Dany would have been devastated to see it. She must have been just as hurt in Winterfell, though she had taken great care not to show it. She had borne the pain as best as any could have in her place. Better than Jon would have, had it been Ghost devastating their armies and tearing Jon’s
heart to shreds.

Thankfully, Jon didn’t know Viserion as Dany had. It was not his dragon, not his child, and not his wolf. And, if Rhaegal cared, he showed no sign of it, for he flew without reluctance as Jon drove him forward.

They needed to get to the Eyrie, where they might cut off the dragon before he could use the castle as target practice. The castle was bright in the distance – lit by the oils being thrust out from the castle windows. It would protect them from the wights, surely, but not a dragon. Fire could not burn a dragon.

Fire could, however, destroy a castle. As Viserion drew closer, a great burst of fire erupted from its tongue. Within an instant, the stream had already devastated the castle walls. Great stacks of stone exploded into rubble. Windows melted, stone melted. The castle shook and trembled under the beast’s mighty blow. Too many men fell and died from windows, from roofs, from ramparts. Even hundreds of feet away, Jon could hear their screams as they fell.

The scent of burning flesh filled the air. He might have choked on it, if not for the fact that it had been etched into his nostrils for weeks. No amount of washing could erase that stench, and he had hardly had the chance. Bathing was a foreign dream with the fate of the world on his shoulders.

He was leaning forward, in the hopes of shifting to some better view, when a passing thought struck him like dragonfire.

Sansa was in that castle. Sansa was burning.

He kicked his feet, as if his steed were naught more than a horse. “Go!” he screamed, over the din. Thankfully, he needn’t have even shouted. He understood him like Ghost did, without needing words or gestures to make himself known. But he’s not Ghost, Jon reminded himself. Ghost was blood as much as he was friend. And now, the wolf was dead, and only the dragon remained.

But he could not mourn long. A dragon was needed in this fight. If he sent a wolf out again, the Night King would crush it with naught more than his hands. A dragon couldn’t be crushed. A dragon took what it wanted with fire and blood, and he wanted Sansa.

I am not a dragon, he thought. But I can be. If I can ride one, I can be one.

So, with the ferocity of Balerion the Black Dread, the wildness of Sheepstealer, and the grief of Silverwing, Jon pushed forward. He and Rhaegal met Viseron against the castle walls. The dragon hadn’t reacted to them yet, though the Night King’s eyes had met Jon’s own.

For once, he had the advantage. He could not waste it.

Someday, someone would ask him what it was like to fight a dragon. They would ask if it felt like his heart was beating again, if it felt like the life had returned to his bones for the first time since the knives on the Wall.

He would say that it hadn’t.

He would lie. Because, as his dragon crashed into Viserion, he had never felt more alive.

For only the second time since the betrayal on the Wall, he felt like he was still an ordinary man again. Like there were no scars on his chest. Like his hands were clean. Like he hadn’t died and come back, only to hang a little boy from the gallows.
This was what he was born for. To ride on the back of a dragon. To slay the enemies of the dawn until he fell from its back.

Rhaegal’s claws raked through Viserion’s spine, missing the Night King by only a few feet. Its claws – sharper than Longclaw – tore through scale and wing alike. A normal dragon might have bled blood or viscera, but only heat burst from beneath Viserion’s torn scales. The blood had frozen, it seemed, or perhaps burned. Jon didn’t care either way. It made no matter. Whether by fire or ice, this creature would die. He had to.

Rhaegal let loose a burst of flames, hot enough that it might have burnt Jon’s hands if he was not already frozen to the core. For once, the blizzard beating at his back was more a help than a hindrance.

Viserion spun to meet them, but Rhaegal was ready. He slashed again with his claws, this time cutting slashes across Viserion’s once-mighty wings. It was not enough to completely tear through the flesh, but the slight holes they left would make it difficult enough to fly, and that was more than Jon could ask for.

As Rhaegal slashed, Viserion let loose another bolt of flames. The fires licked off of the Eyrie, but did nothing against Rhaegal’s scales. Even Jon, clinging to the creature’s back, felt nothing. His skin didn’t scorch, his clothes weren’t singed, and even his hair didn’t catch alight as the blue flames streaked by. Rhaegal was a better shield than any castle wall.

The Night King watched Jon the whole way, his eyes never darting down to its dragon or studying Jon’s. No, his blindingly bright gaze remained on Jon. Once, and only once, his eyes flicked away. They passed over Jon’s belt so quick that, had Jon so much as blinked, he never would have seen it at all.

Still, it was enough to set him thinking.

The dragon was covered in scratches and wounds. Scales had been flaked away, and his wings were slashed in so many places that he struggled to stay in the air. It would be awkward for the rest of his existence. He was just a wight, and wights didn’t heal.

The Night King had not looked for more than a second, but the gaze felt like it still burned through Jon’s side. It burned through his scabbard, and he was almost afraid that Longclaw would fall from his hip if he looked any longer.

Viserion made no sound as Rhaegal slit a claw clear off of his leg. He was just a wight. They didn’t feel pain.

He fought on, striking madly at Rhaegal and sending useless streams of fire into the air. They collided over and over, slamming into the Eyrie and leaving streaks of blood and scale behind them. Still, the undead dragon did not scream.

And he was just a wight.

The idea came to him faster than any he’d ever had.

“Get me close!” Jon screamed. He needn’t have bothered. The dragon understood without words.

The Night King understood before Jon had the chance to move. He scrambled to pull his dragon back, but Rhaegal’s claws were sunk too deep in his flesh. As Jon climbed Rhaegal’s neck, his hands scrambling on the slick scales, the Night King looked to Jon’s belt one last time. And then, his hands loosed, and the Walker slid from his neck and tumbled to the world below.
Jon did not care to watch him fall.

He drew Longclaw from his belt. The ripples on the steel seemed to glow in the light of the dragon’s fire. Red and blue flames danced, and, for a second, it seemed to bring light to the world again. But the moment passed, and the light did not stay. It faded with the flames, not yet able to draw its own. If a sword was meant to light the world, it was not Longclaw.

It did, however, have a role to play.

His feet slipped too many times and his hands burned like they hadn’t since he touched a torch’s flames, but somehow, he didn’t fall. Hundreds of feet in the air with only his fingers and his frozen feet holding him up, his grip stayed strong.

By the time he reached the top of Rhaegal’s horns, clinging there like reins on a horse, he was slick with sweat. He held Longclaw with both hands, terrified of losing his hold. Only his thighs kept him on the dragon now, as he lashed out with valyrian steel.

The first blow bounced harmlessly off of Viserion’s scales. And the next. And the next. Each strike was more desperate than the last. Viserion scrambled back, but Rhaegal drove forward. In all likelihood, this would be his only chance.

He screamed, loud and shrill and scared, and the sword caught the flesh of a wight.

When he looked to meet the dragon’s eyes, there was nothing there but a milky stare. The dragonfire that had been spewing from its mouth came to an abrupt end. Wind snuffed by a shut door.

He was just another wight. Another dead wight that toppled from the sky and landed broken on the ground below.

And Longclaw had slain it. Jon Snow had slain it.

A mad laugh ballooned through his chest. He had to shove Longclaw back into his scabbard. He couldn’t hold it anymore. He couldn’t hold anything anymore! If his legs lost their tension, he would topple to the ground below, just as the Night King had, but he didn’t care. The laughter was too strong, and the joy bubbled up like it hadn’t since he’d first said his oath.

I am the sword in the darkness, he thought, and it made him laugh all the harder.

He wanted to stop. There was still a war going on below. He wanted to stop laughing and return to the fight, just as he wanted to turn around to the living and the dead, and he wanted to scream “The dragon is dead!” for all the world to hear.

Still, the mad laughter went on. Even if it meant nothing at all, and humanity was still doomed to die, Jon Snow had slain a dragon! Lord Snow, Ned Stark’s shame, the bastard of Winterfell – it was him! His sword that slayed an undead dragon! His sword that cut down what even Torrhen Stark couldn’t! His sword that gave humanity a fighting chance!

He had proven the Old Bear right to trust him. Finally! He’d repaid his debt to the man, to the Watch, to the realms of men!
But then Rhaegal let loose a cry of pain, of shame, of something that Jon couldn’t name, and it shattered Jon’s mirth like glass against a sword.

He had lost a brother, just as Jon had, and there Jon was, laughing through a war. The dragon took to the air again before his laughter abated. He had to scramble to renew his hold as the winds claimed him again.

Below them, the death of the dragon had changed little. The living were still falling by the thousands. Blue-eyed giants were tearing through the armies, swinging fallen trees and great swords, and ripping apart their trebuchets. Ice spiders leapt from cliffs, crushing men and horses alike. Direwolves tore through the living the way that Robb’s might have once.

Ghost was one of theirs, now, and maybe Grey Wind too. Perhaps they had claimed his brother’s bones from the Twins and his wolf with him. Perhaps, somewhere below, the King in the North was taking another bolt to the heart, while Jon did nothing.

When Jon glanced behind him, the Eyrie was a smoking ruin. The walls were scorched, the windows shattered, and much of the stone had melted somewhere during the fight. It teetered dangerously, parts of the castle falling with each sway of the breeze.

There had been a tower in Winterfell like that, he remembered. Smaller, surely, but damaged nonetheless. A raven had fallen from it once, and Jon had seen it fall as he flew away.

Now, as he watched the castle sway, he thought he might see it again.

Sansa was in that castle, he knew. She and Tyrion Lannister, Robin Arryn, Petyr Baelish, and the other noncombatants who had stayed behind in the castle. In safety.

Rhaegal let loose a new blight of flame on the enemy wights, just as the archers in the castle let loose a volley of their own. Their arrows did nothing. Rhaegal’s fire did little. Many died, but more came to take their place. There were too many.

He tried to count the living troops remaining, but it was difficult work. Everywhere he looked, another dozen were cut down. If he blinked, there went another ten. Mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, aunts and uncles. There were only a few thousand left of an army that had been ten times that size.

_The battle’s only been on an hour._

He hung in the air, letting Rhaegal lead them forward while he watched the living fall and die and cry. A dragon was dead, but the war was not won. Just as the War of the Five Kings had not ended when Stannis was defeated on the Blackwater, and the Battle of the Bastards had not died with Rickon, the Long Night would not end with the fall of a dragon.

If they won, this would be a chapter in the histories, perhaps, but not the final one. No, there were still more fights to come. He could see that now.

_It never ends_, he thought. _It only gets worse._

Still, he would fight. He would melt down the wights until all that was left were bones and rocks, and he would ensure that the realms of men would survive. If it meant dying on that field, so be it. He would die with honor, like his father did.

The dragon was dead, and the living had a dragon of their own. Even if each and every man in the Vale was cut down that day, they could still win. They had to.
But, while Jon was bringing Rhaegal back around, a new scream came to join the chorus. A deafening one – louder than any he had ever heard. It shook the ground and the air alike, and set the castle trembling again. His hands leapt to his ears, desperate to block out the sound, but he couldn’t. Even a giant didn’t have hands big enough to block that din.

It was a scream of death and pain and hate and suffering. It rang in Jon’s heart just as loud as in his ears. Because as the world trembled, Jon’s collapsed.

Rhaegal fell.

Chapter End Notes

Not up to my usual standard, but it’s been a bit of a down week for me, so sorry about that. Next chapter should be a lot better, especially since it’s a Tyrion POV, which is a lot more fun to write for me.

In other news, I’m trying to hit the resurrection angle a bit harder than the show did, since I always imagined it would play a way bigger role than it did in canon. Jon was resurrected for two reasons (killing Viserion and something else we haven’t seen). We’ll see more on this later.

Next chapter, we’ll have one final scene from the Battle of the Eyrie. And then? Something we’ve been waiting on for a long, long while.
It was days like these that made Tyrion regret his choice to stop his drinking and whoring. What could help a man forget a battle better than a glass or twenty, or a whore in his bed? What could help a man sleep more than a weight by his side?

His head was swimming, like he had swum through the waters of the Sunset Sea when he had been no more than an unloved boy. He tried to scramble to the surface, but there was something pushing him down. Father, perhaps, or Cersei, or the thousands that burned and drowned in the Blackwater Bay. Thousands who were coming back for him now, surely. Not wights – not yet – but corpses all the same. Their hands were wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him down, and he was sinking like a stone. He tried to scream, but the water flooded into his mouth and his lungs, and all the knowledge in the world couldn’t stop a man from drowning.

He thrashed desperately, though his bones were weak. His limbs hardly answered. Still, one of the hands clouted him upside the head. “You want to live, imp?” its owner spat.

Yes, he wanted to say, and no. It’s a bit confusing at the moment, but every time he opened his mouth, he choked on seaweed.

He tried to open his eyes, but the pain was too much. There was jabbing in them, like a smoldering stick. If he forced them open, he thought he might lose his eyes. He didn’t think he’d mind that as much as he would have before.

“Lad!” one of the hands cried. “Some help with the half-man? Looks it lions weigh more than they look.”

More hands came to claim him then. Bigger hands. Stronger hands. Coarse and rough and calloused. He let himself fall into them, because, otherwise, he might have lost his supper on his own clothes.

They were moving, he realized. Downwards, perhaps, though he couldn’t be sure. At the moment, down was up and left was right and the sky was the same color as ocean water. Black as still water.

“IT’s the fuckin’ dragon!” another voice called, though this one was farther.

Was it Rhaegar, or Daenerys, or Aerys himself come back from the dead to burn the world? Had Tyrion died? Was it his father carrying him, leading him back into a world of suffering and hatred? Or was he being carried out of his mother’s womb once more, tearing her apart from the inside and leaving her with a sobbing symphony of final words that Tyrion would never be permitted to hear. They had died with his father, by his own hand. A crossbow bolt. Now, it felt as if a bolt have battered through Tyrion’s aching skull.
“Both of thefuckers,” the same voice whispered in awe.

Jaime and Cersei were there too? Had the ashesfinally fallen?

*Ashes.* He could taste them, hot on his tongue, though everything else burned cold. That waswhat floated in his eyes, carried into his lungs and made him choke and ache and hurt.

He forced his eyes open, and the world greeted himcoolly.

They were out in the open, Tyrion and the many hands. The ink night sky hung above them, whileswarms of snowflakes rained down. He could hardly see them—some black as a Baratheon stagand others white as a Stark field—but he could feel both catching on his clothes, his skin, his eyes.

Everything hurt, but he hardly cared. The pain felt distant, like it was happening to another Tyrionon some other side of the world. The Tyrion in Asshai must not have felt very happy, but theTyrion in Westeros was floating.

He retched, and earned another clout for it. It made histension dance and spin like the singers at Joffrey wedding, or his dear wife’s fool, Ser Dontos, or like Oberyn spun and twisted around a mountain, spin and spin and *thwick* and a skull crushed and *screams*. There were so many screams. Was he back there again?

“I swear to the gods—” A grunt. “-old and new! If he makes sick on me—”

“We’re almost there, Lord Hunter!” Another voice called. This one was new. A woman’s voice. A familiar voice. He thought it was the most beautiful he’d ever heard.

“Lord Hunter?” Tyrion asked, or, well, he tried to. When he opened his mouth, all that came out was drool and a few mindless drivels that sounded something like words.

“Seven Hells,” one of the hands said.

“He’ll be dead by morning,” another added.

“All of us will be, if we don’t stop arguing. We’re almost to Jon.”

“We wait any damn sooner and the fuckin’ castle crumbles. You want to be caught under a castle,archer, or you want to live to see another shit day in your shit castle?”

He let the bickering wash over him without care. All he cared to think of was the ash on his tongue, the hands on his arms, and the foreign pain flickering like flames.

*Milk of the poppy,* he thought. *I have to have taken it.*

But the thought bled away with all the rest. Who cared for poppy milk? Not Tyrion. Tyrion didn’t care for anything. Not sisters and brothers and certainly not the lords and ladies and wherever it was whores went and…

His blink was slow and tired as he tried to remember what it was he didn’t care for. A lot of things,surely, but he couldn’t remember any.

He tried to tell the hands that his nose hurt, but he didn’t think they understood.

Somewhere, a dragon roared, and that was funny. Tyrion had always wanted to meet a dragon.

He blinked, and suddenly, he was somewhere else. He was leaned up against a rock, his head
kissing his own knees. People were screaming, and they smelled of death and fire. He could see
them pushing and prodding at a great green giant. A dragon with wings and tail and teeth and fire.
Tyrion tried to reach out to it, but his hand wouldn’t listen. That was too bad.

A bastard was on the ground, bleeding like Tyrion was, but not as much. No one bled as much as
Tyrion did. He was pushing at the dragon, begging it to stand, but the creature wouldn’t listen. A
great spear of ice was poking out from its leg, and it didn’t look to care for much else.

“Rhaegal!” the bastard cried. “I’m sorry, but we need to go!”

“Control your bloody dragon, Snow!”

Snow? No, Targaryens were from the South, not the North. Targaryens were from Valyria and the
Doom, and Aegon. Northerners couldn’t ride dragons.

*If they can, can I?* He tried to shake his head. It didn’t move. *Not like this, I can’t. Maybe when
I’ve slept a bit. That’s it.*

“You try falling out of the sky and getting back up! We’re lucky he’s still breathin’,” the bastard
said. “Look at him, he’s trying.”

He wasn’t wrong. The dragon hobbled on one leg, stretching both wings out against the cliffs like
little arms searching for holds. With every breath, he let loose a horrible *screech* that probably
sounded worse to people whose ears weren’t clogged with cloth.

“Jon, we have to go. Now,” someone said. A red-head. Tully-red hair. Where had he met a Tully
before? Had he ever been to their castle? Seen their fish beyond the sigil? He didn’t much like fish.
He tried to ask her what kind of fish she was, but she didn’t answer.

“They’re on the goat trail! We need to go now!”

“How are you seeing through all this shit? All I see’s smoke.”

“Look past the castle. Look for the blue.”

“I’m looking for the blue, and all I see is a castle covered in shit. A fuckin’ *tilting* castle covered in
shit!”

Oh, was it really tilting? Tyrion just thought that was his head. Funny how those things worked.
Was it going to fall too? It looked like it might.

He tilted forward, like the castle did, to see how far it had already gone. He shouldn’t have
bothered. He lost his stomach on the rocks. A hand on his shoulder was all that kept him from
falling in it.

“Leave him,” said a man with an empty scabbard. “He’ll die anyway.”

“He won’t,” the red woman promised. “Jon, we need to go!”

There was a roar, like a horn’s call, but Tyrion hadn’t the wits to care. Nor did he care when the
dragon finally took to air, or when more hands came to grab at him and pull him forward. He didn’t
care about the voices, either.

But still, they sounded.

“What are you-“
“Get on the bloody dragon!”

“You don’t need to—”

“What is it with Stark girls and ordering me about? I’m not getting on your damned dragon, girl. I’m not getting on anything. I’m staying here, and I’ll be another corpse in that cunt’s army, you hear? Someone needs to keep these frozen cunts off your tail, eh? They’re getting too bloody close, and this damned dragon’ll is taking too long.”

He blinked open an eye again, and saw them both standing there. One, a giant with a face half crusted with blood and muck and something else, while the other stood only a few feet away in fancy clothes, but somehow looking just as disheveled than the other. Like his face, her arm was discolored by muck and filth. He wondered if they’d gotten it together. If they hadn’t fallen from the tilting castle and dirtied themselves on the ground.

His face was filthy too, he remembered.

No, not filthy. Hurt, perhaps? Yes, that was it. He was hurt. Did that mean they were hurt? He didn’t know.

“Is that it then?” the girl asked, and Tyrion blinked open his other eye. “You’re just going to die here like a coward. After everything.”

The filthy man laughed. Tyrion thought it was a cruel sound. “Aye, a coward. The coward that got you out of this shit castle. Wolf-boy,” he spat, and the Snow turned his head, “you better not kill me with fire, you hear? I want the glass. Or valyrian steel. Always wanted me some valyrian steel, I did.”

“You’ll have it. On my honor,” said the Snow.

The filthy man laughed. “Honor. I’d rather your word in pig shit, wolf.”

“You can have that too,” the Snow said, earning himself another laugh.

And that was that. The girl climbed on the dragon, and the Snow before her, and then hands were hauling Tyrion up and away from his own sick. The movement made him ill again, but he managed to keep it down long enough to settle on the dragon’s back. He hadn’t noticed himself climbing it, but he must have.

“Sandor,” the red-head cried, and she must have said something else too, but it was all drowned out as the dragon took to the skies, screaming with every beat of its wings.

He wondered if they took the spear out of its leg. He hoped so. It probably hurt even more than his nose did.

There were hands on him still, but Tyrion didn’t fight them. He was too busy watching the world below, and trying not to get sick as his stomach lurched again.

The fields below were covered in grey. Dead men, he thought, but they moved all the same. They scrambled at the filthy man – they’d been closer than he thought – and he cut them down with ease. One fell, then two, then ten, then twenty. The filthy man was screaming, but his screams didn’t reach Tyrion. They were moving much too quickly for that. All he saw was blood and fire, and all he heard were winds roaring.

The people around him were still talking – yelling more like – but Tyrion was too focused on the
Did he know he was going to die? He had to. Everything was fuzzy for Tyrion, but probably not for him. He must have seen the dead men coming. He must have known he could never escape without a dragon.

Did he know about the white dragon under the castle? The castle that was tilting more by the second, as the bricks fell from the top? Did he know it was falling? That even through the clouds and the snow, Tyrion could see the roof crumbling and sinking – the haze of ash and dust that arose from the base as it all crumpled in on itself? Did he see that too?

Did he know where they were going? Tyrion didn’t. He hoped it was somewhere warm. He was cold. Really cold. He hoped there was wine. Women, too, and he hoped none of them were grey or filthy.

His eyes slipped shut as the dragon let loose another roar. He didn’t wake until Dragonstone.

Chapter End Notes

End- Short one, but that’s mostly because I’m as impatient as you guys for the next chapter.

Speaking of: Next chapter? A reunion. A long time coming. (Really didn’t expect it to take 50k words to get to this point, but that just shows how bad I am at planning)

Edit- Sorry for the reupload. AO3’s giving me trouble again.
Once, there had been a little girl that dreamed of riding on a dragon’s back. She had listened happily to the stories of Visenya, of Rhaenys, of the Good Queen Alysanne, of Aenar the Exile, of Daenys the Dreamer, of Aegon the Conquerer, and Jaehaerys the Wise. Even in her dreams, before the Night Wolf and before the war, she had ridden in the skies and surveyed the world from the clouds.

If she went back today and told that little girl that, in only a few long years, she would be a dragon rider, the girl might have hugged her, kissed her, and given her the very same flowers that she used to give her father. She might have laughed, cheered, and run around the castle walls to tell anyone who would listen. Arya Underfoot, indeed.

Of course, that would have all been after she asked for proof. Even as a child, she had always been a stubborn one.

And now, with her hands bound behind her back, while the dragon descended from the skies, she did not laugh or cheer or scramble to tell the world. She did not feel anything at all. There was only the terrible, crushing weight, like a hand was wrapped around her throat, draining her breath and freezing her solid.

In the stories, Dragonstone had always been a land of warmth and fire. There was a castle, made from great stone dragons whose mouths formed gates and doors, and whose tails made perches for the dragons of flesh and blood. The wings, they said, were rooms and solars, and their throats were for the kitchens. The great beaches were meant to be filled with sand and waters cleaner than any of the canals in Braavos, and the mines were said to have been stuffed with glass made from dragonflame. It was a place where riders and kings alike had found home and shelter after the Doom. It was a place of magic.

Now, it was a place of cold.

Great piles of snow stretched across the island, where once there had been sandy beaches. The castle was covered too, smothering stone dragons in ice and hail, blocking out their scales. When Drogon settled his feet, the snow completely obscured them. The unsullied too, once they had slid to the ground, were met with snow as high as their knees. They dragged her down with them, mindful of keeping her from sinking too far into the snow. She was far smaller than they, and, undoubtedly, they thought she might disappear into the tundra.

If only.

Far off, by the castle, there were a delegation of envoys come to greet them. The Dragon Queen remained on Drogon’s back, while the Stark men and the unsullied stayed at Arya’s side. The
Starks held their swords at the ready, while Grim Dog and Spearman seemed content to simply carry Arya along.

She didn’t bother fighting. What was the point? Even if she got away, there was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide. This was the Dragon Queen’s castle. She knew it far better than Arya did, and so did her men. She would be a captive again in an hour, and stretched out on a rack in the next. Did the Mother of Dragons have a Tickler?

The first few envoys that came to them were no more than children. Boys and girls, stumbling in the snow, but eager to race out to meet a living, breathing dragon. On their faces were smiles and dirt, good humor and heavy eyes. Children still. Younger than she’d been.

Behind them came the rest. An armored lord, dressed in his finest plating, though each plate was drenched in blood and dirt and etched with scratches. The scabbard at his side was empty, but his armor seemed solid enough. A strange man, she thought, but most men were.

There were more behind him. A dwarf, bloody and limping, swaying with every step. His hair was black with filth, and across his face were burns and ash. There were children at his side, carrying him forward, while he stumbled and fell.

There was Beric Dondarrion, whose face was as scarred as ever, but whose priestly savior was unexpectedly missing. Arya thought he must have died again, because, when she looked, his sword hand had only a single finger.

And then, there were the ones that made the hole in her heart feel just a bit shallower.

Sansa was the first one she saw. Her cloak was ragged and frayed, even worse than Arya’s was. Her hair – once long and beautiful and red as their mother’s – had been stained black by dust and dirt, and it seemed Sansa had sawed at it with a dagger somewhere along the way. Her clothes weren’t very proper, either, beyond the chain weighing around her neck. She wore trousers instead of skirts, a jerkin in place of a fancy dress. The Targaryen sigil sat on her sleeves, where there should have been a direwolf – or a lion, she thought, and hated herself for it.

But it was still Sansa. Through it all, it was still her sister, flesh and blood and alive through it all.

And beside her, a man she had long thought dead. She almost didn’t recognize him. His hair was shorn to his skull, his scruffy beard shaved and forgotten, and his face cleaner than she’d ever seen it before. Still, despite it all, it was him. Gendry the smith, alive! Not burnt, like she thought he’d be, not drowned or beaten or murdered or sold off to some sea king. Just standing on Dragonstone, injured, but alive.

She wanted to call out to him, but she couldn’t. Not while the unsullied watched her, and not while the children watched, and the Stark men, and the Dragon Queen. There was too much at stake. So long as her enemy stood at her side, she would show them no more of her secrets than she already had.

It was an oath she kept for a second more. Then, it all shattered like ice.

Because there, next to Sansa-

Jon.

It felt like all the air had been torn from her lungs. There was a knife in her stomach again, and the Waif made sure to twist and twist. She couldn’t breathe- she couldn’t breathe – she couldn’t breathe!
He was supposed to be dead. She’d heard it in on the ship from Braavos, and it had ripped the hole so much deeper than she had thought it could ever be. She’d been the last of the Starks. Only Sansa and her, and Sansa was a Lannister.

And then he was back. Then, Sansa was a Bolton, and Jon was still a Snow, and Jon ruled Winterfell, and Jon was a King, and Arya hadn’t heard of it until she’d left King’s Landing. Hadn’t believed it until her knees sunk deeper in the snow, and the unsullied were all that kept her from falling.

He was alive. Beyond scarred and limping heavily, but alive!

He was so far away, but he was coming closer. Soon enough, they’d be close enough for him to see her. For him to recognize her, and he would put an end to this mummer’s farce. Free her, and know her, call her “Arya Stark” like she’d wanted to hear again since she was a little boy on the Kingsroad.

And then Daenerys Targaryen would tell him exactly what she was. That she was a murderer, a creature that stole dead man’s faces and wore them as her own. The monster that slaughtered a House, that finished a list of killings, that first killed when she was no more than 11 years old. She didn’t know about those things, but it didn’t matter. Jon would know. He always did.

She wanted to see her brother again. Wanted it more than anything she’d wanted anything, even more than she’d wanted Thoros to bring back a man without a head. Only, he couldn’t then, and suddenly, she didn’t want this either.

Not like this, she thought desperately. Please, not like this.

She wanted him to hug her. To muss her hair, and call her “little sister”. If he knew what she was, he wouldn’t. He’d cast her aside. Mayhaps, he would ask the Dragon Queen to throw her into the sea. Or might be, they would leave her for the Walkers and save themselves the trouble.

No, she thought. This is Jon. He’ll want me. He has to. He has to!

Still, she couldn’t help but start to struggle. She didn’t want him to see her like this – bound like a misbehaving dog. She was a direwolf of Winterfell, and she could not return to her pack chained. She couldn’t!

She hadn’t any knives to fight with, but she didn’t need them. She had her elbows, her teeth, and her legs, and that was enough. She could still fight.

Only, it wasn’t. For, no matter how much she bit and spat and tugged at the arms of her captors, they did not flinch. Their hands did not move, their arms did not retreat. They held her steady, as her pack came closer and closer.

Not like this. Not like this!

But there were no heart trees to pray to. No red leaves to greet her in a nonexistent godswood. If the gods were real, they couldn’t hear her.

“Please!” Arya hissed, but the Dragon Queen didn’t hear either. She was already falling from Drogon’s back, across the field, and running to meet Arya’s brother. Hugging him close, while the rest watched on. Cooing, surely, while the lone wolf hung in her chains. “Please!”

Nobody listened. Nobody cared.
And then they did.

When her pack turned to stare at her, and the Dragon Queen and her bear, too, she felt her hole grow a thousand miles deeper. Once, there had been a heart, she remembered. Now, there was nothing. Nothing and No One as the stony faces locked on hers. Nothing at all, as the unsullied dragged her forward.

_Not like this._

Only, it was. For, as they pushed her to her knees before her pack, there was nothing she could do to get away. She could do nothing but sink her head, so that they might not see her. Nothing, but listen to the bear of Mormont go on and on about her evils, her depravities, her very nature that fed on murder and hate. An faceless assassin, a monster, a murderer.

Nothing until she felt a rough hand finger her chin. It forced her to look up until she was staring into two dark eyes. Eyes like her own, and just as cold.

_Not like this. Please, not like this._

“We let her prove it,” he told her, his voice cutting worse than swords and fear alike. “And if she doesn’t-” She didn’t miss the way his hand fell to his sword. Didn’t miss the way the water welled in her eyes before she could send it away.

And then, every eye was on hers. Gendry, Sansa, Jon, Mormont, the queen, the unsullied, the Starks, the children, the stranger. Every one of them.

Her mouth went dry as dust. Her eyes darted away, suddenly far more interested in the snow than Snow. She would prefer to never see that look again.

And then, when his fingers twisted on the hilt of his sword, she spoke.

She talked about the pointy end, about how sometimes different roads to the same castle, and she told stories of the godsdow in Winterfell, and the crypts, and how Jon had tried to scare them once there, but Arya had hit him because baby Bran had cried and cried. She spoke of Nymeria, of the Night Wolf, of chasing cats in Braavos, and chasing the wolves around Winterfell. To Jon, she spoke of Arya Underfoot, and to Sansa, Arya Horseface, and both of them gave her looks that she’d never wanted to see. Pity and regret and years and years of sorrow. But they believed her, she thought, and that meant more than anything. So, to wipe their faces clean, as she had her own, she went on. She told her sister about a girl who wanted to be Queen and who wanted to have the prince’s children, children with golden hair and bright green eyes and tempers of a lion. She told Jon of a boy who had spoken of knighthood and the Old Bear of the Night’s Watch and Aemon the Dragonknight. She spoke of Septa Mordane, of Jeyne Poole and Beth Cassel, of Maester Lewin, Rodrick Cassel in the yard, Old Nan, little baby Rickon, Robb with a head full of dreams – she did not speak a word of Grey Wind – of Mother, Father, and how Bran would never stop climbing. She spoke of glass gardens and a long journey south, of a broken tower and Mycah, poor Mycah, and a direwolf who paid the price another owed. She even spoke of Needle, and “Don’t tell Sansa”, though it meant another oath broken. Then, of a heart tree, and a home burned, and a Red Keep that hid dragons and swords in the dark.

And then to Jon, to end it all, “I asked you once,” she said, softly, “if I was a bastard too.”

And then, there were hands around her shoulders, and, instead of comforting her, it only made her stiffen. Nobody had touched her like this since the Lady Crane, and before that, since Ned Stark’s head landed on the stairs of the sept. Nobody.
But Jon was Jon, and Arya was Arya. It had always been different with them.

She tried to hug him back, but her wrists were still bound. Instead, she gasped through the ashes in his hair, and tried not to cry. It was a losing battle, and they both knew it.

The unsullied let her go, but Jon didn’t. Nor did the second set of hands, which wrapped around Jon and Arya both. This time, it was burnt hair pressed against her face. This time, it was a sister. This time, the tears came quick as a snake.

‘Arya,’ Sansa whispered, though Jon said not a word.

Her hold was strong, strangling, and suddenly Arya was all too aware of the bindings on her wrists.

What if this was a trap? What if it wasn’t Jon, if it wasn’t Sansa? What if it was Jaqen, or the Waif again, and her stomach would be reopened, but without anyone there to stitch her back together. Arya had never been very good at sewing, and the girl who had been No One hadn’t been any better. The Lady Crane had to do it for her, and she’d died for it. Arya tried to pull herself back, but the hands were too strong. She needed Needle. She needed the Kingslayer’s sword. She needed her arms unbound. She needed something, because she couldn’t do a thing like this!

But when the two pulled back, there was no sudden burning pain in her stomach. She didn’t have to toss herself into the ocean to escape. She didn’t have to do a thing but stare into the eyes of the brother and sister she had long thought lost.

Only, they weren’t the ones lost, she thought. Not really.

Jon’s hands stayed on her shoulders, forcing her to face him. She wanted to pull back, to put space between them, but she couldn’t. If she did, she would fall on her back, and there was nothing more pathetic than that. She was a water dancer, and water dancers couldn’t fall.

“It’s really you,” he whispered. When she did nothing but nod, he pulled her closer again with his left hand, while his right mussed her hair the way it had when they were children. As she shut her eyes and leant into his shoulder, she heard him whisper, “I’ve missed you, little sister,” to her ears alone.

The worry fled her heart, swifter than a deer, as the salt and water in their eyes soaked her shoulder and his. Only Jon knew to muss her hair like that. Only Jon called her little sister. The Faceless Men didn’t know about that. No one did.

“I missed you,” they said at once, and, for a moment, it felt like it was just the two of them again. Sansa had slipped away with Gendry and the Dragon Queen and everyone else. It was just Jon and Arya embracing at the end of the world.

But moments like these never lasted long, and they didn’t now. For, it felt like no sooner had she sunken into her brother’s arms than she was back on her own two feet again.

“Where were you, Arya?” Sansa asked, too loudly. Loud enough for all of them to hear, including the Dragon Queen and her ilk.

As such, it was Grim Dog who answered in Arya’s place. “This one was found in burnt castle.”

“Harrenhal,” Mormont clarified.

Nobody had to focus too hard to hear Gendry’s distress. It came with a gasp and a cry, even a hand reaching out to brush her shoulder, though he was still dozens of feet away. It was dangerous of
him, and stupid too. The Dragon Queen knew about her relation to the Starks, not Gendry. It needed to stay that way.

But Gendry was a stupid bull, and he started forward with an, “Arry-”

“I wasn’t there long,” she answered, quickly. “I was heading North. To Winterfell.”

And Jon’s face fell, just like she’d hoped it wouldn’t. “It’s gone,” he said. “Winterfell. It’s theirs now.”

Somehow, from Jon, the news hit harder than it had with the Dragon Queen. Because Jon knew. Jon had lived there with her, when things were good and life was easy. He’d lived in the stone walls, where the only water was the lake in the godswood, and the only rain came in clumps. Where the people were Northern folk who looked like them, and the smallfolk laughed whenever Arya and Bran would race up the trees. Where Theon would help her with her archery when no one was looking, and Robb would tell her war stories if she begged enough. Where Mother would hug her and tell her to bathe more often, and where Father would tell her that she couldn’t see the Night’s Watchman lose his head, because she was a lady and a gentle soul, and ladies couldn’t see such things. Where her hands were dirty, but they were clean. Clean and pale and clean.

That home was theirs, now. Where once there had been men and wolves and innocence, now there was naught but corpses and rubble. Everyone she’d known was marching south. Everyone she’d loved.

It was only then that Jon noticed the binds holding her hands back, and it was only then that he cut her free. She didn’t take it for the release it was. She only threw her arms around him, the way she’d been dreaming of since the long road from Winterfell.

“I tried to get to the Wall,” she told him. She didn’t know why. “After Father, and Robb, and Mother… I tried.”

“I know you did,” he told her, though he couldn’t have known. No one in Westeros had even known that she was alive. She had died in Saltpans, when she crossed over the Narrow Sea, or at the Twins, perhaps, or maybe she’d died in Harrenhal or King’s Landing. Arya had died a thousand times, and she’d come back from each one. But Jon didn’t know that. She could see it in his face, his eyes. Liar.

Her eyes went to the Dragon Queen, whose eyes bled regret as lesser men bled red. But Arya didn’t care about her regrets. She didn’t care that she stepped forward, hands raised in surrender to beg her pardons and move on. No, Arya cared nothing for the Dragon Queen. Only what was at her belt.

“I still have it,” she told Jon. She gestured to the queen’s side, as if the movement didn’t burn her wrist like the chains at Harrenhal. “Or, I did.”

It was only that which spurred the Dragon Queen into motion. Her hand went to the blade, and then she had it drawn. She wasn’t as smooth with it, of course. Even with a blade as light as Needle, her arm sagged and swayed. She was used to dragons, not swords.

But, whether the Dragon Queen could wield it or not didn’t matter. The only thing that did was the light in Jon’s eyes that was bursting anew again.

“Needle,” Jon breathed, while Sansa stared aimlessly at the sword. But Gendry was smiling too, even if Sansa wasn’t, and that mattered too.
“Arya Stark,” the queen said. She was crouched by her injured dragon, and still had a hand on his scales. She didn’t bother moving away. “I offer my humblest-”

“I don’t care about apologies,” Arya said. “Just give me my swords.”

And so, they did. First came Needle, and she slid it into her belt before anyone else could say a word. She could show it to Jon later, in private, after she’d had the chance to wipe the blood from its steel.

Still, she felt better with it at her side. Safer.

Then came the Kingslayer’s sword, which caught far more eyes than Needle ever had.

“Valyrian steel,” she heard Gendry whisper, at the same time as Sansa said, “Widow’s Wail.”

The Stark men said nothing, though their eyes followed it as they always did, and the unsullied didn’t react at all. The rest were muttering to themselves, even the dwarf and the lord and Beric Dondarrion with his six fingers.

But Jon only smiled. “Where did you get your hands on valyrian steel?”

She didn’t want to answer, but she knew that, if she didn’t, the Dragon Queen would do it for her. So, she diverted her eyes to the knee-high snows, and said, “I found it with a lion.”

The dwarf cursed, but Sansa’s eyes went alight. “Jaime Lannister?”

There was a pause. A moment that barely lasted more than a second, as the dwarf tensed, the Dragon Queen’s fist clenched around her dragon’s scales, and Beric toyed with one of his scars. None breathed a word. Arya wished they would.

And then, like a gift from the gods, one of the Stark men spoke, “M’lord, we’ve all been through much and more, your sister, too. Can’t we all rest a bit? Eat us some bread, some salt?”

“Bread and salt?” Sansa said. She cocked her head like a bird, studying them with narrow eyes. Jon was already nodding. “You’re right. Gendry, if you could find some food, a place for Daenerys and her riders. I think it best if Sansa and I could spend some time with our sister.” Then, before the stupid smith could protest, “Alone.”

Gendry looked near protest, but a quick glare kept him quiet. They could speak later, when there were fewer eyes. Perhaps on their lonesome in the smithy, just like how it used to be when she was the mouse and he was the smith. When they were young, and she was only a little bloody, and he wasn’t a man of the brotherhood. Only, this time, there was no goat come to cut off their feet if they looked the wrong way, and no Mountain to crack their skulls like Aegon.

In the end, Arya went with her siblings, and Gendry with the rest. He was far safer for it.

#

It was only when they were alone, in the company of naught but silk and rock, that the feeling of wrongness struck Arya. They were crowded around a featherbed, lounging while other men struggled and fought and died. Arya hadn’t had a featherbed since King’s Landing. Rocks had been her pillow and dirt her blankets. Once, she had a bed on a ship – the captain’s even – but it had been far from feather.
This place, this castle, it wasn’t a place for her anymore. But then, it never really had been. In all her life, she’d had one home. It was gone now. A haven for Walkers and corpses.

Sansa was beside her, jabbering away as she never had when they were children. About how much she missed Arya, how she wished she’d gone with her, protected her, something. How she didn’t believe anything about the Faceless Man, and she’d never trusted that Dragon Queen, not from the start!

But, for all her words, she eyed the Kingslayer’s sword whenever she thought Arya wasn’t looking. She saw the blood on Needle’s blade, the callouses on Arya’s hands when she pulled her into the room. She saw the scars on her face, surely, and the wolf hidden beneath the flesh, perhaps even the blood flaked beneath her nails. She said not a word of it, but there was worry in her eyes. Though Arya had expected it, it still hurt.

“I’m fine, Sansa,” Arya said. She forced herself to smile, though her lips didn’t seem to want to. “What about you? Where have you been all this time?”

She knew already, of course. The men in King’s Landing had been happy to tell, if she asked the right way. If she wore the right face. A Bolton marriage, a battle of bastards, a widow who cried and cried and cried.

And, for a moment, on Sansa’s face, there was fear instead of worry. The same fear that coursed through Arya’s veins with every word, every second, that she stayed here.

_Fear cuts deeper than swords_, she told herself, but she was afraid all the same.

Jon moved closer, eager to offer his comfort. That was who Jon was. He was Father, honorable to a fault, always willing to help Sansa, even though she called him her half-brother in higher company, instead of the true brother he was.

“I was trapped,” Sansa said, carefully. “After Father-”

“You married the Imp, I know,” Arya supplied. “How’d you get away?”

“After Joffrey died, Littlefinger helped me get away. Cersei tried to blame me, and I- I went to the Vale. We stayed there, until Jon needed us,” she said it sincerely enough, but, while Sansa had improved as a liar, she still wasn’t perfect. Even had Arya not known about the Boltons, she made it obvious enough. Her voice raised in pitch, and her hands worried at the hem of her sleeves. Classic signs, and one she shared with the Waif.

Even so, had she not given herself away, Jon did it well enough for them both. Though his eyes had been on Needle and the Kingslayer’s sword, as soon as he heard Sansa’s lies, his eyes shot to hers. They hung there, too, pressing for answers that wouldn’t come.

Arya supposed it didn’t matter much. She didn’t intend to tell the whole truth, either. So, she turned to her brother, and asked the same, “And you? The Wall?”

“The Watch,” he answered. “But I-” He looked at Sansa, and then back to Arya. And then, the lie slipped his lips. “I came to Winterfell. Took it back from the Boltons. The Northmen tried to call me King, but I knelt. Daenerys offered her armies to help against the dead. Her dragons, too. You see that dragon out there? The green one?” Arya nodded. “I rode him. He listens to me now.”

Arya couldn’t help the laugh that broke free. “You really are a Dragonknight!”

Jon laughed at that too, and it was a sound Arya had waited years to hear again. It sounded almost
as sweet as she remembered.

“Gods, I missed you, Arya,” he said, and even that struck a chord in her. She still wasn’t used to the name, not really.

It was Sansa who spoke next. She looked over her sister, at her scars and her torn cloak, her tattered breeches and the belt that held her swords. “We should get you new clothes. Those seem a bit thin.” She wasn’t wrong. Even now, Arya was trembling like a leaf in the wind. “It might not fit perfectly, but there must be something in the castle.”

A dress, Arya thought, sullenly, but she couldn’t find it in her to complain. After that flight, as long as they let her keep Needle, she would wear a thousand dresses, and she would let Sansa make her hair into the prettiest thing they’d ever set eyes on.

But Sansa wasn’t the Sansa she knew anymore, just as she wasn’t the Arya she’d been, because Sansa didn’t stop there. “This castle is hundreds of years old. Surely, there must be a new cloak, breeches, a jerkin. Armor…”

And for all that Arya had dreamt of this day, it had never been like this. She had thought to fall at her knees beside her sister, to beg her pardons like a proper lady, and I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I should have saved him, I should’ve- she didn’t. Sansa did it for her.

And that day, it wasn’t just Jon whose shoulder she cried on. No, she hung from her sister’s too.

Chapter End Notes

So this is actually a part one... I got a bit carried away.

(We haven't even had the Gendry reunion yet. Or a full Dany+Jon. Or a full Stark reunion. Whoops.)
“Can I see?” Jon asked, tilting his head to the sword at her hip. The sword at her right, not the one that drew Sansa’s eyes whenever she thought herself subtle enough.

Arya drew it with her left hand, while, with her right, she hastily moved to wipe away some of the red. It did nothing. That red had long since dried. Some of it was fully brown now.

Still, Jon didn’t comment any of the colors that ran along the blade. As she settled it on both of her hands, he didn’t say a word about the scratches along the edge, nor the wear on the grip, nor the dirt and mud caked to the blade. Instead, he ran a finger along Mikken’s mark and smiled at her, a half-smile that bled sorrow as much as it did pleasure. “Served you well, did it?”

She nodded. She couldn’t help but look to his own sword, and the wolf’s head pommele that seemed to track her every step. She thought the blade must have been even redder than hers, but when Jon drew it, there was nothing but steel. Rippled steel.

“Valyrian,” she said. She sheathed her own blade, and took his. It was heavier than Needle, and a bit more than the Kingslayer’s sword, but it was lighter than ordinary steel. She didn’t think she would have been able to handle a regular blade this size.

“You’ve one of your own,” he said. “A needle and valyrian steel. Think I might be jealous, little sister.”

Arya grinned – a real grin, like she hadn’t had in years – and claimed the Kingslayer’s. This sword’s blade was red, but not like the red she painted Needle with. No, the steel itself was red, like waves of crimson cascading where once there must have been naught but silver and blue. Some nights, as she rode the Kingslayer’s horse to King’s Landing, she had stared at the metal until dawn came, wondering whose blood had tempered it. She’d never settled on an answer, though she thought too many times of a bright red comet in the Riverlands.

“That’s a Lannister sword, you know,” Sansa said, as Jon admired its edge. “‘Widow’s Wail’, Joffrey called it. Where’d you get it?”

Widow’s Wail, she scoffed. Of course, he’d called it Widow’s Wail.

“I found it,” Arya said. Picked it out from a lion’s paws, she wanted to say, but she held her tongue. They didn’t need to know what she’d done. Not to the Kingslayer, or Cersei, or Ilyn Payne, or anyone else on her stupid list.

“You found it?” Sansa said, incredulously. “Valyrian steel?”
Arya nodded. *Calm as still water. Rule your face.* “The Kingslayer had it. I found him in the Neck. Did you know he lost a hand?”

“The whole realm does,” Sansa said. Her brows were drawn, disbelieving. “Where have you been all these years that you didn’t?”

“Braavos,” she said, for there was no reason to lie. If the bear thought she had a Braavosi tongue, already, then surely Sansa and Jon would have noticed.

Of course, that didn’t mean she needed to share the whole truth. No, nothing of the sort. No need to draw the House’s ire by sharing their secrets, and no need to lay her own out to the world. They were her family, it was true, but even family didn’t need to know everything. Sometimes, they were the worst people to.

“You were in Braavos? This whole time?”

She nodded. Didn’t trust herself to say another word, when half of her wanted to spill her story, and the other screamed at her to *lie, lie, lie, they’ll have your head, lie!*

“Why?” Jon asked. “You could have come to me on the Wall. I could have found somewhere for you. Someplace safe.”

*I tried*, she wanted to say, but instead, she said, “And end up like Brave Danny Flint? No, I thought I’d take my chances with Braavos. It was safe enough there.” *Liar.*

He didn’t need to know about the coin. He didn’t need to know about the captain of *The Titan’s Daughter*, or Jaqen, or the Hound, or any of it. Neither of them did.

“It was safe there,” Sansa insisted. “It’s where I went after-” She broke herself off, wincing as she did. “After the Vale.”

“Doesn’t matter now,” Jon sighed, as Arya sheathed the Kingslayer’s sword. “What matters is you’re here, alive!”

She smiled with him, though the pronouncement made her no happier. It was only another stark reminder of those who weren’t. The three of them were together again, but Father, Mother, Robb, Rickon, and Bran were all gone. Had they made it to the crypts, like every Stark lord and lady before them? Was *anyone* still buried in the crypts?

A great terror took her at the thought. Her hand fell to Needle’s hilt, as she forced herself to remember. *Fear cuts deeper than swords.*

A hand on her shoulder. Jaqen? The Waif? No, they were gone. Jaqen in Braavos and the Waif in the Hall and the rest of her in the canal, eaten by eel and fish alike. Jon.

“Arya,” he drawled, and the name grounded her as much as he did, “what’s wrong?”

“Father,” she said, “Mother, Robb. Are they Walkers now?”

Jon averted his eyes, but Sansa didn’t. For all that she lied, at least she was honest in this. “Yes,” she said. “Wights, not Walkers, but yes, they are.”

She thought that the reminder would make it hurt worse, but those wounds already sunk too deep. Their deaths had long since plunged deeper into the hole in her chest. Now, there was only the same thing she had clung for years. A prayer she thought finished. Not any longer.
“It’s everyone then? Everyone in the North?”

“Everyone in the Neck now too,” Jon said, softly. “And the Eyrie, and the whole of the Riverlands soon too.”

“The Freys,” Arya said. “They’ll be back.” And all of the others, too.

It only made Sansa squint harder. “You knew the Freys were dead, but not about Jaime Lannister’s hand?”

She was suspicious. Of course, she was. Sansa always saw through her, even when she was a little girl, sneaking out of her rooms to steal flowers for Father. She always knew, was always camped out with Jeyne Poole to tell Mother. Back then, Arya had sulked every time she had done it, but laughed the grudge away whenever Jon came by, or Robb.

Only now, the stakes were higher. She couldn’t just laugh this away. Now, Arya really had done something terrible, and Sansa knew it. She must have known it. This time, Arya couldn’t hide with Robb, because Robb was dead, and she couldn’t ask Jon for help, because Jon looked just as confused. So, she fell back on the one thing all her training had amounted to: she lied.

“I just got back to Westeros,” she said. “All anyone’s talking about is the Freys.”

“The Freys died months ago. How long have you been back?”

“How long did you stay in the Vale?” Arya snapped, eager to distract. Anything to distract. Even if it meant pushing her sister away, she had to. Anything was better than Jon knowing what she’d done, than Sansa knowing. Telling Jon would be like telling Father, and telling Sansa like Mother. She couldn’t do it. She wouldn’t. “And why would you go North to the Wall when you were perfectly safe there?”

“I wanted to see my family,” Sansa said, though they both knew it was a lie. “I was alone, and I-I heard Ramsay Bolton had Rickon.”

“Rickon?” she blinked, and all the fear (it cuts deeper than swords) fled her. “You believed that? Rickon died in Winterfell with Bran. Even I heard that.”

“It was a lie,” Jon said, quietly. “Theon didn’t really-”

“Theon?” Arya frowned. “What does Theon have to do with it? Isn’t he dead?”

Sansa rose and strode over to the window. Though Arya could not see her face, her shoulders spoke well enough. She held them tight, though they shook with anger, regret, and a deep-seated sorrow like the sort Arya carried in her own chest.

They hadn’t been that close, had they?


“A moon?” She blinked, shook her head. “No, he died at the wedding. He wouldn’t have left Robb. He wouldn’t. He was his bannerman, his brother. He wouldn’t have left.”

“You heard about the Freys, but not Theon?” Sansa snapped. “Everyone heard about Theon from here to Asshai! How is it even possible-?”

“Arya,” Jon said again, cutting off their sister’s fury. His own voice was stern, but somehow still
soft, just like he always was, “Theon was the one who took Winterfell. Who burned it.”


“Good luck,” Sansa laughed. It was a cold, bitter laugh, like the Hound’s but worse. Worse because it was Sansa. Sansa wasn’t supposed to be bitter. She was supposed to be some stupid girl, lavishing songs and the harp and singing Joffrey’s praises. She was supposed to be stupid, not bitter. Not like me. “Theon died in the Battle of Winterfell, same as Bran and Varys and all of them.”

But Arya didn’t hear anything after Theon died. Because death didn’t mean a thing. Death was temporary now. If the enemy could just raise him, she could kill him again. She could rip him apart and feed him to the wolves, like Robb should have done, like Father should have done instead of dressing a kraken in wolf’s skins.

“He might have gotten away,” she said. “Did you see him die? I can kill him. I will.”

But Jon only shook his head. “He didn’t. You can’t escape the dead. Horses need rest as much as men, but the dead don’t. No one can outrun them.”

I’m no one

“But I can kill him again,” she said, instead.

“Arya,” Sansa hissed, as if that girl of one and ten had thrown an orange at her dress again. “He died a good man. Protecting Bran.”

A good man? Theon should have been on her list. He should have been the first name. At least the Freys hadn’t been Robb’s brother. At least Joffrey hadn’t been Father’s man. Father hadn’t been a child. Theon killed a boy of five and another of nine! He killed Luwin and Ser Rodrick. He killed Robb and Mother. He killed the North before the Walkers ever could. He deserved this. More than anyone, he deserved it.

But when she said that, Sansa only snapped, “He didn’t kill them. He told me. It was the miller’s boys, not Bran, and not Rickon. Ramsay Bolton killed Rickon, and Bran-” she cut herself off, taking in a heavy breath that seemed to shake her as much as it calmed her. “Bran died in the battle.”

Arya wanted to think of Bran. She wanted to mourn and burn, and she wanted to think back on all the times they’d spent together. She wanted it of Rickon, too, the baby who hadn’t even been old enough to write his letters. She wanted to mourn him, cry for him, do anything more than stand there and hate.

But she didn’t. To Arya, they’d been dead since Harrenhal. Bran had died as a boy of nine, and Rickon had been no older than five. Dead in their beds, burned with Winterfell. Bran, a boy with two working legs and a love for swords, armor, and climbing, and Rickon, a baby. They were dead before. A few years of pointless life was nothing. Nothing at all.

And, instead of mourning her brothers like any normal person – any sane person – would do, Arya didn’t know anything else to do. Theon’s was a dead name, an evil name, but a name nonetheless. She added it to her list, to all the names she’d already crossed off, and she would have to cross again.

“Just the miller’s boys?” she said, coldly.
Sansa hadn’t changed at all, she thought. Beneath all the coldness and all the bitterness, she was still just the stupid girl who lied. The same girl who hadn’t cared when Mycah’s body was chopped into pieces and handed back to his father in a potato sack. Of course, she’d forgiven Theon. She forgave Joffrey just as well. Even after Lady.

“That’s not what I meant,” Sansa said, “He was a changed man. You should’ve seen what Ramsay did to him. He was different. He was an honorable man.”

_Honor_, Arya remembered. _Honor served Father well too._

“He was,” Jon said. And, while it was easy for Arya to ignore the woman who’d always called her Horseface, it was harder to ignore the man who gave her Needle.

She hung her head, and suddenly, she hurt like she hadn’t in a long while. “I never got to say goodbye, you know,” she whispered. “To Bran.”

When she’d left, he had been nothing more than a corpse on a bed, thin and sickly and broken. She’d thought him dead, then. She’d thought him dead for a long while. And then, even after Father said otherwise, she’d just found a new way to think it later.

She tried to picture her father’s face, but she couldn’t. Whenever she tried, she just saw Jon. Jon’s face and Joffrey’s, standing on the steps of Baelor and-

_Ilyn Payne, Joffrey, Cersei, Chiswyck, Ser Gregor, Ser Amory, Polliver, Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, the Tickler, Meryn Trant, Weese. Valar morghulis._

She remembered their faces. Every one. She remembered their faces when they lived, and she remembered the few faces she’d seen die just as well. All of them that she’d seen choke and bleed and die.

But not her father, and not her mother either. Not Bran or Rickon, not Mycah the butcher’s boy, Syrio Forrel, Lommy Greenhands, or Yoren of the Night’s Watch. She knew their words, their lessons, but not their faces. Those had faded with the years, while the names stayed. And now the names were done, and the good ones were still gone.

She was sitting on the bed, she realized, and Jon had sat beside her. Like her, there was sorrow in his eyes and a stupid softness in him. The hand that he put on her shoulder was trembling.

“He must have thought I was dead,” she told him. Mother had died thinking that too, and Robb. She’d been so close, but nobody had known except Arya and the Hound.

Grey Wind, too. That had to count for something. Maybe, if Robb was like her, he’d known in the end. Maybe.

Sansa was shaking her head. Already, some of the anger seemed to have fled her. “Bran knew.”

“How?” Arya said. “How long have I been missing for? Ten years?”

“Seven,” Jon said, softly.

They fell quiet at that, all four of them. A quiet that haunted like the many ghosts that surrounded them, and the ghost still to come.

Sansa came and sat beside them. The chain around her throat rustled and shook. It reminded Arya of a maester, somehow, though she hadn’t had one in many years. Had Sansa spent time there,
before the Lannisters wed her to the Imp, and before they wed her to the Bolton’s bastard? Had she hidden her hair like Arya had, changed her name, and proclaimed herself a boy? Had she studied among them like Arya had the Faceless? An acolyte in name, if not in heart?

No, Sansa couldn’t pass as a boy as well as she could. Sansa had been a woman grown when Arya was still Arry. She’d been a woman since they were children.

While Arya mused, Sansa spoke. “Whatever’s happened to you, Arya, I’m sorry.”

Arya blinked. “What?”

“I’m not going to ask you to share it,” she said, “because, right now, I don’t want to share all of mine either.” She wasn’t lying then. Just hiding. Just like Arya was. “But I want you to know, I wish it could’ve been easier. I wish Father hadn’t-” She shut her eyes, and her hands went to fiddle with her chain. “I wish I hadn’t been so rude to you before. It would’ve been better.”

It would have, Arya knew, and that was what made her speak. “Did you know?”

“Did I know what?”

“About Father. What Joffrey would do.”

Sansa’s answer came quicker than a snake. “No!” she spat, like a viper’s poison. “They told me he’d have mercy. That if-”

“‘But they’ve the soft hearts of women’,” Arya said.

Sansa’s skin was already pale, but when she heard those words, she turned as white as the snow settling outside. As white as the Kingslayer’s cloak, before Arya had painted it red. “You were there?” she whispered.

Arya nodded. “I was there. By the statue of Baelor. Father saw me, I think.”

The statue was gone, now, she knew. She hadn’t visited it – couldn’t bring herself to see that place – but she heard tell of what had been done. A statue burned along with the rest of the Sept. The one good thing Cersei had ever done, burning that place. It didn’t deserve to stand.

“How much did you-”

“Not everything,” Arya added, quickly. “I was trying to save him,” I didn’t. “I didn’t see anything after.” Only the birds.

For a long time, when she wasn’t having the wolf dreams, she would dream only of the birds. Of Sansa screaming, Joffrey yelling, and birds.

A hand came to rest on her leg. It took her an embarrassingly long time to realize it was Sansa’s. Another stayed on her shoulder, and that one she knew well.

“Wish I could’ve killed the little shit,” Jon hissed.

“You still can,” she told him. “Tell me about them. The Walkers.”

So, Jon did. And, all the while, while Jon talked, Arya dreamt of plunging the Kingslayer’s sword through Joffrey’s empty heart. It didn’t make her feel any better. Precious little ever did.
She didn’t find him in the smithy that day. In truth, she didn’t even find the smithy. The children tried to guide her there, but they were little and they didn’t really understand what a smithy was. Twice, they led her to the kitchens, and a third time to the privy. After that, she had taken to wandering the castle on her lonesome. She was used to that, at least.

Dragonstone was smaller than Harrenhal had been, though that might have just been because she was little then. Winterfell had seemed colossal, too, a lifetime ago.

He was in Sea Dragon’s Tower, where once the maesters had served, toiling day and night for Aegon the Second, the Third, the Fourth, the Fifth, and on and on it went. Like all the other towers on this rock, it was carved to look like its namesake – a great blue dragon that stood hauntingly over the freezing sea. Snow covered his wings, and icicles hung from his winding tail. She rather liked the look of it. It reminded her of the skulls she had hidden in once. Even if she didn’t much like the flesh and blood creatures, the ones made of stone were welcoming enough.

She’d only found the tower by mistake, but it was still a relief to see him there. He was overlooking the sea, picking at the handle of an obsidian dagger.

“Thought I’d find you in the smithy,” Arya said.

He might have jumped a dozen feet, if the ceiling wasn’t so short. As it was, he cracked his head on the wall and yelped like a hurt dog. “Seven hells!” the bull screamed. “Some warning next time, why don’t ya’?”

Arya only laughed. A real laugh, not like the ones she had for Sansa, when they’d talked about the Dragon Queen and the ridiculous assertion that Arya was, in fact, a faceless assassin.

And Gendry, for all of his fury, was still just as stupid as she remembered. Instead of trying to hug her, or talk to her, or do anything of the sort, all the idiot did was kneel. Like some baseborn miller’s boy kneeling as his king rode by, except even the miller’s boy would have knelt better than Gendry. His knee trembled where he rested on it, and it might have toppled him over if he didn’t have both hands holding him up.

“M’lady,” he called her, like they were kids again on the Kingsroad.

And, like they were kids again, Arya put all her weight into shoving the stupid bull on his arse.

“Still not a lady,” she told him, as he scrambled back to his feet, laughing all the way. Just like that, the tension was gone, and his arms were wrapped around her and hers around him.

He smelled the same, she thought, stupidly. Like steel and fire, dirt and sweat. Too many days in the smithy, and too many days sleeping out under the moon. Or, perhaps, not enough. The days under the moon had been the easy ones. It was the days under stone rooves that had been the worst.

When they pulled away, it was clear that Gendry had the same thought, if the horror on his face was anything to go by. “They said they found you in Harrenhal,” he said. “Why in all the seven hells would you go back?” But before she could answer, he was pulling away, rubbing at his shaved head with the hilt of his dagger. “No, no, you know what, I don’t care. You’re back. You’re alive! Where have you been? I thought you were dead. We all thought you were dead! I didn’t even tell Jon, because- because you were dead! The Hound had you, they said, and then he said he lost you, and Saltpans burned, and he thought- I thought-”

She had to put a hand over his mouth to shut him up. The stupid bull might have gone on forever if she hadn’t. It was only when he stopped mouthing words into her palm that she let him go. Even
“How did you get away from the Red Woman?” she said.

“One of Stannis’ men, Davos,” he said, quickly. “He got me a boat. Little skiff, I think. I don’t know, never been much for sea life, me. Told me to row back to King’s Landing. I’m not much a rower either, so it took me a while, but I made it. And you? You row all the way back from faceless land just to go to Harrenhal again?”

She didn’t have to lie to Gendry. Not when he’d seen her at her worst, already. “I was coming back from Cersei. For Winterfell.”

His eyes went wide, and he spattered out a dozen different ways to say “It’s gone. Winterfell,” before she covered his mouth, and said, “I know.”

“But why Harrenhal?” he said, incredulously. “I’d have slept a hundred days in the wood if it meant avoiding that place, and I-” He turned to face the floor. “It was better for me than you, I think.”

There was nothing she could do to deny that, so she said instead, “The ghosts are gone there. Dead. Weese can’t do a thing from the seventh hell.” She didn’t believe in the seventh hell, but Gendry did, and hearing his laugh made the lie worth it.

“Still,” he said, once the laughter stopped. “You’re lucky you got out of there. I wouldn’t want to be alone in the Walker’s path.”

*Hot Pie is,* she wanted to say, but she held her tongue. This was supposed to be a happy meeting, and mentioning Hot Pie would only make it miserable. He’d been a good lad, and before long, he would be a dead one. No one could outrun the Walkers, Jon said, and Hot Pie could hardly outrun a cripple.

“You’ve seen them,” Arya said. Her forefinger traced the pommel of the Kingslayer’s sword. “Jon says you saved my sister. Twice, actually.”

His nod was a shaky thing. “I almost didn’t the second time around,” he admitted, “but then I thought about what you’d do to me if I left her. Had to get her, if I didn’t want the ghost of Harrenhal haunting me.”

“Smart,” she told him.

“Not so stupid after all.” He grinned, though he wiped it away soon after. “So you made it to Braavos after all, did you?”

She nodded. “Finished my list too.”

His eyes went wide. “You killed the Queen? You killed Kingsguard?” He shook his head slowly. “Don’t know why I’m surprised, really.”

She scoffed. “And the Kingslayer.”

This time, he really didn’t look surprised. “You sure you aren’t going for the new Queen next, then?”

“The Dragon Queen?”
“I saw the look you gave her on the beach. Not a look of a lady, let me say.”

“Sounds fitting, since I’m not one.”

“You are.”

“I don’t know if you knew, but ladies don’t carry swords.” She shook Needle with one hand, while the other continued to trace the Kingslayer’s.

“So? You can be a lady and carry a sword. Just means you’re a weird one.”

“My lady mother would disagree,” Arya said, though she might as well have carved herself open again. It always hurt when she thought of her mother.

“I don’t know much about your lady mother,” Gendry confessed, “but mine always said a lady’s a lady. Queen or lady of a holdfast, they’re all the same. And you, m’lady of Stark, you’ve got that look of you.”

“That look?”

“Like you’ve got the world under you.”

“We’ve all got the world under us. That’s what dirt is, stupid.”

“The lady look. Acting all high and mighty. I’ve seen ’em. Top of the world, looking down from their castles.” His face hardened at that.

“Well, I haven’t been atop a castle since Harrenhal,” she told him, “so you’ll have to find something else to whinge about.”

“I don’t whinge. Why does everyone say that?”

“If you admit I’m not a lady, I’ll say you don’t whinge.”

“Sounds a fair deal. And I guess it is true, isn’t it? You’re not a lady.” He grinned, and gave her a shaky little bow. “Princess.”

She pushed him again, and as he hit the floor, he let loose a laugh that rang through the castle walls.

It was easier to talk with him than it was the rest of her family, in truth. The two spoke through the night, and into the morning (though she could hardly tell through the dark clouds that hung day and night). They did not again speak of Harrenhal, or their days alone in the wilderness with Hot Pie and worms, but, somehow, it didn’t matter. Gendry spoke of his journeys, of days spent beyond the wall and days spent rowing on the high seas from Dragonstone to King’s Landing. Arya, for her part, spoke of her time with the Hound, though she took pains to mention only the time before the Twins, and hinted at nothing of the days after. He knew, of course; his eyes watched Needle in a way no one else had, even Jon. Jon hadn’t been there when Polliver took it. Jon hadn’t been there when Jaqen had given her the coin, and Jon hadn’t been there when Arya had killed over and over again.

Gendry knew. Even if she didn’t talk about it, Gendry knew, and that changed everything.

Somehow, at some point, he’d found ale. She didn’t bother asking where, just sniffs it, chugged it and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, before she handed the rest over to him. He drank
just as deep.

After that, they didn’t talk about the Battle of Winterfell, or the Eyrie, or anywhere Arya had been since just before the Twins. Both of them knew most of it, anyway. The closest they’d come had been Gendry asking what it had been like in Braavos. To that, Arya only shrugged, and said, “I didn’t really see much of it,” before drinking more of the ale than she deserved.

In the end, she had only drunkenly offered to spar him twice, and he had only drunkenly accepted once. Needle nearly slipped through her fingers before she could fully draw it, and Gendry had laughed until she sheathed it again. It didn’t fall, though. No matter how drunken she was, and no matter how tired and lost, and no matter how angry she was at a thousand people and one, she would never drop that sword. It was a part of her, almost as much as the Night Wolf was.

It was at the end of their drunken reunion, when Arya was lounged on an old wooden chair, that Gendry was leaning with his head against a railing, singing that same stupid song Tom o’ Sevenstreams had, a million years ago, about the featherbed and the forest lass. He didn’t sing it near as well, nor did he seem to know all the words, but it sounded nice enough.

And when a morning lit by darkness came to greet them, neither of them had slept a wink. They couldn’t have if they wanted to. And if Arya slipped out of the tower before any could find them, the world was none the wiser.

Chapter End Notes

Gonna be honest with you, I’ve got no idea whose POV comes next. I wrote out a full Jon POV, AND a full Sansa POV set after Jon's, but I think I may fit in a Tyrion somewhere. My outline is a damned mess right now thanks to Arya "I won't talk about my problems" Stark. Hopefully it'll be worked out by next chapter.

Anyway, hope you liked it!
Tyrion III

Chapter Notes

Alright, the only way I could fix some issues that were developing was stuffing this thing in. Believe me, it may seem like filler, but noooope. So, Tyrion lovers, you get a new POV. And our favorite dwarf (fuck Bobono) is pretty clever thankfully.

(Also sorry for the double post again, I suck)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifteen: A Dwarf Unwanted

Dragonstone

Tyrion Lannister

There was little to do on Dragonstone when one did not drink, and the whores had long since run off with Stannis and his men to die far away in a cold and foreign place.

At least I will die where I lived, Tyrion thought. It may well be in a brothel, too.

There were some tools of entertainment, but not many. He could work with the children, of course. Jorah Mormont might have liked him to, and Harlan Hunter too, if it meant Tyrion would not be in their company during their many meetings. Unfortunately for them, Tyrion was a better tactician than anyone left in the castle, and he had been more than welcomed in the Chamber of the Painted Table by the once-King in the North.

But between sessions, what was there to do? He liked children well enough, but he hadn’t the patience to tend to them forever. There was a war on, and he could hardly waste his waking hours entertaining the sons and daughters of the Vale. He misliked the Vale well enough already, and the children did little but whine and feast on dwindling food supplies.

He could tend to the wound in his skull, of course. Sansa had called it a deep cut, and one that came with a great deal of risk, but most of the pain had fled him already. Besides, his head was far too used to trauma, and, if he spent his days tending to it, it might grow softer than his dear sister’s.

No, there was precious little to entertain himself with. The day since the arrival of Daenerys and her Starkling had been a dry one. With so much of the castle dedicated to entertaining its new gusts, there was little to do but the same. So, he took up watching the littlest surviving Stark. The she-wolf of Winterfell, who hadn’t seen the thrice-damned castle since she was a pup.

Oh, he’d heard the stories, of course. A little girl wandering the Riverlands with the Hound. Lysa Tully’s long-lost niece appearing in the Eyrie three days after her death, and vanishing like a ghost in the night. A spotting in Saltpans, some had said, but that was before the town burned, and all trace of the girl was lost. Even Cersei had forgotten, too content with plotting the demise of a thousand different men – himself included – to waste her time on a dead girl.
Too many dead people had been coming back lately. It was starting to get tiring.

He could still remember the day Cersei had spoken of this girl. She’d lost her, of course, in the chaos after Ned Stark’s capture and the slaughter of his men. It had been the first time that Cersei was the disappointment of the family, after a life time of Tyrion’s mistakes and Tyrion’s flaws. His sweet sister had lost half of their furry prize, and only one wolf remained in their kennels, built to house three. Their lordly father had been oh-so-pleased.

He thought he ought to shake the girl’s hand in thanks, but every time he came close, she would retreat. Two cold eyes, like her father’s or her bastard brother’s, would watch him as she fled. Two eyes as dead as she was said to be.

No, it was not she that he was meant to learn from. He might not have enjoyed the man’s company, but he sought out another on the second day after his arrival.

Mormont was, for once in his life, not at the queen’s side. Instead, he was standing on the ramparts, glaring at the night sky as if his eyes could cut holes through the darkness. If he was more like his father, they might have, but never before had a bear grown so much smaller than its sire.

“Tyrion,” the man greeted him, ever reluctantly.

“Ser Jorah. It’s a wonder to see you here.”

Mormont did not look impressed. “I have been here since we broke our fast. You saw me come.”

“Yes, what a terrible coincidence,” he said, with a wave of his hand. There wasn’t much time before Mormont tried to send him away, he knew, and he had no want to leave without answers. “Tell me, what do you know of the Stark girl? The youngest.”

He need not have clarified. Jorah’s face grew darker from the mere mention. His teeth ground, and his eyes darted, as if she might have been hiding on the ramparts with them, cloaked in shadow and bathed in the blood of dragons. Still, he did not look at Tyrion. “Assassin,” he hissed.

“Yes, I’d heard from your speech. Now, if you would give a bit more explanation, we might be able to get somewhere.”

Had Tyrion not been one of the brightest minds on the island, Jorah might have tipped him over the edge. He might have fallen 100 feet, cracked his head for the second time that week, and awoken again with bright blue eyes. As it was, Jorah simply leveled his murderous stare on him, and that was the extent of the killing that day.

“Have you heard her speak?” he spat. “Bravo. And that’s nothing to speak for the Braavosi sword, the Braavosi words. The khaleesi even asked if she wore another’s face, and the assassin confessed.”

Tyrion frowned. “But she still claims to be Arya Stark?”

“She does,” the exile said.

“And the Starks believe it,” Tyrion mused. “She seemed convincing enough.”

And, if the stories from the Twins were told true, she seemed more than convincing enough. The singers had been very forthcoming with that news in Winterfell.
“I do wonder how she might have survived on her lonesome,” he said. “A journey from King’s Landing to Braavos is a dangerous one in peacetimes. In times of war, I can hardly imagine.”

“Why did you come here, Lannister?” Jorah asked him, more tired than angry.

“Why, for the love of your company. I’ll be taking my leave now. I have children to treat with. As you can imagine, it’s quite comforting being taller than the servants for once.”

Jorah saw through him as well as any. “Stay away from her, dwarf.” His voice still cut with ill-disguised anger, but at least there was a hint of softness there. The sort that only came from too much time in another’s company, and too much time serving the same cause. “If she is who she says, she will have no love for Lannisters.”

“Oh, believe me, I have no interest in involving myself in Stark family affairs. I intend to stay far away from anything of the sort,” he promised.

He found the missing Stark girl in the kitchens. She was sat atop the table, feasting in the dark on the skin of a single blood orange. The others sat beside her, all misshapen and discolored, like the skin of a wight. Bright red juices dripped from her mouth to her throat, and some stained the hem of her cloak. A half-eaten chunk of cheese sat beside her, green fur growing on the corner, near where the teeth marks laid.

She was staring at him as he entered, so he thought best to introduce himself with a jape. Or, rather, he always introduced himself with a jape, but it seemed especially prudent now.

“You might have broken your fast with the rest of us, my lady. I’ve always wanted to meet the long-lost Stark, and I imagine our boar lived a shorter life than that cheese.”

The younger Stark did not answer him, nor did she give him any reaction at all. Instead, she chewed. Soon enough, the skin was gone, and she was wiping the juice away from her lips with the back of her right hand. The other went to the pommel of one of her swords, which hung, as ever, from her belt. She hadn’t even stripped it to eat.

“I thought it might be best to apologize on behalf of myself and my family for any pain we’ve caused you,” he tried.

Still, she said nothing. Her eyes were as sharp as her swords, and as cold as a Walker’s stare.

There was a cask of wine on the table, and Tyrion had to fight not to help himself. No matter how tense the air, he needed to stay sober. If not for the conversation, then for the oath he swore his queen. Or, perhaps, for the mind he swore to hone.

“I had no hand in any of the losses your family suffered,” he told her. “Not intentionally, at least.”

Still, her face did not move. It was as stagnant as stone. He could certainly see how Jorah saw an assassin in this child. Her eyes were cruel enough to kill on their lonesome.

*The Old Bear of the Watch would have liked her,* he thought. Then, to his own disgust, *Father would have liked her.*

“Did you ever meet my father?” he asked her, if only to entertain his passing fancy.

She didn’t move.
“Did you kill Joffrey?” she asked him. Her voice was as biting as the chill.

He might have lied, if not for the knowledge that she could draw her sword at any second. “No.”

“Did you marry my sister?”

“Yes,” He frowned. “But I did not bed her.”

She leaned back on the table, her eyes still cold, but somehow, they felt remarkably less murderous. It made Tyrion offer her a warm smile. She returned the favor by returning the murder to her stare. Tyrion’s smile slipped.

“Good,” she said, with finality.

But Tyrion wasn’t done. No, he had to risk his life more with every passing second, else his life would remain as boring as ever. “My family isn’t the only that done yours wrong, is it? Nor am I the only man to disappoint a Stark with a wedding.”

She was finished with the rind, but found another orange by her foot. It was overripe, soft and white and bending around her fingers. Not much of the food in Dragonstone had remained unspoiled, but even so, they had enough food that he could spare himself resorting to eating that. The Stark girl didn’t seem to care much.

“Tread carefully, Lannister,” she spat his name like a curse. It was almost comforting to hear. Lately, he hadn’t much liked the name either.

“I just came to offer my congratulations,” he said. “Your brother avenged, and your mother with him. The North finally remembered how to bite. I imagine you must be pleased.”

She said nothing. Juice ran down her forearm, red and streaking and hungry, just as it must have on that night. The Stranger’s Feast, he’d heard the men calling it. Looking now, at this wolf who sat where once there had been a girl, he certainly could see the Stranger.

“I’m happy for you, truly. Your family deserved their vengeance, and Lord-”

“Go away, Lannister,” the wolf said through her teeth, “while you still have your throat.”

Tyrion did no more than nod. He turned back to the door, his want for food forgotten.

He almost did leave without risking his skin again, but a final thought struck him before he could. A thought that tore free of him before he could clamp his teeth around his tongue.

“I’m glad you escaped when you did,” he told her, earnestly. “I can’t imagine what my nephew would have done if you hadn’t.”

She shut her eyes. The skin of the orange gave, and dark juices ran over her hands like weeping tears. “I can,” she said, softly. But, before he could blink, the coldness was back, and her eyes were wide and fierce again. “Go.”

He went.

#

His third meeting of the day was one he had been looking forward to since Winterfell. Since that fateful day he climbed on the back of the wrong dragon and rode south on green instead of black. Twice, he had ridden south on green. Both memories he would like to forget.
Drogon was wounded, though not nearly as severely Rhaegal was. The great black beast could still fly, even if each flap of his wing was jittery and forced. Rhaegal, on the other hand, could hardly stand on his second leg. Still, days after the attack, the wound had not ceased its bleeding. Tyrion wondered if it ever would. All the books on dragons had burnt in Winterfell, in the Eyrie, and would burn in Old Town if they lost this fight. The few here on Dragonstone were written in High Valyrian, or Bastard.

It was an unfortunate thing that he had never had much a mind for foreign tongues. He had mastered common, of course, but the others came as slowly to him as the written word had to Jaime.

His queen knelt in the snow, where she had scarcely moved for hours. There had been a moment where she stood – a brief one – when the Starks had come for their missing sister, but as soon as Snow left her side, she was back to his dragon. Rubbing it, cooing like a mother with the babe at her breast, and urging Drogon to approach.

Of course, while her largest son had seemed somewhat pleased at his brother’s survival – if that was what his tail meant when it flicked so – he hadn’t approached. For a moment, Tyrion wondered if he was more pleased that Rhaegal was injured than he would have been had the other been healthy. It was hard to tell with dragons. Sometimes, he thought them smarter than any of them could know.

“My queen,” Tyrion greeted. “I cannot express how happy I am to see you safe now.”

She hummed in answer, but she didn’t turn her head. Even in the darkness, he could see the faint reflection of frozen tears on her cheeks.

“Dragons do not cry,” she had told him once, but dragons were not supposed to burn either, and he thought he’d spotted a peculiar set of scars on a young dragon’s hand.

“Will he walk again?” he asked her.

Finally, she turned to catch his gaze. Her bright eyes were the only light in this long night. “Leave me be, Tyrion.”

He stepped forward. “My queen-”

“I will not ask again.”

And, again, he went.

#

It was his fourth and final meeting of the night that found him settled for the night. He did not seek out Harlan Hunter’s company, or Jon Snow’s, or even his former lady wife’s. No, he knew how short their tempers were lately, how little patience they had left, and he did not have much interest in involving himself in Northern and Vale plots. Scheming had been enjoyable enough before the war – necessary even – but now, it felt like a mummer’s game. A waste of time and talent.

So, it was with great reluctance that he sat himself across from the disgraced Lord of Lightning, a man not well known for his politicking.

“Lannister,” Beric greeted him, though there was little warmth in his welcome. His face was in his cup, and the rest of him seemed about ready to topple in.
“Am I missing a nose?” he asked, carelessly. “It is all I can think to explain why so few can bear to look at my face as of late.”

*That* startled Beric into looking up. Tyrion had never felt quite so guilty for a jape before, for Beric’s reaction was anything but pleasing.

“Your nose is fine,” Beric told him. “If anything, I imagine my face is the unbearable one.”

He was not wrong. The man’s face had grown beyond gaunt. The skin hung, like the protruding sacks on the chin of old Walder Frey, or the once-rotting flesh that scarcely stayed on the arm of a decayed wight. His eyepatch had fallen away at some point during the battle, and he had not seen fit to replace it. The scar was all one could see when they looked at him, unless their eye managed to catch sight of the wound across his throat. What little remained of his hair was greying and unwashed, hanging in thick meaty strands about his tired face.

And that was only his face. The sorry state of his sword hand might have made Tyrion sick, if he had not seen worse in this past moon than any ailment could dream. Even the black rot on the tip of his sole surviving finger did little to turn his stomach.

In the Eyrie, his stomach had turned enough for a lifetime’s worth of sickness.

“So, what are you?” Tyrion asked, carelessly. “A cripple, or a broken thing?”

Beric didn’t even have the grace to look confused. “Both, I imagine.” He pushed at his cup with his surviving finger. “I’m not even trusted in the fight against the dead. So much for the Prince that was Promised.”

“Oh, yes,” Tyrion said. “A pious man. They are few enough these days. The God of Light, isn’t it?”

“Lord,” Beric corrected. “He brought me back from the dead six times, only to die of hunger in a castle of dragons.”

Tyrion shrugged. “It’s better than dying a decade past.”

“Would if I could have,” the knight said, wistfully. “I have known much of death, it seems, and not much of life. Just once, I wish our Lord would offer me the chance to bring life in its stead. But that is the duty of the women, not the knights of red cloaks and brotherhoods.” He laughed, for a second. It was a cold, bitter thing, as sharp as a knife and as harsh as dancing green flames. “Perhaps Thoros could have. The man was my mother as much as my first.”

“He was a good man,” Tyrion said. *For what little I saw of him.*

But Beric only frowned. “We all were,” he said, wistfully. “From the lowest of the tavern boys to the highest of the lords and the most pious of the priests. Men of virtue. Knights. True knights, like the realm has not seen since the days of the Sword of the Morning and the White Bull, or, perhaps, since the days of the Dragonknight and Ryam Redwyne.” He clenched his fist. The sole finger on his right hand bent to his palm. “It is a sad day when a band of farmers and outlaws holds more honor in their pigsty than all the rest of the land.”

“It is a common day, I find. I always thought most of the legends quite trite. I prefer a world with its greys, if you would, in place of whites. I find it’s more truthful. But then, the Kingsguard cloak never did fit me well, when my brother offered it.” He shot the man an easy smile. “You will have your day to fight, Ser Beric. I will see to it, myself.”
He would. If ever a man deserved to die a worthy death, it was a man who had died six.

Or was it the other way around. Tyrion could hardly say.

Beric nodded. “As you say.”

“How that that matter is settled, I must ask you to settle a matter for me,” Tyrion said. “Jon Snow assures me that death is empty. Naught but black and nothingness, but I very much doubt such a thing could be true. I was promised tits and wine, or – more like – one of the seven hells. I think I may find the Maiden’s ice, but, who knows, perhaps the Father’s flames suit me well enough.”

“Be grateful,” Beric said, humorlessly. “There was naught at all but black. And then the fire comes and burns it away.” He squeezed his eye shut. “It empties you. Takes something each time, and leaves a hole that cannot fill. You come back weaker, and yet, they claim it is a gift that you came back at all.” He frowned at his drink. “I did not ask for this life.”

“No,” he sighed. Would, if he could have a single conversation without something depressing him. “I cannot imagine anyone would.”

“I heard tell this may be our last battle,” Beric said, after a short silence.

“I hope so. That means we win.” Or it meant they would all die. At least then, the fighting would be over. It would all be over.

“You think he would flee again?”

“He has done it twice already. I would not discount the chance of a third.”

“I hope you’re wrong, Lannister.”

“Oh, as do I. Unfortunately, I find that I seldom am.” There were a few exceptions, of course, and Beric knew that as well as any. He had lost a friend to one of Tyrion’s plots, and perhaps more. Perhaps, he had lost another life, or another seven. Perhaps Tyrion’s plan had damned the world to a bitter frozen end.

It was almost disappointing. He had promised ashes, not ice.

“Then plot well,” Beric sighed. “The fate of the world is in our hands today. May the Lord of Light bless us all.”

“Or just one,” Tyrion said, rubbing at the wound on his head. “Really, all we need is one. One lucky shot, one lucky man.”

“Azor Ahai,” the dead man breathed.

“Ah, yes, Azor Ahai. Do call me when Stannis rises from the dead with that sword of his.”

“Stannis was no Azor Ahai,” Beric told him, fiercely. It was the most life he had seen in the man since they had met in King’s Landing, eight kings ago. Or more. Tyrion had lost count somewhere along the way. “Thoros used to call his priestess a woman made of wildfire. Powerful, devastating, and mad men call them godly.”

He stared at Beric’s drink, too. Oh, how he missed wine. “Where is he then?”

“Standing before you,” Beric said, serious as could be. For a moment, Tyrion almost believed him, if only for the light dancing in his eyes. Then he slumped, and the fire was smothered. “Or so we
used to say. It is a difficult thing to wield the bringer of light with only one hand.”

“My brother learned to fight with his left.”

Beric did not smile. “And if your queen is to be believed, he died at the hands of a woman of eight-and-ten. No, the simplest answer is that I was mistaken all along, and Thoros with me. Perhaps even the Lord of Light, himself. If there is such a thing as Azor Ahai, I am not he.” He rose to his feet then, watching the dwarf as he moved. “I pray that he finds us. I pray that he comes.”

And as Beric fled, Tyrion nodded at the shadows on the wall. They swam, like snakes slithering about the walls. “Yes,” he said, softly. “As do I.”

Chapter End Notes

Arya’s eating habits are disgusting.

Also, last chapter, this thing hit 100 comment threads! Thank you to everyone who’s commented so far! Warms my day every time I see one!

Next up, Jon POV with some hurt/comfort for Dany. Mostly hurt. It’s war. They can have comfort if they kill an 8,000 year old god creature.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Sixteen: Of Dragons and Wolves

**Dragonstone**

*Jon Snow*

He found her on the beach, running her hands over Rhaegal’s scales, and bathing her palms in the bronze of his blood. There was nobody around her – not Jorah Mormont, Tyrion, the unsullied, or any of the others who had once followed her like mindless puppies. Most of them had died. Most of his, too. More than most.

But where he had gained a sister, all Dany had earned was one son injured and another dead. And a pair of angry grey eyes that seemed to follow her across the island. He’d need to talk to her about that. But what would he say? That he had believed it too? That, had she forgotten a thing, he would have called her a pretender? That he had killed a little boy, that he hadn’t been afraid to kill a woman, hardly even a maiden?

*Gods,* he still needed to apologize a thousand times over.

He could still see her face, cold and empty, unblinking and lifeless, where he forced it up to face him. His fingers shaking, but his words the duty of a king. He loved her, he really did, but love was death, and he had smothered it and smothered it, until it choked him.

“We let her prove it,” he had said, like an idiot, like a fool, like the only man who had ever known nothing. Sansa had known better. She’d been arguing, fighting like the she-wolf she was, but Jon had just gone on, like a rash child, like a soft-headed imbecile, “And if she doesn’t-”

He sent the thoughts away, shoving them back where a thousand other guilts waited to be answered. Arya sat near the top, of course, with Olly and Ygritte and Father and Robb, but at least this was a guilt that he could address. He would speak to her again later, once she returned from her walk. Let him apologize a million times over, if it meant showing her his genuine regret.

*I didn’t know, I’m sorry. You were one and ten, and alone in the world. Had to be dead, had to be. I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I didn’t-*

For now, there was a Mother of Dragons trembling over her injured sons, and it was his duty to be at her side.

Duty. That, he understood. Better than anything else, it seemed. But it was love too, and that cut like knives through his skin.

He settled next to her, the snow reaching halfway between his waist and his knees as he touched near his dragon’s wound. It still had not even begun to heal, even days later, and the bronze blood still leaked with Rhaegal’s every move. He was not the only creature suffering there that night. The queen was with him, and Drogon, and a raven roosting on one of his spines, cawing empty words into the air, just as Mormont’s raven had on the wall. “*Corn, corn, corn,*” he said.
It may be the same, he thought, madly. He shivered, and not for the chill, though it bit deeper than any he had felt. That bird will survive us all.

Dany ignored the creature, content to pet her wounded son, but still it cawed on. “Corn. Breathe!” It took to the sky then, black wings hiding amidst the stark black sky, its eyes almost white in the darkness. “Breathe! Breathe!” No one said a word to it, and still the bird cawed on, as it flew off into the night.

She looked to him, then. Her bright eyes were alight with tears, and it burned his heart to see them. Rhaegal let loose a mournful cry, and Dany turned back to him.

“It was during the battle,” he told her. “The Eyrie. I stopped Viserion, but the Night King…”

“Again,” she whispered. “You killed my son, and, still, they nearly killed another. How can we defeat an enemy that can slay three dragons?”

“He’s only slain one,” Jon said, though he knew the argument was weak.

“I do not know what to do,” she admitted. “I don’t know if we can beat them.”

“Of course, we can.” He tried to touch her, but she pulled away.

“I might have conquered cities with a single dragon,” she said. “I bought armies with just one. A single dragon can burn a kingdom to the ground. How do we kill an enemy that can injure two and kill one?”

“Didn’t Dorne kill a dragon?” he tried. He didn’t know his southern history as well as his sisters had, but every child in the seven kingdoms knew the story of Aegon’s conquest. Every one of them knew of his sister’s dragon, and the bolt that pierced its eye.

“Once, by luck. They never could again. Never.” When she turned to face him, there were tears in her eyes. “I do not know if we can win this war, Jon.”

“You’re just giving up now? You came all this way to give up?”

“What else can I do?” she hissed. “I’ve finally made it to Westeros, and the dead have risen to drive me away. Has there ever been a greater sign?” She put her forehead to the dragon’s scales. Rhaegal’s tail moved to cover her back, drenching her with snow and slush, and crushing her beneath his weight. She didn’t seem to mind much. “My father tried to burn this realm, and now it is to freeze.”

“It won’t freeze,” Jon insisted. “We can still win.”

“How?” She was shaking, and he doubted it was because of the cold. The dragon’s scales should have been warm enough to burn. “He can throw a spear hundreds of feet in the air and break through a dragon’s scales. Twice. Dragonfire can’t kill him. Ordinary swords can’t kill him.”

“Valyrian steel,” Jon said.

“Valyrian steel? Do you intend to meet him on the ground? He can crush your throat, he can raise the dead around you, he can live 8,000 years!”

There was a madness in her eyes – the sort he’d seen a thousand times on the Wall, when men were at their wit’s end. When the pressures of war were too much, and they were moments away from leaping over the edge to crush the foes below. He’d seen it in Winterfell, too, and beyond the Wall,
and the Eyrie, and he’d seen it on both of his sisters’ faces. Both times, he had dragged them back, and now he would again.

“Then what?” he hissed. “What would you have me do? Do you mean to run to Essos? They’ll freeze the seas. You saw how the dothraki handled Winterfell. Would you mean to see Essos face an army even greater? I’d like to see Braavos figure out dragonglass. Would the Doom effect the Walkers?”

“It would save us time.”

“Aye, a year, mayhaps two. And we can spend the moons wallowing in dishonor and waiting for our deaths to take us. Is that the life you want?” he demanded. When she said nothing, he went on, “Daenerys,” he said, softer, “you came to Westeros to be its queen, and I believe you’ll be the greatest queen we’ve had. But you can only rule Westeros if Westeros still stands.”

“Rule Westeros,” she said. “I didn’t want to at first, you know.”

“What?”

“That was my brother, Viserys. He always talked about coming west, taking what was ours.” She clenched her fists and buried them in the snow. “He sold me to Khal Drogo for the chance to come home, to rule. I cannot do the same. I will not sell my sons.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you. I really am,” he promised her, “but there is a difference between selling your sister for a chance at a crown, and letting your sons fight for the future.” He came closer to her, and met her hand beneath the snow. Her fingers entangled with his. “If you go east, they will die. If you stay, they may not. That’s a chance worth fighting for.”

They stayed there for a while, crouched in the snow. It was colder now, the snow was higher, and there were no trees around, but, for a moment, Jon shut his eyes and felt like he was home again, beyond the wall, crouched beneath a weirwood and praying for the gods to hear him.

But the old gods never came, nor the new. The Lord of Light had not shined upon them at the Battle of Winterfell, and there had been no priests or priestesses to light the way. He had sent one away, and none other dared treat with him.

Rhaegal’s stomach rumbled – a great roar that made Jon tremble – but they had no food to offer him. The goats had all been slaughtered, and the cattle had been brought to the mainland for the Eyrie. There were a few salted meats left, but nothing substantial enough for a beast this size. The dragons would have to wait, it seemed. They would all have to wait.

“Every problem I have ever had,” Dany whispered to the sleeping dragon, “I have solved with fire and blood, as my father did, and my grandfather, and every man and woman in my line, stretching back for centuries. But this Night King does not burn, nor does he bleed.”

“He can still die,”

“So can we.”

“We won’t,” Jon told her. “No one needs to die. If we’re careful enough-”

“I was careful when I freed the slaves of Yunkai,” she told him, “and yet I still lost men. I was careful when I conquered Meereen, and I still lost one of my closest friends. We planned in Winterfell for weeks. We lost all,” her voice broke there, and Jon’s heart shattered with it, “and they lost some. There is no war without death. You know that.”
He didn’t know Arya anymore.

They were all gathered in one of the many halls. The seats were mostly empty, and most of the castle’s denizens were too busy playing in the snow to come and eat with them. The soldiers, and the Starks, were gathered at the front of the room, feasting on one of the few surviving sheep. There were five left, he knew. They would need to be moving soon.
Daenerys sat at the head of the table, as was her right. This was her castle, and her kingdom, and no one cared to question it.

Jon sat at her right, with Sansa beside him and Arya beside her. Arya had bristled at that, and she’d bristled even more when Gendry the smith sat beside her. That was the Arya he knew. The rest of it?

She hardly touched her food, too content to stare daggers at Daenerys and her man, Jorah Mormont. And, when she wasn’t glaring, her face was empty. A blank slab that had been carved out of the excited little girl she’d once been. Her knife, a blade that was certainly not meant for the cutting of meat – at least not this sort of meat – hardly ever left her grip.

Maybe if he hadn’t threatened her, like the idiotic fool he was, she wouldn’t have been so tense. Or maybe-

*What happened to you, little sister,* he wanted to ask, but his tongue never moved.

She ignored poor Gendry, though he tried countless times to catch her attention. The only time it ever worked was when he’d mentioned her knife, and even then, she had hardly been distracted for more than a moment.

Sansa tried, too but Arya somehow had even less patience for her.

She hadn’t seemed to have grown in all the time she’d been gone. She wasn’t skinny anymore – more muscle than bone now – but even Jon was taller than her, and Jon hadn’t even been taller than Pyp in the end. His sister had even picked up a new tongue along the way, judging by the new inflections she bore on the few times she spoke.

But then, Sansa had been different when he met her again too, and Bran. The wars had changed them all, and the war to come would surely do it again. He should have expected that. The boys and girls were all dead. Now, the men and women had taken their place.

She left the room before the rest were done, and it wasn’t long before Gendry followed, his tail tucked between his legs. Lord Hunter had laughed at the sight, but Jorah Mormont had not even been so gracious. He whispered a thousand things into Daenerys’ ears before the night was done. Never once did it make her look any happier.

It was partway through the meal that Jon excused himself. He hadn’t finished, nor had he the stomach to. Tonight, he knew, he would regret it, but for now he only wished to find his little sister. They still had much to discuss.

But try as he might, he hadn’t been able to find her. She had disappeared into the night. Or perhaps day; he could hardly tell as of late. He knew that she wasn’t outside; he would have seen her tracks in the waist-high snow. He checked the smithy, her rooms, the kitchens, the library. He checked everywhere he could reach, and she was naught to be found. It was only when he retired for the night that he found her, sitting the Dragonknight’s desk and rubbing at one of the scars on her palms.

The room had been dark as pitch before he lit a torch and set it against a wall. How she had found her way around, he could hardly say. Even the halls had been black without the moon’s light to guide his way.

“Arya,” he started, but the look on her face stopped him.

“What’s your plan?” she asked him, calmly.
“My plan? What plan?”

She sighed. A cat had been curled beneath Aemon’s desk, but now it ran for the open door. She paid it no mind. “The plan for the Walkers. If they’re real—”

“They are.”

“Then we need a plan.”

He stared at her for a second more, before he stripped himself of his belt and set Longclaw down beside his bed. This was never a conversation he meant to have with his little sister.

“Dragonglass,” he said. There was a dagger by his side – one of the original daggers Sam had found north of the wall – and he retrieved it before she could even ask. He offered it to her, but his sister didn’t take it.

Arya hardly stared at it for a second, before she said, “Obsidian.”

Jon frowned. “That’s what the maesters called it, and Sam. How did you—”

“I’ve seen it before,” she said, simply. Her eyes didn’t leave his hand.

“You’ve seen it? Where?”

“Braavos.”

“There’s dragonglass on Braavos?”

“There’s everything in Braavos.”

He didn’t know what to say to that. She looked too wistful when she said it. For a moment, he thought she might have longed for the city as much as she had Winterfell, but then it was gone, and her face was blank again.

“Did you like it there?” he asked her.

She frowned. She never used to frown this much. “Some parts,” she said. “The ships, the mummers, the people. I liked the water most. For a while.”

He should have expected that. She’d always loved the godswood for the pool, and little else about it. “And the other parts?”

All hints of life drained from her face, until, suddenly, she was that woman from the beach again. Expressionless, blank, and empty as a burnt village. Her eyes cold and lost, and “We let her prove it. If she doesn’t…”

“The other parts were hard,” she said, impatiently, leaping from the desk and onto her feet. She didn’t stumble. “Do you have a plan for the Walkers?”

For a moment, he saw himself in her stance. The determination, the ruthless willfulness, everything that Arya had been as a child, and Jon had become as a man. It was pure Stark in a way he hadn’t seen since Uncle Benjen had gone North.

_She may be changed, but she’s still Arya._ The thought made him smile.

“There’s a meeting tomorrow,” he told her. “We can go to the Painted Table. We’ll discuss it, all of
us, together.”

“I’ll be there,” she promised.

She didn’t lie. Come morning, he and Dany had broken their fasts, Jon found his little sister standing on the edge of the room, watching the table with eyes that were dark enough to match the dreary skies.

There were hundreds of bright blue chips lain out on the table, and precious little else. They blanketed the North, the Vale, the Riverlands. A single blue piece had been removed from the one they had seen on the Eyrie’s map – a bright blue dragon – but there were others taken, too. The white pieces of the Vale’s armies, gone. The supporting Tully red, gone. Now there only remained the Dornish pieces, the Westerlands, the Stormlands, and the Crownlands. And none of them where they needed to be.

“There are few left in the Stormlands to lend their support,” Tyrion told them, “and it’s said that the Westerlands has devolved into war over Casterly Rock, so they may not be reliable either. The Dornish may come, but I somehow doubt it. They have the men, to be sure, but not the interest.”

“An army of the dead is marching on them, and they haven’t the interest?” Jon repeated.

“I didn’t believe it either,” Dany reminded him.

“They saw it!”

“Cersei saw it.” She glanced at Arya, and then away. “Cersei won’t be coming.”

“What of the Iron Islands?”

“Fighting amongst themselves over their throne, of course. It rarely changes on Pike, it seems.”

“And the Tullys?” Sansa asked.

Tyrion looked at her with great pity. “If the Walkers took the Eyrie, they’ll have already taken Riverrun.”

Jon forced himself not to squeeze his eyes shut. Another Great House, lost. Another line, stretching back thousands and thousands of years, extinguished. The only survivors, two Stark women who couldn’t carry on the name even if they’d wanted to. Not while they carried their father’s.

Another spoke on the wheel broken, Dany, he thought. You’ve got your wish. See how it spins?

It was far too cruel to say when she looked sickly at the thought. He wanted to comfort her, but Sansa’s stare kept his hands still.

“What of the Reach?” Beric asked, drumming the fingers of his good hand against the table. The other was pinned to the pommel of his sword, useless though it might have been.

Another spoke on the wheel broken, Dany, he thought. You’ve got your wish. See how it spins?

It was far too cruel to say when she looked sickly at the thought. He wanted to comfort her, but Sansa’s stare kept his hands still.

“What of the Reach?” Beric asked, drumming the fingers of his good hand against the table. The other was pinned to the pommel of his sword, useless though it might have been.

“With the Tyrells and the Tarlys both burnt, I’m not quite sure who remains to rally them. Hightower? Redwyne? Fossoyway? Florents? Or the Tyrells of Brightwater, perhaps? Either way, as it stands, the armies of the Reach have already shrunken a great deal since the Five Kings, and I can’t imagine they’ve many left to spare.”

“They’ll need to,” Beric said, solemnly. “This is the last battle. Win or lose.”

Jon had already known, as they all did, but it was so much worse to hear the words spoken aloud.
than to simply know. To hear that, if they failed this time, the war was done, the Walkers won. A million men were too many for any army to tackle. The world would be frozen within a decade, and no Last Hero could come to save the day.

“We need to evacuate the city,” Lord Hunter said, and, for once, Jon agreed.

“Have they a navy?”

“Yes,” Arya said, suddenly. “I saw them in the Blackwater, two moons back. Thousands of ships. Most of them krakens, but I saw others. Gold banners and Lannisters.”

*You were in King’s Landing?* he wanted to ask, but instead, he said, “Gold banners?”

“The Golden Company,” Dany said, her lip curled. “Sellswords and Blackfyres.”

“Sellswords they may be, but sellswords can still be useful,” Tyrion said. “Believe me, I know. If we can take their ships, we can move thousands.”

“And hundreds of thousands will remain.”

Lord Hunter frowned, tracing his fingers over the sketch of the city. Wherever he traced, dozens of blue pieces fell. “Do we even want to move all of them out? A million men means a million swords.”

“What swords do you mean to arm them with?” Jon said. “Dragonglass? We haven’t the stores. Or do you mean steel? Because we haven’t enough of that either.”

“They go south,” Dany said with finality. A queen’s voice, though her crown was lost and tarnished. “It doesn’t matter how slowly, as long as they leave. If we die, they all die.”

“We cannot just leave innocent people to the dogs,” Beric argued.

“He’s right. If they bypass King’s Landing, all of them are doomed,” Mormont agreed. “Your brother isn’t here to bait them, now, Snow.”

Jon didn’t miss the way Arya tensed, nor did he miss the way she reached across her body for her sword. Her face remained static – blank and empty as always – but the rest of her was the very portrait of fury. She shook with it, worse than a leaf in a blizzard. If they were alone, Jon would have pulled her aside to explain. As it was, Lord Hunter was already speaking before he could.

“In the last battle, the Walkers seemed to follow your dragon,” he told Jon.

This time, it was Dany tensing. “No.”

“Your grace,” Tyrion said, sorrowfully, “while I hate to say it as well, I do think the dragons may be useful.”

“I am not using my dragons as bait,” she hissed.

“We used our own brother, and you raised no objection,” Sansa said. Jon pointedly did not look at his little sister. It was a difficult thing to manage, when he could feel the wroth bursting from her like bolts from a crossbow. “We ask you to use the dragons to save the world, and-”

“I came to the North to support your cause, not-”

“You came to the North to save your realm,” Sansa snapped. “Even had my brother not bent the
knee to you, you would have come North. There was an Army of the Dead come to steal your kingdom away. I may appear slow, your grace, but I assure you, I am not. Had you not come north, you would have been in the exact same situation you are now, only worse.”

There was fire in Daenerys’ eyes, just as there was in his sister’s, as she said, “I would have had three dragons!”

“And three dragons would die without Sam Tarly’s knowledge and the North’s swords.” She looked pointedly to Longclaw, to Arya’s sword, to Mormont’s. “This isn’t a northern war. It never was.”

And, though Sansa was making the same arguments Jon had, he could not bring himself to outwardly agree. His queen was already furious, shaking nearly as bad as his little sister was, or as much as dragon with a spear caught in its leg. If he spoke, it would only make it worse.

Nobody said a thing for a long while. Not Tyrion, who always had some quip or another on the tip of his tongue. Not Daenerys, who looked about ready to burn the castle to the ground. Not Arya, who had never before been one to stand on the edge with her lips pressed shut and her back taunt. Nobody said a word.

Until, finally, under the eyes of every man and woman of age in the castle, Dany let loose a great sigh. Her shoulders fell forward, and her hands began shaking for an entirely new reason. “One dragon,” she relented. “Whichever is better healed when we move.”

Sansa stepped back, while Tyrion nodded his head and said, “That is all we ask, my queen.”

“It is more than enough,” she hissed.

They planned through the rest of the day and the rest of the night, and did not get any closer to a complete strategy. Not while Tyrion talked them through his own strategies in the Battle of the Blackwater, in his battles in the Riverlands, and while Lord Hunter boasted about battles fought and battles won, and while Jon reported on the failures in the Eyrie and Winterfell.

And, if they ended the session with the same limited strategy as they started it, that would simply have to do. There was a war to be fought, and, if they had a fortnight to prepare, then they ought to spend a fortnight preparing. They wouldn’t win this fight with brute force, or one or two clever, but inconsequential, tricks. No, the Night King had shown them that twice.

They would win this war with fire and blood, and they would stop winter in its tracks.

Chapter End Notes

Got some Dany/Jon in there, some battle plans, and even a little bit of Jon and Arya. When does the plot kick in, you ask? Soon.

Anyway, next time, we're checking in on the third different Stark POV in a row: Sansa. I swear, they won't act like it's season 7.
Sansa II

Chapter Notes

Confession time! Here's what we got...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seventeen: Stories Untold

Dragonstone

Sansa Stark

Sansa spent two more days in the Chamber of the Painted Table before she sickened of it. They had just had – yet another – argument over the distribution of rations amongst the non-fighters. The Dragon Queen, Beric, and Jon had all been in favor, of course. Tyrion, Lord Harlan, Mormont, and Sansa were very much not. And Arya, as she often did, remained on the outskirts of the table, patient and watchful and not breathing a word out of place.

The fight had lasted hours, and they were no closer to an answer than they had been at the start. By the end of it, she’d been about ready to tear her hair out. She had already torn holes through her arm – the soft, fleshy skin gave way if she so much as scratched it. She tried to shield it from sight, kept herself in jerkins that were a few sizes too big, and she ensured that her sleeves always went past her wrists. Still, at times she could feel eyes on the covered wound. Most times, really.

She tried to pack snow into it, to relieve the fire that blazed beneath her skin. It did nothing more than numb the pain for a minute, mayhaps two. No slab of packed snow could do more.

She needed a maester, she knew, if she ever wanted it to feel right, but the nearest maester was a thousand leagues away.

So, as she hovered at the peak of the Windwyrm, she stuck her hand out from the glassless window. Up there, the bitter winds soothed her pain as well as anywhere. At the very least, it made it so she could twitch her fingers again. It had been too long since she’d used it.

The missing sun helped too, she supposed. Without the light bearing down on her, she could only hope to bask in the cold. It was the only benefit of the undying night, but she appreciated it all the same.

As a girl, she’d never believed in a night that wouldn’t end. Oh, she had believed in Florian, Maris the Maid, and Garth Greenhand, of course. But the stories of the Long Night? No, those were Arya’s stories. They were the ones her sister had begged for when she wasn’t listening to a story about some witch queen or another. Bran, too, she knew, though it hurt her heart to think of him.

“You should put honey on that.”

Sansa must have leapt a foot in the air, because when she spun, her sister was smiling.
She hadn’t even realized Arya had left the Chamber, but, then, she never did. The woman could
disappear without a single eye catching her, as silent as a shadow fleeing the light.

She tried to cover her arm, but the damage was done. Arya had seen, and Arya was, apparently,
trying to convince her to stick her burns in a hive.

“Honey?” she asked, and her little sister nodded.

“I’ve seen it work,” Arya told her. “Even when they thought the arm was gone, honey helped.” She
tilted her head, as if listening to some far-off song. “They still died, but they said it helped.”

Sansa had nothing to say to that, but Arya didn’t need her to.

“Did they plan this long in Winterfell?” her sister asked, coming to stand next to her. Her eyes
strayed from her blackened arm, and out to the sea. She couldn’t see much of it, surely, but Sansa
didn’t know if she minded or not. Her face was as blank as the snow.

“Longer,” Sansa said, wistfully. “We had moons to prepare.”

“And we lost,” Arya said, shortly. “Can we beat them?”

Sansa frowned and turned to face the snow. Even so close, she could see nothing but the darkness.

They couldn’t – not really – but how was she to say that? Arya was older now, colder, but how
much did that matter? How was she to tell her sister that their deaths were hardly a fortnight away?
That they were waiting for a storm that would never break? A night that would never end?

“We’ve outlived Joffrey, Ramsay, the Freys, and Littlefinger,” she said, softly.

“They were human.”

“The living beat them before.”

No, not the living. One man. A promised prince. That was supposed to be Daenerys. The mother of
dragons, the bringer of fire. And yet, she had been in Winterfell, and nothing she did had done a
thing. Nobody had and no one could, and Sansa knew that as well as any.

“Apparently not, if they’re back,” Arya said. Her tone didn’t change in the slightest. Frozen like the
world around them.

When Sansa turned to meet her sister’s eyes, she found nothing. A gaze cold, dark, empty. As
expressionless as Sansa’s had surely been, when she returned to Winterfell after Ramsay, after
Rickon, after everything.

“When have you been all these years, Arya?” A place where burns are healed by honey, and eyes
turn to stone. Where men can change their faces, mayhaps.

Her sister said nothing. She stared off, eyes wide and empty and looking to nothing at all. Then,
when she thought her sister would never answer at all, the woman sighed and said, “Tell me yours,
and I’ll tell you mine.”

Her heart leapt into her throat as soon as the words had been said.

*That’s not fair!* she thought, childishly.

But it was. It was fair in a way the rest of the world wasn’t. Arya always had been.
And, in truth, Sansa might have left it there. If not for the girl’s sudden sigh, she would have. Had that not been the sole expression Arya had given her since they’d reunited, she would have been content to sit in silence for hours, basking in the comfort of sharing her time with a sister once thought gone. Of not being quite so alone in this world of nothing.

But Arya sighed, and Sansa needed to know why.

She stayed vague enough, sharing stories of her time in King’s Landing without mentioning any of the worst of it: Meryn Trant, the heads on spikes, the Hound. She spoke of Ser Dontos, the murder of Joffrey – a tale that nearly made Arya crack a smile, but nothing more – and sailing off to the Eyrie. The death of Aunt Lysa. Then, in broken sentences and broken words, the marriage to Ramsay. Then, her escape. Theon – *Reek, Reek, my name is Reek* – by her side, meeting Brienne of Tarth once more, and finding Jon on the Wall. Rallying the North and the Vale, reclaiming Winterfell, meeting Bran, and beginning their preparations for the War for the Dawn. Her sister knew the rest. Now that she’d seen the state of her arm, she knew more than any of them.

And all the while, Arya simply stood and stared. She said nothing, questioned nothing, and didn’t even complain when Sansa danced around Ramsay. The only sign that she had even heard her story was the smile at Joffrey’s death, the low grumble in her throat at the mention of Theon, and the louder grumble when she mentioned Ramsay and Bran.

When it was all over, her hand brushed Sansa’s leg, as reassuring to her as it was foreign. “What happened to Bran?” Arya asked, softly. “I heard… I’m not sure what I heard.”

Sansa looked away. “Bran was… different when he came back from the Wall.”

“I’m different,” Arya said, bluntly. “Am I bait to you too?”

Sansa’s face flushed. “*Gods*, no! I- He wasn’t Bran anymore. He was something else.”

Arya looked away quickly, back to the sea, but when Sansa chanced a look at her eyes, they were cold instead of hot. *She is different.* She dismissed the thought just as quickly as it had come.

“We all are.”

“He was calling himself the Three Eyed Raven,” she admitted.

“What’s that mean?”

“He never said. He only- he had visions. Visions of the past. He could see everything.”

She froze. “Could he see me?”

“He never said,” she told her. She didn’t know if that made her any happier. “He was *different*, Arya. He wasn’t Bran anymore. He told us he could draw the Night King in. He said the he always knew where he was because of some mark on his arm. Even when he was in his ravens.”

Arya frowned. “What?”

*Right,* Sansa thought, dumbly. “He was a skinchanger.”

She didn’t know what she expected from her sister, but Arya’s slow nod surprised her. *Of course, she believes it. She’s just learned of dragons, wights, Walkers, and dead men rising. Of course, she’ll believe in wargs.*

“And he asked for it? To be bait?”
“He said it was the only way. Our only chance.” And we lost.

Arya squeezed her eyes shut and cursed. For a moment, sorrow filled every line of her face – her brows, her mouth, the black splotches under her eyes – and rage too. She nearly chewed through her bottom lip in her fury, tearing it until blood dripped down her chin and staining her throat. But then, like water over a castle of sand, her grief washed away. Only blood and ice remained.

“I should’ve been there,” she said. “I could’ve helped.”

Sansa frowned. “How could you have helped?”

“I could’ve killed them,” her little sister said, as if it was no more important than discussing the color of her boots. “All of them. Faster. You would have been safe then, and Jon too.” For a moment, she made to chew on her lip, but stopped as soon as her teeth touched it. She never used to stop.

Sansa frowned. “You were a little girl.”

Arya frowned too. “It’s my turn then. I was one and ten when I first killed,” she said, and Sansa’s blood turned as cold as her sister’s stare. “A stable boy when I was escaping the castle. He wanted to hand me to the Lannisters, and he tried to take Needle.” Her left hand jerked forward, her sword hand. Sansa could almost imagine the little blade plunging into a boy’s stomach. She could almost hear the screams. She always heard the scream. “He was hardly any older than me, and I cut him down like Mycah.”

“Mycah?” Sansa asked, softly.

“The butcher’s boy. The one the Hound killed near Darry. I ran after, hid for days before they found me. The first time I was hungry. Really hungry.” Arya laughed, a bitter cold thing. A spike of a thousand different emotions built up in Sansa’s chest - regret, fear, disappointment, and the terrible realization that Arya said first. “I was in the woods for four days with Nymeria. Just Nymeria. I sent her off with rocks before the Lannisters found me.” She tilted her head again. “Jory found me first. He helped.”

Sansa’s eyes went wide. “I’d forgotten about Jory.”

Arya shook her head, but said nothing. Her face was blank, but her eyes were studying the world around. Surveying everything and nothing, stuck a thousand years ago, when things were still okay and Sansa was a happy little girl who loved songs and dances and lemon cakes. That girl was dead now.

“That was the first time, you said,” Sansa said, carefully. “What about the others?”

Arya sighed again, and went on, “I lived on the streets of King’s Landing for days. Flea Bottom. I was trying to sell a pigeon when I heard about Father. I went to see, but Yoren found me.” She squeezed her eyes shut, and, this time, it was Sansa who put a hand on her sister’s shoulder. Arya flinched away. “He was a man of the Watch, like Jon. He promised to take me home to Winterfell, had me dress like a boy so no one would notice, but the Lannisters killed him in the Riverlands. The Mountain’s men. They took us to Harrenhal.”

“The Mountain’s men?” Sansa couldn’t help but say. She hadn’t seen much of Ser Gregor Clegane, but what little she had had been grotesque. A squire murdered, a horse decapitated, loyal knights carved asunder. She had even heard stories of Oberyn Martell, of eyes imploded and a skull exploded, and poor Elia Martell, gods be kind. They aren’t.
Arya acted as if she had not said a word. “I was with them a few weeks, before Tywin came. He figured out I was a girl, took me as a cupbearer. I escaped, eventually. He never realized it was me.”

*Of course, he didn’t*, she thought. *Why would you be there? You died.* But instead of saying any of that, she said, “You should tell Tyrion. He would think it funny.”

For once, Arya did crack a hint of a grin. It was a small thing, her smile, but it was enough. “It was, a bit. No one ever looks at the smallfolk.” The grin slipped away. “We wandered the Riverlands for a while. I was trying to get to Riverrun, to Robb. The Brotherhood found us, though. They had the Hound captive, and he told them who I was. Beric swore to ransom me, but he was pushing south, not north. I ran. The Hound found me.” *The Hound?* “Carried me all the way to the Twins.”

A wave of horror washed over her. “Were you-”

“No, I didn’t see it,” Arya said, coolly. She pushed on, before Sansa could say another word. “We went to the Eyrie. Aunt Lysa was dead, so we wandered a bit. Met an armored woman.”

_Brienne_, Sansa knew. _She really did find her._

“She killed the Hound,” her sister said. “I went to Braavos. I learned to survive.”

She said it so coldly, so effortlessly. *I learned to survive.* And then, there came the horrible fear, cutting like knives to her heart. *The Dragon Queen might have been right.*

It was too much information to process at once. Surely, the next morning she would wake with a thousand questions and a million emotions, but, for now, there was only one.

“What do you mean she killed the Hound? The- the armored woman.” _May the Mother grant her mercy._

“By Saltpans,” her sister spat. “She tried to take me, and I ran. Said she worked for Mother.”

“It’s not that,” Sansa said, quickly. “It’s only- Sandor didn’t die, Arya.”

She hardly blinked. “What?”

Sansa had to clear her throat before she spoke again. “He was with us in Winterfell, and in the Eyrie. He… we had to leave him behind.”

“You left him…” Finally, her mask broke, but all it left behind was a distortion of confusion. For a long while, she stared at the floor, before she dragged her eyes back to Sansa. “Have you ever killed anyone?”

When the memories washed over her – a gemstone in her hair, dogs howling in a cell, the man who had saved her lying in a crumbling castle – she had to smother a smile. “Yes,” she said.

“Did they deserve it?” Arya’s voice was weaker than it ought to be. Outside the window, a raven screeched, and even that was louder than her sister. It shrieked three times, shrill and ghostly, before it went off into the night.

“Yes,” Sansa told her. Ramsay more than any of them, but Littlefinger and Joffrey close enough that it didn’t matter.

“I have too,” Arya said, quietly. “He should’ve been one of them.” She squeezed her eyes shut, for
a moment, before forcing them open a second later.

“He was a good man, Arya,” Sansa tried, but her sister only laughed.

“Mycah will agree with that. And Mother.”

Sansa frowned. *Mother?*

“You ought to rest,” Arya said, before Sansa could say another word. “Your arm needs time. Besides, after you left, the Dragon Queen made mention of beginning our flight tomorrow.”

She almost dismissed the notion — there were too many things to discuss, and Arya had hardly breathed a word of Essos, and none of how she’d come to be with the Targaryen — but a single word caught her attention before she could.

*Our?*

The lightless morning found them all in the Chamber of the Painted Table again, circling the table like ravens about the maester’s tower. None seemed to have slept, which was hardly a surprise. Few could rest, after what they had seen. Even Sansa, kept awake by the fire blazing in her arm and the memories that flashed whenever she shut her eyes, found herself staring out into the darkness of the day each time she laid down her head to rest. And, as always was with mornings and meetings as tiring as these, daybreak was accompanied by the sound of fighting.

“What do you mean I’m staying?”

For the first time since they had found her on that beach beside two injured dragons, Arya looked alive. Her face was red, her fists clenched, and she looked only a moment away from shouting her lungs away.

And where once Sansa might have hated it, now she could only smile at the sight. Even wrapped in muscle and calluses and scars, her sister was still her sister at her core, that willful girl who had begged Jon to let her use his sword, who had stolen Theon’s bow whenever she had the chance, and who would scream at Sansa whenever the urge struck her. This was that girl again, and, after days of nothing, it was a welcome sight to see. More than welcome.

Though, she rather wished it could have come at the expense of someone other than her brother.

“You’re not coming,” Jon told her, softly. “We just found you. I’m not losing you again so soon, Arya.”

“You wouldn’t lose me. I can fight.” She gnawed at her lip, and, for the briefest of seconds, she looked like a girl out of time: one-and-ten again, and far more human for it. Then, her eyes went wide, and she stopped biting as quickly as she’d started. With it went the red in her face, and the fire burning under her skin. She was cold again, empty. “I can fight better than any of you,” she said, slowly.

On the other side of the room, Jorah Mormont began his daily mutterings to his queen. Sometimes, Sansa wondered if he ever tired of it. She thought that Tyrion might have to, because the dwarf looked to the sky and sighed.

“I’m sure you can,” Jon told their sister, eager to appease.
But Arya wasn’t done. By the look of her, she would have gone on for hours, if she could have. She still seemed calm – unnaturally calm, like Bran after a vision, cold enough to suck the air from the room and turn it all to pure fire, or freeze it into ice. Did she have the visions too? Was she not Arya in the same way that Bran hadn’t been Bran – lost to the trees and the children? Had she died too?

No, she had been human enough in the Windwyrm. She wasn’t dead yet. But if they let her go to King’s Landing…

“I’m coming with you,” Arya said. “You know that.” Her eyes remained on Jon. They never moved, stagnant as a corpse’s stare.

Don’t let her, Sansa thought. And then, some other side to her screamed back, Would you rather her stay like you did?

Jon wasn’t nearly as conflicted. “I don’t know that. Because you’re staying here where it’s safe.”

“You’re hurt,” she said, gesturing to the bruises on his face. “Your leg’s bad, and his head—” She pointed to Tyrion, and then to Beric, who shifted to hide his wound. “—and his hand. You’re taking them.”

“I’m not,” Jon said.

Ser Beric seemed to disagree. He rose to his feet, swinging his mutilated hand behind his back and dropping his left on the table. Golden pieces shook and fell from the table with every move. They always tended to lately.

But, before he could speak, Tyrion did for him. He was stood on his chair, as tall as any of them with its height, and he stared at Jon from the man’s own level. “Lord Beric intends to join us in the battle, and I, for one, am of mind to let him.”

Jon’s brows furrowed. “He’s got one hand.”

“So does my brother,” Tyrion said, as his eyes went to Arya. “Didn’t stop him from fighting.”

“He didn’t,” Jon said.

Arya didn’t move. Not a muscle. Tyrion still stared.

“The Lord of Light brought me back six times,” Beric argued. He seemed prepared to say more – more likely than not, about the scars on Jon’s chest – but he held his tongue, and said, instead, “He did not do it so I might die a coward.”

Jon could not have looked more distraught if the gods themselves came to tell him he’d been born a Lannister of the Rock. “I’m sure he didn’t—”

“And I didn’t come all the way here to be left behind,” Arya added, unhelpfully. Even Beric frowned at that.

“Arya—”

“I can fight.” She paused, eyes glazed and body tense, before she blinked the milk from her eyes and said, “I have to fight.”

“You have to now?” Mormont said, but even he seemed to be considering it. He thinks her to be an
assassin. Of course, he would want her to die there.

“I’ve tried running,” she told Jon, quietly, as if the young bear hadn’t spoken. In the silence, her voice carried. “Running gets people killed.”

“Not you,” Jon said, just as quietly.

Arya’s hand fell to her side as she muttered something unheard. Somewhere in the castle, a bird called for her, and her words were drowned out by the screech. She tilted her head, and said, “If I die there, I die here too. Sooner there, but I still die. I have a valyrian steel sword; I know how to use it. I know King’s Landing. If I have to fight and die or stay and starve, I’ll die with honor, like Father. I’ll die a Stark of Winterfell. Arya Stark of Winterfell.” She whispered the name like a prayer to the gods.

*Does she still hold the old gods?* Sansa didn’t know. *I used to hold the Seven, but she took Father’s gods. I was a stupid northern girl playing at being of the south. And now I’ve taken his, and I know nothing of her.*

“Winterfell’s gone,” Lord Hunter told her, kindly. “Like the Eyrie, Longbow Hall, and all the rest of them. Can’t be a Stark of Winterfell without Winterfell.”

“Can’t be a pack if the wolves are split, either,” Arya said, quickly. “You in King’s Landing. Sansa and I here, Jon. The lone wolf dies.”

*But the pack survives,* Sansa remembered. Her throat was as dry as sand.

Their family hadn’t been whole in Winterfell. Not if Arya lived elsewhere. Not if she wandered the world alone, while the rest of them fought and died. They hadn’t been whole in the Eyrie, either. They might never be whole again.

“I can fight,” Arya said again. Even with her face as blank as the frozen castle walls, the willfulness remained. *Wolf’s blood,* Father called it once, and Sansa believed it. It was Stark blood that ran through their veins, and that same wolfish determination that had kept them all alive through years of war and pain.

Bran hadn’t had the wolf’s blood; not in the end, when his eyes had been lifeless and the Walkers cut him down. His eyes were white even in death. Sansa could see it from the ground, from above, from the clouds that hung like nooses from the sky. He’d died empty.

But where Bran denied himself, his name, and denounced his title, the rest of them didn’t. They were Starks. Starks of Winterfell, together and alive.

*The lone wolf dies.*

Tyrion caught Sansa’s eyes and smiled, but when he spoke, it was to her sister. “If you’re such a fighter, Lady Arya, why not prove it?”

Jon looked ready to protest, but Arya only frowned. “What?”

“I haven’t seen a good melee in years, and it’s been awfully trite lately,” the dwarf explained. Sansa had to smother a smile. Jon might not have known – he was hardly versed in Tyrion’s games – but Arya seemed to have an idea. She stared, disbelieving at Sansa’s once-husband, before the corner of her lip twisted. It was the closest thing to a real smile her sister had worn since their reunion.
“I’m not fighting my sister!” Jon cried.

Arya only smiled still. “Yes, you are.”

Mormont’s whispering grew a thousand times louder, until he was voicing them aloud for all to hear, but the Dragon Queen did not say a word. She watched them all quietly and warily, as carefully she had since Jon convinced her to send her dragon to the war once more. Sansa had never been more grateful.

Surely, surely, she would approve. They needed Arya, and they had to know that. Sansa wasn’t even sure why she did, but, as the raven screeched overhead, she knew it was so. Every Stark had to play their role to survive this war. Robb had made his mistakes, but his mistakes had made the rest of them stronger. Rickon had brought them together again. Bran had given them knowledge, and machinated a million different plans that hadn’t come to be. Jon had led them forward and slain a fallen dragon. Sansa had rallied the North and reclaimed their home. Arya had a role of her own. I know it. The lone wolf dies.

That day, with a sword in her hand, they found it.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, sorry to the non-Arya fans. I really didn't intend to make this thing too Arya heavy, but she's just so much fun to write, and all the other characters have at least interacted before. In this canon, everyone Arya's interacting with hasn't seen her in years.

Basically, what I'm saying is be thankful the Hound and Brienne are dead, cause that cut back on some cold reunions.

Anyway, next time, we're checking in on Jon Snow for a nice welcome homecoming with his sis… haha, no they're Starks. Nice homecoming. Pft.
Chapter Eighteen: Unbalanced

Dragonstone

Jon Snow

The room was as dim as it was empty. It had once been a child’s chambers, though the bed had been pulled away and the dressers burned to keep the planning room from freezing over. Most of the things in this castle had already been burned, and the rest were still to come. A few banners hung from the walls – some golden with a crowned black stag, those most of them were gone long before Jon had arrived, and others black with a red dragon. Those, Dany refused to burn, and Jon hadn’t minded enough to contest her.

Now, though, as a single torch lit the room, and as the dragon’s heads danced and flickered with the flames, he wished they’d burned them all. If only to stop those beady white eyes from following him everywhere he went.

He would have preferred to have done this in the yard, or at least somewhere brighter, but the world had fallen too dark, the yard was covered in more snow than he could reasonably trudge through, and the cold was bitter enough to freeze his lungs.

So it was that his sister stood across from him, toying with her Needle aimlessly as she waited for him to ready himself. She didn’t seem nervous in the slightest, toying with her blade as another woman might a quill.

His allies, too, watched from the corners. Dany and Jorah, Sansa and Tyrion, Lord Harlan and Lord Dondarrion, even the Stark bannermen, the unsullied soldiers, and Gendry the smith. Only the Eyrie’s children had been sent away, and, even so, some of their ears were pressed to the door, waiting eagerly to hear the sounds of battle.

They had no tourney swords – all had been burnt before the Battle of the Eyrie had even begun – and, while Jon proposed using blunted steel, Gendry hadn’t had the steel to forge them with, and they couldn’t risk blunting good steel. He’d even tried dragonglass, but the material was too brittle for a spar. Even had it worked, Arya had insisted they fight with real steel. Had insisted that he use Longclaw, until he reminded her that Longclaw was valyrian steel, and Needle would shatter as soon as the two blades touched. Even so, she had only relented to the extent that he could use Lord Dondarrion’s steel sword.

Lightbringer was far heavier than his own sword, and much larger too. It was as heavy as the wooden swords Ser Rodrick had in the yard when he was a boy too small to carry them, or the tourney swords he’d used in the yard in Castle Black. This blade was balanced better than they were, of course, but it was no more comfortable in his hands.

And as he swung it to test that balance, Arya had a smile sprawled across her face. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I won’t cut you.”
“That’s not what I’m worried about, little sister.”

Jorah Mormont seemed equally as worried. For the first time in a long while, instead of whispering into Dany’s ear, he was speaking for all the world to hear. “This is a mistake, Snow!”

The unsullied looked to agree with him. Two spears butts slammed against the ground, and two sets of eyes watched Arya with undisguised concern. Neither said a word, but they didn’t need to. All in the room knew well enough. Even Gendry looked concerned.

Do they think I’ll hurt her? Jon thought. Or is the other way around? They think she’s a Faceless Man. He clenched his fists. They’re wrong.

“I don’t want to do this,” he told her.

“Good,” she said. She spun the sword back into its sheath. “I suppose I’ll be joining you in King’s Landing then.”

He narrowed his eyes. Even with another man’s sword, he was a better fighter than most every man on the Wall, and every man on the Wall had trained for moons undying. I’ll end this quickly. “Draw your sword, sister.”

She smiled, and did so. Needle spun in her left hand, like a stick instead of a blade. He’d warned her once that it was a sword, not a toy, but Arya had never learned to listen to anyone, even him. He smiled in spite of himself. Maybe she hadn’t changed as much as he thought.

“You’re not even using the right hand,” he told her.

She just laughed. “We’ll see.”

He waited for his sister to make a move, but she neglected to. She simply shifted, shielding her sword behind her shoulders. That wasn’t safe. She wouldn’t be able to adjust quickly enough.

He swung at her with the flat of his blade. It cut through open air, and he stumbled, unbalanced by the sheer weight of his sword. By the time he recovered, there was a needle at his throat.

I had mine at hers once too, he thought, and hated himself for it.

His sister stared down at him from the other end of the blade. This time, her smile was as genuine as it was when she was a child. Warm and happy, like she’d always been around him. She’d smiled just as happily the day he’d given her that sword.

The smith whistled, and one of the Stark men clouted him upside the ear for it. He couldn’t tell which, but he heard the yelp well enough.

“Was that enough for you?” Arya asked him, softly.

“Beginner’s luck,” he grunted.

She drew back, and the sword went back behind her shoulders. She hadn’t wiped the grin away, though. It seemed as sharp as her sword.

This time, as he swung, he was more careful not to topple over. Instead, he moved slowly. A jab to the front, only to watch her step back. A cut left, only for her to dodge right. He tried to predict where she would move, tried to watch her ever-shifting feet, but in the darkness, it was impossible. The torches had been set too high, and their feet were entrenched in darkness.
She parried one of his blows, and then another. Jon had to wonder in amazement as the thin blade did not shatter. Mikken had always done his work well, but he hadn’t expected a child’s sword to last her a decade.

This match lasted longer, but it ended the same way: his sword pointed down, hers at his chest.

It was not the first blade that had been at his chest, nor the second, or the third, or the first. The thought made him pull away, feet scrambling before he had even told them where to go. He found himself across the room, panting and staring at his little sister – his sister who could wield a sword, who knew which end to stick it with even if he’d never been there to truly show her. *I should have been there,* he thought, awfully. *You shouldn’t have had to learn.*

No one remarked this time. Only Arya, smiling still, and setting her Needle back behind her back. “It seems I’ve a lot of luck.”

“Don’t start bragging yet,” Tyrion Lannister warned her. He seemed a bit too wary, if truth be told.

Ser Jorah was muttering again, while his queen watched Arya with wide eyes. She didn’t seem surprised, though. None of the unsullied did either, or any of the Stark bannermen. Sansa did, though, and Lord Hunter, and even Lord Beric, who stared as if Jon’s sister had seven heads. He thought that if he prodded them, they would fall like statues.

To the surprise of all, it was Gendry who spoke next. “Where did you-”

But Arya was quicker. Her eyes were on Jon as she said, “I practiced every day. Just like you told me.”

“I can tell,” he said, stupidly.

“And suddenly, the years bled away and they were kids again. The sword in his hand was only a stick. Arya was Robb or Theon, or maybe even Pyp the black brother, for her smile matched his well. Suddenly, the onlookers were Night’s Watchmen or the smallfolk of Winterfell, and Sansa was Sansa, and Dany was Ser Rodrick, ready to scuff him upside the head if he kept leaving that opening at his right hip.

This spar went longer. Thankfully, this time, Jon knew just how quick she was, and it made all the difference. He watched her hips to see where she would dart, and to see when she would cut or jab. He blocked a few, parried others, and made lunges of his own only when she left him an opening. Those chances came often enough, but, with Lightbringer, he hadn’t the speed to take them.

He lashed out at her side, and she side-stepped. All the while, he feigned a lower blow with his boot, opening a hole in his defenses on his side. She charged for it. This time, she wasn’t prepared. His sword caught her wrist, and her own blade flew from her hand, toppling over to the smith in the corner.

Her eyes slammed open, as Jon’s foot swept behind her leg. She toppled over, and, while she caught herself before she hit the ground, Jon levied his blade before her throat. *We let her prove it,* he thought, but he blinked the pain away. He was still overbalanced, and still squinting to see through the darkness, but he’d won.
“Yield?”

She didn’t stop smiling, even as she yielded. He pulled her to her feet, and she gave him an appraising grin. “You’re good,” she told him. “Better than I remember.”

Even knowing what this spar would cost them both, he still couldn’t help but grin. “You’re not the only one who’s trained every day.”

“Suppose I’m fit for fighting then.” She spoke quietly, the words meant for his ears and his ears alone. Even so, he was sure that everyone in the room heard. It had fallen quiet as soon as her back had struck the ground – though Tyrion’s laughter rang for a second more.

His smile slipped. “I didn’t say that.”

Hers did too. “You’d lose a fighter with valyrian steel?”

“You weren’t fighting with valyrian steel.” He nodded at the sword on her hip. “Do you know how to use that thing? It’s heavier than Needle.” As heavy to her as Beric’s sword was to him, he was sure.

In turn, she nodded to Longclaw. “You could always teach me.”

“We’ve a fortnight before the battle. At most.”

She shrugged. “I’ve learned quicker before.”

“Aye,” he said. “Doesn’t mean you should come.”

“Doesn’t mean I shouldn’t either.”

“You could die,” he said, though he knew already that this was a lost cause. She would ignore him. She always did when answers didn’t suit her. He’d overheard her mother once, talking to her septa about her willfulness. Whatever she was denied became her heart’s desire. Whatever she desired, she worked for until it was hers. She’d done it with archery, and now she’d done it with swordplay. She’d even done it with Jon, Sansa, and the whole lot of them. Fought her way back home, even when home was a pile of rubble.

If he said no to her now, after she’d shown this to every man and woman in the castle, what would that say to them? If he wasn’t willing to let her fight, how could he ask them to?

“When the snow falls, and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. That’s what Father told me,” she said. “Before our pack split.”

_Before he died_, Jon heard, and his heart filled with grief and guilt.

He didn’t want to answer her. He couldn’t deny her this, couldn’t say no when the world was bearing down on their shoulders. Sometimes, it seemed as if the gods were intent to torment him. _Not today_, he thought. _Find someone else. I’ll do it for you._

“When the snow falls, and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. That’s what Father told me,” she said. “Before our pack split.”

“Dany,” he said, finally looking to his queen. She looked mildly sick, and it only grew worse as he caught her eye, “what say our queen?”

Mormont’s whispering grew substantially louder, until even Jon could hear his suggestions. “-assassin. _This could be a trick_, khaleesi, _a gambit_. You trusted the witch in Essos, will you trust the witch in your midst now?”
To her credit, Arya said nothing in response. She simply let her smile slip, until that face-
emotionless mask had shielded her face once again. Her face, Jon knew, and only hers. Mormont was mistaken. He often seemed to be.

Dany held up a hand, silencing her advisor before he could go any further. Her gaze was on Arya
now, and it did not look likely to break anytime soon.

“Do you swear before the eyes of gods and men to defend the realms of men,” the Queen asked
her. She still looked sickly – her skin pale and lifeless – but stubborn and firm as she had always
been. “To not harm any in this party, any standing here today?”

Arya didn’t twitch. “If I wanted any of you dead, you’d have been already.”

“Arya!” Sansa hissed again, though Jon could see the amusement on her face when he looked back
to her.

_The North is gone_, he wanted to tell her. _You don’t have to hate her now._

He held his tongue. He hadn’t a mind for these sorts of politics any more than Sansa had a mind
for fighting, or Bran had a mind for polite decorum. He’d done enough fighting for that day. Gods,
he’d had enough for a lifetime.

Daenerys seemed to have as well, if the sigh that rippled through her was anything to go by. “You
may come,” she said. “But if you betray me-”

“Dragonfire, I know,” Arya said. Her expression hadn’t changed, yet somehow, she still looked
pleased with herself.

The room fell to an uneasy silence, broken only by Lord Harlan’s whispers to Lord Beric, and Ser
Beric’s finger tapping against his side. At time, he thought he heard Gendry’s breathing, heavy and
frantic, but that was neither here nor there.

“I will go as well,” Ser Beric proclaimed. He did not wait for Dany’s approval, nor did Jon expect
him to. From what he’d heard beyond the wall, the knight and his men were about as eager to
kneel as the free folk were.

“So be it,” Dany said, before Jon could protest. “It is not the place of queens and lords to say
whether men must stay or go.” Her mouth twisted, and she looked to Tyrion, who hovered against
a wall with a self-satisfied smile plastered across his face. “I tried that in Winterfell. Too many
died because of it, and I learn my lessons well.”

Tyrion pushed off of the wall, then, rubbing his hands together first, and then into his greasy hair.
“Well, all that done with, ought we break for lunch? I, for one, am always _famished_ after a good
fight.”

Lord Harlan grunted. “When have you ever fought?”

“I’ve fought more than any Lord of the Vale has, I can promise you that. Oh, wait, haven’t I heard
you’re the last of them? Fascinating, isn’t it?”

Lord Harlan’s spine straightened so quickly, Jon could have sworn he heard it snap. “I do not need
some dwarf.”

“That is quite enough, Lord Hunter, Tyrion,” Dany – or, rather, the Queen – shouted. This was not
the Dany that Jon lay with, or the Dany he had found by her dragons’ sides. Gone was the pale
pallor of her skin, and the fingers that trembled when she thought of the night that had come upon them. This was the queen who had conquered whole chunks of Essos, and was soon to conquer all seven kingdoms, if they were lucky enough to have her. This was a woman with a will sharper than steel and a ferocity that could level mountains. This was a warrior in woman’s skin, a free folk from the East. Ygritte would have loved her.

“As you wish, your grace,” Tyrion answered, quickly, before he fled the room. The Starks followed him, and the unsullied when Daenerys gave them leave. Sansa stayed behind, with Arya, and Gendry hovered too, though Jon could hardly say why. He might have gone to ask, but a hand fell on his shoulder before he could.

Daenerys – Dany, now that the queen had fled her again – smiled at him. “I always thought you were more graceful than that.”

He frowned. “I am graceful.”

“As a wolf with three legs.”

“It’s the sword,” he told her. “It’s heavier than I’m used to.”

She hummed. “Bigger too, is it?”

“It is,” he hastily agreed. He’d always liked bastard swords better than longswords. There might have been less reach to them, but they never overbalanced him, and the weight was always less. He could move quicker, easier. He told her that, and it just made his queen grin.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose the length doesn’t matter, if you use your own well enough.”

“Aye,” Jon said. “I knew a man on the Wall once who wouldn’t use more than a dagger. Killed a dozen of the free folk before they took him down.”

“Quite the man,” she said.

“Never rode a dragon, though.”

Dany hummed. “I suppose you do have that over him, though little else, I imagine,” She smiled, even as she teased him. “Come, I must retire. You can tell his story in my solar.”

“Retire? It’s hardly noon.”

“Who can tell without a sun?” she said, softly. “For all we know, it could be dusk, or perhaps you may have fought through the night.”

She led him from the room, before he could spare a second glance at her bannermen or his sisters. To some extent, that saddened him, but to another, it was a relief. He loved Dany nearly as much as his family, nearly as much as he’d loved a girl with fire in her hair and an endless array of words on her tongue.

They weren’t much alike, Dany and Ygritte. In truth, Ygritte reminded him more of the Arya that had been, and Dany more of the Arya that was now, or perhaps some mix of the Arya of now and the Sansa of Winterfell, before the castle froze. Still, they shared some things, if not all. They were both willful, both powerful, and both willing to quiet him quickly if he dared say something stupid.

I’ve a type, he realized with horror. This seemed an awfully uncomfortable time to realize it.
His queen did, in fact, lead him to her solar, though they hardly made it inside before she was stripping the clothes from his shoulders. He hadn’t even given Beric his sword back, he realized, and he did his best to throw it in the corner, where he knew it wouldn’t be disturbed.

The fire was already going when they arrived, thankfully. It was the only reason they didn’t freeze, standing in the midst of a frozen world without even their smallclothes.

*There’s two things to keep you warm,* he thought, and all thoughts of chill fled him.

Her lips pressed against his, and suddenly, winter had only lasted a year, and the warmth of summer was bearing down on him again. He clung to her – this dragon who had delivered him back to a world that made sense – and, for the first time in a long while, he didn’t worry about the war, or his sisters, or his father’s House, or his duty.

Night had come, and his watch had ended.

And in the morn, it began again, with the beat of a dragon’s wings.

Chapter End Notes

A/N- Before anyone gets the wrong idea, Arya is absolutely not a better fighter than Jon. I'll get more into that in later Arya chapters, but Arya only won twice (out of three matches) because she had literally every advantage possible.

1) He was facing a fighting style he'd never seen

2) it was dark

3) Jon had a sword he wasn't comfortable with

4) Arya was comfortable with hers

Jon is an extremely accomplished and skilled swordsman, and Arya's way more comfortable with a staff than she is a sword. I made this change from the show canon, because it makes absolutely no sense that Arya can lose to Thoros of Myr in a split second, and then kick Brienne's ass when her last experience sword training was with Syrio Forel back in season 1.

Anyway, next chapter we'll be visiting Dany's POV, because it's time for some plot development!
That night, as every night since the days before that fateful pyre, Daenerys dreamt of dragons.

She dreamt of Viserion, blue-eyed and white-scaled, cutting down a wall of ice with flames brighter than stars. She dreamt of Rhaegal, wounded and bleeding bronze blood all across the realm. She dreamt of Drogon most of all, his great black wings shadowing a frozen lake and letting loose a stream of discolored fire. She was on his back, standing on one of his spines and staring over his shoulder at the world below. For once, the winds did not buffet her. No, instead, they helped her stand, cradled her, and held her in place as she watched.

There, by the shore, by a great stone statue of some fallen king, a sword burned green against the lake. There, on the river, a wolf dragged a corpse across the ice. Whether it was the remains of a pup or a cat, Dany could hardly say. In her dreams, the world was filled with smoke and darkness and fog, and she could hardly see through any of it.

She saw a deer sprinting across the shore, and she saw a great grey dragon following close behind. The deer was just as quick as the dragon, but neither could outpace lightning, and, as it struck, the ice crumbled, and the corpse and wolf alike were dragged beneath the depths.

She slipped into another dream, soon after, but all she saw was a nine-spoked wheel spinning on and on. All nine spokes were cracked, but still, it moved. She watched the wheel for hours undying, and grew no closer to understanding why.

It wasn’t a restful sleep by any measure. In truth, she hadn’t had a peaceful hour since the night before Winterfell, since all the world had gone to ice. She had hoped having Jon sleeping at her side would keep the dreams away, but even that hadn’t made a difference.

Still, it was nice to wake beside him, even if the night hadn’t been one to celebrate.

He woke quickly, as he always did. A life beyond the Wall, he’d said, makes you sleep lighter. She didn’t believe him. She spent a lifetime with the dothraki, and she could sleep through anything.

He hadn’t slept long, she knew, if he’d slept at all. There was a darkness under his eyes, as thick as the black blanket hanging over the skies. She would have pressed him, but she knew he would only buffet her attempts. They were off to war that day. It took a cold man to sleep soundly in the face of that.

They did not go to the kitchens that morning, nor to the chamber with the Painted Table. No, all planning was done in this castle. If she saw it again, it would be a monument to her victory. She would return with her armies, innocents, and a sea of people scrambling to celebrate.
Her every step was slow and halted. Her tattered boots scraped the slippery stones with every shaken step. She doubted she would see this place again. She doubted she would ever know the home of the Targaryens again.

They were among the first out in the snow, sleepless as she was. There were still hours until their journey, and many more before they reached the city without a queen. The rest of the castle still had time to eat and sleep and drink until the dragon’s roar carried them away.

Some of the children had gathered already to see them off, eager as could be to see the dragons fly again. Ser Beric Dondarrion had already arrived, and he had taken care to keep them in safety from her sons. Tyrion was with him, too, though he hardly ever cared if the children played. He was sitting before a fire, beside the Lady Stark, speaking quietly with her as Jon and Dany approached. Likely there to send them off. A final farewell, perhaps. Tyrion seemed the sentimental sort, though Lady Sansa certainly didn’t.

The rest were missing. Jorah, asleep still; the man slept like the bear he was. Lady Arya, Lord Harlan, Gendry, the unsullied, and the Stark bannermen were still inside somewhere. If Dany listened closely, she could hear voices coming from the Sea Dragon’s Tower. The Starks, in all likelihood. The unsullied wouldn’t be nearly so loud, and, if left unchecked, Lord Harlan often slept until noon, she found. The Starks, then. They had been a loud few on the road, at least until Jorah’s revelation.

In truth, she misliked the thought of travelling with the Stark girl. Jorah’s constant whispers only made those worries sharper. A Faceless Man journeying with them – again – could hardly be considered a comforting presence. Dany had no love for assassins. They were Usurper’s men, honorless and cruel. In truth, if she could send the girl off to fight the Walkers alone, she would be all the happier for it, and mayhaps Jorah would cease his endless arguing.

But the girl was no simple assassin to be sent to the dragon’s flame, and this was not the sort of time to be casting aside help. She could no more bring herself to kill Jon’s sister than she could to kill Jorah or Tyrion. The girl was the blood of her blood, whether it pleased her or not.

Yet, blood of her blood or not, she did not have to treat with the girl. So, when she arrived an hour later, the assassin found companionship with her siblings, rather than the Mother of Dragons. That suited them both well enough. Dany had her dragons to tend to, after all.

In the end, there wasn’t a choice to be made between the dragons. Rhaegal’s wound still hadn’t closed, while most of Drogon’s had at least scabbed. Forcing Rhaegal to fly with an injury of that degree would only get him killed. She needn’t to take the risk. Not now, when every other choice she made had forced such a heavy price.

She trudged through the snows to whisper her goodbyes to Rhaegal. Solemn words, not meant for the ears of the rest. Words in High Valyrian. And, while once she might have spoken them aloud for all the world to hear, she kept her words hushed. The littlest Stark was only a few feet away, by the fire. If what Jorah said of her people was true, Dany doubted there was a language the Faceless Men didn’t know.

“I will return,” she promised her dragon. It was a promise made to be broken. “Drogon and I will crush these snow creatures. When I return, you will be healed.”

Drogon’s massive head twitched at the sound of his name, though he gave no other sign that he heard. He had been more restful of late, ever since the wights had savaged him in the snows. She often wondered how he would survive this journey. No, feared. She often feared.
“I will return to you a queen,” she swore. “And I will bring Jon Snow with me.”

It was Rhaegal’s turn to react now. He let loose a lifeless grumble. Dany stroked his scales to soothe him. Even after all these years, she could not say if he felt her hand.

Jon settled beside her, a frown pressed into his face. Though he did not speak her mother tongue, he whispered his own message all the same. “I’ll bring her home to you,” he swore. “Make sure not to eat any of the children, won’t you?”

Rhaegal grumbled, and Dany had to smother a laugh. It was a bad time to be laughing, surely, but Jon always had a way to warm her when she most needed to be cold.

She was so enraptured by her own amusement that she did not notice the Lord Lannister and the Lady Stark approaching. Tyrion stood a few feet away, reserved as he always was around her. Still, his voice was strong as ever, as he said, “It is time for us all to move, your grace.”

Jon rose first, and it was his hand that helped pull Dany to her feet. He stood strong, untampered by the chill in the air, unlike her. The fire in her veins made this weather unbearable, while the ice in his thrived. For a moment, she could almost see the old winter kings in those Stark grey eyes, but once she had risen, there was only Jon.

He might have worn a crown, if not for Aegon and his sisters, she remembered. It would have suited him. Mayhaps she would be the one to return it to him, once the war was done and peace was won.

“Are you coming, too?” Jon asked Tyrion. “Don’t think I’ve another spar in me. Lord Beric’s sword’s a heavy one, and I didn’t bring it with me.”

“I am, I’m afraid,” Tyrion said, and then quickly added, “but no need to spar. Like most, I assume, I would rather die in the company of a friend or two than languishing away in starvation. There’s a town I saw on the table near King’s Landing. If you would be kind enough to leave us there—”

“Us?” Dany asked. “Does that include Ser Beric?”

“No,” said Lady Stark. “I have every indication that Lord Beric wishes to fight. I’ll be the one joining Tyrion.”

Jon’s eyes went wide. “Sansa—”

“I hid twice,” Sansa snapped. “Once in Winterfell, and once in the Eyrie. Neither ended well, if you would be so kind to remember. I will not hide again.”

“Sansa, this is war,” Jon strained. “It’s not a game. You’re not hiding. It’s war. If you’re found – if you’re there…”

She wouldn’t hear it. “If I am found, the war is already lost, Jon,” She stepped towards him, one hand reaching out for him, but never touching. “It is enough that I will die in the South. I will not die leagues away from the shores of Westeros.”

Jon looked ready to protest once more, but Dany raised a hand to silence him. “I said yesterday that it is not the place of kings and queen to decide where men and women should go. I stand by that decree. You may join us, Lady Sansa, and any else who wishes, but should you slow us—”

“I will not,” Lady Stark swore. And, though Dany had little love for either of Jon’s sisters, she appreciated the sheer determination in her voice.
“It is done,” Dany said.

They did not stay on solid ground much longer. She felt all the better for it.

This time, Jon did not give any mighty speech before they took to the air, and Dany did not either. All who had joined them knew the war they would face, and the price they might pay. They knew just as well the cost of losing this fight. There was no need to rally them yet, or explain simple truths. There would be speeches before the battle, and, if they were lucky, there would be speeches after. There would be many speeches by many men to many, many more. But not now. Now, they flew. She was ever thankful for the chance.

Some days, flying was the only thing that could keep her from losing her mind. From shouting all her loves and fears and hates and sorrows for all the world to hear. It was all that kept her from shattering under the weight of some unseen crown, as the whole of the realm came to swallow her whole, as creatures of ice came to slay them all.

_I am the blood of the dragon_, she thought. _This is what I was made for._

Some days, she thought that Jon was the same. His smile was never quite so radiant as when he sat between a dragon’s wings, and it was never so sweet to see the worry bleed from his eyes as they took to the skies. To see the wind billowing through his hair as involuntary whispers of delight escaped his lips.

They were thousands of leagues from a house with a red door, and yet Dany had never felt so at home. His front was flush against her back, his smile pressed into her neck. Drogo come again, only gentler, kinder. The blood of her blood, reborn into a softer soul.

The riders behind him were not nearly as comfortable as they. When she looked to them, all were varying shades of pale and white, but thankfully, none yet green. There was still time before then.

It would come, though. She knew that well. It always did.

Somehow, they made it to Driftmark before their first man lost his stomach. It came as soon as they settled, of course. First, it was Tyrion. Then, Lady Stark. Then, Rodrick, and only then did Gendry and Jorah give in to the jerking beats of Drogon’s wings and the spray that left their mouths.

Their arrival was welcomed by a shift from rain to hail. The black sky, however, neglected to shift. Dany could not say if it was the next day or the same. In this darkness, night and day were the same, and each day bled into the next without care for the living and their cycles.

While the rest of the riders emptied their bellies, Arya Stark and Jon set about collecting wood. They needn’t have bothered. Drogon set fire to a tree before the assassin could amass more than a handful. She’d dropped them then – out of fright more than anything else – but she’d recovered soon after, and returned to her senseless foraging, while her brother went to Dany’s side.

By the time all of his riders had recovered, Drogon had settled beside the burning tree. His flames had cleared the area of snow and ice alike, and, so, the rest met again his side, each greener than the rest. Dany settled beside them, and Jon beside her. They broke their fast on salted meats and dried fruits. Dany did not care to ask what sort of meats they were. She didn’t think she would like the answer.

There was no ale to be had, nor wine, but the Stark men were jovial enough all the same. As they had on their frequent rests during flight to Dragonstone, they japed and sang while the rest warmed
their palms beside the flames. For a moment, as Rodrick shared some story of his days fighting
behind the Young Wolf of Winterfell, she thought they might have been back there again.
Wandering the Riverlands while they flew on the back of an injured dragon. The sole survivors of
a world gone cold.

The illusion was shattered when she felt Jon’s hand on her shoulder, and then when she saw Arya
Stark sulking by her lonesome near a pile of burning branches. The Arya she had known on the
road would have been among them, japing and jawing with the best of them.

A wealth of guilt blossomed in her chest - the same sort she had felt after she had heard tell of Ser
Beric’s mutilation, or the wound on Tyrion’s scalp. This was somehow even worse. A promise
broken. A betrayal.

*She is an assassin,* she reminded herself. She couldn’t dwell on this. Assassins were evil creatures,
filled with cruelty and treason in place of blood and bones. If she pitied this one, what of the rest?
How long must she mourn the others she had slain? Did they all have families as she did? Did she
steal husbands and sons, as they had stolen her own? *If I look back I am lost.*

But she was already lost, and she had never looked. She had been lost since Jon Snow arrived at
her home and urged her to fight another realm’s wars. She had been lost since Winterfell, and all
those she had- No. *If I look back, I am lost. I am lost. I am lost. I am lost.*

She did not hear what the Northmen said next, but she did hear Jon. He was so close it was all she
could hear, besides Drogon’s earth-shaking snores.

“Aye,” he said, in answer to some forgotten jape. “It was cold, to be sure, but I had my furs.”

“And your friend had his fat!” Branden laughed.

Jon’s face twitched, but did not fall. “He has more furs than me. Maester Aemon’s rooms were
always coldest. He used to say it’s why he lived so long.”

Dany froze. Her hand, which had been slowly petting at Drogon’s scales stilled over his claw. She
clenched her fist, and her pale knuckles somehow grew even whiter than the snow that had settled
upon them.

“Maester Aemon?” she asked. She must have been blessed by the old gods and the new, for,
somehow, she managed to keep her voice from breaking.

Jon had the grace to look shamefaced. He must have realized sooner than any of them, but, as soon
as they looked to him, they knew. She could see it in their faces. Some pity, some guilt, some
indifference that stung deeper than all the rest.

*I am not the only one who’s lost them all,* she reminded herself. *I am one of many now.*

“Aye,” Jon said, softly. His voice was pitied, too. Part of her hated him for it, but the rest just
ached. “He was the maester at Castle Black. They wanted to make him king over his brother, he
said, so he took the black and left his name behind.”

Her heart hammered at her chest. “Is he-”

“No,” he muttered. “He was an old man. A good man. Lived a long life, he did. A dutiful one.”

She might have been saddened by the news once, when she was a little girl with fear in her heart
and loss biting at her like a lion at a chick. But Daenerys Targaryen had seen her share of death,
and it cut no deeper than the thorns of a rose.

She swallowed her grief, and said, “You knew him well?”

“Aye, as well as any man could hope to. He saved my life, once. More than once. It was his vote that make me Lord Commander, you know.”

Jorah sucked in a breath and fled from her side, but Dany only smiled. “Really?”

“Aye. Sam had this whole plan, but it all fell to a tie. We vote in the Night’s Watch, you see. The Lord Commander’s only chosen when two thirds of the Watch picks. I was a single vote from the seat, and we’d thought the night lost, but then there was our maester. We’d forgotten, all of us. He hadn’t voted before. Hadn’t wanted to take part. But he planted his vote, and there I was. A man of no more than nine and ten, Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch.”

“He made a good choice.”

“Can’t say I agree,” he said.

“I am sure you did a fine job.”

The rest of the group was splitting off, she noticed. The Stark men together with Jorah and the unsullied. Dany and Jon, Lady Stark with Tyrion and Lord Hunter, and Gendry has gone to sit by Arya, who seemed uncharacteristically uncomfortable. Dany might have watched them longer, but Jon’s smile caught her eyes and dragged them back.

“‘Fine’,” he repeated, spitefully. “Aye, that’s why they-” His eyes went to his assassin sister, and his tongue stilled. He clenched his right hand and loosed it as soon as he’d made a fist. “That’s why I’m here.”

She doesn’t know, Dany realized. Not of the scars on his chest, or the betrayal on the Wall.

“You should tell her,” she told him. *If only for your own peace of mind.*

“Should I?” he scoffed. “I can’t put this on her. There’s enough already.”

“She would want to know.”

“She wouldn’t believe it.”

She didn’t know why she was pushing, but Dany drove forth with all her strength. “In magic? She can wear the faces of-”

“Oh, not this again,” he groaned. He rose to his feet, sure to storm off, but Dany grabbed his wrist before he could.

“Stay,” she told him.

He stared for a little more than a second, his mouth hung open and his eyes soft and brooding. It went on long enough that she thought he might actually listen. That he might kneel at her side and take her advice as he always did. Then, he shook his wrist free and went to his sister’s side. Not to tell his story, no, but just to sit and gaze at her flames. She seemed surprised to see him, but welcomed him far more warmly than she had the smith.

She stared after him until her own man came to join her. Her sworn sword, her loyal bear, her man of whispers and fear.
“The assassin draws in stag and wolf alike,” Jorah whispered. Somewhere, a raven screeched into the night, shrill as the clang of sword on stone.

“Do Faceless Men always hope to draw a crowd?” She did not whisper as he did, though she did keep her voice low. There was no need for the Stark girl to overhear, even if she did not mean the girl any harm. And, in truth, she didn’t. She would leave the girl be until the war was done.

Then… She didn’t know what she would do then.

“They will do anything for a target,” Jorah explained. “A target which may be you or him, khaleesi. They can appear as ladies or peasants, farmers or queens-”

“It seems she is only queen of the bastards then. The rest appear afraid.”

“Only because she was caught.”

Dany rose. “Not tonight, ser. I fear I’ve grown too tired for plots.”

“Sleep, khaleesi. I will keep watch.”

_And if she means to kill me, I will die regardless_, she thought. But Dany had learned grace as other men learned the sword, and so instead, she said, “Thank you, ser.”

That night, she slept beside a dragon, a broken pack of Northern survivors, unsullied warriors, and an assassin. A decade before, she had slept alone in a featherbed that was too big for her, her brother sleeping in the next room over, while Walkers marched beyond the Wall, as they had been for 8,000 years. And now, she marched to meet them.

_If I look back, I am lost. Back there is the dead; all I’ve loved and all I’ve lost. But now, the dead lie before me, and I march to them._

She rose that morning and rode. And, for the first time in a lifetime, she would not have to look back to see her family again.

Chapter End Notes

And we’re off to war! Finally! (Seriously, they stayed on Dragonstone way longer than I expected).

Next chapter, we’ll be checking in on Gendry from Duskendale, as the gang goes south.
Chapter Twenty: The Songs of Winterfell

Duskendale

Gendry

The dead were more than a week away by the time they reached Duskendale, and they could not have been happier for it. Few of them had slept well in the past few days. Between the bitter cold, the undying hailstorms, and the terrible fear that the dead would march on them while they slept, it was a wonder they had managed more than an hour a night.

There were still some torches blazing in the castle when they arrived, though there was not a man to speak of why. The Queen sent her men scurrying through the entire keep, and none of them had managed to find anything alive between the walls. One of Jon Snow’s men – a man called Branden – claimed the Walkers might have come through already, but Lord Hunter found undisturbed graves north of them, and that had quieted any thoughts of Walkers.

But, while the Queen stressed over the White Walkers, and Jon Snow over King’s Landing, Gendry had other concerns. Namely, the kitchens.

The stores were only half-stocked, but that hardly mattered. They were only staying the night, and that wasn’t even long enough to eat a tenth of it all. Even Hot Pie could have spent a year in this place, and Hot Pie had eaten more of the Brotherhood’s food than the Hound and Arry combined.

Gods, even the food the Rykkers had abandoned was better than the rotted shit on Dragonstone. Though, by the way Arry stared at it, one would never know.

“You know, just because it tastes good doesn’t mean it’ll kill you,” he said, around the bits of apple in his mouth. She’d almost hit him when he first tried to eat it, and now sniffed every one he’d selected, as if her nose and her breath would brush away any bad humours. “I thought you’d like it better, really. Thought all ladies liked their fruits.”

Arry’s face crunched. “I’m sure they do. Just as I’m sure stupid people eat anything they find lying around.”

“It’s fruit.” He took another bite just to prove his point.
“It could be poisoned.”

“Why would they poison fruit? Leftover fruit. They’d have no idea who’d be eating it.”

“You, clearly. Stupid.” Even as she teased, she went on calculating. “The Dragon Queen could be the target. Why else would they have left so soon? They can’t know about the Walkers.”

“Why can’t they?”

“You think the Rykkers believe that the White Walkers are back?”

“You did.”

“Not until I met the Dragon Queen,” she argued. “I was headed North, even after I read a raven.”

“Well, then, you’re stupid.”

“And you’re as gullible as a nine-year-old.”

Gendry shook his head. “How would they even know she was coming?”

The stare she gave him was the same stare she had so often leveled at Hot Pie on the road from Harrenhal. The stupid stare, she’d called it then. Reserved for only the stupidest of the stupid. He might have been offended, if she wasn’t losing her temper over a bleeding apple.

“We’ve been flying on dragonback for days, and the whole of the realm knows about the dragons,” she told him. “If they didn’t know by now, they’d be as dull as a rock.”

“Arry, the whole of the realm is empty. You saw it yourself. Even your wolves have gone.”

But Arry had always been stubborn as steel, and as rough as the worst of them. “Not the wolves,” she told him. “Wolves don’t cower from a fight.”

“Well, the rest of us do. And no one would abandon a castle and half their food to kill one woman.”

Arry shrugged. “Depends on the woman.”

“Is that why you never eat with us? Scared the world’s trying to poison you?”

“I’m not scared,” she told him. She didn’t sputter or shake like she used to. Didn’t even shout at him.

You’ve gotten better, he thought. Anyone else, and you might’ve convinced them.

But Gendry? He rolled his eyes and took another bite. “Speaking of wolves,” he said, before he swallowed. “You still howl in your sleep?”

She didn’t give as much of a reaction as he expected – she rarely did anymore – but even the sigh she did give was enough to make him smile. “I did that here too?”

“Since Harrenhal,” he told her. “Used to think you’d draw wolves. You would’ve, I bet, if the Brotherhood hadn’t found us.”

“The wolves wouldn’t hurt us,” Arry said, so confidently that Gendry almost believed it himself.
“You know, just because you wear them on your shield doesn’t mean the wolves won’t eat you.”

That made her smile. It wasn’t the same smile she shared with him when they were kids, but it was close enough that it didn’t matter. He’d always liked her smile.

“They won’t,” she promised him.

And she’s still just as mad.

His apple finished, he leant forward, reaching for a peach. It tasted sweeter than anything he had ever tasted. Like the candies his mum had stolen for him when he was just a boy, before she died and everything went to shit and hammers. Smith’s hammer, the hightborn had it good. By the time he looked up to Arry again, there were juices dripping onto his face. Arry threw him a handkerchief, and he laughed as he caught it.

He offered her a grin of his own. “Oh, I see. Is that it? All this time I’ve been slaving away over a hot forge, and you’ve been running with the wolves.”

She smiled again, but said nothing. The smile was the only answer he needed. It was a wolf’s grin – all teeth and no humor – like she’d never worn before Harrenhal, but often after. After Jaqen H’ghar and the wishes wasted.

She could get more than three, now. If she had told it right, and he very much trusted that she had, Arry could kill far more than three now. She could probably kill half of Westeros with a chicken bone. And all it had cost was Gendry’s freedom and hers.

He tried to see this girl as the same one he’d found in King’s Landing, and it was a hard thing to imagine. Even ignoring the hair, the growth, and the more… maidenly features, she was changed. She smiled less – when he hadn’t urged her with ale – and the circles under her eyes were darker than ever.

He’d changed, too, he thought. Beric had, too, and Jon Snow, and the Queen. They all had.

Well, Hot Pie hadn’t, but Hot Pie was Hot Pie and that was to be expected.

“I miss it sometimes,” he told her.

“What?”

“The Night’s Watch. Things were easier then.”

She smiled. It didn’t reach her eyes. “Sometimes,” she said, vaguely. “The fights were harder.”

He kicked an upturned wheel of cheese, and it rolled down to the end of the room. It was a good thing he had. The other end had green fur growing all around the edges.

“You were smaller,” he told her. “And we didn’t have the wights hunting us halfway across the realm.”

“Only gold cloaks and Lannisters.”

They were both quiet for a while. Gendry, munching on his peach, and Arry toying with the hilt of her valyrian sword. He would need to ask her if he could borrow it. He’d always wanted to work with valyrian steel. Master Mott had never had any to forge with, and, even if he had, Gendry certainly wouldn’t have touched it. Master Mott would have socked him upside the head if he so
much as looked at it. There wasn’t enough coin in the world to convince him otherwise.

“I miss him,” she said, after the silence had struck him numb.

_Master Mott?_ he thought. “Hot Pie?” he said.

She hesitated, but eventually shook her head. She dug the toe of her boot into the stone floor. “Arry. I miss Hot Pie too, but…”

“You’re still Arry to me.”

She smiled again, but said nothing more.

_That isn’t a real smile, _he knew. _I’ve seen her smile, and even her new one never looks that sad._

“You are!” he told her, but she didn’t listen.

“And you’re still you,” she answered. “Still just as stupid.”

“See?” He grinned. “Calling me stupid. That’s Arry. You ‘bout to start shoving me again, eh?”

Her smile was no more real than the last. “Have you seen the smithy yet?”

“Don’t see a need,” he said. “We’re not here long enough to smith anything worth smithing.”

She didn’t seem to mind it too much. She was leaving before he had even noticed she’d moved. She dodged the misplaced boxes of fruit and salted meats expertly, where Gendry always stumbled and bumped into one or the other. Still, he followed her like a lost wolf pup, close to her tail and eager to please.

“If you can find something worth taking, no wrong in taking it,” she said. She didn’t look back to him. She didn’t need to. He would have heard every word, even if she whispered them. The whole damned castle – a place that must have once been home to thousands of highborn and smallfolk alike, all loud and jittering and sprinting about the halls – was quiet. Dead. As quiet as the Eyrie, when the castle had fallen and the army slaughtered. Gone in a single night.

He shook his head. “You’re a thief now, then?”

Arry shrugged. “Castle’s empty. Not much of anyone to steal from, is there?”

He followed her through the hall, into a throne room sized for kings and queens and lords and ladies, not bastard boys and little not-lady assassins. She belonged in them, once, he remembered, before they’d met and Yoren had chopped chopped her hair short. She didn’t fit now. Her hair was too mussed, her skin too dirtied, and her hands too calloused to belong in a place like this. Somehow, he didn’t think he’d like her as much if she did. It wouldn’t have mattered, anyway. If Arry had stayed Arya, they never would have met. He would have been just another stupid bastard boy on his way to the wall.

You’d be a dead bastard boy, if she did, _he thought, and she’d be happy._

Guilt clawed at his heart. He didn’t belong there with her, this highborn girl. He didn’t belong anywhere near her. He was just a bastard, a son of sin. Bastards weren’t supposed to know highborns. They didn’t deserve to.

But, somehow, he was there all the same.
“They might come back,” he said, feebly.

She shrugged. She spun on her heal, dodging the lord’s chair, which had been thrust into the middle of the room at some point as the unsullied searched. They’d turned over every loose stone for signs of life. All they’d found were bugs and dust.

“They might be dead already,” she said. “Or they might die if we don’t take it.”

“‘Take it’? You’ve already got an idea of something to take, then?”

She flashed him a toothy grin. “There’s always something to take in castles.”

“Not this one. Bleedin’ empty, it is.”

“Not empty enough for your stomach.”

He wanted to shrug, but he had to sprint to catch up with her. She moved faster than she used to, as if the world was a second away from collapsing, and the only thing keeping her from falling in with it was her feet scrambling on the damp old stones. Or, maybe that was him. He wasn’t much sure anymore.

“You think you’ll ever get through a conversation without insulting me?”

This time, she did turn back, if only so he could see the humor in her eyes. “Only when you stop being stupid.”

“It might take a while then,” he told her. She laughed with him, and it warmed his heart better than any fire.

But humor bled like wounds these days, and soon enough, it was gone from her face. Her stone-grey eyes turned back to the hall before them, as she wandered into Duskendale’s court.

A thousand hammers hung from the wall. It was hard to see them in the darkness – only the torches on the wall gave them any light at all. The windows left them nothing but a sea of black, as thick and dark as blood.

They passed under a blue and white banner, painted with two warhammers crossed. He watched them as Arry sped through the room. She didn’t even pause to look at the lord’s chair as Gendry did. Not the pale white cushion placed on the ground-level seat, nor the hammers that emerged from the chair’s shoulders. He almost reached for one, but Arry would have left him behind if he had.

“Not much of a while left,” Arry said. “I have it on good authority the world’s ending.”

His tongue froze in his mouth. He didn’t know what to say to that, what to even think of that. Arry had always been a bit cold, but not like that. The Arry he knew wouldn’t shrug off the end of everything the same way she’d shrugged off eating bugs and scrambling through bogs. She had been angry, not resigned. She’d been ready to tear apart the world, if only to get back at the ones who’d pissed her off.

*What changed?* he thought, but the answer came quick as a bird. “Your list finished, you said. How’ve you been sleeping now?”

The smile Arry gave him was filled with teeth. “The list isn’t done yet.”
Gendry frowned. “But you said-”

“The list can change,” she told him. “Names can come and go. And there’s one that deserves it more than anyone.” Her hand fell to the thin sword on her hip – Needle, he remembered – and her shoulders swung.

“Beric?” he asked.

She shook her head. “We’re going to go meet the god of death,” she told him, easily. “I don’t know his name, and he’s got too many faces to count, but I’ve met a lot of them. And I intend to carve this one too.”

He didn’t ask her anymore about the list. Not after that. Arry could be uncomfortably terrifying when she wanted to be.

#

The rest of the riders didn’t waste the day away stealing equipment from the forge, or hiding in the shadows, of course. The unsullied patrolled, and the Stark men with them. The others plotted. They were always plotting. Never once in his life had Gendry been thankful of his low birth, but, if it kept him away from the plotting, he would have to find his father and thank him for hiding.

Arry went to the meetings too, sometimes. She hated them, of course. Called them slow, pointless. “They never actually decide on anything,” she told him. “Just talk themselves in circles, until the next mealtime comes ‘round.”

The mealtime had already come around four times since they settled in Duskendale. Supposedly, there was to be two or three more before they took to the air again. According to the unsullied, there were wights in the wood. Two or three. Scouts, at worst, and all without any support, but none of them were willing to take the risk. They needed to move soon, if they wanted to give King’s Landing any chance to escape.

He was sat in the forge that day, picking through the swords the Rykkers had left behind. He had already taken anything he would need. There were bits of valuables to be had. A couple of hammers, a bit of oil. Nothing significant, but there was no harm searching the rest. There was little else to do in Duskendale, when Arry was off changing faces or howling at the moon, or whatever it was she did now. Sparring, maybe. She was good at that. Too good.

And suddenly, he wasn’t much interested in the swords anymore. He rose, wiped the dust and icicles from off his legs, and left the frozen forge. Might be he could grab something else from the kitchens. He hadn’t had this much food in this life. Not even with Melisandre or the Brotherhood. He’d never been full before. If this was how Hot Pie felt every day, he could see why he stayed in that inn. Well, besides being sold. That was probably the main reason, really.

He found a box filled with peaches beneath another of frozen lemons. The peaches were warm enough that he could eat them straight, if he held them over a fire for a few minutes. He tried to sniff each one the way Arry did. He didn’t know what he was supposed to be sniffing for, but they only smelled of peaches, and he ate without abandon.

After he was done with them, he made his way to his borrowed chambers. Well, after he’d stuffed another ten peaches down his shirt, of course.

He made his way through the castle in utter darkness. He didn’t have a torch of his own, and most of the ones on the walls weren’t lit anymore. Only the ones near the planning room had light. In
the sleep hours, they didn’t even bother with those. All the while, the rest of the castle was darker than Dragonstone.

In truth, of all the things he missed from before the war, he thought it might have been the sun he missed most. He would have given all the peaches in the world for the chance to lay out in the snow and bask in the light. Sometimes, when he slept, he could feel the warmth on his face, warming his frozen soul and bringing life where only death had thrived. The fires just didn’t burn bright enough.

It was the darkness that led him astray that night. He turned one too many corners before he’d reached the third door, and then he’d turned another before he realized his mistake. He had to fumble back, hands on the wall and his steps short and staggered to keep him steady. Arry had laughed at him the first time she saw him stumble like this. She’d led him the rest of the way to his rooms, and she moved so well, Gendry had nearly forgotten that she couldn't see either.

But now it was just Gendry, and he needed to find his way without his lord’s sister to guide him. Through a castle. He’d never been much good at navigating castles. He’d never been much good at navigating anything. Even finding his way back to the Wall had been a struggle, and all he’d done was run in a straight line south.

Thankfully, he didn’t have to wander far. After a few too many times stumbling into walls, he found an unlit torch against the center of his forehead. From there, it was only a matter of cursing and fumbling with his flint until the sparks caught. He probably didn’t have to add the cursing, but at least it made his head feel better.

It was a lucky thing he’d found the torch.

Almost as soon as light bathed the grimy hall, he caught sight of another face on the other end of the corridor. A pale one, as stern and as lordly as the face of his father. He had been sitting on a box beside a window, silent as the shadows as they creeped over his face, but hiccupping every time Gendry blinked. How long he had been sitting in the darkness, Gendry could not say, but if the black lines beneath his eyes spoke, they would surely have screamed “hours”.


Jon blinked, his brows drawn tight. He stared as if he hadn’t noticed that a torch had been lit at all. Wind buffeted his hair, making it even more disheveled than it already was.

“Gendry,” he answered, frowning. “It’s late.”

“Is it? I can’t tell.”

“Dany says we’ll be off soon.”

“How soon is soon?”

“By morning’s light.”

“Well, we’ll all be waiting a long time for that, then.” Gendry had to smother a frown. “When’s the last time you’ve slept, m’lord?”

Jon’s grin was a shaky one. “We’re heading to our deaths for the – gods, how many times now?” He hung his head, whispered something to his lap. “It isn’t easy now.”

“M’lord?” Gendry said again.
Jon shook his head. “I’m no lord, Gendry. Only the black bastard of the Wall, and the Wall’s gone.”

Gendry was slow to move, but Jon didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he waved him closer as the smith hovered. Ever so reluctantly, Gendry obeyed.

It was a mistake. The scent of ale struck him like a bolt from a crossbow.

_Bloody Starks. Pains in my arse, the lot of them._

“I should get you to your rooms, m’- Jon.”

The once-King only laughed. “Won’t do me much, will it? Can’t sleep now, without the dreams.”

He wrapped Jon’s arm around his shoulder and pulled him to his feet. The man swayed terribly, and nearly threw Gendry off balance, but they both recovered well enough. He kept speaking, if only to avoid discomfiting the lord in his arms. “You’re lucky not to.”

“Am I?” he whispered into his own chest. “I don’t know how to sleep without him.” Gendry thought it best to leave that well enough alone, but Jon wasn’t done. “He was always there. Even when he was beyond the Wall, and I couldn’t feel him. He was…”

“He was a good man,” Gendry answered, quickly, though he hadn’t the faintest clue who Jon might have meant. He led Jon further down the hall, wishing without hope for some way to escape this mess without leaving his lord to make sick all over himself and fall from the window. He was swaying hard enough that he might have.

His lord turned two frowning eyes to him. “Not a man,” he drawled. He might have dropped Jon right there, and left him to the window, if the man hadn’t whispered, “He was the runt of ‘em. He used to- used to fight for me. With me.”

_The wolf_, Gendry realized. _He’s missing his wolf._

Arry hadn’t talked about her own much, but, sometimes, when the wolves howled outside Harrenhal, he caught her staring wistfully at the walls and whispering words he couldn’t hear. He’d asked her about it once, after, and he’d told her a story of six wolf pups, a witch queen from Dorne, and two boy who’d named their wolves for the color of their fur. He’d never thought about it much before – too incensed by the fact that Lord Stark had trusted a live wolf to a girl of one-and-ten – but he’d heard the pain in her voice then, just as he heard it in Jon’s now.

“He was part of me,” Jon told him, so pained and so heartbroken that Gendry might have thought he lost a brother, or a lover.

And he believed him. He really did. There wasn’t much in the world he wouldn’t believe, if it was the Starks who told it to him. They’d proven themselves too much, these past few years.

They walked for a while. Gendry didn’t say a word to him, and Jon couldn’t do much of anything besides sway and stumble. He preferred it that way. Jon wasn’t nearly the happy drunk his sister was. He wondered if Lady Sansa was any better, or their other brothers. If their father wasn’t the sort who’d swing out the castle walls and sing for all of Winterfell to hear.

The thought nearly made him laugh aloud. Arry hadn’t ever said much a word about her lord father, but, from what Gendry had seen, he would’ve been like his son.

“Sorry,” Jon told him suddenly, as Gendry pulled him up the stairs. “I’m not usually…”
“Just don’t do it again,” Gendry told him. And then, just because he knew Jon wouldn’t remember it come ‘morning’, “You bleedin’ Starks just can’t be normal, can you?”

“I’m not a Stark,” Jon mumbled.

“Aye, and I’m Pate the Pig Boy, and your sister’s planning to run off with the Rainbow Knight,” Gendry spat. “You had one of the wolves following you about, didn’t you?”

“Ghost,” he breathed, like a prayer.

“And your father raised you with the rest of them,” he added, “and if the Queen ever sees the throne, you’ll have the name within the hour.” He paused, frowning. “If you don’t take hers first.”

Jon had no answer to that. He was too busy wallowing in his own bastardy to care. As if being a bastard meant a thing when he slept in a castle, raised beside family, with a father who’d acknowledged him and cared for him.

And, as he led Jon into his rooms, and settled him down on his bed, he thought that might have imagined the call that cut through the night. The wolf’s cry. One, at first, loud and shrill and enough to send him back to his days in the Riverlands, wandering without any food in his belly and without the security of walls around him. Sleeping under the stars, pretending he didn’t hear an army howling up at the moon, pretending it was normal that they never struck the three helpless children wandering through their territory, pretending it was normal that they’d been left alone for wolf and man when Harrenhal was no more than a day’s ride away.

He’d pretended for a long time. It never mattered.

A second call answered the first a few seconds later. Then came a third, louder than the others by half, and stronger too. This voice did not quake or hesitate. It simply came, drowning out any sound in the world, and replacing it with those of the hunt. Then, almost in answer, came them all. Tens, dozens, hundreds of calls shrieking through the air, biting through the silence that had clung to the Earth since Winterfell had fallen, and that had held on tighter, still, since the Eyrie came crashing down in a great cloud of smoke and stone.

For the first time since his days with the Brotherhood, the world was alive with the sound of wolves.

Chapter End Notes

So we’ve got some good old scenes where we learn more about the terrible ways two of the three surviving Stark kids handle severe trauma. Wonder what’ll happen in the next chapter…

Oh, wait, it’s a Sansa POV? Wonder how that’ll work out.
Chapter Twenty-One: Even the Lost Can Find Their Way

Duskendale

Sansa Stark

The song of wolves was sweeter than any Sansa has ever known. Sweeter than Jonquil and Two Hearts That Beat as One and The Roadside Rose. Sweeter than the songs of ladies in their castles, and queens as pretty as their kings were kind. She’d loved those songs so much as a girl, but she would trade them all for just a second of wolves singing through the dark of night.

She had been in her chambers when they started, lying awake and staring off at a darkness as oppressive as it was unending. By the times the wolves had all joined the third wolf’s cry, she was on her feet and strolling for the door.

If anyone had asked her that night why she had run out to the parapets, she would not have been able to answer. It was some primal instinct that drove her, leading her to her torch, to the door, to the halls, to the castle walls. The same sort that drove wolves to howl at the moon, or sent little mice scurrying away at the sight of a cat.

The darkness outside held no answers for her. In truth, it held nothing but snow and ice. She trudged through it as best she could, hoping beyond hope for a sight of wolves in the woods. Instead, she found a different sort of wolf, its own howls melting into the ones echoing through the land.

Her sister stood on a mound of frozen snow, leaning halfway over the wall and howling like a mad woman. “Ahooooooooo, ahoooooooo.”

Where the light from Sansa’s torch touched her face, she could see a smile wider than any she had know since Winterfell, the first time around. Her hair was wild, and her eyes, too, darting between the trees like they were searching for prey. But it wasn’t prey she was searching for. It was a predator. Predators.

She didn’t seem to notice Sansa’s arrival. She didn’t seem to notice much of anything, but the wolves.

She looked nothing like the woman Sansa had met on Dragonstone. In truth, she looked like Sansa felt, when she saw Jon again, and Bran, and her. She was an ordinary woman. A happy woman.

It had been a long time since Sansa had seen a Stark happy.

“Arya,” Sansa called, quietly at first, and then she was shouting, “Arya!”

The loudest wolf was howling again, its voice drowning out her mad sister’s cries. Arya didn’t seem to mind. If anything, her smile only grew wider.
And, somehow, Sansa understood. Her heart raced and tore with sorrow, but she understood. She said nothing as Arya leapt off the snow and barreled past her at the wolf’s call. She didn’t even say a thing as she chased her, like Jon has once chased Robb through all the halls of Winterfell, because their brother had broken Jon’s bow.

It was hard to run in a castle painted black, even with a torch to light her way. How Arya sped past corridors, down stairs, and through the yard without a hint of light, Sansa would never know. Sansa doubted she would ever know most things about her wayward little sister.

But this? This, she understood.

It seemed that the wolves, and most probably Sansa’s footsteps, had woken the castle. Before she had even reached the castle yard, there were men blanketing her. Lord Harlan Hunter and Gendry the bastard smith, chasing after her as if they even knew where she was going.

She didn’t know where Jon was. She wondered if this would hurt him, too.

“Lady Sansa!” Lord Harlan cried after her, but Sansa didn’t care. She needed to stay with her sister. She needed to, and she still didn’t know why.

Arya ran out into the snow, into the cold, like a woman possessed. Even when she hit the mounds of slick snow, she kept moving. She tore through piles that were higher than her knees, scrambling on all fours to get closer. Sansa followed, though she kept on two legs.

If it was another wolf, she thought that she might have been on all fours, too. But that wolf had lost her head a lifetime ago, and that Sansa would have tripped on her skirts.

The wolves continued to sing, and the loudest let loose another cry.

It was madness; that was all it was. The madness that took them in battle, when the blood flowed through her veins and the panic coursed through her head. It was escaping Winterfell again. It was the Eyrie collapsing. It was standing aside, while her brother held a sword to her sister’s throat, and her heart filled with hate for a queen of dragons. No, it wasn’t that. That was a vengeful sort of madness. This? This was good. There was no other word for it. This was good.

Lord Harlan caught up to her just as she reached the snow, but he didn’t stop for her, and Gendry didn’t either. They raced past – minds set on the woman who was running on her lonesome. The woman running towards a pack of wolves that could tear her to pieces.

“It’s all right,” Sansa wanted to scream. “The lone wolf dies, not the pack!”

And for the first time in a long time, it was a pack.

As Arya tore through the gate – Sansa not 20 feet behind her – the first of the wolves ran free of the surrounding trees. It would have been difficult to see, had Lord Harlan not reached Arya with his torch.

First came a grey beast, half the size of an ordinary wolf, but with teeth too big for his mouth. Next came white, a creature with only a single ear but who still seemed to hear well enough to welcome her. Then came white, its maw stained brown with blood and dirt alike. Then grey, then grey, then red, then white, then black, then grey. Dozens of them, teeth snapping and ears high, fur not yet bristled where it sat on their spines. A dozen hounds came with them, all wolfish in their own rights, but smaller and considerably less fearsome than the wolf pack that came to greet them.

They stopped as soon as they breached the tree line, held off by a howl that split the night. The
flames illuminated their faces, but with every flicker, a thousand shadows moved towards her. Her heart beat faster than a raven’s wings.

Sansa hadn’t stopped running, and Arya wouldn’t have either, had Gendry not reached her side. Before she could get any further, his arm was wrapped around Arya’s waist. He dragged her into the snow, just before she could get within five feet of the pack. She flailed and flailed, but the smith was too strong, and, for all that Arya was too, she was still a head smaller.

For a minute, Sansa could see nothing through the explosion of powdered snow as they fell together. Gendry and Arya disappeared behind it, and most of the wolves with them.

“Arya!” she cried, panicked, despite her earlier confidence. Would she be able to live with herself, if something happened? If she simply trusted her sister to a pack of hungry wolves? She didn’t know, and that stung worse than any bite.

But, as the smoke dissipated, her racing heart slowed, and Arya’s struggling stopped with it. Even Gendry had ceased moving, his eyes caught on one wolf standing between all the rest. The she-wolf.

Nymeria.

She was massive. Bigger than a pony, bigger than Ghost. She towered over the other wolves, twice their size and coated in twice as much blood around the maw. Her eyes shined like golden coins, brighter than a dragon’s flames. Her teeth were bared, but not at Sansa and not at Gendry or Arya. No, her eyes were on Harlan, who was standing before her with his sword drawn and held aloft before him. Sansa hadn’t even seen him draw it.

Nymeria let loose a growl that came as loud as her howl, and Arya was struggling again.

“Nymeria! It's me! It’s Arya,” she called, drawing the direwolf’s eyes. “Arya Stark.”

The wolf softened, teeth retreating behind her bloodied maw. Her ears rose, and her head tilted, soft and curious and-

Lady. The memory tugged at her heart, tore it to pieces before she even knew what happened. She could have been Lady.

But Lady had never been a wolf. Not really. Lady wasn’t the sort of she-wolf that could lead a pack like this. She wouldn’t have blood on her fur or mud on her paws or a howl as loud as a dragon’s roar. Lady was a dog tied in chains.

Sansa had to smother all of her old sorrows, as she stared at her house’s sigil. The last survivor. The lone wolf that made a pack of her own.

“Let go of me,” Arya hissed. And then, as Gendry let loose a pained grunt, Arya was on her feet again.

She might have gone to the wolf, if Lord Harlan hadn’t been there. But the Hunter stood tall, his hand on his bloodless sword, waving it at each wolf that happened to catch his eye.

“Stand back, my lady,” Lord Harlan told her. “I’ve heard of this beast. The ravager of the Riverlands, they called it. A man-eater, my lady. They say it’s a warg, a skinchanger.”

A warg, Sansa thought, looking to her sister. Bran was a warg, too.
Nymeria bore her teeth again, her ears folding back against her skull. The other wolves seemed to
take her cue, as a hundred rumbling growls rang through the woods, a new song to celebrate
Nymeria’s homecoming. A song set to a soon-to-be murder.

“Nymeria, don’t,” Arya told her.

But Nymeria was no dog to be tamed, not like Lady. This was a direwolf, and a wild one at that.
Where her once-master commanded, the wolf paid no mind. She strode forward, ears pinned and
fur bristled at her spine. The wolves followed her, each taking a step whenever she would, and each
growling whenever she cared to.

Lord Harlan eyed them all with eyes as wide as a Bolton’s shield. He swung his sword, frantically
aimed it at each and every wolf in kind. Wherever he pointed, the growls grew louder, until Sansa
knew that she would not have heard a dragon above the din.

“Nymeria!” Arya tried, once last time.

Still, the wolf did not listen. She went on, her feet sinking through the snow further with every
step. All around them, light hails and heavy snows fell without ease. They would not cease; they
would not pause. Sansa wondered if Nymeria was cold, too.

“Get back!” Lord Harlan screamed, though, if it was directed at the direwolf or at her sister, Sansa
would never know. She was frozen in place, watching in horror as Harlan doomed himself.

Gendry had reached Arya again, and it was a good thing he did. Just as Nymeria set her feet to
lunge, her sister fell into the snow.

The collapse was so quick, Sansa hardly noticed it. She was a mummer’s wolf, but the strings had
been sawed and torn and broken. What little Sansa could see of her face was slack, and her muscles
did not so much as twitch. It was good that Gendry was there to catch her, or else she might have
choked in the snow.

“Arya!” Sansa screamed, just as Gendry screamed some strange bastardization of her sister’s
name.

The smith was pulling her sister back, and Sansa abandoned any propriety she might have
otherwise had. She sprinted to Arya’s side, grabbed hold of one of her arms and pulled. Something
sharp pulled at her flesh, but she hadn’t the time or mind to care. If Arya wanted to carry knives, it
was not Sansa’s need to question it. Not now, when the wolves were prowling and snapping. Later,
though, if they escaped this unharmed, she would at least ask her to keep them sheathed.

Together, Sansa and Gendry dragged her back another 15 feet. It was only then that Sansa realized
the world had gone quiet.

The wolves were silent and staring, ears raised and mouths shut. Most sat like dogs by their
master’s feet, while others turned their backs and wandered away. Nymeria, still tall and proud in
the middle of them all, was watching her sister’s body, something amused in those bright golden
eyes. Her fur had flattened, her claws dug into the snow. If before, there had been a creature of
nightmares, now there was only a little girl’s pet.

“Lord Harlan, get back,” Sansa said, as loudly as she dared. It wasn’t very loud at all, but the man
heard all the same.

He looked back at her – fool – and frowned. “My lady-”
“Drop your sword, and get back!”

Harlan still hesitated, but Gendry moved as soon as she gave the order. He dragged Arya back, carrying her as easily as he might have held a hammer.

As he hurried by her, Sansa thought she saw white in place of the grey of her eyes.

She turned back to Nymeria and let a nervous laugh break free of her lips. “Arya,” she whispered to the wolf.

Nymeria’s front knees gave, and the wolf tilted her head. Her tail waved lazily behind her back, until Sansa was sure that the direwolf was offering her the same stupid mocking curtsy Arya had given her every time she flung something at one of Sansa’s dresses.

Lord Harlan stumbled back, more from shock than any true intent to retreat. Even so, when her curtsy was done, the wolf was on her feet again. Her ears pinned back once more, and the amusement bled away, but the wolf stayed her ground.

In Gendry’s arms, she heard Arya gasp her way back to life, her breathing coming as ragged as her hair. Gendry dropped her down, his hands running over her arms as he tried to steady her.

“Arry,” he said, as if everyone in the castle hadn’t shared her name a thousand times before. “What was that? You alright? Because that- I don’t know what that was. I don’t know how you- you’re fine, are you?”

Arya only smiled. A real smile. The smile of a wolf reunited with her pack.

_Lady_, Sansa thought again. It was another thought she smothered in its infancy.

She ran to her sister’s side. Sansa spared not another second for Lord Harlan, but, after a moment, he followed her all the same. _Why_? she wondered. _To protect his honor, or for the warmth slowly streaming down his leg?

Her sister didn’t care for Harlan, or Sansa, or any of them. No, all she cared for was the direwolf. She called out to her again, and, where earlier the wolf had ignored her, now she listened like a trained dog. She moved slowly, every step careful and cautious, but still, she moved.

This time, Lord Harlan did not bear steel against her. This time, there was only Gendry dragging Arya back. It wasn’t long before she was free again, Gendry nursing his side and sucking in a great lungful of breath.

Nymeria was ten feet away – no, five – no, two – no, one – no, there. She stood before her sister, her master, her Stark. Blood still dripped from her maw, and her golden eyes were warmer than her sister’s frozen grey, but somehow, they looked the same. They were the same. Woman and wolf. Pack.

_She deserves better than a butcher._

Somewhere in the trees, a raven cawed. Or perhaps it was a crow. Sansa never had much an eye for differentiating dark wings, and never much an ear for their words. Now, she could hardly spare it more than a passing thought.

She still didn’t know why – no more than she knew why the North still called for her, or why the heart tree felt as true to her as any sept – but she did know that this was important. This sight, Arya and her direwolf, it was important. A sign from the gods, perhaps, if the gods cared to answer to
They were Starks, and winter had come. It was time for the wolves to answer their call.

*Is this your command? Sansa shivered. It wasn’t from the cold.*

Arya’s hand shook as she reached for the wolf, but Nymeria never pulled away. Five scrawny fingers sunk into the furs, and as soon as skin touched skin, Arya was surging forward. Her face disappeared amidst her wolf’s coat, swallowed whole by the fur. Sansa thought it must have been the softest blanket in the world.

Arya might have clung to the wolf for hours and, if not for the bitter winds, Sansa would never have known it. She was back there. Watching a direwolf tear its teeth through human flesh for the first time, lying to a monster queen, screaming while her world fell to pieces. One direwolf gone, the other lost.

*I should have sent her away too. I should have known.*

Arya had. Arya knew, and Arya had sent her away somehow, and now, Nymeria lived to see another day.

*Another fortnight*, she thought. It comforted and disgusted her at once.

She heard her sister whisper into the direwolf’s fur, though she could not make out the words. They were too low, too foreign. She spoke in another tongue with the ease at which she spoke the common. Some words, Sansa recognized – the ones that were the same in High Valyrian, and the ones Littlefinger had whispered when the world was quiet – but most flooded over her like water.

It didn’t matter. She didn’t need to know Braavosi to know an apology when she saw one. And an apology, it was. She knew that as well as any, because with Nymeria… it was like all the things that had made Arya not had bled away. There was the little girl again, the one that Sansa had known. There was the girl who combed her wolf’s coat for hours and ran laughing with her through the woods of Winterfell, giggling and playing without a care in the world. Arya didn’t giggle now, but she could see the girl in her eyes again, behind Arya’s otherwise perfect mask. There was life there. Life that had been snuffed out, only to return when the night was darkest.

They needed to get inside, Sansa knew. It was too cold to spend too long outside the castle walls, and Lord Harlan looked dangerously close to dropping his torch in the snow, as Gendry had lost his. But, even with the cold creeping up her dress like fingers – *no, no, no, stop thinking, stop* – she couldn’t bear to say a word. Not when the last of the direwolves had finally come home. Not when the little girl had finally come back, if only for a while.

“I killed her,” she heard her sister whisper – in Braavosi, not common, but the words were the same in Valyrian and Littlefinger – through the winds and the wolves and the wetness clogging her throat. “I killed her.”

A thousand knives plunged into Sansa’s chest. A thousand pains like nothing she’d ever felt, and a thousand hurts unanswered through a thousand years. She didn’t even know why. Not really.

Inside, the castle slept. Out here, in the snows, as the white winds blew, the Stark girls wept.

#

It fell to Gendry to build the fire as the cold intruded on the reunion’s warmth. Sansa didn’t have the strength to gather wood when her arm still sang of fire and weakness, and Lord Harlan could
not move an inch without drawing the fury of the pack. Arya might have done it, but she didn’t seem all too eager to leave her wolf’s side. Even if she did, Nymeria seemed more than likely to hold her down if she dared move.

She had long since removed her face from Nymeria’s coat, but her hands were still buried in the furs. Nymeria’s massive head was settled on her lap, and it was a wonder it even fit at all. She dwarfed the woman - her head four times the size of Arya’s and surely twice her weight.

But there was no strain on Arya’s face, nor sorrow in those cold eyes of hers. It seemed the years had been stripped away, the scars and circles the only signs that Arya had aged a day since Winterfell. Well, that and the blood Nymeria had stuck to her.

Sansa sat no more than a foot away from them both. Each time she moved to pull away, Nymeria would growl or whine, and Arya would have to warg again to keep her from moving.

Lord Harlan had returned to the castle, after Arya left herself again, on the promise to bring more swords with him, but he ran back with two empty scabbards instead of the one. The wolves sung as he fled, and one fell asleep atop his fallen blade.

All the while, Nymeria did not move. Even as Gendry set a fire before her, she did not so much as twitch. Sansa had never known a dog or wolf that did not flinch at fire.

The ravager of the Riverlands. Lady didn’t move either.

“She must have missed you,” Sansa said, eventually, when the silence came to suffocate her.

Her sister said nothing. Gendry spoke instead. “Giant wolves,” he said. He looked pale. “Dragons and giant wolves and White Walkers, and—” He looked to Arya. Whatever he wanted to say, he didn’t.

“The end of the world,” Arya answered. Her voice stayed soft, but her fingers curled in Nymeria’s fur.

“Did you know?” Sansa asked.

“That the world was ending?”

“That you’re like Bran.”

Arya’s face went still. “I don’t have visions.”

“You’re a warg,” Sansa said. She did not miss the sudden tension in Gendry’s shoulders.

One hand went to pet at Nymeria’s massive skull. “I knew we were one,” Arya said, nodding to the direwolf. “Part of me was a wolf, and part of her was Arya.”

Sansa swallowed a long-suffering sob. She wouldn’t let herself think of why.

While Sansa choked, Gendry spoke, “Was that the first time you... you know...”

“No,” Arya said, simply. The smile didn’t return as it had earlier, and she said nothing more.

The wolf let loose a grumble. She looked as discontent as Arya did. A mimic. Ghost had been that way, too. And Lady, Sansa thought, though she had hardly known Lady for more than handful of moons.
“She’s bigger than you said,” Gendry said.

How would you know? Sansa thought. She didn’t voice a word.

The wolf’s grumble turned into a growl. Arya’s face didn’t so much as twitch. “We’ve both grown a lot.” She looked to Sansa, then, and her face softened. “We’ve all grown a lot.” She said it, as if she didn’t look the same as she had when the met the wolf the first time through, when their worst trouble was Arya getting mud on Sansa’s doll and ruining its hair.

She wished there was wine, but all the wine was in the castle, and Arya wouldn’t move a muscle if it meant leaving her wolf’s side. She could go herself, she knew, but somehow, she thought it best to stay. If she left, she had the strangest feeling that she would never see her sister again. She would run off to the woods, to hunt with the wolves until the Walkers came.

No, she couldn’t let her. If staying by her side meant her sister surviving, she would stay there forever. She couldn’t let another Stark fall. She wouldn’t. She swallowed and let loose a raw breath.

“We all had wolves,” Sansa said, for Gendry’s benefit. If she didn’t say something, they might have all stayed quiet forever, and then she would have lost her mind.

Gendry didn’t look any more pleased. He didn’t look away from Arya. “Were you the youngest?”

“Rickon,” Sansa answered, when her sister made no move to speak. Another sort of grief struck her then, just as sharp as the reminder of Lady. Another wolf dead, and this time, the boy with him. “He was five when Father gave us the wolves.”

“And when he died?” It was Arya who asked it. It made the wound somehow deeper.

“Two-and-ten.”

She had grown to expect that Arya wouldn’t react, but the wolf’s whine still caught her by surprise. There was a beat – a long pause that lasted a lifetime – and then Arya smiled at her, a sad little grin, and rubbed between her ears. She knelt forward and whispered something to her wolf. This time, her voice caught on the wind as she spoke the common words, and, for once, Sansa was close enough to hear it.

“The waif would have hated you,” her sister had said, soft as a featherbed.

“So, let me get this straight,” Gendry said, before Sansa could even begin to question what any of that meant, “Lord Stark – the Hand of the King – he gave a five-year-old a wolf.”

“Direwolf,” Arya corrected.

“He wouldn’t have trusted us with ordinary wolves,” Sansa explained.

“No, of course he wouldn’t.” Gendry shook his head in astonishment. “Because it’s much better to give a little boy a- a direwolf. Twice the size of a wolf.”

Arya finally looked up from her wolf. Her gaze was hard. “The direwolf is the sigil of our House. They didn’t just come to Winterfell by mistake.”

She didn’t need to ask to know what her sister meant. “You think the gods sent them?”

Nymeria shut her eyes as the humans spoke. Around them, the rest of the wolves settled, too.
Sansa watched as a one-eyed wolf settled against a frozen log. Its single eye slipped shut, as a red wolf rested with its head on its back. More wolves laid by him, some to sleep and others to simply rest while their leader slipped into an easy slumber in her human’s lap. Before long, there were over a hundred wolves hobbling towards the walls of Duskendale. Each one more than willing to lay before these humans they had never met, without showing more than a passing hint of malice.

Sansa wondered how long it had been since they last slept. It couldn’t have been easy, moving on four legs while a restless army chased them south, or while a warg led them forward.

“Father’s gods,” Arya said to the gushing wind.

“You still hold them? Father’s gods?”

“Mostly,” Arya answered, vaguely. “Do you think the wolves might have woken Jon?”

Gendry grimaced. “A dragon couldn’t have woken him. He must’ve been in his cups for hours, way he was swaying.”

Sansa had the grace not to curse, but her sister certainly didn’t.

They hung in silence for a while, while they waited for the Dragon Queen, or Lord Harlan, or whoever else might stumble upon them to break the peace. It did not come as quickly as Sansa had expected. No, if Lord Harlan had gone to fetch help, he was not much of a messenger. For a short while, Sansa entertained the idea of Lord Harlan slipping on ice and falling into a well, shouting for help that couldn’t hear over the sound of snoring wolves. It was enough to keep her from falling asleep until Gendry broke their quiet.

“You had a wolf too, m’lady?” he asked Sansa.

Pain clawed at Sansa’s heart, unbidden. She thought she might have torn through her palms from the way her nails dug into the skin. Fortunately, it was cold enough that she hardly even felt the pain. It seemed her skin was as numb as the rest of her.

“Her name was Lady,” she said, proudly, though all she wanted was to whisper. But Sansa was the Lady of Winterfell, even if it had fallen to rubble, and she had a role to play like any other. Her dignity could not escape her, no matter the circumstance.

Arya seemed to know that, as well. Instead of leaving Sansa to explain, she lifted her face from Nymeria’s furs and said, “Queen Cersei had her killed.” She looked to Gendry then, pointedly, but it seemed the man did not understand whatever she was hinting.

“That’s why she was on your list,” Gendry breathed.

Sansa banished the thought of Lady, eager for the reprieve this line brought her. Do they know each other? What list? Why does Arya still care about Cersei? And, of all things, since when did Arya refer to people by their titles?

“That’s why she was on your list,” Sansa asked, first. The rest could come later. The rest would come later, if she had anything to say about it.

Arya offered her an unhappy smile. “Not much of a list. There’s only one left now. Of everyone who’d wronged our pack.” The smile slipped. “Anyone who’d wronged anyone.”

Gendry might have shivered from the chill, but, from the look he gave her sister, Sansa very much doubted it.
“You knew each other,” Sansa said. It wasn’t a question.

There were three different reactions then, each as telling as the others. Gendry paled, his skin lightening until he was as bright as the summer snows under the light of a cloudless sky. He looked frantically to Arya, whose face hadn’t changed, but whose gaze was fixed firmly on her wolf. Nymeria hadn’t even bothered opening her eyes. Her growl was enough to speak for her.

Arya hadn’t even looked at Gendry, but still, she said, calmly, “You may be the worst liar in the Seven Kingdoms.”

Gendry’s cheeks flushed red, while the rest of him continued to tremble. Even the snowflakes settling in his hair were darker than his pallor, Sansa noticed.

“He was in the Night’s Watch with me after King’s Landing,” Arya told her. Her tone hadn’t shifted at all. “He was the only one who figured out who I was.”

“Only because you told me.”

“You’d already figured out I was a girl.”

“Bit of a leap from just a girl to Lady of the North!”

“I’m not a lady,” and it was with that that Arya’s masks broke, and a hint of a grin – a real sign of life – slipped onto her face. She wiped it away only a second later, but Sansa still noticed.

Arya was right, in her own strange little way. There weren’t any ladies left in all of House Stark. How could there be? There were few lords in the kingdom seeking out swordfighters and women with an arm that looked like a blackened chunk of wood. There might never be a Lady Stark again, in truth. Unless some hero from the songs came to save the day, there might never be a Lady Anything, either.

But there were no true knights, and no one coming to save them. The ladies would die. The lords would die.

Yet there was no point dwelling in lives lost and homes torn asunder. As her sister flagged and the wolves slipped off into a loud grumbling sleep, Sansa stared at her and said, “How long have you—”

Something, an old remnant of the girl she thought dead, shouted in fear, but Sansa smothered it before her sister could hear. “Have you warged?”

The wolf twitched. “Harrenhal.”

Gendry shifted so suddenly the wolf next to him growled. He must have been there too, if his flinch was anything to note. Sansa tried to recall what Arya had told her of Harrenhal, but no answer came.

_Sandor had saved her_ , she thought. _Or Yoren. The Brotherhood, perhaps?_ She couldn’t remember. There were too many details, all come too quickly. Some days, she could hardly pierce her own story together through memories that haunted like shattered window panes. Had the beatings started before or after she’d seen Father’s head? Had Ser Dontos come before Sandor, and had Ser Dontos ever truly been there at all? Or had that always been Littlefinger, scheming and playing with lives like dolls.

_What happened in Harrenhal?_ she wanted to ask. Instead, she cleared her throat, and said, “Was her pack always this… large?”
Relief flooded her sister’s face, if only for a second, and Gendry’s too, and Sansa knew she made the right choice.

“As long as I can remember,” Arya said. She shifted then, finally lifting her hands from out of Nymeria’s fur. “That one, there-” She pointed to the one with a bloodied stump of a leg. “-I call him Three Paw. Her, Black Tooth. Him, Furless. That one’s Frey Eater. I liked him best.” She grinned a horrible grin. “Lion Hunter, there, she’s great too.”

And that was how they spent the rest of the night. Arya, pointing to each wolf and describing their names, their deeds, even their favorite meats and mates. That day, Arya was not the woman from Dragonstone, cold and heartless and conflicted. Nor was she the girl from King’s Landing, always out to prove her sister wrong and the Lannisters evil.

No, this was the girl from Winterfell, running with Nymeria or eating bugs just to know the taste. This was the girl who had slept covered in mud even when the bath was already settled in her room. The same girl who had learned the bow when Mother had forbidden it, who had loved Jon when the castle called him ‘bastard’, and who had hunted for rubies and flowers and sparred with little boys on the Kingsroad.

Nymeria had given that back to her.

*Lady never can.*

And, if Sansa fell asleep to the words of a woman from Winterfell, well, she could hardly be blamed for it. It was the first time she’d slept in days.

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Chapter End Notes

Technical difficulties still running my life, but I think I’ve got a handle on them, so figured you guys deserved a quick update this time round after last time's issues.

That’ll probably (not) be the last reunion in this fic, but we’ve finally got a direwolf. Only took us 90k words to get to it (help me).

Anyway, look forward to another Jon, because I can’t get enough of these damned Stark kids, as we finally get to King’s Landing. Oh, actually, speaking of reunions...
Chapter Twenty-Two: If Only They Can See the Day

**Duskendale**

*Jon Snow*

Most times, Jon hated himself.

It was for the obvious reasons. When he closed his eyes, he would see Olly swinging, and his heart would ache for hours. When he picked up his sword, he would think of Robb, and the brother he'd left to die alone. When he picked up a bow, he would think of Lord Stark, the father who'd lost his head, because Jon was too loyal to save him. When he kissed Dany come morning, he would think of a girl kissed by fire, pierced by an arrow that wasn't his. When he walked, he thought of Ghost, of Rickon, of Bran, of Sam, of poor Dolorous Edd, of Pyp, or Grenn, of Satin, of Tormund, and the rest of them. Some days, he even thought of those judging eyes of Thorne's as the man swung and swung, and the Old Bear's face as he rode off for the last time. Of Qhorin Halfhand, dead for a play that was hardly even worth it, and a boy who would not become a man for many years still.

Sometimes, it was the lesser things that hurt. The scars in his chest, the memory of sword severing Slynt's head, the memory of the wildlings he'd fought beside and betray as soon as the chance had struck him. And though the memory of the Eyrie falling struck him no worse than the thought of the friends he'd gained and lost, the orders that had crumbled and died, it stung. Every life he'd lost stung a thousand-fold.

But, at the moment, all of those things fled him. The only pain he felt was the pain behind his eyes. The pain of too long a night with too many horns of ale to be had. He'd hated these mornings just as much on the Wall, when he and his brothers celebrated some victory or another. They'd hidden from the sun together, cursed the Old Bear when he sent them to guard atop the Wall, and avoided Donal Noye and his smithy for as long as they could last, if only to keep away from the sound of hammers falling.

Now, there was no morning to be seen. No sun pierced his eyes, no Old Bear sent him atop a wall that had fallen, and Donal Noye had died as his smithy did. There were no victories to celebrate, and no brothers to celebrate them with.

He thought of the oaths he'd broken as he stumbled onto shaky feet. Too many. He'd had a wildling wife, he'd had lands, wore a crown atop his head. Yet still, he was the sword in the darkness. He was the horn to wake the sleepers, the shield that guarded the realms of men. The last of the shields.

He filled his chamber pot from the wrong end and stumbled into the halls. Somewhere, he knew, Dany was preparing her dragon for the rest of their flight. By the time he slept again, they would be in King's Landing. He would fight again.

He stumbled back into his rooms and filled his chamber pot again. The stench of sick must have filled the castle.

By the time he reached the planning rooms, his stomach was empty and the pain behind his eyes
screamed after every step.

*Someday, I'll learn,* he thought, as he reached for another horn. *But not today.*

There were only four others in the room when he arrived – a far cry from the dozen or so he ordinarily saw. There was Lord Harlan Hunter, babbling to himself in the corner, while Lord Beric Dondarrion, the unsullied, Grim Dog, and the oldest of the Stark men, Rodrick, looked on.

"*Wolves!"* he heard the man shout, as Jon downed his first horn. There were others on the table, and Jon was already heavily considering a second. "Dozens of them. *Hundreds!* One of them – the girl's – big as a horse!"

He stopped his hand halfway to the second horn. The fingers of his right hand clenched of their own accord, as his tongue went dry as meat on the Wall.

"They were to eat us. I know it. But the girl… Lady Arya, she- she-" He swallowed. Jon might have reached for his sword, if the man didn't go on. "She just fell. Mother have mercy, I've never seen anything of the sort. She fell, and the wolf… it just… it just stopped!"

Little sister, Jon thought, stupidly. *You're like me.*

"Starks and their wolves," Rodrick said. "They said her brother, the Young Wolf, he could do it, too. Wargs, the wet nurses called 'em, but I never believed it."

Lord Harlan must not have noticed Jon there before, because as soon as their eyes made contact, he sputtered out a hundred apologies and one. Jon didn't have time for a single one.

"Where?" he demanded. It was the Lord Commander that spoke, not he. The man who'd murdered a child, who'd turned his cloak, who'd slain his mentor, and who'd loosed Janos Slynt's head with a single swing of his sword. The man who'd held his sword to his own sister's throat. The *fool.*

"Beyond the main gate," Lord Harlan told him. His voice had recovered its strength, if only for a moment.

Jon left the second horn where it was and ran.

#

The first thought – the stupidest thought – was that Lord Harlan hadn't been lying about the pack.

In plain view, there were dozens of them. Some big, some small, some bloody and some not. Some were mere hound dogs, while others were grown wolves with teeth the size of fingers and fur that reminded him all too much of Ghost. Some had four limbs and others only three. Some wore wounds on their faces, on their backs, on the torn remnants of their tails. Some, he could tell, had fled the North, and others had coats thin enough to mark them southerners. There was space for dozens more, too. Imprints in the snow, where massive creatures had lain and left, off to hunt for prey that wasn't there.

But, what drew his eyes most was no meagre wolf. No, it was the giant in his sister's lap.

Nymeria had grown since he'd seen her last. She was four times the size she'd been, and twice the size of Ghost. She dwarfed his sister, making her look no more than a child beneath her wolf's colossal coat. They sat together, the two of them, cloaked beneath a sentinel tree whose leaves shielded them from the worst of the snow.
Sansa was with them, he noticed, covered in furs and curled against a white hound with grey markings on its back. She was shivering in the snows, though he could hardly tell if it was due to the chill or her dreams. She often did for both.

Gendry was with them too, his head resting on Nymeria's tail.

When Jon approached, none of the three shifted. The only sign any was even awake was Arya – smiling at him from behind Nymeria's massive skull.

"I'm surprised she didn't wake you," Arya said, softly. "They were howling."

"You found her," he whispered. A pang struck him. Ghost.

But Arya only shook her head. "She found me." She shifted, and Nymeria opened two bright golden eyes as her human struggled to her feet. The direwolf whined, but Arya paid her no mind. "We'll need to move. The wolves know where to meet us, but it'll take them longer to get there than us."

"They do..." he said. Then, "You're like me."

She stared at him for a second. She didn't need to ask. "Ghost," she said.

He nodded. He wanted to say something – I miss him. Like Father, like Robb, like Bran, like Rickon – but his tongue didn't seem to work. For so long, it had only been he and Dany who understood. Only they, the ones who had bonded with beasts. Now, there was another, and he could hardly say a word.

"We'll kill him," she promised him. "We will."

He found that he believed her.

He sat in the snow, though he was hardly dressed to stay out long. He was only wearing three layers on his chest, and his cloak was nowhere near thick enough. If he stayed out long, he might lose a toe to the chill. He didn't care. Just waved at her to sit, again. She did, ever reluctantly, even as Nymeria slumped back over her legs.

"Wherever you were before this," he started, soft as could be, "were you safe?"

She stared at him. For a long time, until they both knew to the answer.

She opened her mouth and shut it again. If she spoke, she was going to lie to him, he knew, to say that she was safe and secure and happy. But then her eyes caught his own and the lie faltered. She stared down to Nymeria and shook her head.

"Could I have helped?" he asked her.

"No." This time, she met his eyes. "You would have died with all the rest of them."

There was nothing he could say to that. If she wanted to tell him about her own journey, she would. With time. He wouldn't force it. He didn't know if he could.

So instead, he leaned back against a tree, and said, "I'm sorry. For Dragonstone. For- the sword. I should have known it was you."

"You thought I was dead," she said, and it stung his mutilated heart worse than anything else she could have said. "And some random woman arrives wearing her face. I would have done the
same." She frowned at her wolf. "I would have done worse."

*That doesn't mean you should forgive me*, he thought, but there was no time for grudges now, and, even after all these years, he knew her well enough to know she didn't hold it. She never had.

Instead, he looked to her and said, "You're good with it. Needle."

"It was dark. I'm good at fighting in the dark," she said. "I had a sword I knew, and you didn't. That's all."

"No need to be so humble, little sister."

It was dark, but not too dark that he couldn't see the whites of her teeth as she grinned. "I did best the great Jon Snow."

"How couldn't you be with the lesson I gave you?"

She laughed. It was a sound he would carry with him until his dying breath. "Stick 'em with the pointy end!"

In the dim light of a fallen torch, he could see her shift. Her hand went to Needle and, suddenly, the amusement drained from Jon like water through a river.

"You won't be able to use that, you know," he told her. "Even Mikken's work won't kill the Walkers."

She nodded, though her hand didn't move. If anything, her grip only grew tighter.

"You shouldn't bring it with you. It's extra weight," he told her. Any bit of extra weight against the Walkers could be the difference between life and death.

He didn't think he could stand to lose her again.

She shook her head. "It's not."

"Arya," he whispered.

"It's saved my life before," she said, and, before he could protest. "I think I'd feel naked without it."

"Just be careful with it. I don't want you reaching for the wrong sword."

"I know which sword to use," she said, a mirror of a girl he'd long thought gone.

He laughed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd really laughed. Somehow, it felt right that it came because of her.

He nodded to her second sword. The Lannister sword. "Does it have a name?"

Arya shrugged. "Not yet. Won't be staying Widow's Wail though."

"Do you have any other chores you love?"

She laughed. "Won't be calling it Stable Mucker." He nearly laughed himself, at least until her face twisted. "Or cupbearer."

"You were a cupbearer?"
"Tywin Lannister's cupbearer."

He frowned. "He didn't know it was you?"

"He thought I was the daughter of a stonemason from Barrowton," she sounded a bit too proud, like she always did when one of her lies actually succeeded. Poor Bran had been blamed for stealing candies a thousand times over, and every time she'd truly fooled Lady Catelyn, she would beam like the sun.

"You tricked Tywin Lannister?"

"And Littlefinger too."

The pride struck him then, like an arrow to the chest. He couldn't wipe the smile from his face.

They spent the rest of the night trading tales from their journeys. For cupbearing for Tywin Lannister, he offered her the Great Ranging. For her days with the Brotherhood, he offered meeting Samwell Tarly and helping him kill the boy in his heart. For her journey on the Kingsroad, he offered his own to Castle Black, and back.

She said nothing of the days after the Brotherhood or her time at Harrenhal before Tywin Lannister, just as he said nothing of Ygritte and Ramsay and dying for the Free Folk. It was a trade. Someday, they would trade the rest. Someday, both of them would know.

That night, he buried a hand in Nymeria's fur and breathed in the smell of wolves and sweat. It was the sweetest smell he had ever known.

#

King's Landing greeted them with screams and tears. Children fleeing for their lives, grown men falling to their knees, grown women begging them to hold back the flames.

"Dragon!" they cried. "Aegon! He's back!"

A pious few shouted for the Mother and her mercy, but the only mother sat on her dragon's back. Any other had died with the old gods in the North, or the Lord of Light when Stannis fell.

Jon wanted to call down to them, to tell them that they meant no harm, but his voice could not carry over Drogon's ear-splitting roar. Nothing could.

They descended upon the Dragon Pit, where the walls were as white as they were crumbling. Jon spent too many of his years on the Wall, where icicles hung from his hair after every bath, and snow was never more than a few feet away, but never had he seen a snow like this. It filled the pit like water filled a lake. It seemed as if all of King's Landings snows had been piled in this place, but, when they had flown over, Jon had seen all too well that the rest of the city was just as white.

It'll be hard to run in this, Jon thought, and harder to fight.

Dany must have thought the same, because they had barely begun to land, before she shouted, "Dracarys!" and the world erupted into flames.

It was not the first time Jon had ridden on dragon back as it spewed forth fire, but it brought with it the same terror it always did. Hot gusts of wind blew past his face, searing his skin as red as the scar on his sword hand. Its scales grew hotter, too, like little flames licking at his skin. It didn't burn him – it never did – but it was enough to startle.
The snow had all but melted away as Drogon set his feet to the ground. His claws sunk into a pool of muddy water, though even that was burning away. Little droplets splashed on them, but there was so little left that Jon hardly noticed.

"Good work," he heard Lord Tyrion call to their queen, as the other riders slipped off of Drogon's spines. "We were all in dire need of a bath."

Behind him, Lord Harlan grumbled – something about Valemen and rocks – but Jon had never had much an ear for their arguments. The two had gone on too long already.

Jon aimed to meet with his sisters as soon as they landed, but there was too much to be done. Already, there were men coming through the gates of the pit. Men bearing cloaks and sigils of all different colors and symbols, trudging through the snow with a familiar displeasure.

At the front of the pack stood a man with a face longer than Drogon's, wearing a cloak of red and blue hanging over his well-padded shoulders. A silver trout pinned the cloak at his collar, though Jon could scarcely see it through the unkempt beard the man sported.

"Uncle Edmure," he heard Sansa whisper.

But others came soon after.

First came a man in an orange cloak wearing leather armor draped in more furs than could possibly be comfortable. He wore a hood over his ears, but what little Jon could make out of his face was covered in hair. _Preparing for the winter, I see_, Jon thought, dryly, but one look at his shield explained why. A golden spear piercing a red sun. A Dornishman. A Martell, if his long-ago lessons with Maester Lewin spoke it true. He had never thought to meet a Dornishman so far north, let alone in the midst of the long winter.

Beside him stood a woman, dressed in a man's armor and covered in more scars than he could count. Jon didn't need to see a sigil to know this one. One look at her told him all he needed to know. She and Theon shared the look.

Then, there was the Reachman. He was dressed not unlike Lord Tully and adorned in the cloak of his House. Red and blue, with a red fox on the shoulder, surrounded by blue flowers. It wasn't a sigil he recognized, but he knew well enough that he was a high lord. No one else would have the gall to approach a dragon.

Next came a tall man in a cloak fashioned from leaves and mud. In one hand, he clutched a frog spear, and, in the other, a shield adorned with a black lizard-lion on a great green field. He wore a shirt of leather scales, and carried a bow across his shoulder. A Northman, Jon knew. A Reed. He would have to greet him first.

There were others, too. Men wearing a dozen different sigils. Three stalks of wheat on a brown field. Red and yellow shields with three ships on blue. Two griffins fighting on red and white. A seven-sided star colored blue and silver. A shield of pure gold, and armor that matched. A black portcullis on a sandy field. A white sword and a falling star. Grapes on blue. Three scorpions on red. Three brass buckles on blue. A blue rooster on a yellow field. A white tower blazing on a grey field. Suns and moons quartered on rose and blue. That one, he recognized. Lord Tarth. That one hurt.

Some weren't even Westerosi. There were men of Braavos, of Lys, of Myr. There were men and women in crimson red robes, priests and priestesses like Melisandre, only some were older and some considerably drunker. Some wore cloaks of black and white, their faces shrouded in the
darkness beneath their cowls. Others, still, wore naught but furs and mismatched cloaks. There were men and women alike, fighters and fat men, grown adults and boys barely whetted. Dozens of them flooded into the Dragon Pit to greet them.

Most stayed far from the dragon, but a choice few stepped forward. Sansa's lord uncle for one, and the Martell after him. And with them…

The approaching man was short and as scrawny as a frog spear. He had a weasely face lined with bruises and circles under his eyes. On his chest, he bore the sigil that haunted Jon's dreams, even years after the betrayal. Two blue towers linked with a bridge, standing over a field of grey. He must have recognized Sansa by her look, because his eyes dropped as soon as he saw her, and his feet came to an abrupt halt

But Jon? No, he didn't recognize Jon. Which was why, as soon as Jon retrieved Longclaw from his belt, the man didn't even know to run.

Jon had hardly made it three steps before two arms came to pull him back. Or, rather, one arm and one mutilated hand. He pulled against them, but Jon was a man of speed, not strength. No matter how he struggled, he could not break the hold.

"Lord Snow," Beric's voice shouted into his ear, "this is no time-"

He needn't have bothered. Jon was not the only child of Winterfell there that day. He ought to have looked to his left before he went to Jon.

Sansa and Arya were approaching too. Sansa, at the head, but Arya not too far behind. It was much to his surprise that Arya didn't reach for either of her swords, or the little finger knife he'd spotted hidden amidst her cloak.

Kill him, he thought, and hated himself for it.

Lord Tully's eyes shot to Sansa, never once looking to the Stark at her side. "Cat," Jon saw him mouth, but nothing more left his lips.

Unlike Lord Tully, the Frey – the coward – leapt back as soon as he saw her coming. He stumbled behind her uncle, a Frey hoping to cloak himself beneath the Tully shield. The shield they'd slaughtered. The shield they'd bloodied.

"My lady! Your Grace!" the Frey man screamed. "I mean no harm! I mean no- I was a squire! Your brother's squire! His Grace, the King-"

"Olyvar is a friend," Lord Tully insisted. His hand went to his sword, though he seemed reluctant to draw it.

He's a Frey, Jon thought, as he slipped free of Lord Beric's grip. Beric didn't have another chance to catch him. He was running, like a wolf on a hunt.

"I wasn't at the damned wedding!" the Frey screamed, stepping back behind the line of lords. "I had nothing to do with it. They sent me off! I swear it to the gods! Old and new!"

I don't believe you, Jon thought, but then, Lord Tully was nodding.

"A Father's crimes are not his son's," the lord agreed, quickly. "I know your lord father will have taught you that!"
His feet slid to a halt as Arya's did. They used to finish each other's sentences, he remembered. Now, it seemed they even hated as one.

Distantly, he could hear people screaming his name. Tyrion and Dany, even Lord Harlan and Ser Beric. Before he even knew it, Dany's arm was around his, pulling him back.

Before, Jon had only eyes for the Frey, but now he saw them all - all the great lords and lesser, watching with interest as the Stark-Frey feud began anew. Some look scared, some angry, some even looked pleased. The Martell, in particular, looked as if he was ready to offer Jon a dagger, if only he breathe the word.

Dozens of faces. All looking to them. The last of the Starks, and the bastard in their midst.

Jon sucked in a breath. Then another. Then another. He tried not to think of Robb's face, of Lady Stark's. He tried not to think of thousands of men, slaughtered by friends and swallowed by crows. He tried not to think of the men who would never return home to father their sons, of the boys who would grow old without their fathers, who would never grow at all. He tried not to think that, without their treachery, maybe- maybe- it would have been different. Maybe Winterfell would stand. Maybe-

He took another breath.

"Think," Dany whispered in his ear. "You told me we need everyone. Everyone."

Would you fight beside a Baratheon? he wanted to spit, but he looked at Gendry and held his tongue. Dany had fought beside Baratheons and Starks and Lannisters and never once did she complain.

One Frey. One. He trembled just to think of it.

Arya was trembling too, though Gendry was whispering in her ear, like Dany was in his. No one else looked to her, but Jon. In truth, it was all too likely that none of them even knew who she was.

Do you know each other? he wanted to ask of Gendry, but his mind was a muddled mess of faces known and faces lost, and he lost the thought in the sea of them. Robb's uncle treats with his killer. If he'd eaten at all since Duskendale, he would have been sick. He wanted to be.

The lords were beginning to break from each other, eager to seek out the new faces and new stories. Lord Tyrion greeted them warmly, apologized with humor, and even seemed to recognize each of their many sigils, for he welcomed each man with a name. Some sought out Jon, others still sought out Lord Harlan – Lord Hunter, now, surely – and Lord Beric. Even Sansa had left Arya's side to speak with her uncle, to speak with the Frey. Arya remained behind with Gendry, not even willing to approach her uncle if it meant treating with a Frey. Even after all these years, she and Jon were still much too alike.

"We need to meet with them," Dany told him. He wondered how many times she had said it. He couldn't remember. There was hate singing in his ears, and it was hard to hear anything else.

"Aye," he said, finally, when he had dismissed the many faces. "Keep me away from the Frey."

"I will," she promised him. "Come."

And, then, she pulled him forward. He did not meet with Lord Reed first, as he had planned to, nor any of the Houses he'd had rather treated with than this. Gods, he might have rather spoken with a Lannister or even the Frey boy first. But she led him to a cloak of red and blue, and a sigil who
brought back memories he would rather not have.

Lord Edmure Tully regarded him with a shaken smile. He didn't look much like Lady Stark did. He
did not share the bright Tully hair or the regal air she carried. His hair was dark, his face long and
as solemn as a Stark's. He and his lady sister shared only the eyes. Two blue eyes that seemed as
cold as winter and as bright as the waters of the Riverlands were before the Long Night had
stripped the world of its color.

Lord Tully regarded Dany warmly. He knelt as soon as she approached. He seemed rather eager to,
in truth. Jon could see why. His eyes never left her dragon, not even to check the ground where he
knelt. His knee went into a great puddle, and the rest of him nearly fell in when he noticed. It was a
lucky thing he recovered as quickly as he did, for the Dornishman was already laughing.

"It is good to see you, my queen," the Dornishman said, when he had finished. "The whole of
Dorne bids you welcome to the city."

Dany frowned. "Dorne rules the city?"

The Dornishman smiled at her, all lips and no teeth. "Dorne bends to no one, and no one bends to
Dorne."

"Then who rules?" Jon asked.

"Dorne, of course," the lord explained, happily. "Dorne and the Riverlands, and the Stormlands,
and the Westerlands, and the Crownlands. Dorne and the North, and the Free Cities of Essos, and
the ones without a land to flee to."

"We received ravens," Lord Tully explained, as one took to the sky above them. Two milk white
eyes watched them from the air. "Too many ravens, across the Seven Kingdoms."

"And not just ravens," Yara Greyjoy said. She was leaning on a stick, and chewing mindlessly on
blackberries. "Some of my oarsmen – mindless men, of brains like butter – started going on about
King's Landing and White Walkers."

"My son as well," the Dornishman said. "A boy of two-and-ten who has never spoken a word, until
a day, a moon past, he begins whispering of Walkers in the wood and Winterfell falling. I have
heard half of the lords say the same."

"So, you believe it, then," Dany said. "In the Walkers."

"I imagine I will not fully believe until I have seen them with my own eyes," the Dornishman said,
"but I have seen enough to believe there is something. I have no wish to fight grumkins and snarks,
but there are too many stories of White Walkers in the past few years for them all to be a lie. My
armies are yours, my queen. But if this threat is a lie, my armies will be mine once more. And if
this is all some dragon trick-" He nodded to the dagger on his belt, and the spear on his back. "-I
may not be my uncle, but I am as good with a spear as any man of Dorne."

Her face hardened, but Dany was still cordial, as she said, "I speak no lies, my Lord."

"Prince," he corrected. "We have no lords in Dorne. We never did bend to the dragons." He looked
to Lord Tully and smothered another laugh. Lord Tully's blush was rather unlordly.

Jon thanked every god, that he no longer believed in, that he had not laughed himself. He had no
wish to spit on Lady Catelyn's memory any more than he already had.
"We have made our encampments within the city," Lord Tully explained to them, as he waved them to the exit. Jon tried to find his sisters, before they could be ushered away, but there were already too many surrounding him. Lords and ladies and Jorah Mormont, each more eager than the last to block his line of sight. He tried to pull back, but Dany's hand went around his arm before he could. Lord Tully went on, unaware. "Food supplies are short, but the Hightowers and the Florents have brought enough food to supply the men for a few fortnights more."

"It's more than we had at Winterfell," Jon said, shortly.

Lord Tully regarded him with unconcealed displeasure. Jon didn't mind much. He had long ago grown used to disdain from the Tullys. "We haven't much in the way of weapons. A few chunks of dragonglass, and a few dozen swords of valyrian steel."

Jon shook his head. "Anything's better than nothing. As long as we've fire-"

Lord Tully paled, but Yara was quick to intercede, a toothy smile sprawled across her face. "Oh, we have the fire. Where'd those Florents get off to?"

"Florents?" Dany asked.

Edmure looked vaguely sick, and even the Dornishman seemed discomforted. It was only the man with the fox on his shield who came forth to answer, and, as soon as he saw him, Jon wished he hadn't.

In a horrible, terrible way, he reminded Jon of the Hound. Most of the man's face had melted away, thin streaks of skin everywhere there had once been hair and flesh. One of his eyes had gone — another slip of skin in its place — and the other was trained across the Pit, to Tyrion by the men of the Westerlands. His cloak was blue, lined with orange, but burnt like the rest of him. On his breastplate, an orange fox stared out, lined by flowers colored the same as his cloak. He tried to force a smile, but his lips couldn't move far enough. He knelt before Daenerys, though every movement seemed to make him flinch.

"My queen," he told her. Still, his eyes did not leave Tyrion. "We have much to discuss."

"Lord Florent," Dany greeted. She had the grace not to flinch at his scars.

"The alchemists-" He coughed, and a wad of spittle slipped free of his lips. "They've been making fire, your grace. Liquid fire."

Chapter End Notes

And finally, the reveal of what's been going on in King's Landing! And the reason I needed to run to the books for more characters, because the show could not have cared less about any of the realms that weren't the Crownlands and the North.

Anyway, we'll be seeing more of these guys next time, as we slip into an Arya POV.
She’d been too long from the North.

The cold seeped into her bones like it never had when she was a girl, angry and biting like the worst of the bugs in the Riverlands. Only she couldn’t bite back, this time. She could only stew in her frozen bones, heat herself by fires that weren’t hot enough, and cradle against the dragon that had been itching to swallow her whole, not a fortnight past.

She’d been cold since Braavos, she realized, suddenly. Cold, since the knife had sunk deep into her stomach, and she’d woken up underwater with the taste of ashes on her tongue and fear in her belly.

Once, when she was a child – barely old enough to hold a bow straight – her brother had found her out in the snow. She’d been there for hours, picking winter roses in the Wolfswood and chasing rabbits through the trees, and when Robb had found her there, her lips had been tinted blue.

“One of these days,” he had told her, as she reached to toy with the snowflakes melting in his hair, “you’re going to give our lady mother a heart attack.”

She’d offered her the flowers after, and her lady mother had hugged her until the sun went down.

Both of them were dead now, and the flowers too.

She didn’t cry. She hadn’t cried since, and she wouldn’t ever again.

The Frey was speaking to her sister, introducing himself and his friends, offering his humblest and sincerest apologies, and the true sorrow he felt for Robb’s fate.

Arya hadn’t felt this furious since the start. Since Queen Cersei damned an innocent wolf, and it all went to all the seven hells.

I’ve never spoken to one of them before, she realized. Not Polliver, not Meryn Trant, not Walder Frey, not Cersei, not any of them. Not really.

Somehow, it only made her hatred burn brighter. Hot enough to hurt.

And Sansa – Sansa was treating with him, like an ally, like a friend, when she should have slit his throat and been done with it. She was asking him about the feast and the poison, and how did he escape when the rest of his House had perished?

“The Freys of the Twins are dead,” the Frey agreed, not seeming to mind that fact as much as he should have. In fact, he seemed remarkably pleased.
Stop smiling. I didn't kill him to give you the seat, Arya thought, but didn’t say. Not while Sansa was around. Sansa knew some, but not all. She didn’t know about the Twins. She would give anything in the world for Sansa to never hear of it again.

The Frey went on. “But the Stranger’s Feast did not kill all the Freys, princess.” He seemed pained to mention the feast. Arya didn’t care. They deserved pain. “The Freys of Rosby stand by Robb Stark’s kin, as do the Crakehall, even the Lannister Freys at Darry. There are few enough of us, it’s true, but those that fight at my side are loyal men. Loyal to the true King in the North and the Trident.”

I don’t care, I don’t care, I don’t care—

Sansa had always been courtlier than her. “The Lannisters?”

He nodded. “Their queen is dead. Their lord is dead. Their ladies are all dead. The only living Lannister serves at a Targaryen’s behest, I can see, but also at Jon Snow’s. And so, they come to support the Starks’ cause, as they do the Targaryen’s. As they should have done Robb’s.”

Sansa paused. A thousand masks of courtesy and lady-like smiles slipped away, if only for a second, as she asked, “And that matters to you?”

The Frey only smiled. A sad little smile that made Arya want to add him to the list that only held a single other name. But, when he spoke, it was anything but hateful.

“I am no traitor, Lady Stark.” He shook his head, and Arya’s unbeating heart burned like frozen fire. “I squirmed for King Robb and served him well in the Whispering Wood. I was no older than nine and ten when my father betrayed the laws of men and gods and had my king murdered,” he said. Arya would not have known his true age for the white hairs that sprouted from his chin and scalp alike. “I did not know of his plans, nor was I allowed to attend the wedding. My lord father kept me in a cell with the Lannisters, except they freed the Lannisters before the fighting. My own father locked me away for the crime of having attached myself to the man he gave me to. To the king. While my king died, I sat in a black cell with my loyal brothers, while my sister was wedded and bedded over the sounds of slaughter.” Arya did her best not to react to the bile rising in her throat. She did it well. Even swallowed it down when some came up. “Then, when it was done, my father sent me off to Rosby, where I couldn’t stain his black name more than I already had.”

“You should have killed him for it,” Arya whispered.

He must have heard, because he nodded and answered, even if the look he offered her was a strange one. “You’re right, I should have. I should have never left my king’s side, and I ought to have known my lord father’s treachery before he threw me in that cell. Might be I could have worn the name kinslayer in place of oathbreaker, but it seems I wear both names now, when I should have worn one.” His frown grew deeper, and he slid to one knee before Sansa. “I swear to you, princess, I fought once I was freed. When my Lord of Rosby released my bonds, I hunted my own brothers and slew as many as I could trail. But I am one man, and unlike he of the Stranger’s Feast, I have no faces to call on but my own.”

Sansa’s face crinkled, and Arya nearly chewed through her lip. She caught herself before her sister noticed, but the damage was done. The Frey was watching her, his face shadowed.

Still, he went on, “My brothers did not trust this face as they did the man who wore my father’s. If it is not enough, you may slay me where I stand, as is your right. But I am not the sort of man to stand by while the world crumbles. Not again.” His face was hard and tired. “It is true that I am not a man of the North, my lady. Not truly. I was born a Southerner of the Trident, a Frey of the
Crossing, and I was not raised in the old way. I was taught of Kingsguard, my lady. Men who were made to live and die beside their king, who earned their honor with each passing second that their king breathed, and lost it for each second he didn’t.” He let loose a sigh, as fierce as the winds of winter that the Walkers carried down with them. “I have lost more honor in my life than most ever gained, and I am hardly a man grown. And with each second he stood unavenged, I lost more. I am not here to fight for the North, my lady, and I will not pretend I am. I am here to fight for my people of Rosby, and all the living that are and have been. And I will fight for the dead, too.” His fist clenched around the hilt of his sword, and his face tore with a great sorrow. “I fight for my king. The man I failed.”

“Robb,” Sansa said, and the Frey nodded slowly.

“You need not love me,” he told Sansa. “Nor any of my blood. I cannot fault your hate. I would surely feel the same in your place.” He was still on his knee, there in the puddle of mud and water and slush. He looked to Sansa, never once turning his eye to Arya or Gendry or any of the rest. “But allow me to fight beside you.”

Sansa was going to accept him, she realized. She was already leaning forward, lifting her hand to gesture for him to stand, offering him one of her courtly smiles. She was so practiced at them, so good at words and dancing and curtsies and courtship.

But Arya was no daughter of court, and Arya would not hear it. She was the daughter of rivers and streams, of forests and beds of dirt and straw, of canals and cells, and blood running like the Blackwater Rush. She had no need for treating with Freys. All that had ever brought them was a wedding and blood and Mother and axes and ” Here comes the King in the North!” and Grey Wind’s- stop. She clenched her teeth, counted to five in her head, and said, “You’re not a Northerner. He wasn’t your king.”

Sansa jerked, her spine taunt and her smile crooked. She turned to Arya, impatience in her eyes as strong as it had been since they were children.

“Robb was the King in the North and the Trident,” Sansa tried to explain to her. But Arya could see the way her teeth were grit and her eyes narrowed, her fingers curled into fists behind her back.

*She hides behind the courtesy*, Arya realized. *She shouldn’t hide.*

“We allow nothing,” Sansa said to the Frey. “Fight as you will, Lord-”


She was suddenly very glad that Nymeria wasn’t there yet. Had she been, Olyvar Frey might have lost more than his precious honor.

And, as he fled the Dragon Pit, Arya stayed and watched, protected by the dragon on her chest and the blandness of her features. She said nothing to the lords and ladies, and nothing to any of the rest. She couldn’t help it. Any time she looked, she just saw Frey faces and “Ready to head home to Winterfell?” and- stop, stop, stop.

But, if she made her way to the Red Keep without suffering through the endless stares of self-important lords, perhaps her way was better than Sansa’s.

#

There were already rooms organized for them in the Keep. The King’s rooms for the Dragon Queen, and the Queen’s rooms for Jon. The rest found rooms in the princes’ chambers, in the
princess’, in the Maidenvault. Sansa quickly arranged for Arya to take Prince Tommen’s former rooms – that fat little prince that had sparred with Bran, a thousand years ago.

That fat little prince was dead. Everyone was dead.

*Not me,* she thought, but that was a lie. Stupid little Arya had died in the same castle he did. With Syrio Forel, and her father, both dead only a short walk away from this place. She could return to the balcony, if she wanted, and see where wood fought steel. Or, she could look through her own balcony to the blackened dent where once a statue and a sept had stood. Cersei’s only gift to the House Stark.

She tapped the Kingslayer’s hilt. Two gifts, then.

This castle would be a third.

There wasn’t much left to do, in truth. Oh, she could take part in the planning, but Arya had no mind for warfare. She’d been trained for an individual attack – one girl on one man, or woman, or whatever else they needed her for. If they asked her to kill a queen? She could do it. A king? She could do it. But to lead an army? No, that was Robb. Only Robb.

Jon might have learned later, and Sansa with him, but Arya hadn’t the need. Besides, she wasn’t so sure she was ready for Arya Stark to be welcomed back to the world just yet.

So… training. There was always a place for training.

She stood on the pillar of her bedpost, one leg folded to her rear and the other entirely supporting her. She held Needle before her, her body sideface, and her own face empty. And as she balanced, she cut through faces that were long dead and faces that deserved to be.


It had been hours since she’d started, and still, she felt none the better.

Wasn’t it supposed to feel good when she won? When the faces were cut and the names struck from her list? Why hadn’t it? Why did they still cling to her, like perfume to a lady or powders to a mummer?

She didn’t know, but she said the names anyway. And, for the first time in a long time, she wondered what her lord father would have said if he saw this. If he heard the names, saw the red on her sword, the red on her hands.

There were footsteps outside her door. Heavy steps, pounding like drums on the edge of a battlefield. Both sounds she knew well. Gendry.

She leapt off the post, sheathing Needle before she had even reached the wall. The door was barred – a thought that would have made her comfortable, if only the windows were too – and Arya needed both hands to lift it.

To his credit, Gendry didn’t even seem surprised when she opened the door. The only acknowledgement he gave it was, “I shouldn’t be here.”

“Don’t be stupid,” she told him, as she waved him in. She shut the door behind him, sure to bar it as soon as she was able.

“I’m surprised they left you alone,” he said, as he wandered over to the balcony. It wasn’t the
prettiest view in the world, to be true. She could see all of Flea Bottom if it pleased her, and, at random times of day, the wind would carry the fresh scent of shit and bowls of brown to her. She preferred it that way. She’d rather see the living than the gardens filled with snow and dying crops. As for the smell, she’d long since grown used to it. She’d spent too many years beside canals.

She climbed back onto the post. A different leg, this time. Water dancers needed both legs balanced, not just one.

“Why wouldn’t they?” She gestured to the dragon on her stolen shirt. “I’m just one of the Dragon Queen’s followers. A loyal servant, fresh from Braavos.” She’d considered changing it earlier, but there were only gowns and dresses in the Maidenvault, and she’d never learned to fight in dresses.

Gendry frowned. “But you should be with them. Planning. You’re a l-”

“Finish that sentence,” she warned. She didn’t need to say more. Only needed to wrap her fingers on Needle’s hilt.

“-Arya Stark,” he said. Wisely.

She was quiet for a second more, as she lifted herself onto a single toe. It was a credit to how well Gendry knew her that he didn’t say a word about it. She’d spent much of their journey to the Wall practicing with Needle on the Kingsroad, and sticks after Harrenhal. In truth, he must have seen more water dancing from Arry and Nan than Arya had seen from Syrio Forel.

“Arya Stark died eight years past,” she told him. “Every lord in the Seven Kingdoms knows it.”

His frown only grew deeper. “But you’re alive. You can just-” He waved a hand. “be a Stark. Lady Sansa and Lord Snow would support you.”

Arya nodded. “They would.”

In truth, even Arya didn’t know why she wanted to keep herself secret. Maybe because she’d gone by so many other names, it was hard to settle for just the one. Maybe because, if she took Arya Stark again, then Arya was the killer; not no one, not Arry, not Cat in her canals. Maybe because she knew, if she took that name again – if it was permanently hers, and she couldn’t run off to steal another – she would bear her father’s name again. She, the killer. She, the murderer. She, the woman who had ended more lives than she could count. She, who had wiped a House from the face of Westeros, who had worshiped the God of Death for years, who had abandoned her brothers and her sister in the War for the Dawn, because she had been too occupied with Queen Cersei and Ser Ilyn and the Mountain.

She couldn’t be all those things and still be Arya Stark. She couldn’t. It wasn’t right.

She shifted and, for the first time in a long time, she fell. Her toe slipped from the post, and the rest of her toppled forward. Her face might have met the floor, but Gendry was there too soon. She’d hardly fallen more than a few feet before his arms wrapped around her chest and pulled her back.

You are with your trouble, she thought, as he set her back on her feet.

“You need to be more careful,” he told her, and, before she could protest, added, “We’ll need you in the fight, won’t we? Can’t let you get yourself out of it once the horns blow.”

She pulled herself out of her arms and, though she tried to scowl, she couldn’t keep the smile off her face. “You seem to have been handling it just fine.”
“Oh, of course. Fallen castles everywhere I go, but otherwise, it’s been great. Only a few thousands of deaths, but you know how it is.” The humor fled his face then, as fresh horror washed over him. She wasn’t sure why. “Arry-”

“Gendry.”

“You could die,” he told her, and suddenly, the room was cold again. He stepped back, running his hands over his freshly-shorn scalp. His eyes were wild, his hands trembling. “We both could. Even if we win.”

She shrugged. “Then we’ve a few more days to live.”

“How can you be so calm about this?”

A rueful smile broke free before she could stop it. Rule your face, she told herself, but try as she might, she couldn’t send it away.

“Fear cuts deeper than swords,” she told him, “and the man who fears losing has already lost.”

He stared at her, as lost as he’d been when she first told him her name. “You make that up?”

She shook her head. “Syrio Forel, the First Sword to the Sealord of Braavos. He taught me other things too.”

“Oh?”

“Like this.” She tried to rule her face, but another smile came anyway. A true one, this time. “We’re going to face the God of Death. And there’s only one thing we say to him.”

“Fuck off?” he said, blinking.

Arya couldn’t smother her laugh, either. She couldn’t smother anything around him. When it finally came to a stop, she only shrugged, and said, “Close enough.”

She found herself sat on the featherbed. She waved for him to sit beside her, and regretted it as soon as she did. Never had she seen a man go so tense or turn so red so quickly.

“Again,” she said, “I’m not a lady. You can sit beside me, stupid.”

His cheeks were brighter than the flames in Prince Tommen’s fireplace. “It’s not proper,” he told her.

She had to force her eyes not to roll. “Wasn’t proper in the Night’s Watch either,” she said. “Or Harrenhal.”

“We didn’t have a choice in either.”

“And Arya Stark died eight years ago. I’m not a lady,” she reminded him. “So, it doesn’t matter if it’s proper or not.”

“You’re still-”

“Arry,” she said. “Just Arry.”

He didn’t look too happy to hear it. “Arry…”
“You said it yourself,” she said. “We might both be dead by the turn of the moon. Are you going to let propriety get in the way, now? Seven hells.” He blushed – properly blushed, like a maiden in a brothel – and it was all she could do not to laugh. “Remember Harrenhal? The Watch? The Brotherhood?” All times they’d slept no more than a few inches away, her clinging to his leg or his head resting on her shoulder.

“That was different,” he said, even as he sat beside her.

“How?” she asked. When he had no answer, she went on, “I haven’t been a lady since I was a little girl.” Since I killed my first boy.

“You’re still you,” he told her.

“Right, and you’re still the armorer’s apprentice who threatened Hot Pie and Lommy, is that it?”

He let out a terrible sigh, as if she had given him such a mighty inconvenience. “At least the world’s ending,” he said, as he sat. “Your brother can’t kill me if I’m already dead.”

She leaned back, head pressed against a too-soft cushion. “Do you really think we die here?”

He settled back, too. He didn’t seem too happy about it, if his shaking hands were anything to go by.

He was quiet for a while. A long while. Long enough that the Arry of old might have fallen asleep waiting, as comfortable by his side as she was anywhere. But Arya had grown up, and featherbeds were no place to sleep. On Dragonstone, she’d slept on the floor wrapped in blankets, and she’d do the same here. The featherbed was too damned comfortable, and, the last time she’d sought comfort, she’d gained three new scars and lost a friend.

She had almost forgotten the question by the time he said, “What do you plan to do if we don’t?” When she didn’t answer, he stuttered on, “If we win this, and the dead are gone, and- and you can go home and be Lady Stark, and-”

“And you’ll come with me,” she said, so confidently that she almost believed it herself. As if Gendry hadn’t turned down this exact offer a thousand years ago. “You won’t need to work for a lord, or anyone. Jon likes you.”

“He won’t if he finds out about this.”

“If. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” She grinned. “Besides, it’s not like I won’t be there if he finds out.”

He went quiet again, and Arya let it lie. At least until he gathered a great sigh and sat up as quick as a snake. His hands raked over his scalp, and, for just a second, Arya’s heart beat faster than a dragon’s wings. Her hand went for her sword, while the rest of her went, No, no, no, not again, no-

But that was stupid. His hands went back to his lap, and his face was still fixed to his skull. Stupid. Jaqen hadn’t sent anyone after her. He let her go. The name offered had been given. A face had been added to the Hall. She didn’t need to offer anything else.

She needed to get a grip on herself. Else, she might lose more than just her mind.

“Why am I here, Arry?” he asked, softly.

She shook her head. “Because you were standing outside the door like an idiot.”
“Arry,” he hissed, and she sighed.

“The world might be ending, and no one out there knows the two of us exist.” She stared up at the ceiling – at the cobwebs hanging, where ice spiders might rest by the turn of the next moon. “Seems right to spend the night, doesn’t it?”

“Spend the night?” he sputtered. “No! No. You’re a lady, and I’m just a bastard smith from-”

“We’ve talked about this.”

“We can talk about it a thousand times! I’m still a bastard who can’t use a fork, and you’re-”

“A Lady Stark, who hasn’t been to Winterfell in half her life, hadn’t been in a castle for most of that time, hasn’t been North for any of it, and dead for all of it.” She sat up, leaving the cobwebs to hang unabated. “I don’t care if you’re a bastard or the King of the Seven Kingdoms.” He tensed at that and, for the life of her, Arya couldn’t tell why. “You’re my friend. You’re family. My pack. Even if you don’t want to be.

“You can’t just-”

They might have gone on for hours, she realized. Days, perhaps, and then the dead would be upon them, and all would be done. The arguments would die with them, and nothing would ever be answered.

So, when she grabbed hold of his furs and pulled him close, it was really only to stop the argument. Really. And, if she pulled him a bit too close, well that was just Arya underestimating her own strength. And, if she accidentally pressed their lips together, well that was...

Well, she didn’t have much a reason for that.

The kiss was a rushed thing, barely more than a scraping of lips on lips. It wasn’t like anything she’d seen in the brothels as she strolled by with clams and cockles, or in Harrenhal when the Tickler was offered a woman. She nearly pulled away when she remembered that, but something kept her still, and she’d appreciate whatever it was for the rest of her life, however short it might be.

Because, as soon as their lips touched, any reservations Gendry had bled away. His arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer and cradling her as softly as a mother might a babe.

He pulled back only for a second, just to whisper the word, “Arry,” like a prayer in the night. Like he’d prayed to his Seven on the road, and she’d prayed to the old gods by the weirwood, and the shrines in the House. She tried to respond with his name, but she hadn’t the chance. He was on her again before she could even breathe.

It wasn’t much of a gentle kiss. Neither of them were very gentle people. He tried to be at first, tried to kiss her like a lord might kiss a lady. A soft peck, a gentle touch, his hand careful as it tangled in her hair. But both of them had been raised by black brothers, by outlaws and killers, and Arya wasn’t content with soft. She pushed him forward, back on the bed, and drove him down, fierce as a wolverine.

He tasted of ash, she realized. Ash and apples and sweat. It might have bothered anyone else, she knew, but not her. It wasn’t the first time Arya had tasted ash in her mouth, and it wouldn’t be the last.

When they broke again, it wasn’t for long. Just enough to catch their breaths and grin at each other
while they panted.

But, as his smile slipped, so did hers.

“You’re a maiden,” he whispered, his voice labored. “Your brother-”

“Will think I lost it in a brothel in Braavos.” Or, perhaps, she’d lost her maidenhead on a horse’s back somewhere along the way. That would be easier to explain. She’d heard stories of that.

She didn’t have much longer to think, because Gendry was pulling his shirt over his head and reaching for hers after, and Arya let him. Just for a moment – blinded by the heat in her belly and her cheeks – she didn’t think. Didn’t spare a single thought to her stomach, to Braavos.

Then, moment was done, and her shirt was gone, and Gendry’s face was frozen. Frozen in fear, in horror, in a terror so primal she ought to have called him the direwolf. But Arya didn’t have it in her to laugh.

She knew what he was seeing. Thick scars, too deep and too red and too puckered. Wounds in the worst of places that had never really fully recovered around her crooked stitching. One stretching from hip to hip, lower than the rest and shallower. But the others - one in the center, and one to the side larger and deeper and brighter, where the knife had been twisted and pulled. There were other scars, too. They were all across her twisted flesh, scattered like snowflakes in her brother’s hair. It didn’t matter. Those three were the worst. Those were the ones he stared after.

His mouth hung, like a seal waiting to catch a fish or a baby direwolf waiting for scraps. His eyes darted back and forth, cataloging each injury with the same horrible fear.

She made to move for her shirt, but stopped herself before she could. There was no use hiding when Gendry already knew everything else.

He reached out to touch them, his fingers ghosting over the once-festered flesh. She might have flinched back, if not for her training. She hadn’t flinched in years.

“You should have…” He swallowed. “That could’ve killed you. That should have killed you…”

I know, she thought. But Arya didn’t want to dwelling on wounds that had long since faded. At least, not those wounds.

She forced herself to shrug. “I should’ve died lots of times. I’ll probably die when the Walkers come. So how about you stop your whinging and we can enjoy living until I do.”

“I’m not whinging!” he said, whinging.

“Good,” she said, grinning with all her teeth. “Then let’s get on with it, m’lord.”

And then, she was on him again, and all thoughts of scars and war went with the winds.

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell how much I want Olyvar to come back in Winds? Bring it, George.

In other news, finally got to the Gendrya. It only took, what 100k words? Ha, I'm great
at pacing, what're you talking about?

Anyway, my pacing skills aside, we're heading for a Tyrion POV as we prepare for the end times. Get ready for some battle strategies with some old faces and new.
Chapter Twenty-Four: Words are Wind

King’s Landing

Tyrion Lannister

When he was a boy only freshly weaned from his wet nurse’s breast, she had offered him stories. Oh, every castle had one. Some old woman who’d raised half the boys in the city and whipped the other into shape. One who knew a thousand stories about days they certainly couldn’t remember. Stories passed on from wet nurse to wet nurse, until each tale was as muddled as the milk that dripped from their breasts.

She’d been the first to tell him the stories. Stories about the Isle of Faces, about the Dornishmen that could slay dragons, the snarks and grumkins that would steal him away if he was wicked (and he so often was), and the Doom in Valyria that was waiting for a little runt of a boy to stumble upon it the way poor Aerea Targaryen had. He’d laughed at that, said Father would be happy if they took him, and she’d refused to speak to him for days.

But after that, when the silent treatment had worn thin, and her mind was full of stories again, she sat him down and told him of the Land of Always Winter.

It had been his one of his least favorite stories. He had always been too taken by tales of dragons and riders to bother listening after the rest. But still, he let her talk. She told him of spiders made of ice, of wolves with eyes like the ocean, and men risen from the dead to slay their brothers and fathers. Of the prince that was promised, the last hero. A man strong enough to slay the Great Other, to cast him off to the darkness from whence he’d came. He had been banished there and chained limb to limb for all the rest of time. Or, at least until a little dwarf boy angered his father too much.

He’d laughed at that, said his lord father would have scared the Great Other away with a glare and a marriage proposal. His wet nurse hadn’t been pleased. In fact, if he recalled correctly, she had cuffped him upside the head. A great many people did in those days.

For the first time, he almost regretted killing the man who sired him. If only because, had his lord father been there, it would have been Tywin Lannister sitting in on these meetings, and not Tyrion.

In all his days studying the Last Hero, he had never imagined the War for the Dawn could be so dreadfully boring.

“She Martells, the Yronwoods, the Daynes, and the Qorgyles can hold the Dragon Gate. Any spare
men from any of the other Dornish Houses will go with them,” Jon Snow said, moving the pieces in place with the hilt of a dagger.

It was a clever move, Tyrion thought, eyeing each of the yellow pieces. The Dragon Gate was one of the northernmost gates, the one that would surely be the center of attack, and one that would surely be the first to fall. But by pinning the Dornish Houses there – the armies most untouched by the War of the Five Kings and the many wars after – they might actually seem to stand a chance. Not a likely one, of course, but better than any other Houses manning that gate.

The Night King would expect heavier forces there, too. And, if he was smart enough, he might expect southern forces to be the most fearful of the wrath of winter. He would know the lines would break. Gods be willing, he would count on it.

Of course, it was not a plan Prince Ryndon Martell would take to well, hence why the meeting was lasting as long as it did.

“I still do not understand why the Lannisters cannot hold the gate,” the prince said. “The Dornish are southern men. We will not fare well in snow. It is much too far.”

“It’ll be snowing all across the city,” Jorah Mormont said. “It won’t matter if it’s the north end or the south.”

“The North is further. Our men are not trained for moving in snow. You ask me to direct my men to suicide.”

“I ask you to direct your men in war,” Daenerys said, coldly. “You say they have not practiced moving in snow. It is a good thing they will have a week before the war. I expect them to spend it training.”

“A week will not be-”

Tyrek Lannister stepped forward. “Do you think men of the Westerlands are any better trained? We’ve less than 5,000 men and fewer still have seen snow before this past moon. Seven hells, half our armies are summer children.”

“Do you expect me to pity sons of Lannister?”

“I would ask you to show a little resp-”

“Enough!” Daenerys hissed, rising to her feet. She wore no crown, but, somehow, even without it, she looked more of a Queen than Cersei ever had. “The Dornish will hold the Dragon Gate, and the Lannisters will hold the Gate of the Gods. That is my final decision.”


The Dornishman only bowed his head to Daenerys. Suddenly, the snow seemed no more of an issue than the chill in the air. A thin smile whipped across his dark lips. “As my Queen commands.”

“My grace, the Westerlands alone haven’t the men to hold the Gate of the Gods. If the Night King is as smart as you say…” Lord Crakehall sputtered. He was a stout man, and he looked rather like the boar on his sigil, if Tyrion told it true. As it stood, half of his chins flapped with every word.

“Smarter,” Jon Snow said. “He completely outmaneuvered us at Hardhome, Winterfell, and the
“Eyrie. He may not look it, but he’s smart.” He looked to their queen. “Lord Crakehall is right, your grace. They’ll need more men.”

“If we could take men from the Reach—”

“The Reach will barely have the men to hold the River Gate, let alone the Gate of the Gods. If your grace wills it, we may be able to hold the River or the King’s, but not the Gods. No, not that. Not one second, your grace. We lost as many in the Blackwater as the Lannisters did, your grace. Yes, just as many.”

A lie, of course, and their Queen knew it as much as Tyrion did. For, when he caught her eyes, the scowl was clear for all to see.

The Tyrells had lost a few hundred, mayhaps a thousand. But as many as the Lannisters? When Tyrion and his men had fought for hours, while they fought for less than one? When they came upon a siege that had already fallen, with the enemy’s leader fortuitously missing, and their navy destroyed? When half of the enemy forces were tricked onto their side as soon as they arrived?

No, the Reach had more men in their army than King’s Landing had left, and the Reach knew it as well as he did.

But just as Daenerys was about to speak, the Lord Florent climbed laboriously to his feet. He had been sat in his wheeled chair, easing his burns and his discomforts, but now, he bore his pain with teeth grit. He reached for a cane, and it was a miracle it did not snap under his weight.

“The Reach will hold the… Gate of the Gods with… Lord Tyrek’s men,” he told them. Every word came paired with a wince. It was miracle the man was still alive for all the breaths he cut short to cough. As Tyrion recalled, he had not coughed nearly this much outside. Perhaps the cool air soothed his burns? “Lord Hightower… does not speak for us all… your grace.”

He sat against after, and the knight at his side eased him into his seat. The lord grunted and hissed his way down, but never once did he react in any way to Lord Hightower’s glare. Nor to the glare of any of the Reach lords, who had been all-too-content to escape the worst of the fighting.

Do you intend to come to Tumbleton with us? Tyrion wondered, idly. Or will you die with the rest, in the same fires that claimed your charred flesh?

He wanted to tell the man to go. He didn’t need more blood on his hands. This plan would already stain them the color of his banners.

“Thank you, Lord Florent,” Daenerys said, gracefully. When the burned man smiled at her – a grotesque grin that only served to flash more of his teeth through his cheek – she went on, “If the Gate of the Gods are in order, and the Dragon and the Iron, which else are left?”

“The Lion, the Old, and the King’s,” Jon Snow said. “The ironborn can watch over the River Gate, if they can pull their ships into the bay.”

“I can’t speak for Euron’s men, but the rest of the fleet’ll be there,” said the Lady Greyjoy. She didn’t look up from her hands, too busy cleaning her browned nails with the tip of her dagger.

“Any word from Euron?”

Somewhere, a raven screamed. Tyrion dismissed it, though he did notice that Lord Tarth tensed.

Sansa Stark shifted. “The old master of whispers claims he hasn’t had word.”
“You believe him?” Lord Redwyne scoffed. “It’s no matter. The Redwyne fleet is greater than any force a Greyjoy could muster.”

Lady Greyjoy’s hand twisted on the hilt of her blade, but, before Tyrion could step in, Sansa was already answering, “The Redwynes are already planted around the Blackwater, aren’t they? By the Iron Gate. We will need you there, my lord. We cannot let anything into the bay.”

Lord Redwyne grumbled, but seemed to acquiesce. It was the most they would get.

Tyrion was quick enough to give him no chance to change his mind. “The Old Gate will also be a center point for attack. Can someone please explain to me why they had to build so many northern gates?”

“The Stormlands will defend the Old, your grace,” said Ser Beric, ignoring Tyrion’s perfectly valid inquiry.

“Lord Beric,” began Lord Buckler – a man of the Stormlands who did not seem to be particularly pleased with his fellow Stormlander – but the Lightning Lord was unwilling to let him go on.

“I have been away from our lands for many years, but I do not remember the Bucklers shying from battle. I hope you the years have not turned you craven, my lord.” He set his mutilated hand on the table. The few remaining fingers thrashed aimlessly against the wood. “The Stormlands will defend the Old, and the Lord of Light with us.”

The pieces were moved and the armies were set. Five of the seven gates chosen. They had made a fair amount of progress for once. Pointless progress, but progress nonetheless. The order would be changed a thousand times more before the battle actually began, and a thousand times during. Strategies were never truly set until the war was already done. It was something he had come to learn many times over.

“The Freys can defend the Lion Gate,” Olyvar Frey stated. “We haven’t the men to hold off a full attack, but the Riverlands has enough left for a single gate.”

Lord Tully nodded. “He speaks it true.”

And so, more pieces moved. More grumbles earned. More discontent lords who might have each other’s heads, if not for the war on the horizon. Come tomorrow, they would revise these plans completely. Come tomorrow, the same arguments would sprout again.

Why did the people always have to be so stupid?

“Who will defend the King’s Gate?” Daenerys asked.

“The rest,” said a Myrish man in a red cloak with a blazing heart sewn into the shoulder. A Red Priest, Tyrion noted. “The priests of R’hollor shall be scattered, but there is no reason the Myrish, Lyseni, and Braavosi cannot man your Gate of Kings.”

None disputed him, and more pieces moved.

Of course, the Dornish fought again, and the meeting devolved once more.

When the meeting was broken, Tyrion found that his queen remained, surrounded by a field of lords and ladies. Lord Brax, and Lady Broome, Lord Payne, Lord Prester, Lady Hetherspoon, Lord
Kyndall, Lord Marbrand, and dozens more whose banners Tyrion did not know. Men and women who had been silent in the meeting, but now sought favors from their rightful queen.

It was difficult to weave his way through the crowd, and harder, still, to catch his queen’s attention. He had to shout to grab her eye, and, even then, she spent longer than he would have liked searching for him.

Then, by her order, the crowd was dispersing, and Tyrion was left alone with her, Ser Jorah, and the last two unsullied soldiers.

The Lannister lions were gone from the tapestries, and the crowned stags with them. In their place were Dornish spears, Tully trouts, Florent foxes, Hightower towers, and a single red dragon on a black field. There were no wolves, no falcons, and no golden roses anywhere in sight. He found he only mourned for the wolves. He had grown surprisingly fond of them in these past few years.

King’s Landing had changed since he had last found himself in this place, and the rest of Westeros too. Almost too much. Sometimes, Tyrion wondered if even they won the war, if they could recover. Somehow, he was not truly sure.

Tyrion strode to his queen’s side, his legs cramping with every step. He had spent too much of the day on his feet. Mayhaps he could ask for a stool for the next meeting. At the moment, only Dany and Lord Florent had a seat, and even she rarely made use of it.

“That went well,” he remarked, settling on one of the stone steps. The others remained standing, but then, the others didn’t have his legs either.

“Have the ironborn and the Farmans always been so-”

“Yes,” Tyrion said. “As far as history can remember it, there has been little love between them.”

“They can hold themselves together for a week more,” Ser Jorah said. “Once this war is done, the ironborn can tend to themselves.”

“They will still be our allies. I would like not to see my allies at war, if I can prevent it.”

“You would be hard pressed to try. The Farmans spent thousands of years guarding the Westerlands from the iron invaders, and it was not too long ago that the ironborn even managed to steel Fair Isle from under them. If I recall well, under His Grace, your grandfather, the Iron Fleet destroyed the whole of the Farman forces.” He shifted, easing his left leg on the steps below. “The Walkers will sooner come to terms with us than the Farmans will the ironborn.”

Daenerys’ lips twisted in displeasure. “The world is at an end, and they bicker like children…”

“Mayhaps they prefer to die as they lived,” Tyrion offered. “Would you have befriended Robert on the eve of war?”

“I befriended Ned Stark's son, did I not?”

“Yes,” Tyrion said, grinning good-naturedly, “the bastard who knelt for you and gave you the North, with a face as pretty as any a brothel could offer you. A true sacrifice, your grace.”

For a moment, Dany only scowled, but, before long, a smile broke on her own perfect face. “Perhaps we can bond the Farmans and the Greyjoys the same way.”

And, as night gathered and the cold winds blew, Tyrion laughed with his queen.
Of course, the mirth could only last so long before they were back to their scowls and sorrows. Those moments were growing shorter by the day. Soon enough, he might never have a laugh again, and what was the point in life, if he could not laugh at terrible proposals? It would be worse than asking him to live without wine and whores.

Ah, how his life had degraded these past few years.

“Have you spoken with Lord Tyrek?” Dany asked him, and Tyrion offered her a grim nod.

“We have agreed that he will lead the Lannister vanguard. According to all the laws of Westeros, I am still officially in exile. It is a miracle that none of our honorable lords and ladies have called for my head.”

“The day they do, they will lose their own,” Daenerys promised him. “As soon as the war is done, you shall have your pardon.”

He nodded his head. “My gratitude is unending, your grace.”

“And...” Ser Jorah said, unamused.

Tyrion smiled. “And, I would ask your grace to speak with my dearest cousin of the lordship of the Rock. Lawfully, if my honor and titles are restored, the castle should fall to me. After the war is done, of course.”

“After the war,” she told him. “We will discuss it then. For now, what are your plans for the battle? I will not lose my Hand to the Walkers, and one man will not make much a difference in the fight.”

He nodded his head. “And a half-man even less, I’m quite sure. Lord Footly has offered Castle Tumbleton as lodging for the ladies and the weak. It seems I am a good fit for one and good company for the other.”

“Which?” Ser Jorah asked.

Daenerys’ glare could have levelled mountains. In truth, it likely would. Tyrion had never been one to bet against dragons. Few clever men did, and he liked to fancy himself at least that.

“Tumbleton,” the queen said to Tyrion. “With the Lady Sansa?”

He nodded. “So I’ve heard.”

Daenerys looked to the ground, before she forced her gaze back to him, jerking like a mad horse, instead of the dragon she was. “Keep her safe,” she told him, suddenly. “There may be raiders, attackers, assassins-”

“I will do my best, your grace,” Tyrion said. He rose to his aching feet and stepped forward. “Though, if I may ask, why the sudden interest? I thought there was no love lost between you both.”

“There is,” Daenerys said. “But she is Jon Snow’s sister and the Lady of Winterfell.”

“Ah, yes, it does seem prudent to protect the heiress to a pile of rubble.” And all the more prudent to prevent the risk of the castle falling to the other of the Stark sisters, if the look on Daenerys’ face spoke it true.
This time, the glare was directed at Tyrion, and it was all he could do not to wither and hide.

They went on talking for another hour, and then the meetings resumed again. Sometimes, Tyrion thought they would never end.

Yet, in a few days’ time, he knew he would wish they hadn’t. In a few days’ time, he would stand at the cusp of a foreign castle, staring up at the sky and willing any hint of word from a battle that he could not see. Hoping, beyond hope, to see a dragon soar above his head. Hoping he would not have to use the dragonglass knife he had carried since Winterfell. Hoping his life would not end at the beckoning of some blue-eyed beast. A wolf, or a spider, or even a man. Maybe even a dragon, if he was unlucky enough.

He returned to the meeting with his head high and his legs aching and cramping.

The day he left for the final time, his legs still screamed, his head still ached, and the fear in his heart pulsed like none he had ever known before the Eyrie.

By the time he returned – if he returned – this castle would be filled with cripples and broken things. Perhaps, for once in his life, he would fit among them well.

There were tables set up about the room. Tables lined with wine and water. Tables that called him to the wrong end, to the wrong cup. As Lord Dayne inquired about the usefulness his family’s sword, and as Lord Sweet argued against the placement of too many early troops at the River Gate, he inched ever closer to the wine.

Maybe it was an act of benevolence, or some mark of the gods’ righteous wills, but before he could get any closer, Ser Beric was there. Frowning at him from the table, as he poured himself Dornish red and a cup of water. He handed one to Tyrion, shaking his head all the while.

Tyrion spoke not a word, but, when the cup was in his hands, he toasted to the Lightning Lord’s Lord of Light, and drank down the red. It was the greatest thing he’d tasted since the horse piss on Varys’ ship. It would be the greatest for a long time still.

Chapter End Notes

No, I did not make up Lord Sweet, and I don’t understand either.

Unfortunately, not much action to be had in this one, which is why it’s a rare weekend update. But I thought it was probably important to understand what, exactly, they’ve been planning for so long. Or, at least, a few pieces of their plans. Can’t exactly play all my cards before the battle even starts, can I?

Anyway, next time, we’ve got Sansa again, as she heads off to Tumbleton. Time for a good old Stark goodbye. They’re pretty used to those, I’ve noticed.
Sansa IV

Chapter Notes

If anyone's wondering why updates are coming so quick, it's because I've written a good seven chapters ahead without really meaning to. Battles are pretty fun to write, I'm learning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Five: When the Snows Fall

King’s Landing

Sansa Stark

Nymeria returned two nights before the Walkers came.

A sennight had passed since they had arrived, and little had changed since. The castle was loud, rife with the sounds of thousands of men – tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, more than Sansa had ever expected when they left Dragonstone – shouting and singing and drinking themselves to sleep. The Dornishmen led the celebration, drunk on the finest Dornish reds, while the Redwyne men spread about all the Arbor gold an army could need.

The lords, ladies, and commanders slept in the keep, while the rest made their lodgings outside the walls in houses long abandoned. A few scattered civilians still remained, but most were settled in Tumbleton, Fawnton, or Felwood. A brave assortment had sworn to travel to Dorne, but they hadn’t the food or the mares, and Lord Cafferens had assured Sansa that his cousins at Fawnton would convince them to stay, at least until word came from King’s Landing. In truth, he needn’t have bothered. If the wrong word came, they would be dead no matter where they ran.

The largest army Westeros had ever mustered was gathered in the city. By Sansa’s count, over a hundred Houses had pledged their armies, some mustering only a dozen men, but others bringing thousands. All around, men spoke of lame brothers and mindless cousins speaking for the first time in decades, warning of Walkers and wights and a fallen Winterfell. Others spoke of ravens, white-eyed and cawing endlessly, until the lord saw the missives and heard the lame, and called his banners. Of green dreams and visions and signs from the gods. Visions and messages that had stopped the same day Winterfell collapsed.

If she could stand to be near a weirwood, Sansa might have prayed her thanks. As it stood, she only whispered her prayers to the night sky. Prayers, not to the gods, but to the little brother, gone too soon.

When she walked on the battlements, she saw a field of color. Hundreds of colors adorning shields and banners alike. More than she could have dreamt of. More than any of them had expected when they had been a dozen survivors crowded around a painted table.

They had just broken from another meeting. One with far more lords and ladies than Sansa was
used to. They had needed to make use of throne room, if only because there were few other places that could hold hundreds of lords and ladies, and their commanders too.

She recalled most of the sigils, though some escaped her. She even recognized some of the names, and a few scattered faces. The man carrying Ser Arthur Dayne’s sword with the falling star on his tunic was Edric Dayne, Lord of Starfall. The man wearing the Lannister lion was Tyrek Lannister. The one with the frog spear on his back was her father’s friend, Howland Reed. All faces she knew well, if only from her time in court – both in King’s Landing and her father’s.

It was good to see friendly faces in this field of foreign foes.

Of course, there was Jon, too, and all the rest from Dragonstone. Of the group from the Chamber of the Painted Table, only Arya had abandoned these meetings. She’d attended the first meeting, of course, but she hadn’t stayed long. She had left after they had sent the youngest of the soldiers away – boys of three-and-ten who could scarcely hold the swords they’d been given. Boys who had been grateful to leave, who had run back to their castles and keeps with smiles that seemed to light the darkened city, if only for a day.

Her sister hadn’t been convinced.

“It’s their city too. They should be allowed to fight,” she had said to Sansa, after the meeting was done. When Sansa had reminded her that they were only children, she had only grown more confused, and had not returned to a meeting since.

They were better off, she supposed. The fewer opinions at these meetings, the better. There were already enough as it was. Debates raged from morning to night, or, at least, what they thought morning to night was. Sansa was fairly convinced none of them knew anymore.

She found Jon after most of the crowd had fled, eager to meet with their men before the agreed-upon sleeping hours. The scouts claimed that the Walkers were a few days’ march. The men needed to know as much as their lords.

“Sansa,” he greeted her, after the stragglers abandoned him for the Dragon Queen.

“The wolves are howling again,” she told him.

“Nymeria,” he said, not bothering to hide his wince. She understood. Of all those in the castle, she must have been the only one who could. Every time she saw Arya’s wolf, it sent pangs of grief through her, deeper than any sword could reach.

She started making her way towards the exit, and Jon followed like a lost pup. “We can let them sleep in the gardens. We’ll need to tell the men not to bother them.”

“Shouldn’t we send them south?” Jon asked. He frowned, and the curve of his lips only made the circles under his eyes darker. “Wolves aren’t made of dragonglass.”

“No,” Sansa agreed. She thought of Lady, and the sword that she’d never seen fall, but that she’d felt all the same. “They’re not valyrian steel, either. But they could be helpful.”

They slipped free of the throne room, and out into the yard. The wind buffeted them just as furiously as it had when they were sat upon Rhaegal’s back. Sometimes, Sansa wondered if arrows would work at all when the fighting came. The winds were strong enough to make any shot impossible.

But, then, the archers in the Eyrie had done their jobs well enough. Perhaps she did not know
enough of warfare to conclude these things.

It did not matter either way. If the plan worked, they would have no need for hours. They would not need anything but swords, men to hold them, and red priests to light them.

“How?” Jon asked her. He didn’t even shiver as they stepped into the snows. Not like she did. The Wall had taught him much and more of cold, it seemed.

“They can stay by Arya,” she said. “They will distract any wights, or cripple them, perhaps. They can last enough for her to get away.”

“If the plan works-”

“If the plan works, we don’t need the ships either. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have them.”

“At least the ships can-”

“Shoot at wights that can’t swim?” A new voice. One that came so suddenly that Sansa nearly leapt out of her skin. This time, it was not so much a surprise when she turned to find Arya, standing impatiently in the snow as she fiddled with a dagger. A strange dagger with ripples in the steel and a sharp hilt made of blackened bone.

Jon recovered sooner than Sansa did. “That’s valyrian steel. Where do you keep finding-”

“You should come with me,” she said. “There’s… I’ve something to show you.”

It was a testament to how strange Sansa’s life had become that she did not even question it. Not as her sister led her into the Tower of the Hand – even if it tore her breath from her lungs to even look at it – and not as she led them down. Down, into the dungeons. Down, below the castle and below the keep, below the might of Aegon’s hill.

Jon tried a few times. To question her, to ask her how she had even found this place, why she had ever bothered going this low. He had questioned it as she pressed them through a tunnel that could barely fit a child, let alone three grown siblings. He had questioned it as she led him to a place so dark, it was a wonder Arya could find her way at all. But, while Sansa and Jon stumbled and clung to the walls, Arya walked as if the sun still shone over their heads.

Mother’s mercy, the years had not changed her strange little sister.

In the end, Sansa found a torch on one of the walls. Or, rather, Sansa stumbled into a torch on the walls, and tore it free of its sconce before she would move any further. She had taken to carrying a piece of flint with her, and it served her well now. For the first time in a quarter hour, there was light again, and suddenly, she could see.

For a moment, she wished she hadn’t.

There was a monster sitting in the middle of the room. A great monster with a skull a dozen times Sansa’s size and blacker than the dark of night. Its teeth as long and sharp as knives. A bolt – a hundred times the size of a normal arrow – stuck out from the shattered remnants of its hallowed eye. Just the sight of it was enough to make Sansa shiver.

“Balerion the Black Dread,” Jon whispered.

Arya nodded. “I found it years ago. Before Father…” She approached it without fear, like one might greet an old friend. She even tapped its great muzzle, right above one of the teeth. “It didn’t
have the arrow back then. I think Joffrey had something to do with that. He seems the sort.”

“How did you find this?” Jon asked, a bit of amusement clouding his confusion. Sansa could relate.

“I was chasing cats.” She shook her head. “Doesn’t matter. You see this?” She bent below one of the teeth, careless as it scraped her cloak, and pointed to a tiny piece of paper placed lazily inside the monster’s mouth. “This wasn’t there then. It’s new.”

She pulled back, the missive crumpled in her fist. When she handed it to Sansa, she didn’t meet her eyes. As soon as she began to read, Sansa understood why.

To the Cat of the Canals,

I place this where I trust only you will find it. This is a dagger of great value. Valyrian steel is one of the few tools that can kill the White Walkers. They are coming for you. Use it.

I also leave you with another weapon. There are stores of liquid fire planted all across the city, and more being made by the day. Tell Stone to do what must be done. Tell Snow not to fear. I have sent bait.

Winterfell is falling. Valar morghulis. Valar dohaeris. But what is dead may never die.

The Three-Eyed Raven

For a moment, Sansa stared at the page. A thousand thoughts ran through her mind, and with it a thousand fears, a thousand worries. Worries over Bran, over those foreign words, over the dagger and bait. Yet, somehow, the only thing that came out from her mouth, as she passed the missive to Jon was, “Who’s the Cat of the Canals supposed to be?”

“No one,” Arya answered. And, while it was hard to see in the near-darkness, Sansa could have sworn her skin had paled.

“And the bait?”

Arya didn’t have the chance to answer. Before she could hope to, the sound of feathers catching wind overtook the silent dungeon. The flame’s light nearly flickered away as a black bird flew past, screaming into the night. The beast settled on the dragon’s snout, and watched the three of them with eyes as white as snow.

“Breath!” it screamed, “Death! Breath!”

Before she could hope to say a word, Jon had already dropped the page and whispered, “Bran?”

But the bird was uninterested in answering him. “Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!” it said. “Breath! Breath! Breath!”

If Arya could have gone any paler, she might have passed for Jon’s wolf. Jon looked just as ghostly. He reached out for the bird, but never quite touched its flailing wings before he pulled back again. It was the first time Sansa had seen him afraid since the castle had fallen.

“You were a warg,” he whispered.

“Jon,” Sansa hissed, “what is it?”

He swallowed. “When I was with the wildlings... I met a man. A skinchanger. He told me...
told me wargs and skinchangers don’t live just one life. They— they get two. One as a man, and one as a beast. After they die.” He reached to touch the bird. This time, his fingers traced over the bird’s – over Bran’s – beak.

In Winterfell, Sansa thought that she had known cold. When she’d been a little girl, wandering about in the summer snows, she thought she knew it as well as any Northern lady could. But, as the raven cawed and screamed, Sansa thought that she had never been so cold as she was then. Not in the winter snows, not in the sky above a dying Eyrie, not in the crypts of Winterfell as Winterfell died around her and Gendry the smith came screaming.

This was a different sort of cold. It was the type of cold that froze her very soul, that reached between her bones and tore her to pieces.

Bran was dead, but he wasn’t. Bran was dead, but he was in the room, and he’d left them weapons and words. Bran was dead, and yet he was still influencing them, still manipulating the world from beyond the grave. Bran was alive.

“Jon—” she whispered, but Jon was frozen, too. Jon and Arya both, staring at the raven as if it held all the world’s answers. It did, if it was Bran. Bran always knew.

Arya, in particular, looked green. Actually, she’d looked green ever since the bird had started speaking. She spoke not a word, but her eyes spoke her terror as well as any.

_Has she seen magic before? Sansa wondered. Walkers, or wights, or men brought back from the dead? She might not have. That might be why she seems so afraid._

Jon picked up the letter with shaking fingers. He was trying to temper them – Sansa could see that – but there was little to be done.

She read the missive with him again. And again. And again. She read it until she had the words memorized.

“Valar morghulis,” Jon whispered. “What does that—”

“Valar morghulis,” Arya corrected. Whatever the difference was, Sansa didn’t hear it. “All men must die.”

“All,” Bran-the-raven screamed. “All. All.”

Sansa shivered. “And valar dohaeris?”

Either Sansa had pronounced it right, or Arya didn’t care to correct them anymore. She was too busy squinting at the raven. “All men must serve,” she muttered. Then, louder, “That’s really Bran?”

And the thrice-damned bird squawked. It said no more words, but its blinding white eyes seemed to track Sansa everywhere she moved. If the bird wasn’t Bran, it certainly shared his uncanny stare.

“IT’s Bran,” Jon said, his voice trembling.

Once, Sansa might not have believed it. She would have rolled her eyes, laughed and called it a jape or one of Old Nan’s stories. But that Sansa had not met dragons, and Walkers, and wights, and a brother who could see everything, and a half-brother who had risen from the dead, and a sister who could leave her body and control a wolf. Life had grown so much stranger since the
direwolves came to Winterfell.

They stood in silence for a moment, staring at their bird of a brother, while Nymeria’s wolf pack howled outside the city gates. In the end, it was Jon who broke the silence, with little more than a whisper. “Bran. We should have gone back for you. We all should have.”

The bird said nothing to that. He only cocked his head and flapped his dark wings. His eyes went to Jon, and then to Arya. He squawked – a wordless squeal this time – and took to the air. Before Sansa could duck, he was soaring past her head and into the darkness. Where he went, she could hardly say. If he managed to fly back to Winterfell within the next quarter hour, she would not even be surprised.

*The world has gone mad,* she thought. *Freys fight beside Starks. The Dornish fight beside Lannisters. The dragon for a city of stags. Why shouldn’t my brother be a raven?*

Jon slumped against a wall and let loose a tiny laugh. “Bran’s a bird,” he laughed, again. “Our brother’s a…” He shook his head, and had to lift his hand to his face to wipe away his smile.

Sansa sat on the stone. All-too-suddenly, she realized she didn’t mind the dragon much anymore. At least dragons were real beasts. At least dragons made sense. They were not little boys who could see the past and turn into birds when they died.

Sansa had to stifle a laugh of her own. “When Father warned us winter was coming, I never could have thought…”

“I don’t think this was what he meant,” Arya said, all too seriously.

“What?” Sansa said, nodding to the note. “You think Father did not know that Bran would become a bird?” It was the closest thing to a joke she had made since the Eyrie fell. When she realized that, the joke was not nearly as funny as it had been before.

“Not the White Walkers either,” Jon said, wincing. He slid down the wall, which, in truth, was a good thing. His legs were shaking about as much as Sansa’s were.

Arya stayed on her feet. She was the only one. “When the Walkers come,” she said, softly, “you’ll be away, won’t you, Sansa?”

Sansa nodded. “Lord Footly has offered Tumbleton to us. We’ll be leaving on the morrow.”

Her sister frowned. “We?”

“Lord Tyrion and I, and all the ladies of the court.”

She looked just as displeased as she did when they sent off the children. “All the ladies?”

“They don’t want to fight,” Sansa said, shortly.

“Nobody wants to fight,” Arya said, her fingers dancing on the hilt of her dagger. “You do it because you have to.”

*That isn’t true,* Sansa thought. *I want to.*

But Arya didn’t give her the chance to reply. “I found the dagger in the skull,” she said. “Don’t know how no one found it.”

*Because Bran made sure they wouldn’t,* Sansa thought. Cat of the Canals. There was a story there.
But Jon did not see that as she did. “I don’t see how you did,” he said. “What were you doing down here?”

Arya’s tooth tugged at her lip, if only for a second. She pulled it back before she could chew. “This is where I went,” she said to her boots. “The day Father died. This is how I got out.”

Sansa’s tongue froze to the roof of her mouth. _I never asked._ All the time they had been together – traveling on a dragon’s back, waiting in one castle or another, talking about everything they’d been through on Dragonstone – and she had never bothered to ask after how a girl of one and ten had managed to escape the most heavily guarded keep in the Seven Kingdoms. She knew about the stable boy, about the Night’s Watch, but never about how. The path she took, the time it took, the effort.

She should have asked, she realized, but somewhere deep down, she had not wanted to know just how easily she could have done it, too.

It seemed Jon had not asked her either, if the grief on his face was any indication. Though, in truth, it might have only been for Father.

“Why’d you come back?” he asked her, softly.

She tensed. A thousand muscles locked at once, though not a single one in her face moved. She looked to Sansa, and, though Sansa knew her story, the fear in her eyes did not abate in the slightest.

There was more to her. More she hadn’t told Sansa.

She wanted to be angry, but she couldn’t. She had hidden truths, too. Not a word of Ramsay, not a word. Not even a thought. She didn’t think she could bear it.

If Arya had a Ramsay of her own...

Jon seemed to notice it as well as Sansa. “What happened to you, Arya?”

“After the war,” her sister drawled. “We can talk when it’s over.”

Sansa wanted to protest, but Jon was already nodding. “After.” He reached for her hair and mussed it with his sword hand. “All the more reason to come out of this alive.”

Arya didn’t push him away like Sansa thought she might. Instead, she only smiled and spun her little dagger through her fingers. “It’s not hard,” Arya said. “When the god of death comes for us, all you do is just tell him ‘not today’.”

Jon laughed, though his hand went to rub at his chest. At the scars. The scars that proved just how wrong their sister was.

_If it was so easy, Robb would have done it. And Theon. And Mother and Father and everyone else we’ve lost along the way._

“There’s a reason most people don’t pray to the Stranger, Arya,” Sansa said, instead. “He doesn’t usually listen.”

Arya only grinned at her boots. When she moved to meet Sansa’s eyes, her own were as cold as a wight. “Only to no one.”
They stood in silence for a moment. Jon clutched at his scars, Arya grinned at them both, and Sansa was left to stare.

“You haven’t changed, Arya,” she said, finally. “You’re still just as strange as I remember.”

“Just so.” Her sister’s smile didn’t slip. “Lost the horseface, though.”

Sansa couldn’t stop herself from laughing. “Somehow, I think the horseface isn’t so important anymore.”

“It never was, and you never had one,” Jon said. “It was the swordhand that mattered. I still don’t know how you-”

“We’ve a war to get to, haven’t we?” Arya said, suddenly. If that was meant to distract them, it didn’t work. But, if it was meant to distract herself, well… Sansa could understand that.

“Do you know the way back?” she asked. “We’ll need to meet with Lord Farman before tomorrow. The Farman fleet will need to know how many priests we can provide.”

Jon winced. “What about Yara? The Iron Fleet’ll need just as many.”

“You try getting the Iron Fleet and the Farmans to talk. I think the Dragon Queen might tear her hair out soon.”

If Arya grinned at her as she led them back, Sansa did not see it. If, after she led them back to the Red Keep, she did not say a word of goodbye when she slipped away, Sansa didn’t mind. They would see each other again, she knew, before the flight. And they would see each other again after. They had to.

#

Her sister did not come to see her off.

Instead, she would see her off in the hours before the flight. While Jon was working with the Alchemists, Arya snuck into Sansa’s rooms and handed her a dagger made from dragon steel and bone.

“If they come for you,” she told her, “you stick ‘em with the pointy end.”

And, no matter how Sansa protested – how much she wanted to hand the dagger of to someone who could use it, who could do something important with it – she took it. She took it, because it was important. Because, if the battle went wrong, it could very well be the last thing her sister ever gave her. The only thing.

And, as she watched the farewell party arrive, she came to the terrible realization that it likely was.

They had gathered by the River Gate, where soon, the land would turn to a warzone. She studied it one last time and tried to picture it muddy and broken, bloody and cold. She couldn’t. This place did not seem like a battlefield. Not yet.

The Dragon Queen had come, and Jon, and Ser Beric, Lord Harlan, the Stark bannermen, and Gendry the smith. Even Olyvar Frey had come, with his blue towers on his jerkin and his weasely face smiling. She wanted to scream at him, wanted to tell him to lead the charge against the Walkers, wanted to tell him to leap into flames as soon as he saw the blue in their eyes.
She did not do a thing like that. Instead, she thanked him for his presence, just as she thanked Lady Wyl, Lord Algood, Lord Gaunt, Lord Mullendore, Lord Yronwood, Lord Selmy, Prince Martell, Lord Lannister, Lord Saltcliffe, Lord Yarwyck, Lady Wells, and all the rest. It would not do to slight him now.

After though… after, she could slight him until the dawn no longer came as a surprise.

When all that was done, she made her way to her brother. Her human brother.

She held Jon close, and hugged until she felt she couldn’t breathe. Hugged through the tears in her eyes and the sobs in her throat and the horrible thought that this could be it. The last time they would see each other. The last time she would ever see a Stark again.

When she whispered that to him – that he was a Stark and a brother, and the best she could have asked for – he held her even tighter and said the same. And, when they finally pulled away, she pretended that there weren’t tears on her shoulder, and he pretended the same of his.

Tyrion Lannister led him to the Dragon Queen, to the dragon. He let her climb first, though if it was to reassure her or to simply limit the space he would need to climb, Sansa could hardly say. She appreciated it, nonetheless.

As she settled onto Drogon’s back for what would surely be the final time, she looked out at the city. A city of a hundred banners and a hundred thousand men. A city of what had once been half a million, but would be naught but dust by the next sennight. A city she had longed for, once. Now, she was anxious to see it go.

The lords waved as one. Some had come to see her off, but more came to see their families. Too many ladies clung to the dragon, and many more were riding to Tumbleton on horseback. Most were already there, waiting for news like a pup waits for its master. These men had come to send it.

They were well past the gates already, and beyond them was a sea of snow and countryside. Once, she had ridden into this kingdom in a windowless carriage, drinking wine and tea with Cersei Baratheon and dreaming of becoming Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Whole and beautiful, dreaming of songs and heroes. As the Dragon Queen took to the air, Sansa left a different woman. A woman left with broken and scorched flesh all across her right arm. Her hair was dirty and ashen, the ends burnt and blackened. Her clothes were just as graceless.

The girl who-would-have-been-queen had come to King’s Landing porcelain. She had left in disgrace, hidden in a cabin on a ship that would take her to terrible places. She would become a new woman on that journey, a girl named Stone. A bastard.

The woman left- steel. She left to the call of a crowd, to waving hands and a sea of banners from every House that still stood, and from many that could only call half a dozen men or less. She would change again over the next fortnight. Whether to be a lady or a wight, she couldn’t say.

But as the wind caught in her blackened hair, she found she did not quite care. There were people trapped in Tumbleton already. Ladies and children, terrified and lonely, not knowing if their husbands, fathers, and brothers would ever return. Not knowing if death was a day’s ride away, or a lifetime. Though Sansa wanted to stay beside her pack, there were scared people trapped in a foreign place who knew nothing of the war or the wights or the Walkers. They deserved someone to guide them. They needed her, even if the soldiers didn’t.
It was a hard thing to come to terms with, but she had. Sansa Stark was not a fighter. She couldn’t use a sword or a bow or an axe. If Arya expected her to do anything with this dagger, she was sorely mistaken. She wouldn’t do a thing with it.

She wasn’t much of a planner, either, if truth be told. She wasn’t a war strategist, or a clever maester, and she wasn’t a member of the Alchemist’s Guild either.

She was a Lady of Winterfell, a woman made hard by pain and death and castles crumbled. A pretty lady who wore dresses and loved them. A lady who was loved and who cared. A lady who might have been queen.

But Winterfell was gone, and now there was a dagger on her belt. Daggers were for knights and lords and commonfolk, not ladies. Valyrian daggers even more so.

On this trip, she would not be a lady, and she would not be a night. She would be something between. She could be a lady without being a naïve girl with songs in her heart. She could stay with the children without cowering and give them courage with the blade in her hand. She could be the last defense, if everything went wrong. She could.

Somewhere, Bran the Bird was cawing. Screaming for her to breathe.

And, as the dragon took to the air, she did. She took in a deep gasp of air that tasted of ash and corpses. And, somewhere, in the midst of fire and dust and flesh burning, she smelled the scent of sentinel trees and pine. And, suddenly, everything felt alright.

It shouldn’t have.

Chapter End Notes

Yep! Bran’s alive! Been holding onto that one for a good long while. He’s just made sure to be creepy as all hell stalking the group since the Eyrie, but, I mean, that’s Bran for you.

Anyway, I think it’s about time for a visit with our Dragon Queen. Been a while since we last checked in.
She hadn’t looked back, yet she found herself lost all the same.

The scouts had been clear. The Army of the Dead was a day’s march away, and perhaps it could arrive even sooner. They dead did not rest like the armies of the living, Jon had warned her, and they had proven him true. The march from Winterfell to the Eyrie, and then to King’s Landing was a long one indeed. Longer than they should have been able to journey in so short a time. But all was easy without sleep or rest. All was easy without food.

And, with every village they passed by, every homestead and castle and farm and graveyard, their army grew only stronger. Dany’s withered.

Grey Worm fought for them now. He and Missandei and all the rest. People she had known, people she had freed, people she had loved and trusted. Her unsullied, her dothraki, all bloodriders that had died before their khaleesi.

The war was marching for them, and her friends marched with it.

But there was little time to mourn. She was never alone in King’s Landing. She was never alone at all. There were too many in the Red Keep who wished her harm. Men who would sooner see her dead than ascended to the throne. Men who would rather her head crowned with blood than iron.

She wondered if, somewhere, Drogo would rise and with him, Viserys, who would awaken with eyes as bright as the ocean.

But, no, Viserys had burned. His face had reddened and blistered and the skin had burst with pus and oil, but no blood. Never blood in the sacred city. Drogo was too cautious a man.

Drogo would not rise, either. Drogo had burnt, and Mirri Maz Durr, and all the Great Khals in their great city. They had died by fire.

And, now, it was her duty to bring it again.

Drogon sat in the courtyard, feasting on sheep and frozen horses as she stood by and watched. The wolves had scattered with his arrival and, though the great one had growled, none made any move against him, nor did he them. It seemed even the animals knew that they could not spare a single ally in times like these. The cost of this war had already grown too great.

If only men were quite so wise.

The Farmans and the ironborn had spent the past two meetings bristling over imagined slights. A ship veered off course, a banner burnt, a Harlaw had thrown a horn of ale into a Farman’s face, and
a scuffle had broken out on the bay. Two dead in that fight alone and, still, the Walkers had not reached them.

That was to say nothing of the Freys and the Rivermen. Already, three of the Freys had been found with their throats slit from ear to ear, but not a man could say by who. There was word that the Stranger had come again for the Freys, not yet sated from his Feast at the Twins. Olyvar Frey had spent the last night searching frantically for a culprit, but the killer, it seemed, had vanished into shadow. Jorah had not rested since the first body was found, but even so, he had slept just as little before.

And then, there was the fighting between the Lannisters and the Martells. Naught had come of it yet, but Dany could see the tension building. It would burst, if the Walkers did not arrive soon.

And all the while, there was little Dany could do. She knew some Westerosi politics, of course. Tyrion, Jorah, and Ser Barristan had taught her much, but there was too much still unknown. She could not weigh the anger of the Farmans and the ironborn, the vengeance for a wedding turned bloody, the resentment from the Freys as their killer went unfound, and the tempers of thousands of men trapped in a single city as the dead marched on them.

If she did not tear out her hair by the time this battle was done, they would have to add “Daenerys the Patient” to her many titles.

Tyrion was gone, now. Off to Tumbleton, to live or die by Dany’s decisions. She already regretted sending him away. He had used wildfire before, hadn’t he? From the stories Varys had told her, he had burned the Blackwater and all of the usurper’s ships.

Oh, he had given her his advice, of course, and she had followed his every word. Every position he had pointed to on the maps, she had set about placing a cask of green fire. He had other plans, and she had followed through as best as she could, but what if there was more? What if there were more ideas he had, more that could be done? What if sending him away had damned them all to a cold death?

It was too much, she thought, leaning over the parapets in a castle her ancestors had forged for her. Aegon, Aenys, and Maegor had built it with their own hands. With sweat and tears, they had crafted a castle fit for queens and king. A castle red with the blood of their enemies. Red like fire and blood.

But these enemies did not bleed red, and these enemies would not be stopped by a castle. Only one half of the Targaryen words would matter at all. The other half would only be shed by her own.

She wondered if, somewhere, her ancestors were not staring at her, waiting. If Aegon the Conquerer, Baelor the Blessed, and her own father, the Mad King Aerys were not standing in one of the Seven Heavens, or in the Night Lands, waiting to see if their last descendant could bring the dawn.

She had to. She was the only one who could.

Ser Jorah stood beside her, patient but ever-present as the snow fell around them. Most of it had been swept from this wall, or burned, but it accumulated quickly. Within the hour, they would need to burn it again. And then, the hour after.

Out in the streets, ten thousand men worked tirelessly to pave the path for the armies. Soon, it might mean the difference between a hundred thousand lost or a few thousand troops.
The war was coming on the morrow. Like the snow, it could not be easily swept away.

There was much to be done before it began.

She returned to her chambers, to Jon Snow and a single night of happiness, before the Long Night ended or proved unstoppable. Either way, at least she would have one happy moment, before it all went to hell.

She would not trade these moments with him for a million more without.

#

That night, the dreams came scattered.

She dreamt of a singer, going on and on about castles and dancing, while wights feasted on his innards. She dreamt of a great hero, in the armor of Old Valyria and a sword blazing hot with flames, but the flames sputtered out and the armor fell, and the hero stared down an army of the dead with nothing but his smallclothes. She dreamt of a ring of fire, burning around a fresh corpse, and a cat opening sightless eyes as lightning flashed overhead. She dreamt of a man without a head, walking aimlessly through great cascades of green fire. Only, the man stumbled and fell, and a pup cried out beneath its feet.

When the sleep died, and she awoke gasping in the winter winds, she found herself with her face pressed against his chest, while her final two unsullied stood guard outside the doors. She had offered them the chance to rest before the battle, but the two were insistent.

“If we are to die,” Grim Dog had told her, “we will die knowing our queen is safe until our last.”

Grim Dog did not come in now, nor did Spearman. They were used to her shouts in the night, she supposed. They hadn’t stopped since Winterfell.

Jon Snow, though – he was not so experienced.

She could not see his face in the insurmountable dark, but she could feel the sudden shift in his muscles. He forced himself onto his elbows, groaning softly as he was torn from sleep.

“Dany?” he grumbled. “What is it?”

“Go back to sleep,” she told him, but he would not have it. They were both awake now.

“Is it the Walkers?”

She only nodded. She could have lied, she knew, but she didn’t think she wanted to. Not now, when everything was set to crumble. At least, this way, she could go to her grave an honest woman. One who had done all she could.

*Hundreds of thousands of chains broken*, she thought, as she stared into the darkness. *And if I fail, it will all be for naught.*

No, not for naught. She gave them years of freedom, years of justice and peace and prosperity. Even if it was only a few short years, at least it was a taste of a true life. That was worth it. It had to be.

“The plan will work,” Jon told her, though she doubted he believed it himself. “We have the men and the gates.”
“And no dragonglass.”

“We have fire,” he said. “We have enough blades for every man, and we’ve more than enough pitch and oil. If we can just keep them-“

“If a gate falls too late or too soon, it is all for nothing.”

He tensed under her touch. She pulled back, head flat against the pillows. Suddenly, she was glad for the darkness. She would give anything to keep from seeing whatever pain must have been written across his face.

“None of it was for nothing,” he told her. “We’re giving the living a chance. Even if we’d have died in Winterfell with all the rest and did nothing since, we’re the reason they’ve gathered. Bran-”

She did not need to see his face to see how he flinched. “They wouldn’t have known without us there to defend him. All these people, these Houses, none of them would have known. Even if we all die tomorrow, at least there’s a chance we don’t. That’s more than we can ask for.”

“No,” Dany said, softly. “We can ask to win.”

Like her, he laid his head back against the pillow. A great sigh rippled through his chest. She wondered if he was as tired as she was.

“Sometimes I think I was born on that wall, a green boy, with Alliser Thorne screaming in my ear and the Old Bear guiding me along.” he said. She didn’t recognize the names, but she knew the strain in his voice. They were important people, whoever they were. Important and dead. She reached for his hand. If he smiled at her, she didn’t see it. “It was the day I learned about the Walkers, I think. The day I met the dead the first time. It seemed like everything in my life was a poppy dream before that. Winterfell, the Starks, my father and my brothers and sisters, all of it. I was a summer’s child who lived his life in the Long Summer, but Winter had found me before the summer was even done.” He sighed, again. “We were all of us summer’s children. But winter has come, and we’re the ones who know it best. There’s no one coming to save us. We need to do it ourselves.”

Dany shut her eyes again. She hadn’t even realized they were open. “And if we lose?”

He was silent for a while. A long while. And when he finally spoke, it was only to say, “We won’t need to worry.” He turned his head to her and placed his lips on her own. His were bloody and rough, but they were warm all the same. “You should rest, Dany. There’s a war on the morrow.”

She tried to meet his eyes, but all there was was darkness. She did not try to sleep again. She didn’t think she could.

#

It was only after Jon fell asleep again that Dany crawled out of their bed. She moved quietly, carefully. Even if she couldn’t bring herself to sleep again, there was no need to disturb his own rest. He deserved it as much as any.

She nodded to Grim Dog as she crept out of the room, and the man was quick to attach himself to her shadow. Spearman remained behind to guard the man she’d left. If they survived this, she would thank him for that. She would thank them all a thousand times.

She was not too surprised to find that the castle was still lively. Without daylight, it seemed that each man had grown to select his own cycle. While the lords scheduled their rests around their meetings, the guards and soldiers had no such qualms. She could hear their singing from inside the
castle walls. Loud, drunken songs, each as bawdy as any she had ever heard.

When she crossed the parapets, she found a man sprawled across the rooftop, singing *Her Little Flower* into the empty night. A few soldiers were beneath him, yelling for him to come down, but the drunken man seemed too preoccupied with remembering the lines. By the time she reached the next tower over, he had given up on *Her Little Flower* and screamed out *The Bear and the Maiden Fair* for all the city to hear. He seemed to have an easier time of it.

“They should not drink,” Grim Dog muttered at her side. “There is war come.”

Dany nodded. He was right. If this singer was too drunken to fight, they would be down a man, and there were few enough to spare.

Dany climbed down from the walls by the godswood. It was a riskier path than she generally took – on account of the wolves – but, if she could avoid the crowds of jeering soldiers, she could end the night without the stench of ale clinging to her clothes. She greatly preferred that.

There were some wolves prowling in the gardens when she approached, but most were asleep already. The waking wolves were mostly tearing at the skins of long-dead deer. They needn’t have bothered. Tomorrow, the wolves would feast.

She had thought to pass them by for the throne room, but Dany had never had much good fortune. For, as she walked through, the light of a fire caught her eye, and a dozen happy voices her ears.

She could see them, over by the frozen fountain, steadily feeding the fire with broken sticks. Most were armored, some even still wearing their helms and carrying their swords. Useless swords, to be sure, until the red priests, but ones they refused to part with. Most still doubted the strength of the dead. Most still doubted much of what Jon and Dany had shared with them.

But among them were men that surely did believe. Ser Beric was there, carrying a horn of his own, though he did not seem too inclined to make use of it. Beside him, Gendry the smith boy; his face flushed red as the flames. And across from him, the assassin of Stark, one hand wrapped around the hilt of the Kingslayer’s sword, and the other clutching a horn.

One of the men – a Blacktyde from the Iron Islands, if she had not mistaken his sigil – was in the midst of some great tale of his seaward journeys, while a Farman sat beside him, scoffing at each turn of phrase. A Durwell spilled wine on himself partway through the story, while one man of Tarth and one of Trant laughed at him, as a Redwyne spilled his own in the snow.

“In memory,” the Redwyne laughed. “For your doublet!”

And then, when the Blacktyde was done, to her great surprise, the assassin took up the role of storyweaver. She told some tale of a storm on the sea, of *The Titan’s Daughter* cutting through a wave taller than the Braavosi Titan’s feet. The men looked enthralled enough. Even the ironborn among them seemed fascinated, though one man of Codd seemed determined to pick apart every detail. It did not seem to work for him well. Either the tale was true enough, or the assassin was a strong liar, because Arya Stark had an answer for his every argument.

“Why not just lower the sail?”

“Last man who tried found your god.”

“-why would the Captain swing *East*?”

“Would you rather he have aimed for the rocks?”
And then, her story was done, and it was the Farman’s turn to tell his tale.

Dany did not quite know when her feet had stopped moving. Nor did she know why Grim Dog did not guide her any further.

Why was it the men could work so well together when their lords held no love? How could a Farman, a Redwyne, a Blacktyde, and a Stark treat with one another, share stories, and drink when so much of their history dwelled in hate?

Dany couldn’t understand it. Oh, she could treat with the lords and ladies, and they would respect her for the dragon on her breast, but she could never do this with them. She would never sit before a fire, drinking and jeering into the night. Never.

Arya Stark told some jape about the Codd’s twisted nose, and the men erupted into laughter. And then, when the Codd returned the favor, Arya laughed right along with them, as she reached to hide her ears.

Was she playing them? Did they know what she was? Did they know the craven that laughed with them – the assassin? Did they know what she could do to them, when the war was done? Would they still laugh if they did?

Part of her tried to remember that this was Jon’s sister, and Jon had always been able to treat with the smallfolk. This was no different.

But the other part reminded her assassin, assassin, assassin until she could think little else.

Before she could stop herself, her feet were pressing forward. She stood before the young assassin, her lips twisted into a frown and her back taunt as a board.

The group fell silent as the light settled on Dany’s chest. There, the three-headed dragon stared out at them all. There was a similar marking on the assassin’s shoulder, though not nearly as well-kept as Dany’s own. The sewing was already coming loose on her jerkin.

Some of the soldiers scrambled to kneel, and others stared aimlessly, stupidly. Their faces were flushed red, and their eyes blinked without seeing. If they were any drunker, they would be no use in the war to come.

She should have warned the lords to keep their men sober. There had been drunken men in Winterfell, and that battle had not ended well.

“Lady Arya,” Dany greeted her, with a tilt of her head.

Those still sober enough to think shook as she said the words. A half dozen heads spun to the assassin, who only answered them with a shrug.

“Lady?” the Codd spat.

“Fuck the ‘lady’,” the Blacktyde answered. “But Arya? I’ve heard of two Aryas, and neither been much a friend.”

“I heard you were dead,” said the Redwyne man. His face seemed familiar to Dany. A commander, most like, for the Lord of the Arbor was a man half his age. “You one of them wight things?”

Arya shook her head. “You shouldn’t always believe what you hear.”
The Blacktyde man didn’t seem to care much for her supposed death. He leaned forward, finger on his lip. “Should’ve figured it out from the look, I’d say. All of us should’ve. Fought your daddy on Pike, I did. Cut me up real good, he did, from here to here.” He gestured from his shoulder to the opposing waist. “Good fighter, your daddy was. Paid the price for the Greyjoy boy, he did, and it wasn’t the gold one.” Then, with a great grin, he rose from his knee and lifted his horn to the assassin. “To Theon Greyjoy, dumb little shit that he was.”

He drank, and the Stark drank with him. She drank more than a single toast ought to have called for, but then, the Blacktyde did too.

When she was done, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and greeted Dany with a feral grin. More wolf than girl. Or, perhaps, that was only the influence of the wolf prowling not a few feet behind. None of the men seemed bothered by it – perhaps they were too deep in their cups – but Dany had never known a wolf so large.

“You grace,” the assassin greeted, finally.

Dany did not know what to say to that. In truth, she did not know why she had come over at all. She ought to have kept walking, to go by unnoticed as the men enjoyed what could easily be their last night alive.

But she had come, and she would not turn away now. Dragons did not turn their backs to a foe.

“She asked for me?” the Stark girl said. She stood with her back taunt, hands locked behind her. Both of her swords remained at her side.

Dany forced herself to nod. “You are Jon’s sister,” she said. “I am quite… fond of him, and, for his sake, I would think it best to rectify this… wedge between us.”

“I am meant to be done fearing assassins, she thought. But here I fear again. Will they always scare me? She was grateful there were no others in the room. If it all went wrong, she would rather not die in sight of those she ruled. She did not need to die in shame.

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“This couldn’t wait until after the war?”

It could have. “You are an assassin, are you not?”
The woman stared; her grey eyes hard. “I am a Stark of Winterfell. Arya.”

“There have been rumors,” Dany said. “The lords of Westeros claim that the whole of House Frey was slaughtered by a Faceless Man, not a half-year before we found you.” The assassin stared, but did not respond. “Lord Tyrek of Casterly Rock claims that a knight of House Payne was murdered by a Faceless Man as his guard watched.”

“He should have done something then,” the assassin said, shrugging.

“The guard is dead now.”

The girl tilted her head, but said nothing more.

Dany had to smother a sudden bolt of wroth. “I imagine it is well known of how well I regard assassins.”

The girl hummed. “The singers only speak your love for the masters.”

“You will hold your tongue!” Grim Dog hissed, fury dripping from his own.

“I thought we came to talk? Hard to do that if I’m holding my tongue.”

“What do you plan to do during the battle?” Dany asked her, unwilling to entertain her snark.

The assassin shrugged. “Fight.”

“Jorah tells me you can steal faces. Why not steal the face of a wight, or a Walker?”

“It doesn’t work like that.”


“Even if I had a wight to skin, you can’t use moving flesh, or rotted. It won’t work.” She scowled, finally showing something beyond than that terrible blankness in those cold grey eyes. Hate. “Even if it did, I left my… materials with my horse at Harrenhal. I can’t take a face even if I wanted to.”

Dany frowned. “You don’t want to?”

Finally, the girl seemed to hesitate. Her teeth gnawed on her lower lip for a moment, before she schooled herself again. “I’m not speaking any of their secrets. I don’t need them coming after me.”

She had said something of the sort before, Dany recalled. That she had left them, and they had come to take her back. That she had nearly died for it.

*How does a girl of not even 20 years survive faceless assassins?* She wondered. And then, she grimaced. *How does a khaleesi?*

She must have stood in silence for too long, because the girl turned to take her leave. She did not offer Dany any courtesies. She did not curtsy or bow, kneel, or nod her head. Instead, she spun on her heel and made for the door. All she offered to her rightful queen was a single pause. Her foot hesitating for just a moment, before she spun her head, and offered a passing, “It was good. In Essos. What you did for the slaves.”

And then, the assassin was gone, and Dany was left with only Grim Dog to keep her company. Later, when she spoke of it to Jorah, the man would chastise her for as long as she let him. But later was not now. For now, Dany sat on the iron throne – the throne Aegon the Conqueror had forged
from a thousand enemy swords – and waited for a dawn that might never come.

By what might have been the morning, she had pricked herself a hundred times. Grim Dog never said a word.

Chapter End Notes

So this was probably way too subtle to notice (my bad), but RIP Dunsen. You probably didn't deserve to be on that list.

Dunsen aside, good news is, we're finally done with the damned travelogues! Planning's done, drama's (temporarily) done, and we're finally good to go on the whole final battle thing. It only took us, what, 370 pages, but at least it wasn't rushed?

Anyway, next chapter we check in with Jon Snow for the Battle of King's Landing.
Ahooooooooo went the horn that woke Jon from a restless sleep. It rang for ten seconds, and ten seconds only. Long enough that a thousand different emotions ran through him at once, and a thousand different instincts sang a thousand different orders.

Rangers coming, said one, the fool.

Walkers on the way, said another, the right one.

You told them to do it, said another, as he stumbled out of bed to find his sword. It sat where he left it, on the table beside Dany’s bed. She was gone, but his sword wasn’t. He grabbed it as he ran for the door, where one of the unsullied waited for him to move. The soldier was more than willing to aid him into his armor, and Jon had never been more thankful.

Typically, he took less than ten minutes to ready himself in the morn. Too many years on patrol on the Wall had shed hours off of his morning routine. Now? On the eve of battle, Jon would take no more than two.

Ahoooooooooooo, came the horn, a second time.

Wildlings, the stupid naive of him said, but all of them were dead. The free folk had died with the Northerners in Winterfell. They all had.

The unsullied man – Jon desperately wished he knew his name – was finishing with his chest plate when the third horn sounded. Ahooooooooooooo!

Jon’s heart thundered in his chest. His scars burned like wildfire. Soon, he might too.

By the time the horn was finished, his armor was, too, and Jon was sprinting down the hall. Even as he ran, he was strapping Longclaw to his side. It hardly even mattered. He wouldn’t be using the sheathe during the fighting, anyway.

The unsullied man followed him. In truth, he was faster than Jon, but he kept pace all the same. Dany must have ordered him to stand guard over her lover. The thought nearly made him smile, even as he ran off to his death.
All around him, the castle was in motion. Doors flung in every hallway, men sprinting down stairs and squires struggling to carry all of their knights’ things. There were no songs now, as there had been in the night. Only the familiar sound of men preparing to die.

The exterior of the castle was brighter than he had ever seen it, even before the Long Night struck them. Everywhere he looked, there were men carrying torches and burning swords. Red cloaks hovered by every man who didn’t carry one, whispering valyrian words and setting their swords ablaze. There were others, screaming at the men to avoid buildings and puddles, and, for the sake of all the gods, not to sheathe their damned swords. Already, King’s Landing smelled of ashes.

He could see the squire, Olyvar Frey, as he led a band of men to the Lion Gate. Even as he sprinted by, and even in the thralls of a thousand men rushing aimlessly, he could hear him screaming to his men.

“We will not lose today!” he called, loud and clear. “Whether we die, or live, we will not lose! The world is counting on us!” A thousand men screamed in answer, waving blazing swords high. “They may forget us come morning’s light, or, mayhaps, they will sing songs of us for all the dawns to come. But it is not they who we fight for! We fight for our wives! For our sons, our daughters, our sisters, our brothers, our mothers! We fight to bring honor back to our House! Fight with me, brothers! And let us teach these corpses what it means to be a Frey of Rosby, of Darry, of Crakehall, of Lannister, of the bloody Twins! Fight with me like you did Robb! Fight with me like you did in the Riverlands! Stand together!”

Hundreds of men echoed his closing cry, as he brought them forward. Hundreds who might be dead come the morning’s light, if it came at all. Hundreds who might have seen their final sunrise, who had seen their children for the last time. Hundreds whose widows would wait forever, or maybe not at all.

Jon tried not to pay them much mind as he bounded forward. Through the streets of King’s Landing, to the Dragonpit. There was not an inch of the city devoid of men, as too many to count readied themselves for war. Everywhere he looked, squires pushed past him, carrying swords and pales of water and torches and a hundred different banners from a hundred different houses.

“He will not lose today!” he called, loud and clear. “Whether we die, or live, we will not lose! The world is counting on us!” A thousand men screamed in answer, waving blazing swords high. “They may forget us come morning’s light, or, mayhaps, they will sing songs of us for all the dawns to come. But it is not they who we fight for! We fight for our wives! For our sons, our daughters, our sisters, our brothers, our mothers! We fight to bring honor back to our House! Fight with me, brothers! And let us teach these corpses what it means to be a Frey of Rosby, of Darry, of Crakehall, of Lannister, of the bloody Twins! Fight with me like you did Robb! Fight with me like you did in the Riverlands! Stand together!”

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“Leave the banners!” he told them, as he ran by. “You don’t need them!”

If they obeyed, he did not know. He never would. If the horns were blowing now, the Walkers could not have been more than an hour away. There was no time to waste on squires.

He made it to the Dragonpit as Dany did. Drogon was already waiting, surrounded by pooling water and growling ineffectively as Dany ran to his side.

There were others there, already. Gendry, the other unsullied, Lord Beric Dondarrion, and his little sister, clutching a spear in the crook of her elbow while she stood, hands clasped behind her back, waiting. Like a soldier awaiting orders, he realized. He hadn’t time to dwell on where she’d learned it. He merely allowed himself to be grateful that, wherever she had gotten it, both ends of her spear were dragonglass. It was good. The needle at her hip wouldn’t be much of a use in this fight. He wished she hadn’t brought it.

Nymeria sat beside her, fur bristled and tail beating unhappily against her leg. Her ears were pressed, and, every few seconds, she would move to nip at Arya’s arm. As Jon watched, she grabbed hold of Needle’s hilt and tried to force Arya away, but his little sister did not so much as move. Her eyes were staring forward, as cold and as empty as the North.

He went to her first, the way she always did him when they were children. He pulled her into a
hug, and she sunk into him, the way she had on Dragonstone. The way she had in Winterfell, a lifetime ago. This time, her hair smelled of smoke and ash and fire. He didn’t care.

“You should have gone with Sansa,” he whispered.

“And miss the chance to save the world?” she whispered back.

He laughed into her ear, and she laughed with him. When he pulled back, there were tears on his face.

“Stay safe,” he told her, louder this time.

She didn’t have the chance to answer. Lord Beric came forth before she could. “The boy and I will keep her safe,” Lord Beric swore, nodding to the red-faced smith at his side. “We failed to once, my lady. We will not fail again. I swear it, by all the honor I have left, and by the Lord of Light himself.”

For a passing second, Jon was grateful to the man. He might have thanked him, but Arya spoke before he could. “If anyone needs to stay safe, it’s you,” she said to Jon. “You’re stupid enough to get yourself killed.”

He mussed her hair for what might very well be the last time. His stomach twisted and, for a moment, he thought he might be sick.

“You need a helmet,” he told her. His own was Lannister, a spare borrowed from some of Lord Tyrek’s men. He hated to wear it, but it was better than dying. “Armor.”

But she only shook her head. “Plate can be heavy. It’ll slow me down.”

His heart hammered. He put his hands on each of her shoulders and knelt just enough that he could stare directly into her eyes. Seven hells, she was too small to fight this war.

“Whatever happens today, I love you,” he told her. He was bent down, staring into eyes so much like his own. No one else had eyes like theirs, and it warmed his heart to see it. “Father would be proud to see the woman you’ve become.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth, before she was clinging to him again. He clung back, whispering a thousand apologies as she hissed at him, called him stupid, and said his words right back to him.

By the time they pulled apart, Arya’s leather armor dripped with snowflakes and tears. He couldn’t tell if his own was in the same state. The sight of melting snow and tears looked the same on his armor.

“Go to the River Gate. It’s safest there,” he told her. “After the fire, run to the Red Keep and see if you can’t help any survivors.” It had been Lord Tyrion Lannister’s plan, but it was a sound one. It should do well to keep her out of harm’s way. He thought that she might have fought him – and, once, she might have – but Arya only nodded. “Meet me in my chambers after. As soon as you can.”

“You stay alive, Jon,” she demanded.

“I’ll try my best, little sister.” He looked to her wolf then, who was still tugging fruitlessly at Arya’s sword. He knelt before her, slowly placed his palm on her back and said, “You keep her safe, will you?”
But instead of laughing as Jon expected her to, Arya only winced. “Wolves can’t stop this.”

“It’s a good thing you’re good with that sword then.”

This time she did laugh, and it warmed Jon’s heart the way it always did.

He turned to Dany, ready to wish her well, too, but Arya grabbed his arm and before he could.

“I’m happy I saw you again,” she said, softly, when he looked back. “There was a long while I thought I’d die without seeing another Stark.”

His eyes welled with tears, as he pulled her into another hug. She didn’t fight him. This one lasted even longer than the last, and he didn’t think either of them minded.

When he pulled away this time, he didn’t look back at her again. If he did, he would never have been able to leave.

He met Dany with a shoulder wet and dripping. She did not say a word of it. She was already on Drogon’s back, leaning into his scales and whispering High Valyrian words that Jon would never know. She only stopped when she noticed him, and even then, it was only to tilt her head like a bird. Like a dragon.

They had said their goodbyes the night before. Had whispered it as they fell asleep, and a hundred times in the days prior.

“Winter is coming,” he’d whispered, as they drifted off together. He was still sticky, and she too. There were two things to warm you in the cold, he had remembered, and grinned into her hair.

“Then we answer it with fire and blood,” she told him.

They hadn’t drifted off, then. It had only started anew. That night was the warmest he had in moons.

They were lucky to have had the time they did, he knew, but somehow, he wanted more.

““I will have no goodbyes, Jon Snow. We will not need them,”’’ she said to him now, when he opened his mouth to offer them. “We will talk in the morning. At dawn. And we will return to that waterfall. At dawn.”’’ She sounded so insistent that he almost believed her. She smiled at him, atop a creature of magic and hope, but all he could see was fiery red hair and an arrow bleeding red, and all he could hear was you know nothing, Jon Snow.

He couldn’t lose her. Not like that. He didn’t think he could bear it.

He wanted to call out to her. Wanted to scream out that he loved her, that he needed her, that she best stay safe, or he would never be able to live with himself. He wanted to pull her off of Drogon’s back, to drag her off to Tumbleton with Sansa and Tyrion, where she could be safe.

But Dany was not one to stay from a fight. It was one of the reasons he loved her.

She took to air as he choked on his breath. She had no time to waste, the way he did. He could spare time to talk to the lords that remained behind in the Dragonpit. She needed to scout. She needed to hide.

All he needed to do was wait.

There were more lords in the Dragonpit, now. Arya stood by one – Lord Tully – who was staring...
at her with eyes as wide as Bolton shields. Maybe she had finally realized who she was. Maybe she
was why she was staring forward, fighting a familiar smirk. Prince Ryndon was there, too, and
Lord Tyrek. Lady Yara was nowhere to be seen, probably already on her ships and headed off to
battle. Most of the other lords had followed her, off to command their troops.

To the few that remained, Jon had little to say. He had made his speeches twice before, and neither
had made a difference. Besides, there was hardly time for speeches. There was hardly time for
anything.

Instead, he addressed them all. “No one dies,” commanded the once-King, loud and proud and
strong as he could be. “Everyone in this pit, we live.”

“It is not always so easy as it seems,” said Lord Beric Dondarrion, rubbing his ruined eye gently as
he spoke.

“No one,” Jon said, again. This time, no one dared disagree. “Off to the Gates! We need to be in
position by the hour’s turn! Remember: flee as soon as your gates fall!”

The lords did not run, as he had, but they moved briskly enough. More like than not, they were
saving their breath for the run to come. He could hardly blame them.

Arya spared Jon one last look – as pained as it had been the first time he’d left her – and then, she
was off to join the ironborn at the River Gate. Jon prayed to all the gods that would listen that she
would come back safe. He didn’t know if it would matter. He wasn’t so sure he believed in gods
anymore.

A raven took off after her, squawking and screaming, but not breathing a single word. He
wondered if it was Bran. He wished he should have said goodbye again.

He didn’t stay in the Dragonpit for another moment. Instead, he ran to the Iron Gate, where the
Redwynes guarded the waters and the Westerlings and the Tarth men guarded the ground. It was
the most defensible position, but one with the fewest ground forces covering it, and they would
need all the feigned support they could get.

And, if that gate was near enough to the Red Keep that he could find Arya in the worst-case
scenario, well, who would know to question him? Who would care to? Only Tyrion Lannister, and
it would be strange to see him question his own assignments.

There were alchemists in the streets as he ran by, and a dragon roared overhead. All around, red
priests and priestesses scrambled to finish arming the men. Jon could only hope they would get to
them all in time. Already, he could see the storm clouds overhead, swirling with lightning and
thunder that shook his bones every time he heard it.

By the time he reached the Iron Gate, there were hundreds of men standing behind the walls, all
armed with blazing torches and drawn fiery swords. It was quiet on the vanguard, not like the
center of the city. Here the men simply stood and shook, waiting for a plan that might get every
last one killed.

Lord Westerling and Lord Tarth met him by the center of the gate, where no man dared to stand.
Lord Tarth looked somber, and Lord Westerling looked as if he hadn’t had a night’s rest since he’d
reached King’s Landing.

“My lord,” Lord Tarth greeted him, while Westerling nodded his head.

Jon didn’t have the energy to deny the title. He was still too exhausted from his run, panting and
sweating through the furs beneath his armor.

“Are the men set?” he demanded.

Lord Westerling nodded again. “The ravens say every gate, besides the River, is ready.”

“Ironborn,” Lord Tarth grumbled.

“I don’t blame them. They’re the southernmost gate. They’ve the most time to prepare,” Jon said. “Today’s not for fighting. Focus on your own men, my lords.”

Lord Tarth nodded, while Westerling stared. “Are you to come with us, my lord?”

“Aye.”

He nodded to Longclaw. “You should get that burnt. There’s a priest over by the watering—”

“It’s valyrian steel,” Jon said, dismissively. “Do all your men know the plans?”

“Yes,” said one, while the other said, “Aye, my lord.”

“Good. How long do we have until the start?”

“A quarter hour, maybe less.”

It was less.

There was no view between King’s Landing and the world outside the gates. Not even a single peep-hole standing between the living and the dead. They had no scouts to instruct them of the dead’s arrival, nor ravens to spread the word to the other gates. Only the men atop the wall, standing with pitch and oil and wielding the catapults and scorpions.

They warned them with screams. Horrible screams that sounded like they came from children, rather than grown men trained for war. Shrill cries, strange cries, cries a thousand ways.

Then, some commander or another gave the order, and the catapults launched.

Jon watched the skies. He could see them firing from every gate. Balls of burning rock cutting through the night and the storm, before disappearing over the wall. Archers and red priests stood beside them, and he could hear the rhythmic call of their commander, even over the sounds of men screaming and catapults firing.

“Draw! Aim! Loose! Draw! Aim! Loose! Draw! Aim! Loose! Draw!” on and on, like the beat of a drum. It was mostly useless. There were hardly enough arrows to make a dent, but they needed to appear as if they expected it to. Just enough to draw the Walkers. Just enough to put up a fight.

The first indication that the wights had reached the gates came from little thumps along the wall. Single men, plunging themselves into the burning spikes they had set up against the doors. He could hear their fists slamming against the stone, and more bodies plunging behind them.

“Oil!” a commander called.

The oil poured and lit, and the thumps stopped. But only for a time. Before long, more thumps came along, and more oil.

“Aim for the spiders!” one man cried. The commander faltered for a moment, but then his voice
rang loud, again.

“Draw! Aim! Loose! Draw! Aim! Loose! Draw!”

All around Jon, men were trembling. He could hear them shifting and whispering, “spiders?” while their lords turned to him. He did not meet their eyes. Could not. Not yet. Not until the next stage had begun.

“Aim! Loose! Draw! Aim!”

“For the wolves!” one commander shrieked, and Jon watched the archers shift.

He bit his tongue. He bit through his tongue. That cry hurt more than any of the others.


And then came the cry he had been waiting for.

“Half the oil, sir!”

“Stop the oil! Draw! Aim! Loose! Draw!”

The thumps came quicker. Harder, too. Before long, he heard them, beating faster than a raven’s wings from all around the wall. The force of them sent snow and dust billowing through the air. The hardy stone shook. Some of the men flinched back from the wall, but Lords Tarth and Westerling kept them in line well enough.

The commander did not speak again, except to say, “Hold!”

The thumps kept coming. It would not stop until the doors broke down.

_Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump._

Jon took one final look at the great doors standing between them and certain death. As the snow fell away, he caught sight of the hinges between the wall and the stone door. They were so brown, they were almost black. Caked in rust and tarnished metal.

_Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump._

His heart leapt into his throat. In the midst of a crowd of stalwart soldiers, he found Lord Tarth, staring aimlessly at the doors. The man was trembling, as bad as Pyp on the worst days on the Wall. The rusted hinges screamed. The bitter scent of piss cut through the air.

_Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump._

“Retreat!” Jon demanded, grabbing the man by the collar and pulling him close, so he would hear.

_Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump._

“What? But they haven’t-”

_Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump._

“That’s an order, my lord.”

_Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump._
Tarth stared for a second more, before his gaze hardened. He turned his back on Jon and screamed to the men, “To the Second Point, men!”

\textit{Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.}

Hundreds of men turned to move, each more eager than the last to escape. It was early, and they all knew it, but they knew what to do. Hundreds of them, moving as one, just as they’d drilled it. Jon drew Longclaw, and the men held their own swords high.

\textit{Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, cruuuuuunch.}

Jon turned tail and ran. A sea of wights followed him.

The plans fell apart as death came for them. Instead of retreating in a nice, orderly fashion, the men took one look at the wights and fled screaming. Some threw down their swords, and, when they could no longer guide their way with the flames, they tripped over the freshly-fallen snows and fell to the horde.

The archers were not firing again. He had no time to wonder why. He was too busy running for his life. There were too many wights, too many to fight, and that was good. He hadn’t the strength to kill them all. But if this worked, they could kill enough.

He ran south. Past the Red Keep, to the Blackwater. He ran with hundreds of men, all shoving and pushing and screaming at him to “get out of the damned way!”

He ran past the ache in his lungs and his legs. He ran until there was bile in his throat and sweat dripping even in the chill. He ran until the soldiers were falling, not because they were caught, but because their legs could no longer carry them.

War, he had come to learn, was one of the only ways to truly test the mettle of a man. It seemed that the Tarth and the Westerling forces were quite the varied bunch.

He was quick, thankfully. While he had started at the back of the pack, he worked his way to the middle. Already, he could hear screams behind him, as men were pulled down and swallowed by the raging mass of wights. He wondered if their Walker was with them. He hoped so.

He heard screams from the west and knew another gate had fallen. Early. He had no way of knowing how many had already run. He had no way of knowing which gate would fall next. In this fight, Jon had nothing. He was no commander, no lord, no king. He was just another man, running for his life, and doing everything he could.

There was something freeing about that. As freeing as wandering the lands beyond the Wall, before the Walkers claimed his every waking thought, before everything had gone unbearably wrong, before Father’s blood had stained these streets forever. It reminded him of just being Jon Snow, off to say the words before the heart tree with his brothers and his friends. He’d wanted to run then, too, but Sam had slowed him.

“Avoid the damned buildings!” someone screamed, dragging him back to the times of war and sorrow. The call was apparently noticed, because they all lived at least another moment.

More men fell. Someday, Jon hoped that he could mourn them.

He could not say how long he had been running. He couldn’t even say that he was tired. He was sprinting across the city, and yet, he felt like he could run a thousand leagues more. Maybe it was fear. Maybe not. He couldn’t say.
He thought of what Arya told them in the dungeons. He thought of waking up on a cold metal table, shivering and terrified, plucking at scars that never should have been. He shut his eyes, and whispered, “Not today,” as the wights chased him south.

They cut through Flea Bottom, ran parallel to the Street of Sisters, and kept going onto the Hook. They must have run for a quarter hour, and still, the wights chased them. They found their way across the Muddy Way, across dozens of hobbled buildings and towers dripping wet with green cascades of liquid death.

_I should have gone with Arya_, he thought. _I should have gone with Dany_. But, if he had, Tarth would never have retreated in time, and they would have lost even more than they already had.

He wondered if, somewhere in the midst of the battle, if the Night King wasn’t laughing at them. At the masses of the living whose lines had broken before the first drop of blood had been spilled. _Come get us, Jon thought_. _Come get us, you coward._

They reached the Fishmonger’s Square. Already, he could see a flood of living pushing their way through the River Gate. Men from another fallen gate, each as exhausted as Jon’s men. The ones in the back were holding off their pursuers, their clothes stained so red that Jon couldn’t make out the sigils on their armor.

It was time to relieve them.

The men from the Iron Gate arrived screaming. Their blazing swords cut into the backs of the hundreds of distracted wights, even as their own pursuers closed in on them. A dozen of their men were cut down, before Lord Westerling screamed, “Back lines, turn!” and the battle changed in an instant.

Jon was close enough to the front lines that he simply pushed forward. He cut through the first wight with ease. Then the second, then the third. Black blood splattered everywhere he pushed.

All around them, corpses were catching fire as the living cut them down. It spread through the ranks of the dead, even pushing behind their lines. But they did not fall so easily, and so Jon continued to carve.

They fell by tens, by dozens, by the hundreds. Each of them sunk deep into his sword. The smell of piss and shit and sweat and ash was all he knew. It was the Battle of the Bastards again, the Battle of Winterfell. It was Castle Black and the Eyrie and every other bleeding battle he’d been forced into. Blood and mud and screaming.

By the time he looked up again, all the men from the other gate were safely through to the harbor. Some of Jon’s front line had plunged through, too, and were already bathing in the cold waters of the Blackwater. When he looked the other way, he could see reinforcements coming. Men from the Dragon Gate, if that was truly a spear on the leader’s shield.

Someone cried “Iron!” and suddenly, they were all pushing towards the gate again. He followed them, if only because Arya would be behind those lines too.

Jon must have cut down dozens, before he crossed through himself. When he did, there were hands guiding him forward, leading him to the Blackwater and away from the fighting. He would never see who those hands were. He would never know. They shoved him beyond the gate, and then they were gone. Somewhere, a raven screamed. Jon didn’t see him against the blank black sky.

There was a pile of blazing swords in front of the water. None of the swimmers had dared bring
them in, for fear of leaving themselves defenseless. He could see a line of them, heading for the refreshing chill of water on their faces, and then returning back to find any random sword some other soldier left.

He was half-tempted to take the plunge himself. He was dripping with sweat and blood and whatever other liquids he did not want to imagine. For a moment, he nearly leapt into the water, if only for the moment’s rest, but he knew it wasn’t safe. Too much time on the Wall had taught him the dangers of water in the cold. Let other men risk their toes. He had a war to fight.

There was a pile of broken sticks in the center dock. Each piece had been dried and the mass of them covered with a golden cloth to ensure that the wood would not be drenched by the snow. It stood taller than giants, taller than ten men would be if they stood on each other’s shoulders. It would burn bright, soon enough, but not yet. Not yet.

He noted it rested as he stumbled along. Only a few hundred feet from where he stood now. The survivors were already scattering along the long coastline. He looked to find any lord he might have recognized, but he couldn’t make out faces among the lot. They were too bloody, too tired, too muddy.

Some of the man had settled against the wall. Most collapsed in the first patch of bare grass they could find. Others on the docks, or in the snow, or further to the west, where they would be safe if the wights broke through. At least for a little while. Others still were hovering by the gates, ready to kill any nonliving man who broke through. They were the fresh troops – the ones that hadn’t run. He could see Gendry the smith among them but, wherever Arya and Ser Beric were, he could not say. Jon hoped they were safe. He hoped with all his heart.

And Dany, too, was somewhere in the air, ready to launch as soon as they gave the word. He hoped she was safe too. No, he needed her to be safe. He didn’t think he could lose her again. He had already lost too much. Not her.

He didn’t have the strength to look. His mouth was too dry, his bones too sore, his muscles screaming from exertion. Now that he had escaped the fighting, it seemed that he could do little more than fall.

So, as his vision spun in circles, he did. He crumpled, like he hadn’t since the Battle at Castle Black was done. And, for a few blissful moments, he slept there on the snow. He had never known a sleep more restful. By the time he woke, he would never know one more disastrous.

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Chapter End Notes

We have finally seen the first part of the Battle of King's Landing! I've been waiting to get to this part for just as long as you guys, so believe me when I say I'm happy to finally get here. Wrote the entirety of this thing in one sitting, just because I was having way too much fun with it.

Anyway, next time, we're checking in on a brand new POV as we see what happens when the White Walkers meet a united Five Kingdoms.
Beric I

Chapter Notes

The worst part of AO3 is just figuring out how to get the fic to update properly...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Eight: The Walkers are Coming

The River Gate

Beric Dondarrion

The first time he died, Beric slipped into the darkness without fear.

He was a godly man, had been since the day his lord father led him to a Sept for the first time. He had begged the Warrior to lend him His courage, begged the Smith for strength, and, every night, he begged the Father to show him the path to true justice. He had never prayed to the Stranger or the Mother or the Maiden, and never prayed to the Crone often enough. Still, he had counted them in his daily prayer, and had long seen them as gods that would lead him wherever he must go.

So, when the time of his death came as the Mountain’s lance plunged forth, he had gone asunder happy to follow the Stranger to wherever his new path might take him. He had died in honor, in glory, as many a knight would have been proud to. He died unfulfilled, an oath broken, but at least he was doing what he knew was right, seeking the Father’s justice.

Then, he had woken. His faith in those seven gods had died with him, never to be seen again.

He remembered vividly the taste of ashes in his mouth and panic in his breath. There was a hole shattered into his breastplate, and a red cloak leaning over him. Thoros of Myr, the drunken priest. Lord Beric had made himself sick on the soil several times that day, and he had not fully recovered from his untimely demise for hours after.

The second time came from a mace to the side of the head by Ser Burton Crakehall. He recovered more quickly after that. Only spent an hour writhing in the soil, rather than six.

After him, a hanging by Ser Amory Lorch. After him, a dirk to the eye, courtesy of Ser Gregor Clegane. Both the same incident, but both had done him the favor all the same. After, Vargo Hoat of the Brave Companions. He couldn’t remember how Hoat had killed him. It all fades. The sixth time, Sandor Clegane had cleaved his heart with a sword.

Each times, Beric had awoken with ash in his mouth. Each times, Beric had been killed and born again. All those many deaths to lead him to this.

He stood in the midst of battle, carving through wights with his left hand, because his right had lost a few too many fingers. It still sent pangs of pain through him, but pain was temporary, and he could stand to ignore it.
His arm tired quickly; Beric did not. He fought through the exhaustion as they funneled in. First the men from the Old Gate. Stormlanders. Men whose sigils he still recognized, even after so long swimming in the vast sea between the dead and the living. The Carons, the Selmys, the Swanns, Gowers, Grandisons, Mertyns, Bucklers, Trants, Hastys, and dozens more he could not recall. They had come far, but not the farthest still. The men of the Gate of the Gods would have that honor, and the Dragon Gate after them.

The Iron Gate came after the Old, their legs flagging and their breaths coming short, but their arms as strong as any. As the Stormlanders flooded through the gate, the Iron men held their retreat. Then came the Dragons from the East. Their gate must have fallen shortly after the Iron, or, perhaps they had been attacked from below as the wights made their way into the city.

Either way, as they came for the River Gate, they were greeted with a battle. The last of the Iron Gate’s men retreated for the harbor, as the men from the Old Gate returned to continue their fight.

Beric had not fought beside Stormlanders for many years. Not since before his first death, before the Lord of Light had breathed life into his lungs. They held different gods now, wore different coats of arms, and bore different scars. But they were the same men he had trained beside. Men he used to know; men he had been proud to know. He fought beside them with pleasure, thankful that the Lord of Light had afforded him the chance. He would not fail them. He could not.

Once, the cut of steel on steel had been a song to him. An exciting melody, the sort that he had spent all his days wishing to hear. He had been a boy of an age he could not recall, from a castle he could scarcely remember, with dreams of duty and knighthood.

He was a knight, now, for all the horror the title had brought with it. This was his song.

He could only fight behind the ranks. His left hand was not so skilled as his right had been once. Where once he would have killed a dozen, now he killed three.

It mattered not. There were other men to aid him.

The girl was one. She moved her spear as Ser Jaime Lannister once did his sword, as quick as Anguy could be on his best day. It moved in a whirl, cutting through corpses with grace, yet somehow not touching a single living soul. Still, she could do little against the masses. They were surrounding her, and gaining ground by the second.

Her blacksmith was beside her. He held the hammer the way his father had once, if all the legends were true. Beric had not been old enough to see the Demon of the Trident at work, but his son looked as much a demon as any man in the battle.

He tried to cut his way to the girl – he had sworn a vow to keep her safe, and Beric was no oathbreaker – but there were too many. It seemed as if hundreds of wights were converging on them. Even as more of the living recovered from their retreat and came to aid them, their line fell back more by the second.

R’hhlor’s blessing came with the cries of hundreds of men. Men with spears on their chests, and fallen stars, and scorpions. Ned Dayne ran at their head, wielding Dawn in a single hand, while the other gestured for all his men to follow. They collided with the wights in a sea of black and red, hidden behind a flutter of powdered snow that drenched them all.

Beric fell back as the men of the Dragon Gate charged forward. A wave of wights had washed away, but more were coming. In this war, more would always come. It reminded Beric of the Riverlands. He could cut down a thousand wolves and lions, but more would come by the hour,
and the smallfolk were the ones to suffer for it. Now, they would all suffer. In darkness, no one thrived, for the night was full of terrors.

The Dornish from the Dragon Gate fought for a quarter hour before more reinforcements came. When they did, they fell back behind the mighty doors. The men of the Lion Gate had come, bearing towers on their breasts, or trees and ravens, and precious few with trouts. Lord Edmure ran win them, as Ned Dayne had with his. A good man, Beric thought. A good lord.

But the Lion Gate had fewer men than most, and the Dornish were forced back into the fight all too soon. More wights were coming from all sides, and it was growing more and more difficult to clear the flood. Beric cut down ten, while the man beside him took twenty. He could no longer see the young Stark in the crowd.

He tried to fight his way back behind the gate, intent to find her. He had sworn an oath to her brother. Beric Dondarrion was no oathbreaker.

Somewhere above, he heard a call for archers. If he were a cruder man, like Thoros or Lem, he might have spewed a thousand curses. But those men were dead, and none around him knew the plan. None knew that the archers were not meant to come so soon.

“The Gate of the Gods!” one man screamed. Beric saw him behind the walls, running for the harbor. Red blood stained his doublet so well that Beric could not see his sigil, and it covered his face just as much. It hardly mattered. Houses meant little when grey skin meant as much as banners.

There were more men screaming, but, somehow, Beric noticed only him. He forced his way through the crowds, cut down another two before he found himself on his lonesome. He had to push past dozens of men to find the screamer again. There, he did. The man was losing his stomach in the waters. Too many men were knelt beside him, doing the same.

Beric grabbed the man’s shoulder and forced him back. Bile spilled down his chin, mixed there with blood and sweat. He was shaking like a leaf in the wind, eyes wild and mad.

“The gate fell,” the man stuttered, as he caught sight of the purple lightning on Beric’s chest. “The Gate of the- Mother’s Mercy, the gate, the gate…”

“The gate was meant to fall,” he tried to tell the man.

It did not seem as if he was heard. The mad man trembled where he knelt and, as another round of sickness took him, he dropped forward and dipped his face in the water. Then, and only then, did enough of the blood drain from his chest. An Oakheart. He was meant to be at the gate. If he was there, when the rest had not yet come…

“It fell,” the man said, wiping the sick away with a trembling hand. “It fell- it fell- it fell… All of them… All of them… Gone…”

Beyond the gate, the men of the Lion were still fighting their way through the mob. After them was meant to come the men from the Gate of the Gods. After them, the King’s. If a gate had fallen, and all the men lost, the order would be disrupted. There would be more wights coming. How could they flee when there was nowhere to flee to?

Somewhere in the city, he knew that the men of the King’s were already coming. If no one came to warn them, they would be running into a trap. A crowd of thousands of wights, maybe tens of thousands, undeterred by the runners.
It is no wonder they called for archers.

Beric pulled back from the man. He made his way to the few still bent over, recovering from their own sprints. He passed over the Lion and Dragon men, and instead went for the River, the Old, and the Iron.

“On your feet!” he screamed, louder than he had ever thought possible. He held his flaming blade aloft over his head, waving frantically to catch their eyes. It did little, when there were so many fires all around. “On your feet! The Gate of the Gods has fallen! More are coming!”

Next to him, a man lost his stomach on Beric’s boots. He was small – hardly taller than the Stark girl and younger still. His face was pale, sickly, streaked with blood. Still, he stumbled to his feet and reached for his blade. As soon as he was finished with his sickness, he raised his sword and screamed a wordless scream. He ran into the battle, and Beric never saw him again.

But there were others around him picking up the call. Some lords, some not, rising to their feet and shouting.

“Nightsong!” one screamed, lifting his sword high.

“Stonehelm!” said another.

“Shitmouth!” shouted a grey-haired man with grizzly beard.

Others shouted wordlessly, or called the names of friends and family, gods and lords. But they raised their swords. They ran off to the gates.

He caught sight of the Baratheon bastard, leaning heavily on a hammer forged from dragonglass and coughing into his cloak. The Lady Arya was nowhere to be seen, nor was her brother. Lord Snow was meant to have arrived with the Iron Gate, but Beric could see no sign of him.

If he is lost, Beric thought, gravely, so might be it all.

But, even if the war was already done, he would not go to his grave a coward. If this was truly his last death, let him die with honor.

There were a mass of men running back into the fight as the men from the Lion Gate retreated. More than enough to squash the enemy wights, especially as the archers took up their posts on the parapets. They were early, it was true, and they would all die for it. But it gave the living a chance. They would be remembered, he knew. Heroes. Someday, they would sing songs of the archers on the wall. The archers damned.

They had planned for six gates to meet at the River Gate. If only five were coming, the fight would be harder.

In the quarter hour before the men of the King’s Gate reached them, Beric fought as valiantly as he could with only a single hand to wield his blade. He must have cut down two dozen, maybe more. Those fighting at his side changed by the second. Some cut down, some pushed forward, some retreated for a drink or a bath in the frozen waters. When Beric retreated – for scarcely more than a second, and only to catch his breath – he found the whole of the harbor stained the same faded pink as Thoros’ cloak had been, a lifetime ago.

The King’s men took another quarter hour to clear the inner gates of wights. Beric had never breathed a happier sigh than when he saw them coming.
He heard the archers shouting at each other to stop. Beric pulled away, his duty done. The King’s had arrived. Now, the next stage had begun.

As Beric retreated one final time, to survey the scene and the bloodshed, he found the harbor far emptier than it was meant to be. Of the men from before the battle, perhaps three quarters remained, mayhaps less. Whether they had lost more men to the run or the fighting, Beric could not say. It hardly mattered. Dead men were dead men, no matter the manner of their death. They would all have their pyre, and the Lord of Light would welcome them all to His Hall. All the men who died for the living would sit beside Him and feast.

Beric searched fruitlessly for Jon Snow. Snow was the man meant to light the signal, but he was nowhere to be found amidst the crowds of bloodied men. If he still lived, he was among them, lost to Beric and lost to their cause. If not, someone else would need to take his duties, if any of the living were to survive this fight.

*I am not an oathbreaker.*

More of the King’s men fought through the thickening plague of wights. The enemy was already hundreds strong, thousands, tens of thousands, and that was only at the River Gate. If all had gone right, they were across the city, a mass of mindless men wandering the streets they might have once known. Men stolen from their graves, their crypts, their resting places. Men the Great Other had taken as tools to be used and dismissed.

*The Lord will cleanse them. The fires always do.*

As the crowd of approaching King’s men thinned, Beric fought his way below the castle walls. He shouted up, as loud as he could, “Seal the gates!”

But they did not hear, and, soon, the men around Beric were shouting it, too.

“Seal the gates!”

“Seal the gates!”

“Seven Hells, close the fuckin’ gates, you useless pieces of-”

Finally, they heard his cries. Suddenly, they, too, were repeating his order. He could see the men atop the walls running for the gates, while others shouted for the archers.

Few men were running towards the city now. Far more were running from it. He could see the wights surging through the unsealed doors, while men atop the wall screamed for pitch. R’lllor’s chosen priests encircled the doors, chanting madly as flames licked up from the grounds. The Lord’s Light streaked before the entrance, burning red-hot even in the heavy snows. The Lord must have been smiling upon them that day.

They had not bothered with catapults on the River Gate, but still, he watched men tip heavy stones over the walls. A futile effort, but he could not blame them for trying. These men had not the dragonglass, valyrian steel, nor the fire. They would make do with what they had.

It took longer than he would have liked to seal the doors. Twice, the flames went out as wights threw themselves atop them, and twice, a dozen priests were cut down in the process. Their screams haunted Beric as all screams did. He would go to his grave with the sounds in his ears.

But the plan was working. The living repelled them, and, with a great *creeeeee*, the stone walls slid shut.
“Send the signal!” the men were screaming. “Go!”

But Lord Snow was gone. Beric held his sword before him, and used its light to guide him forward. *I am no oathbreaker*, he thought, and he ran.

He ran through crowds of men, sick and bleeding and dying. He slipped on intestines and recovered by pushing himself up with the aid of a corpse. He nearly tripped over a half-severed leg, and he *did* trip over a man motionless in a Lannister helm. As his hand hit the ground, he had to bite back a terrible scream. His missing fingers felt like hot coals driving their way into his palm, but there was naught he could do to fix it. They hurt as much as his eye did, and his heart, and his throat. A pain that would never stop. A pain that did not matter.

He forced himself back to his feet. He walked. This time, steadier with each step. He dodged three men who had fallen atop each other. Three men who no longer breathed. Another man was gathering bodies, while another set them alight. The air tasted of ash and pork.

He passed by men screaming for their mothers, their daughters, their sons. He walked through crowds filled with men scarcely of age, wallowing as blood streamed down their faces. He saw bodies in the river, face-down while men frantically tried to set them alight.

The flames did not catch. Soon, there would be wights in the water.

This was the work of the Great Other. What Thoros had always warned about when the night was darkest and the flames grew dim.

“Someday,” he had whispered, sometime after Beric’s third death, or fourth, “the whole of the world will freeze. I can see it, here. See? Right in the flames.” He had drunken more than his fair share that night, swaying even as he sat. Still, his words came easy. They always had for Thoros. A better wordsmith than he was a priest. A better drunk than either.

“What will we do?” Beric had asked of him.

Thoros laughed. “The Hall of Light always has seats. That it does, my friend, your lordship.”

Thoros had fallen asleep after that, but Beric had his answer, anyway. When the flames simmered down, and all that was left was embers dying in the cold of winter, Beric had seen the truth.

He stood before the center dock, dripping with sweat and blood. Before him was a pile of sticks and branches, cloaked by a great gold cloth. A Baratheon banner, it had been. A banner he had sworn himself to. A banner for a man he had led a brotherhood for. His liege lords, his King, his honor.

He let his sword scrape across the remains of his right hand. He did not so much as wince. Pain was fleeting. Pain was unending.

Fire leapt from his fingers onto the blade, hungry and angry. There had been flames before, but now they were brighter. Now, they raged. The fire knew the wrong of this night. It knew the blood that had been shed in the name of a cruel god. It yearned to make it right with the same savagery that Beric felt in his heart, whenever he thought of Thoros and his fallen brothers and his murdered king.

“Lord of Light,” he whispered. “Lead us from the darkness, o’ my Lord. Fill our hearts with fire, so we may walk your shining path. R’hllor, you are the light in our eyes, the fire in our hearts, the heat in our loins.”
He set the tip of his sword beneath the golden cloth. Flames licked out, eager to escape and spread. The Lord must have heard him, because they even swallowed the cloth, wet with snow and harbor waters. They need not have placed it at all, he realized, as he watched the crowned stag burn.

_Forgive me_, he prayed. _Forgive me._

The fire leapt from stick to stick, from branch to branch, from thread to thread. It spread until the entire pile was alight. A pile greater than the height of any inn, taller than some of the burned walls of Harrenhal. Tall enough to shine bright even in the darkness. Tall enough to be seen from the skies. He just prayed that it was enough.

It was.

It took scarcely a minute, and then, somewhere in the skies, a dragon began to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

And the battle unfolds! There’s a lot more to go, and little of it will be much fun for our heroes.

Anyway, next chapter we’re checking in with our eye in the sky. It’s time for fire, and blood.
As war ravaged her people, the last of the Targaryens watched and waited.

She was outside of the city walls, far across the harbor, shielded by the night. There, the dead would not see her. There, the Night King would not anticipate her coming. There, so long as their plan succeeded, she could strike without the Walkers ever expecting it.

It was one of the hardest things she had ever done. Dany had always considered herself a patient woman. She had lived with Viserys Targaryen for too many years, bending to his every whim and way. He had taught her patience and caution, just as he had taught her of Westeros and its people. She had learned it again in the Red Waste, in Meereen, and in the wait for war. She had learned it a thousand times over, and she had been willing to suffer it each time.

But now? As her people died just across the water, as the flames flickered out even as she watched, impatience poked her like a valyrian knife.

Jon Snow was somewhere in that crowd. He might be dead already, might have blue eyes and rotting skin, and she would not know. She had not wished him goodbye again – could not bring herself to – but now, she wished she had. A thousand goodbyes would not have been enough, but at least it would he closure. If all went wrong, she would have none. She would have nothing.

Drogon writhed beneath her. Sorry little sounds escaped his throat, as tiny pinpricks of light burst from beneath his scales. She shushed him with a whisper and ran a hand over his spines.

“Soon,” she told him in her mother tongue.

He grumbled beneath her palm, but otherwise remained compliant.

*Rhaegal would have been fighting me,* she thought, and then, *Jon would have been riding him.*

At least Rhaegal would live, if all went wrong. One of her sons. The last of her sons, if the Walkers won this night.

She took a breath to steady herself, as Drogon hissed. It took more whispers to calm him. Many more.

She could hardly blame his nerves. Her own heart was beating like a war drum, as loud in her ears as the screams of her people. It was worse than battle, she thought. At least in battle, she could make a difference. She could put an end to the screams, burn her enemies for daring to hurt her people.

But this? Standing aside as they died? Watching pathetically from the borders? It was as if her sons
were babes again, and she had to trust Jorah and his men to win her wars for her. It had been many years since those days, and it hurt more than she cared to admit that they had returned to her.

“Fire and blood,” she whispered to herself, but the dead did not bleed. All the blood from this fight was on her side.

She was so entranced by her own thoughts that she nearly did not notice the pyre. There were so many lights across the harbor that, at first, it blended with them all. Just another dot amidst a sea of them. Another drop of blood spilt.

But then it grew stronger. The hungry flames ate their way through wood and dried banners, sending forth a fire brighter than any of the others. Dany’s knees drove into Drogon’s side, more of instinct than any agreed-upon signal. But Drogon understood all the same. Each beat of his wings was a pained one, but her son bore it all the same.

“Today, we win this war,” she told him, as his feet first left the frozen floor.

It was a lucky thing that Drogon did not roar. But, then, did it truly matter if he did?

It took only a few dozen beats of his wings to carry her over the harbor. Then, three more to bring her above the River Gate, where tens of thousands of men stared in horror as Drogon soared over their heads. Some screamed, loud and shrill. Some cheered. Some knelt in the snow and prayed to seven gods, to old gods, to foreign gods, to whichever gods could hear them.

She passed over the gate, and the world beyond was as terrifying as it was grey.

It was an endless mass of wights. Grey men, small as ants beneath her feet, but horrifying from the sheer number. There were hundreds of thousands, maybe millions crowded into the city. So many that she could not see the snow beneath them, or the flames they smothered with their bodies. She could see many by the gates but, further than that, she saw nothing. The darkness was too strong. All around, clouds and darkness claimed the world, until all that was left was the color black and the sound of dead feet marching. A sound loud enough to hear even from hundreds of feet in the air.

She leaned over her dragon’s neck and urged him forward. Drogon was more than willing to comply. He let loose a roar – a sound like a thousand swords clashing, and a million wolves howling, and a billion voices screaming. The sound of it sent shivers down Dany’s spine. Reflexively, she wrapped her arms around his throat. Distantly, she realized she could feel the muscles working, the flames building.

She drove him over to the Muddy Way, and the first of the buildings she could see between wights and darkness.

Then, as she ordered him lower, she prepared to whisper a single valyrian word to her son.

For a moment, it seemed as if the world had gone quiet. Suddenly, her skin was not crawling, and the wights were not marching, and the thrum of her heart was not an ever-present roar. Suddenly, she was a little girl again, staring from the ship’s mast out at the sea, as she and Viserys sailed off to another adventure in some other place. A girl uneducated, untrained, and unskilled in the art of anything.

And then, she was Daenerys of the House Targaryen, again, 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 Regent of the Seven Kingdoms, Fighter of the White
Daenerys stared down at the world below, at the tragedy of it, at the horror, the corpses that had once been men, now forced to act against their brothers and their fathers and their sons. All chained by dark magics. All chains needing to be broken.

If there was anything Dany knew, it was how to break chains.

"Dracarys," she said.

She felt the fire bloom in Drogon’s throat. Watched it spew from his mouth, red and black and yellow. Watched it strike a hundred wights first, and then, watched the flames leap from the wights to a tiny little hut, stationed against a thousand others that looked just like it. There was nothing special about this hut; at least, not that she could see. She did not aim for it in particular. She hadn’t needed to. Every building in King’s Landing was just like it.

“Up!” she shouted, as loud as the flames that were no longer flowing. Drogon pulled up, and ceilings made of wood and mud and metal exploded into great shards, as sharp as any scorpion’s tail.

The world flashed green, and Dany slid.

Once, when Dany was a child – too young to count to twenty, but too old to cower in her brother’s bed – she had been hidden away in a great house in Braavos. There was a lemon tree outside her window, and a red door that led into a great garden. She had her own room for the first time in her life, and whenever she wanted, she could visit a room with great wooden beams carved with the faces of animals. It had been the only home she had ever known.

Once, when Dany was older and innocent still, she had stuck her hand in a fire while her brother was off begging for a crown or an army. She had only wanted to see if the flames would dance around her palm the way they did the wood. They had. She had emerged unscathed and thought nothing of it.

Once, when Dany was a woman grown, she had stepped into a bath of boiling water. Once, when Dany was a maiden no more, she had touched a burning dragon egg. Once, when Dany was a widow, she walked into a pyre and emerged unscathed. Once, when Dany was a queen, she had set alight the khals of the dothraki and emerged the Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea.

None of that mattered. Not the house with the red door, or the fire that danced on her palm, or the boiling water, or the eggs, or the pyre, or the titles. No, all that would matter was today. If they survived this war, this would be all they remembered.

And it was not the fires that burned.

The explosion was nearly enough to force her off of Drogon’s back.

For a moment, as the world flashed a terrible green, she swayed. Her fingers loosened, her knees crumpled. She sagged forward, a breath away from dying from a terrible fall into the eager flames.

Drogon’s scream was the only thing that kept her grounded. His wings were not flapping anymore, nor was he breathing flames. He fell back, propelled by a thousand different explosions as the city
of her forefathers crumbled.

Hundreds of caches, thousands of cashes – all of it had been lit. For the first time in moons, the world was light. It was as if the sun had risen again, and she was staring at green grasses as they hurled towards her.

The explosions spread like nothing she had ever seen. The whole of the city was alight in a horrible green. Green, green, green. Everything was green.

Once, Drogon had promised to make the whole of Westeros into a new sea of grass. Is this what you wanted, my sun and stars? Here is a green city. Here are grasses, burned and soon-to-be-plundered. My stallion has mounted the world, has burned a city to ashes. Are you proud?

As feeling returned to her fingers, she tried to urge Drogon south, but the dragon would not obey. He screamed again – a terrible scream – and continued his descent.

She had always known that she might die on this mission, but she had not truly come to terms with it. How could she? She was the last of her House; the only remnant of a great and powerful dynasty that had lasted 300 years. She was the Mother of Dragons, the Unburnt. How could she die by fire?

But it wasn’t the fire that would kill her. It was the stone that had shot from the walls of the city, the rooftops that had exploded into her Drogon’s belly, the fall.

Jon was somewhere outside of the city, she hoped. Jon was safe, and Rhaegar, too. They were the only thoughts that brought her comfort.

My love and my son. Safe.

There was something sticky dripping down the side of her face, but she did not dare release Drogon to see what it was. Tears, perhaps? No, she had not cried since she was a maiden. Blood? She had done nothing to earn it.

She was going to die, she realized. If Drogon fell, she would die. If any surviving wights found her, they would tear her to pieces, and she would die.

We’re giving the living a chance, she thought. Is it worth it?

Yes. Yes, it was.

If she was to be queen of this realm, who was she to put herself above the people? Who was she to say they should die in the war, but not her? She was the Protector of the Realm. If she did not put her life on the line to protect it, who was she to call herself queen?

No. It was Viserys’ dream to rule, she realized, suddenly. I just wanted a house with a red door.

But her wants did not matter. The people looked to her, regardless of what she willed. She would defend them. She had to. Though, perhaps for not much longer.

“Drogon!” she hissed, as they fell further and further through the sky.

And, as they went, she could see the enemy, all circling the city. Crowds of wights, standing outside the gates, protected from the glowing green. Too many to count. Too many to even process.
He knew, she realized, and she had never felt sicker. The Night King knew. We’ve lost.

Her dragon shrieked again. It felt like hours had passed since the green fires had lit, yet they had only fallen a hundred feet. Kinvara’s god was with them, yet.

It seemed someone else was listening as well, for Drogon’s wings finally spread. With a great roar and another burst of flames, Drogon forced them back into something like their usual pace. Each flap drew a scream from her wounded son, and each scream tore a thousand knives through her flesh.

The explosions were still spreading through the city as Drogon carried them back beyond the River Gate. She could see them, from the Fishmonger’s Square to Flea Bottom to the Sept of Baelor to the Cobbler’s Square and the Dragonpit and the Hook. The only part of the city not bathed in green was the Red Keep. Her father’s keep. It was too far away from where they had hoped to lead the wights. They was no need to waste the caches.

She stared at it as Drogon flew. It was still the color of blood. Fire and blood.

Drogon’s claws were scraping on stone as he carried her over the River Gate. Each beat was weaker to the last, until his wings finally came to an abrupt halt. Every inch of him went limp, a puppet abandoned. A mummer’s dragon left to fall.

They dropped down to the soil, Drogon lifeless and Dany crying out, until his soft underbelly struck the ground. There, the blood seeped and there the blood pooled. Red blood and black blood. Human blood and dragon blood.

She scrambled off of his back. Where normally, he might have offered her his tail as support, Drogon did no such thing. His muscles were limp; his face unmoving. When she ran to catch his eyes, both had drooped shut.

Fire cannot kill a dragon, she thought, desperately. Then, as she gazed at his belly, at chunks and shards of wood and metal poking out from between his scales, she swallowed. But explosions might.

“No, no, no,” she whispered, growing louder with each word. “No, no, please, no, no…”

She pawed at his nose, at his mouth, even his eyes. He did not move. Not a muscle.

The caches were still launching across the way. Green bathed over them all. It was far enough away from the gates that it did not swallow them – the Alchemists had been just as precise as they said – but that didn’t matter. What did any of it matter when two of her sons were…

Drogon had been hers. Her dragon, her chosen, her first-born. The egg she had first touched, the dragon who had saved her, the one who had carried her from Winterfell. The war was won, but he was the cost.

How much must she lose for this throne? Drogo was dead. Her son was dead. Viserion was gone. Her father’s city would be naught but green dust after this night. And now Drogon… What would be next? Rhaegal? Jon? How much more must she lose?

She did not cry. She could not cry. She did not think she had any tears left. They had fled her with Drogo.

She was supposed to be stronger than that.
She had to be. Already, there was a crowd forming around her. Brave men poking at the fallen
dragon; cowards hovering dozens of feet away. She had not the strength to send them back. She
had not the will.

Her son had been black in life. Black of scale, black of heart. But, now, in the light of a feigned
dawn, he was as green as his brother.

Jorah found her after the explosions had stopped. The wildfire still raged. The Alchemists had
promised an hour before they could return to the city to pick off any stragglers. Dany had expected
to be among the fighters, but now?

*I won’t cry. The blood of the dragon does not cry.*

“*Khaleesi,*” Jorah said, wrapping his hands around her shoulders. She pushed him away, rising to
her feet before he could humiliate her any further.

“The dothraki are dead,” she said. It was a testament to her will that her voice did not quake. “A
khaleesi with no khalasar is no khaleesi.”

“Your grace…”

“Did you forget my name through the years, bear?” She spat the words, but she didn’t care. She
didn’t care about anything but her son.

“Daenerys,” he tried. It seemed to pain him to use her true name. She did not care. “We must
ensure that…” His hand fell to the hilt of his sword.

*Fire cannot kill a dragon.*

She thought of her dream, not a fortnight before. Of standing on Drogon’s shoulders, as her son
breathed discolored flames across the land. She thought of blue eyes and a dragon colored white,
breathing flames as the world trembled.

She beat Jorah’s hand away from his hilt. She took a breath, shaken as any she had ever taken, and
drew the blade from his sheathe. The ripples in the valyrian steel trembled in the green light. For a
second, she thought it to be Rhaegal’s scales, and it broke her heart when she only found steel.

“Daenerys, you need not-”

“He is my son,” Dany said. “I will tend to it myself.”

Jorah nodded. He did not step back, so Dany stepped forward. Jorah was an old friend, and a loyal
one, but this was her place.

“What is it the ironborn say? What is dead may never die?” She set the blade against Drogon’s
eye. She was not sure if it would pierce his scales. She did not want to know.

Jorah nodded. “But rises again, harder and stronger.”

“I will not let them do that to him,” she said, pressing forward. The blade met no resistance. It was
sharper than Drogon’s claws, sharper than a dothraki arakh. Drogon made no sound, nor did he
move. Dany did not stop until the cross guard was pressed against the socket. When she drew it
back, again, the blade dripped black with blood.

Jorah hung his head. If he wished to hold her again, he did not act on it. She was grateful. She did
not wish to shove him away again.

He took the sword from her hand. She let him. She would never look at it again, if she could. She would have it thrown into the ocean, but they still needed it, she knew. Dragon fire had not killed the Night King in Winterfell; there was no reason to think wildfire would.

There was still a war to fight. Even if everything felt like it had gone horribly right and irreparably wrong, there was more to come.

They had an hour until the fires simmered and died. She felt like she needed a lifetime.

“He was my son,” she whispered. She slumped against him, as she often had in life. Already, he felt colder.

Somehow, Jorah heard. “He may have saved millions of lives, your- Daenerys.”

“And not his own.”

He was quiet for a moment, staring at his own bloodied boots. His face was streaked with red, and, if she looked carefully beneath the dirt, there was a gash in the side of his head. The skin there was puckered and red, bleeding sluggishly to his brow. He hardly seemed to notice. Too damned loyal to worry about himself.

“Rhaegal lives,” he told her.

Her heart remained sore, but at least it eased her pain some. He was the son she had named for the same man she had once named her other son for. Somewhere, on Dragonstone, one son still lived.

“Where is Jon Snow?” she demanded.

“I do not know. The battle, it has been…” His face was strained. “Chaotic, khal- Daenerys. Finding one man, I fear, may not be possible.”

Even he may not live.

She wanted to scream, but she swallowed her sorrows. The blood of the dragon did not cry. A queen did not cry.

All I wanted was a house-

They had an hour. An hour. An hour of staring through this green sun, praying that there would not be much left when the fires ended. Praying the wights outside the gates would burn, though she knew they wouldn’t. She would have told someone, warned someone, but she didn’t know who to tell. Jon was gone. All command was gone. There were just men. Men and boys.

In the end, they did not have an hour. They had five short minutes. Five minutes of rest before the green flames died, and the snow began to fall. Five minutes.

Then, the Walkers came.
I did say early on I’d be sticking to some key points in canon, didn't I? Well, King’s Landing’s burned and two dragons are dead. This totally counts.

Anyway, still more battle to come, and we’ll be checking in next time with our favorite stupid bull.
Chapter Thirty: Lend Me Your Strength

The River Gate

Gendry

As the sky turned green, Gendry tried to pray.

Oh, it was a difficult thing to do. The first explosion sent him flying back, just as it did the hundreds of men around him. The thousands of men. It was hard to pray when his everything was sorer than it had been after his long row.

He was one of the lucky ones, he knew. His back hit a pile of swords, and all he suffered for it was a few scratches to his plating and a few extra bruises. He was winded, of course. The first blast sucked the air out of him worse than Master Mott had, whenever his swing went awry and caught Gendry in the chest. The first time it happened, Gendry had been holding a shield – lucky he had – and Master Mott had laughed at him as he wheezed.

“You’re a lucky one, aren’t you? Hit like that would’ve killed most of ‘em,” his master had told him. “But bastards like you’re born lucky. Else you never would’ve been born at all.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe Gendry had been so lucky that he hadn’t even realized it. Maybe that was why he’d survived the battle on the Kingsroad. Maybe that was why he’d met Arry, why he’d survived the Tickler and Harrenhal, the escape and the days after, Dragonstone and the Wall, Winterfell and the Eyrie. Maybe that was why he’d met Arry again, at the end of all things when the world thought her dead. Maybe he really was just a bastard born lucky.

He sure didn’t feel lucky. He coughed and coughed and choked, and he didn’t feel any luckier for it. But, when he turned to the harbor, he found that the Crone had been guiding him well.

The explosion had sent hundreds of men into the water. Men armed with heavy metal swords, men in furs and cloaks, men wearing plates and armor. Men who had fallen beneath the depths, never to rise again. There were some rushing into the water, hopeful to save the drowning, but few enough came out again themselves. The water was as cold as it was hungry.

The Stranger would guide many a man this night. Gendry hoped it wouldn’t guide them the wrong way.

He wanted to go help, but he still hadn’t caught his breath. With every explosion, it grew worse any worse. He was choking on dust, on stone, on snow. He was choking on the smoke that shrouded them, on the ash that was raining from the sky. He fell back with every subsequent boom, and tried not to think of how it rattled his core.

He tried especially hard not to look at the water. There were so many dead. Too many.

There was a stranger to his left, babbling into his stomach. He still had his hand twisted around his
sword, but the dancing flames had sputtered out somewhere along the way. His eyes were wide, his lips ever-moving, and his stare sightless.

Gendry had seen his sort before. A broken man. He would not last the night.

The thought struck him like the explosions never could. It tore the breath from his lungs just the same, but the pain was a thousand times worse. He forced himself to his feet, stumbling with every *boom* and *bang*. Still, he moved. He had to. If he sat down, he might never rise again.

He tried to scream her name, but all he could do was wheeze. He wanted to pray for her, but he didn’t even know who to pray to. Which god was meant to heal? The Maiden or the Smith? It had been so long since he’d been to a sept, and the only one he’d ever seen had been blown to the Wall.

*Crone, show me the way,* he prayed. But the Crone must have heard thousands of prayers like it, and Gendry’s went unheard.

He was exhausted. Bone tired. Just walking felt like a trudge through a vat of tree sap. Like the red tears from the eyes of the weirwoods in Harrenhal. Those were Arry’s gods, he remembered. Were there weirwoods here? Would he find her praying, too? Would he find her at all? Or was she underwater with the rest of them?

No, Arry didn’t wear plate. Her armor was leather. It wasn’t heavy enough to drag her down.

*Unless she can’t swim. Can she swim?* She’d never been scared of the rivers before, but Lommy hadn’t been either, and Lommy had nearly been swept away once.

He tried to find her among the crowd, but it was impossible. There were too many faces, too many lost, too many burning. Green fires licked out from the walls, and any who had come too close had been set alight. One poor man thought to piss on the flames, and his cock was burning with the rest of him.

He made his way back to the gates, where he’d seen her last, but she was nowhere to be found. Gods, he didn’t even know where to look. What if she was looking for him too? What if she died because he couldn’t find her?

Where in the seven hells was Beric?

He didn’t have much longer to look. Even as he searched, the green light grew dimmer, until he was suddenly – terribly – aware that it was dark again.

Green fire wasn’t meant to go out this soon. He’d heard about the Blackwater, about the Great Sept. The flames had burned for an hour after, and the screams had gone on longer. How could it have already died?

There was snow falling, again, where before there had been ash. They tasted the same as they fell on Gendry’s tongue.

All around him, the men were silent. Where, before, there had been screams of pain and screams of joy, now there was only the quiet. Every member of the living – of the men who had survived the run and the fire – sat in silence and watched the snow. The ones dead at their feet, who’d bled from wounds or fell from the wall, they didn’t say a thing either.

Beyond the gate, he heard a beat of quiet, and then the terrible sound of the *thump*. A single body
dragged up against the other end of the doors. A single corpse, unaffected by the flames. There were no archers to shoot at it. Every man on the wall had been blown back to the ground. All of them were dead or bleeding, and the bleeding wouldn’t last much longer.

That single thump went on. Just a single man throwing himself at the gate. Over and over and over and over.

Then came the sound. A crinkling, like ice cracking on a lake. Gendry had heard it before, beyond the Wall. When they’d faced the Walker.

Only this time, it was louder. Louder, heavier, from all directions instead of just one. From his left, from his right, from directly in front of him. He felt like they could see him, even through the stone. Their bright blue eyes trained on his own.

The ice stopped. The Walkers stopped. Everything went quiet again.


Then came a whisper. Soft as Arry’s featherbed, sharp as a dagger. So quiet, he almost didn’t hear it over the wights beating at the wall. A single man, breathing into the wind, whispering, “We’re all gonna die, ain’t we?”

Off in the water, a thousand corpses opened their eyes.

“What is dead may never die,” one man said. And then the war began anew.

#

He had taken his hammer with him from Winterfell. He’d carried it on his back all the way to the Eyrie, and still to King’s Landing. He’d made it himself, one of the first things he’d forged in that castle of rubble to the North. It was the only thing he still carried from that place. Even his clothes, he’d changed a dozen times since.

He’d never been much good with a sword. Even at half his size, Arry had been able to best him in an instant every time they sparred. Bleeding Hot Pie had taken his sword, once, though he’d yielded as soon as he saw the look on Gendry’s face.

In short, Gendry was utterly useless with a sword. He could make them well enough, but using them? No, he was a lost cause at that.

But with a hammer?

The cold dragonglass pulverized the first face he set it against. And then next. And the next.

There were wights coming down from the walls, wights in the water, wights on the docks, and wights on the shores. Wights without legs and arms, crawling along on the ground to trip them up and tear them apart.

He bashed in skulls and chests alike. Crushed what had once been the faces of men, where eyes like shining balls of ice stared him down.

In the heat of battle, he didn’t have to think. He didn’t have to wonder about his future or his present, or any of it. He just set his feet and slammed.
There were fewer fires to guide his way this time. Most of the swords had been thrust into the water by the green flames, or smothered by the sudden snows. In the light of one of the last few flames from the explosions, he could see the storm passing overhead, thickening by the second as the Walkers pressed nearer.

If they did not clear these shores soon, they would all be doomed.

So, Gendry fought. He fought for all the living and for the future he wanted. He fought for what might have been hours or minutes. He couldn’t tell.

Hundreds of men fought around him. Men of the Westerlands, of the Reach, of the Iron Islands, the Stormlands, the Crownlands, the Riverlands, and the last few survivors of the Vale and the North. They fought. Together. Because, if only for a single moment in their terrible tired lives, they weren’t fighting for lords and ladies, kings and queens, priests and gods that didn’t care to answer their prayers. They fought for themselves.

There were fewer cowards here than there had been in the Vale. Maybe because they understood the price. Maybe because they’d already run, and they were too tired to do it again. Maybe because their mothers, their daughters, their wives were just a short march south, and if they let the wights pass, they would all be doomed. It didn’t matter. At Gendry’s side, they stood their ground. They found flaming swords, they found red priests, they found torches burning, and they returned to the fight.

Gendry was by the gates, after a time, thrashing at the wights that had stormed over the walls. He moved quicker than he had in his life, wielded his hammer like he never had before. For every wight his neighbors killed, Gendry killed two. For every drop of black blood that splattered on their faces, Gendry bathed.

All the while, the wights slammed into the gates. Over and over and over, until he could hear the rhythm of it as loud as the beating of his pounding heart.

And then, like a shriek out from the seventh hell, the gates creaked. They creaked and creaked, until finally, the stone crumbled. And the dead came.

There were as many now as there were earlier, if not more. They climbed over the blackened corpses of the wights that had crumpled in the green flames.

He couldn’t see any Walkers amidst the masses. There were only the rotted corpses. Every time he cut down one, another two would rise in its place. All around him, men were falling under the assault. Screams echoed high across the field. From all around the shore, from the waters, from the docks, from everywhere.

There were too many.

He must have fought for hours, still, before he caught sight of the first Walker. He had pushed his way closer to the gate, enough to catch sight of the land beyond the last remaining stone barricade. And, there, off by the Hook, headed for the Red Keep, was the Night King. Riding oh-so-calmly on the back of a rotten horse, on the way to the last remaining structure in a city of ash.

A spike of hatred shot through Gendry. What right did he have to roam so casually while the kingdoms were falling? While his own soldiers were being cut down a thousand at a time? While so many of his men lay dead. At least the living lords fought beside their men. What kind of king would abandon his own?
Gendry tried to fight his way to him, but there were too many. All across the city, there just
devastation. There was no great hero come to slay the beasts and save the living. There only stood
the dead.

They fell back. Further and further, they fell. The masses swarmed them, hungry as the wolves.
Where in the hells are the wolves? Where in the hells is Arry?

And then, like a gift from the gods, the wight line broke. The front swayed, the light fleeing their
grasping blue eyes. A thousand bodies fell at once, crumbling like the Eyrie. Somewhere, a Walker
had fallen. There was still a chance.

The lines behind them pushed forward. They couldn’t leave them time to recover.

He and a thousand others plunged forward. Each screamed a hundred different cries. Some
screamed for their mothers, their lords, their castles, their everything. Some screamed their own
names, and some just screamed, “Die!”

Gendry only screamed. A wordless stupid scream. Suddenly, he didn’t care about the soreness in
his arms or the strain in his muscles. All that mattered was survival. If he had to fight until he
collapsed, he would. He would!

And as his hammer smashed through a wight’s wet skull, he caught sight of the horde behind it. A
mass of dead men with rotted faces, missing noses, skin that hung and waved. A line that stretched
all the way to the Gate of the Gods and back. A line that might have stretched to Winterfell for all
that he knew.

The green fire hadn’t taken enough of them. There were still more. Too many more.

Where are the Walkers?

He pulled back, only for a second, and two more men rushed to take his place. A Dornishman and
a gold cloak. The gold cloak took a dagger to the eye, and a man of the Reach rushed to replace
him.

Where are the Walkers?

He checked their right, and saw nothing but men and wights. He checked their front, and saw
naught but more. He checked left, and saw nothing at all. Just a wall.

But there, on the parapets, holding half of a spear in their right hand, was a short soldier in leather
armor. They were sprinting, faster than anyone he had ever seen, with their eyes trained on the Red
Keep. With their eyes trained on the White Walker, riding patiently on his undead steed. In the
soldier’s hand, a dragonglass spear.

No, Gendry thought. No, no, no, no you don’t!

He tried to run for her. There were wights in the way, and he smashed them down as quickly as he
could. There were too many. She had taken the smart route through the walls, rather than the battle
itself. When had she even gotten atop the walls?

“Arry!” he screamed, terror spitting from his tongue.

She didn’t turn. She didn’t hear him. No matter how loud he screamed, she didn’t hear. He tried to
fight his way back to her, but she was too quick. She was always too quick.
Another Walker fell, the army staggered, and Gendry managed to run for a few seconds, before more wights came to take the place of the fallen. The living were making their way through the dead, but none of it mattered if he couldn’t find his way to her.

*Please, gods, please. Smith, Father, Mother, Crone, Warrior, Maiden, please! Lord of Light, old gods, drowned god, gods of goats and babes and slaves, whichever one of you is out there, please.*

And then, he thought of what he told her that night. Before they had slept together, before the cold that had settled in his bones had been driven away by her touch.

*We’re going to face the God of Death. And there’s only one thing we say to him.*

“Fuck off!” he screamed. His cries startled the Dornishman at his side. He earned a knife to the throat for it. Someday, Gendry hoped to mourn him. For now, he just fought.

He would fight the whole way back to her, if only to tell her what a stupid annoying little shit she was. Then, he would never let her do anything this stupid again.

He just needed to get there first, and everything would be alright.

It had to be.

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**Chapter End Notes**

So this'll probably end up being one of the shorter chapters in the fic, but I didn't see a need to drag it out any further than it needed to be. I think this might be the first time I've used self-control in this fic, so yay!

Anyway, be ready to check in with the youngest living Stark (the one that isn't a bird...man, this fic got weird). Been wanting to get to this next one for a while, so I'm really looking forward to this next update!
In the Free City of Braavos, there had once been a girl with eyes as grey as the rags she wore, with a belly that ached for food and more. She spent her days wandering the streets, aimlessly and stupidly. Too many times, she had fallen into the canals and one Braavosi salesman or another would pluck her out of the water, clucking their tongues at her. They’d pick a coin out of her bowl for the trouble, and she would go about her day, taking care to watch for any dips in the streets.

She hadn’t been much good at... well, anything. She couldn’t fight, she couldn’t navigate, and she could hardly even speak the tongue. The only respite from the hunger in her belly, and the pain in her knees and her palms, was the dreaming.

In her dreams, she could see.

In the good dreams, she was a wolf. She wandered in the night, tearing the limbs off of menfolk with the lions on their shoulders or the towers at their breast. Blood would stain her maw, painting her red and black in the dark of night. In her dreams, she could see flowers and bodies and wolves, colors and people, sights that were as beautiful as the sunrise over the stones of Winterfell, as welcoming as Jon Snow’s smile, or the feel of Needle in her hand.

But there were other dreams, too. And though they brought her sight and color and life again, she would have stayed blind for a thousand years if it meant she didn’t have to roam the halls of the Tower of the Hand, again. If it meant she didn’t have to run from Syrio, watch the birds, cower from the Tickler, see the Wedding and Robb’s-

It seemed that the dreams had come to life, somewhere along the way. Syrio wasn’t there, nor father, or the Tickler, or the birds, or the terrible creature that had once been her brother, but the tower was. The great tower, which had once been adorned with an endless array of direwolves, but now bore lions on the stone-grey walls. She had avoided this castle since they reached King’s Landing, but, now, she had no choice.

The Night King had taken wights with him, and Arya was terribly unprepared.

She’d never seen them before, and the sight of a single one was terrifying enough to send her into shivers. Fear cut deeper than swords, and the man who fears losing has already lost, and she knew it better than anyone. So why am I so afraid?

There were dozens of them chasing her and, while she was skilled enough with her staff, the Waif had never prepared her for this. She was trained to kill a single individual, not the masses that chased her now. It was why she had gone after the Night King in the first place, before a Walker had spotted her and set his wights after her.

But even so, at least there was one benefit to her training. Even in the black of night, Arya never slipped. Oh, her senses were dulled, to be sure, but not nearly as much as the rest of the world’s. The smoke clogged her nostrils, and the muffled sound of feet on snow was different to that which
she had learned, but it helped all the same. She moved as if her eyes were still working, and she had never been more thankful. If she tripped now, she would die.

Death lived all around her. It carried in the snow, in the hail, in the spew of arrows flying from the bows of Walkers on the horizon. It came from rooftops, as long-decayed wights leapt and screamed, brandishing knives they hardly knew how to use. It isn’t even hard, she thought. Jon taught me in a sentence.

Everywhere she went, she was dodging a dozen swords, a hundred, a thousand! Rotted faces were all around her, and she had found slabs of skin sopped in puddles in the streets.

Somewhere - high above the castle, in a place that the wights hadn’t yet reached - a lone voice was singing out to the world. It was sharp and cold and empty, but still, the song went. Somehow, she heard his tune above the cries, above the screams, above the blood rushing in her ears and the sound of a hundred feet chasing her through the halls.

Perhaps it was the voice of the gods, she thought. But surely, the gods sung better than this.

If she shut her eyes, she could pinpoint the singer. There was a man atop the room with the throne. Some mad singer, who had somehow survived the explosions and the wildfire, and who now sung a forgotten song into the night.

It was distracting. It was annoying. It was so stupid, she could hardly understand it. Singing made noise, and noise would only get him killed.

But still, he sang. The dead man went on. And, as Arya ran, he sang louder and louder and louder.

She crawled up from the dungeons as the first song ended. Something about a boy, his thrice-damned father, and a maiden who was a maiden no more. Just before it ended, a wight lashed out at her leg, but the tip of her spear lodged in its brain before it could reach her. One down. Too many more to count.

The second song began as she killed another. And then, she was on her feet and moving again. “High in the halls of the kings who are gone,” the mad singer sang. “Jenny would dance with her ghosts.”

She sprinted up the stairs, spinning her spear with every step. Dozens of wights followed her, their steps as loud as the horns. The horde was descending on her. It was nothing like on the outskirts of the city, or the few wights she had noticed as she ran along the way. This was a swarm.

Everywhere she looked, knives slashed and grey faces roared.

“The ones who were lost…”

She ran past the rooms of those who had lived there, a thousand years ago. Septa Mordane, Jeyne Poole, Jory Cassel, and a hundred guards whose names she might have known then, but now she couldn’t recall any of their faces, or their voices, or much of anything at all. But Septa Mordane used to crack her knuckles, and Jeyne Poole called her Horseface, and Jory Cassel had been there to drag her back to Father after Nymeria left.

That was all. The rest was a mystery. As foreign as her lord father’s face or her mother’s smile. They were her people once, and now even the memory of them had fled.

“And the ones who were found…”
Outside, a bird screeched. “Breathe!” it called, loud and shrill and horrible. “Breathe!”

Sansa’s room passed by her right. Arya couldn’t bring herself to look. There, she had left her sister when everything in their lives had gone wrong. There, she had abandoned her to Joffrey, to Meryn Trant, and to Queen Cersei, to the Kingslayer. There, Sansa had turned from a wolf to a lion’s sheep, just as Arya had. She should have gone back. She should have saved her.

She failed her sister then. She wouldn’t do it again.

Her spear tasted more blood, and her feet did nothing more than lick the stone, barely touching each brick for more than a half-second.

“The ones who had loved her the most…”

She didn’t look at the room where once her lord father had worked. She ran up the stairs, where once she had learned to balance on a single toe, where once she had chased cats. She cut down another wight when it got too close, and wondered if her Father would be proud to see her today.

No, she thought, and she had never been more sure of anything in her life.

“The ones who’d been gone for so very long, she couldn’t remember their names.”

It was getting harder to sense with every step. She could no longer smell the faint scent of rot on the wights. The smoke filled her nostrils too completely, and, worse was the way the cold was sapping her sense of touch. Though her feet still vibrated on the ground, she could no longer feel the way the wights did. Her every sense was growing clouded, and that scared her more than the darkness ever had.

She went by her another door then, and – for just a fraction of a second – her feet stuttered. She recovered quickly enough, but she had to kill another two wights as they reached for her with rusted iron knives.

She had never wanted to be anywhere near that room again. Not in a decade, or a century, or a thousand years. This was where a girl of one-and-ten had sat with her father and learned the truth, where she had lived and died. Or had that death been on the balcony above? In the dungeons below? Or beneath the statue of Baelor, not an hour’s walk from this place? Or had she survived it all, only to die a thousand deaths on the way back, damned to die again as soon as she found these cursed walls?

She couldn’t say. She could only run.

“They spun her around on the damp old stones. Spun away all her sorrows and hates,” the singer went on, but Arya could scarcely think of him. She was too busy running. Sprinting past the balcony, where once she had learned and Syrio died. Where once a name had been added to a list that had not yet come to be.

“And she never wanted to leave... Never-”

Finally, the stairs ended and the bridge began. She was on solid ground again, where she could run far longer and far quicker. It gave her a chance. All she needed was a chance.

Whatever the singer meant to sing next, she would never know. His song turned to shrieks as she made her way to the Small Hall. Gurgled cries as grey fingers ripped at entrails and dug knives into flesh. He would not sing again.
She had precious little time to care.

A thousand years ago, this was where the Stark Household had broken their fast and taken their supper every morn and every night. It was where she had caught the three-legged ginger tomcat, the first one she’d ever caught. It was where Jory had offered her a cake he’d stolen. It was where Fat Tom had laughed when she’d tried to steal a knife from the table. It was where Desmond had talked her through their defenses.

They were all dead. The Small Hall was empty.

It filled again, and not with friends.

She paused to cut down a few of the wights, but there were too many. Before she had trimmed three from their ranks, a fourth caught hold of her staff. She tried to wrench it from its pull, but its grip did not loosen. It was still a fresh enough corpse that the bones were not yet brittle. She tried to drive it forward, but a fifth came and latched on, and a sixth.

She pulled, one last time, and the wooden shaft snapped. Dammit, Gendry.

She was showered with splinters, though she hardly felt the pain. It was only after she began to run again that she noticed the long sharp piece stuck into her left palm. It didn’t matter. None of it mattered. The other half of the spear was still in her right hand. If she’d lost it, she still had the Kingslayer’s sword. Only that mattered. She could fight. So long as she kept moving, she could fight.

Her legs screamed for her to stop and rest, but rest was death. If she stopped for more than a moment, she might never start again. Or, rather, she might start again, but with eyes as blue as ice.

She found her way to the outer fortifications, and ran as far as they would take her. It took everything she had not to slip on the snow, or sway from the sudden gusts of wind. Four wights slid and fell. The rest held their feet. They weren’t scared to follow her. They weren’t scared of anything. Their fear of death had fled them when death did. Only ice remained.

The Small Hall connected to the Throne Room, she remembered. She found her way there from the battlements, and skidded onto its roof. It strained her leg, but still she kept moving. She had to.

Her left hand was sticky with blood. She spared a second to look, and it was far from a pretty sight. Blood oozed down to her forearm, staining the entirety of her arm red. She couldn’t see past it to the wound, but she knew it wouldn’t be a pretty sight. Just the look of it sent waves of pain radiating through her. She cursed. The left was her better hand. Without it, she would be more useful behind the walls.

But it didn’t matter. There was no going back now. When she glanced out to the gardens and the King of the Walkers, she found the choice taken from her.

There was a bird in the godswood. A black raven with eyes as white as snow. Bran.

And suddenly, it was clear. Everything was clear. The letter to the Cat of the Canals. The dagger he’d given her. The dagger she’d just thrown away. I have sent bait.

The Night King had gone for him in Winterfell, but the job wasn’t done.

Valar morghulis, the letter said. All men must die. But Bran hadn’t yet. He was alive and flying, still carrying whatever it was that the Walkers needed. The Night King would still want him.
She wanted to scream. She wanted him to fly to someplace safe, where the Night King would never find him. She wanted him to cross the Narrow Sea, to hide in Asshai or Southros or the center of the Dothraki Sea. She wanted him to run away to the cells in the House of Black and White, where no one would ever find him.

But Bran would not go. He was perched on an old rotting weirwood stump, surrounded by trees. He watched her. His head jerked, beckoning her closer. The trap had been set, she realized, too late. Bran was the bait, the Night King was the quarry, and Arya... Arya was the hunter. The direwolf.

The Night King marched along, oblivious. He had abandoned his horse at the entrance to the Red Keep and now he made his way afoot. He moved so slowly that Arya thought he might not have been moving at all.

The eyes behind the White Walker’s skull shimmered even in the dead of night. Even surrounded by the burnt bushes and ashen trees, shrouded in darkness, she saw him. Two glimmering blue eyes that seemed to stare right at her, before passing over harmlessly. She shuddered, even as she ran.

A thousand wights followed him. Two thousand feet marching. A mass of men that would swallow her if she came anywhere close. Another twenty or so followed her. She couldn’t kill them all. Unless...

Unless...

She was tiring. She had fought her the way from the River Gate, had snuck through the dungeons, and up several flights in the Tower, all while fleeing for her life.

She tried to cut down another wight, but her muscle flagged before she could make contact. It lashed out at her with its dagger and, while she pulled back in time, the blade still scraped her left arm. The blood flowed faster now.

With her right arm, she dug the tip of her broken spear in the wight’s skull. It slid in and out, smoother than the Waif’s knife. It came out drenched somehow blacker, and the wight toppled over. Another lunged for her, and Arya was running again.

She reached the edge of the roof. Nowhere to go.

She didn’t even think. She didn’t look back at the wights, either. There wasn’t time. Her feet carried her where her mind wouldn’t. She stepped over the edge. She fell.

Arya had never been as good a climber as Bran. Maybe that was why he was the bird and she was the wolf. He could climb, and she could fight. Now, he could fly, and she could kill. It was fair.

So, when Arya fell face-first into the tree, she expected to fall. She didn’t expect her scrambling fingers to find purchase on the branches, or her feet to lock against the trunk.

The gods must have been watching. They must have been smiling.

Her fingers locked and her feet, too, and Arya found herself hanging over the godswood, over the weirwood stump, over Bran.

By some miracle, the Night King hadn’t noticed her, nor did he look to see why his wights had leapt off of the roof.

None of them touched her. For the first time since she’d come to the Keep, she was safe.
It never lasted.

The Night King did not look to her, but he did look to Bran. He reached for his weapon, as he stared her brother in the eye, and her brother stared back. Bran’s wings beat – once, twice – and she knew with certainty that he would fly away. He would be safe, no matter what happened next.

_Look with your eyes_, a voice whispered, and she listened the way she always did. She saw exactly what she needed to. The Night King was unaccompanied, unprotected, and unaware. Too focused on the bird to see the cat prowling in the trees. The wolf.

_This could be my last chance_, she thought. _To avenge Bran and Mikken and Maester Luwin and everyone else he killed at Winterfell and everywhere else. This is my chance._

And, just before his hands could touch the blade on his back, Arya jumped.

She did not make a sound. She did not shout or cry or whimper. She did nothing but leap and fall.

Yet, somehow, the Night King heard her. Before she had fallen more than a foot, he was there. His hand outstretched, his lips twisted in a terrible grin.

One of his hands wrapped around her throat. The other, her right hand – the one holding the spear. Agony pulsed wherever his fingers touched. An awful cold that plunged deeper than her bones, into her very soul. Already, the skin was cracking and ripping and _burning_.

It didn’t matter. She’d fought through pain before. She’d fought through death before.

She tried to stab forward, but his grip was as strong as a bear. It didn’t matter. She had practiced this, too. Quick as a snake, she loosened her grip, and the broken spear fell.

His eyes widened; his grin slipped away. He dropped his head to stare at her left hand.

And the spear slipped through her bloodied palm.

There was no time to revel in her shock. There was no time to think. The spear was gone. It didn’t matter. She had other weapons. _Calm as still water. Fear cuts deeper than swords._

Her muscles moved before her mind, a memory sewn in by years of practice and years of pain. Her left hand went to her right side, and, in a single move, a long thin blade slid against his ribs.

And, against that very slab of ice and bone, that sword that had been home – had been her sister and her brothers, her father and her mother, cobbles and trees and a great godswood with dark water and bright leaves; her friends and her people, and the smile of the man who gave it to her, who had hugged her and loved her and swore to protect her no matter what she had done or what she was; this sword that was pine needles and pigeon pies, warm fires and hot springs, sentinel trees that stood tall beyond the stone walls, the endless scent of lemon cakes in the air and the sound of singing and dancing and harp strings, and Robb’s booming laugh ringing loud and Theon’s joining him, fingers scraping on stone as a little boy climbed too high, and a little baby cheering him on with words that weren’t; this sword that was rustling leaves and birds in the air, summer snows on the ground, and Mikken’s hammer singing through the days – she plunged it into him. She stuck the pointy end right where the heart should be, and drove it forward with all the strength she didn’t know she had. And Jon Snow’s smile shattered.

For a moment, she couldn’t think. She just stared at it. This broken blade in her bloody hand. The long thin spike of castle-forged steel that had been reduced to a jagged protrusion of no more than an inch. A blade she fought for, lived for, killed for.
Needle...

She wouldn’t drop it. She couldn’t. She stared, and the Night King’s hands didn’t stop her breath so much as the shock in her system did.

For all the years she’d spent with death – a servant, a soldier, a sword – she had never expected it to hurt this much. Hadn’t expected it to feel like burning. Ice and fire at once across her skin, in her head, her lungs, her throat, her heart. The burning frost spreading across her skin, painting its frozen fires all across her flesh. She tried desperately to gasp for air, but it wouldn’t come. She tried to scream, but even screaming was beyond her.

She had known the darkness before, but it had never been like this. Then, it had only taken her eyes. Now, it clawed at her lungs and her tongue, her ears and her hands, her nose and her throat. Black spots danced along her eyes, as Sansa and Jeyne Poole had danced across Winterfell.

The raven flew away. He left her alone there, in the Night King’s hold. He was safe, and that was all that mattered. She was just a lone wolf again. She was always the lone wolf. The lone wolf dies.

Then, the moment broke, and she was kicking and clawing at stabbing at his hand with her broken sword. Each blow only made the blade worse. Chips and pieces came off as it shattered and shattered, until even the hilt was cracked and broken. Fear cut deep. Deeper than swords, deeper than anything.

*Valar morghulis! Valar morghulis! Valar morghulis!* she thought, madly, and suddenly, she couldn’t think anything else. How many times had she said those words and never once had she realized the one inescapable truth: *it means me too.*

Only then, as the pain flushed through her throat, hot as a cask of wildfire, did her left hand fall. The life fled her like a bird in the night. Like Bran. Dark wings. *Jon. Sansa. Gendry.* All of them would die with her. She might have screamed, but her throat had frozen shut.

*I can’t breathe,* she thought, madly. *I can’t breathe – I can’t breathe!*  

She didn’t want to die. It was only now that she really truly realized it. Oh, she had run from it before. She had run for so long that her bones were so tired, that she thought they would shatter before she ever made it home. She had shouted “Not today!” so many times it was a wonder her tongue hadn’t tired, and she had seen so much, she was lucky her eyes hadn’t fallen out.

But now, she couldn’t say a word. ‘*Not today*’ bled away. The only thing that was left was *I can’t breathe!* She tried to think of fear and swords, but his hand cut deeper than either. It didn’t matter that she was afraid, when the fight was already lost.

“Nymeria,” she mouthed, but her dying throat could not form the word. With every second that passed, her life slipped further away. *Not like this. Please, not like this…*  

And, just like little Arry, and Nan, and Weasel, and Salty, and Cat, and Beth, and Mercy, and Lyanna Stark the Faceless Man, all that she was fled with the breeze. Her hand could no longer claw at the nails around her throat. Her legs could not keep kicking when all the air was gone from her lungs. *Stick ‘em with the pointy end,* but the pointy end was gone.

She slumped in his frozen hands, lulled by the sound of ice crackling, ice laughing, and a lone wolf howling. It sounded as pained as she felt. Fire licked at her insides but, outside, the world was as cold as him.

Her life did not flash before her eyes, as she might have expected it to. She did not see Winterfell,
or Braavos, or Jon, or Gendry, or anything good from the life she’d had and lost. The life she’d wasted.

She only saw them.


*I did it.*

She saw their faces. She saw their deeds. She saw heads on spikes, wolf heads on shoulders, and women screaming as men tore off their clothes. She saw the Tickler at work, and she saw Gendry sitting before him. She saw men threatening to fuck her bloody, and killers prowling in the night. She saw bodies on a slab, bodies on the road, bodies in the canals.

She saw blood. Everywhere, she saw blood. Blood and water.*All men are made of water.*

When his touch left her throat, the ground rushed up to meet her. She didn’t have the strength to soften the fall. Her head struck something hard, but she didn’t feel it. She didn’t feel anything. She only knew the frost that stayed at her throat, and its bite was cold and black.

*Not today,* she thought, but the one true god did not hear.
Sansa V

Chapter Notes

So, for dramatic purposes, I didn’t include this in the last chapter, but credit to Sand44 on ao3 and TheEarthTiger on ff.net, who were the only people to predict Arya’s death! I’ve been not-so-subtly hinting at it for a while now, and I’m beyond relieved that card’s finally on the table. Anyway, hope you guys enjoy 32!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Two: On the Horizon

Tumbleton

Sansa Stark

The ground trembled as it had not since the fall of the Eyrie.

The room was lit by scattered torches and a terrible green glow that painted the walls. Miles and miles away, yet Sansa could still see green through the trees, in the skies. The sight of it sent pain billowing through her burned arm. Still, she did not flinch. Her skin was made of steel, not ivory or porcelain. Burned steel, perhaps, and blackened by the flames, but steel was steel no matter how dark the coloring. She would not crack today.

She was alone in her courage that day. All around her, innocent people flinched and cowered. Some screamed, some cried, some stared off and said nothing as the tears dripped down their pink cheeks.

Some of these people had surely never seen a battle in their lives. Most had not been there during the Blackwater, when the wildfire raged just as well as it did now. None had been there in Winterfell, when blood and mud stained every inch of the field, of her home. These were innocents. Just happy ladies, still trapped in the stories their septas told them. Songs of heroes that would come to save them from this castle. Heroes who would slay the Walker threat.

Sansa knew better. There were no heroes, just men. Men no better or braver than her. If the heroes truly did live, she doubted they would find them in Tumbleton.

But she could not say that any more than she could speak of the horror she had seen in Winterfell. Instead, she found herself sitting with them in Tumbleton’s hall, patting shoulders and wiping tears from the eyes of wailing women. She spoke with some prayed beside others, though she herself had no gods to believe in.

Most often, she sang. When she had been a girl, Septa Mordane had always told her that her voice could calm babes and wolves alike. Now, as Sansa sung beside these terrified innocents, she found that it was truer than she had ever known.

She hummed songs she had once known by heart, but now, she could only recall bits and pieces. She sung Seasons of My Love, then Maiden, Mother, and Crone, and finally The Song of the Seven.
Holy songs, and songs she had loved, but songs that now interested her no more than needlework
had interested Arya and the letters had interested Rickon. She tripped over her words, missed notes,
and jumbled the rhythms, but it made no matter. The ladies sang with her and over her.

And with each song, the words came clearer and her voice came stronger. What began as hoarse
rhythms, still stilted from the ashes of the Eyrie, turned to sweet melodies that sounded not unlike
the ones she had known. Still different, of course. Nothing would ever truly be the same. She knew
that now.

They didn’t. No, they sung along with her, and they truly believed them to be the words of her
heart. Each careful note pressed out from a gentle soul. Each kind-hearted word truly meant. She
could see it in their eyes, as she sang of the Father’s protection and the Warrior’s strength. Neither
were real, nor were any of the others. No one watched over ladies and children. The gods would not
grant them justice. They had to grant their own.

And, out there, on the edge of the horizon, that was what Jon was doing. Fighting to bring justice to
a world that had lost it. It was what they had done with the Boltons, it was what the Stranger had
done to the Freys, and it was what they were trying to do again. What they had to do.

So Sansa stayed, and Sansa comforted them all. Poor Lady Stokeworth, with her babe pressed to
her breast and her tears flowing free. Sansa sang to her of heroic knights and dead Lannisters, but
she only wanted to hear of sellswords with souls softer than silk. Lady Smallwood, who cried for a
daughter she hadn’t seen in years, and wanted songs of maidens with flowers and acorns in their
hair. Lady Tully, who asked not for a song, but for word of her lord husband’s survival. Sansa had
no truth to give her, but lies were a woman’s weapons as much as courtesy and poison. As she
slipped over to the next lady in need, Lady Tully had tears in her eyes, and none were tears of
sorrow.

When they no longer needed her, she separated herself from the other ladies. Her duty was done for
the moment. Before long, she would be needed again, but at least now, there was no panic. For
now, she could rest her voice a bit. For now, she could search for others who might need her.

There was a little girl, no older than Sansa had been at the start, curled up against the wall. Her
head was tucked against her scraped knees, her fingers shaking where they pressed against her flat
chest. Fat tears streamed down her weasely face. She was highborn, Sansa knew, but only from the
dress. The rest of her looked as common as any of the smallfolk. Sansa wondered if she, herself,
did too.

She found herself sat beside the girl, careful not to startle her. When the girl finally looked to meet
her eyes, Sansa fell into some old song about Jenny of Oldstones, a girl with flowers in her hair.

The girl did not so much as smile. She simply set her head against her knees and sobbed. She
would stay sobbing, until the sun rose again.

If, Sansa thought, horribly.

That was where Tyrion found her, sat against the wall while the ladies went on with songs she had
long since forgotten. The tears on their cheeks had dried, but the fear had not fully fled them. It
never would. Sansa knew that well.

He slumped down beside her. There was a flask in his hand. Every few seconds, he would take
another swig. When he offered it to her – after his third – she took it gracefully. It was good, she
thought. The finest Arbor gold. But Arbor gold could not keep the fear from her, and Arbor gold
would not stop her heart from pounding as she watched the green light fade.
The smallfolk cheered when the fires dimmed, and the highborn, too, and Sansa smiled along with them. She had to. If they knew what it meant, they would panic. She would rather them spend their last few hours in peace.

Tyrion sat in silence for a moment, before he turned his head to her. The scar on his face looked wicked in the light of the flames.

“You are good at this,” he told her, softly. “Lady Smallwood is very grateful. She claims you calmed half the castle tonight.”

Sansa hummed, but said nothing to that. She would rather not speak of any of them at the moment. Every time she looked at the other ladies, it only reminded her that, a few minutes before, they had been shrouded in green.

“I thought you’d stopped drinking,” she said, instead.

He took the flask back and drank deep. When it was done, he signaled to some waiting squire, who bore the Lannister lion on his sash. He was of age with Rickon, and smaller still. Sansa had never been happier that she kept these boys from battle, no matter how Arya complained.

The squire filled Tyrion’s flask, and Tyrion drank it again before handing it off to Sansa.

“I thought you had stopped singing,” he said, finally. Streaks of white dripped down his bearded chin. “War always seems to bring us back to the start.”

“What about after? Will you drink then?”

His voice fell to a whisper. “Are we so confident, my lady?”

Sansa held back a sigh. “Will you drink then?” she repeated.

He stared at her for a moment. Then, he hung his head back and reached for the flask. “I think I will drink Casterly Rock clear of its stores.”

“Casterly Rock? Here I thought you were in exile.”

He waved a hand, grinning. “Exile seems so temporary a position these days. You need only ask your brother. Exiled to the Wall.”

Sansa had to hold back a flinch. “Until the day of his death, which has long passed us by.”

Tyrion nodded. He drank. “And, if you do not mind sharing with a lecherous, evil imp, what are your plans, my lady of Stark? Home to Winterfell?”

She didn’t know any more than he did, and she didn’t want to think of it.

“What do you think they’re doing in King’s Landing?” she asked, instead.

Tyrion drank. He handed her the flask, and she drank too.

“If the wildfire already launched, I assume the retreats were successful. If they lured enough of the wights into the city, they may be finishing off the stragglers as we speak.”

They both knew it wasn’t true. The wildfire would never have gone out so soon, if it was. But it made the little girl next to Sansa lift her head, and that made the lie worth it.
Sansa went on, as if she had not noticed. “Who do you think will be the one?” she asked. Then, for the girl’s benefit, “To kill the Night King?”

Tyrion hummed, drank. “Your sister, I imagine.”

Sansa’s eyes went wide. “Arya?”

“Why not?” Tyrion said, shrugging. He handed her the flask, and she drank down the rest. The sweet white tasted bitter on her tongue. When his spoke, his words were just as sour as the wine. “She already killed Jaime. Perhaps she means to take the Kingslayer mantle.”

She nearly dropped the flask. Thankfully, the cupbearer was there to catch it and fill it. He handed it off to Tyrion, who smiled softly as Sansa’s stricken face.

“Arya didn’t-”

“Yes,” Tyrion hummed, “my brother’s sword found its way to her belt by way of magic, I’m sure.”

She had nearly forgotten the sword.

“I found it,” Arya had said, but Sansa had known it for a lie as soon as she heard it. Men did not simply leave valyrian steel lying in the open. And Arya had proven surprisingly adept against Jon in their little spar.

“Your brother was one of the finest swordsmen in Westeros,” she said.

“As I’ve heard it told, as is Jon Snow.” He waved his hand. “And my brother was a great sword. But my brother lost his right hand, and not all men can use both hands as well as I.” He cupped himself with his left hand and laughed, a cold and bitter thing.

Arya knew about the hand too, Sansa remembered.

“Just because Arya could… handle a crippled Jaime Lannister doesn’t mean she can kill the Night King.”

Tyrion only smiled. That smug smile he only ever reserved for the moments when he thought he was cleverer than the world. He wore it often.

Dread crept like wights in the night. “What is it?”

“‘The North remembers’;” Tyrion said, idly. “And ‘Winter came for House Frey.’ Peculiar words from a girl of the Riverlands, aren’t they?”

The strange girl beside them sobbed anew, all her mirth lost in a moment. Sansa wanted to comfort her, but she didn’t know how. She imagined the sudden darkness was all-the-more terrifying at the tender age of ten, and Tyrion’s words even darker.

Sansa shut her eyes and reached for the flask. This time, she drained it alone. A thousand songs rang through the hall as the flustered cupbearer refilled it. Twice.

“The Freys,” she said, softly, when she was done. Her eyes remained shut. The strange girl cried.

“I’m sure your brother would have been pleased.”

If he meant Robb, he was wrong. Robb would have loved to see them dead, it was true, but not like that. Not at his little sister’s hand. Not a single man in Winterfell had wanted this life for them.
None. It was Robb who was supposed to protect them, but, somewhere along the line, it had become they who had avenged him.

“The Dragon Queen was right then,” she said, pained.

“Right and wrong. You’ve heard the rumors, I suppose?”

“Walder Frey slaughtered the whole of his household, before he tore off his own face and turned into a maiden.” They’d asked her, once, if she’d hired a faceless man to do the deed. She’d denied it, but, in a way, it seemed she had. She just hadn’t known it yet.

The weeping girl ran off then. Sansa did not go after her. She had a terrible feeling her tears were not for the battle, and Sansa could not help tears born from this. No matter what she did, her presence would only make it worse.

Tyrion nodded. “There are many people with motive to kill the Freys,” he said, “but few enough to do it as a Stark.”

“I know it’s her,” Sansa snapped. She slumped then, eyes on the ceiling as Tyrion’s settled on her. “I only… I was supposed to be her sister. I should have been there to protect her. She shouldn’t have had to become an-” She couldn’t finish the sentence. She wasn’t sure she was capable of thinking of her own sister that way.

I was a victim in Winterfell, and you were training to be a soldier, a warrior, an assassin. Neither of us are what Septa Mordane wanted, are we? She winced. That wasn’t fair. In truth, she must have been exactly what the septa had hoped for when she’d lain on Ramsey’s bed, and that stung worse than even the burns on her arm.

“You had your own hands full, my lady. Or would you have rather her have remained at your side?”

She thought of Joffrey, of Littlefinger, of Ramsay, and all the other ways her sister would have died along the way. Rickon had been in Ramsay’s care for less than two moons, and his bones were lain to rest in the crypts for it. Sansa’s willful sister would have been dead within a sennight. Besides, there are some days I am glad they never saw.

“Do you think she told Jon?”

Tyrion toyed with the hem of his cloak. “You know your sister better than I, my lady.”

That’s the trouble, isn’t it? she thought, I don’t.

“I’ll talk to her,” Sansa said, quietly. “When all this is over, we’ll talk.”

“Ever the optimist,” Tyrion said, prying the flask from her fingers. “What other plans do you do have for once this war of ours is done?”

She didn’t know that either. She had been trying not to think of it. “Rebuild Winterfell, I suppose.”

He hummed as he drank. “I thought the same.”

“You want to rebuild Winterfell?”

“Castamere,” he said, setting down the flask. “Mayhaps Tarbeck Hall if we’ve the funds. I hear our gold reserves haven’t fared too well with all these wars.”
“Why would you rebuild Castamere?”

Tyrion offered her a rueful grin. “I always do try to find new and exciting ways to destroy my father’s legacy. Being born, killing my mother, refusing to bed a Stark girl, proving once and for all that Tywin Lannister shits brown, bringing a Targaryen to Westeros—” He counted each off on his fingers. “It’s all in a life’s work, my lady. Mayhaps Castamere and the Tarbecks can be the next step.”

Sansa was silent for a moment. She had nearly forgotten, but her mind had stopped as soon as he mentioned it. “We never did annul the marriage, did we?”

Tyrion’s brows went high. A grim smile settled on his face. “It is difficult to annul a marriage that never was, I find.”

“What?”

“The laws of Westeros are quite clear on certain matters. A man cannot hold two wives, unless he bears the blood of the dragons. A marriage consummated cannot be annulled. Not even by the High Septon. No matter how my father pretended.” He looked pained. “We were never married, my lady. This I assure you.”

“You were married before,” Sansa said, awed. It was a stupid question, but who could blame her? She had never been a Lannister. Never once, not in all her years, had she been bonded to the blood of the lion. Oh, the flayed man still stained her soul as it had once stained her cloak, but the lion had never been.

He nodded and said no more. And, though Sansa’s heart swelled, a terrible burst of pity smothered her mirth. Once, she might have felt nothing for him at all, but now, she looked to him with sorrow. She did not inquire any further, and he seemed all the happier for it.

“What do you think they’re doing now?” Sansa asked. She glanced around them and, when she saw no one near, she whispered, “We both know the fire was not meant to smother so soon.”

He sighed. “I thought something like this might happen.” He shifted, resting his arm atop his tented knee. “They managed to put out the fires at Winterfell after all.”

“The Harbor won’t be safe for long,” Sansa said.

Tyrion worried at his scar. “If they are smart, they will worm their way into the city. The wildfire trap will have killed enough of the Night King’s forces to give them a chance. This is not yet the end.”

“It only takes one,” Sansa said. “If they can kill him…”

Tyrion grinned. “A single fighter in the right place can make quite the difference, can’t they?”

_His Dragon Queen_

“Jon will be there,” Sansa said.

“Jon Snow.” Tyrion hummed. “Do forgive me, but I must ask, my lady. After you rebuild Winterfell, what then? Does he return to his post as Warden in the North? Do you return to your castle a lady? I am curious what your repopulation plans are, or if you wish to rule over a castle of corpses.”
Sansa glanced back at the horizon, where darkness had taken the place of green. The city was gone, surely. Crumbled as the Eyrie had. Lost like Winterfell.

“I imagine there are many from King’s Landing who will need a new home. We’ll be needing new farmers, builders…” She stared at the ladies around them. None had traveled under Northern banners. “Lords.”

Tyrion straightened. “If you’re in need for a new lord, I have a candidate who-”

“No.”

“My lady-”

“I believe Jon and I can handle the lordships ourselves. I mean you no offense, Tyrion, but you haven’t the best instinct in choosing friends.”

He looked ready to contradict her, but, after a moment, the words stalled on his tongue. “I suppose you’re right.” He drank. “Who do you have in mind then, my lady?”

“Sansa,” she said. “I thought we were married once, even if it was false. You may call me by my name, Tyrion.”

He smiled. “Sansa, then. Who do you have in mind?”

It was Sansa’s turn to hum and drink. “There are few surviving friends of the Starks.”

“You are welcome to Moon Boy if you will it,” Tyrion said.

Sansa had not expected to laugh that night, and it filled her heart that she did.

As it always did, the laughter died quickly.

Somewhere, a wolf loosed a deafening cry, enough to shush all the ladies of the court. It went on longer than it ought to, and louder still. A pack joined it after, but their cries were quieter. Weaker. For a moment, Sansa entertained the thought that they were crying for her, asking her to join them in their fight. But deep in her heart, Sansa knew the truth. This was not a cry for her. This was a cry for wolves.

The howls did not stop the ways the songs did. They went on and on, growing even louder after a minute had passed. Growing pained, as if the wolves themselves knew the war was done, and they were set to bear their pelts at the Night King’s feet.

But the war was not done until they all were. Sansa dropped her hand to the hilt of Arya’s blade. It gave her courage, even if nothing else would.

Tyrion stared at her as she rose to her feet, swaying heavily with every step. Her head felt weighty and the was felt fuzzy. Whether it was from the drink or the grief, she could hardly say.

Sansa had spent the War of the Five Kings in King’s Landing, it was true, but she had travelled to the Vale after, and then to the North. She might not have known the southern songs any longer, but the songs of the North – the songs of wolves – came to her sooner than any from her childhood.

She did not howl as Arya would, nor did she shout the words the way Jon would. Instead, she sang, soft and pretty, of the battle Robb Stark had won on the Oxcross.

She began to sing, and every eye in the tower turned to her.
“Though the lion has claws that are sharper, and the stag has horns three feet long, though they’ve taken the rivers and harbors, and their false king declares our cause wrong…” she sang. This time, she did not stutter or misplace the words.

A dozen gasps came from her left, but only from the ladies of the lion and the stag. The rest listened intently, though they knew naught of the words. This was a Northern song. This was Robb’s song.

The Stark sung it alone, “It all means naught when the war drums are sought. The King in the North comes along. And the stars in the night were the eyes of his wolf, and the wind itself was their song.”

Between each verse, she paused to let the sound of howling fill the room.

Tyrion watched her, his eyes hooded, and the lion on his doublet shining proudly. But there was a wolf hidden beneath the dragon on Sansa’s own, and wolves did not care for the opinions of those who were not in their pack.

“And the wolf had teeth that were harder, than the lion could e’er hope to crack. And they found that the wolf, he was larger, than the lion on the attack…”

Others picked up the song, now. A few scattered servants. Lady Tully. A woman adorned in the ravens and tree of House Blackwood. The children of the Riverlands, who had been babies when Robb roamed their lands. They sung it with her, just as she had sung the Southern songs once. Soon enough, they were howling between each verse, their voices joined with the agonized cries of the wolves.

“It all means naught when the war drums are sought. The King in the North comes along. And the stars in the night were the eyes of his wolf, and the wind itself was their song…”

But they did not know the next verse. Sansa did.

“And now, as the dead march around them, the wolves have taken his cry. They don’t seek to slaughter the lion. Instead, they’re beside you and I…”

The women of the Westerlands eased, a bit. It had been dangerous, she knew, to remind them of the dead, but it was also dangerous not to address the wolves. The Westerlands had gone too long imagining wolves as their enemies. Perhaps they needed to remember they could be friends too.

Sansa smiled. A wolf’s grin, but a grin nonetheless. “And it all means naught when the war drums are sought. The Kings in the North come along. And the stars in the night were the eyes of their wolves, and the wind itself was their song. And the wind itself is our song.”

The children of the Riverlands took it from there, singing the stories of Robb’s war as the wolves howled on. They sung of his defeat of Jaime Lannister, of his victories across the Riverlands. Once, the Westerlands countered with the Rains of Castamere, but the Riverlanders sang of the Rat Cook after, and all songs of Castamere came to an abrupt end.

Sansa wondered if she could ever be so… witty about those wars, but the smallfolk and the ladies bore it well. Some looked to her as the lions sang, while others smiled at her as the song of the Rat Cook echoed.

Sansa sat beside Tyrion, who had not taken his eyes off of her at all. He had finished his flask again, and their cupbearer was refilling it. He handed it to her first, and Sansa drank deep. It helped her forget the tears in her eyes.
“You did well,” he told her. “It seems they have forgotten.”

_I haven’t_, she thought. Somewhere, across the harbor, Nymeria hadn’t either. She sang her mournful song, and something in Sansa’s stomach lurched.

Once upon a lifetime ago, Summer sang that same song.

Chapter End Notes

Well, out of context, that was delightful. I mostly included this scene to give us an eye on Tumbleton, but also as a good old palette cleanser from the tediousness of battle. I’m sure it came at exactly the time you guys wanted it, right?

All this time, Sansa’s been doing her best to prepare for life after war, teaching people that wolves can be just as strong an ally as they are an enemy. ‘Course, they just hit a road block in that whole “future” thing, but she doesn’t need to know about that just yet. If she’s lucky, she never will! :D
Jon VIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Three: The Longer You Hide, the Sterner the Penance

The River Gate

Jon Snow

His head ached as it had not since his drunken night at Duskendale. He felt like he was crawling through mud, but the ground was only slick with blood and snow. Around him, thousands of men were fighting for their lives, and Jon was merely fighting to stay standing.

He should not have run so far after the Eyrie, he knew. He had thought the old wounds healed, but now his leg was weak again, and now his head screamed. Exhaustion still crippled him, but Jon had long since learned to ignore its sting. At Castle Black, he had fought for days undying as Mance Rayder besieged them. Even after Stannis’ arrival, he had earned himself little rest.

Now, in the midst of the greatest battle of his life, Jon had crumbled.

No more, he thought, tugging himself along on unsteady feet. Kill the boy.

For his first few steps, he used Longclaw as a cane. The valyrian steel held true, even despite his heavy weight. He had never been so thankful.

Jon had not seen Dany land after the wildfire had gone off, nor could he see her in the skies. She must have been incinerating the Night King’s forces on the other side of the city. That had been the plan, hadn’t it? It was hard to remember. Sometime during the explosion, a man had been thrown into Jon’s helmet and, ever since, it had been hard to focus on more than a single thing at once.

She must be safe, he thought. She’s on a dragon.

But he hadn’t been safe on a dragon, had he? No, Rhaegal had fallen, and Viserion too. Ghost fell.

The howl broke his concentration. It wasn’t particularly hard. The thoughts danced.

It was loud and shrill and haunting. Ghost had never been one to howl. He’d been a silent wolf, mute from birth to death. Mute as Jon was stabbed. Mute as Jon came back. Mute as Ghost didn’t.

But, now, another direwolf howled, and it sent fear pulsing through Jon as much as it would any normal man.

There were no wolves in the area. No, all had gone at some point during the run. He could see claw marks on the walls, but no wolves to deliver them. They were further east, he knew, where the Blackwater met the Red Keep’s walls. Far, but not too far. He could make it. He had to. He didn’t know why, but he had to.

I have heard a wolf howl like that once, he thought. And, suddenly, his mind was as clear as it had ever been.
All around him, men and wights were meeting on the field. Red swords flared and caught, and a sea of yellow flames had overtaken the harbor. The River Gate was alight, and the fire showed no signs of stopping. Men fell all around him, clutching stumps and wounds, and screaming, but Jon could not hear them. No, not as the cry of the wolf grew louder. Not as it came to dominate the world, a terrible sound that would haunt his dreams for years, if he survived this night.

Suddenly, he did not need to stumble. He was running; Longclaw back in its sheathe before he even knew his hands were moving.

He had left Sam behind, once, and Ghost and Edd and Tormund and all the rest of them. Whichever god had dragged him back from death had asked for them all, and Jon had given them willingly. He had asked for Father and Bran and Rickon and Robb and even Lady Catelyn, and Jon had let them all go. He had taken Ygritte, and Jon kept his oaths and did his duty.

But this? The gods asked too much. If this was his test, let him fail! He would rather that than knowing he couldn’t save one little girl. The one who hadn’t ever fit any more than he had. The one who had sat beside him at feasts, though her mother despised it. The one who had called him brother, when even Robb named him Snow. He remembered how he’d mussed her hair, how he’d told her to take armor, to go to the Red Keep to search for survivors.

The howls came from there, from the Keep and the Blackwater. I sent her there, he thought, and suddenly, there was bile rising in his throat. He loosed it on a dead man and kept moving.

Somehow, the wights let him be. Maybe they preferred the prey at their side. Or maybe they had no interest in a man that was already dead. Did they care for men with knives in their hearts? He didn’t know. He didn’t care. His little sister’s direwolf was screaming. That was all that mattered.

He didn’t make it to the Red Keep. There was no way in, and he sat trapped behind the walls, stuck between the Blackwater and the stone, with no place to climb. There were too many wights storming the keep, where no wight was meant to be. There were no living souls within the castle, nor corpses either. It was meant to stay empty, while the wights stormed the city. Empty, but for Arya.

Where had all the wights even come from?

*He must have known*, Jon thought. He must have held back some of his forces, and none of them would have known. The city might not have been full when the wildfire launched.

But he had little time to spare for the wights, for the howling came to an abrupt halt. In its place, a hundred whines, or a thousand. And if he squinted – across the water, where the Redwyne fleet aimed their fire arrows against the sudden threat – he could see them: wolves swimming in the Blackwater.

They must have been a hundred feet out, mayhaps two. The entire pack was out there, braving the frozen water and whining all the while. Even as he watched, some slipped beneath the depths, never to rise again, while otherspushed on. They swam near to the Redwynes, but not near enough to earn any arrows. By some miracle, the Redwynes did not fire.

A wight came for him, finally, and Jon had Longclaw drawn before it could get any closer. Its black blood soon stained his cloak.

He turned back to the direwolves, and he saw her: the great silver beast, her eyes shining like golden coins through the water. *Nymeria*. Arya’s wolf. She was swimming opposite the pack, her eyes wide and her ears flat. The others sank beneath the waves, while more still hovered above the
dead.

Whatever it was they were doing, Jon could not say. And, rather than wasting his time trying to see through the darkness, he did the only thing he could. He met Nymeria on the icy shore.

She scrambled up the rocks, sending a burst of shrill shrieks into the air as each claw scraped the ice. She was shaking, whimpering, and whining. Shards of ice clung to her pelt, but she hardly seemed to care. Even as she found her way to solid ground, she did not move to shake away the ice. Instead, her back paw went to her throat. She scratched and scratched, tearing at the fur and skin, until Jon could see blood amidst her coat.

He approached cautiously, sheathing Longclaw once more. He spared one last look to the wolves in the water. They were fighting with a wight, he thought, though he couldn’t see the wight moving at all. But their teeth had sunken into a human arm, and all of the wolves there seemed to be scrabbling for a piece of it.

Nymeria just went on scratching. She didn’t look back at her packmates. Not once.

Jon didn’t want to startle her. Each step was slow, and he kept his palms high. She didn’t care. She paid him no mind at all. Blood was dripping down from her throat now, and her eyes were as wild as the wolves in the Blackwater. She was making noises – pitiful little noises – that wrenched at Jon’s heart.

“Nymeria,” he whispered.

The wolf’s ears somehow grew flatter. She turned her eyes to him, and the wildness grew a thousand-fold. She lunged, faster than he thought possible for a beast so large.

Her paws tapped his chest and dragged him down, but the claws did not break his skin. She was careful, it seemed. He had never been so relieved.

He dug his hands into her frozen coat, while she went on whimpering and whining. At least the howling was done, he thought. He didn’t think he would survive her howl so near.

He had not been so near to Nymeria since that night Arya had found her again. Before that, not since he had carried a blind pup through the wood. Yet, somehow, the wolf knew him, as Ghost had and Orell’s eagle, a lifetime ago.

She was a weighty thing, Nymeria. The size of a horse and just as heavy. When she shifted just right, her elbows caught his chest by the ribs, and Jon had to choke out an, “Easy, girl.”

The direwolf was off him in a second, back on the ice and scratching at her throat. *Can direwolves have fleas?* No, it was too cold. Any fleas would have frozen in the waters.

Jon caught his breath quickly. He stumbled onto his feet and looked back at the Blackwater. The wolves had grown closer while he was occupied with Nymeria. They still dragged the wight between them. Even cloaked in darkness and shadow, he could see that it was not moving at all. Its limbs were limp between the wolves’ teeth.

*Is this a message?* Jon wondered, stepping forward. *Wights can drown?*

But Bran was not near to warn him, and the old gods had never bothered to answer his prayers. The Lord of Light had, once, but never again.

He thought of praying, but something stopped him. He did not know what. Instead, he went back to
the wolf and set his hand upon the crown of her skull.

“It’s alright,” he told her, but it only made her whines worse. “What’s wrong, girl?”

The wolf only answered by clawing at her throat, like a dog tearing at a disliked collar. He did not have to kneel to look her in the eyes, but he did anyway. His legs were still trembling. He tried to feel through her fur to find whatever she was clawing at, but he found nothing more than cold, fresh blood, and newly torn skin. Patches of fur came out with his fingers. When he looked back, a chunk of it was missing, and all he could see was pale bloody skin all across the wolf’s throat.

“What happened? Where’s Arya, girl?”

The whine came louder than it ever had before, and the scratching with it. She collapsed onto the ice, scratching and scratching, until Jon had to pull her paw back before she ripped through her own throat. Somehow, miraculously, she did not bite him. She just settled those bright gold eyes on him, as her fur softened about her spine. He did not know how long he stared at the wolf, but, when he looked away, the wolves were no more than a few dozen feet from the shore. And, soon, as the first wolf finally reached the ice, dragging with it a limp leg, Jon left Nymeria’s side with a whispered apology. He was drawn to the waters, like a raven to its castle.

He should have stayed with Nymeria.

They left the body there, face-down on the ground before him. None of the wolves bothered him as he approached. There came no growls, or gnashing teeth, or hungry whines. No, the wolves let him be. As soon as they had dragged the body to the rocks, they backed away and lay there, flat on the icy ground. Some licked the frozen waters from their coats, while others simply curled into balls and shivered.

And Jon… Jon kept moving.

The first thing that he noticed was that the skin of the corpse was colored a pale blue. Leather armor adorned the body, and a decent-sized bastard sword hanging from the hip. It sported dark hair, though the exact coloring was difficult to determine in the dark of the night. Its left hand was clenched and, when he went to move it, he felt the air leave him in one terrible breath.

Jon had felt knives in his flesh once. Too many knives, digging deeper than any man could hope to survive. He felt a blade pierce his heart, and he felt nothing after. But nothing – nothing – had ever hurt him as much as this.

He put his hands against the waist and pushed, and it took all his effort not to throw himself atop her and sob. She rolled, flat on her back, without any resistance. Sightless grey eyes watched the skies. The grey was the same as his. No one else had eyes like those.

“No,” he tried to say, but he hadn’t the air in his lungs. “No, no, no, no, no…” His hands were trembling as he went to shake her. “Wake up,” he said. “Wake up! Arya, wake up!”

Her hair moved with the wind, and her skin sagged beneath his hand, but her muscles did not so much as twitch. The lips stayed a dreadful blue. The eyes stared on, haunting him. Tearing him apart.

He reached for her left hand – her sword hand, he remembered. She’d beaten him with it, when no
one else had in years, and she’d done it easily. How, how, how? And there, he saw it. There, he found it: the shattered remnants of a needle still clasped tight between her frozen fingers. The blade gone, and frost licking along the edges of a broken hilt. At her hip, the valyrian sword sat wet and unused.

*I know which sword to use,* she’d said, and remembering it only made the tears come quicker. A sob tore through his throat. He didn’t care enough to stop it.

*You just came back.* His heart and his stomach lurched at once. *You just came back, and I’ve lost you again.* It’s my fault. It’s my fault…

“I told you not to…” he whispered. He reached for her collar, fingers tight on the leather. Her hair fell away, and all he could see were the markings on her throat, markings that seemed to stretch and spread like fingers to her chin, to her cheeks, all the way up to brush her eyes. Black and frostbitten. As dark as the prints on Bran’s arm. Every inch of it radiating a terrible cold like none he had ever known. He let go, horror flowing through him like the cold through his fingers. “No one di- no one,” he told her. “I told you not to.” He shut his eyes and a new sob came free. “It should have been me. Me. Why would you…”

The wolves watched him grieve. None made a sound, but the direwolf. Still whining and whimpering. She surged to her feet, each limb trembling something terrible. She came for him. And, when Jon met her eyes, another sob tore free.

The direwolf stumbled closer, but all Jon could think of was Bran. Bran the bird, hidden somewhere in the castle. Bran, and Orell, and even himself. He thought of that one fleeting moment when he’d opened his eyes and seen himself, lying there on the table…

He threw himself between the wolf and his sister. Drove forward, until he was pushing her back, and she was letting him. Turning away, not looking—*please, please, don’t look. I can’t let you see this. Please!*

He turned her around completely and, still, he pushed. *Don’t look. Please, don’t look.* He pushed her along for a full minute before he realized he was saying the words aloud. The wolf’s whimper struck him like swords in the night.

When he deemed her far enough away—a hundred feet on unsteady legs—he dropped to his knees before her. There were tears freezing to his cheeks, and fire in his throat. She could not see either. He still wore his helm.

She went to scratch at her throat again, and all he could think of was the marking’s on Arya’s body—the markings on Arya. His little sister. *I promised to protect you.*

*Stay safe,* he’d said. Gods, she wasn’t even supposed to be there. *Why couldn’t you have gone to Tumbleton? Why didn’t you stay in Braavos? It was safe! You were safe! You were-*

It was his own fault. He should have been better. If he would have just won the spar from the start, she would have stayed there, or at least gone to Tumbleton with Sansa and Tyrion. She would have gone, and she would be safe, and everything would be fine.

He wanted to cry, but he needed to be strong. She was staring at him, eyes wild as she tore at her flesh. He pulled her foot from her throat, his fingers trembling against her fur.

“Arya,” he said. He would forever curse himself for the way his voice trembled. “Little sister.”

Her foot stilled, and, finally, her eyes steadied. She stared at him, still panicked as a wolf could be,
but the whimpers stopped, at least. For a moment, the whole of the world was those two golden eyes.

And his sister, his little sister – who had always finished his sentences with him and cheered him in the yard – she watched him with eyes warmer than any summer day. It warmed him despite the chill in the air and the ice under his feet and the dreadful cold that had overtaken him since he saw those eyes sightless.

*What happened?* he wanted to ask, but she wouldn’t have been able to answer. It was a useless question, anyway. He knew what happened. *You left your sister in a warzone. What did you think was going to happen, Snow?*

“I’m sorry,” he said, instead. He choked on the words and the lump in his throat. “I should have… I’m sorry.”

She came closer, let her head fall against his quivering knees. His hand went behind her ears by reflex, but this was not Ghost. This was his little sister. The one whose hair he’d mussed, and the one who’d followed him like a lost pup, only *she* was a pup now. A real pup with sharp ears and warm eyes and a coat drenched with her own blood.

“You said you knew which sword to use,” he said. He didn’t even know why. “You said-” He broke off with a sob and hated himself for it. He was supposed to be strong. For her. He needed to be.

She whined, and he could almost imagine her getting ready to mock him. But, when her mouth fell open, only another short whine came free. She went to scratch at her throat again, but Jon stopped her paw halfway.

“You’re hurting yourself,” he told her. It sounded ridiculous even to his own ears. If she was still her, he thought that she might have laughed. She would have pointed to her throat, mocked him the way Ygritte would, or Dany on a good day.

“I already have,” she would have said, smiling with those dark blue lips and sightless eyes. She would have rubbed at the throat the way she’d rubbed at bruises and skinned knees, welts and rashes from whichever poisonous flower she’d touched that week. He would have laughed too, and she would have fetched it again just to show Jon what it felt like to itch. They would have fought together and laughed together until Septa Mordane came to fetch her.

But Arya was a wolf, now, and she could not jape or mock. She merely butt her head into his chest, letting loose a sigh that tore Jon’s soul to pieces.

*What am I going to tell Sansa?* He’d lost all of their siblings. He, the stupid bastard boy who couldn’t protect a little girl. He, who had lost baby Rickon, and Robb, and Bran, and now even his favorite sister. Another life lived and lost in vain. There was one Stark left in the whole of the world, beyond this wolf who stared up at him with pained eyes, and it was his fault. There was no grey in those eyes. Soon, there would be no Arya, either.

*We all fade,* Orell had told the Magnar, once, when Jon had been pretending to sleep. *The second life is a short one. A few years at most, and man becomes more beast by the day, until all that is left is beast, and man is gone.*

His sister was damned. Not to a second-life, but to a half-life. She could not join their lord father and her lady mother. She could not meet Robb again. She could not reunite with Rickon, another Stark dead at Jon’s feet. She would never see Sansa or Bran or Maester Lewin or Jory or any of
them. She would fade away, more beast than man.

And it was Jon’s fault. Lady Catelyn was right about him. She always had been.

He put a hand on her shoulder, his fingers disappearing in her frozen coat. A flash of fury flooded through him, and, when he met her eyes, it was an easy thing to stare and say, “I’ll kill him. For you, little sister. I’ll kill every last one.”

Arya’s eyes went wide. Her ears flattened, and the hairs along her spine bristled. Her lips pulled back, teeth bare to her world. A terrible snarl tore free of her lips and, for a moment, even Arya looked surprised.

*More beast than man.* The thought cut him worse than any knife.

Arya’s teeth found the hem of his cloak. She rose to her full height – larger than him by more than a head – and started forward. Her grip was strong, and Jon’s feet slid out from under him. Before he could even recognize what she was doing, she was dragging him away. Away from the Blackwater, away from the Red Keep, away from the frozen cloud descending overhead.

“Arya!” he shouted, as his shoulders slammed into the ice. She didn’t seem to care. She dragged him further, away from where some of the wolves were sniffing, away from the raven in the air. He hadn’t even noticed the bird before, but, now, he could see it. Black wings against a black sky, flying circles around the Keep while his sister rotted.

Had Bran seen it? Had he seen Arya’s- had he seen Jon’s failure?

The wolf – his sister – didn’t listen to him. She pulled him along, until Jon was shouting, and the wights were taking notice.

Wights.

*Her body!*

He’d never burned Sam or Edd or Bran, and now, they were among the horde. He couldn’t let that happen to Arya. He *couldn’t*.

One little girl. That was all he’d asked for. A lifetime ago, that was all he’d wanted. When the Starks had fallen and Robb had died and Bran and Rickon were gone, that was it. Just one little girl, alive and safe somewhere.

*Dany will die too*, he thought, as his helm struck a rock. *Dany and Sansa and all the rest. Love is the death of duty, and love has killed me a thousand times.*

He didn’t know how far Arya might have dragged him, but his cloak tore before she could take him any further. It ripped in two, sending him roughly to the floor. His legs struck the ground harder than they ought to have, and Arya’s ears pressed against her skull. Guilty. Her teeth were bared again, but somehow Jon didn’t mind. He scrambled to his feet anyway.

“I have to go,” he told her. She let slip a growl, but Jon didn’t let it stop him. He couldn’t. “I’m sorry. I am so sorry.” He stepped forward, each step careful and careless at the same time, until they were face-to-face. His forehead pressed against hers, and he was staring into those warm eyes. Her eyes had never been warm. There had always been a touch of winter in her gaze, just like there had been in Father’s. “But I need to go.”

Her paw went to scrape at her throat. Again, he stopped it. Somehow, the wolf showed her
annoyance just as well as Arya would have. He could imagine her lips thinned, her brows pulled tight, her muscles tensing as she went to hit him. When she was a little girl, and he no more than a boy, she used to hit him every time he did something stupid. He took more in those days than any in the yard, and not a single one left a bruise. *You know nothing, Jon Snow.*

She whined, short and low, and it shattered what little Jon had left of his heart.

*Loving is the death of duty,* he reminded himself. *Kill the boy, kill the boy, kill the boy!*

But, somehow, it was harder to kill the boy when the girl stood no more than a few inches away. When her corpse was no more than a hundred feet back, water lapping at her limp feet.

“Stay here,” he told her. “I’ll be back for you. I swear it. By the old gods, father’s gods.” There were tears welling in his eyes. “We’ll make you a place in the crypts. I’ll build you a statue and—you’ll have your Needle with you. I’ll have it fixed. And we’ll lay it across your lap like Father and Robb and Rickon and Bran and Uncle Brandon. You’ll be a Queen of Winter. A Stark, for all time to come.” The wolf whimpered, and now, the tears were streaming down his face. “You’ll be with our family forever. Never lost again. I swear it.” He tapped the pommel at his side. A white wolf brushed against his fingers. “But you need to let me do this first.”

Her eyes were judging, accusing, but wolves had no words, and she couldn’t stop him without hurting him, and, even now, Jon knew she never would. She could only howl. And, as Jon rose to his feet, she did. She howled so loud that Jon thought his ears might burst, and so long that he thought she would never stop. She howled as he walked away, tears streaming down to his neck, and she howled as he knelt beside another Arya Stark—the Arya Stark he’d known when she was a girl. The Arya Stark who carried a freshly shattered sword, who he had held a sword to in the stupidest moment of his life. She howled as he laid a soft kiss to her forehead. She howled as he shut her lifeless eyes. She howled as he stood.

And, as he followed a black bird into the heart of King’s Landing, her howls followed him, but she did not.

Jon had never been more thankful. He didn’t think he could bear it, if she had to see him dead, too.

Chapter End Notes

I’m gonna be honest, this may be the heaviest chapter of anything I’ve ever written. But, you can’t blame me, can you? I mean, Jon did predict this in AGOT. Not really my fault if he’s mad at his own prophecy.

Not gonna lie, part of this chapter has been sitting in my notes since I started Prince (as have parts of Arya VII). Been waiting a long time to share it with you guys, so I’m happy we’re finally here (even if everyone else probably isn’t). The Nymarya introduction has been a long time coming.
As the wights staggered, the army of the living surged forward. There were tens of thousands of them; men shouting as one and leaping into the fray. They screamed a million different names and places and promises. Beric could not hear a single one over the din.

There were humans screaming, dead feet marching, and wolves howling over the sound of the wind. His mouth tasted of copper and ash, and, beneath his skin, the ice burned hotter than any flame.

His sword cut from man to man, but more always came. It was an endless sea of grey and death. The wildfire had not taken enough. No matter how many Walkers were killed, there were still more wights to come.

Soon, Beric thought, we will be overwhelmed.

But he could not cower. He could not lay down his sword and await death’s arrival. He had sworn an oath, and he would abide by it.

Many times in his life had he sworn oaths. More than he could remember. He could not recall the man who knighted him, but he knew the oath he had sworn.

In the name of the Warrior, I charge you to be brave. He had. Again, and again, and again. There, an oath kept. In the name of the Father, I charge you to be just. He had. For as long as he could remember, he had. There, an oath kept. In the name of the Mother, I charge you to defend the young and innocent. He sold a boy to a woman who meant to kill him. There, an oath broken. In the name of the Maid, I charge you to protect all women. He lost a maiden to a man of low intent, who would carry her off and darken her soul another shade. There, an oath broken. In the name of the Crone, I charge you to be wise. He hadn’t, else he might not have died so often. There, an oath broken. In the name of the Smith, I charge you to heal what is broken. His heart still beat sluggishly, near death and decay. There, an oath broken. In the name of the Stranger, I charge you to guide us from destruction. He looked to his left, to his right. There, an oath broken.

He stuck a sword in a wight’s eye. It collapsed, blazing brighter than the sun once had.

He had sworn to Lord Eddard Stark, in King Robert’s name, to guard the smallfolk and to take the Mountain’s head. The Riverlands had burned within the year, and the Mountain did not die until
long after Oberyn Martell fell. There, an oath broken.

Another wight fell by his hand. Another death that would soon mean nothing at all.

He had promised to deliver a little girl to her lady mother and her kingly brother. He had lost her to a monster in a dog’s helm, and her lady mother and her kingly brother bled on the stones of the Twins. There, an oath broken.

He severed a wight’s limb, but, when he pulled back, his sword slashed across a living man’s arm. His armor was no more than a few strips of boiled leather, and Beric’s sword cut straight through. The man screamed, and a wight caught him by the throat and stabbed a stolen knife between his ribs.

How many vows would he fail before it all was done?

Once, the day he had first been reborn in a sea of grass, as smoke billowed from a burning inn, Thoros had called him the Prince that was Promised. Azor Ahai. A man restored from death to bring justice to the world, and to slay the Great Other that opposed Thoros’ god. Beric believed him, because of course he had. Gregor Clegane had left a lance in Beric’s chest, and he had seen the abyss beyond. Why else would he live, if not for some greater purpose? If not for some godly intervention by a god that he had never known, but who seemed to care all the same.

But then the Walkers had come, and Beric had not killed them. Then, he had learned that Jon Snow came back, too. Then, Thoros died.

A prince, he was not. The Lord had not brought him back to defend against the Walkers, not if the Priestess had spoken it true. Daenerys Targaryen was the name passed around by the Red Priests in the castle, and Jon Snow for the few who disagreed. Beric Dondarrion was no more than a foot soldier in the Great War.

It suited him better, he thought, as he cut down another two wights that dared cross too near. His neighbor laughed and pierced a third. Then, he died, too.

Beric had been born a lord, but he had died a fool. A soldier, and a fool. Each and every time. He never learned, much as Thoros might have liked him to.

He lorded over the rest of the Brotherhood, led them as any group of knights and heroes ought to be led. They had defended the innocent, slaughtered wolf and lion alike, and killed the highwaymen, rapers, and robbers that dared take advantage of the smallfolk.

But they were gone. The Brotherhood and the smallfolk both. Beric had not been able to save a single man.

The fight was worth it; he knew that. Every day they’d lived was another worth fighting for. But every death was another failure, too. Another stain on a soul that bore so many scars already.

I held a castle on the Marches once, he thought, and I fought beside men of honor. But just as I could not find that castle today, nor can I see those men stand. Memory and men fade alike. Oaths and promises, pledged and well-intended, but broken all the same.

Beside him, a dozen men fell in the time it took him to kill one wight. His weak arm was flagging, and his arm could no longer bear a sword’s weight.

It was difficult not to lose himself to thought in the midst of battle. It always had been. Mayhaps that was why he never fared well in them. Too caught in his own head to watch the world beyond.
It had grown worse with each death, until he could hardly spend more than a passing second without slipping into one stray thought or another.

In some ways, it was easier. In others…

A blade caught against his hand. The already-mutilated, thankfully, but it still drew a fresh spurt of blood. Should he survive this fight, it would surely be lost to him forever. Mayhaps some master would loose him of it. If it eased the pain, he would hardly mind. It was just another scar. Another ugly mark on a man so decorated already.

He had been young, when Robert sat the Iron Throne, and Lord Eddard had sent him away. Eight years had passed hence, and yet his hair was tinged grey and his skin sagged. Only eight years. Each longer than a lifetime.

The city was a warzone. Angry fires licked them all, but snowfall and hailstorms smothered them just as often. There were men burning alive, men gurgling on blood, men who couldn’t scream over the sword jabbed deep in their throats. When Beric looked left, he saw a man on the ground, staring sightlessly as a sea of soldiers stomped on him. When he looked left, a squire slipped on snow and earned a sword to his side. He died screaming.

Beric killed one wight, then two more. Then another, and another, and another. King Robert’s bastard found his way to Beric’s side and, together, they killed ten. Gendry killed more than he did. Many more. That black hammer of his sung every time it struck flesh.

The next time the wights staggered, it was their front that fell. A few hundred wights – enough to drive the men to scream and surge forward. Beric was set to lead them, but a hand on his collar stopped him. Fingers tight, pulling him back, forceful and furious. The boy.

The wolves were crying, as the boy screamed, “You said you’d protect her!” He pulled Beric by the injured arm, and the lightning lord stumbled. “You swore!”

“How is she?” Beric tried to ask, but his voice was drowned by the clamor of war.

Gendry pulled him forward, and, though the battle raged around him, Beric followed. They were beyond the city gates, surrounded by wights from all sides. Still, Gendry pulled. Through the crowd, through the fighters, towards the massive keep standing before a city filled with fire.

They went by buildings crumbled to ash and dust. Blackened frames still hovered, but there were few enough of those. Little green fires burned just bright enough to guide their way. Larger red fires – burning wights and men alike – were their beacons.

There was no way of knowing the state of battle. Five feet away, the darkness was just as thick as it was 100. Miniscule flames could do nothing more than show them where to step. Four times, Beric fell over a fallen man. Six times, Gendry did. All ten, they picked each other up and kept moving. Gendry’s hammer swung at regular intervals, clearing their way and leaving a welcoming mat colored black and red.

It was difficult to breathe as they charged forward. Everywhere he went, Beric could smell only the standard scent of wars. Blood curdled, bowels loosened, sweat cascaded through the skies. Ash painted his face black as night, and Beric was sure he had killed more than one man because their painted faces matched the wights. Even the air had a scent to it – the terrible twinge of frozen wind, sharp and pained. He smelled the sickness of men, and the horrible scent of bodies long rotted. Fresh wights didn’t smell, he knew, but these did.
There was one wight – fresh as could be and fatter than any Beric had ever seen – that ambled to them slowly. Black hair toppled around a chunky face. In its hand, a single kitchen knife, stained with rotted meats all around the edge. Two terrible wounds were pierced in its throat, where once a wight must have caught him and killed him. It looked familiar enough to Beric, but the name fled him like all others did these days. *It all fades.*

The bastard smith must have known him, though, for his hammer did not swing. It hovered, no more than an inch away from a hungry skull, and Beric had to be the one to sink his blade into its stomach. The wight fell, blue fading from its eyes as red heat danced across its chest.

*The night is dark and full of terrors,* he thought. *Each worse than the last.*

He grabbed the boy’s arm and pulled him forward. The lad stared down at the fat wight one last time, looking as lost as a boy his age should have been on the battlefield.

*I was born here.*

It felt like they fought through the wights for hours. More men died at their side, but Beric and the bastard escaped with only cuts and bruises. The Lord of Light had smiled on them, he knew. They still had a purpose.

Beric had a terrible feeling he would be finding it before the night was done.

He saw the sea before he saw the wolves, but their calls alerted him well enough. There was a ring of them, howling at the black sky as flames flickered around them. They stood side-by-side with a band of living men and women, each bearing a long red cloak and rings of flame emerging around them. There were hundreds of wolves, and a mere ten priests. Somehow, together, they beat back a storm of wights, lashing and burning and scratching and snarling.

Thoros might have known all the priests by name, but Beric only knew one. The boy knew her just as well.

“What is *she* doing here?” he hissed. It was a foolish decision. His voice caught the attention of the horde and, before Beric could even ready his sword, they were turning to them.

The wolves handled it before Beric could move. Dozens of them, snarling and spitting as they leapt into the fray. Among them was the Stark girl’s, a massive bitch with patches missing from her coat and a snarl fierce enough to drive good men to tears. She had looked to them, and then to the wights. Her teeth were pulled back, her hackles raised, and her tail beating to prepare for the hunt. But so, too, were her limbs shaking and her eyes wild. Beric had seen the beast before – few men in the castle hadn’t – and never before had he seen it this *hungry.*

With a great growl, like the roar of a dragon, the beast surged forward. And all of the wolves followed.

Teeth tore through the flesh of a hundred different wights. Limbs fell from sockets. Heads were torn from shoulders. Wolves shrieked as knives pierced their flesh, before they turned and tore the arms to pierces. Yelps and howls overtook all other sounds in the Blackwater Bay. Instead, as the salty waters splashed at Beric’s feet, he merely stood and watched the beasts through the veil of the smoke that billowed from the flames.

Gendry moved to fight beside them, but Beric clasped his weak fingers around the boy’s shoulder. His grip was not strong enough to pull him back, but the boy turned nonetheless.

“With me!” he shouted. And, though the boy looked to the direwolf again, he was still loyal.
enough to follow Beric back.

He made his way behind the wall of flames. Unlike the boy, he did not flinch as the flames crept back for him, nor did he stare in wonder as they closed again as soon as he had crossed. He simply made his way to the red priestess with the hair as bright as her flames and the eyes to match it. All around, the cries of wolves shook the land, but here, it felt quiet.

“Beric Dondarrion,” she greeted him. She turned to the woman at her side, a woman with hair as black as night, though the ruby at her throat shined just as bright as the first. When the greeting was done, they spoke in their native tongue, the High Valyrian that Thoros scarcely ever bothered with. He caught the man’s name amidst the chatter, but the other words fled him.

The second priestess came to study Beric, but the boy smith was foolish enough to involve himself too soon. He tore his eyes away from the direwolf, and instead focused his rage on the first priestess.

“You tried to kill me,” he snapped. “You took me from the Brotherhood and-”

She reached for him, but the boy flinched back, nearly catching himself in the flames. Beric thought that she might be offended, but Melisandre of Asshai smiled. “And now you are here, at the end of the world. The Lord of Light brought us here for a reason.”

“Oh, yeah,” the boy drawled. “And what’s that, eh? Leeches supposed to kill the Night King?”

“No,” Melisandre said. Beric thought she might speak more, but she merely stepped aside. One hand swayed, back to the edge of the flames, where a shadowed rock sat upon the icy shore.

The flames flicked higher, and suddenly, Beric was stepping forward, and the boy with him.

It was not a rock. No, it was a corpse.

A child, it seemed, by the size of it. Black markings covered the face, while the pale section had since gone blue.

He stepped closer and closer still. And then, he could see it. The shape of the face, the curve of the nose, the dark hair shaped the way her father had worn it once.

_How many vows must I break? Oathbreaker. Oathbreaker._

The boy fell to his knees beside her. All of his fury fled like wind. He grabbed her arm, her face. He shook her, as if it would matter. As if those dark blue lips would suddenly open and those eyes would flash with light again. But Beric knew death better than any man alive. This was death.

_Oathbreaker. Oathbreaker._

The boy was whispering to the corpse, but Beric did not so much as kneel. She would not know him if he did. She knew nothing now. Only the black expanse that greeted every man when the Lord of Light extinguished their flame. Or, judging by the markings, the Great Other.

_I was meant to deliver you to your mother, your brother. I swore to your father, and I failed him. I swore to your baseborn brother, and I failed him. I swore to you, and I failed all the same._

He looked to Melisandre, who watched him with shadowed eyes. The fingers of his ruined hand twisted and pulled.
“Is this why He brought me back?” Beric asked her, softly. The boy could not have heard over his wails. “To stand aside and fail every oath I take?”

Melisandre deferred to the second priestess. The dark haired woman glanced at her companions, and each bowed to her. When she spoke, it was with great hesitance. “It is not the place of man to judge the Lord’s acts. Nor is it our place to judge the visions in his flames, or the gifts that He sends. We do not choose his champions—” She looked to Melisandre then, her gaze hard. “- and mankind will not find him until the time is right. In the day, all is clear and all is shadowed. But it is in the night that we see our true friends, our true champions. For the night is dark and full of terrors.”

“For the night is dark and full of terrors,” the others echoed, ten voices blended into one. Beric’s joined them, if only by reflex.

In truth, he thought of nothing beyond the word oathbreaker. The rest faded like snow.

“Our Lord’s champion is to be reborn amidst salt and smoke,” the priestess said. “Born when the stars bleed and the cold breath of darkness falls heavy on the world.”

Beric looked to the skies. There were no stars left to bleed, but there was darkness. That, there was.

“R’hllor brought you back for a reason, Beric Dondarrion,” the priestess told him.

He knew that. He had always known that.

“I tried to do it myself, but I have only brought back the newly dead,” Melisandre said then. “Never one gone this long. Never in a place such as this.”

He swallowed. It was a gift, Beric knew, that his voice remained steady. “I saw her not an hour past.”

“It is not an hour past that she died,” the priestess said. She led him forward, each step as graceful as the last.

Gendry, still crouched and shaking at the girl’s side, moved to push the priestess away, but an arm on the shoulder stopped him. A red priest, with his lips drawn tight and his eyes hard. He spat something in Thoros’ tongue. If it was meant to calm Gendry, it did not succeed. The boy, blinking through the frozen tears in his eyes, reached for his hammer. Beric lunged forward and held down his hand before he could.

Melisandre’s hand went to the Stark girl’s armor. The leather peeled off easily enough, likely because this had been done a dozen times before Beric arrived. The girl was drenched in ice, but not in that one patch of flesh. Why? The answer came clear as her skin was left bare to the world.

There were scars all across her stomach. Red, angry slashes that did not seem to have ever quite healed. Even from several feet away, Beric could see the fraying by the edges, where stitches had clearly been torn and never did heal. They shouldn’t have, anyway. Beric had seen many wounds of that sort in his life. Never once had he seen them on a living man.

He ran the fingers of his left hand over each scar. They were cold, now, but each was still puckered and stretched. It felt the same as the wounds over his heart, his throat, his chest.

He pulled back his hand and stared aimlessly at her wounds, as he had the day he first awoke with ashes in his mouth and a fresh scar on his chest.
“What do they mean?” the boy demanded. Beric scarcely heard him, even as he repeated his question another four times. Somewhere, a wolf screamed.

One of the priests reached and pulled back the lids of her eyes. Grey stared blankly out to the world, not a hint of blue yet settled. Gendry went to slap the hand away, and the priest relented surprisingly quickly. He barked some foreign phrase, and the second priestess – the one without a name – nodded.

“Still grey,” she said in the common tongue. “She can still be saved.”

Gendry looked to him, his mouth hung in shock. “Saved? Like Thoros?” he said. The boy could be clever when he willed it, though he did not often will it.

“There is little time, Beric Dondarrion,” Melisandre said, brushing back the poor girl’s newly-cut hair. In life, Beric thought, Arya Stark might have stabbed her for it. For now, she could do no more than stare.

But the priestess was right. There was no way of knowing when the Night King might raise the dead again. He did not know why they willed it, but if the Lord wished this of him, Beric would lay down his arms gladly.

I am not an oathbreaker, he thought. He could not deliver her to her mother, as he had sworn to. He had not fulfilled his promise to her lord father, and he had not kept the Brotherhood from crumbling.

A few hundred feet away, the wolves were fighting amongst their own. Most of the human wights had fled them, and now there remained only the animals. Giant spiders – big as hounds – and a wolf as large as a pony. It was covered in bloody stab wounds that bled no longer. Half of its silver fur had been torn away, and the rest was matted with mud and wolf blood.

The girl’s direwolf hesitated when she saw it, but then her teeth bared. The she-wolf launched with a ferocity Beric had never before seen. With one savage pull, she ripped the ear from its skull. With the next, she tore through its throat. With the next, she tore at the leg, then the face, then the chest.

The wight-wolf did not fall. Instead, it returned the favor, teeth snapping at open air, and then around the she-wolf’s leg. The yelp she let loose was a pitiful thing. And, though Beric had never known good to come of wolves, he felt a burst of pity for the beast.

Thankfully, the other wolves were there to aid her. While the direwolf fell back, blood seeping from her throat and her maw and her leg, the others struck the wight-wolf. It crumbled under the mass, a thousand teeth slashing and ripping, until even the Great Other could control the corpse no more. There was nothing left to move.

In all, it took less than a few seconds. Still, the sight haunted him. He could not say why.

“The Lord of Light brought you back for a purpose,” Melisandre said, tearing his eyes away from the wolves.

Is this why, truly? Beric thought. Was I only brought back to vessel a faint breath of life?

Aye, he was. It always had been. Was this what Thoros had seen in his flames, as he dragged Beric back and back and back and back and back and back? Lord, cast your light upon this man, your servant. Bring him back from death and darkness. His flame has been extinguished, restore it! Did he know? Did he ever?
“He needs her?” Beric asked.

“The girl has a greater purpose,” said one of the priests, his voice as foreign as theirs, though his cloak was grey and theirs red. “A purpose not yet fulfilled.”

“The Lord does not ask this lightly,” said another, “but He does ask it, and it is not our place to question.”

The taste of ashes still raged in his mouth. The flames had never left. They burned endlessly under his tongue, a pain so familiar he hardly noticed it any more than the ache in his arm.

He looked to the direwolf and, somehow, she caught his eyes. Two golden coins stared at him, and then to the corpse resting before him. Her ears flattened, and her eyes went wide. Before she could move, he looked down to the still girl at his feet. The sound of men screaming hung heavy in his ears. Too many men. More men than he would ever know.

A wolf had fallen by the bay. Yet, as he watched, its tail twitched and its fur trembled. Another dead man shifted at its side, and another beside.


He had failed this girl once. He had sworn to a little girl that he would keep her safe, that he would bring her home to her mother and brother, and he had failed. He could not do it again.

“Beric-” Gendry started, but there was no time to listen to whatever the boy had to say.


Beric pressed his lips to hers, and forced the ashes in his mouth into frozen lungs.

And he never breathed again.

Chapter End Notes

So, props to all of our correct guessers, especially Rachet, who perfectly guessed the main plot of this chapter! Sorry for not responding to any of them, but, I kinda couldn’t, seeing how this chapter ended and all.

Honestly, you should all be really glad I found a merciful bone somewhere. I was planning a good 5-8 chapter gap between Arya’s death and this chapter, but I figured it’d just be padding filler at that point. As of this point, this train ain’t slowing down anytime soon. We’re on a full speed collision course with me returning to my OC work for the first time in like five months.

However, happy stuff aside, I’d like the record to reflect that this isn’t where this thread ends. This won’t be like the show where resurrection is a piece of cake. Cut a guy’s hair, wash his body a bit, and he comes back with a limited vocabulary, but everything else pretty solid? Yeah, no. It isn’t that easy. I chose to kill Arya for a very specific reason, and we will see the consequences of that, even if it does appear that, like in the show, she’s got plot armor stronger than Ser Twenty Goodmen. In this story, there is a cost to resurrection, and that cost is one of the reasons I chose to go through this storyline after the first four-or-so chapters.
(Spoiler alert: It isn’t pretty)
A Dead Girl I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Wolf Without a Head

Along the Blackwater

A Dead Girl

It was cold.

That was all she could think. She was choking on the fire in her mouth and the chill in her throat, and she was cold. She had only felt this frozen once before, she thought, but the memory escaped her. Fled like a raven. Don’t go...

Her very soul felt frozen, icicles carving like knives in her throat, burning like a raging fire but cold as a Wintertown night.

Wintertown. Pack. Where was her pack? Where was Red-Face and Three-Paw and Black-Tooth? Where was Grey-Black and Furless and White-Tail? Where were the wolves and the hounds and any other than the grey-skinned prey, who died to teeth and claw and rose again? She was alone, she realized, but, try as she might, she couldn’t bring herself to stand to find them. Her legs were too weak, her front paws half-frozen and the fur had been stripped away.

She tried to howl, but her every attempt was cut short in her throat. It was too cold for sound, and she was too dead to cry. Her tongue felt different, too. Fatter and shorter and frozen solid.

She crawled forward on all four of her paws, graceless and worthless on the heatless sands. Hands pawed at her, but she shrugged them away. She felt like manfolk again, but her manfolk was dead. She was dead. She, who crawled now like something more living than corpse, had seen herself – her throat black as pitch and rotted, and her eyes wide and staring, filled with red where once there had been white. The face had been a motley of blue and black and purple, and her tongue lolled uselessly in her unmoving mouth.

She had seen it all. Jon had, too. I sat in his lap and stayed with him, she remembered. He rubbed my head and cried and promised me a million things. And then he left.

“Jon,” she mouthed. Not a sound came. Her throat burned like fire and ice.

Human fingers scrambled on frozen stones. She hadn’t the strength to lift herself all the way. She hadn’t the strength to do much of anything. More hands came for her, and she snarled until they went away.

The grey-skinned creatures were coming for her, claws strapped to sticks in their hands - knives, she thought, but she couldn’t be sure. The world was as blurry as it was cold. There were flames between them, anyway.

She tried to crawl away, but she wasn’t fast enough. Every inch took more energy than she had to give. Every foot pulled at the cut in her paw and the wounds on her flesh. Skin. Where was her
fur?

I’m going to die, she realized. Again. Not today, not today, not again!

She coughed, and the sound sent shards of agony through her throat. It was a violent cough that went on and on, until all she could think was *I can’t breathe- I can’t-*

She shut her eyes and let them wrack at her until her shoulders screamed. She doubled into herself, as she had on the foot of her girl’s bed when- *no, no, that’s not me!*

Who was she? The wolf, or the girl, or the man frozen to the tree? She could remember all three, but every moment blurred like frost on glass. Had she ever lived at all? Had she dreamed her lives?

The arms wrapped around her again. She hadn’t the strength to push them away.

When the coughs finally subsided, and her trembling began anew, she forced her eyes back open. It was hard. It felt like the lashes had fused, driven together by the bitter winds and the dripping ice. It took all the strength she had not to roll in on herself and fade into the wolf again. She missed being strong.

The heat came like a sudden burst of wind. Or, mayhaps it came on the wind. She couldn’t say. But still, it came. It took the grey-skins first, as they passed by her pack. Her pack. The grey-skins didn’t scream as the fires ate at them, or as the flesh dripped from their faces. They died quietly. *I did too.*

The flames burned for a long while, as hot as the fire burned under her tongue. She watched them, unafraid. Too many men had tried to scare her off with burning sticks. She never cowered. Burning sticks couldn’t hurt her nearly as much as the long steel claws.

She tried to get to her feet again, but her muscles wouldn’t hold her. She could barely even keep her eyes open long enough to see the source of the flames: a shade of a woman cloaked in light, her hair as red as the blaze and a gown weaved from burning wood. The dead girl could see wrinkles lining her pretty face, and a crimson ruby that hung from her throat, bright enough to light the world. Her hair looked just the way she had seen it in long-forgotten dreams.

“Mother,” a dead girl mouthed. No sound came. She tried to crawl forward. She hardly even moved. The hands were still holding her down. She was still too far. “Mother.” Her eyes welled with water. She didn’t know why.

She heard her name. Not the wolf name, but the woman’s. The manfolk’s. The one who had hung and choked and died. *Can you bring back a man without a head?*

She needed to get to this new woman, she knew, but she never reached the places she wanted to go. She was always close, but everyone always died or left her first, and now, she was alone. *Even Jon left me.*

But her lady mother was there. She was a fish, not a wolf, but that didn’t matter. The wolves in her first pack were all dead, but fish were faster. Fish could flee.

“Arya Stark,” the shade told her. It was hard to hear her over the endlessly repeating *Arry* that dripped from her captor’s lips. Her mother moved closer, but stayed away from the dead wolf’s reaching paw. “The Lord brought you back for a purpose.”

“Mother,” she mouthed again. Her fingers scrambled on the ice. *Fingers. I shouldn’t have those.*
“I am afraid not,” said the shade.

“Arry,” the voice in her ear said again. “You’re alive. You’re alive! He brought you back! You’re alright!” She went to push him away, but her arm would not obey. She only managed to strike inches to his left. Fingers dancing through open air. Why do I have fingers?

She shivered. Trembled, really. At least her captor’s arms were warm. At least the breaths against her ear could give some warmth to the bitter ice radiating from her throat, from her cheeks, from her chest and her arm. It was barely enough to notice, but she appreciated it all the same.

She tried to remember what happened, how she had gotten here, but the thoughts dripped like rain through her fingers.

She remembered a pact with children – children of leaves and trees and gods of old – and the terror it had brought. She remembered being born a Stark of Winterfell, sold off like some dog to the children, by a brother older than her by a single year. She remembered dying, the knife plunging through her chest and sinking deeper and deeper, until she was choking on blood and screams. She remembered begging fruitlessly while short inhuman creatures looked on. She remembered war, leading a troop of the dead to march against the menfolk. She remembered winning, and then a new pact. A fresh pact. A pact between man and man, and suddenly, the weapon was unneeded. She was unneeded. Chains and shackles and waiting, waiting, waiting, until the world was quiet and the menfolk had forgotten her, and the children grew too weak to fight.

She remembered watching until the menfolk on their magic wall were weak, and the creatures and their magics had grown crippled by time and memory’s decay. The last of the lizard beasts dying out, and the last of the magic with them, until all that was left was her. She remembered her shackles breaking, gone with the death of magic, and fire, and pain like nothing she had ever known. Gathering her armies for another hundred years, because what did time matter when she had seen so much? When she would live millenia more? When the creatures had forced her into a life of pain and war? When all they had tasked her to do was kill, and then, when she had done it, when they cast her aside - a tool unwanted and outgrown? She remembered pushing south, for the trees and the Wall and the magic that had trapped her. She remembered pain.

And the magic still flowed, through the trees, in the wolves, in the birds, and that bird there was flooded with it. And, while she had suffered for the power in her, they let him thrive and live and breathe, because he was theirs. The tool they still wanted. The toy. The raven with more eyes than he should have, rather than the soldier with eyes shining blue like ice.

Most of all, she remembered dying a different person, and waking up to a world gone blue, beaten back by red, red, red, when she was supposed to be blue.

No, it’s not me. Not me! But the blood still pulsed, hot and angry, behind her eyes.

A hand on her face. Warmth. Warm against the ice pressed below her brow, as warm as a fire.

“Breathe, Arya Stark,” the warm thing told her. “The Lord of Light needs you now.”

She tried to, but her breaths would not come easily. Every time she tried, she would choke and cough and the knives in her throat would scream.

“It’s alright,” said the voice in her ear. It was familiar. Close. You’d be m’lady. Where was Jon? “You’re alright. I promise. You’re alright!”

And, somehow, she believed him. It was dark, but she wasn’t scared. The night had already fallen,
and the fires had burnt it away. Now, her mouth filled with ash and flames, and she lived again. *Today,* she thought, *today. It came and today. I died, but not.*

She choked on the smoke in the air, and the pain in her throat. She choked on the salty water that melted in her mouth, and the ash under her tongue. She choked on fear that cut deep and she choked on the feel of Gendry’s hands wrapping around her shoulders.

*I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe!*

And, then, like a gift from her father’s gods, she found air. It came in slowly at first, in little wisps, and then, in gusts. She felt like she could breathe again. Like her ruined throat could still work to drag in air, even if every breath brought with it a fresh burst of icy agony. It didn’t matter. If she could breathe, she could live. If she could live, she could fight.

The ice creatures had called on her to fight, but the wolf wanted her to fight the other way. To fight the living, not the reborn, but she had been reborn, so why should she fight for the ones the frozen ones called enemies?

There were wolves all around, she realized, now that her vision was clearing. Grey wolves and black wolves, white and red, and *Nymeria.* For a second, she thought she could see Grey Wind, and the thought haunted her worse than any of the other ghosts. But then, she saw wolves that looked like Summer and Lady and Shaggydog, and *I’m home.* For one mad second, she was in Winterfell again, surrounded by her family’s wolves, cradled in the arms of her father. There was snow melting on her face, and streams of water running down icy cheeks. They froze again, there, where the skin was as cold as the Night King’s hands.

*The Night King. He’d risen her, hadn’t he? But why, then, did it taste of ash?*

But the moment passed as all moments did, and the wolves were just wolves. Her pack. Nymeria’s pack. Grey Wind was dead, and Summer, and Lady, and Shaggydog. Her home was a pile of rubble. The weirwood, *where once a man had been stabbed in the heart with a dagger of glass,* had been torn asunder. The gods themselves had died.

And yet, she lived.

She turned her head and found a dead man burning at her side. His face was already melting, and his hands had burned black, but the metal on his chest did not change at all. A lightning bolt stared back at her.

She didn’t know whether to cry or kick him, so she did neither. She just stared at this man who had come to her side when even Jon had left. This man who had guided her through the Riverlands, only to lie and betray her. This man who had returned.

*Valar morghulis,* she thought. She wanted to say it, but her tongue couldn’t form the words. It still felt frozen, even as the flames leapt in her mouth. All of her muscles did.

“You must heal quickly, child,” cried the voice of a stranger. She wanted to tell him that she was no child, but her voice had fled her when her tongue had. All that came out was a miserable croak.

Her hand found her throat somehow. The skin was cold to the touch. Frozen to the touch. It radiated cold like Winterfell springs would the heat. She didn’t think she would ever feel warm again.

The hands around her shifted. From her chest to her shoulders. Then, Gendry’s concerned face came into view, and the world made a bit more sense. That was nice. Little enough did.
“Arry,” he breathed, staring into eyes that had been dead – *I should be dead* – but not saying a word of it.

She tried to form his name, and he must have heard it, because he wrapped his arms around her back and pulled her close. He was warm. She couldn’t remember when she’d last been warm.

He didn’t let her go for a long while. When he did, she found herself beside the woman who was not her mother, but who might have been. Winterhell was a lifetime ago, and the faces were as hard to remember as the names.

The red woman knelt before her, her dress muddied by the ever-falling snow. The dead girl couldn’t see much in the darkness, but she didn’t need to. She could have felt this woman’s heat from a thousand leagues away.

“At the crossroads,” the red woman said, soft enough that only the dead girl and Gendry could hear, “why did you choose to go south?”

The answer fled her for a moment. When had she been at a crossroads? Why had she gone south? Had she? Home was in the North. She remembered that. Home was the place with snows in the summer and a family with ice in their hearts. Home was as cold as the fire on her neck, but somehow just as warm as the ashes in her mouth.

She pictured cold blue eyes and the answer came unwittingly. *I had nowhere else to go.* Someone had stolen her home, and more someones had killed her family. Those names came too. The Boltons and the Freys, and the Lannisters. Queen Cersei and King Joffrey and the leafy children and Ser Ilyn with his throat slit deep. Pies and fingers wrapped around throats – *I can’t breathe* – and knives jabbed into eyes.

She wanted to go home, but she wasn’t sure where home was. Winterhell was rubble. The North was… the Night King’s, she recalled. His name came quicker than the others had. She could still remember frozen eyes and chains on her wrists and an obsidian dagger plunging through the chest.

*That’s not me.*

The wolves still hadn’t left her, and Gendry hadn’t either. Even surrounded by men and women in red, carrying fire in their palms, none of her pack so much as flinched. The wolves fought on, ripping apart the grey-skins. Wights, she thought they were called, though the wolf hadn’t known the word.

A hand caught under her chin, forcing her eyes up. She went to snarl, but it couldn’t have looked very frightening, because the red woman did not flinch.

“Why did you go south?” the woman demanded again.

“Jon,” she mouthed. She would have said it, but when she tried, all that came was a pained croak.

“Dead.” That was right. He was dead. He and Sansa and Bran and Rickon and Robb and Mother and Father. All dead. She, the lone wolf, had survived, but the pack had gone when the snows fell.

“Let her be,” Gendry hissed, shoving the woman away. Her fingers scraped against the frozen skin on the dead girl’s cheek, and the dead girl sucked in a breath. Her throat screamed its fury, but not a sound left her.

There was fighting all around her, but she could do nothing. Nothing but lay and writhe.

*Was this death?* Not today. No, today. *Today, I died, and now I’m back. Why?*
“Rise, child,” said one of the others. He kneeled down before her, his eyes as red as the Night King’s were blue. I can’t breathe...  

This man was larger than Gendry, and he could not be so easily dismissed. He watched her, a terrible satisfaction on his plump face.  

She tried to stand. She really did. She stumbled onto her feet, and held as long as she could, but her muscles were weaker than a babe’s. The strain was too much, and then she was sinking again. Gendry was there to catch her. She was thankful.  

“She needs time,” the red woman said, but the priest did not listen.  

“With every moment that passes, more of our own fall,” the priest said, his words flavored in the tongue of Old Valyria. Somehow, she knew it, though she could not recall how.  

“If she dies again, we have no means to restore her.”  

“If she dies, she was not His chosen.”  


“And the Lightning Lord, and the Black Bastard at the Wall.” The Black Bastard? Did he mean Jon? Jon died? Now or then? Were the rumors true, or did they make themselves later? Where was he? Why wasn’t he there? She wanted to ask, but all that came out was a painful croak. Gendry’s hold on her tightened, and suddenly she wanted to be as far away from him as she could.  

She tried to get back to her feet again. This time, she held longer. Enough that the red priest’s interest returned to her just as her knees crumpled. This time, Gendry was not quick enough. Her face struck the icy rock, and she screamed. Again, no sound left her. It only made the pain worse.  

The priest sighed. “How long should it take?”  

The red woman was grim. “Jon Snow took hours.”  

Jon Snow, again. Was he liked her?  

“We don’t have hours.”  

“Nor do we have another chance.”  

A raven screeched somewhere in the sky. The dead girl watched white eyes catch her own, halt for a moment, and then the bird was gone, and she was alone again.  

“Nymeria,” she tried to say. This time, a wisp of a word slipped her lips. It burned like all the seven hells. Gendry must have heard, because a great grin broke across his face.  

“Nymeria,” he repeated, staring aimlessly for a second. Then, his eyes cleared. “Nymeria. That’s your wolf, isn’t it? You need her?” The dead girl nodded. “I’ll get her. Anything you want. Stay here, alright? I’ll get her.” And then, Gendry was gone too.  

The dead girl watched him go and said nothing. It struck her for a moment that he would not know that Jon had died, and mayhaps not that she had. He would not know that the red people were plotting something, or that a part of her was shriveled and gone. That the hole in her heart was deep and thick and gaping. That every time the red woman looked at her, the fire under her tongue grew hot enough to light her whole.
“Jon,” she mouthed. This time, no one cared enough to listen. “Jon...”

None of them answered her. None of them stopped her, either, when she set her elbows in the ground and started dragging herself forward. She pulled herself as close to the fire as she could, and still, her face did not feel any warmer.

The red woman came close, crouched in front of her and offered her a thin smile. “You must go,” she said. “Find the Night King. Fulfill your purpose.”

Her breath stuttered again, and it hurt more than anything the dead girl had ever felt. She shook her head, as much as the burns on her throat would allow, and mouthed a fresh refusal.

Fingers wrapped around her chin, settling into more and more burns. It was all she could do not to scream. But, try as she might, she was too weak to get away.

“What do we say to the god of death?” the red woman said, so sure of herself, so proud and so confident. She knew what the woman wanted her to say, but she wouldn’t. It would have been a lie.

“It was,” she mouthed instead, twisting away and stumbling onto shaking knees. She inched close to the fire. The feel of it soothed the skin around the black burns she could see on her right arm. Her armor had torn away, and it only made the cold worse.

If these people expected a hero, they ought look elsewhere. This dead girl was a failure. The whole of the world had been counting on her, and she’d reached for the wrong damned sword. The Kingslayer still hung on her hip, mocking with every bump against its sheathe.

She sat by the flames and stared off into the water. There was no use doing anything else. It would only get her killed again, or worse. She would rather stay here, where her corpse could not hurt the brother who had left her, or the sister who had too.

“The Lord tests us today,” cried one of the red men. “This cannot be.”

“You saw it with your own eyes, Benerro,” said the priestess that the dead girl knew, but didn’t. The red woman who’d been so sure and so wrong.

“It is the one on the dragon. The girl of the blood of Old Valyria.”

“The dragon fell. The blood of the First Men is in this one. Old blood. King’s blood. There is power in King’s blood. No matter the source.”

“King’s blood? The kings are dragons and stags.”

“The blood of the boy-king crowned when this one fled.” Even the dead girl knew Robb Stark the dead wolf, and it tore her unbeating heart to think of him. Why had she come back and not him? He wouldn’t have died. He would have reached for the right sword. He wouldn’t have broken Needle. “And the one I thought second.”

“Much of what you think proves miscarried, it seems.”

“I know only what the Lord shows us, and the Lord shows a wolf returned from beyond.”

“Not a wolf,” said another. This time, a voice she knew. More so than the red woman, and much more than the Benerro. “A Cat.”

She must have tensed at that, because the voices fell silent. The red woman came to her, her feet
creaking on the ice and crunching in the snow. The one she’d killed in Braavos would have struck her for that.

A new man came to her too, but each of his steps were silent.

This name did not come to her at all, because he never had one at all, even when his face did. He knelt before her, cloaked in red with skin as pale as milk.

“A girl has delivered herself from death.” He did not speak in the high tongue as the others did. No, from his lips slipped one of the tongues she knew best. Bastard Valyrian. Braavosi Valyrian. “A man is not surprised. A girl was always too stubborn for sense.”

For a moment, she felt the air slip from her lungs. It came quickly again, in a rush of I can’t breathe- I can’t breathe. Every time she looked to his face, she expected to feel a dagger sinking into her stomach. The scars there burned hot.

“Mors?” said one of the red priests.

The Faceless paid him no mind. “The balance has been rocked. The god of ice steals from the god of flame. The Red God chooses a girl to steal back from ice, and a girl must serve his whims. All men must die?”

“Valar dohaeris,” she mouthed. Little cracks of a voice came free, and each burned cold. Then, “No.” I don’t want to play this stupid game anymore.

He shook his head. “Who are you?”

She caught his eyes. For once, her gaze held steady. And, for only the briefest of moments, the pain in her throat eased. A thousand different faces and names bled before her eyes, but she pushed through them all, until she found the only one that mattered. The one still trapped in the hollow of her heart. The one obscured and obstructed and adrift, but never gone.

“Arya,” she breathed, but could not say, “of House Stark.” Daughter to Eddard and Catelyn, sister to Robb, Sansa, Bran, Rickon, and half-sister to Jon. Friend to Syrio, to Hot Pie, to Lommy, to Jory, to Jaqen, to Lady Crane. More to Gendry. Daughter of Winterfell. Ghost in Harrenhal. A wolf and a fish and a weasel and a sheep and a mouse and a ghost, and a Stark most of all.

He smiled. She was not sure she had ever seen him smile before.

She rose to her feet. He helped her all the way, but she didn’t need it. The wolf was already there, her tongue lolling, her eyes wide, and her ears perked. She didn’t even know when the wolf had arrived. It didn’t matter. They were one same soul, and now they were together again. This time, it would stay that way.

The dead girl – the Arya – let a hand fall to Nymeria’s back. Nymeria took her weight with ease. She even knelt, nudging Arya, and the dead girl obeyed without question. Her weak fingers clung into the fur, and her limp legs hung across her sides. Her right arm could barely hold on, and her left was still slick with frozen blood, but they held. Too stubborn for sense, her fragile body held. Too stubborn to die, her aching lungs breathed.

She blinked, let slip her mind from the bounds of her skin. When she opened her eyes again, she was a wolf. Big and fierce and terrible. A heavy weight pressed against her back, but she breathed more easily than she had since the living had brought her back. It felt like peace. Even if the fires still raged across the way, and even if she could see wights outside of the fire ring, she could breathe again. She looked to the priests first, and then to the world beside them.
Gendry was stood outside of the flames, staring at her with an awe that terrified her. There were tear tracts staining the blood and the mud on his face, and a thousand cuts or bruises that might never heal. His hair was disheveled, his armor torn, and his hood had been ripped away at some point, but he was Gendry. He was hers.

He was safe. But he was the only one.

Elsewhere, there was fighting. Human fighters and pack, priests and priestesses using flames like weapons, and wights dragging themselves into the battle. There was ice and fire and blood. Everywhere.

She slipped back into her own skin and woke to a pain like she had never known. The air had fled her again, and her throat burned like knives to the gut. Spikes of frozen fire radiated from her right forearm, where his grip had been tightest. But, when the pain eased and her lungs returned to form, she had just enough strength to wrench her head up. She looked to Jaqen, to the red priests, to Gendry.

The red woman was staring at her. “I told you when we first met,” the woman said, as if the dead girl remembered her at all. “You will shut many eyes forever. Brown eyes.” The Freys, she remembered, quickly. She’d killed them all. “Green eyes.” The twin Lannisters. The man took a sword to the heart, and the woman felt fingers wrapped around her throat, squeezing and burning and taking all that she was. “Blue eyes…”

And, once, that might have spurned her. It might have sent her off to find the Night King to stick ‘em with the pointy end.

But she had done that once, and now it felt as if his hands were permanently etched around her throat. She had lived her life for vengeance and hatred and fury, and it had never done a thing.

The Freys were dead. The Lannisters were dead. But her father was too. Her father, her mother, Robb, and all the rest. Killing them didn’t bring anyone back. Killing only ever sunk her deeper into this hole she dug, where once there had been a heart.

Vengeance wouldn’t bring her father back, and it wouldn’t bring that little girl back, either. She was dead and gone, and she wouldn’t be coming back. Ever. How many Starks do they got to behead before you figure it out?

But maybe she didn’t need to bring anyone back. Mayhaps it was time to stop them from going at all.

“Jon,” she croaked. “Where?” She devolved into coughs, and each burned worse than the last. A hand beat at her back, and it did nothing but make her feel colder.

She looked to Gendry, then, but it was clear he knew less than any. He looked paler than the summer snows. If not for the black of his cloak, he might have blended into the ice and disappeared. She might have stayed with him forever, but his was not the face she needed to save. He had not been fool enough to run.

“Far and away,” said the faceless, when she looked to him, smiling that terrible smile, “with birds, the dying hunter, and a man without a head. To the very place where a girl learned the words and truly met her god.” He paused, tilted his head. “Before a girl met a man.”

The god.

Where had she met him? She had nearly died a thousand times, it seemed, but where had been the
first? Not the Trident, though she had come close when the boy prince swung his sword. Not the balcony, where Syrio had saved her before she ever tasted steel. Not even in the stable, where a fat boy had been the one to meet the god.

Where did Arya Stark die? Many places. Many times. She’d been dead, and she’d died and come back every time. Once, in the gardens of King’s Landing, and she burned hot and cold for it. Once, in Braavos, when she had cast aside her name and her sword. Once, after the Wedding, when she’d sunk her blade deep into Frey flesh and felt the world no fairer for it. And, before any of it, once, as a little girl with only a few drops of blood on her hands, hair longer than she had ever dared wear it since.

The one place she had hoped to never go again. For anyone else, she didn’t think she could have. Her feet would not have been able to carry her through those streets.

But this wasn’t anyone else. This was Jon.

In the winter, we must protect ourselves.

She slipped her skin once more. And, with one final look back at the man she loved, the man who’d raised her, and the woman who wore her mother’s hair, she turned away and ran. Gendry tried to follow her, but human legs were no match for a wolf’s. He screamed for her, reached for her, begged her to stay. He was more desperate than she’d ever heard him. Even in Harrenhal, when he’d been strapped down with the bucket and the rat, he never screamed. Now, he did, and now it sang with grief. She didn’t look back. Fear cuts deeper than swords, she remembered, and this deeper than both.

She carried her fears with her, and her swords too. One pommel still clasped between two of her right fingers, and the other strapped safely to her side. She wouldn’t let either go for as long as she still lived.

Not today, she thought. Not again.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, that second death was a lot more traumatic than the first, huh? This story has spent a lot of time exploring the slow deterioration of Arya’s mental state, and this finally tipped her over the edge. Arya had a nice calm first death thanks to Lady Crane’s poppy milk, but this one had no such care attached. So, the effects are a wee bit more pronounced. Especially because, this time, Arya has proof she actually did die. She might have suspected before, but now she’s got definitive, actual proof. And that, besides, she’s got several types of magic dragging her every which way back to life, and that’s the sort of thing that can screw up your day real well.

Fortunately, the kid’s a survivor (unlike someone we were reintroduced to last chapter…) and, by the end of the chapter, she’s already pulling herself back together.

Anyway, this isn’t the end of this thread, as I’m sure you’ve imagined, so let’s see where this kid takes us as we check in with… oh. Whoops.
Chapter Thirty-Six: The Bear and the Maiden Fair

Daenerys Targaryen

She had no sword, nor torch, nor arrows. She could not wield an axe or a hammer, and she had never once learned to wield a dagger, or set flames with the will of gods. Dany had only ever learned to ride on a dragon’s spines, to lead from some high table, to stand watch as her armies fought and died.

Now, she was trapped in the midst of battle. Now, there was a field of men around her that had sworn to take arms against her. Lannisters and Stormlanders, each sweating and angry and scared. None even looked to her. Here, she was just another face in a sea of them.

It was like no other battle Dany had ever seen. There was no pillaging, looting, or raping here. There was nothing to take. Only the endless swarm of death that seemed content to kill them all.

If I look back, I am lost, she thought. But, if there is nothing forward, what do I look to?

There was only death. Death and decay. She had only ever been this lost once before, in the Red Wastes of Essos, when her fat had turned to skin and bones, and even the horses died as the flies circled. When she had three sons, instead of one. When she had never held a sword, or known of the dead, or seen a castle die. It was before the words “Fire and Blood” became prophecy. Before the world turned to stone.

If I look back, I am lost. I am lost. I am lost.

It did not scare her. Perhaps, if the only way forward was a path lined with blood, one needed to be lost to survive.

Jorah remained at her side. The only constant. The only one there from the very beginning, when her own brother had sold her like some broodmare.

He led her through the battle by her arm, and she stumbled along with him. He was shouting to her, but she could not hear his words over the sound of men dying all around. The gate had fallen not long ago and now the harbor was death.

Once, in Winterfell, the Night King had smiled at her. A terrible smile like the chill of the lands beyond the Wall, or the stinging bite of winter winds. A smile as sharp as an arakh, or perhaps valyrian steel.

She had never been meant to wield valyrian steel, nor raise it against her son. But, then, she had never been meant to raise dragons, either, nor carry a sword. Desperate times made desperate women, and desperate women could fight as well as any desperate man.
There was a sword still blazing in a dead man’s hand. The wights ignored the corpse and the flames, all too eager to prey on living flesh. But that sword called to Dany, even as Jorah ran by it, his hand still tight on her wrist.

She wasted no time before reaching for it. The hilt was cold, somehow, despite the reaching flames, but her grip held strong all the same. She pulled away from her sworn shield and slashed wildly at the first wight that came near. Her first blow missed. Wide to the right. Her second missed, left. Her third was high, but the flames licked out and caught its hair, and the beast was set alight.

Jorah said nothing of her swordplay, nor of the wight. He only reestablished his grip on her arm and pulled her forward again. It took every ounce of strength she had not to drop the blade.

If they survived this, she would ask him to teach her. She would ask him to help her build the strength that the man had built. She would never be so helpless again, and she would be stronger than any man, woman, or Walker. If they survived this, she would do a lot of things.

A knife cut dangerously close to Dany’s face, and another to Jorah’s side. The blade bounced off of his armor, but Dany wore none. Had the blade struck an inch lower, she would be dead.

Jorah pushed her back. He took hold of his sword with both hands. With a great roar, he sent a vicious cut at the nearest wights. His blade slashed through four in one swing. Each crumbled. Jorah wasted no time in grabbing her again and running.

His legs were longer than hers and far better trained. Where Jorah had learned to fight and endure, Dany had learned to lead and ride. So, while he dragged her, her feet stumbled and scraped on growing piles of snow, and he stood tall. In the darkness, it was all she could do not to fall and die.

“Jorah!” she shouted, but her man did not hear. The bear would not have heard her if she shouted into his ears. She had seen his eyes as he fought – crazed and gone. He had not looked back, she knew, but he was lost all the same.

They passed by a pile of corpses, collected sometime before the Walkers had returned. Someone had set it aflame, but the fire was slow to spread, and the snow smothered it well.

To her horror, the pile twitched. An arm slipped here, a finger shifted there. And, as she stared in abject terror, a hundred eyes opened, and each a brilliant blue. They looked to her, and she found herself staring into the cold eyes of death, and there was nothing to do.

Their numbers were falling, the living, and the enemy was rising by the minute. There had been too many outside the city walls. More than she could count in a hundred years. Now, there were even more. Their only hopes had been stymied, because the Night King had known. He must have known their plan before they even made it.

Tyrion had told her, once, that a red priestess had met them in Meereen, while Dany, herself, was trapped in Vaes Dothrak. That she had called Daenerys the Princess that was Promised. That she had declared that Dany would save the world, and bring forth a new dawn.

She was wrong.

Her son had brought down the Wall. Her armies had died in Winterfell. Her last great plan had been a failure. There were too many enemies to fight and far too few allies. If the war did not end now, it would soon.

There had never been a chance.
“Where are we running?” she demanded, but Jorah did not hear. He kept moving and, when she pulled his hand away from his, it took him another five steps to realize that she was gone.

A Lannister soldier’s sword was the only thing that stopped the nearest wight from carving her in two. When she looked, the man looked back to her. She did not know where he had come from. She did not care.

“Queen,” Tyrek Lannister began. He never finished. A knife sunk deep into his throat, and Lord Tyrek fell, gurgling on blood and spit. Dany slashed her sword over him as his body crumpled. The blade struck armor, and did nothing more than scrape the steel.

Jorah was there before she could swing again. His blade carved through the wight’s head, and then another, and then another. He fought like a man possessed. A man of the fighting pits. He fought like he had when she was a woman with her waters freshly broken, and he had been left to defend her from the whole of her khalasar.

She had sent him away, once. Called him a traitor and a slaver, and it had been the right thing to do. She had known it then, and for all the days after. But, now, as she watched her bear fight for her with everything he had, she could not see him for his failures. She could not see treason and lies and betrayals.

There was only her bear. Only the man who had fought for her for as long as he had known her. The man who had defended her against Viserys, and the assassins, and everyone who had ever tried to hurt her. The man who had stood beside her, even as his own blood shamed him for it. Called exile and traitor and liar, and stayed at her side through it all.

He was the only one who had stayed. Even Jon Snow had gone and, for all that she loved him, she had not known him for more than the season.

Jorah was always there.

They would die soon, if naught was done. They would all be dead. He and her and all the rest. But there was no one to do it, and nothing to be done.

Except…

In all her days, Jorah remained the only one who had never failed her. She did not think he would start now.

“Jorah!” she shouted, hoping beyond hopes that he would hear her over the din of a thousand swords clashing and more men screeching.

He did not look to her, but his head tilted just enough. He heard.

“The Night King,” she said. “Go!”

She did not need to see his face to know his terror. “Khaleesi!” he screamed, as he cut down another three wights.

She swung her sword. This time, the steel met flesh, and a wight went down screaming. She had to wrench the blade out of its throat, and it took all the strength she had. Thankfully, there was a Dondarrion man beside her to cut down the next.

“Go!” Dany shouted. Avenge my sons, prove yourself, survive. Kill my enemies, win the war, save the whole of the world and be remembered a hero.
He hesitated for another moment. His sword hung in the air – halfway to the sky and halfway to his sheathe. He looked to her, confused and soft and lost.

Then, the moment broke. His gaze hardened. He tore his eyes from wight to wight, and none offered the answer he needed. His sword moved faster than she could see, and eight went down by the time Dany swung her own. She missed.

“Jorah!” she called again, desperate.

“No!” he screamed, loud and frantic and furious. “Here-“ His sword pierced through a wight’s throat. “I-” His backhand swing took another in the eye. “stand!” He ripped it free and the forward swing took another.

He fought better than he had in the fighting pits. There, he had been hampered by greyscale and famine. Now, he was rested. Still, he was hungry. He was brave, and fierce, and Jorah.

A dozen wights were dead before Dany could even lift her sword. Two more before she could swing it. Another two as she missed.

The sky was falling, the world was dying, and King’s Landing had burned. But, in Jorah’s shadow, none of it meant a thing. If they died there, they would die fighting beside the usurper’s men. Beside lions and stags and a wolf she loved. Viserys would have beaten her senseless if he knew where she would find herself. He would have beaten her senseless for a great many things.

But Viserys was seven years dead, and Dany had lost more than she thought possible. She had lost her first love and now perhaps her last. She had lost friend after friend, son after son. She had lost her armies and her kingdom and everything she had worked towards. She had played her part in history, and she had lost.

Her sword sunk deep into a skeleton’s skull. There was no blood to splatter, but she felt it all the same. It tasted of salt.

She could do nothing as the men along her line fell. She could not defend them, or pray for them, or order her son to save them. There was no one coming this time. No one at all.

She heard it before she saw it. It came as a tiny grunt, barely more than a whisper, yet it sounded louder than any scream. Even in the din, she heard the sharp breath leave Jorah’s lips.

The hilt of a knife stuck out from the pit between his plate and his arm. Blood drained down, across his armor, his arm, his hands. His teeth were bared, his eyes wild, and he fought on still, looking more bear than man. Yet, now, there was a stumble in his step. The tip of his sword hung lower than it had before. No longer did he twist his torso with every swing, and he favored his left side more than he ought have.

That would be the damning blow, she knew. That and all the rest.

Drogo, Drogon, Viserion, Irri, Missandei, Jhiqui, Grey Worm, Mother, Father, Rhaegar, Viserys, all of you... I return soon. Would that you would welcome me. Would that you would know me. Would that you did not have to greet me at all.

A Stormlander died at her side. She did not see it. He screamed as he fell, crying out for his mother as the dagger cut through his eye. He lived for a minute more, screaming all the way. When he died, Dany was only grateful that the screams finally ended.

She managed to cut the wight that killed him. It was a glancing blow, but the flames did the worst
work for her. The creature’s clothes lit aflame, and then it crumbled in a pile of flesh and bone. She wanted to celebrate the kill, but there were four others behind it, and she only swung the blade again.

At her side, Jorah screamed the cry of a warrior. She did not look to him again. She could not.

All around her, the fighters were falling. It was half a miracle that she lived, while the trained soldiers died in droves.

But she knew was no miracle that she lived and they did not. She would be gone soon with them. That they died first was simply the way of war. It did not matter if one was strong, or weak, or brave, or craven. All men were born to die. It was simply to the wights to decide who went first.

For a moment, she could not help but think that, as a girl, she might have celebrated this sight. Her enemies dead, their lands slaughtered, and she hardly had to raise a hand.

But that was not true, and she knew it well. That little girl never wanted to kill anyone. She just wanted a place to live, to survive, to be. If she could have found that in a cabin on some merchant’s ship, she would have been happy to stay forever. She would have stayed in the house with the red door, but Viserys dragged her on and on, and now she paid the price. A lifetime had passed since, and Dany was no closer to it. She did not know if it even mattered. The sky was falling, and the world was dying. No one cared for the whims of a scared little girl.

A crippled wight clawed at her legs. Thankfully, it carried no sword, else Dany might have died then and there. She kicked it away, back towards the bloodied gate. A man tripped over its head and died before he even struck the ground, as a dozen wights lunged to pluck his head from his shoulders. Dany could not see his colors in the darkness, and yet, she knew that they did not matter. In this war, all of the living fought the same. In this war, they died together.

More men fell, and it was by no great skill that Dany survived while they crumbled. It was naught more than luck, and Jorah. Without either, she would be a corpse as much as any. The blood of the dragon could not save her sons, and it would not save her now. Nothing and no one would.

At least I die in King’s Landing. Viserys would have been jealous. He had died in Vaes Dothrak, in the camp of the men he called savages and beasts, but those Dany had called her own. She would die in the city of their ancestors, as Jaehaerys had, and Maegor, and Aerys. When she thought of it like that, dying seemed easier.

But when she smelled the sharp scent of stool and sickness wafting through the air, she remembered all too quickly that dying was never easy. Dying burned like wildfire, if the screams in the air were anything to speak of.

She had no way of knowing how many men were left. There was no way to know if they had killed half of the Night King’s army, or even a quarter. She did not know if she would survive this night, or if she would only roam the world with an unbeating heart and eyes that blazed like a dead dragon’s flames.

Her sword sunk into flesh. When she tried to pull it back, the blade stayed. She tried to wrench it away, but her shaking arms were no match for the grip of bone and muscle and blood. The wight burned, and her sword with it.

She scrambled back, slipping on snow and ice and blood. Jorah did not seem to notice her retreat. He was too busy fighting through the pain in his shoulder and the horde surrounding him.
There were swords on the ground, but, when Dany reached for one, a wight came from the darkness with a spear held between his bony fingers. She did not know who he had been in life, but she knew his spiked cap and his leather armor and the darkness of skin that did not come from Westeros.

*I cannot free you twice,* she thought. *This chain is not so easily broken.* And then, she thought, *I am sorry.*

She stretched to reach the sword in time, but the wight was quicker. His spear plunged forward, as quick as he must have been in life. She closed her eyes.

She did not die.

When she opened them again – after a second that might have lasted a thousand years – there was a blood-drenched man standing before her. He was not one she recognized, nor did she know the meaning of the blood-red griffon on his chest. But he offered her a hand and he offered her a sword and a smile, and Dany took it. She took all three.

When the griffon died, she felt as much as she had for the man without colors, and the lion who had stolen Tyrion’s lordship, and the many others who had fallen that day. Someday, perhaps, she would mourn, but that was not this day.

This was a day for fighting. This was a day for dying.

On the next swing, her fresh sword caught a wight in the throat. The fires didn’t catch, at first, but they did on the second cut. She swung at the next, without another thought. There were more wights to kill, and more time before she would return to her ancestors with her head held high.

Daenerys Stormborn was the blood of the dragon. Dragons did not die cowards.

She would die fighting on the fields her forefathers had forged with dreams and dragons and fire and blood. A new world, they had built. Perhaps, if they survived this, she could build one of her own.

Yet, she knew, better than any, that survival was a fleeting dream no truer than those of doors as red as the griffon’s hair.

But Daenerys Targaryen was a mother of dragons, a breaker of chains, and a survivor of Winterfell. And the blood of the dragon would not run.

Chapter End Notes

Not gonna insult your intelligence and pretend this wasn’t largely filler, but there’s some important stuff in this one that I couldn’t leave out. I’ll leave you lot to figure out which bits are important and which absolutely aren’t.

Also, huge thank you for the awesome response to the past few chapters! It's been ridiculously cool seeing all the comments and kudos', so thanks to everyone who has!

Anyway, let’s get to some non-filler next time, eh? Looks like… well, my notes say we’re returning to a confused dead wolf teen, so I guess we’ll see how that goes.
Chapter Thirty-Seven: The Pointy End

Inside King’s Landing

Arya Stark of Winterfell

It had all begun a lifetime ago. Or, perhaps two. It was hard to say. Time had become a very flexible thing since the Many-Faced God had taken her and left her. It had been stretchy before then, too, but somehow, it was worse now. Worse than even the days in Braavos, when the wounds on her stomach refused to seal and the Waif’s blood clung to her no matter how often she washed.

But it had begun here, on the Street of Flour. There had been a dead pigeon, she remembered, and a shop-keep with a temper. The air had smelled sweeter than any she had known during the days spent wasting away on the streets of Flea Bottom.

It didn’t smell sweet now. It only smelled of ash and cold.

The winds lapped at her, and it made her shivering worse. She was still frozen solid from her bath in the Blackwater – not to speak of the cold burning through her throat, her face, and her arm. Even her feet, in places, had been burned black when she kicked and thrashed.

In truth, the only thing keeping her from collapsing was the direwolf under her. Nymeria’s warmth was as comforting as Arya was pained. It even eased the hurt, just a bit. At least, the hurt in her arms, where her pack’s teeth had sunk deep. The pain on her throat did not abate. Not at all.

But it didn’t matter. None of it mattered. There was work to be done, a pack to protect. She could stew on her hurts and her failures later. There wasn’t time now.

Nymeria carried her up the steps, where once she’d fallen and shattered her nail while hordes of half-naked children ran by. None of it looked the same. The buildings were all gone, and the steps shattered to pieces. The wildfire had swallowed it all, and now the city was black and white with ash and snow. These were the colors of home, she remembered. Black and white.

There were few wights in the area. Most had already congregated around the River Gate and beyond. For the time being, she was safe.

She might have laughed at that, if she could. She hadn’t been safe since she had first walked these steps. She hadn’t been safe since she’d left Winterfell, or perhaps before. Perhaps she had never been safe. The raven – Bran, she remembered – he hadn’t been safe in that place. He’d fallen. Now, he was dead. The Many-Faced God hadn’t cared to give him back.

It wasn’t fair, but the god never was. If so, she would have died at the Twins with Robb and her mother. Instead, Arya stood at the end of all things. Alone. Jon was gone, and Sansa, and Bran, and all of them. The god had brought her back just to see her die again.
King’s Landing was quieter than she’d ever heard it. Even in the dead of night, the city had always been loud and angry, but now, she could hear nothing but the faint din of clashing swords and ear-splitting screams. Even they were so far, it hardly processed at all.

She did not think she was meant to return to this place. She had been in the city three times since, and never once had she dared even approach. It was a cruel place, a cursed place. The only reason she could ever bear to look upon it was that the smoke had grown thick enough to cloak what little she could see of the crumbled buildings and dust-ridden streets. That made her feel somewhat better, though her skin still crawled.

Thankfully, Nymeria was not so lost. Somehow, she remembered these streets as well than Arya did, though she had never once crossed them. But Nymeria was as much Arya as Arya was Nymeria, and that was becoming clearer with every passing hour.

It had always been the two of them, hadn’t it? Arya had driven her away, but she’d always been there. Killing the Lannisters, after she’d run from Harrenhal. Killing the Freys after the wedding. Killing the Boltons, too. Stealing her dreams, when Arya was a girl who was no one and nothing.

Robb had forgotten her, and her lady mother too. Even after Sansa and Jon had overlooked her for their wars, Nymeria was searching for her. Even when Jon had left her on the beach, dead to the world and scared, Nymeria had given her the chance to hide inside her skin. Even when no one in the world wanted her – when Gendry joined the Brotherhood, when Bran hadn’t cared to look for her though Sansa said he could see everything, when even Jaqen had called for her head, Nymeria remembered. Nymeria looked.

_I threw rocks_, she thought, clenching her frozen fingers against the direwolf’s fur. Nymeria’s ears twitched, but she showed no hint of annoyance or pain or hate. She should have. _She should have eaten me._

“Jon,” she mumbled into the fur. That word, alone, cut deeper than any sword. It carved hr heart and throat alike.

Arya slumped further against Nymeria’s back. It was getting harder and harder to keep her eyes from shuddering shut. With the way her hands were shaking, she thought that she might slip free and fall back down to Earth.

If she fell, she did not think she would find the strength to claw her way back again.

But Jaqen had sent her here, and the red woman too. Two people who had found their own unique ways to ruin her life. One she’d trusted with her life, and who had tricked her and damned her all the same. One she hadn’t, who had proven her right.

Yet, it ended the same way. Arya hurt. Arya alone. Arya hunting for the creature that had seen fit to throw her corpse in the bay.

She didn’t know if she could do it, but she had to try. For Jon. Because, even if he’d left, he was still her brother. And she would not fail him the way she did Robb, the way she did her mother, and Bran, and the baby, and Father. She couldn’t let that happen.

Her eyes nearly slipped shut by the time the screams reached her ears. They were war cries, like the ones she’d let loose no more than a lifetime ago, when she and the army of the living had been fighting by the River Gate. She hadn’t stayed long there – only enough to watch the wildfire light – but the little she had seen had been enough to turn her stomach.
Now, the screaming was quieter. Somehow, that only made it worse.

They reached the top step, and then level ground. Crumbled buildings surrounded her, but there was only one thing that Arya could bear to notice.

Even on a battlefield, she could track their voices. The Faceless ones had trained her well. Somewhere to the right and below them, there were three living men. The steps of a hundred wights followed them, and along with them, the steps of a creature forged from ice. Though Arya lay over a hundred feet away, she could hear the sounds of them: ice cracking, ice laughing, I can’t breathe-

She was torn back to a past she hadn’t lived. There were chains on her arms, children all around her, magic living and magic dying, and an obsidian shard stabbing through her sternum- that isn’t me, it isn’t me, it isn’t!

She wanted to be sick. She was sick. Blood and bile spilled from her lips and onto Nymeria’s back. She shouldn’t have been alive, but she was, and he was the reason why. Just him, just him, just him.

She wanted to turn. She wanted to apologize to her wolf. She wanted Nymeria to take her somewhere where the dead couldn’t find her. Someplace safe.

Safe? There’s no safety, you dumb bitch. How many Starks have they got to behead before you figure it out?

She buried her face in Nymeria’s fur, but, as her cheeks touched the direwolf’s skin, the wolf skidded to a stop and let loose a terrible yelp. She forced her head back, and kept her right arm as far from Nymeria’s skin as she could manage. She tried to whisper an apology, but the words caught in her throat and all that came was another pained whimper.

She didn’t loosen her grip, though. Not when she could see him standing there, atop a pit as large as the House of Black and White.

He sat upon his dead steed again, looking for all the world like a true king. Spikes of ice protruded from his misshapen skull, and she could remember the feel of them tearing through bone and skin and that’s not me.

She wondered how close she’d been to joining his army. She wondered if that was why she felt so cold, why his memories were billowing behind her eyes, why his wights hardly seemed to notice her, as they started for Nymeria.

She wondered if she was dying again. It felt like it.

The Night King did not face her this time, but that did mean he didn’t see her. She knew that now. In all likelihood, he was baiting her. Drawing her close, so that he could tear the life from her lungs again. So that he could stare and smile, while she kicked and died.

She took a second to stop and breathe, just to remind herself that she still could.

When she had collected herself, she slid from Nymeria’s back. Her knees struck the ground with a thud that was far too loud. She flinched at the sound, but Nymeria was quick to nudge her back to her feet. She tried to thank her, but the pain cut deeper every time she tried. A whisper of a word came free, and nothing more.

Before, Arya remembered, the direwolf had been hesitant to see her off. Before the battle, before
Arya had bled and died. She clung to Arya’s cloak, tried to hold her back even after Jon was gone and Gendry was moving to the River Gate. She had been content to stay there, biting her cloak through the night, but Arya had slipped her skin to send her off, and they had not seen each again until the Blackwater. Until Arya was trapped in her skin.

It was a mistake. She should have listened. She should have stayed. She never should have gone to the Red Keep, or tried to trick a Walker, or brought Needle with her to the gardens.

Needle. The reminder hurt worse than any wound. The broken pommel was still strapped to her belt, but she couldn’t bring herself to let it go.

She never should have done a lot of things.

And, now, Nymeria was set to see her off. This time, her direwolf stayed in the alley. None of the wights around the Night King seemed to notice Arya, though some behind her were already making their way for Nymeria.

She drew the Kingslayer’s sword with her right hand, though the brand on her arm screamed with every shift. The valyrian steel seemed to guide the way as well as any torch. The few bits of light left in the world caught on her sword. It shone red and green, though most of the flames dimmed hours ago.

She shifted the blade into her left hand. This time, the blood had long since dried. The sword stayed locked between her fingers, and she had never been more thankful.

She took one step, and then another. A third, and a fourth. Every time she wanted to stop, she took another. And another. And another. She’d lived that way for a long time, moving forward though everything in her begged her to lay down and die. What was one more day? What was one more step?

Maybe, when his blood stained the ground and the sun was rising over Westeros, maybe she wouldn’t ever have to take another.

She watched the Night King bear down on the pit with his frozen blade in hand. She heard him speak – words that sounded of crackles and creaks. She wondered if he had a tongue, and then she knew he didn’t. She’d lived in that skin, if only for a moment before the fires came and burned the ice away.

The Night King was just a man. A man frozen, but a man all the same. For all the magic and gods and warring, he was just a man cloaked in blue.

She crept closer. Every step sent a bolt of pain through her frozen feet. But the Night King was ahead, and she could end the war, so what did it do her to rest? She could kill him before he found Jon. Before he could hurt Bran, Sansa, Gendry, and all the rest. All the ones that mattered and the ones that didn’t.

As she crested Visenya’s Hill, she found that she had even less time than she thought.

There, near the bottom, was one of the two men she’d hoped beyond hope was far and away. He was slick with blood and snow, holding his bastard sword before him and screaming some pointless cry. That stupid Lannister helm still covered his face, but she knew him all the same. His eyes were wild and his limbs were trembling. Whether he shook from the cold or the fear, she
could not say. She hoped it was the cold. She knew well that fear cut deeper than swords.

The three men around him looked no less afraid.

One was a man of Dragonstone – Lord Hunter, she recalled. His sword was aflame, and he was wielding it as if it would make any difference.

Fire would only kill the wights. She had seen that from atop the wall, when the Walkers passed through flames that would have demolished half of their armies.

Valyrian steel, though – that could kill anything. Her grip tightened on the Kingslayer’s sword, as bile rose in her throat.

Of the four men, Jon was the only one with valyrian steel, and he was farther from the Night King than Lord Hunter. The other two remained behind him, one armed and one not. The soldier carried a blade as pale as milk of the poppy. It was a greatsword that dwarfed him, and yet he wielded it with grace.

Behind him stood a man with a fish on his chest, weaponless and unarmored, but nevertheless standing tall as a Tully should.

Jon Snow, Harlan Hunter, and Ned Dayne, defending the Lord of Riverrun. And beside them, a single black raven perched on a jagged piece of rock. A more motley crew had never before been found.

They were five men she did not wish to see dead. But, then, there was only one man left she did, and he was hardly even a man.

The Night King crept closer, moving almost as slowly as Arya did.

But, while Arya kept moving, dragging herself even as the wights began to take notice of her, the Night King did not. He stopped, atop a pile of rubble, only to watch the four of them stand. His eyes went to Jon for a moment, and then to the valyrian steel in her brother’s hands. She felt the Night King’s smile more than she saw it.

The marks on her throat burned anew. She never wanted to see it again.

And, while the Night King stood grinning, Lord Hunter let loose a scream that might have shaken the Earth. As Arya crested the hill, she watched him charge. She wanted to scream for him to stay away, but only a whisper left her throat.

He waved his sword frantically before him, and she wondered where the Harlan family sword had gone. It was valyrian steel, she remembered, but lost. Had he carried it that day, he might even have lived.

But his sword was castle-forged steel, and the Night King’s cut through it as easily as a butcher might carve a decayed boar. The steel split as Beric’s once had, and Lord Harlan tasted the bitter sting of the Night King’s touch.

His skin turned black where the ice blade cut him. As black as the marks on Arya’s arm. She imagined that the look on his face was the same one she’d worn. Sheer terror, as the black claimed his soul, and Harlan Hunter fell and died.

Another House gone, because Arya was a minute too late.
She did not stop. She did not pause. Even as Lord Hunter’s eyes looked to her. They were empty as the seas and just as blue. They would turn a different shade soon, if she failed again.

The Night King turned to her brother, to her uncle, and poor Ned Dayne. Dayne stood valiantly enough, but his sword was not the proper steel. He would die too. And, if Jon’s swing went errant, so would he. Her uncle, too.

There was salt on her lips. She wondered if the ocean water was finally melting on her cheeks. She didn’t think so.

Jon took one step, then two. No more than a foot away, he screamed. And Arya picked up her pace as he swung his sword over his head, and valyrian steel met ice.

Unlike Hunter’s sword – unlike Needle – the steel did not splinter. It held strong, and, though the Night King’s strength had him falling back, his blade did not meet Jon’s flesh. Her last brother did not die as she had.

She went on stumbling, as Ned Dayne lunged forward. When his blade did not shatter either, he laughed.

And, suddenly, there was a battle. It was a strange battle, to be sure. Rather than a thousand men hacking and slashing unabated, it was three strong fighters, two on one end and one on the other, and a fourth dragging herself down into the pit. All the while, a fifth remained perched on his rock, unmoving and eerily patient as the Battle for the Dawn played out before his milky white eyes.

The Night King stood higher than Jon and Lord Dayne, and his blows were all the stronger for it. Each time ice met steel, steel was driven further back. Jon and Ned were stumbling down, further and further by every step the Night King took.

They hacked at his legs, at his arms, at his chest. Jon, quicker than a Braavosi, and Ned, stronger than a Westerosi, but it didn’t matter. The Night King was quicker and stronger and fiercer, too.

Arya was twenty steps away. Fifteen. Ten. She choked on her own breath, but she hadn’t the time to cough.

And then, just as he charged for another blow, poor Ned Dayne slipped on a spot of ice. Jon had already been driven back, and there was blood on his face, on his hip, on his shoulder. She didn’t know when he’d been bloodied, and she didn’t know what to do about it. Would minor nicks be deadly? Could chips of ice freeze a man as easily as fingers?

It made no matter. Jon was not the next to die.

The Night King swung forward. The top half of Dayne’s head landed ten feet away, in a pile of snow and encroaching wights. His body fell to its knees, and then to the ground, leaking brain and blood every which way. The white sword stayed in his hand, his grip strong even in death. A Sword of the Morning, only he hadn’t lived to see it.

Jon’s feet held for a moment, as he watched his ally crumble. She wondered if they were friends.

Nine steps. Eight. Seven.

Across the way, there were more Walkers coming. She could hear them across the hill, surrounded by a sea of wights and marching together as men crumpled and died. Too many to be fought. If she lost this chance, she would not find another.
Lord Tully went for Ned Dayne’s sword, but he was too slow, and the Night King was too close. His frozen blade leapt at Lord Tully’s chest, and there was nothing her uncle could do.

_Not another_, she thought, desperately. _No more blood. Please._

But Arya was six steps away, and nowhere near close enough to stop it.

Jon was.

He had been still as a statue, but, as a strangled cry slipped from her lips, he moved again. Each movement shattered another layer of the stone that had pinned him in place. With a great roar – a dragon’s roar – he charged forward.

His sword stayed the Night King’s no more than a half-foot from Lord Tully’s chest. The man scrambled back, abandoning the blade to Ned Dayne. It was wise of him. From what she had seen of him already, he was no more of a fighter than Sansa was. It was no wonder he’d lost his sword along the way.

Five steps.

Jon parried another blow. The force of it was enough to drive him back into the snow. His back struck the ground with a terrible clang. Even a dead man could have heard the breath flee his lungs.

The Night King did not relent. He stood above his prey, lifting his sword over his head and bringing it down. Once. Twice.

Bran took to the sky, screaming at her to _breathe, breathe, breathe!_ 

She did. She breathed in time with the Night King’s strikes. Each breath came short.

Jon’s held his sword over his chest. One hand was pressed against the steel and one, the hilt. Red blood oozed from his left palm, where his own blade had already split the flesh. He let loose a single, terrible scream, as the Night King bore down again.

This time, she was there.

When Winter came for House Stark, she there.

When the snows fell and the white winds blew, she was standing over her brother, the cold fingers of a once-dead hand wrapped tight around the Kingslayer’s sword.

The Night King spun to face her, but, this time, he was too late. The Kingslayer caught him in the back. It slid right through the holes in his plate, right where she aimed it.

_Do you know where the heart is, girl?_

Valyrian steel carved into obsidian, and it cut just as easily as it would any other man.

Once, in a meeting at the Painted Table, Tyrion Lannister had asked if this creature could even be killed. Some men, he said, may not be meant to die.

_No, my lord_, she thought, as the sword sunk deep. _Anyone can be killed._

No water leaked out of the Night King that day. Only shards. A thousand shards of ice, spewing in every direction. One moment, he was there, and the next, he was gone. Her sword was slicing
through open air. The ruby red eyes of a hungry lion stared at her. Once, a lion this red had stolen her life from her. Now, Jon was alive because of it. The Kingslayer had given her her life back.

*A blade with a name*, she remembered, and she could almost hear his voice again, in this damned place.

The ice was hard beneath her knees. She didn’t know when she’d fallen. Time fled the world when the Night King had. Seven hells, time had fled the world when *she* had.

She felt feverish, lost. Like the dream of a little girl sick in bed, waiting for the maester’s potions and her mother’s gentle touch. Perhaps that was all this ever was, and she would wake again in a world that made sense. Perhaps that was why she couldn’t drag the air back into her lungs. Perhaps that was why the ground beneath her was slick with more blood than any corpse could hold. Perhaps that was why she gagged and gagged and choked on her gagging.

Why everything hurt and burned. She had frozen alive, and she hadn’t even realized it.

She’d done what Jaqen wanted. She was done serving, and she had driven another man to death. Did that mean he would send her back? Back to Nymeria’s skin, out of this rotting corpse of a girl?

She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t.

Two warm hands wrapped around her chest, as her face slickened with blood and salt. They held her tight and close, but all she could think was that, up there in the sky, there was not a single bird in sight.

Chapter End Notes

So, we've finally finished 8x03. It only took us about 37 chapters and 150,000 words. Man, Arya going North was a real time saver, huh? Azor Ahotpie sure saved a lot of lives.

So, as I’m sure you guys expected, the story’s not done here. We’ve got a lot of cleanup to do, and a fair amount more conflict on the horizon, plus it’s about time we figure out what to do about Westeros now that well over 50% of the population is gone, and with it the entire infrastructure of the capital city, as well as two of the seven kingdoms.

And it’s also time to see how the world responds to Azor Ahai being an 18-year-old (and a woman at that). One of my biggest issues with the show was that they completely ignored the consequences of Arya being the Promised Prince in favor of… whatever 8x04 was, so you better expect I’m getting into it.

And, for the Dany side of the story, how does a woman respond to the deaths of two of her sons, the loss of a perceived destiny, and the loss of her father’s seat? And, better than that, how does she respond to the hero of the day not being her, and instead being an assassin of all things? Well, I can promise she won’t be burning thousands of innocent civilians, so Dany fans need not fear on that regard. I think we’ve all had enough of burning (well… to an extent).

Anyway, lots more to get at, so let’s get to it. Jon Snow’s excited to return to his seat
as POV.
For the past eight years, Jon had spent every waking moment dreading this day.

Every night, before he laid down to rest, he thought of blazing blue eyes and a terror like none other. Every morning when he woke, with the taste of blood in his mouth, he would think of the cold touch of the wight’s skin on his throat. With every meal, every fight, every moment, he thought of this day: the realm fallen, the people around him dead, and him standing above it all, alive.

Never once had he thought to see the end. Never once had he thought of how to celebrate the moment when the last shards of ice would slit his skin and stain the floor. Even now, as the Night King fell and the first rays of light were already breaking on the horizon, he couldn’t think of a single thing to do.

One moment, the Night King stood above him, bearing down with a ferocity that Jon could not contest. Death was waiting in the wings, ready to take him and pull him back into Ghost’s flesh. Or, mayhaps into the nothingness that lay beyond, now that Ghost was gone.

In the next, he was showered with sharp spears of sleet and snow and ice. It hailed on him, leaving thin slashes everywhere the creature’s frozen flesh touched. All around him came a thousand thuds, as wight after wight after wight crumbled in the snow. The scent of ashes and corpses overtook the air, where before there had only been the sharp smell of winter.

And, there, standing before him with a Lannister sword in her hands, was his little sister. The ruins of the little girl he’d known from Winterfell, when they were children of summer, and their greatest worry was the attention of her mother and the yells of Winterfell’s septa. Now, she was bruised and bloody, and half her hair had been shorn away sometime between the Blackwater and Visenya’s Hill. Her face was still blackened in places, and her throat completely, but her eyes were open and moving. Her chest shuddered, drawing in shallow breaths, though he had never thought her to breathe again.

“Arya!” he shouted. Longclaw slipped from his fingers to the ground, but Jon didn’t care. He was already leaping for his sister.

It was a good thing he did. Her knees betrayed her as soon as he stood. She slumped into his arms, and it was all he could do not to smother her in a hug.

Her skin was cold. Dangerously so. Wet, too. The battle for the dawn might have been done, but hers wasn’t. If she didn’t get warm soon, she could slip away again. He didn’t think he could look at those golden eyes, if he let her leave again. He just couldn’t.
He wrapped his cloak around her shoulders, though it would do little against the cold that was pulsing from her throat. Even now, with the Night King gone, the marks were glacial. He wondered if they would ever warm again.

He did not know how long he stayed there, holding his sister tight against him. He did not know when the tears came to his cheeks, nor when Lord Tully came to his side. All he knew was the fragile shaking of Arya’s shoulders, as his little sister took breath after breath after breath.

A hand touched his shoulder, and another hers. Gentle and cautious, but Jon still flinched away.

“Get a maester,” he said into his little sister’s shoulder. She smelled of sweat and ash, salt and cold, blood and fire. She smelled like they all did. Even him.

He felt Lord Edmure reach for Arya’s face, and he pulled her away before the lord could make contact. Arya made no move against it, and it occurred to him suddenly that she may not have been awake. He cursed, drew her back, and stared at her wide grey eyes. They stared aimlessly, just as they had not a few hours prior. It took everything in him not to cry out at the sight, and only the subtle trembles in her shoulders kept him from breaking down. The occasional blinks helped, but they were few enough and far between.

“A maester!” he hissed.

He did not know when Lord Tully left, but he knew when he returned. It could have been a minute later, or an hour. It didn’t matter. Not while Arya was dying in his arms.

It occurred to him, then, as two pairs of hands came to pull them apart, that the Night King was dead. They were standing in his corpse. It had been so sudden that he almost hadn’t thought of it. The White Walkers, the wights, the threat beyond the Wall – it was all done! His little sister – Arya Stark of Winterfell – had done what he couldn’t. His little sister. The willful little girl. She’d saved him. She’d saved them all.

He’d always been proud of her. Since she was a little girl, still playing with Sansa’s dolls, he’d felt pride in her. Since her first word slipped free of her lips, and it was his name, he’d been proud, even if Lady Catelyn never forgave him for it. Arya spoke the word $Snow$ into the night, over and over, and she would only ever stop crying if he or Father held her close. “It’s the Stark blood,” Father would say, but she had never stopped for Robb, and with Sansa, she’d only cried louder.

He had loved her since she was naught but a babe, since first saw those dark strands of hair, and the grey eyes like his. Eyes that had been dim not two hours before.

He had always, always, been proud of her. But now, that pride was a thousand times stronger. A million. A billion!

He fought back when the men came to separate them, though later, he would apologize for it. In that moment, he couldn’t leave his sister again. He’d done it too many times, and she died for it! She died, and they brought her back just like they did him.

He’d been lost when he came back. She’d saved the world.

There was no maester come to speak to them, nor Edmure Tully. There were only strangers. Ironborn, who must have come from the Blackwater. How long had he been sitting here that the ironmen had reached them?

But Arya was breathing, and that was all that mattered. That was all that had ever mattered. His family breathing, alive.
Where’s Dany? he thought, as his back struck the ground. Someone had shoved him, he knew, but he could hardly see who.

He stillled his frantic swings, as the first ironman set Arya down on the ground. He was muttering to himself, a thousand different things that Jon didn’t have the capability of understanding. The man pressed at her throat, feeling for a pulse that was there. It had to be!

But the man flinched back before he could have hoped to find it. Why?

The second man had his hands on Jon’s shoulders, pressing him down, pushing. His face was close to Jon’s, and he was repeating the same question over and over again. His breath smelled of fish and rot.

“You were here?” he asked. First in common, and then in the tongue of the wildlings. He must have seen Jon’s face, even through the slashes and the blood. Too Northern for a place like this. Jon was made for colder weather.

Colder weather, indeed. Already, the storm clouds were fading, and a few streaks of light were dancing on the horizon. It was a meagre gleam – no stronger than a few dying embers – but it was more than he had seen in many moons. He gave himself a moment, if only to bath in the sight of it, before he remembered Arya and Dany, and steeled himself again.

“Who did it?” the second man demanded. Not ironborn, Jon thought, numbly. He would have cursed more. “Who?”

He didn’t know what Arya would have wanted him to say – and gods, that hurt more than any of cut ever had – so, instead of answering, he said, “Where’s Dany?”

The first man blinked, cocked his head. “The Dragon Queen? No one’s seen her since the dragon fell.”

His heart jolted and tore. Arya had lived, just as he had and just as he hadn’t, but Dany? What if she was hurt, or dead, or needed him?

He didn’t know what to do. He felt frozen again. As cold as the Night King, as cold as the marks on his little sister’s throat.

The second man was still shaking his sister, but, now, at least he looked relieved. He held her close, just as Jon had, and his mouth never seemed to stop moving. “Arry,” the man said, over and over and over. “Arry, Arry, Arry.”

Gendry, Jon thought after he had wiped away the salt from his eyes. Since when had the two grown so close? Why hadn’t he noticed? Wasn’t he supposed to be Arya’s brother? He should have noticed. Why didn’t he notice? How much more could he fail his family, before Ned Stark came to drag him to whatever shallow grave they had left him in?

But the Night King was dead, now. The war was done. He could be her brother again. If only Edmure would return with the damned maester, he could be her brother for all the days to come! They could return to Winterfell, to Sansa, to home!

But Dany wouldn’t go. The thought deflated him, even as the first man held him steady. It hadn’t mattered before. He hadn’t thought he would make it this far. But now? Now, there was a future. Now, he had choices to make. He didn’t want them. He’d gone long enough without any.

How long had it been since the battle? When had this strange man, who smelled of salt and fish,
fled his ship? Where was the maester?

He looked to Arya again and found her safe. If not because of Gendry, then because of the direwolf nestled at her feet. When had the direwolf come? Jon couldn’t say. Everything felt blurry, like his very mind had stuttered to a halt.

Even prone on the ice, the wolf reached Arya’s hips. That was good. If his sister fell, at least her wolf was there to catch her. Jon’s shaking hands would do her no good.

“Where’s the maester?” Jon said, now that the clarity was returning to him.

“Fuck the maester,” spat the ironborn. “Who killed him? Was it you? That little shit?” He jerked his knife at the Dayne boy’s corpse. Dawn was still nestled between his fingers, even as chunks of blood and brain slopped from his head to the floor.

He didn’t know what Arya wanted him to say, so he said nothing. He only jerked away from the ironborn’s hold and batted his knife away. Somehow, he hadn’t noticed it before. He cursed himself. That would be a stupid way to die.

But then, he’d always been stupid. He’d never known a single thing. Not of the Free Folk, or the White Walkers, or the ways of love and duty.

No, that wasn’t right. He’d known one thing all along. Longer than anyone. Than the maesters and the lords and the Walkers themselves. Even a babe in their father’s arms, he had been the first to look at Arya and to see greatness. Even when she’d been a skinny little thing with braids in her hair and a smile best suited for a snark. He hadn’t seen anything so great as this, but he’d seen something, and that was more than anyone else ever had.

He wanted to go to her, but, when he tried, his leg crumpled under him. His palms slammed into the rough icy ground, smearing more blood everywhere he went. For the first time, he felt the thin trickle of it along his leg.

Now that the battle was done – now that they were surrounded by corpses and ice – he could feel all the pains of the battle bearing down on him. The exhaustion from his run, the pain of losing his little sister, the shock of getting her back, and a thousand different hurts he’d picked up along the way. His shoulders were tender, his palms raw, and his leg felt like it had been torn through with a knife. It may well have been. He didn’t know.

His hands fumbled for his helm. He didn’t so much take it off, so much as he ripped it from his skull. It was a hard thing to do. His frozen sweat had seared the steel to his skin.

It didn’t matter. For once, he felt like he could breathe again, and that was worth all the sore skin in the world.

The ironborn sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re Stark’s bastard?”

Jon didn’t bother answering him. He was too busy pulling himself to his feet. He was forced to favor his wounded leg, but thankfully found Longclaw nearby. It was a strange thing, he thought, to use it as a crutch. He didn’t think it was what the Old Bear had intended it for.

But the Old Bear wouldn’t have intended for Arya to be the one, either. He wouldn’t have intended for the North to be lost, or for the Wall to fall at all. He wouldn’t have let the Free Folk south, and he would never have betrayed his vows as Jon had, a thousand times over. In the end, he would have died with the rest of them. In the end, he did.
Jon had, too, and Arya, and all the rest. They were the light that brought the dawn, the swords in
the darkness, the fire that burned against the cold, and the shield that guarded the realms of men
for as long as they could last. They had all of them died for this moment. This chance to live again,
to breathe in air that wasn’t sharp as steel.

Red rays streaked across the sky. For the first time in moons, he could clearly see the clouds
hanging above them. They were black, like the soiled cloak he wore, but they were breaking apart.
Little bits of red shone through the cracks, bathing the world with the light that had abandoned
them.

He did not jump when Bran landed on his shoulder. He didn’t have the strength. The bird
squawked, shaking out his wings as Jon turned to face him. “Safe,” Bran said, as soft as a bird
could be. “Safe, safe.”

This time, a mad laugh broke through Jon’s lips. It was a laugh full of mirth, of relief, of a million
different things he’d thought he would never feel again. But the Night King was dead, and little
Arya Stark had been the one to do it. She used to crawl into my bed whenever Jeyne called her
names, he remembered. And suddenly, there were tears in his eyes.

What would their father think? Her lady mother? What would Maester Lewin think, and Ser
Rodrick, and Robb? Would Hodor have smiled at her, mussed her hair the way Jon used to?
Would Old Nan have weaved a story of her deeds to be shared for a thousand generations, passed
on from wet nurse to wet nurse? Would the septa have her sewing through the night to make up for
the black bruises staining her pale skin, or the dirt and blood that marked her once-pristine clothes?

He didn’t know. They were all dead. If they weren’t, he was sure they wouldn’t know either. He
didn’t. Jon had never known anything at all.

The ironborn abandoned him as Jon made his way towards his little sister. Jon was thankful. When
he finally settled down beside her and the smith, he had never been more grateful not to have the
man’s enormous nose butting into view.

He brushed Arya’s hair back. She didn’t react at all. She was staring off, numb to the world and
numb to him. That shouldn’t have been the surprise it was. Jon had seen hard men fall to the shock
of battle, and Arya was hardly even a maiden.

“He’s gone,” Jon told her. He tried to catch her eyes. He failed. “It’s alright, Arya. You did it.
You’re safe. It’s over.”

Her gaze hardly moved. Her attention was settled on some distant place, a lifetime away. Another
world, perhaps. His sister had brought the dawn, and now all that was left was to bring her back.

He looked to Gendry, and to the man with the cod on his chest. “The maester!” he said, urgently.
“She’s hurt. She needs… she needs-”

A warm cloak, he remembered. Tea, or something stronger. The chance to sleep for four straight
nights. A bath. A friend by her side. Someone to ground her. A sword at her side. The second he
thought that, he reached out and grabbed her fallen blade. Slipped it into her scabbard, because
swords were safety, and she knew that the way he did. If it made him feel safe, surely it would her
too.

Not long after Jon died, his sister had been there to keep him standing. A different sister, but his
sister all the same. Arya would need that. He could do that.
Where in the seven hells was the maester? Where was Dany?

He held her until the maester came. Lord Tully was with him, but Jon didn’t spare the man a second glance. He and Gendry carried her to the Red Keep, while Edmure stayed behind with the ironman. The maester hardly complained, seeming all too eager to study the markings on Arya’s face.

Somehow, the maester’s turret was undisturbed. For all the thousands of wights that had wandered these halls, and for all the blue-eyed corpses he’d seen along the way, none had bothered breaking the lock to this room. Mayhaps they thought it pointless. Mayhaps they didn’t think at all. Jon didn’t know. He didn’t care. Arya Stark was alive, and Sansa, and him, and even Bran. If Dany still lived, he would have his family. He would finally have them back.

He set Arya down on the table in the center of the room. He did not know the maester’s name, nor his specialties. Only that his chest was bare of chains, but he insisted that he was a maester, once chained and once sworn. Jon didn’t know what it meant for a maester to lose his chains, but this was the only one Lord Tully could find, and it was all Jon could do not to fall at his feet and beg.

Arya’s eyes had slipped closed partway through the journey to the turret. Though the maester swore that she would be alright, he had also sworn to the maesters and lost his chain anyway, so his words did not stop Jon’s heart from skipping a beat every time her breathing stuttered.

A thousand bottles of a thousand different substances hung from the walls, and the maester took his time tending to each one. Arya remained on the workbench, while Jon and the smith watched over her. The maester didn’t seem to mind their presence all too much. By the time he reached Arya’s side, his hands were filled with knives and cloths and bottles.

“Safe,” Bran the raven reminded him from where he was still perched on Jon’s shoulder. It was enough to make his tension ease, if ever so slightly.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” the maester told them, tracing a finger over each of the dark lines on his little sister’s throat. A stab of guilt plunged into Jon’s spine. It should have been me. “We will have to see how far the corruption spread before we make any determinations.” A grim smile crossed his lips. “But I’ve healed worse cases than this, Lord Snow.”

Jon didn’t bother asking how he knew his name. He didn’t care.

The maester didn’t waste any time in cutting Arya loose of her armor. Jon moved to avert his gaze, but he needn’t have bothered. Her chest was bound well enough, and the maester was careful in his cuts.

Besides, once the armor was pulled free, Jon had other thoughts than his little sister’s bindings.

The black bruises on her chest, he had expected. They stretched in the same way as the marks on her throat did, and the ones on her face. The Night King must have held her longer than he had Bran, and it showed. That wasn’t the surprise. It was the other scars that caught his eye.

The first thing he noticed was that they were like his. One was jagged and loose, and he knew the marks of a twisted knife when he saw one, each time he looked in glass or some still puddle. But another scar was long and shallow, like the scars on his face. Another, deep and small. A quick stab, and nothing less. He shared those scars, too.

There were others. Ones he carried from moons spent in the yard with Robb and Theon. Little marks where wood had broken skin. Not enough to note, ordinarily, but against skin as pale as
their’s, it was easy to see. Somehow, those marks caught his eyes as much as the black ones did.

“Those could have killed her,” he said. He had to swallow back the bile bleeding in his throat.

At his side, Gendry shifted uncomfortably, but said nothing.

The maester hummed, his lips twisted. “It appears they did. See these markings here?” His skeletal fingers passed over the curved scar. “This was torn open. It appears to have never fully closed.”

His fingers moved to the long scar, then the short. “And here, here...” Then to another dark red mark on her side. “And here, signs of rot. All of these festered.” His hand returned to the curved. “Each of these wounds alone could have killed her. But this... her bowels should have leaked into her blood, and even had they not, she should have lost enough blood by the time for festering.”

Jon felt sick. “When did she-”

“Years ago, it seems. Look at the coloring. Silvers, reds, browns. These are old wounds, my lord.”

“They are,” said Gendry the smith. He looked as red as the blood on Arya’s palm. “She... showed me them. Before the battle.”

Someday, Jon would have time to process what that meant. Someday, he would haunt Gendry night and day for it, until the man feared his very stare. Someday. But that day was not this one. This day, Jon only looked, and shivered.

“She’ll live?” he demanded.

The maester looked grim. “Few things will kill her, I imagine, if the rest hasn’t. I have seen this sort of affliction before, but never quite like this.” He tutted. “I only saw to one wound before. This is three. Four, if we count the throat.”

Four. Three wounds that should have killed her, and one that did.

He stepped out of the maester’s workplace, calm as a crow at the Wall. He left Gendry there with the maester. There was no spare time to say a word. He simply stepped beyond the door, knelt over the stairs, and lost everything he had ever eaten. There was little to be found. A few chunks of deer he’d eaten two sleeps prior. A mound of bile. A fair amount of blood he’d swallowed.

Bran fled somewhere along the way, taking to the air and shrieking, “Tumble town!”

Jon didn’t ask him to stay. He wanted to, but when he opened his mouth, his stomach lurched again, and more bile stained the slippery floors.

When he was done, he spat once, twice. A string of spittle clung to his chin, and he hadn’t the strength to wipe it away.

A few stray shards of light shone through the far-away windows. Red and yellow. The colors of the rising sun. The sun that only rose because his sister had made it so. It was her blood that ran red in the skies. Her warmth that shone over them all.

He walked back into the maester’s chambers. Said nothing at all. Merely accepted the handkerchief that the maester offered him. Didn’t bother wiping his face with it.

“Gendry,” he said, his voice hoarse, “find Dany.”

The man paled. “Arry needs-”
“I’m here,” Jon said. “I’ll watch her. Find Dany.”

Gendry still seemed hesitant, but, before long, he did as he was bid. Jon had never been more thankful. He turned back to the maester once the smith was gone, and watched the strange man work.

If the maester was offended by his scrutiny, he made no mention of it. He simply busied himself caring for her wounds, old and new. He pressed warm cloths against her throat, her cheek, her chest. He spread creams over her wounds, and stitched her bloodied left hand with sutures so well-placed they may as well have been Sansa’s.

All the while, she did not wake. The maester promised he would offer her milk of the poppy when she did, but she showed no signs of stirring. Jon tried not to let it worry him. Her chest was moving, her fingers were trembling. She would live. She had to.

The maester worked for a quarter hour, before he turned his gaze to Jon and said, “I take it this was the ice king’s work?”

“The Night King,” Jon said, grimly. Had it been any other man, he might have lied, but Jon knew well the dangers of lying to maesters. Maester Luwin had taught him as a boy, when a pox had taken him. He’d been four years old, and he’d lied then, passed it off as a mere chill. The lesson he’d learned had stayed with him for life, and even now, it haunted him.

No, he wouldn’t lie to Arya’s maester. Not if the truth could help her.

The man hummed and continued his work. He never said a word about the one prevailing certainty that hung over them both. He never mentioned that the marks on her throat looked like long reaching fingers, or that the ones on her arm were the same. He never mentioned the shards of ice that had left a thousand different cuts in her skin, just as they had him.

Once, the maester tried to tend to his wounds, and Jon rejected the offer as soon as it came. The maester did not ask again. He simply tutted and continued his work. The cloths needed changing. The marks needed reporting. The scars needed noting.

“We must be able to see if the swelling goes down, you see,” the maester explained it, but Jon doubted his reasons were so benign. Even Maester Aemon liked to study the oddities at times, and Arya, with her death and her markings, was certainly an oddity.

He could not say how long he stayed there with his little sister and the maester. But he could say exactly how many tears he shed when Gendry returned to the turret and told him that Dany lived. She was with Jorah, the smith said. He’d heard it from a man on the ground, who’d fought near them at the River Gate. She was alive and well and tending to his wounds. Jon could not say exactly how it felt when his knees struck the ground, and he could not describe the way the relief flooded over him like the tide on the shores of Dragonstone.

The shadow of death had cloaked him for so long that he hardly knew how to act now that the light had come. For the first time in a lifetime, his family was safe. The Night King was not marching for them. The Starks were not being hunted. Sansa was safe in Tumbleton, Arya was safe on the maester’s table, Bran was safe in the skies, and Dany was alive and well and with Ser Jorah Mormont.

When this war had started, Jon had been a boy. Now, at its end, he was a boy again. Kneeling on the ground, crying into the shoulders of a man he hardly knew, and thinking to himself, over and over again, what now?
What was left for them, now that the war was done? What was left for any of them? Stark and Targaryen and Lannister and Tully and Martell and anyone left with a claim to anything? What was left for the peasants, for the lords, for the people whose villages had burned and whose castles had crumbled?

What was left? What now? He’d spent a lifetime on the Wall, preparing for this fight, and never once had he considered an after. He never thought he’d make it that far.

How was a man supposed to live when the legend was done? What did the heroes in the songs do once their stories were finished? When the songs were written and the bards had sung their piece?

He didn’t know. He truly didn’t.

The one thing he did know – the one thing Ygritte had taught him, all those many years ago – was that, as long as he had his family with him, it didn’t matter. He didn’t need to know a thing. He needed them.

And he had them. Arya, Sansa, Dany, Bran. They were alive. They were safe!

Now, they could heal. Now, they could rest.

A long time ago, the wisest man he’d ever known had told him that love was the death of duty. But now, the duty was done, and now he could love.

Chapter End Notes

End: So, here, we see an actual aftermath of the battle. I thought that was a bit important.

Lots happened this chapter, and yet, not as much as it seems. But the first hints of dawn are breaking on the horizon, and the first survivors are starting to gather within the city. In other words, light gathers, and now their watch has ended.

In other, less uplifting news, chapter updates may start to range from biweekly to once a week. Work’s been catching up on me lately, and I’ve started catching up on the chapters in the can. We should have at least another four updates before this change comes in, but be mindful it will probably be coming.

Anyway, next time we’ll have an eye on the ground as the last (widely) known living dragon surveys the fallen city of her ancestors.
Daenerys V

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Dawn

The River Gate

Daenerys Targaryen

The she-wolf finds her, when all the fighting is done. She was not looking for her; that was to be sure. The beast was wandering through the gate, as Dany passed, a pack of no more than a dozen padding at her heels. Her fur was matted with blood and sickness, and patches had been torn away. Her golden eyes passed over Dany, and then over Jorah and the knight and the swine herder, but she paid them no mind. She simply continued on along the shoreline, while Dany and her own walked the other way.

Jorah eyed them warily, but Jorah eyed everyone warily. He need not have. The war was done. For a few glorious hours, they would have peace among their people. She truly believed that.

All around, ironborn ships pulled into shore. Some sailors had already leapt over the railings, and were now swimming back, cheering and japing and celebrating a victory they had not seen. Others sat motionless, even after their ships reached port. She could see them on the docks, bloodless and woundless, but shocked all the same. Their eyes stared sightlessly at the bodies piled. Some of the wounds reached their waists.

Others had already begun to clean the fields. There were some men wandering, missing arms and tending to bloody wounds, but still dragging corpses behind them. Others set fire to stacks of men, still checking eyes habitually and clinging to their swords.

There were others of more questionable intent, of course. Men who were stripping the armor from the corpses; men who were stealing swords and coin and cloaks; men who were killing old rivals, though the fighting had ended.

The knight steered her past those men. She did not know his name, nor his sigil, nor why he was bothering to help her. She did not particularly care. She was too exhausted, and Jorah too injured, to argue. They were lucky to be alive at all.

Snow melted under her feet as the first red rays of light sprawled across the sky. She tried not to bask too much in the sight. There was still much to be done before any of them could celebrate the return of the morning. Too many bodies to be burned, too many questions to be asked. There was always more to do.

It was there, as she passed through the River Gate – or the Mud Gate, as the swine herder called it – that she realized that none of them knew a thing.

There were men arguing amongst themselves all through the streets. One man, drenched in blood both black and red, proclaimed himself their savior. Then, another. Then, another and another and another.
She stumbled through streets burned black. The buildings were all gone. Where once there had been streets lined with homes and workshops, now there only sat ashes and corpses. The stones were stained with the blood of more wights than she could count.

She wondered if she would ever be able to sleep again. The exhaustion weighing over her breathed a quiet, “Yes”.

Her meagre procession picked up more men as they moved along. Their leathers were stained with ashes, and she couldn’t see a single sigil in the midst of it all. That didn’t matter. For the first time in ages, the Houses meant nothing. They were one people. One people who had survived the end of days.

She had never felt so much a queen as she did when she stepped through the gates that shielded the Red Keep, nor had she ever felt so uncomfortable. The castles her ancestors had built for her sat untouched. The walls were blackened by the smoke, but there was no damage to any of it. It stood as it had stood for hundreds of years.

She wondered why it should survive when so little else had.

Some of the men left the group, off to make their way for the kitchens or the barracks. Others simply walked into the gardens and sat among the trees, basking in the light of the rising sun.

She did not know where she was going. She had not told Jon where to meet her. Perhaps, she would simply wander until she found him again.

No, Jorah needed aid. There was blood dripping through his plate, and she knew the risk of festering wounds. She could not let that be.

She made her way to the maester’s turret, and dozens of soldiers followed.

Already, ravens were flying out from the windows of the tower, but Dany could not see who had loosed them. She continued to climb, up flight after flight, until she was left wondering why her ancestors had thought it wise to place a healer’s chambers above the stairs.

But, eventually, when her legs were sore and her arms tired from holding Jorah’s weight, she found her way to the office of the maester. The ground was slick with sickness. It was of no surprise to her. She had never seen a maester before, but she had always imagined their chambers to be as filthy as an Essosi maegi’s. She imagined bones hanging on the walls, blood staining the floors, and old men wrapped in chains clawing for her with long bony fingers.

But, as her men opened the door for her, and she half-dragged Jorah into the room, she saw nothing of the sort.

The walls were bare and clean. The ground was simple stone, not lined with anything more than a few droplets of blood and muddy melted snow. The maester, hovering over a fresh corpse, was no monster from the stories. His face was lined, to be sure, but his hands were not the hands of a beast. Instead, they held a few Stark-white cloths, each stained with a few spots of blood. He did not even wear chains about his throat.

She had already set Jorah on the floor by the time she noticed the man in the corner. He was drenched with blood, mud, and something worse, and his eyes shone grey in the light of the room. The man stared at her, as if she held all the secrets in the world, but he didn’t care for a single one so long as he had her.

By the time she noticed him, his lips were already on hers. He tasted of ash and sweat and blood,
but mostly, he tasted of Jon, so she forgave it all.

His arms wrapped around her, and hers around him. He held her with the same desperation she felt. Half-formed words escaped his lips, but Dany could not hear a single one. Her heart beat too erratically, too loud, too sharp. She held him close and pretended she had not nearly died a thousand times over, pretended her son was not gone, pretended she hadn’t shoved Jorah’s blade through his eye.

It had been a long time since Dany had truly felt safe. In Jon Snow’s arms, she did.

When they finally broke apart, her eyes were dry, and his too. There was nothing left to cry. Everything had fled them in the moment they had seen each other again. But now, she took note of everything around.

The maester had come to Jorah’s side, and was already leading him to a chair in the corner. There was a vial of some strange potion in the palm of his hand, but Jorah did not protest it, so Dany did not worry. She trusted him. He had long since earned her faith.

She turned her eyes back to Jon. His hands were shaking, she noticed, and he looked hungrier than she had ever seen him.

“Was it you?” she demanded.

He did not have to ask. He merely hung his head. His eyes went to the corpse on the table, and Dany’s followed them. The sight she saw was a sad one.

Dany did not hold much love in her heart for the young assassin, but the love she had for Jon made her mourn the girl. She was Jon’s sister, Jon’s favorite. She was the one he talked about, when they had first grown close on the ship to Dragonstone. He had told her stories of a little girl who worshipped Aegon’s sisters, who had loved the songs of dragons and swords and knights. That little girl had disappeared somewhere along the way, but Jon loved her all the same.

Even if it meant mourning an assassin, Dany could do that for him.

But Jon did not appeared to be mourning. He seemed worried, yes, but not mourning. And, suddenly, Dany could see the subtle shifts in the woman’s chest. She could see the touch of color to her cheeks, cloaked beneath a sea of black markings. She set a hand on the girl’s own and felt a tiny sliver of warmth. But, when her hand brushed over the black, it burned colder than ice.

The girl had lived. So why…

The realization struck her more fiercely than any fist. “It was her?”

Jon nodded. His eyes did not leave her, but his hand had. It settled on blackened arm of the Stark girl, the assassin, the one who’d won the war.

She couldn’t believe it; nor could Jorah, who sat staring in shock even as the maester stitched his wounds shut and spilled wine wherever he found blood.

Even now, having walked more than an hour through streets black with blood and piled with corpses, she could not believe the war was won. She could not believe the Walkers were gone, her people safe, the castle of her ancestors still standing.

And it was all because of this girl.
A girl she’d found in a burned castle. A girl she’d hated. A girl who was the only reason any living man would continue to breathe for at least another day.

The girl lay on the table, her breaths coming in short rasps that were quieter than any Dany had ever known. It seemed that half of her was painted black, and the other half red with cuts and blood. Her hair had been shorn to the shoulders since she had seen her last. Arya Stark looked more corpse than girl. Dany had never seen such a sight before, and she hoped never to again.

She touched the frozen skin again. The cold seemed to catch onto her own, and she pulled back, flinching. Jon took the hand in his own, but his other settled on his sister’s blackened face. He did not flinch away from the cold, but Jon never had. He was of the North in a way she would never be. She envied him for it, somehow. A man who could survive fire and ice, instead of just half.

“What is it?” Dany asked, staring after the marks, the scars.

Jon’s face was grim. “The same as Bran’s.”

“Your brother’s were…” She searched for the word for a long while. “Smaller.”

“Bran said he was held for less than a second.” His fingers trailed off of Arya’s arm and curled into fists at his side. “Think he held her longer.”

_How do you know?_ Dany wanted to ask, but one look at him had her reconsidering. His eyes were drawn tight, his breath coming as short as his sister’s. Every muscle in his body seemed wracked with tension. Guilt. She could not bear to make that worse.

“Will she be alright?”

Jon nodded. Even his nod was stilted. “She will.” And then, to himself. “She will.” Then, finally, he seemed to notice Dany’s wounds. A few cuts and many bruises – nothing compared to his own, but enough to sting. His gaze softened. “Are you alright?”

It was Dany’s turn to nod. Yet, when she spoke, she did not sound as sure as she thought. “Drogon…”

He did not give her a chance to finish. He wrapped his arms around her again, and she sank into them. She never felt quite so safe as she did with him that day, in that moment, and, for the rest of her life, she did not think she would ever truly know why.

They held each other like that until the sun had fully risen in a sky that had been devoid of light for so long, she had almost forgotten it was blue. While the maester continued to work on Jorah and Arya at once, Jon led her over to the window. She sat with him, eager to stay by his side and Jorah’s. She did not have the strength to leave them again.

The window was a small thing, hardly more than a miniscule frame designed to allow just enough light to get by. But, through it, she could see the smoke rising from every inch of the city. She could see walls crumbled, an ocean aflame, and ships burning in the Blackwater. If she looked far enough, she could see a pack of wolves swimming across the harbor, off to the south. She could see peasants, sailors, knights, and lords; all of them were standing in the courtyard and basking in the sunshine.

There were bodies too. Bodies as far as the eye could see. The bodies of grown men, young women, children. The bodies of lords and peasants alike. They wore dothraki quills, unsullied helms, Northern armor, the cloaks of the Free Folk, the plate of the Vale, the torn and heavy clothing of the smallfolk of winter. None of them had escaped the Long Night.
Any one of them could have been someone she knew. Someone she loved. They could have been Grey Worm, Missandei, Irri, Jhiqui, her bloodriders, the unsullied, or anyone else she had lost along the way. In a few hours’ time, they would have been her and Jorah and Jon.

Arya Stark had saved them all. She had been the ones to break their chains. All while Dany had hidden and fallen.

Dany could not say how long she sat there, watching. All she knew was that every quarter hour, the maester would push the Stark girl just a few inches closer to the dim fire. After she’d sat through eight inches, the maester threw a thick blanket over her shoulders. So far as Dany could tell, it did nothing to help the girl. Her skin was still as pale as Viserion’s scales.

She choked, for a second, but recovered before Jon noticed. *Rhaegal still lives*, she reminded herself. It was the only reason she was still breathing. If he did not, she might have collapsed on that snowy shoreline and died with all the rest.

In time, Jorah healed. And, while he offered to stay with her, the maester instructed him to rest. Dany sent him off – else he might have stayed a thousand years for her – and continued to sit. It felt like all she could do. The city had fallen, the North and the Vale were gone, and the Riverlands was decimated, but the war was over. The dawn had come. Rebuilding could come on the morrow. For now, she would bask in the sunlight. For now, she would bask in victory.

“Tumbleton,” she said, quietly, after the maester had pushed Arya another four inches. She was beginning to shiver, and, while Jon grew concerned, the maester assured them it was a fortunate thing. Had she not started, he said, she would not have survived the night.

“Bran already went,” Jon told her. “And if he hadn’t, I’m sure someone would have gotten them. Brought them back.” His fingers clenched in his lap, and his eyes squeezed just as tight. For the first time, she noticed the little slab of metal poking out from his fist. It cut into his skin, but he hardly seemed to care.

They were silent, for a long while more. The maester pushed Arya twice in the time it took for them to speak again.

When it came, Jon did not look at her. He was staring at his sister, at the girl who had saved the world. Just a bit too late.

“I gave her this sword,” he said, quietly. He spun the little slab between his fingers. She never would have known it was meant to be a sword. “She was a little girl. Going off to King’s landing with our father and Sansa. She was supposed to be safe. Learn about court, grow up a bit. But I was leaving for the Watch, and I wanted her to have a good memory of me. Something to keep by her. She loved watching me fight, so I thought it’d be a good gift. Something to make her happy. And she was. When I gave it to her. I’d only seen her happier when Robb gave her Nymeria. That was the last time I saw her, before...” His eyes slipped shut. “I told her to leave it. *I told her!*” For a moment, every muscle tensed. His shoulders trembled, his jaw shook, and, for just a second, Dany thought that he might cry. But, in time, he recovered. He hung his head and stared at the bloody chair where Jorah had been stitched and healed. “I let her come...”

Dany put a hand on his shoulder. “Arya Stark saved us all.”

“My little sister...” He sucked in a breath. “Look at her, Dany.”

She did. It was not a pretty sight. The girl was a mess of scars both red and black. She was trembling even more than Jon was, and her breathing was shallow, forced. She still had yet to
wake, and, according to the maester, it would be a long time still.

_Live_, she thought. _For him, at the least._

Jon sighed. “She was never supposed to be like me.” His hand went to his chest, where a curved scar sat, and—_oh._

She said nothing of it, but she understood without words. The curves on the woman’s stomach was just as bright as Jon’s. The marks on her throat looked worse.

“We’ve all lost things,” Dany said, threading her fingers through his. Somehow, his skin was as pale as her own. “But she has you.”

“Aye,” he said, softly. “So do you.”

His hand pulled her close, and then they were embracing again. Salt welled in Dany’s eyes. She could not remember the last time she cried. She could not remember if she ever had.

Was this what her father envisioned for her? Fire and blood tempered by ice and Snow? Viserys had wanted a weak and feeble servant for a sister. Drogo had wanted a lover as fierce as she was beautiful. Daario had wanted influence, attention, and a nice lay when the night was dark. Hizdahr had wanted a beauty on his shoulder and the power she provided him.

Jon’s arms snaked around her back. His grip was strong and gentle at once. Strong enough to hold her together, but gentle enough that she did not shatter.

Drogon was gone. Viserion was gone. Rhaegal was far and away. But Jon was here.

She was tired of losing. She was tired of warring. She was tired of all of it. All she had ever wanted was a house with a red door.

But the house was gone. Perhaps it had never existed at all. Perhaps it was merely the fever dream of a girl so young, she could hardly even count to twenty. It hardly mattered now. The house was gone, and the city of her forefathers was burned. She had dreamed of this day for so long, and now that her final victory was an iron chair away, she only wished for this moment to last a thousand years longer.

She sank into his arms and dreamed on her feet, of ice and snow and brighter shores. Tears streamed down her face, as his fingers clenched tight against the small of her back. Not once did she dream of dragons. Not once.

Chapter End Notes

Captain Friendzone, watching Dany kiss Jon after being severely wounded: You know, I think the gods just don’t like me.

Short one, this time, but gets us into Dany’s head before the political plots begin. Oh yeah, and one other plot I forgot…

Anyway, next time, we’re jumping in on the Tumbleton crew as they stumble in on the wreck of a city, and as Sansa Stark stumbles upon her wreck of a sister.
They passed through the River Gate at sundown. Bran was still sat on Sansa’s horse, screeching endlessly “Red, red, red.”

It was no coincidence that Sansa understood him. It wasn’t very hard to decipher, when the Red Keep was the only structure left standing in the whole of King’s Landing.

For once, Tyrion was silent by her side, as he sat upon his horse and stared off at the city they had both called theirs for years. The colorful streets were stained grey with ash and smoke. The once-endless fields of hobbles were reduced to piles of rubble. Streets paved with cobblestone were cracked and splintered. The snow, at least, had gone away in most places, but now there only remained mud and corpses.

And the bodies… There were so many bodies. Too many to count. Corpses both wight and man alike. Sansa’s horse struggled to make her way past them, and Tyrion’s nearly broke her leg after stumbling over a fallen wight.

With every inch, Sansa felt sicker. With every corpse, she grew more worried. What if Jon was among the piles? What if Arya was hidden beneath that disemboweled soldier, or that headless wight? What if she would ride past a body, and Theon’s face would stare back at her? Or little Rickon? What if Robb was somewhere in this battlefield, his body standing tall and Grey Wind’s head perched on his shoulders? What about her lady mother? Brienne? Podrick? Bran? Would his corpse have crawled?

She shut her eyes and let the horse guide them. Her lips moved beyond her control. “Mother, Father, Smith, Maiden, Crone, Warrior, old gods beyond counting,” she whispered. “Let them be safe. Please.”

Tyrion, for once, was not watching her. His eyes were on the bodies, same as hers. She wondered if he was wondering after his family, too. She wondered how many he had lost this day. She wondered how many she had.

There were others riding with them. Servants, squires, and ladies who had wanted to greet their husbands, brothers, fathers as soon as they saw the sun rising over the Narrow Sea. Bran’s arrival had spurned Sansa forward, and she led them all the way back to King’s Landing. A day of riding had passed them by, and Sansa had never hated riding more.

The smell of sickness filled the air. Death and pestilence had claimed this city, and, soon, famine would follow. The stores would have all been destroyed in the fires. The farmers to the North were all dead. The long winter had still yet to be finished, if the chill in the air could speak to it. So many of these men, who had hardly survived the battle, would be dead by winter’s end.
This is what Father always warned us for, she thought. Winter is truly here, and we were not ready.

There was a crowd of survivors huddled by the ruins of the Sept of Baelor. Among them, men sat weeping, cheering, and vomiting where once they had knelt and prayed. Where once they had cheered as her father was dragged before them, and hailed when Joffrey called for his head.

They trotted by the group, a thousand thick. She heard them talking amongst themselves, whispering of wolves wailing in the water, a fallen dragon, and an ice king shattered. She had not seen any of it, but enough men agreed on all three that Sansa felt her fears lessen by the second. If a dragon had fallen, Daenerys would be less of a danger come peacetimes. If the Night King was gone – and it truly looked like he was – they could be safe. If both were true, she and Jon could go back home and rebuild and be safe. Safe for the first time since Robert had come to Winterfell.

But the wolves in the water struck her with a different fear, and it grew worse by the moment.

“Saw ‘em all bunched there,” one said, a man devoid of the blood and muck that covered the rest of them. On his chest, the cluster of grapes on azure that marked the Redwynes. “I tell you, it was her. Same one from the fire before the fightin’. Bigger than any wolf I’d ever seen. And the damned howl. Loud enough to burst ears, it was.” And it seemed he spoke it true, for his blood leaked from ear to chin.

*Nymeria,* Sansa thought, as she pulled her mount to a stop. Tyrion, beside her, pulled back on his reins.

“I heard the wolf’s dead,” another said. “All the magics went with the Walkers.”

“The wolf’s not magic, you idiot. It’s from the North. Beyond the damned Wall. Just a wolf bigger,” said another.

“I heard it’s a warg.”

“Warg? Bleedin’ hells, we’ve got the Walkers and the dragons, don’t need any wargs. What’s next, eh? Snarks and grumkins?”

“I saw Arya Stark,” the Redwyne said. “Before the battle. The Targaryen called her it an’ everythin’.”

Sansa’s heart sank. She needed news of now, not fading reports from the days before death can come upon their gates. She needed to know why Nymeria was howling. She needed to.

“Wight?”

The Redwyne shook his head. “Livin’. Breathin’, and talkin’, and everythin’.” And, just as Sansa was turning away, he said, “Saw her during, too. In the Blackwater. With the wolves and all.”

“Arya Stark?” one said. “A fuckin’ Stark was in the Blackwater? You’re shitting on me, you are.”

“I saw it in the air,” said another. “Flung right from the gardens in the Keep. Shot like a bolt, it did. I was on my ship and it landed right by me. Could’ve torn a hole in the hull, if the captain had us a bit off course.”

*What?* Sansa was slipping off of her horse before she even knew she was moving. Her feet crunched in the snow, and blood drenched her riding clothes, but that hardly mattered.
As soon as she had wrestled control of her panic, Sansa approached with haste. She stopped no less than a meter away from the man and said, “You saw what?”

The soldier only grinned, sly and tired and hungry. “The women back in the city, eh? You missed the fun. We can show you a bit of fun, if you’ll be wanting it.”

“Idiot,” the Redwyne man hissed, as he fell to a knee. “That’s the sister. The Stark sister.”

The man flushed and fell to the ground. “My lady, I-”

“I don’t care,” Sansa said. “What do you know of my sister?”

The man’s face filled with horror. “It’s real, then?” Then, they told her.

Sansa’s heart had not sunk so deeply since she had seen Bran, since she had heard of Rickon’s capture and, before that, since she had heard tale of a bloody wedding.

Mayhaps the Starks weren’t meant to survive after all. Mayhaps none of them were.

#

They passed through the gates to the Red Keep, though the gate itself was missing. The doors had been forced open, each metal slab prone and bent against the muddy ground. Several of the squires were forced to dismount to clear the way of corpses. They came back painted red and black. More than one lost their stomachs in the piles.

They moved into the Red Keep, and, as they stepped in, Sansa was met with the few remaining members of Nymeria’s pack. They were all lying prone on the ground, each whining and licking their wounds. There were 13 in all now, at Sansa’s count, and the direwolf stood at the head of them. None of the wolves looked well – some missing ears, limbs, and bearing bloody patches of missing fur – and Nymeria was no exception. The day before, the beast had been all muscle and fur, but now much of the fur was lost. The muscle remained, but was drenched in blood and icicles. How the wolf had not fallen, Sansa would never be able to say.

And, there, clinging to the wolf’s few remaining hairs, was Gendry the smith. The boy who had followed them from Winterfell to the Eyrie to Duskendale and now this. There were tracks of ice running down his face, lined like frozen tears.

Sansa did not feel herself dismounting again until her feet struck the slippery stones. Tyrion followed suit, though she only knew it from the sound of his stumbling. He never could sit a horse well.

She had not been very close with Gendry, before. Oh, he had saved her in Winterfell, it was true, but they had rarely spoken after. She knew him as well as she knew Lord Harlan, or Ser Jorah, or any of them. Yet, as her feet scrambled on snow and mud, she found her way to his side, and, in the midst of this destruction, she pulled him close.

She would never truly be able to say why she did it. Perhaps, because she was happy to see a recognizable face. Perhaps, because, if he was alive, maybe her siblings were too. Perhaps, because he and Arya seemed close, and that was all that mattered. Or, perhaps, because it was just nice to see someone survive, when most of the rest were corpses.

He sucked in a breath as she pulled him in, but did not protest her hold. Nor, though, did he return the embrace. When Sansa pulled back, he was white as a cloud, and growing whiter still.
“Your sister,” he started. “She’s… Jon… Maester. He wanted- he wanted the wolf. Nymeria. And I
went, and she was here, and- your sister. Arya.” He flinched, suddenly frightened. “Arya! Not Arry,
Arya.”

She said nothing to him. There weren’t words, and, even if there were, she didn’t want to hear
them. Instead, Sansa watched him for no more than a second, before she spun in her saddle and
looked to Tyrion. “I-” she started.

But Tyrion waved her away. “Go. I can handle things here. It seems it has become my specialty,
cleaning up after wars.”

She nodded her thanks, left the horses, and made her way to the maester. That tower, at least, had
not gone.

Some had already abandoned Sansa’s loose escort, and the rest did not follow. She heard the happy
cheers of some in her party, as they reunited with those they must have thought dead. Others had
remained behind at the River Gate, too afraid to enter this bloody keep. For a moment, she hated
them for their cowardice. For a moment, she hated that she’d brought them at all.

But few living women had seen the horrors Sansa had. Had she still been a girl of three-and-ten,
she would have stayed behind as well. She could not expect them to push forward as she did. It was
not fair to judge them so harshly, when she would have failed as well.

Only Gendry, Nymeria, and Bran followed her. The wolf pack stayed where they were, content to
lick their wounds and heal. Sansa didn’t mind. She doubted there was room for them all.

Tyrion remained where he stood, staring up at the Keep as if it held every answer in the world.
Sansa didn’t have time to question him. Something was wrong, and she needed to know what.
Now.

Bran, who had long since settled on her shoulder, shook as they passed beneath the Tower of the
Hand. His head tilted completely back, until his beak was point up at the roof to the room with the
throne, and then down to the gardens. He said nothing, but he did not need to. She knew.

Nymeria, too, had her eyes on the gardens. She made not a sound as they passed by them, but
Sansa could steal feel the fear whenever she pressed a hand against the wolf’s skin. Trembles. She
had never known a wolf to tremble.

Then, all at once, the fear was gone, and the wolf pushed forward. Not cruel, but not content.
Sometimes, Sansa thought that the direwolves were too much like their masters. That, she
supposed, was why they were all dead. All but Nymeria.

By the time she reached the maester’s rooms, the sun had settled over the Sunset Sea. A large part
of Sansa ached to see it go. It had been so long since she felt its warmth on her skin. The flames of
a fire did not burn the same.

But all thoughts of heat fled with the sun as the maester rose to bid her entrance. He was not alone.
Not at all.

The Dragon Queen met her by the door. And, though Sansa had scarcely ever seen the woman
without a fine dress shaping her body, or her hair done just right with a thousand braids, she looked
worse than even Sansa must have when she first escaped Winterfell. Her hair was burned and
trussed a thousand ways, frizzled and aimless. Her clothes were ripped and torn and scorched. The
sleeves were completely gone, and so too were the flimsy remains of her cloak. Her face was
covered in blood and muck and melted snow. Even her eyes were rimmed red and blackened.

The Dragon Queen stared at her, stupidly, her shock clear as day. “Lady Stark?”

There was a flurry of movement, and then Sansa was forced back. Bran flew away, frantic as a bird could be. His wings clipped her ear twice, as he carried himself high. Two arms wrapped around her, pushing her close to the wall, and all she could smell was sweat and ash.

“Sansa,” Jon breathed. There was a sort of reverence to it, like nothing Sansa had ever known. When he pulled back, he looked to the bird, his eyes filled with awe. “Bran. All of us…”

And, then, he looked back, and Sansa’s eyes followed. And Sansa’s heart stopped.

At first, she thought her sister was dead. Between her pallor and the fresh black burns stretching from her throat to just below her eyes, it would not have been too difficult a mistake to make. Her throat was wrapped, and her left hand, too, but Sansa could still see the marks of blood and black burns, even through the thin fabric. Five fingers, grasping at her throat. They were not bruises, but similar enough that Sansa had to suck in a breath.

Ramsay, she thought, madly, but she dismissed her panic quickly. Ramsay was dead. Dead, dead, dead. She was the one to kill him. He was gone. Twice now. Gone.

Her sister was sat up against a wall, close to the dim fire pit, but not close enough to stop the horrible shaking. Her legs were pushed up to her chest, her head settling on her knees. Her eyes were as red as the Dragon Queen’s, but, when she looked to Sansa, there was nothing there at all but cold stark relief.

Sansa looked to Jon. “What-”

“It was Arya,” Jon said, numbly. “Arya killed him.”

The Dragon Queen must have known already, for she had no reaction, and the maester too. Even Bran merely settled for glancing at their sister, not voicing a single complaint or hint of surprise. But, then, Bran had not anything of the sort since he had returned from the trees beyond the Wall. He’d died there, she knew. They’d all died before they met again.

Only Gendry and Sansa reacted at all. She heard his hiss, felt him step forward, but gave him the chance to do no more. Because Sansa was already moving, past the Dragon Queen and Jon and the maester. She found herself kneeling by her sister’s side. She tried to throw her arms around her shoulders, but even through her gloves, Arya’s skin burned cold, and she had to smother a hiss.

Arya was stiff in her hold, as rigid as she had been when they met again on the shores of Dragonstone. Still, it made no matter. Her sister was there and alive. Wounded, clearly, but alive. The men were wrong. She hadn’t swum. She was safe.

When Sansa pulled back, she ran her hands over the freezing burns on her sister’s face – though Arya pulled away as soon as they touched – and her fingers ran through tangled muddy hair and the blood crusted to her forehead.

“You’re alive,” Sansa breathed. “You did it. You did it!”

Her sister looked up at her. Her eyes watched her, and flecks of blue danced where the grey met the red. Arya said nothing, did not even bother opening her mouth. She simply stared and stared and stared.
Gendry the smith fell to his knees at their side. There was horror wrought in every inch of his face. “You’re awake,” he said, awed. “I thought—gods, Arry. I saw!”

Her little sister looked to him then. Still, she said nothing. Sansa wondered if she could have formed words even if she wanted to.

Sansa had borne bruises like those before—not so terrible, to be true, but awful still—and she had not been able to speak for days after. Weeks, at times.

She put a hand on Arya’s shoulder, and tried not to flinch when the cold lashed at her palm. “Are you alright?” she asked.

Arya stared at her. She went to chew on her lip, as she often had as a girl, but merely grimaced and pulled back as soon as her teeth touched the blackened skin.

“It hurts?” Sansa asked, instead, soft as could be. Soft as her mother whenever one of them fell ill. Arya had only been so sickly once as a child, and even then, she had never looked this haggard.

The girl stared, saying nothing. Finally, what might have been a lifetime later, she nodded. It was hardly more than a shiver of a nod, but it made her wince all the same.

“Milk of the poppy,” Sansa said, quickly. There were tears in her eyes, and it hurt to blink them away. Could not a single Stark live in peace? Was this their curse? To suffer to the end of days and beyond? “Maester—”

“We’ve tried,” Jon said, weary. “She wouldn’t have it.”

How Arya had even protested, Sansa could hardly say. She was wrapped in more bandages than Sansa had seen on any one man, since Tyrion’s face after the Blackwater.

“Arya,” Sansa said, reproving.

Her sister only stared. Those sad grey eyes blinked slowly. So slowly that, once, after they had shut, Sansa thought they might never open again. As they closed, Nymeria moved forward, through the door and up to her charge. She stayed far from the flames, but still sat beside Arya, her fur pressed against the frozen skin.

Arya’s hand shifted, each movement jerking like a mad man’s fist, and settled between her wolf’s ears.

“I would not recommend this, my lady,” the maester warned. “Your heart has been under great strain already, and I fear that if you warm too quickly, it may stop. The wolf is too-”

Arya’s fingers only dug deeper into Nymeria’s fur, as the wolf let loose a growl that might have driven grown women to tears. But Sansa did not cry, nor did the Dragon Queen. They were made of tougher steel.

The bandaged hand rose to her throat, to the thin wrappings that covered the burns. She mouthed something—Sansa had never been very skilled at reading lips—but it was enough to make Gendry frown.

“Ale?” he said, brows furrowed and mouth hanging.

Sansa might have laughed. Even Jon, who looked more like a beaten puppy than a war hero, cracked the slightest hint of a smile. Trust Arya to think of ale in a moment like this.
For a moment, relief flooded her, and all she could think was maybe this will be okay. Maybe we all will.

But the maester was shaking his head. “Ale will only make the burning worse, my lady.” He turned to Gendry. “Water. Cold.”

As Gendry leapt to his feet and fled to find her water, the maester made his way to Arya’s side. His long bony fingers prodded at her wounds, digging into cuts and burns and bruises. To Arya’s credit, she hardly reacted at all. A few winces here and there, but never a complaint. Sansa wondered if she could even voice one if she wanted to.

Gods, while Sansa had been singing to a crowd of crying ladies, her siblings had been fighting for their lives. Her sister had been burned, beaten, and bruised, and Sansa had done nothing with the valyrian knife she’d given her. She shouldn’t have given it, Sansa thought. It could have stopped her from looking like- like this!

She looked to the maester, then, as the guilt filled her. “Will it heal? The-” She swallowed. “-the scarring.”

“Perhaps,” the maester answered. “As I understand it, these-” He poked at her throat with his fingers. This time, Arya pulled back. “-were caused by one of those White Walkers. A direct touch. Pity it could not have been saved, the beast. It would have been an inserting study, I’m sure.” Arya flinched back again, as the maester drew forward. “But, without a test subject, there can be no way to say. I have never dealt with wounds of this nature before. It could heal within the day, or it could heal as regular burns do, or not at all.”

The maester went to touch one of the marks on Arya’s face, but Nymeria lurched to her feet before his hand could make contact. The wolf’s growl sent him stumbling back, and the teeth must have helped it along.

It was not only the wolf that reacted. Arya’s bandaged hand shot to her hip. When she touched nothing more than touch the leather, she sucked in a sharp breath and hissed a strained and wordless curse.

“Arya!” Jon and Sansa said at once, while Jon pulled the maester back, and Sansa eased Arya’s arm back to her side.

When her sister fell back, wincing, she no longer looked like Arya Stark, wanter of ale and slayer of Walkers. Rather, she looked like a wight. The last of the wights. She could even see a tiny spot of blue hiding in the grey of those eyes, but only if she searched for it.

Sansa settled back on her knees again and inched forward. She did not know if the maester had gone, or the Dragon Queen, or if Gendry had come back. She did not know if the people needed her, or the women from Tumbleton, or Tyrion. None of that mattered. This was her sister. Her only sister. She had left her behind once, twice, but not again. Not now.

In truth, Sansa had been a Tully at heart since she was born. Oh, the North was in her blood, but the words of the Starks had never suited her as well as the words of the Tullys did now. Family, Duty, Honor. Her duties could come after. Her honor could come even later. For now, her family was hurt. This was her place. Just here.

“He only wants to help,” Sansa said.

Arya’s gaze met her own. Her sad grey eyes were glossy, and still stained by the blue, yet,
somehow, she did not waver. She mouthed something again. Some phrase that Sansa still could not decipher.

They might have argued longer, if not for the fervent knock on the door. It came so suddenly, yet they all reacted just as quickly. Sansa rose to her feet, wiping her tears on her sleeve, and Jon’s hand fell to his valyrian sword. Even the Dragon Queen, freshly devoid of her dragon, surged forward for the sword on Arya’s belt. It was only the direwolf’s growls that kept her away.

They needn’t have bothered. It was no warrior standing in the doorway. Instead, it was a boy. A boy no older than Rickon, dressed in bloody rags and covered in mud.

“The Blackwater,” he stuttered. “M’lady, m’lord, your grace… The- the- the-”

Nymeria’s growl came louder, but Sansa could only hear the blood rushing to her head. Because, as she approached the window, all she could see on the horizon, past the Redwyne fleet and the ironborn and the Farmans, were ships. Ships she had not seen from the River Gate. Ships that had not been there when she left. Ships unmarred by war and suffering and ice. Ships still far away, but coming ever closer with every second she watched.

And at the helm of them all, cloaked by the darkness of the night, but lit by a burning scorpion, a black and gold banner and a crow’s eye.

Chapter End Notes

End: It sucks to be a Stark. But it also sucks to be in the army of the living. The War for the Dawn may be over, but the Battle of King’s Landing still has a few more loose knots to tie before it’s done. Ain’t no prophecies to save you this time, living folk.

Bit of bad news before the anyway, by the way. No update’ll be coming for another week or so. I’m not going to have access to my laptop this weekend, meaning no editing/writing can be done. Sorry about that.

Anyway, onto good old Tyrion Lannister. Haven’t seen him in a long while, so it’ll be fun to check out his voice again.
Chapter Forty-One: Blood in the Water

The Red Keep

Tyrion Lannister

The throne room smelled as foul as Winterfell had when Lady Sansa had pulled him through the halls of her castle in a desperate attempt to find Jon Snow amidst the rubble. Sweat, piss, shit, and vomit clung to every man, and one in four smelled of festering wounds. Left alone, they might have kept away from civilization, eager to wash themselves and rest. But there was little time to themselves in war, and it seemed less was afforded to them by the minute.

Not a day had passed since the raven Sansa called Bran had flown to them in Tumbleton and shrieked for them to return to King’s Landing. He had not been all too unpleasant company on the return, though Tyrion might have preferred the Bran Stark with a mouth to the one with a beak.

Daenerys stood before them all, her face pale but strong, even in the face of utter devastation. Jon Snow stood by her side, looking far less composed than his queen. He was bruised and bloody and, beyond that, ruined. Tyrion had seen many broken men in his life, and Jon was near enough that he could hardly tell the difference. Even as he stood before this makeshift war council, his gaze was a thousand leagues away.

He was not the only one. There were several surviving lords who seemed far more amused by their shoes than by the strategies. Lord Reed was too busy staring at Snow to pay attention to the deliberations, and Lord Tully seemed just as infatuated. Every few moments, the Lord Paramount of the Riverlands would pick frantically at his clothes, all the while spewing strange spiels of Lyanna Stark reborn in smoke and blood. Even Lord Ryndon of House Martell was distracted. He had suffered a sword to his side, and the maester had offered him just enough milk of the poppy to keep him sated. Prince Martell may have been in the room with them, but his mind was as far away as Snow’s.

It was the lords of the sea who served better. Lords Blacktyde, Farwynd, Farman, and Lady Greyjoy had hardly a spot of dirt on their persons. The only blood staining their clothes came from the stray touches they gave the fighters, or from a few lost droplets that trickled from the walls. They spoke most passionately of the subject, and Lady Yara led the campaign.

“She lost four ships,” she hissed. “But we’ve more than enough to fight. The Farman fleet-” She grit her teeth. “It should be enough. But the Redwynes, the Golden Company, the Farmans, and the Ironborn? We can crush him on the seas.”

“And risk losing more men,” Daenerys argued. It was a feeble argument to be true.

Lady Yara’s eyes were cold. “If Euron touches these shores, we will lose more than just a few men.”

“We can always close the gates-” said a lord of the Stormlands, fingerling his scabbard. His eyes
were far away, like Jon’s and the rest of them. Distracted, and foolish for speaking in spite of it.

Tyrion smothered a grin as the lady of the Iron Islands seethed. Yara stared at the stormlord as if
he had gone mad. “Close the gates? The gates are gone!” She turned to Daenerys, to Jon Snow, to
Tyrion. “We must meet Euron in the waters.”

“Why?” Tyrion said, when Dany showed no signs of answering.

“Because Euron Greyjoy in the water is dangerous,” Yara said, cold and angry and so sure that
Tyrion almost believed her without a thought. Almost, of course. Tyrion never believed anyone
without a thought. “But Euron Greyjoy loose in the Seven Kingdoms is more dangerous than you
will ever know.”

“Our men are tired,” Lord Farman said.

For the first time, Jon Snow looked up. His gaze was hard. “Your men hardly fought.”

Farman’s cheeks flared red. “My men fought as hard as any!”

“I didn’t see them on the battlefield,” Jon said. “We all fought. Hard. Some harder than others.” He
blinked, slowly. “Our men are tired, hungry, hurt. We’ve all lost things. People.” His voice broke,
but he put it back together as soon as it shattered. “Your men stayed on their ships, ready to defend
us from the water. But the Night King never came to you. You held the Blackwater well – I won’t
say you didn’t, my lord – but it’s your turn now. Euron won’t just kill the Greyjoys. You think he’ll
spare the Farmans?” He looked to the others then. “Or the Redwynes? Essosi? Or any of you with
your ships? He’s coming to take the kingdom after we’ve bled to keep it safe! The Night King is
dead, now-”

“Who killed him?” said Ser Harry Strickland. His once-pristine golden armor was doused black
with blood, and it appeared he had taken a blow to the head, judging by the red stains in his hair.
He must have been fighting on the ground, while the rest of his forces remained on their ships.
They had been the furthest out, and the first to report of Euron’s fleet, as they landed in the bay.

Jon ground his teeth. For a moment, he looked remarkably like Stannis Baratheon, though, in
looks, the two shared little. In temperament, though, Tyrion could hardly see a difference. “It
doesn’t matter right now.”

Lord Tully exchanged an uneasy look with the lad, but he made no move to contest it. If anything,
he seemed relieved.

“Was it you?” said Lord Crakehall. “Or Lord Tyrek?”

“Tyrek is dead,” Daenerys said, shortly. She looked down at the table, lost in thought. She looked
to Jon and then away, quickly enough that most would not have noticed. But Tyrion knew her well,
and Tyrion would have known that look anywhere.

She knew, then, of the true killer. She, Jon Snow, and Edmure Tully. Who else? And why keep it
such a secret?

Sansa must have known, as well, if these three did, but she was nowhere to be found. From what he
had heard of her conversation with the soldiers in the streets, her sister had not fared well in the
battle. If she was not tending to the girl, then she was tending to her corpse.

Tyrion had to smother a smile. Oh, he would pity Sansa for this loss, but he could not stop himself
from dwelling in his own spiteful pleasure. His father would have been oh-so-pleased to see the
Great Other avenge his son, and Tyrion had never seen him pleased before. Tyrion imagined that he and the Night King would have made decent companions, if they didn’t come to blows within the first few minutes of their introduction. For a moment, he entertained the thought that Tywin might have married Cersei to the Night King, and that image alone was enough to warm his frozen skin.

There was a bit of commotion from the lords of the Westerlands, and Tyrion tried his best not to savor in the sound. All these lords and ladies who had refused his hand, his rule, and his advice had no other Lord Paramount to look to than the Imp of Casterly Rock. Oh, how sweet life’s little ironies could be. How strange the histories were, compared to the songs, that in life the dwarves and kinslayers could rule in place of Kingsguard and Queens.

When the lords finally settled down, Jon Snow eyed them all warily and said, “I know who killed the Night King. I saw it with my own eyes on the battlefield. He died in the ruins of the Great Sept. When this fight is done, I’ll tell you who did it. For now, we focus on the fight.”

Lord Tully flushed red. His cheeks matched his hair well, Tyrion noted.

“Oh, spare me the gold,” Lady Yara snapped. “We’re not here to beg you to fight. We’re fighting so my uncle doesn’t fuck your wives and kill your son. Are you men, or cowards, to need more than that?”

“More man than you,” Lord Redwyne muttered.

Just as quickly, Yara shot, “How can you tell? From what I’ve heard of the famed Redwynes, our pricks are equal in length and girth.”

Redwyne surged to his feet, but Lord Tully stood with him. The man still seemed restless beyond compare, but his voice was strong, as he said, “We do not have time for this.”

Tyrion rose to his feet, too, ever-eager to include himself where he did not belong. “Tensions are high, it seems,” he said, more to amuse himself than to calm them. “And I imagine it will remain so, but perhaps we can stave off the fighting until all of our battles are done? Once Euron’s fleet is destroyed, we can all happily go back to killing each other, as we all do so love.”

“Quiet, Imp,” one man began. Tyrion did not see his face, but he would remember the voice. He always did.

“He’s right,” Jon hissed. “I don’t care if you fight each other after, but we need to get this done.”

“Why? We’ve done our parts. Why should we fight for the Greyjoys?”

“Because our families are here!” His voice broke again, as he screamed. “Our brothers and fathers and sons. Our sisters.”

Some of the lords shifted at that, while others froze. Even Ryndon Martell seemed stricken, and he was hardly even present. Twice, Tyrion had caught him drawing in the air with a blood-stained dagger. The lord who sat beside him had steadily inched away.

“The women are here?” Lord Merryweather asked, suddenly far more nervous than he had been before.

“Aye,” Jon said. “Arrived not an hour back. My sister’s in the maester’s chambers right now, as we speak, and she says she brought half of Tumbleton with her. The others should be arriving soon.”
Tyrion had to smother another smile. That was a lie, to be true. They had brought back some women, but not nearly half. Too many had been too nervous to leave the keep, and for good reason. It seemed they had been wiser than the rest.

“Why would you bring them back so soon?” said a marcher lord. Lord Caron, if Tyrion was not mistaking a field of ravens for nightingales. Once, he might have known for certain, but it had been many years since Tyrion had seen the lords of Westeros, and many more since he had last seen a Caron.

“We didn’t know of the Greyjoy fleet,” Tyrion said.

“Bleedin’ hells,” shot one, and half-a-hundred voices joined his in his cursing.

Even Lord Farman seemed unnerved. “How many ships are in his fleet?”

Tyrion smiled even as Lady Yara stepped forward and led.

By the time the chambers were free of the ship captains and most of the proud lords, Daenerys looked ready to collapse. The lines under her eyes were darker than Tyrion had ever seen them, and the shake of her hands had grown more pronounced by the minute. For once, she did not look like a high queen or a born ruler, but rather more like a lost soldier, or a soiled woman of the smallfolk. Even her hair – once as silver as any Targaryen Tyrion had read the stories of – was colored black with blood and ash, just as much as the rest of her. She had not bathed since the battle’s start, nor had she been tended to by a maester, judging by the blaring wound on her cheek.

As soon as the commanders had gone, she sunk her head against the table. She hardly even seemed to notice Lord Edmure, waiting across the room from Tyrion and looking just as apprehensive.

Jon Snow was at her side in an instant, though he hardly looked any better than her. He, too, was streaked in wounds from head to toe, and stunk more than the soldiers had when Tyrion was leading them against Stannis.

“Come, Dany,” Jon told her, pulling her up with his hands on her back. She went as he urged her, though she hardly seemed to notice. By the look in her eyes, she was somewhere out beyond the Sunset Sea. He wondered what fantastical sights she would find there. Perhaps a land of kittens and summer, where winter and Walkers were naught but a dream. Or, perhaps more likely, there was nothing West but an endless field of water, a bright blue sky, and Elissa Farman’s rotted corpse. “Jorah’s waiting, and Sansa, and-” He looked to Tyrion then, and his gaze hardened. Yet, when he spoke, he sounded more tired than irritable. “Why are you still here?”

“As the Hand of the Queen-”

“Aye, you did a great job. The meeting went well. And I’m sure you can do more with Yara than you can us.”

Whatever Tyrion had done to offend him, he could not say. “I am only seeking to support my queen.”

“It’s fine, Jon,” Dany said, though her voice was only as strong as a sword of gold. She looked to Tyrion then, eyes half-lidded. “We must see the maester.”

“Ah,” Tyrion drawled. “To tend to your wounds? Or to visit a friend?”
Jon’s face somehow went paler, but Daenerys’ stayed stagnant. “Jorah was hurt.”

Tyrion frowned. He did not have much love for the aging bear, but most of the malice had bled away through the years. And, besides, the loss of Mormont would wound Dany, and it hurt him to think of his queen in pain. She had done much and more for Tyrion, and to wish her any misfortune would be a betrayal of everything he held dear. Oh, he could send a thousand curses to his sweet sister, he could kill his own father while he sat on the privy, he could watch his one true friend waste away in the crypts of Winterfell, a boy of six-and-ten die in the Godswood, and he could send a young maiden to die in the Red Keep, but there was only so much pain a man could bear to see. Perhaps he had reached his match.

But, just as the pity built in him, it came crashing down as he noticed the look on Jon Snow’s face. Just as suddenly, he remembered his earlier deduction.

“And many others, I imagine,” he said to Jon.

Lord Edmure, across the room, jerked. He scanned Tyrion, eyes flailing like a man gone mad. Tyrion had half a mind to call him over, but instead, he looked away.

“Aye,” Jon said, shortly, “much and many. We should go, Dany. The maester could use a few extra hands.” He looked to the Tully and frowned, cleared his throat. “Lord Edmure.” He shut his eyes for a moment, and went on, “You should come with us. Sansa and Arya could use their family.” His voice caught on the latter girl’s name.

Lord Edmure stared after him, eyes wide and wild. He looked to Jon, then Tyrion, then back to Jon, searching to see if it was all some mummer’s farce. Instead, Jon’s gaze held steady, and the Riverlord let loose a tiny breath, and said, “I would- of course, I would! Are they-”

“Alive,” Jon said. Then, “Both of them.”

Edmure’s shoulders slumped in relief. It seemed that his fears fled him in a moment, until all that was left was the exhaustion that seemed to haunt them all.

Tyrion had never been more relieved that he had gone to Tumbleton, and yet, somehow, he had never felt more irritated. He should not have been sat there, well-rested and at ease, while the rest of the realm died. How was a man to win his glory from behind the castle gates?

“Did you have reason to suspect otherwise?” Tyrion asked, after he had shaken the anger away.

Jon’s lip curled, but he seemed too weary to show any true disdain. “My sister was fighting a war. A girl of eight-and-ten on a battlefield.” He slumped, head hanging as his arms held him against the table. “Of course, we had reason.”

Tyrion frowned. He had thought that, in truth. Hoped for it, even. A girl of her skill was a dangerous thing, and a girl that had sent his brother to his grave was worse still. Yet, somehow, in the midst of a mottling mix of emotion, he had forgotten that she had family as much as he. She would be missed as Jaime was, as Shae was, as his lord father was not. Somehow, he had forgotten that along the way.

It seemed the Starks had lost their luck around the same time the Lannisters had. He doubted either of them would find it again. Though, if they truly all had survived, perhaps the Seven, or the Lord of Light, or the old gods, or the Black Goat, or whichever god there was had finally sought fit to grant them justice. Mayhaps, as the sun rose over the realm, so too did their chances for a future. But first, there was a war to be fought.
There was always a war to be fought.

“I see,” he said with as much compassion as he could muster. Even now, with his fingers numbed and cold, it was enough to draw the tiny traces of anger away from Jon Snow’s eyes. “Does she intend to fight in this battle?”

Jon’s gloved hand clenched and unclenched at his side. “No,” he said.

“And what of you?”

Jon stared at him for a moment, and then away, looking to the window across the way. His teeth worried at his lower lip, and his hand fell to the hilt of his sword. Not to draw it, it seemed, but merely to remind himself that it was there.

Jon looked to Edmure, to Dany, then back to Tyrion. All the while, Tyrion stood patiently. He had waited longer for less interesting answers before.

“It’s been eight years,” he said, finally. The words came through his teeth. “And Arya…” He looked askance. “I’ve played my part. I’ve more than played my part.”

Tyrion frowned. “My queen?”

She blinked. Once, twice, a dozen times. She hardly seemed to even notice where she was. When she finally met his eyes, she held his gaze the way she always had, but something in it looked wilder. “Drogon is dead,” she said, soft and lost, as if Lord Edmure had long since gone, and not watching her with wide eyes. As if she could afford to be vulnerable. She couldn’t.

Shock fell over him like snow and ash. The great dragon was dead? Balerion reborn, only to die before his first decade was through? He might have been the greatest beast there ever was. Under Daenerys’ command, he might have ushered in a golden age beyond compare.

But without a dragon, who was to enforce the laws? Rhaegal was alive, but Rhaegal was wounded, and might never heal, and even so, he was far and away on Dragonstone, hundreds of leagues from them. Who was to enforce order across the realm, when the realm had fallen into chaos, and so many men were gone? Who was to keep the lords in line? Who was to fight the Walkers, should this victory be a feint? Who was to be a dragon?

“I’m-” he started, before breaking off to clear his throat. He stepped forward, limbs shaking and jaw suddenly hanging. He extended a hand to her, and Dany let it touch her arm. Even through the thick clothing, he felt the heat of her skin rage. “I offer my sincerest condolences, your grace.”

She blinked, uncomprehending. “Jorah could die.”

Tyrion frowned. “I did not know there was a wound magical enough to kill Ser Jorah. Even greyscale could not seem to do the trick.”

“They stabbed him,” she said. “They stabbed him.” She looked to Jon then, and he nodded.

“We should go,” the bastard said. “The maester could use the help.”

“I could-”

Dany was already shaking her head. “Stay. The lords may need you. I will not be of use in a naval battle without my- without Drogon. They can still use you.”
Tyrion cleared his throat. He wanted to protest, but he knew a futile fight when he saw one. “It will not be my first time defending the Blackwater.”

She spared him a hint of a smile, and Tyrion could not help but return it. And, as they fled the room with Jon offering a nod farewell and Lord Edmure doing nothing of the sort, Tyrion made no effort to follow. Let them tend to Jorah and Arya Stark. Tyrion was the Hand of the Queen. He had duties to be done, as he had done when he was young and foolish.

He made his way over to the windows, and passed through a set of doors taller than the Mountain. His limbs were shaking, he realized, and he could hardly stop them.

He looked down from a balcony, at a city he had lived in, grown in, loved in. He thought of days spent in brothels, the long night spent fighting on the Blackwater, and the times in-between whoring and drinking and ruling. He thought of Joff’s wedding, of Cersei’s pride, of Jaime’s flowing white cloak. He thought of Shea, of Varys, of Ser Bronn of the Blackwater, wherever he was. He thought of a great many things. And, as he stood over it all, at a city burned to ash and painted black with smoke and corpses, just as he had once prayed for it to be, he shut his eyes. He felt nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Nice simple set-up chapter. We’ve got a bit of an outside glimpse into the states of our heroes, and they’re, uh, not doing well. Nor are the lords, to be quite honest.

Anyway, time to jump to what will probably be the last new POV in Prince. It’s a late introduction. I felt like, after all the shit this character's been dealing with over these past few years, they deserve it. Any guesses?
Yara Greyjoy

Many times in her life, the kraken’s daughter had stood at the bow of her ship and watched the bowsprit guide her way through an endless expanse of sea. The wind would beat against her face, the waves would lick at the sides of her vessel, and the water would sing to her like the sirens in the songs.

Now, with her feet pressed against the wooden deck, and her fingers loose around her axe, nothing could calm her fury. Not the wind, nor the waves, nor the soft songs of the ocean waters. Not while Euron Greyjoy still lived and sailed on the fleet she was born to command.

Hatred toiled in her gut as hot as burning coals. All night, as Euron’s ships inched closer and closer, she had been left to stew in her hate. Even now, as they were only a few choppy waves away from his fleet, her crew watched her warily as her lips peeled back. Not to smile. Not to sneer. To bear her teeth like a dog on the hunt.

*Like a wolf,* she thought. *My brother would be proud.*

There were no fires on her ships, nor on any of them. In the dark of the night, there was no need to
inform her uncle of their arrival. The closest they came to a warning was the shouting men on each ship in the fleet, and the torchlights that shone through the captain’s quarters in the stern of their vessels. Just enough to warn their fellows, without letting Euron see them at all.

Euron, fool that he was, kept the torchlight blazing on the bow of his ships. Mayhaps he thought it an impressive sight, his fleet. A hundred ships – a far cry from the thousand he had promised, though he had torn away most every tree the Iron Islands had to offer – and most of them smaller than her own.

*Theon should be here,* she thought, bitterly. He was said to have died a hero in Winterfell, one that would be in the songs for all the days to come. The Stark woman had been proud to tell her, had spoken in the dead of darkness two sleeps before she had fled the city gates, a coward in the night. Theon had nearly died for her once, and he *had* died for her brother.

“You idiot,” she spat, glaring at the black waters. His soul had not found its way beneath the depths. She would need to find his fool corpse someday to guide him along. He always did need her help. The boy was too damned fool to walk his own path without dying for it. *Idiot.* Their father would have been proud.

She scoffed. Their father had never been proud. At least, not of them.

Beside her, Grimtongue watched the enemy fleet without a word to waste. Even when she spoke, he eyed her only with an unpleasant stare, before turning back to the sea. It was only when the ship was near enough to *The Silence* that they could see the mouthless maiden on the prow, that Grimtongue turned his head to her and said, “Is it time?”

“Ready the axes,” she said. And then, louder, to all her crew, “*What is dead may never die!*”

A hundred voices answered her call. Oarsmen and men of ropes and men who hadn’t a role at all. A hundred voices loud and proud and vengeful. Some blood and some not. Some ironborn and some not. Some men and some boys. It didn’t matter. They would fight and die all the same. And they would rise again, harder and stronger.

She might have prayed to the Drowned God for guidance, but she doubted he would answer. Only one god ever had, and he was said to be a pile of shards. Of her men, only Bowen claimed the kill for himself, but Bowen was known for his lies, and Yara was known for not caring. They could argue over petty victories *later,* when her sweet uncle was a corpse in the sea. And *that* was only if Yara was kind enough not to burn him first. Yara was so rarely kind.

There were few voices on Euron’s ships that could announce her attack. *The Silence* was manned by mutes and eunuchs. There were a rare few he kept to himself as ironborn allies, but most were thralls. Thralls he was fool enough to bring on a ship to serve as oarsmen and sailors.

Thralls were meant for farming and mining, not sailing! It was luck alone that kept his ship from sinking each time he approached a rocky shore.

Or mayhaps he had chosen the weakest of the lot to serve on his ship. The ones too frightened to rebel against true men of hard isles. It was difficult to argue. Yara had never been all too adept at telling madness from cowardice, though she had spent much of her life in the company of both.

As they reached *The Silence* and its surrounding ships – the *Iron Victory, Kraken’s Kiss, Thrall’s Bane, Fear, Headless Jeyne, Slayer’s Scream, Kite, Red God’s Wroth, Maiden’s Fear, Woe, Lord Dagon, Shark,* and dozens of others stretching further than Yara could see – great balls of fire cut through the air, and arrows with them. Redwyne weapons, and Farman, and Hightower. Her ships
did not dare launch such coward’s tools. A man who did not fight with his own two hands was no man at all.

Her fleet sailed to meet Euron’s on the water, and Euron’s sailed on to greet her own. She had no way of knowing if he had spotted her ships against the darkness, or if he sailed unaware. Her sails were colored black – the golden kraken scraped away by the ashes in the city – and impossible to note in the dark of night. The long dusk had fled them, but now the short swallowed them whole, and Yara was more than prepared to fight within its maw.

As her ship came no more than a few hundred feet from Euron, she waved a hand high, and Droopeye Dale called for their oarsmen to hold. He was not one of her men, but he was ironborn, just as much as Blacktyde, who stood beside Rolfe the Dwarf on her deck. None of her men would be manning the oars that day. No, she would rather they rest before the battle. She did not need to lose her life to Euron Greyjoy because Fingers couldn’t lift his damned axe.

The wind and the waves carried them the rest of the way, after the oars were settled. Her crew and her men gathered on the deck, reaching for their weapons as their ship ambled forward. In their hands were axes, swords, hammers, and shields. In their company, Yara felt no fear. It would not do for ironmen to be afraid. She had learned that on the sea, as a girl of no older than two-and-ten when her brothers had sent her on her first lone voyage. She had come back a woman grown, and a fierce one at that. Ironborn. She had not known fear since.

The wait was as numbing as it always was. The men stood in silence, eyes trained on the bow of the enemy ship, as it crept closer and closer. Not a breath out of place. Not a word spoken.

Then, with a great jerking beneath their feet, their bow struck The Silence in the side. Yara wasted no time.

She threw herself over the bannister with one hand, and swung her axe with the other. It struck a mute skull as soon as she surged onto the ship. All around, the roaring cries of her men accompanied her.

An ironman came for her with an axe. His blow was high, and Yara simply ducked under the blow. In the time it took for the axe to soar overhead, her own took him in the side. Then, the throat. The axe fell from his hand, forgotten. Coward! No true ironman would ever drop his axe.

Fury coursed through Yara like liquid fire. It fueled her. As her men charged onto the ship, Yara set after every damned crewman in sight. Her axe tasted blood like Euron would taste her wrath. And, if the man was fool enough to meet her on the deck of his ship, he would taste it soon.

She pushed past Rogon Rustbeard as he threw a thrall into the sea. The thrall could not scream, but he let loose a terrible croak that brought a mad smile to Yara’s face.

Her axe tasted the blood of a thrall not a moment later, when an oarsman ran at Rustbeard with a dagger. He, too, sunk into the depths with his fellow fish-food.

Hardly ten minutes had passed before the planks were soaked through with the blood of The Silence’s own men.

There were few survivors, and fewer who would live through the night.

The battle had hardly begun by the time Yara won.

Cromm met her by the bow, his smile as wide as she had ever seen it. There was a tooth missing from his maw and blood streaming from his nose, but he hardly seemed to mind.
“Euron’s below deck,” he told her, happily. “I wouldn’t recommend going down just yet. Never want to stop Fingers while he’s having his fun.”

She grinned a wicked grin. “I’ll be sure to join him soon. Where are the rest of his lot?”

“Cabin,” Cromm said. He showed her the way to the captain’s quarters, eager as a dog at a dinner table. “I’ll give it to ya, fight was easier than I thought it’d be.”

“I imagine he intended for us all to be dead already,” Yara answered, wiping her axe on the shoulder of a dead thrall.

He grunted, ducking his head as they passed through the door. The damp quarters greeted them. A thousand maps and a hundred little swords and stolen trinkets. Yara did not care for a single one.

“What sort of man is he?” Cromm groaned. “Needing others to do his reeving for him.”

“A kinslayer,” she answered.

And, though Cromm opened his mouth, it was not he who answered her.

“Kinslayer, eh?” cried Left-Hand Lucas, from his seat against the wall. His hands had already been tied down, and now, Rook was busy tying his feet to the arms of his chair. It seemed as if half of Left-Hand’s face had been carved away in the battle, but he hardly seemed to mind, nor notice. “And what do you intend to do in return? Offer him flowers and kittens?”

“Kinslay,” she answered, happily.

There were others tied and gagged beside Left-Hand, but she hardly had a mind for any. Most were mutes and eunuchs. Cowardly men who had not sworn to her father, to her name, and then turned cloak for Euron Crow’s Eye. Left Hand’s was a different sort of treason. One that deserved attention.

“Might be I’ll offer him your tongue,” she said. “Or your famous left hand. My uncle could always use the help.”

“I think he might prefer yours,” Left-Hand sneered.

“Mine uncle might surprise you.” She traded her axe for Rook’s knife and approached the Codd with a savage grin. “Forgive my asking – I don’t really care if you do – why would you fight for Euron Greyjoy? You can’t think he’d win, could you? I don’t remember your skull being that thick the last time I cracked it.”

The fool rolled his eyes and drawled, “‘Though all men do despise us.'”

_The Codd words._ “There were Codds fighting in King’s Landing.”

He grinned. Like Cromm, he was missing more teeth than she remembered. “All men include our own.” He licked the blood from his lips. “You mean to scare me with that axe, little girl?”

She flipped it in her hand, just because she could. “I wonder, how much do you like your fingers, Left-Hand?” She nodded to Cromm, who moved without any further prompting. Before a minute had passed, there was a board beneath Left-Hand’s right hand, and Cromm had wrenched his wrist until his fingers splayed out over the wood.

“I’ve danced the finger dance with the best of them,” Yara told him. She waved her hands, knuckle
first, to offer him a glimpse at her scars. It hardly mattered. He’d seen them before, surely, and there were fewer there than on most. She grinned as he flinched back. “But I’ve never done it with an axe.” She set the head beside his thumb. “Why did you serve my uncle?”

“Serve?” Left-Hand spat. A string of bloody saliva drooped from his lips. It hardly sprayed more than an inch. He should have drunken more. “We do not serve any more than a kraken sow!. Or did your coward father forget to show you that when he was letting you think there was a cock in those breeches?”

The axe took him in the first knuckle, after the first step of the dance. Next, it danced the proper step, between his forefinger and his center. Left-Hand did not shout, or cry, or beg. His gaze held steady.

That was fine. They had time.

“I’ll have more of a cock than you at the end of this night,” she promised him.

“Your bitch brother has more of a cock than you,” he sneered.

“And two more balls than you.”

The axe caught his middle. This time, the finger struck the floor. Left-Hand grit his teeth, but did not once cry.

“The Walkers take my fingers,” he hissed. “I’m dead, hand or not.”

“The Walkers are, too,” Yara said. “You might have been of use.”

“Ironmen reave. We don’t fight another kingdom’s wars-”

“Tell me, Left-Hand, who you intend to reave, if the whole of the Seven Kingdoms is dead? I never knew you for a corpse fucker, but I suppose the Codd words do come from somewhere.” She sniffed. “Though the smell could explain it all the same. Flowers, truly?”

Cromm laughed. “You smell like a salt wife.”

Left-Hand grunted, and Yara moved her axe quicker, now. Before she knew it, all five of his fingers were no taller than stumps, and his palm had even shortened some. She nodded to Cromm, and he took the board and shifted it to Left-Hand’s other wrist. The Codd’s eyes grew wider still, and the spittle dried on his chin.

“You wouldn’t,” he said, though he did not sound all too sure.

“Why not?” she said, starting the dance beside his thumb. She made it twelve steps before the blade nicked a knuckle. “A man as craven as you doesn’t deserve to feast in the Hall with the God, and how can a man feast without his hands?” She hummed. “Should I take his tongue, next, or would that add to the trouble?”

Cromm shrugged. “Euron likes his mutes.”

“It’s not about the damned feast-” Left-Hand said, before the axe caught on a nail, and he sucked in a hiss. “A man who can’t fight-”

“-is no man,” Cromm said. “Euron likes his eunuchs too.”

Left-Hand’s eyes went wide. “He wanted to join with the Walkers!” he said, suddenly, as her axe
danced the next steps. She stilled it between his fingers, and each digit scrambled away.

“Why?” she drawled.

“We would have the seas, and he could have the land,” Left-Hand said, each word coming quicker than the last. “We could be grey kings again! Follow the old way!”

She twisted her lips. “The old way without women to take or villages to reave. Tell me, has my uncle grown madder with the years?”

“Why would the Walkers let him join?” Cromm asked. “Didn’t seem too excited to join forces back there.”

“Euron found this horn,” Left-Hand told them, quickly and shamelessly. “Magic, it was. Said it came from beyond the Wall, had the power to bring it down. Found it at the Citadel – some Night’s Watchman left it behind. Of course, the day we found the damned thing, the ravens came. Wall was fallen, it said. Gone. The queen, too, the dumb whore. Euron wanted us take King’s Landing by himself, not us. He left the horn back on the islands just in-”

“The short version,” Yara cut in. “My hand is getting twitchy.”

His gaze hardened, yet on he went. “We heard Winterfell was gone. We wanted to stay in the Iron Islands, but he heard about you.” Of course he did. “A Greyjoy allying with Redwynes and Farmans and Lannisters. Had us sail here. Wanted to kill you himself, he said. I tried to get him to sail back. I did.”

“I’m sure you did,” Yara said. She spun around and waved at the rest of the cabin. “Seems you’ve done a great job.”

“I don’t need lecturing by a woman,” he spat. He seemed to have not learned from the last time he tried that. More bloody spit colored his chin.

“Don’t think I need lecturing by a cripple, either.”

“Cripple?” he said, as if he had forgotten his right hand. Well, she would do her best to remind him.

Her axe came down between his arm and his palm. His famed left hand flopped down to the planks, and jumped with every bob of the ship in the waters. Left-Hand’s eyes went wider as he saw it. This time, he screamed.

Yara observed him without a care in the world. “You’ll need a new name, I think. Cromm, see to it he won’t be able to say it himself.”

Cromm smiled and pulled his dagger from his belt. While he set about working, Yara abandoned the captain’s quarters. She had an uncle to welcome.

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She found Euron below deck, just as Cromm had promised. He was tied to an oarsman’s post, and Fingers stood above him, twisting and pulling and cutting and pushing. She couldn’t see exactly what he was doing, but she knew enough of Fingers to know that it would be effective. He always was.

And, as she pulled closer, she found herself suitably impressed. Her uncle was covered in more
blood than she had ever worn. His teeth were cracked, and many missing entirely, one eye bleeding and one gone. All this while a white-eyed raven stood above his head, poking endlessly at the center of his brow. His inner legs were bleeding more than any of the rest of him, and the oar beside him was just as bloody.

Yet, when his eye caught her, he mustered a senseless smile. “Niece,” he greeted her, warmly, “I hadn’t thought to see you here.”

“Funny,” Yara said. “That’s what we said when we first saw your ships. Euron Crow’s Eye coming to fight after the war was done? Daenerys could hardly believe it. Even I hadn’t expected you to be such a craven.”

“Craven,” he slurred. Fingers went to twist his wrist, but Yara signaled him to stay. “Last I saw, you ran. Had you nice and cozy on my ship-”

“I have fond memories. Though I remember more time off than on.” More time under the water, gasping for air that wouldn’t come, screaming as it gushed into her lungs. Waking up coughing and shaking on the deck of his ship. Dying.

Yes, fond memories. Soon, she would make them fonder.

“And little Theon had to- had to end the game. Where is my little eunuch, anyway?”

“Dead.”

Euron laughed and laughed and laughed. He laughed until Fingers took his toes, and then he laughed even longer. Yara buried her axe in his stomach and stepped back as he gasped and bled. Through it all, she felt nothing.

How disappointing. She’d expected this to be entertaining, at the very least. It seemed Euron could disappoint even on his dying day. She imagined many woman might have agreed.

“Here’s how this will go,” Yara explained, calm and careful and careless at once. “Your crew is tied down in your quarters. You will remain here. My crew will be leaving your ship.”

“How generous,” he drawled. Blood dripped from his mouth to the bench. It landed with a squish.

“We will be returning to the Iron Islands. We will take back Pike, the Seastone Chair, and the whole of the Iron Fleet. We will swear ourselves to Daenerys Targaryen, and she will restore our kingdom to us.”

“You paid the gold price.” He laughed his way into a cough. “My brother would be so proud.”

“We bled for her. It’s as iron as any reaving,” she said, though she needn’t explain herself to him. To be true, she spoke for Fingers, and all the crewmates who might think the same. “And besides-” She leaned forward. “-you’re the price. Not gold.”

“And what am I to do? Return to Valyria with my tail tucked between my legs?”

Yara smiled. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? And then you could come back and try to take Pike, as soon as you’ve found another magic horn.” He tensed. She didn’t care. “I’m not my father, Crow’s Eye. I don’t leave my enemies to tell the tale. I don’t leave them to come back.”

She wrenched her axe from his stomach, while he writhed. No use wasting good steel on cravens. She had a better way.
They spent no more than another quarter hour on *The Silence*. Her crew returned to *Black Wind* one by one, trickling in like melting snow. Each of Euron’s men remained on his ship, while the rest of his fleet burned around him. The salt ships had done their jobs well. Many of the enemy ships had burned, already. Many others were being burned as she sent her men to the sails.

And, while her crew worked to spin the sails and man the oars, Yara stood at the stern. She had taken one of Theon’s many bows from the captain’s quarters, and twelve of his arrows. Now, as she soaked the tip, Hagen’s daughter steered them west. Away from these dying ships. Away from Euron’s failure. Away from kinslayers and betrayers.

Grimtongue curled his lip when he saw her rolling the string between her fingers. He set his arms on the bannister, eyes dark with wroth. “A coward’s weapon,” he sneered.

“It is,” she agreed, easily. “Fitting, isn’t it?”

He grunted. Spend enough years on a ship with a man, and you’ll know his happy grunts from his angry from his lost. This was a happy one, she thought. It made her smile.

She always did love a happy crew.

Six-Toed Harl’s voice carried in the night, though she could not make out the words. The ship jerked as the first oars pulled out from the water. Then, it jerked again, as the oars returned to the water and the winds caught on their sails. She watched Qarl the Maid scramble into the crow’s nest, eager to spot for shore.

“She shouldn’t be more than an hour from landing,” Grimtongue told her.

“I know,” she said. She reached for the first arrow, stuck it to the string. She had no flames of her own, but Grimtongue was generous enough to bring a torch for her. The fire leapt eagerly onto the oils that coated her point.

“Think he expects it?” Earl Harlaw asked. Yara hadn’t even heard him approach. The thrice-damned Harlaws were always too quiet.

“No,” she said. “Mine uncle’s a fool.”

She shut an eye and drew the string back to her shoulder. One eye shut, back wrenched forward, she loosed her hold and sent the arrow flying. The flames shone over the sea like a single star in the sky. But, all too soon, the light in the ocean met the light of the flames, and the arrow sputtered out.

“Suppose that’s better than if you’re any good,” Earl said. “Your father would have been more disappointed if you’d done it.”

The ship wrenched further away as she dipped the next arrow. Notched it, lit it, launched it. It soared again, and the waters claimed her gift again. This time, too far. She drew the next.

“My father’s dead,” she said, setting the fletching against her jaw.

This time, she kept her back straight.

This time, she kept both eyes open.
This time, the arrow struck the ship’s side.

This time, the flames spread, and they danced.

_They dance, and I am no kinslayer_, she thought, as _The Silence_ burned. _The fire slays for me._

Before her eyes, it slayed them all. _Lord Quellon_ sank quickest, as the living’s fleet sent fire at its hulls. _Lamentation_ went next, then _Kite_, then _Thrall’s Bane_ and _Red Jester_ and _Dagger_. _Leviathan_ and _Woe_ tried to sail away from the fires, but there were Golden Company ships all around to trap them, and burn them. _Fingerdancer_ managed to sink a single Farman ship with a scorpion bolt, but a Redwyne sunk it soon after. Then went _Iron Lady, Dagon’s Feast_, and the _Iron Victory_.

_The Silence_ went somewhere between them all. _Iron Victory_ was still standing as it sunk, though not for long after. She watched as the mast burned, and the mouthless mermaid with it. There were some who made their way from the deck into the water, but they would get no further. The Golden Company’s ships remained, stocked with arrows and hungry bowmen.

Euron would have been wiser to attack by land, she knew. And now, he did too. The sea was Yara’s. The sea was safe for the Kraken’s daughter. The world was.

The _Black Wind_ sailed to the sound of screams and laughter. And Yara had never felt more content.

Chapter End Notes

Arya takes 37 chapters to kill her big bad? Yara takes one. The fight of the anagrams is won. Yara takes the cake.

Yeah, this was my tribute to showEuron and whatever weird unrelated show he crawled out of. Odds were completely in his favor, and he whiffs it, much in the way of show canon. I also decided to keep it to canon in that he was just as much related to Jaime Lannister’s death in the show as he was in Prince.

In all seriousness, though, Euron’s arc is not about Euron. In his own weird-ass way, Euron’s arc is about tying knots and opening doors. What that means should become clearer as the story progresses.

Anyway, Dany time! Don’t expect a complete answer to this in the next update, but it’s time to explore the question: what befalls the Seven Kingdoms now that half the population is gone?
Chapter Forty-Three: See How It Spins?

The Iron Throne

Daenerys Targaryen

As the sun rose over the Seven Kingdoms for only the second time in moons, Dany sat upon the Iron Throne.

It had been her ancestor who had built it, Aegon the Conqueror. He had taken the swords of his foes – thousands it was said, but now, she thought it was no more than two hundred – and melted it into a chair. Viserys had always been so proud when he described this seat. He spoke of the blood that had been shed to forge it, of the dragon fire that had shaped it, and the genius it had taken for Aegon to craft it.

After all, who else could have thought of a chair so magnificent? Who could have been such a righteous king that he would insist the throne’s edges be sharp, that the steel never be dulled. Even now, as she sat with her back taut and her arms tucked to her side, she could feel the sharp steel pricking at her legs. It did not draw blood – not yet – but she could feel it trying. If she rose too quickly, it would succeed.

I am no Aegon the Conquerer, she thought. Aegon built. She shook her head, suddenly. No, he burned. Dragons do not plant trees.

There was a sea of lords and ladies settled into the chamber. Each in their finest dress, even as the scars of war stood clear in their cloths and armors. Most were still stained with ash and blood. They might have bathed, she thought, but she knew well that bathing could not wash all the dust away. Her own hair had been stained black, and no matter how she scrubbed at her fingernails, the dried crumbs of blood would not leave them.

There were many lords missing from those that had gathered last. The burned Lord Florent had come and gone. It was said they had found his sword by the River Gate, though the man himself was lost to war and time. The man could hardly walk, yet he had found the strength to march for the living. There was a strength to that, of a sort that Dany knew all too well. Come time, they would sing songs of him. Come time, he would be remembered.

There were others dead, as well. Others to be remembered, others not. Euron Greyjoy at his niece’s hand, though she tended to blame the fire. Lord Dayne, dead at the Great Sept. Lord Dondarrion, whose story was mad enough that Dany would not have believed it, had she not seen madder. Lords Blount and Pyle and Longwaters and Boggs and Crabb and Cressey. Lords Connington and Blackwood and Smallwood and Terrick. Lords Kenning, Stackspear, Garner, Merryweather, Rodden, Rowan, Graceford, Cockshaw, Hightower, Peake, Oakheart, Meryn, Buckler, Wagstaff, Blackmont, Fowler, and Qorgyle. Names and Houses that Tyrion taught her, over the many hours they sat tending to their every want and whim.

All they were gone, and more. These were only the ones with bodies or trinkets to pair with names,
and even they were only the ones Dany remembered. Many more were missing or gone. Many more were forgotten.

But Dany and Tyrion were not the only ones in the chambers. No, there were others. Smallfolk and knights, priests and sparrows, gold cloaks and soldiers, and even two members of Cersei’s Queensguard – a knight named Kettleblack and a food taster called Blount. There were a thousand faces clamoring for her attention, and Dany only had eyes for the few.

One stood before her now. A Prince of Dorne, he styled himself, and he had been the first to lay his spear down and declare her queen. The rest had come after, though some still waited and schemed. Tyrion had taken care to remind them of the dragon she had left on Dragonstone – “And I imagine its leg has healed in the time we’ve been gone, wouldn’t you say, your grace?” – and that was enough to quiet the discontent.

Now, Prince Ryndon smiled at her. A small smile, but not cruel. “Dorne offers its sincerest condolences for your losses in Winterfell and beyond, your grace. I hear your sworn sword was wounded in the attacks. I would be honored to ask your grace to accept my son as your shield, at least until the time your own heals.”

It was a difficult thing to keep herself from screaming. The sun has hardly risen, she thought, and already you scheme.

But politics never rested, even on the dusk of war, and Dany was forced to keep the frown from her face. “I would love to accept, but I find the offer unnecessary,” she told him, not unkindly. “Ser Jorah is on the mend.” If she said it enough, she thought it might even prove true.

The next man to stand before her was a drunken lad, formerly of Flea Bottom, and wouldn’t it please your grace to let him sleep in the Red Keep? At least until his family could rebuild.

But the Red Keep was already filled. There were soldiers sleeping in the gardens, countless lords hiding in the chambers, and squires filling the stables. Even in a castle so large, with what seemed to be all of Westeros confined in its halls, there was no room to spare for a single man. Nor was there wood to build another shelter. All of it had burned in the wildfire. Everything had burned in the wildfire.

“Where have you been sleeping?” she asked him, and the man gave no answer that satisfied. Judging by the darkness under his eyes, he hadn’t been sleeping at all. That was alright. Most of them hadn’t.

In the end, they found him lodging on a Redwyne ship. He and many of his fellow smallfolk. It was the least Dany could do for them – they, who had fought as much as the soldiers.

The next to approach was a knight, drunk on victory and wine alike. On his chest sat the sigil of a house Dany did not know. Judging by the flowers, she thought he might have been of the Reach, but she could not know for certain.

When asked to state his business, the man bowed deep and low, one arm swinging behind him. His sword swayed where it sat at his hip. “You stand in the presence of Ser Robert of House Cuy.”

I had not heard of him, Dany thought, but did not say. Instead, she lifted her chin, and forced a response through her teeth. “I am sat.”

He rose then and frowned at her, where she sat on the throne. Then, his eyes brightened, and he let loose an uproarious laugh. Dany hated every second of it.
“Of course, your grace. Perhaps this is good! For my lady, her grace, should be sat to hear this news!” His voice grew loud enough to fill the room. “She sits in the presence of Ser Robert Cuy, the Bringer of Dawn, Slayer of the King of Ice and Walkers, Scourge of Winter, and Slayer of Night!”

This time, the frown did find its way to her face, even as the whispers grew in the crowd. She could not break its hold. “And with what sword did you slay this ‘King of Ice and Walkers’?”

He smiled again, mindless to her displeasure. He drew his blade – a greatsword with countless emeralds emblazoned on the pommel and streaks of metal dancing through the crossbar. But, as the blade glimmered in the light, she saw no ripples along the steel. Only the black marks of burned metal, and the few stripes of melted leather along the hilt. He hefted it high for all the room to see. “I call it Dawnbringer!”

*I call it liar*, she thought. Instead, she said, “Have you any evidence of your deed?”

And, indeed, he did. He hefted a great piece of evidence – a strip torn from the Night King’s cloak and carried all the way from the ruins of the Sept of Baelor.

He was not particularly pleased when he discovered that the Night King did not, in fact, wear a cloak, nor was he pleased to learn that Walkers did not leave behind corpses or clothes when they died. He was even less pleased to learn that she already knew the identity of the Night King’s killer. Somehow, none of this stopped the next supposed slayer, nor the next, or the slayer after him.

Some came with singers, boasting of their great deeds. Some came with broken swords and spears. Others came with frozen knives. One even came with both halves of a fragmented dragonglass spear he’d claimed had done the deed. None were particularly happy when she sent them away, unrewarded. They should have been. She ought to have them arrested.

Yet, if she did, there would be nowhere to put them. There were soldiers sleeping even in the darkest of the Black Cells. Somehow, even that was preferable to sleeping beside the frozen corpses outside the Keep.

She stayed longer, listening to their wants and their whims. People begging for food she didn’t have, people begging for prizes and women and castles on hills. She granted none, because she had no prizes, no women, and no castles. She had nothing. Nothing but a name and a dragon that was so very far away.

And, then, as the moon rose to claim the sky from the sun’s grasping hand, one last petitioner came forth, bearing the seal of a sun on his shoulder and a thoughtless smile on his face. He knelt before her, his red and white cloak splayed out behind him.

“Your grace,” he drawled, “I bring news from the hills on high.”

“Rise,” she told him. That day, of all days, the sight of men kneeling felt wrong. She could not put to words why.

He rose. “I have spoken with the priests of R’hllor. All claim to have seen the Ice King’s slayer.”

Once, she might have been amused. Now, she shut her eyes, and said, “You, I take it?”

But, when she opened them again, she found his head shaking. “Arya Stark of Winterfell,” he said instead, driving her heart to a stumbling halt. “Returned from the dead.”
To her right, she saw Tyrion tense, and, in the crowd, several of the ironborn. For the rest, silence hung in the air, like men on a noose. A great ear-splitting silence that drove Dany’s breath to come faster and faster. Jon had not wanted to tell anyone yet. No one was supposed to know. Not until the girl was healed. Not until she could retreat to somewhere safer, where the expectations and greed of the lords of Westeros would not follow.

And, then, after a beat that lasted a lifetime, a short man in a green cloak let loose a great rumbling laugh. He laughed so hard, he dropped his pronged spear as he waved his leather shield about. The laugh was a forced one, it seemed to Dany, but one that caught and spread like dragonfire, like wildfire.

Soon, the hall was alight with merriment, though Dany could not, for the life of her, say why.

And then, the man stepped forward, a sly grin on his long, bearded face, and said, loudly, “Arya Stark has been dead eight years!”

“She returned!” the crier whined, but his voice was drowned out by jeers and japes. By the time the knights had led the crier away, hardly a man in the hall remembered Dany’s fear and Tyrion’s tension. Hardly a man, but the little one in the short green cloak.

When her duties were done, and the lords appeased for the day, Dany knew that she ought to meet with him, but she could not bear too. She fell back into the habit she had sunken into since the moment the war was done. She stood, dodging sharp edges and blades, brushed the settled ashes from her legs, and made her way to the maester’s turret. A hundred knights tried to follow her, but none were unsullied or dothraki, and she let none come. Even Tyrion, she left where he was. He would not understand this daily penance. He had not fought.

The room was no different as it had been she’d left it. Jorah was still lain upon the table, his arm wrapped in bandages, and his lower leg too. On his arm, beneath the thick white cloth, came through the scent of the maester’s ale and potions, and something stronger and sharper beneath it. Only time would heal him, she knew, if anything at all. She went to his side first, but the man was drunk on poppy milk, and he did not know to wake.

On the other end of the room, crouched beside his sister and the fire, was Jon Snow, his leg sprawled out before him. He had not bathed since the war, nor slept, despite the kind maester’s urging. His smith beside him had, though he had slept at the Kingslayer’s side, while Jon watched over them both. The other sister, too, had slept in these cramped chambers, and Lord Tully had taken to roaming between his own and the maester’s. When Dany had left, he was sat below the window, rubbing his hands for warmth as wind swept through the room. Now, he was nowhere to be found.

By the fire, Arya Stark – the slayer – looked no different than she had the night before, and the night before that. Still sat, knees to her chest, black bruises marring her pale face, and shivering despite the flames. The only difference was that the bandages, which had once been white, were now sopping with a bright yellow paste. The smith was pushing the wolf away as she tried to lap at it.

The chamber was silent as Dany entered. Three sets of eyes turned to her, another remained on the blank world before her, and another two were shut. The maester was nowhere to be found.

Jon did not rise to greet Dany, as she might have hoped, but he could not have risen for anything anyway. The maester had finally seen to his wounds after the navy had gone off to battle, and, while most of them were as shallow as her own, the one on his leg had taken over a dozen stitches and three different potions.
The room was somber. It always was. Between the foul smells and the horrid sights, it was a miracle they could stand it at all.

She took her seat by Jon and threaded her fingers through his. Exhaustion rippled at her, but there were more important things now than tired eyes. There was always something.

“How’d it go?” Jon asked her, even as he rubbed at his wound.

Sansa slapped his hand away with a hiss, breathing something about stitches and tears. She did not look to Dany, and Dany did not look to her. A truce, of sorts, and one they recognized without words.

“Long,” Dany said. Jon offered her a cup of wine, and she took it gracelessly. There was so little time for grace of late. She looked to Arya and frowned. “Half of the lords seem to think they might worm their way into my heart with lies and trickery.”

The smith began to stir then. It was a good thing he did. He’d started twitching before he woke. As soon as his eyes opened, he was reaching for Arya’s arm. He flinched, but did not retreat, when his hand settled over one of the cold marks on her flesh. Dany had touched one, once, when the girl was sleeping. It burned like fire never had.

“What sort of trickery?” Sansa asked, calculating.

Dany hesitated, but only for a moment. She looked to Arya Stark, amused and not. “A hundred different men claim to have killed the Night King.” Then, and only then, did the girl flinch. It seemed only Dany and the blacksmith noticed, for neither of the Starks responded to it. “And one who knew the truth.”

It was Jon’s turn to tense, and Sansa’s. The smith hardly seemed to react at all. Though, perhaps that might best be explained by the way he whispered in the girl’s ear, as Jorah always had Dany’s.

Idly, Dany wondered why Gendry was there, why he cared. But then, she remembered the fire pit, and the drunken smith taking Arya’s ale for her. They had known each other, it seemed, and she wondered how she had never noticed it before.

Sansa’s eyes hardened. “Did they believe him?”

“No.”

“We should tell them. Break the news ourselves. Ensure that no one else can first. We can phrase it gently, carefully.”

The direwolf lifted her head and growled, though she made no move to leave the girl’s side.

Dany eyed the beast warily, but nodded, reluctantly, as Jon’s eyes widened. “We agreed to speak the truth after the Greyjoy threat was handled,” she said. “The people are impatient.”

“Fuck them,” the smith hissed. He pulled away from Arya. She didn’t seem to notice. Merely slumped further into herself without his hands holding her steady. “They don’t deserve a damned thing. Not a- nothing. Nothing. She di- she decides for herself. No one else. No one!”

Once, it might have annoyed her or amused her to see him speak so freely, so informally. She could not decide which. But now, the war had torn away the bonds of crowns and cloths, and all that was were broken people in broken towers, trying to solve the problems of other broken people and broken places. Decorum had died in Winterfell.
“He’s right,” Jon said, soft and lost. He pushed himself closer to Arya. When his skin touched hers, her eyes shifted for a moment, but nothing more. If Dany did not know better, she might have thought the woman died where she sat. “Arya can decide. If she wants to say…”

There isn’t time, Dany wanted to argue, but one look at his face had her pressing her lips close. She had no wish to upset him anymore than he already was.

She was tired, she realized again. Too tired. She wanted to sleep for a thousand years. But the pressure of this empty crown weighed heavier than she had ever known. Even now, beside her lover and his family, she could do nothing but dwell on knights and lords and crowns.

“Arya saved the world,” Sansa said, looking to her sister. Only the wolf reacted, ears flat and tail down. Arya simply stared, empty, the way Dany had felt after Drogo and Viserion and every other horrible day. “She deserves recognition for that.”

The woman in question looked to her for a second, and then to the floor. Dany thought she might have sighed, if not for the way each breath came faltered.

“She deserves a choice,” Jon insisted. “As soon as she’s better, we can discuss it.”

“And what happens if we do leave it be, Jon? What if there comes a knight with a convincing argument to prove it was him, to worm his way into a lordship he didn’t earn.”

“Dany doesn’t have to grant it.”

“And what proof will she have that it wasn’t him?”

“Because it wasn’t,” said Jon.

“Does they know that?”

Dany shut her eyes. As much as she disagreed with the younger Stark on most matters, this was not one. The claimant with the cloak had come close, but soon would come another with a piece of armor or the Night King’s sword. And then, what could she say? Any denial would seem false, childish. A Targaryen queen who could not let the glory escape her, though the glory had long since fled. The wolves had saved her, and the lions, and the stags, and the spears, and the foxes, and the griffons. But they did not know that, and they would not care.

I did not want this politicking, she thought, numbly. It was not supposed to end like this.

They might have gone on like that for hours, if not for the raven hiding above the maester’s window. It pitched forward, wings catching in the air, until its claws scraped against Jon’s wounded leg. He made no reaction but to grimace, and the raven only answered him with a cry of its own. A screech, more like.

Jon stared at the bird as if it held the answer to every question he had ever asked. But, when Dany looked, all she saw was Drogon.

The room fell silent. A terrible hanging silence that choked her as well as any. Dany did not deign to stop its dwell. Her eyes were already meandering shut, and her head was slowly slipping onto Jon’s shoulder. The day had been long and tiresome. There would be time for arguing on the morrow.

She had almost slipped off to sleep when she heard his answer. He had turned to face the slayer, and his shoulders shook, even as the raven loosed another shriek. Dany jerked back awake, and
caught eyes with the bird. Jon’s voice came soon after. No more than a whisper, a ghost in the wind. “She won’t be safe, if we do.”

“She’ll be safer,” Sansa promised, though, how she was so sure, Dany could not say. “No one will ever harm House Stark again, if they know.”

“They’ll want to use her,” he said, soft and sad.

The smith spat, “Course they will. That’s all you nobl-” He cut himself off, fists tight at his sides. “She won’t want this.”

How would you know? Dany wanted to ask, but Jon and Sansa both seemed to understand, and Dany was too tired to pose the question.

Jon looked to Arya again. The girl did not move a muscle, as the direwolf whined. He shut his eyes, and his head tilted to Sansa. “I assume you’ll need me.” He did not sound pleased.

“You were there,” Lady Sansa said. She looked to the smith, and her gaze softened. “And you.”

The smith’s eyes widened. “What? No. I’m not- I’m not leaving her. No. No. That’s not happening.”

Once, Dany might have wondered where the two had met, and where she had found a man so loyal. But his loyalty only reminded her of Jorah Mormont, prone on the table, and all thought of Gendry fled with the wind.

“You claim you saw her… come back,” Lady Sansa said, carefully. When Dany looked to Arya, both of her eyes were closed. She hardly looked to be breathing. “We’ll need witnesses.”

“Can’t you use someone else? The priests? Jaqen?”

Lady Sansa frowned. “Jaqen?”

“He was there,” Gendry insisted, madly. It was only now that Dany noticed the dark circles beneath his eyes, and the fear, too.

“I don’t know who Jaqen is, but he isn’t here right now.” She spoke softly. Carefully. Perhaps she had seen the look of crazed terror in his gaze just as Dany did.

“You don’t know that,” he hissed.

Sansa blinked. “I do.”

“No, you don’t! He could be you, or Jon, or- or him!” He pointed frantically to Jorah, still prone on the table. “He could be here. He could. He- Speak, you prick!”

No one spoke. Not until Jon shifted his leg, and hissed as the stitches pulled. Sansa slapped his hand back, as he went to scratch again. Then, she turned back to Gendry.

“He was a… Faceless Man?”

If Gendry’s face could have grown any paler, it would have. Instead, he simply shook. “We met him on the way North,” he said, to no one and all of them. “He got us out of Harrenhal. He liked Arya. We couldn’t figure out why, but he did. She went with him, I think. After…”

Only Jon reacted to that news at all. Daenerys, who had long since uncovered that little kernel of
truth. Sansa gave no reaction either, except to purse her lips and glare.

Jon, though, Jon looked more stunned than she had ever seen him. He looked to Arya, but she was lost. The wolf’s head ducked beneath her paws, and the girl did not move at all.

“My sister,” Jon whispered. Had Dany been an inch further away, she would never have heard him at all.

The bird took to the air again. This time, in a great storm of plumage, it settled on Arya’s slumped shoulder. Its talons cut through her bandages like a sword through paper. Arya did not move. Not at all.

None of them spoke for a long while after. Dany, leaning on Jon and easing him back against the wall. Jon, looking more panicked than she had seen him since the battle beyond the Wall. The smith, breathing for himself and the woman at his feet, heavy and fast and madly. Sansa turned to him, and said, “It doesn’t matter about Jagen.”

“Jaqen!” the smith snapped.

Sansa went on, as if she had not heard, “You can explain…” She looked to Arya, and frowned. “Whatever it was… that happened.”

“We can’t just leave her-”

“It won’t be tomorrow. And Lord Edmure will stay here,” Jon said, suddenly. Defensively and definitively. His fingers curled on Longclaw’s hilt. Not a threat, she knew, but a reminder. To himself. “A dozen guards. Outside. They don’t need to-” The strength left him, and he swallowed. “They don’t need to come in.”

Dany might have pitied her, if her own eyes weren’t slipping shut again. The day had been too long, too busy. Even the confirmation of the girl’s status could do nothing to keep her grounded. Dany had not slept the night since the days before the battle, and it had never worn so heavily on her. She didn’t even get the chance to breathe a word in agreement before she had slipped away.

That night, in her lover’s arms, and in the company of heroes and more, Dany dreamed of dragons, of a house with a red door, and a single spinning wheel. She dreamed that the wheel spun off track, towards the house, crushed it beneath its spokes with a great shower of splinters and fire. It crushed a dragon next, and a cat, and a wolf, and a stag and a lion. And there, Dany stood before it all, with Arya Stark’s stolen sword in her hand. Somehow, she knew that, if she could only cut another spoke, the wheel would collapse. She swung the sword, two-handed, over her shoulders. A terrible cry tore from her lips. It hurt more than anything she’d ever known.

She woke before the sword touched wood. She woke in Jon’s arms. She woke in a dream, she thought, and it was not her own.

Chapter End Notes

End: We’ve moved out of the Death arc and the Euron arc and into what I call the Dany arc. (It’ll be longer than the Euron arc, I swear). It’s been a bit harder to write, just because a lot more emotional than many of the other arcs in Prince (with one obvious exception) while also being a lot more political. Combining extreme trauma
with extreme politics has been a difficult balance to hold, which is one part of the many reasons updates have slowed.

But, as I’m sure you guys noticed, the Euron arc was cut a bit short. I actually planned for a bit more, but Yara was just that much of a badass. I’m getting off track, though. The length of the arc was because the point of it wasn’t Euron, and it wasn’t the Iron Island plot, either. Like the show, Euron was largely just a tool for Dany’s own development. And I think we’ve seen in this chapter a hint of what I mean by that, but within the next few chapters, it’ll be obvious.

Also, sorry about the new weekly schedule, but I’m in midterm hell right now, and I just don’t have time to write. My last midterm’s next week, so look forward to a potential return to the biweekly then. For now, I’m just gonna keep drowning in textbooks.

Anyway, speaking of next chapter, we’ll be checking in on a certain kingslayer! Might be she’ll use a certain other kingslayer. Might be she won’t. Stay tuned, folks.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Four: The Ghost of Arya

Prince Tommen’s Chambers

Arya Stark

She couldn’t sleep. No matter how much she yearned for it, she couldn’t bring herself to. Not while her family was in danger, not while Gendry was resting, and not while the maester hovered over her like Luwin always had, when her family still lived, her friends were all whole, and the world made sense.

The maester was the same that had hovered in Harrenhal and at Cersei’s side, she recognized idly. The one who smiled had smiled just a bit too wide whenever she came near, who now poked at her wounds a bit too carelessly, and who always had a knife strapped to his thigh and a vial of poison hidden among his potions. Arya knew well what a killer looked like, and this maester was one, if he was a maester at all. When he’d introduced himself to her, as the maester of the Red Keep, his brow had twitched and his head cocked just so. Liar. Dangerous.

She almost wanted to tell Jon, but Jon had troubles enough, and she had no need to make his duties any more difficult than they already were. Besides, if the man had foul intentions, it hardly mattered. If she died again, the gods would only drag her back, again and again and again. Clearly, Arya Stark was not permitted to die.

They tried to give her milk of the poppy, as if the war was over and the fighting done. They told her she could rest now, at the end of all things. At the end of war and pain and a night longer than any other.

I can’t, she thought, and pushed it away every time. The war’s not done. We never stop playing.

There was always someone with her, urging her to rest, to relax, to breathe, Arya, just breathe. But she couldn’t; she couldn’t!

Even now, as Gendry watched over her with those shining blue eyes of his – blue like the Night King’s, blue like the ocean, blue like death – she couldn’t bring herself to let down her guard. Earlier, while he had slept, at least she had an excuse. She needed to keep an eye for threats. She needed to protect him if anyone came. She needed him to be safe.

He wasn’t, before. Neither of them were. None of them were.

If her sword had slipped, even Tumbleton would have been doomed, and that scared her more than anything she had ever known. Even in Harrenhal, huddled like a mouse in the Mountain’s pen, she had never been this afraid. Nor on Braavos, on Dragonstone, or in the battle itself. Nothing was ever as terrifying as the moments after the battle, because now that it was done, she could see every little path that could have taken her somewhere else, somewhere better.

What if she had stayed by the River Gate? What if she hadn’t leapt at the Night King? What if she
would have just waited? What if she hadn’t reached for Needle, Needle, Needle, Needle…

She tried to take a breath. It was still hard. The maester – the one that worked for Roose Bolton, then Tywin, then Cersei, and now Jon – had assured her that the pain would ease with time, but what could he know? He’d never died.

Jon and Sansa were gone, she knew. Jon to tend to some matter with the Dragon Queen, and he’d whispered a thousand apologies before he went, but he’d left all the same. Sansa to speak with Tyrion to help organize the temporary settlement of the people of King’s Landing.

Arya didn’t like to think of them – the people. Didn’t like to think that they could have all still had homes and families and food, if she had only gone north. If she’d stopped being selfish for just a moment. A single stupid moment.

Because the Red Woman was right. All along, she’d been right. Arya was the one who was supposed to stop the war. Arya! Stupid Arya Horseface from Winterfell. But, when the Wall needed her, she had hidden away in the House of Black and White. When Winterfell needed her, she had gone south for Cersei. When the Eyrie needed her, she had been riding off to her death. And now, all those deaths later, she could not even save King’s Landing.

It was her fault. Her fault, her fault, her-

Gendry must have sensed her distress, because his hand came to rest on her shoulder, and his blue eyes came no more than an inch away from her own. Somehow, it only made her heart beat faster.

“Arry,” he said, softly, “breathe.”

I can’t, she wanted to tell him, but it was too hard to move her lips and too painful to move at all.

“Can you hear me?” he asked, and he sounded so pitiful that she forced herself to nod. Even that tore at the wounds on her throat – winter’s bite, the maester had called them, as he lathered honey under the bandages – but it didn’t matter when she saw the smile break on his face. “You’ll be alright. The maester says-”

I know what the maester says, she wanted to snap. The maester insisted that she was shaken and lost, but that she would come back eventually, if they would only just be patient. Her face would heal, her throat might, and the scars would stay forever. Faded, perhaps, but there all the same. That was all he said. That was all he ever said!

Arya had never been a great beauty. That was Sansa, with her graceful hair and pretty dresses. Arya was just the stupid girl with dirt under her nails, tangles in her hair, and bruises collected like coppers. She’d long since come to accept that.

But to bear scars so terrible that Jon had to cloak her face when the guards came to bring her to the dead prince’s chambers? So cold that Sansa flinched back whenever she touched her? So strange that they burned even now, though the maester had lathered them with some strange concoction? Somewhere along the way, she must have found her way into some god’s disfavor. She must have.

I killed the Waif, she thought. And the god took everything for it. Even the sword I used to do it…

She might have cried for Needle, but she hadn’t cried since she was a little girl, curled into Yoren’s chest and trying not to choke on tears and loss. She couldn’t remember what her father had looked like on that day – she couldn’t remember her father at all – but she remembered Yoren’s stench and Sansa’s scream and the knife coming for her face.
She didn’t calm. She didn’t think she ever would again.

When Gendry was finished listing off all the things she already knew, he said, “Arry,” so soft and tender that it killed her. He spoke to her, as if she was alive and well and still there in the room with him. Nobody else did that anymore. Nobody.

“Still can’t believe it was you,” he said. “I still- I remember when you were just a little shit. A right pain in my arse. Always running about in the forges, underfoot…”

Underfoot. They called her that in Winterfell when she was a girl. All those people who’d done it were dead, and the castle was gone too. The memory hurt like everything else.

“And that little shit saved the world,” Gendry finished, breathless.

*I didn’t*, she wanted to say. *It was Jon and Jaqen and Beric and Syrio. I only swung the sword.*

But Gendry couldn’t hear her, and so he went on, “And here I thought you were just another lady.” He must have seen something on her face, or thought he did, because he laughed, suddenly. “Well, you’re more awake than you were. You know where we are?”

She nodded – a miniscule thing, just enough to let him know without tearing her throat open in the process – and Gendry grinned so widely, it might have blinded her. Her moving at all seemed to make him smile of late.

It shouldn’t have surprised him. She was aware enough to know the Baratheon prince’s room from the maester’s turret. She knew the post of this bed was where she had fallen, and she knew the bed itself, because she and Gendry had lain there together, before her world had gone cold and hot and black and blue and red. She knew the furs that covered her wounds, and the fire blazing in the corner, and the windows covered with blankets and sheets, so that no one might see Arya Stark’s scars and cower from the terrible sight.

“Can you talk?” he asked her. She frowned, said nothing. He took the hint all the same. “That’s alright. It’ll get better.” He said it so confidently, she almost thought he believed it. “The maester says so. He says he’s dealt with worse than you.”

*Dead things*, she thought, but didn’t say. She wouldn’t have, anyway. Gendry didn’t need to know about the Mountain. No one did.

He leaned back against his chair. He looked like he might have fallen asleep like that, only, as soon as his hand stilled, he jerked forward. Reached for a sword he didn’t have, and only calmed when he caught sight of her face.

*Stupid*, she thought. He should have kept his sword with him, like she did Kingslayer. She hadn’t let the maester take it, no matter how he insisted that the metal was too cold against her flesh. Nymeria had nearly torn his ear off when he tried, and he hadn’t tried since.

It was easier, being in Nymeria. She was on the hunt now, feasting on corpses of men and wights alike. The few survivors of her pack were with her, cleaning the streets the way the fires hadn’t. Sometimes, Arya liked to slip her skin and feast along with her. It hurt less when she was Nymeria. In more ways than one.

“Sorry,” Gendry breathed. “I- sorry. You can hear me, right? You’re- you’re you. You can hear me.”

A nod. A small one, but a nod all the same. It burned like all the seven hells. She might have
flinched, if the Waif hadn’t beaten that out of her.

She wondered if the Waif had come back in the war. She wondered if she’d killed her again. She found she didn’t care.

In time, a nameless guard came to bring her soup. Cold soup. Always cold. She wasn’t allowed to have anything hot. The shock of it might kill her, the maester had promised. She’d slipped her skin and growled, but the man hadn’t relented. So cold it was.

Her left hand was still wrapped in bandages, as was her right forearm, and every spoonful came from Gendry’s hand. He was careful – always so careful; they all were – and she took every one without complaint, though it hurt to move her lips.

She didn’t smell the food, or judge the taste, or do anything at all. The Faceless had fed her more than enough poisons in her time at the House. A few drops would do no worse than upset her lurching stomach. Besides, if Jaqen wanted her dead, she would be already. If anyone else did, then at least she could live in Nymeria’s skin again. That would be alright.

She didn’t know what was supposed to happen now. In truth, she didn’t know much of anything.

What was a woman to do when she was born for one thing, and it was done? When Father and Mother and Robb and Rickon and Bran, and the fat baker, and the greenhand, and the butcher’s boy, and the lady in Braavos, and Lady, and Ghost, and all the other wolf, and the people of Winterfell, and the Eyrie, and all of them, when all of them had died for her. Just to get her here, so she could stab a man she should have stabbed sooner. So she could wallow in pain as the sun rose and set and rose again. So she could live, while all of them were dead. What was she supposed to do?

She sat. She stared.

And, though Gendry tried to talk to her a thousand times over, she hardly heard a word.

She wondered how many were dead. There was no way to know. She would never know.

There might have been a little girl in the wreckage who’d lost her father. Who’d seen a wight take his head, because Arya had been too slow, too slow, too slow! She wondered if the girl would hate her, the way Arya had hated the boy king Joffrey, and the way she’d hated Queen Cersei and all the rest.

She wanted to get up. She wanted to find this imaginary little girl she’d orphaned, and she wanted to hold her tight and take care of her, because, of all people, Arya Stark knew what it was like to be a little girl alone in the world.

Some of her distress must have shown on her face, because Gendry’s arms wrapped around her shoulders and pulled her close. She flinched back, and he did a little too, but he held her all the same.


And, if hot water burned at the scars on her cheeks, Gendry didn’t say a word about it. She loved him for it.

#

He would not be gone long, he’d promised her. Just a bath, by order of the maester. Apparently
being covered in filth and blood around the newly undead wasn’t the brightest idea. If they’d asked Arya, she would have asked him to stay. But they didn’t, and Gendry had gone off to bathe, while a lord with a long face stayed behind to watch her. Lord Tully, she remembered, by the fish on his collar. He was related to her mother, somehow. Riverrun. She’d almost made it to Riverrun once. Almost.

There was always one of them watching her now. Jon, or Gendry, or Sansa, or Lord Tully. Them and a guard or two, stationed beyond the door. She didn’t know why they bothered.

Tully was a quiet man. A brooding man. As far as she could tell, he had never worn a smile on his face. The bags beneath his eyes were deep as the Blackwater, and his hair was streaked with grey. He was sat beside her, as far back in his chair as could be, while his eyes gazed anywhere but to her.

That was alright. Arya had seen a glimpse of herself in the reflection of Mormont’s armor, and she hadn’t wanted to look at herself either.

They had been sat for hours, each studying a different section of the wall when she reached for her side, just to be sure that Kingslayer was still there. Just to make sure she would be ready if the enemy came storming through the door. Not for her sake, of course, but for Tully. Because he was of Riverrun, and he was her lady mother’s blood, and even if she’d lost everything else, she hadn’t lost this. Tully was pack. Blood. The blood of the fish.

It sounded stupid when she put it like that.

He must have noticed her move. Before her hand touched the hilt, he was jerking back, startled as a scared cat. He’d slept more than she had, but sleep didn’t always clear away the fear, she knew. Fear cut too deep. Maybe not as deep as the cold, but deep enough. Too deep, it seemed.

“Do you remember me?” Tully asked, suddenly, as if Arya knew him by more than the sigil on his shoulder. When she offered no response, he went on, “I didn’t recognize you at first, in the dragon’s clothes, but I see it now.” It was barely more than a whisper. She had to strain to hear him. She didn’t strain. “I was there – you remember? – at the Stranger’s Feast. In the cells. You came, freed us.” He swallowed. “You should have told me you were a Stark. I would have-”

What? she wanted to say. Sent me to Winterfell? To the Boltons? To Riverrun and the Lannisters? Stayed at the Twins and waited, while Cersei ruled the realm? There’s no safety. There never was.

But Arya had no voice, and Lord Tully did not stop. “Cat would be proud of you. What you did.”

And suddenly, she wanted him to leave, like nothing she had ever wanted before. She wanted to run back to Braavos, where she could hide behind the faces and never have to look at her mother’s blood again. She wanted to go to the Twins and throw him back in the cells. She wanted to search the rivers and find the corpse she’d left there, and she wanted to burn the castle until there was nothing left, nothing at all!

But it hurt too much to move so far, and so Arya sat. And, with her face frozen, Lord Tully did not notice a thing.

“I never knew your father well, but I knew your brother, Robb.”

The sight of Grey Wind’s head came unbidden, and a corpse atop a horse, and chants all through the massacre. A mummer’s wolf; a mummer’s man. All because of her. Because of her stupid destiny, and the stupid prophecy, and because she hadn’t been quick enough. If she’d just run
faster, if she’d saved Grey Wind in time, if she’d gotten away from the Hound, if she’d stayed with the Brotherhood…

“Stop,” she mouthed. A whisper of a word came free, and with it a cough. And another. And another. So many coughs, she was doubled over, pulling at the wounds on her chest and burning the ones on her throat. Lord Tully’s hand came to beat at her back, but she felt it halt after only a single hit. He pulled back quickly, while she hacked and hacked and hacked.

*I’m dying again,* she thought. Strangely, she felt no worse for knowing it.

But eventually, the fit faded, and Arya was left sucking in air as quickly as it would come. Lord Tully did not breathe another word of Robb or her lady mother. He left when Gendry returned. Quickly and silently. She had never been happier to see a man go.

It was Jon who came next, after Gendry had long since fallen asleep with his head tucked against her shoulder. Nymeria had returned, and now lay over Arya’s legs atop a sea of blankets and sheets. It was with great discontent that Arya realized the direwolf was more comfortable on a featherbed than she was. The wolf had fallen asleep within the first quarter hour of her return. It had been days since the battle, and Arya had not slept at all.

Nymeria’s bright eyes flickered open as Jon slipped into the room, but she settled as soon as she saw it was him.

“Arya,” Jon said, as soon as he reached her bed. Gendry shifted, but gave no sign of waking. He had been by her side for hours, and, frankly, she could not blame him for catching a few hours of rest. He deserved it. Jon did too, and Sansa, and all of them. “How are you?”

“Fine,” she mouthed. *Nothing hurts,* she wanted to say. *The burns are healing, I’m sleeping well, and I don’t need milk of the poppy.*

He sat on the edge of the featherbed, didn’t even bother asking if he could. She used to do that as a girl, whenever she snuck into his room at night. She would fall onto his pillow and rant about Sansa before he had even noticed she was there. Three times, he had lain down atop her and laughed when she’d push him off. He never stopped her, only told her to be careful her mother didn’t see.

But her mother was dead now, and there was no one to stop him.

*The Night King had,* she remembered. Jon had run, even when she’d tried to drag him back, even when she’d all but begged him to stay. He had stood, and said a thousand things that meant nothing at all. And then he left. He left like Hot Pie and Gendry had in the Riverlands, like her lady mother had left her to the South, like Jon had already left her to run to the Wall. Only Syrio hadn’t left her, and her father, and they still died. Perhaps it was best that they leave.

She looked away, but Jon stayed all the same.

“Lord Edmure said you spoke.”

* Barely.

“The maester says that’s good. Means your throat’s healing quicker than he thought.”

*Good. Then I can leave quicker.*

“You’re even looking better, you know.”
That, she might have laughed at. She looked like death and she knew it. A corpse in the water. Blood on stone. That was all she was. All she’d been since Braavos.

“We’re meeting tomorrow. To talk about—” He paused, looked away, and then back. He sighed. “About you. To everyone.” He must have seen something on her face, because he was quick to add, “I didn’t want to. Sansa said it’d be best, safer, if they know.”

_Safer_, she thought, but not safe. In this world, nothing was safe. Not the forests or the castles, not the gardens or the septs, not the canals or mummer’s shows. Nothing. The only safety was in the gift, and even that wasn’t safe for a girl like her.

“For the record, I wanted to wait until you were up to it.” He would be waiting a long while. Long enough that he might grow as tired as she was. Maybe his face would turn just as black. “But they’re right. If they find out first, we can’t frame it right. They could make it worse.”

She clenched her bloodied left fist. _How?_

He inched closer to her, the way he used to when they would sit on the walls, watching Robb and Theon practice their archery. Back then, he would wrap his arms around her shoulder and pull her close. He would muss her hair and call her “little sister” and everything would be alright. No matter what was wrong, he would be there for her and nothing would be amiss again.

Now, as his hand crossed the distance between them, she could only think of frozen claws reaching for her throat. Only cold and hot and I can’t breathe— I can’t breathe— I can’t breathe!

She reached for her sword – the one at her left hip this time, because the other was gone and broken – and ignored the pain that burst both dull and sharp.

But the Night King’s hand caught her own, right where he had the first time, and all she wanted to do was scream, but his hand was around her throat and she couldn’t breathe— she couldn’t—

Someone was shouting her name through the din. The blood in her ears and the pounding of her heart meant she couldn’t make out the words, but she knew the voice. The first and the second, as they jumped in, and as hands pulled her right hand down, and then her left, and then her legs. Stopping her from kicking and thrashing and clawing.

She heard a harsh yelp as her teeth sank into flesh, but it didn’t matter. Syrio taught her to fight with everything she had. Syrio taught her to kill.

But then there was fur against her face, brushing the burns and crushing her throat, and suddenly she was screaming soundlessly into the other half of her soul. Nymeria.

It was better, she thought, to die in the company of a friend. It hadn’t been like that before. Even Bran had gone…

Only, this day, she didn’t die. When the pain had ebbed enough that she could draw her eyes open again, it was not the cold blue stare looking back at her. No, there was only a warm blue, a bright gold, and eyes as grey as her own.

She went to chew on her lip. She nearly stopped herself, but she hadn’t the strength to. Damn Jaqen, damn the Waif, damn every stupid lesson they’d ever taught her! It didn’t matter. None of it mattered. None of it! None!

The Kingslayer was gone from her hands. Jon held it as far back as he could reach. The sheath was still strapped to her side, but what did a sheath matter if the sword was gone? What would anything
matter? What would happen if the Night King came to kill her again, and the sword was gone? She’d be helpless. Useless! Her stupid cowardice would get them all killed, and it was all because she couldn’t keep her stupid head straight!

She’d almost stabbed Jon. The only one who’d cared, even when things were hard. The only one she’d known would accept her, as the blood ran down her fingers, as Needle carved through name after name. And she’d almost killed him…

No man is so accursed as the kinslayer, a voice whispered from the darkness. And he was kin.

He was, and that hurt as much as the burns on her throat. It mattered not how distant his blood was from hers. The Night King had been a Stark too, once, and she’d driven her sword through his back. If she could kill him, she could kill Jon, and Sansa, and Bran. She’d already killed Robb and her mother. She should have been there, and she wasn’t, and now the blood was on her hands. What was more blood? What was more kin?

Kinslayer. Kingslayer.

“Arya,” Gendry breathed, and that was worse than anything the Night King had done. Worse than anything she had done. He never calls me Arya.

Jon looked to Gendry for a moment, before his steel eyes met her own. Only then did they soften. “It’s alright,” he said, setting Kingslayer on the bed. It carved through the blankets before he noticed and set it down on the floor. Even then, it carved through the carpets.

When Jon had recovered himself, he turned back to Arya with his hands up and palms out. “You’re in the Red Keep. The war’s over.”

It’s not, and I know, she wanted to spit. I just… forgot, is all.

Had she been able to speak, Gendry might have laughed. He would have mocked her for it – what do you mean, you forgot? You forget your name, too? – and she could pretend everything was alright. She could laugh, like her heart wasn’t still beating faster than a raven’s wings, like her hands weren’t trembling, like the burns in her throat hadn’t grown a thousand times colder, and like she had never once forgotten her name. But Arya’s tongue was stone, and they knew everything she couldn’t say.

“You’re safe,” Jon said, but all she could think was that he wasn’t. If he’d been any slower, she would have stuck him with the pointy end the way she had the stable boy, the Freys, the Braavosi, Ilyn Payne, her kin, and everyone else she had met along the way. Jon would be dead, and maybe Gendry too. Both as broken as Needle. If she hadn’t been hurt, she could have driven the sword through them before they even knew it was coming. And it would be her fault. Her stupid bone-headed fault.

She wanted to run again, but she couldn’t move her leg with Jon was sat on her toes. Instead, she dropped her head into one of an endless array of pillows, and, as she shut her eyes, Nymeria rose and fled the room without so much of a huff. There were wolves below, and enough meat to scavenge to keep her pack sated for months. A pack that she would never hurt, and grey cousins that needed her and wanted her. Her wolves would never leave her, and she would never leave them.

She fled the castle and its high stone walls and haunting trees. She fled under the eyes of the raven that had left her, and the sister who’d been gone. She walked before men with long claws and sharp steel fangs, but they did not smell of death, and so she walked past them all without care.
And, as she met the few survivors – Black Tooth, Orange Eye, Frey-Eater, Long-Limbed, Toothless, Grey-Black, Stark, and Squab – she tipped back her head and howled. She sung for the cousins they’d lost in the battle, and the pack mates they had lost long ago. She howled for her brothers and sister, her girl in the grey walls above, and the family that waited for her in whatever life would come after. She howled for the living, the dead, and the living who would soon be dead. And, as the sun rose over the horizon, her grey cousins joined her. As one, they sang.

With her pack, she didn’t have to think. With them, it all hurt just a little less.

Chapter End Notes

End: Arya’s not… well.

God, part of these delays have been because I had to take breaks multiple times while I wrote and edited this, because it was too damned sad. Someone help this poor traumatized kid. Please do it before I have to write another Arya POV.

Anyway, tragedy aside (or not), back to politics. Dany’s got an announcement to make, and it may be very wise for the seven kingdoms to listen.
Chapter Notes

We got a good one today, folks

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-Five: Seven Kingdoms

The Throne Room

Daenerys Targaryen

She was sat on the chair again.

There were friends stretched out before her. Jon Snow, shaken and nervous before a field of lords, ladies, knights, smallfolk, soldiers, and more. Sansa Stark, sharing her smiles and charms with half the men in the keep and all of the women. Tyrion Lannister, standing straight and staring forward, glaring daggers at faces and sigils that Dany did not know. Even Yara Greyjoy, bloody and smirking from her perch on the steps. It was said that she had not washed since Euron Greyjoy burned on the Blackwater, three days prior, for she could not bear to wash his blood from her skin. By the smell of her, it was true.

They had asked for the bastard smith to come, too, but he had taken one look at the guards and stood his ground. Baratheon, she’d thought with disdain, but he had sat beside the Stark girl, and even Jon could not coax him away.

There were others, too. Edmure Tully, long-faced and wild-eyed. As she watched the lords gather, he leapt from swineherd to smith, learning names and faces and listening to all the tales his people knew. Ryndon Martell, whose wounds had healed enough that he was standing steadily on his feet and sharing words with the stalwart strength of a man twice his size and twice as wise. Even minor lords and ladies mingled amidst this crowd, eager to forge alliances after the war had claimed their old.

Great banners hovered above them all. Banners depicting the direwolf of Winterfell, the three-headed dragon of Dragonstone, the lion of Casterly Rock, the sun and spear of Sunspear, and the crowned stag of Storm’s End, though all the stags were dead. Even some banners depicting lesser seats hung from the walls. A thousand ravens, stars, and stripes greeted her whenever she turned her eyes in any particular direction. She did not know them all. She did not know most.

Not a sennight past, we all wore the same colors, she thought, as bile filled her throat. Now we wear them on walls.

All through the room was a hollow din. A thousand voices, maybe more, and not a single one said anything worthwhile. Jon watched her warily, and even Tyrion had not dared say a word this night.

The din died as she set a hand upon the chair’s arm. Slabs of steel slit her skin, but she hardly noticed it as every eye in the hall turned to her. Once, it might have given her pride. Now, with
everything that had befallen her, it only made her heart sink deeper.

“Two days past,” she began, her voice steadier than she might have thought, “a man came into this hall to claim that Arya Stark of Winterfell returned from the dead, only to slay the Night King.” A few scattered laughs came from one corner, while Tyrion and Jon bristled alike. Dany frowned; the laughter died. “I promised that I would tell the realm of the Night King’s killer, after Euron Greyjoy was defeated. Our navies have done their part.”

Several staggered jeers met her then. Some even chanted “Yara Queen!” to the dismay of the Farmans standing beside them, who themselves looked to their lord. The Farmans did not call him king. The Farmans said nothing.

“That man who came to these halls spoke the truth,” Dany said. And, as Jon stiffened, “Arya Stark is alive, and it was she who-”

Her proclamation would go unfinished, for the dull grumble that had once claimed the room had risen to a great roar. A thousand voices coming together to protest, to laugh, to mock. A few scattered voices sought to hush the crowd, but they could scarcely be heard over the clamor.

It took minutes to silence them, and minutes more to stifle out the last few traces of laughter. All the while, Dany heard their jeers.

“Dead,” she heard, and, “A bleedin’ woman. Next they’ll be hailing a damned sheep!” Then, “Seven Hells.” And, “Are they- they saying a fucking wight killed him?”

All the voices blurred together into a cacophony of sound that did nothing more than heat Dany’s heart.

“This is what the dothraki said of me, she remembered. And Meereen, when I was gone. A woman ruler. A woman dead.

“Enough!” she said, loud and angry and fierce. In Meereen, she might have worked to assuage their fears, but now Dany was tired. Tired of tempering the tempers of fools in fine clothes. Tired of tending to their every wit and whim, comforting them when their expectations were trampled, assuring them that she did not mean to change the world. Tired of relenting to men who didn’t deserve it.

I will rule these people, she remembered, and the thought made her vaguely sick. Of all these jeering men, she knew no more than twenty, and she liked even fewer.

“Arya Stark killed the Night King!” She shouted the words, like a herald announcing the coming of a queen. Like Missandei, whose undead chains Arya Stark had broken when Daenerys Stormborn was nowhere to be found.

“And I fucked the King!” said a faceless woman in the crowd. All around her, men burst into laughter, while lords chuckled and bristled alike.

“Enough.” She heard Jon mutter. He did not raise his voice, though, and his gaze was firmly fixed to his boots. He was leaving this to her, and, while she was grateful, she had never been so unhappy to have his esteem.

“Her, and what fucking army?” another screamed.

“Our own!” Dany said, just as furious as she had been not a minute prior. “Every man and woman who fought and died here! Everyone who fought and died in the Vale, and the Riverlands, the
North, beyond the Wall! They were our army.”

She expected more jeers, but instead, the crowd settled. For a moment, she thought them tempered, beaten. But such things were always in short supply, and such hopes were always dashed. From her perch on the throne, she could see why they had stopped. Cloaked men in red were making their way through the people, sparking flames on their fingers to keep them away. All wore their hoods atop their heads, shrouding themselves from view, and yet drawing every eye within a hundred feet.

“The Stormborn speaks it true,” said one, as she reached the front of the lines. She did not speak strongly, yet her voice still carried. Though over a thousand men had packed into the room, not a single one shouted against her, as she blew her flames away. “Azor Ahai has returned to us and has brought an end to the Second Long Night!” There was something else she might have said, but she shook her head and looked to the crowd.

Her words swayed some, it was clear. The high lords with fancy dress and pristine armor seemed to disavow her words, but many others seemed cowered. They had seen the priests and priestesses work their magic in the battle and before it, weaving fire from blood and thin air. They had been dressed by them, armed and armored. Many had their lives saved by R’hllor’s army, while Dany had damned their brothers, sisters, cousins, fathers, wives, husbands, sons, and daughters, who might have all still been inside the city. Even now, many were unaccounted for. Few would ever be found.

And she knew it as well as they did.

When the words were said, it was not Dany they looked to, nor the priests and priestesses, nor Tyrion Lannister, who hovered by her side, her ever-looming shadow. No, instead, they looked to the Starks. Jon and Sansa. Sansa, with the name that marked her as Arya Stark’s sister, and Jon, with the look that did the same.

And, though Dany might have preferred otherwise, it was Sansa who stepped forward, the tail end of her cloak kicking up ash with every step. She looked to the crowd with her eyes steady and her chin high, and said, “My sister returned to us on Dragonstone, alive and well! She was… trained while she was away. When my brother was wounded, my sister, Arya, was able to use it to slay the Night King.”

There were still doubters, it seemed, by the mutters Dany could hear to her right, but others were simply staring. Confused. Lost.

“Arya Stark’s dead,” one called. “They searched for her for weeks.”

“Tore apart m’store!”

“Killed my dog! Just to see if he’d eaten her!”

“Blocked the gates for moons!”

“Where is she then?” one called, louder than all the others. She was stood at the front of them all, on the steps before the Iron Throne, as she had been since they’d first gathered. She faced Sansa, but her eyes were on Dany, and none other. “If it’s as you say, I’d like to meet her.” Yara flashed a smile, and Dany noticed that she was missing teeth since they first met, ages ago, beyond the sea. “I imagine we’d get along well.”

“Recovering,” Jon said, finally breaking his silence.
There were some in the crowd who groaned, others who laughed. Yara merely rolled her eyes and said, “She can recover here as well as wherever you’re hiding her.”

Dany moved to speak, but Sansa was quicker, “My sister needs time to rest. She was wounded in the battle.”

“We were all wounded in the battle,” said a new voice. As Dany watched, the crowd parted for it, and a lithe dark-skinned man dressed in orange and white stepped forward, leaning on a wooden staff as he moved. Around his skull, there was a sea of bandages, covering hair that seemed desperate to poke through each crack. He hardly seemed to notice. “If it is as you say, all who fought in this battle would need time to cower in our beds. How did this undead Stark bring us dawn, and where does she rest now?”

“My sister-”

“I did not ask you,” Prince Martell said. From anyone else, it may have been insulting. From Ryndon Martell, it was merely frank. His eyes were on Dany, and none other. His only answer would come from her. “Few children can kill the gods, and fewer still have the tools to. How, your grace, did she?”

A swell of pride burst in Dany’s chest, while the rest of her scowled. She did not know the answer that would satisfy him, nor could she weigh his intentions. Did he mean to hail the girl? To use her? Arya Stark would be a great prize to any who could get their hands on her. With Arya in their care, any lord would have the attention of all the realm – all the world – and Dany doubted there was a single one in the crowd that saw that fact escape them.

Arya Stark was a hero, it was true, but she could be a tool just as easily. For Jon’s sake, and the sake of the realm, she could not allow that.

“You ask how,” she said. By the look in his eyes, Ryndon noticed her hesitation, though he said nothing of it. “When I first met Arya Stark, she showed me the valyrian steel sword she took from Jaime Lannister’s belt. That is how.”

There was more fervor from the crowd, but Dany was blind to it all. Instead, she saw the interest in Ryndon’s eyes, the delight in Yara’s, the shock in Jon’s, and the anger in Lady Stark’s. She saw nothing in Tyrion’s. Not devastation, not anger, not loss. She did not know what she expected, but it was not this. Not this.

“It is true, your grace?” said another lord – a tall, weasely man with blue towers pinned to his breast. “By your honor, another Stark lives?”

What honor? she wanted to ask, but a Westerosi man spoke first. He was of the smallfolk, dressed in rags and a swineskin cloak, but he was taller than the man in front of him, and broader. He bore a wound above his eye, and a scratch across his throat that reminded Dany of all too many corpses after battle. He had been lucky to get away. Most of them had been.

She might have pitied him, if not for what he said next.

“The word of a Targaryen.” He spat. The man at his front shouted and flinched back, but the first hardly seemed to mind. “There’s your word, dragon.”

A bolt of rage, of fire, of dragon shot through her. How dare he? She had hardly lived a year among the Westerosi, and fewer still in the company of these, and yet, they saw fit to judge her. She, who had served beside them on the battlefield! She, who had saved every one of their lives
and sacrificed her son to do it! She, who had lost more than they would ever gain! Her home, her
family, the last of her bloodline! A bloodline that meant to burn them all... that had launched their
realm into war... that had shed more blood than she would ever know...

And, suddenly, the dragon fled her like water from a river. So sudden, she had not felt it slip
between her fingers.

She wondered which blood had been taken that had driven this man to such ire.

It was Rhaegar, surely, who had brought war to his door. A man blinded by love, who had
trounced off with a girl of noble stock, and wrought more war than the realm could bear. He was
not the first. How many of her ancestors had walked with blood stained beneath their feet? How
many Blackfyre Rebellions? How many petty Dornish wars? How much blood had come with the
dragon’s dances?

She thought of her ancestor, Aegon, who had conquered the Starks and the Lannisters and all those
she had known since settling into this land, though he had not known their culture any better than
she had. She thought of the wars born from his lust for a throne, and the wars born a thousand
times after.

She looked to the crowd. Men who knew her. Men who did not.

Some thought her their rightful queen. Born and bred. Descendent from the blood of the dragon,
rightful heir to the throne.

Some thought her queen by right of conquest. She was the one with the dragons, and that was what
they feared. But Dany did not know if Rhaegal would ever fly again, and perhaps it would be
blood saved if he did not. Perhaps there was a reason the dragons died.

No, she thought, but her heart ached all the same.

They would realize it soon, though. They would see the weakness that had permitted them to
slaughter her father, her brother, her niece and nephew. Perhaps not this day, but in the next, or the
next, or in the years to come.

She looked that man in the eyes – the one who spat and scowled. His face was lined with age, and
his brows were furrowed even tighter. He did not know her. That did not matter. They had not
known Rhaegar either. Not truly.

Her fingers tightened on the end of her bloodied seat. The swords slit her palms, but they were so
sharp that she felt no pain. Instead, all she saw was the red blood dripping down from between her
fingers, clattering to the floor. Even in a room as loud as a storm on the sea, she could hear every
drip and every drop.

She could not help but think of the house, as she watched the red drain down her hand. The big
house with a red door and a lemon tree outside her window. There, she had a room of her own, and
she could visit a place with great wooden beams carved with the faces of animals. A knight had
protected her there, as they had through all her years of war and strife. Her brother had been there,
too, and lavish men in elegant clothes, carrying more gold than she had ever known.

But she did not think of the knight, or her brother, or the elegant men in elegant clothes. Nor did
she think of her room, or the lemon tree, or the beams and the animals. She did not think of days
breathing in the salty airs from the Braavosi sea, or the nights spent counting the stars in the sky,
while Viserys recounted the titles their brother gave to each constellation. She did not think of
being a girl no older than four, of cowering while her brother broke his deals, and the knight fell ill. No, she thought of none of that.

She only thought of that bright red door. As bright as the blood on her hands. Jon came with a cloth to wipe it away, but she waved him off. She did not need his aid. She did not need anyone. Only Rhaegal. Rhaegal and the house with the red door.

With one last clench of her bloodied fists, Dany rose. Slowly and carefully, she stood before the crowd of Westerosi, as the smallfolk whispered, and the high lords hushed, and the red priests stared at her with looks that told her they knew well what she planned to do.

But she did had no plan. Not even then.

It was only when the crowd fell silent that she spoke, words whispered and carried all the same. “I spent much of my life hating the Westerosi. Lions and wolves and stags. My first twenty years, I spent despising them all. I saw in you betrayers, liars, usurper’s dogs. I saw men who cast down my father, who butchered by nephew and my niece, who slaughtered my brother for a crime he did not commit.”

There was an uproar then, from the dornishmen to the rear of the room, screaming of babes and Elia Martell, but Prince Ryndon said nothing and did not move at all. He watched her with cold dark eyes that looked eerily similar to the dornish women that Dany had known once, a lifetime ago.

She frowned, but she did not take her eyes from Prince Ryndon, until Jon caught her gaze on the steps. He mouthed something to her, but Dany had never learned to read lips well, and it was no help to her then.

Instead, she went on, “But I see now that I was wrong. One of my closest friends fought for the North and now lies wounded in the course of serving it and me. One of my greatest advisors has a lion on his crest. My-” She shut her eyes and breathed. “Jon was born a wolf of Winterfell. I fought besides stags and wolves and lions alike, and they have fought beside me. I was raised – born – to be the blood of the dragon. To kill all those who despise us, to paint the land with fire and blood.”

Some nights, she could still see Viserys, hovering over her and screaming of fire and blood and a dragon awoken. She would wake screaming, though the nightmare was long passed, and her brother was dead. Their line would end with her.

She smiled, a sad, lost smile. “But when my son died, when my dragons died, it was not fire and blood that aided me. It was a lion and a griffin and a bear and a stag and all those I cannot name, who died at my side all the same.”

“My queen-” Tyrion began, but Dany did not hear, and Dany did not care.

“Today, I stand in the shadow of those who have come before me. Aegon the Conquerer, Maegor the Cruel, Jaehaerys the Wise, Aegon the Unworthy, the Unlikely, the Mad King Aerys.” That name carried with it cheers from some and hisses from others. Dany cleared her throat and cleared her mind of all but this. “But that shadow is painted red, and I cannot name it all dragonfire.

“My sigil was painted with the blood of Westeros. The blood of Starks, of Lannisters, Martells, Baratheons, Greyjoys, Tullys, Tyrells, and all those who serve with them or beneath them.” Her eyes darted from face to face as she named off their houses. None seemed to understand, save for Sansa Stark, who watched her with a shuttered smile, and Tyron Lannister, who watched with horror. “They ruled for thousands of years before me and mine, and they will rule for thousands
after.”

All the hisses and jeers and laughter bled away in that moment. Even the least astute fell silent, sensing, perhaps, the history that would be made in this moment, the legacy she would leave behind her.

None at all.

She smiled, and a decade of fears, losses, and pain swept away with the current.

“It was Arya Stark who saved this realm from the White Walkers,” she told them. “It was Yara Greyjoy who saved us from her mad uncle. It was Tyrion Lannister who aided me in Meereen and beyond, serving the people of Westeros all the while. It was Olenna Tyrell who offered aid in deposing the tyrant Cersei from this throne. It was Stannis Baratheon.” It took all the strength she had to force out the name. “-who was the first to send his men to the Wall to battle the White Walkers. It was Lord Tully who-” She paused, when she realized that she had never been told exactly what he’d done. “-defended his people after the Red Wedding.”

Jon’s mouth had fallen open, Yara Greyjoy was grinning, Ryndon Martell with her. In truth, only Edmure Tully seemed displeased. The rest were staring with eyes wide, with eyes hardly seeing at all. None of them could have expected this. None could have dreamed of it.

“When I was queen in Meereen, I swore to break the wheel that was crushing Westeros. The wheel of ancient houses that set fire to the realm and broke apart the realm that my ancestors built.” She shut her eyes, and thought of Aegon, staring down at her from the eyes of a dragon. And, for the first time in her life, she ignored his fury and his greed. “But it was not that wheel that crushed this realm. It was not the wheel of Houses that rule tiny fragments of a land as large as the Dothraki Sea. They, who knew their people. Who fought beside them, lived beside them. It was a different wheel. A wheel that I supported, and one that could spin with all the spokes broken, for all it needs to move is the rim. I spent years looking to the spokes, when I should have seen the rim, the hub, the rest.

“This realm is larger than any man could walk.” Many of the Northerners had never seen a southerner before the White Walkers came. From what she had seen of them, they worshipped different gods, sung different songs in their halls than the singers of the south. Now, they were gone. But the rest remained, and the rest deserved the chance they hadn’t gotten. “I could roam the length of Meereen and back between dawn and dusk, and even that was too large to lead. I did not know my people. There were too many.”

The faces of thousands of people – lords and smallfolk and ladies and men at arms – stared at her. She knew so few, even now. So very few. It felt like all she could think of, even as the words fell from her tongue like the sweetest of poisons.

“I am not my ancestors.” Not Aegon or Visenya or Jaehaerys, or Rhaenys or Aerys. “But perhaps that is good. They wanted for power. For a throne. They wanted to build a land of glory,” she told them, “but dragons plant no trees.

“And yet…”

Daenerys Targaryen looked to the floor, and then to the skies. Her mouth was dry as a desert day. Like she was wandering in the Red Waste again, and all she could see were faces and darkness. She wanted to leave them midway through, to take off on a dragon’s wings, to travel the world and pretend that she would never need to say these words.
But her sons were dead, her destiny died with them, and she had burned the city her bloodline had built.

How long ago had it been that Kinvara called her the Princess who was Promised? I never wanted to be a princess. I wanted to be safe.

In the crowd, they gawked and called and cried, as the words slipped her tongue. She did not hear a single one, but they all heard hers. With a great trembling breath, she spoke the words loud and true:

“There is no one man or woman who should rule Seven Kingdoms,” Daenerys Targaryen, First of her Name, Breaker of Chains, and Mother of Dragons, said to the city Aegon Targaryen had built.

And then the crowd screamed.

Chapter End Notes

So, normally, my chapter-specific notes are about four lines each. Just a summary of what’ll be in the chapter. The title, I’ll come up with after I finish the chapter, right before I move into the next. Some huge events (NK’s death, Arya’s second death, the reunion) get a section of notes dedicated to them. Prewritten scenes, quotes I’ve come up with long before I get to writing it, anything I might get too excited to wait for.

This chapter had a page and a half of notes in the summary section, and an entire section that probably made up 1/10th of my notes. I have over many, many pages of notes. This was a big ’un, folks, and the one that plunged me right out of my writer’s block (before I plunged back in… I mean what?)

As for the elephant in the room (cue Cersei), ie, everyone hoping for the grand old Targaryen restoration… sorry, but no. Jonerys is still going to be one of the two main ships in this story, but I’m also trying to stick with the characterizations of these guys, and I just can’t see a non-mad Dany actually wanting to sit the throne after something as devastating as this. At the core of her character, all she ever wanted was that house with the red door. The throne was Viserys’ dream, while Dany just dreamed of home. And home isn’t what she pictured it to be, nor what she wants. Dany wants a family, not this. She doesn’t want to deal with all the problems she faced in Meereen. She doesn’t want to be bound by lords and lordlings. And, after everything she’s suffered, I’m inclined to give her, and the others, a bit of what they want.

I mean, like Jon said, “Love was the death of duty. But now, the duty was done, and now [she] could love.”

Anyway, time to check out some fallout of Dany’s decision. Let’s check in one someone who was absolutely always supposed to have this POV, and I definitely never changed it because I hit writer’s block again. (sweats nervously). Sansa Stark, come on down!

(Also, if anyone wants to read the section I cut from the POV I definitely didn’t cut from the next chapter, I’ll be posting it on my tumblr: igitnothing)
Chapter Forty-Six: A Wooden Crown

The Red Keep

Sansa Stark

The winds of winter sung through the halls of the Red Keep. Solemn songs that they sang in the night, and happy tunes as the sun rose over the black horizon, where burned ships sailed aimlessly in the seas. It seemed that even the gods welcomed the light’s return, and, with it, the return of kings and queens and kingdoms of their own. Uncrowned, but honored all the same.

Some had already fled, intent to claim their seats as their ancestors had a dozen lifetimes ago, before the Targaryens had taken what was theirs and turned it into dragon-feed. Arstan Selmy had been one, and he had gone as soon as the sun rose after Daenerys’ proclamation. The Stormlords were a proud people, but, with Houses Dondarrion and Baratheon extinguished, few held a better claim than Selmy. There might be squabbling later, Sansa knew, but Selmy would hold his crown. He and a dozen other petty kings.

Lord Farman, the King of the Reach, was another who had left for his pastures. “If we’re to survive winter, our lands will need tending,” he told them, “and Highgarden will need purging.” And then, he had ridden, leaving behind only a few loyal vassals to speak for him. Sansa doubted they would ever meet again.

Her uncle Edmure would ride soon too, she knew. The Riverlords already hailed him king, though he stuttered with every word and could hardly hold a sword. The smallfolk loved him, it was said, and, though Sansa could see little reason why, she would offer him her support. The bond of blood was hard to break. It was half of the reason he was still here. He, Jon, and the bastard smith seemed to cycle from Arya’s bedside, standing guard, though she already had more guards than Sansa could count. Somehow, it didn’t feel like enough. Every time she was in that room, the maester toiling at her sister’s side, it felt like something was boiling underneath it all, soon to reach the surface.

Half the realm was vying to be by their savior’s side, and the other half, well, Sansa had heard them scheming more than once. Twice, the guards had spotted Ironborn scaling the walls of Arya’s turret. Once, a Dornishman had even tried to come through the door. There had been no bloodshed as of yet, and, though Lord Edmure had doubled the guard, Sansa was not sure they could even trust the guards.

Arya’s name was worth more than all the rest put together now. More than the kings and queens,
more than the lords and ladies, more than all the Essosi nobles that vied for her attention. More
than, perhaps, the fallen dragon’s bones, though Sansa knew that its scales were selling for more
than the cost of enough food to feed them for however long the winter might last.

There were other dragons. Dragons in history and one that lived on Dragonstone. There had never
been another who had killed the Night King. Her scarred sister – the little girl who’d once collected
poisoned berries the way Sansa had her dolls – was worth more than them all.

Sansa might have been compelled to press that advantage, but Jon had refused her every time she
tried.

“She needs time,” he would tell her, looking for all the world like a lost child. “A few days. Gods,
Sansa, she can’t even talk yet. You can’t expect her to…”

But Sansa knew well how a few days could turn to a few weeks, and weeks to months to years.
Too many times, she had sworn to herself that rescue was a few days away. But rescue never came.

And now, as she waited for her sister to recover, she chose to spend her time on more useful
ventures. Though the North held too few people to bestow upon her a crown, she sought alliances
anyway. They would need them in the games to come.

That was how she found herself on a balcony overlooking the rocky shores of the Blackwater.
Snow drizzled lightly, but the roof was enough to shield her from most of the slush. Only the wind
and the splashing seas could truly touch her, as frozen water speckled her and the cold gusts caught
on her skin. Somehow, it made her colder than her days Winterfell had, before the Night King had
brought his armies to meet them. To tear them apart.

And, though the bitter winds drove Sansa to shivers, it held no such effect over Lady Greyjoy. She
was sat on the balcony, legs swaying aimlessly over the rocks gathered below. She stared at the
waters, while she stuffed an onion in her mouth, as blind to the rest of the world as Sansa had been
as a child.

“We’ve done it,” she heard Lady Greyjoy say to the sea, wistful in all the ways Sansa had never
heard her. “Can’t say you were much a help.”

Sansa stepped forward. Below, the waves lapped at the rocks and showered Greyjoy all the while.
A faint breeze caught Sansa’s hair, pulling the strands from her eyes, but sprinkling her with hail,
too. She wanted to retreat back inside, but she hadn’t a choice. This needed to be done.

can’t imagine they’ll be in the Hall very long.” She hung her head and took a breath. A long,
shuddering breath. “In a few moons, I will sit the Seastone Chair. And your Starks will sit their
own. Whatever’s left of it.” She grit her teeth, said the name as Joffrey once had, and as Ramsay
never had. Sansa’s name dripped from her tongue like pure venom. Sometimes, she wondered if
Yara hadn’t killed her uncle with her teeth, instead of the axe the Farmans spoke to.

More than anything, Sansa wanted to back away, to retreat to where the halls were warmer and the
company friendlier. But she had to be braver than that. She needed to be as brave as Robb in the
Whispering Wood, as brave as Jon in the Battle of the Bastards, as brave as Arya at the ruins of the
Sept. War was their domain. This was her own, and she needed to be just as strong as them.

Lady Greyjoy’s voice had fallen to a whisper, but there was nothing to mask her. The birds had
long since fled this place, and they had taken their songs with them. It would be a long while
before they returned. “I have men scouring the kingdoms. For you. Only you. If you weren’t fool
enough to burn, we’ll take you to the sea. What is dead may never die.” She paused, waiting for an answer that would never come.

She might have gone on longer, but Sansa could not bear to hear any more. She moved forward, keeping her steps light, but not bothering to mask the sounds of her breath or the sounds her cloak made as it brushed the stone.

Yara’s hand went to her axe. She swung her legs back over the railing. She landed in a crouch, bearing her teeth, but did not yet draw her blade. That was good. If they were to be allies, it would be best not to have her bear steel in their first true meeting as representatives. As rulers.

“Lady Greyjoy,” Sansa greeted her, warmly enough. “I doubt you’ll be needing that. I come in peace.”

Yara sighed and took her hand away from the hilt. It was smaller than any axe Sansa had ever seen, but she supposed that was to be expected. A woman’s hand was made for smaller tools. Arya’s sword had been small, too, she remembered.

“I’m disappointed,” she scoffed. “Here I thought you came to fight in that.”

Sansa scowled. There was nothing wrong with her dress. It was one of Margaery’s. Sansa had found it stashed away in Joffrey’s chambers, and, as such, Sansa wore the Tyrell rose on her breast. Her dress hung past her ankles and hugged both of her arms, shielding the pink skin from sight. The dress trailed behind her, much like the cloak she wore at all times these days. It was too cold, and she was too burned, for anything else.

“I came to discuss the future of our realms,” Sansa told her, careful to keep herself from snapping. “I imagine you will be the Queen of the Iron Islands, and, given the history between our Houses, I thought it might be best to—”

“The history between our Houses?” Lady Greyjoy said. “Killing two of my brothers and taking another hostage, you mean?”

Sansa frowned. “Theon was—”

“Ned Stark’s hostage. Your father, was it? Do remind me. I never did take to current events.”

“Theon Greyjoy was a friend to House Stark,” Sansa said, through her teeth.

“And I am Yara Greyjoy. You’ll find my brother and I hadn’t the same mind.”

“Your father hadn’t either. And it was his war that took your brothers, not my father’s.” She shut her eyes and let slip the one jab that would hurt them both most. “If not for that, you would have all three of your brothers.” And I would never have known Theon. Thank the Seven for your father. And curse him to all the Seven Hells.

Lady Greyjoy put her back to her, and instead looked to the sea. The growing tide slapped the stones and splashed her with every coming wave. She paid it no mind. She had lived in wetter places, surely. Warmer, but wetter.

“I do not come to make enemies, Lady Greyjoy,” Sansa said, when the tensions had eased some. “The realm fares better when the Houses of Greyjoy and Stark – when the Crowns of Winter and Grey – are at peace.”

“You want peace?” Lady Greyjoy said, tracing her thumb over the head of her axe. “Aye, I’ll speak
Lady Greyjoy did not let her finish. “It would be nice to meet a fellow Kingslayer, don’t you think?”

Sansa blinked. She was almost too baffled to be annoyed. “What?”

“You speak with the Slayer of Euron Greyjoy.” She said it proudly, as if kinslaying was a blessing, instead of a sin. The greatest sin. “A failed king, I’ll be the first to admit, but he wore the crown all the same.”

Sansa was shaking her head. In her shock, all her courtesies had fled her. “None of us have killed a kin—” This time, it was not Lady Greyjoy who interrupted her. She did it on her own. “Arya.”

Arya, who’d killed a king with a valyrian sword, and died for it. Arya, who should have had a dagger. Arya, who might have been able to walk and talk and help, if not for that. Sansa sent her sister into the War for the Dawn, and she’d taken her dagger to do it.

She took a breath. Not now.

Lady Greyjoy grinned. “How many women can say they’ve entertained the Bringer of Dawn?”

“Entertained?”

“Tell me, does she share your look or the bastard’s? Theon never spoke much of her.” She tilted her head and brought up a hand to sway through the air, like a leaf in the wind. “Or you, come to think of it.”

Some things cut deeper than knives and burns alike. Some insults poured into the soul and festered there, heavy wounds that would never heal. Some pains were blacker than her arm had been after the Eyrie, when the skin fell in chunks, and she had been so unbearably sure that it would kill her.

But Sansa had survived many pains, and this was just another.

She lies, she told herself, until she could almost believe it. Almost.

“He never mentioned you either,” Sansa told the ungrateful queen. “He used to talk about his brothers, and his father, and the ironborn way, but never his sister.” It was no lie. Theon never liked to speak of the living, save his father. She had never heard him mention his mother, either.

“We’re a private people,” Greyjoy said, quickly. “And I thought we were speaking of your sister, not Theon’s.”

This was where the begging came, she knew. Where the lords and ladies would prostrate themselves to speak to the savior of the realm, though her sister could hardly speak a word, her face looked as if it was colored with bloody dung, and she refused to release her sword, even if all the guards in the realm hovered by the door. There were some things Sansa would be happy to let the world see. Her sister was not one.
“Arya’s… recovering.”

Greyjoy grinned. “I can be gentle.”

Disgust flooded through her just as the relief had earlier, before Greyjoy had stomped it with a petty jab. “Queen Yara-”

“Not queen. Yet.”

“Lady Yara,” she said, instead. “You would do well to have friends in the North.”

The Greyjoy only laughed. “Would I? And which friends would that be?”

“She Greyjos.”

Another laugh. It sent fire through Sansa’s frozen heart.

“Ah, yes, the mighty House in the North. Let me know how many armies you’ll raise. How many ships you’ll build. How many men you’ll find to sail them.”

None, she thought. It was a reality she’d been hoping to deny for longer, but it seemed she would have to face it all the same.

“My House has been in a worse—”

“Really? Have you? What are there- two Houses left in the North? Wolves and frog hunters?” She scoffed. “The Iron Islands has more Houses than you have men. You need my allegiance, Stark.” She looked back to the seas. Her seas, now. “I don’t need yours.”

Sansa’s frown turned to a scowl as her mask slipped away. “It took one Stark to conquer the Riverlands,” she reminded the Greyjoy, as fire flooded through her. “One of us to reconquer the North. Two of us to take back Winterfell. One of us to kill the Night King.” The Greyjoy turned, and Sansa met her gaze with fury. “And one Stark to defeat the Greyjos. House Stark will stand strong. As it always has.”

If she thought that might cow the Greyjoy, she was sorely mistaken. “One Stark and an army.” She shrugged. “But mayhaps you’re right. House Stark will stand strong, so long as you have the bastard and the Kingslayer.” She cocked her head, grinning a horrible grin. “And how long do you think you’ll have them?”

Jon is already gone, she thought, in spite of herself. He and Daenerys… But Arya would stay. Arya had nowhere else to go, but Winterfell.

No, that wasn’t true, was it? Everyone in all the seven kingdoms would take her. Everyone in the world. A hundred suitors had come and gone, and none had even seen her face. Gods, she’d heard some of them calling for Arya to be Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, even after Daenerys’ proclamation.

They hadn’t told her yet. They hadn’t told her anything.

Suddenly, Sansa felt more alone than she had been since she had returned to Winterfell, only to find Theon in the kennels and cruelty in her husband. More alone than she was when the kindly old woman was flayed and hung. Since Jon had left her to fight his battle. Since she had been trapped in the crypts, and the Eyrie, and Tumbleton. Lonely as a woman in a battlefield. It seemed she was never allowed to leave it.
“Jon and Arya will not abandon the North,” she lied. “I would look to my own shores, if I were you, Lady Greyjoy. I heard many hailed your uncle.”

Greyjoy smiled. “Is this about me now? Here I thought it was about your sister.” She turned back from Sansa, and strode back into the Keep. Without looking back, she shouted, “Send her my message. I’d like to know what it’s like to lay with the Bringer of Dawn. Warm, I’d wager.”

And then, she was gone, before Sansa could say another word. It seemed she would have to find other allies than the Iron Islands. Whoever rose to claim the shattered remnants of the Vale, perhaps. Tyrion would surely take her side, wouldn’t he? And the Dornish had never been cruel to the Starks. According to Jon, one had even died for him by the Sept. Him and Arya.

The realm owed them. For the things they suffered, the wars they’d led, the creature in the night that the Stark name had slain. They owed them Winterfell. They owed them the North. They owed them peace. And Sansa would do everything within her power to get it.

She thought of going to Arya’s chambers, but something stilled her feet. It was a difficult thing, to see her family like that. For so many years, she had thought it gone, and now it was. Sansa was the only Stark who had lived through this night. All the rest had died. Jon, Arya, Robb, Bran, Rickon, Mother, Father, even Aunt Lysa and Sweetrobin. She was the last of them. Each and every time she stood in their presence, she remembered that. That she had been the one to get out alive, and all the rest were dead. It hurt like a pain she had never known before, and hoped to never know again, though she knew it would ache for all the rest of her days.

She could not turn back time. She could not travel back to the days before the war. She could not save their lord father, stop the bloody wedding, and the Battle of the Bastards, and the Battle of Winterfell. She could not save the Eyrie and the North and King’s Landing and everything else that had been lost along the way. She could do nothing of the sort.

But she could ensure a future for their House. She could find safety for Arya, a place for Jon, a purpose for her bird of a brother, who roosted above the Red Keep even now.

Instead of going to her sister, she went to a chamber near enough to her that it hardly mattered. A chamber that had once housed Joffrey, and King Robert before him. A chamber now adorned with the red and black of House Targaryen, and the three-headed dragon that covered every hall in Dragonstone.

The guards let her pass unabated. There were only three of them, and none that had followed the dragon from Winterfell. It seemed the unsullied and dothraki alike had been lost in the wars. Perhaps that was why she had given up the throne. Without her dragon and without her armies, she had no way to hold it.

Clever, Sansa thought, as she knocked, once, twice, three times. They would have killed you, but now all the realm will love you, and all the stories too. All the realm, save for the Tarlys, of course, but their House was gone. Even Jon’s friend had died in Winterfell.

Too many Houses had been lost to this war.

She waited by the door for a minute, perhaps two, before the lock unlatched and the former queen met her in the frame. She was a haggard creature, to be sure. Her eyes were lined, her silver hair unmanaged, and her wounds had only just begun to heal. Her face was a cacophony of yellows and blacks clashing so unbearably, as her many bruises fought for dominance across her skin.

Sansa’s own bruises were only along her thighs. She had ridden for hours, saddle sore and
agonized, but riding all the same, because her sister might be dead and her brother, too, and it hardly seemed real at all, but she needed to go anyway, because she needed to know. She needed to.

And now, every step hurt like it had in Winterfell, the second time, only somehow better. Because this time, she had ridden to find happiness. In those days, she had only ridden to more and more pain.

But she could not bear to dwell on those things as Daenerys Targaryen stood before her, clad in armor instead of a dress, and wearing clumsy braids instead of a crown.

Sansa bowed her head all the same.

“Lady Sansa?” Daenerys said. It was not the proper address, but Sansa said nothing of it. “Did Jon send you?”

*I can come on my own*, Sansa thought, angrily, but she knew it wasn’t fair. She had never sought out Daenerys of her own accord before. Perhaps the dragon was right to be confused. “No,” she said, instead. “I came to talk.” *As we did before, in Winterfell, when you took my hand and I drove you off.*

Daenerys waved her inside, and, though Sansa was hesitant, she stepped into Joffrey’s quarters for the first time. Before, she had shied away, ever careful to stay on the other side of the castle, where Joffrey could not be tempted to drag her inside and leave her tainted.

Then, she had always imagined the room would be lined with stags and lions. Gold, red, and black would line every wall, and cover the bedsheets where the bastard boy slept. She imagined blood lining the floors, splattered on the roof, staining every golden curtain Lannister red. She had always thought that his bedside would be lined with heads tarred and spiked, each face staring at Joffrey as terrified and lost as they had been in life and ever-trapped in death. She imagined bastard corpses on his dresser, and a closet lined with more Lannister gold than any man could know what to do with.

But Joffrey was dead, and, if ever those things did exist, Tommen had cleared them all away. Now, the walls were gold and black. Now, the floors had been scrubbed clean. Now, the curtains had been replaced. Now, there were no heads, no corpses, no bastard boys. Only Daenerys Targaryen, dressed in armor that did not bear a single dragon, and looking as tired as a corpse.

There was a table in the corner, by the window, where the glare of a forgotten sun shed light across a place that had not known it for so terribly long. There, Daenerys led her, looking none-too-pleased as she did.

They sat in two of six chairs, each as comfortable as a featherbed. After the riding, it soothed Sansa’s pains like nothing else ever had.

A flagon of wine greeted Sansa as she sat. It was already half empty, and the red flush across Daenerys’ face clearly spoke to why. Sansa poured her own cup and drank eagerly.

It seemed that neither of them knew how to start. Sansa was drinking her wine as Cersei had once, dainty and proper and careful. Daenerys was not nearly so cautious. She drank the way Tyrion did—heavily, quickly, angrily—and simply wiped away the stains on her lips with her hand. Arya did that too, Sansa remembered, though she was somehow even less graceful. It was the one thing that hadn’t changed.
In the end, it was Daenerys who broke the silence, her voice no more than a whisper, but as loud as a horn’s blow in the room’s silence. “Have you and Jon discussed your plans to settle the North?”

Sansa tilted her head. “Somewhat,” she said, honestly. “We intend to offer refuge to the people who lost their homes here, in the Vale, the Riverlands. Any survivors.”

Daenerys smiled. “Good. They’ll have somewhere to go then. I was... wondering.”

They fell into another silence. It was no lighter than the last.

Outside, Sansa watched Bran soar in circles over a turret. He roosted most often across this one, where Jon, Arya, and Sansa all lived and slept. He could also be seen by the Maidenvault at times, hovering over the last survivors of the North – crannogmen, scattered mountain men, and a few members of the smallfolk who had escaped the massacre in Winterfell and beyond.

He might have been their king, she realized. Had he lived, he would have been. The Cripple King of the North. But Bran was dead and Jon was a bastard.

*It can be me*, she thought, madly. And then, she thought of a little girl from Winterfell, dreaming of knights and dragons and boys with blonde hair and gallant natures. The girl who wanted to be queen more than anything else. Who thought she was entitled to it, simply by virtue of her hair and her gentle nature and her oh-so-practiced courtesies. *Have I earned it? Have any of us?*

“Lady Sansa, you came to speak with me?” Daenerys said, as suspicious as Sansa had been, a lifetime ago in Winterfell, when Daenerys had taken her hand and spoken oh-so-softly. The two of them were similar in the worst ways and different in their best. Sansa hated it.

She pursed her lips, before she realized she was doing it. She tried to school her face, but it took too long, and Daenerys must have seen. But Daenerys was a queen in the way Sansa always wanted to be, and she was too graceful to speak of it.

“I was wrong,” Sansa said, through her teeth.

Whatever the Targaryen expected to hear, that was not it, for her eyes went wide and her shaking hands stilled around her cup. “What?”

“About you. I thought that all you wanted was to steal our home from us, and everything we fought for, and... Jon.”

Her face softened some. “I mean no harm to your family,” Daenerys promised her. “You and yours are safe.”

Once, that might have brought comfort to Sansa. Now, it only made her frown. There was no safety, and they both knew it.

“And yours?” Sansa said. “I hear Ser Jorah-”

“-is fine,” Daenerys said, through her own teeth now.

*Fine with a festering wound*, Sansa thought. *If only we could all be so lucky.*

“The maester is with him,” the dragon went on.

It was no more true than the thought of Jorah’s good health. The maester spent more time with Arya than he ever did with Jorah Mormont, in truth. It seemed he wasted away his days prodding at
The wounds at her throat, and the ones on her belly. Muttering on and on about miraculous survivals and scientific marvels, and how he only wished she would drink the poppy milk so he might study it further. On the one occasion Sansa had seen him with Jorah, he had been just as useless, picking at scaly scars for no more than a quarter hour, before returning to Arya’s side and lathering honey on her throat.

*It’s always about Arya,* she thought, and just as soon hated herself for thing it. *Arya saved the world, and what did I do, besides sitting in a castle far away, feeling sorry for myself.*

There was more to be done. Always more. And she would do it.

Daenerys went on talking, but Sansa did not here. She was too busy thinking, planning, preparing. Rehearsing her mother’s words in her head, like she once had done the songs of old.


She would fulfill all three. On her duty as a Stark and a Tully alike, she would. By the gods of her mother and the old gods beyond counting, she would.

And she knew just how to do it. It would only take time. Thanks to Jon, Arya, and Daenerys, they had all that, and more.

Chapter End Notes

Yara: Let me at least try to fuck this frozen grotesque traumatized corpse of a woman, or so help me, I will fuck off to Pike, not bother you at all, and take the ironmen with me!
Sansa: um… cool?

So the ink has barely dried on Dany’s proclamation, and our old schemers are back to scheming. Sansa’s building alliances and breaking down others, all the while holding onto the thought that she has the Bringer of Dawn tied to House Stark by blood and allegiance. The politics are growing in Prince, and, unsurprisingly, the Prince That Did (Finally) Come is at the center of it all.

Fun fact: This was actually originally a Yara POV. If you want, you can head over to my tumblr to see the opening monologue that would’ve led into her prayer. It might be reused someday, but I doubt that very much.

Anyway, prime yourselves for another schemer as he tries to navigate this post-Kingdom of Westeros world.
Chapter Notes

This time, I’m actually aware it’s Wednesday. Posting early for various reasons, so enjoy the update!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Forty-Seven: Kinslayer

The Red Keep

Tyrion Lannister

The lords of the Westerlands were a proud people, and fierce too. They wore their sigils as lesser men wore armor, and they carried their swords every which way. The smiles of the women were often painted on, and the ferocious glares of their husbands just as manufactured. They were as proud as they were false, and it was a thing that had angered his brother more than Tyrion wished to remember.

Jaime had been proud, too. Then they’d taken his sword, taken his hand, and left him to be cut down by a little girl in a man’s clothes.

Oh, how the mighty fall further and further, once they have begun to fall at all. Jaime had been born heir to Casterly Rock, and he had died a cripple with no one to bury him.

The Westerlords wore Jaime’s arrogance on their shoulders. They were too proud to kneel to a dwarf king, but Tyrion, too, was too proud to bow. And, though he wore no crown and stood no taller than even the youngest of their surviving sons, Tyrion was his father’s son in every way that mattered. His shadow stretched further than the Wall, and it was tall as a king.

Tyrek was dead. Jaime too, and Cersei, and all the many rest who might have come to usurp this crown from him. Cousin after cousin had fallen and rotted, and Tyrion was the last in the line of Lann the Clever. Should he bear no bastard son, his wretched name would die with him, and the realm would be all the better for it.

But Tyrion was no hero, and Tyrion did not wish to see his line die. No, he wished to see it stretch for thousands of years, and he wished to see it stem from him. Tywin Lannister’s perfect wretch of a son. The dwarf who had risen to a throne. The dwarf who sat a seat far more comfortable than his lord father had ever borne, and who had earned it all of his own accord. He need not spill the blood of castles to earn it. He need only live and love and learn.

Lord Tywin would never have allied himself with a Targaryen. Not after he had shed the blood of babes on the walls of their father’s keep. Not after he had sworn himself to the Stag King, after he had wed his daughter to the man, had her bear bastards in his name.

Tywin Lannister’s disappointment of a son had returned the seat of the Kings of the Rock to his House. The Imp had earned what 300 years of Lannister trickery had failed to do. Now, all he had
to do was remind the Westerlords of that victory, and he would have the crown for himself.

Some things were easier said than done.

They were gathered in an atrium, so that any vagrant hiding on the rooves could hear Tyrion’s remarks. The Spider would have been proud of him. His father would have been revolted.

“My lords!” he called, as loud as he had been when the Blackwater was aflame. The first time, at least. “I am Tyrion, son of Tywin, heir to Casterly Rock, and last in the line of Lann!”

“We know who you are, Imp,” one of the lords – Spicer, by the three pepper pots on his hauberk – said.

Tyrion smiled. “Then you know why I’ve called you here.” Then, louder, “The seat of Casterly Rock is mine by rights, and with it, the Lion’s Crown!”

“Will it fit your head?” This one, he could not see, but he would take care to remember all the faces that laughed. There were many. Too many.

They would respect him as they had his grandfather, then. It was no matter. Tywin had earned their ire along with their respect. Tyrion could earn both just as well as his lord father had. His aunt always did say that Tyrion was more his father’s son than Jaime had ever been. Much as it disgusted them both at the time, Tyrion appreciated it now; Tywin would never be mocked.

“Your father would not have allowed this,” said Lord Turnberry, as if any man cared for the opinions of a Turnberry.

“My father is dead,” Tyrion reminded them all.

He imagined that it would calm the fuming crowd. That the reminder would bring them peace, show them that they were safe from his father’s cruelty, his callous disregard for their lives and welfare. That they would never have to fear the Rains of Castamere again, for Tyrion would rebuild instead of destroy. He thought that it would help.

It was the first major political miscalculation he made that day.

He had forgotten, for a moment, who’d killed Tywin Lannister. And, just as quickly, he’d forgotten who had given the Westerlands the first ruling Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, before Tyrion had ever dared return.

He had forgotten. The Westerlords did not.

“Aye!” one shouted, Lord Bettley. “He is!”

“So say the kinslayer!” said another, Ser Swyft.

Tyrion tried to defend himself, but his voice could carry no further than the shouts of the lords. They called him Imp, kinslayer, wretched refuse of the gods! They might have spat on him, if he were any other man.

*The Lannister name saves me again*, Tyrion thought, irritably. “I have made a great many mistakes in life,” he told them, once their screams had quieted some, “but that was not one.” He studied their faces, as they erupted again. This time, he was louder than them all. “Have you forgotten what he did in Castamere? Do you forget the Reynes and the Tarbecks so quickly?”
“Your father made the Westerlands strong, boy,” spat a knight of Stackspear. In his father’s day, a knight of an inconsequential House would not have dared speak to a Lannister at all. Now, he thought himself as tall as a king.

He wasn’t.

“My father was a butcher,” Tyrion said. “How many men died for Tywin Lannister?”

“They died for the West!” cried Lord Lanny.

“They died for his pride.” And, though the roar rose again, Tyrion was once more louder than them all. “You claim that I dishonored myself? That the gods disdain when they see me? What would they think of him? Do the gods smile upon the breach of guest right? Do you think they cheered as my father arranged for Robb Stark’s head to be carved from his shoulders?”

That quieted them some.

“It was the Freys,” Lord Kyndall said, though he did not sound sure. “And they paid the price. The Stranger took them all.”

_Arya Stark took them all_, he thought. He was grateful. Had it been any other of her guild, he would have feared for his safety, but he doubted she would be taking him anytime soon. His friendship with Sansa and Jon would, at the very least, save him from that. Well, that and the girl’s injuries. He had cornered the unchained maester that had supposedly been tending to her and Ser Jorah, and the man had been as grim as any he had known. “It is as likely as not neither of them survive,” the maester had explained, when Tyrion asked when the girl would be fit to leave the city. He was grateful. King’s Landing would be much more manageable without her in it.

He shook his head to clear it and addressed the petulant lords. “A Faceless Man took the Freys, and I took my father. The Father works through us all.”

He saw eyes roll from several. They, he knew, understood Tyrion’s own opinion of the gods. Others simply disdained to hear word of the Seven working through an imp. Others still seemed keen to disagree just to disagree.

“Father or not,” he heard one shout, “a kinslayer is no king!”

Tyrion laughed, loud and booming and fake. “No,” he said, “only a queen. Or did you forget how my sweet sister dealt with her son’s wife? Where did Tommen go, I wonder? And how did the Westerlands answer my sister’s crimes?”

It hurt like poison to speak of Tommen as no more than a passing tool, but it was a point that needed making if he was to be accepted. He was not his father’s father. He would not be mocked by charlatans and turncoats. He would not be mocked by any.

“Lord Tyrek had a plan for your sister,” one called, but then came a roar of voices louder than any Tyrion had heard since the Battle of the Blackwater.

“Then Lord Tyrek was just as much a kinslayer!”

“They were hardly related!”

“They shared a name!”

“I share a name with the Lannisters of Casterly Rock! Does that make me a bleedin’ lion? I hope
so! I’ll take their damned gold!”

“My mother used to say I had the honor of an Arryn. Does that mean I can have the Eyrie?”

“They were blood!”

“They were cousins. It’s nothing like killing a father.”

“She was a kinslayer, wasn’t she?”

“By the gods, the whole House is!”

It was true, he realized, suddenly. They were a family of abominations. Tyrion had killed his father and his mother, his father had been ready to kill him, Cersei had dragged Tommen to his death, and Jaime was said to have done worse in Robb Stark’s cage. Only Tommen and Myrcella had been innocent among them, and they had died with all the rest.

Gods, somehow Tyrion was the best of them. Tyrion, who had destroyed an entire fleet with mummerly and wildfire. Tyrion, who had prostrated himself to the first ruler he saw. Who had damned every last man and woman in King’s Landing twice over!

But Jaime had thrown a boy of 10 from a window, and never said a word to deny it. Cersei had destroyed the Sept of Baelor with her good-daughter still inside, and so many more. Tywin had destroyed the Reynes and the Tarbecks for no more than his pride and their taxes.

“And who are you?” the proud lord said, “that I must bow so low?”

What legacy had the lions left for Westeros? Blood and betrayal. A bloody wedding, drowned halls, fire across the Riverlands and fire across King’s Landing.

Their family had all born the same coat. Gold and red, bright and angry. And they had torn each other to pieces.

We betray the gods, Tyrion thought, and the gods send us their answers.

Daenerys had given her crown away in the face of a truth like this. The Targaryens, too, had brought naught to the realm but more fire and more blood. There was enough of both already. The Lannisters had given more than their share.

She had been right to split the kingdoms, he knew, even if she did not know the true benefit. A truly centralized power could never coordinate with so few survivors. Given time, the throne would simply be ignored, without soldiers to reinforce it and dragons to be feared. The people, too, would go hungry with more taxes to pay and desperately needed mouths to feed. The kingdoms would have rebelled in time. Dorne first, perhaps, then the Iron Islands, and the Stormlands would have found their way to take affront at a Targaryen ruler after having been bannermen to kings. The Westerlands, too, with the queen who had come to claim the throne of their deposed ruler.

But all those things were not what mattered. Dany had seen the damage her family had done. Dany had been generous enough to end it.

Tyrion was not.

“My lords,” he drawled. “Might I remind you of the state of our lands?” He stepped forward, as the room hushed and glared. He stood below them all, and yet they looked to him even now. It was almost enough to make him smile. “The Westerlands are seen as an enemy to the Reach, for
slaughtering their liege lords. The Riverlands despise us for encouraging Walder Frey to break guest rights against their own Lord Paramount, and offering him their seat as a reward. And that’s not to mention the burnings and the Mountain and the Bloody Mummers we loosed in their lands.” There were grumbles came then. The religious, he imagined, murmuring over guest rights and affronts to the gods. “The North despises us for Robb and Ned Stark, for Catelyn Tully, for Sansa Stark. Dorne despises us for Elia Targaryen, Aegon, and Rhaenys. The Stormlands despise us for usurping Tommen’s throne, and for my sweet sister making a cuckold of Robert Baratheon. The Crownlands for the Great Sept.” He paused, cocked his head. “Have I forgotten anyone?”

“The Vale,” a man shouted. “It holds no ire!”

Tyrion shrugged his shoulders. “The Vale is dust. And, had he lived, I can’t imagine Robin Arryn would much love the people who killed his mother’s blood.” He took another step forward. The lords before him pulled back. That, too, was near enough to make him smile. “It was the Targaryens who kept the realm together, and the Baratheons when they were gone. It was they who kept us at peace, kept us from slaughtering one another. Oh, we had our wars. All people do. But there was incentive not to fight. Lannister gold was more than enough to keep the crown in our favor.”

“The gold mines went dry,” said a Lannister of Lannisport. “Hard to buy the crown when you haven’t gold.”

There were some assenting grumbles that followed, and a knight even struck the Lannister’s shoulder in agreement.

Tyrion was not so sated. “Gold would not even be enough now. Why fight for a kingdom so hated, when one can simply fight for another and take the gold a fortnight later? We are an impatient people, Westerosi, but not so impatient as that.”

“What, then?” spat a Myatt. If she was a lady or not, Tyrion could not say. “Get to it, dwarf.”

“I thank you for the encouragement,” he said, dryly. “Gold will not keep the West together, but what shall?” This time, he did smile. “Alliances.”

Then came the laughs of half a hundred Houses. Rumbling through the hall like the roar of a lion, only it was the lion that was standing before them, twitching in his anger.

“Alliances have bound noble Houses for as long as time can recall. Marriages, friendships, blood. Many of you remember my marriage with the Lady Stark—”

“Aye, lady of a lost castle. Quite the alliance you have, Imp.”

“An alliance with the sister of the Bringer of Dawn,” he reminded them. It hushed some, and excited others. He had to smother a grin, as he waved his arms wide. “But, if my lords do not deem these things to be enough, I have friendships, too. I have made acquaintance with Yara of House Greyjoy, I have earned the friendship of Daenerys Targaryen—”

“A woman without a crown.”

“And yet, a woman with a dragon. I have been defended by a Prince of Dorne before, so it clear the House has no more hate for me as they would any other who shares my blood. I have acquainted myself with the last bastard stag, and I have made no enemies of the Reach. Might I also remind who planned the defense of King’s Landing? At the Blackwater and the Long Night?”

A Banefort surged forward, his hand on his sword, shouting, “Half the city’s gone!” before a
dozen hands came to pull him back. That was a good sign, Tyrion thought. It meant half a dozen of them were listening. More than he expected, to be true.

“Half the city,” he asked the Banefort, “or all the world?”

“It wasn’t you who saved the world,” said Lord Doggett, a man with a white unicorn pinned to his shoulder, while on his shield sat a black raven, of the sort that stalked the crannogmen and the Starks.

It had not been his plan to lay this piece. In truth, he had planned to never confess it at all. Rather, to let the memory go forgotten, so that Jon Snow might not hunt him like a hog in the Kingswood. But some things were too important to remain unrecognized. Some things were too consequential for the man who should be king.

So, Tyrion took another step closer to the crowd, and said, “Who do you think convinced Jon Snow to allow Arya Stark to travel to King’s Landing with us?” The crowd went silent again, as half a hundred eyes went wider than their shields. Tyrion savored the sight. “Before I spoke, he had convinced himself to leave her on Dragonstone, and then there would we be? I urged Lord Snow to give her the chance to prove her valor. Had I not spoken, she might have stayed there. And do my lords not recall our meetings here? Who was it that planned to send Arya Stark after the Night King, into the Red Keep? Who was it to send her to the River Gate, so that she might not tire before the battle had even begun?”

“Have you proof?” said a lord Tyrion could not see.

“Only my word, and the ears I assume you all have.”

His mockery made the lords no more content. In truth, it only made there frowns deeper. It was the second great mistake he made that day.

“Where is she now?” Lord Yarwyck demanded.

Dying, most like. Tyrion ground his teeth, then flashed them for all the room to see. “There are other issues at hand than the Bringer of Dawn. She lives. That much is not in doubt.” He paused, waited for the right moment, and then said, “Will the Westerlands?”

He looked to the important lords first, the ones gathered at the front of the pride. There stood Lord Farman, cloaked in crimson, gold, and smoke. Lady Westerling, shrouded in seashells. Lord Crakehall, wearing his hog’s helm on his head, though it could not have been comfortable. Lord Kenning, with his sunburst shield strapped to his back. All armed for war, and ready for death. Tyrion was hopeful they would not have to face it. But Tyrion had been the victim of false hope too many times in this life.

“I have such good friends from all across the kingdoms,” Tyrion said. “One of my closest confidants is the sister of your savior—”

“The prince that was promised,” he heard Lady Estren whisper, adoringly.

It was a testament to his many talents that Tyrion did not roll his eyes. Perhaps next, he ought juggle knives or swallow fire. They would all take equal shows of willpower, he thought.

“And another is her brother,” Tyrion went on, as if she had not spoken. “How do you think the realm will react to the Westerlands, if we have friends in such high places?”

There was silence in the hall, but smiles in their eyes. Even in the dim light of the rising sun, he
could see it. From the high lords to the minor, from the ladies to the knights, they saw what he did. They believed.

*You see, Father? You need not have slaughtered Houses. Only forged friends.*

Tyrion left the room three hours later, without a crown to speak of. But he had a kingdom, he had throne, and surely, he had his lord father’s ire. What else could a dwarf want for? What else could any man want?

#

There were a dozen guards blocking the door, but they let him through as soon as they caught sight of the scars on his face, the length of his shadow. They did not kneel for him, nor bow, nor mutter “Your Grace” as he stalked by. He was no king to them. Only a dwarf with friends.

In truth, there was hardly a difference at all.

Inside, the curtains were all drawn tight. Grey curtains, lined with the direwolf, and donated by a thousand different suitors, surely. There were other gifts, stacked in every corner of the room. Piles of swords, daggers, lances, and armor. Stacks of books, taller than three men on each other’s shoulders, and all older than even some he had seen in Winterfell, a decade past. There was food, too. Mounds of it, though the realm was starving. Lemon cakes, cheese wheels, honeycombs, black bread, and bowls of rabbit stew. He did not know where they had gotten the rabbits. There were turnips soaked in butter, pies of all sorts, and more barrels of ale than even Tyrion would care to drink.

Westeros had not known its hero long, but it surely seemed to treat her well. Tyrion wondered if it would be so, if half the men who sent the gifts knew how ghastly she looked.

She was still lain on the bed with the bastard smith sat in a chair beside her, clutching her bandaged hand in his own, over her direwolf’s still fur. The wolf and the bastard were asleep. His head rested between the Stark’s legs, down by her knees. There was a story there, and Tyrion did hope to uncover it someday, but that was for another time. Today, he did not come to greet her as a king, but as – perhaps not a friend – but an ally. No, a debtor. Yes, that was it. A debtor.

Her eyes looked to him as he strolled forward, and that was more of a welcome than he had expected that day. The last time, her eyes had been white all the time he visited. This time, at least there was grey. Grey and the tiny streaks of blue that danced beside the black in the center and the red in the corners. He wondered when she had last slept. He need not have wondered.

“My lady,” he greeted, warmly enough, “I came to speak, but—” He looked to the bastard smith. “—I believe I ought be quick. I’d rather not interrupt you two.”

She gave him no thanks. He did not expect any. From what he had been told, she could hardly speak a word without coughing a lung away. It was not any different from before.

What was it she’d said to him last? *Go away, Lannister, while you still have your throat?* Her prediction seemed to have gone astray, he noted, eyeing her scars. They were still dark as pitch, even through the many, many bandages.

“I thought I would come to warn you. It may be best for you to leave King’s Landing sooner than planned.”

For the first time, he caught a hint of a reaction from the girl. It was miniscule – no more than a shift of the brow – but if the maester spoke it true, she could hardly move much else. With time, he
had said. For now, Tyrion would have to trouble himself translating a still face.

She croaked out a subtle sound. It was no louder than a mouse’s belch – and after, her brows came tight, as she bit back a fresh cough – but Tyrion heard it all the same. “Why?”

His eyes wandered the room for a moment, studying every last drapery and each morsel of food. The fire seemed to grow hotter by the moment, and he wondered how she could be comfortable between that, the beast, the bastard, and the twelve blankets stacked over her frozen flesh. He might have pondered longer, but the direwolf’s growl caught his attention too soon.

He looked back to the girl and smiled a bitter smile. “I suppose your brother hasn’t told you? Half the realm wants you in their bed, and I suppose the other half would be content to have you in their castles.”

She shifted, propping all her weight on her bandaged left arm, if only to glare more harshly. She might have leaned on the right, but there was a dagger there, beside the bed. A dagger he knew all too well. He’d almost been killed for it, once. It was a wonder it had ended in the hands of a Stark again. They seemed to have an affinity for artifacts like these.

The bastard smith did not react to them in the slightest, though the wolf let out another growl. “Jon-” she started. The sound hardly came, and soon she was smothering another great, wracking cough. It appeared she was well-practiced in handling her coughs, for she hardly even shook the smith at all.

Tyrion waited for her to calm, and then went on, “Your brother is a good man, and I’m sure he would love to keep you with him. But he is one man, and Dorne has an army. As does the Stormlands, the Reach, the Iron Islands, and…” He paused, gazed around, and swung his arms wide. “-the Westerlands. All who are very eager to entertain the Prince that was Promised. And all who would fight valiantly to ensure her safe arrival in their castles.”

Her right fist clenched where it sat in the bastard’s hand. He shifted, but did not wake.

On her lap, the direwolf glared. Still, it made no move to strike him. Somehow, Tyrion felt no fear. It seemed fear had fled him somewhere along the way. Perhaps he had taken a few too many blows to the head.

At least I still have my looks, he thought. He took another look at the girl and smothered a grimace.

“This is no threat,” he promised her. “I will do my best to ensure that the Westerlands will pose no threat to you.”

“Why?” she mouthed. Her lips hardly moved, yet he could read them all the same. Somehow, he knew all the rest, too. Even the parts she didn’t say.

Tyrion smiled grimly. “A Lannister always pays his debts,” he told her. “You may have killed my brother, and I will never forgive you for that.” Not in a thousand years, not in a thousand lives. She could kill the Night King until the sun set on their world, and she would still never be forgiven. “But I know what he was. Your brother was a kind boy and, much as I hate to admit it, your grievance with my own was sound. He paid his debt, wherever you found him, and you paid your own here.” A glance at her face was enough vengeance for one lifetime, he supposed. “You saved the world. Consider this your reward from the Kingdom of the Rock. Get out of King’s Landing, before the other kings remember they have armies.” He leaned forward. Even with her laying down, he hardly reached her shoulders. “Before they remember just how great a prize the Bringer
of Dawn could be.” *Just how great a tool.*

It was not wholly altruistic, this warning of his. She would be a threat to him, if she found herself in the custody of another kingdom. He needed her alone, away. It was all the better for his own lands, if she was gone.

He could take her for himself, he knew, and he would reap the benefits within the day. There could be no greater tool in all the Seven Kingdoms. No man would dare move against a House with the Bringer of Dawn as a hostage, and no man would dare challenge them when he could slit their savior’s throat and be done with it, or if he could marry her off to some undeserving Westerlord. Their honor would never allow it while the debt of all their lives was in her hands.

_Not mine_, Tyrion thought, as he stepped back. _Not mine._

He took a honeycake as he strode through the door. The guards did not look in as Tyrion walked out. And not once did Arya Stark take her eyes off of him.

He did not know if she would take his advice. He did not care. Tyrion Lannister was a king now, and there was more to worry about than one woman. There was a kingdom of them to care for now. A kingdom filled with cripples, bastards, and broken things. Tyrion would save them all.

But before he could? Before he could tend to the lords, rebuild their keeps, cleanse his castle of whichever corpses had clawed free of their crypts, there was one thing left to be done.

It was time to mop the rain.

Chapter End Notes

Nice check in with Tyrion, as we wade into another kingdom’s politics. Tyrion has earned his crown and delivered some much-needed information for Arya that will become more significant as we go on.

Fun fact: This chapter, and the aforementioned information, is the only reason Tyrion survived Winterfell. In the initial plan, he died in the crypts. He also almost died in the Eyrie, but managed to pull through just as unexpectedly. There’s a few characters who’ve survived for similar reasons (cough Beric cough), but this was Tyrion’s. His purpose has built since, but, yeah, if not for this chapter, he never would’ve made it.

Anyway, next time we’ll check in on an aging bear in the maester’s turret.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-Eight: Absolution

The Maester's Turret

Jorah Mormont

It is a strange thing for a man to know he is going to die. Half a hundred years of history bleed away. A thousand traumas, pains, and fears all die in an instant, repelled by the very notion that it all is coming to an end.

This was not the first time Jorah had felt this fear. He had felt it every day, as the grey scales crept from his arm to his chest to the bare skin of his throat. But Daenerys had a need of him, and so he stood. He felt it every day in the Red Waste, fearing that each morn would be his last. He would succumb to the heat, to the starvation, to the thirst. But Daenerys needed him, and so he stood. He felt it every day after the march beyond the Wall, after seeing the Walkers, after feeling their skin against his own. But Daenerys needed him, and so he stood.

She needed him to help command her armies. She needed him to help fight the wights. She needed him for information on the North and Westeros. She needed him to support her, after Drogon had fallen. She even needed his advice as she crept her way to the throne she was destined to hold.

But his khaleesi had left the throne behind, and Jorah the Andal was no longer needed.

The pain was unbearable, even with the poppy milk numbing it some. Red heat flared all across his shoulder, and the black rot crept closer and closer to his heart. The maester told him he would not survive to see the morning, and offered him sweetsleep to ease his passing, but Jorah had refused as soon as it came. He would not spend his last hours prostrated on a bed. Would that he could spend them with a sword in hand, defending his queen to his last. The gods were good, but not so good. They had given him the chance to save her, and now he would devastate her.

He was not alone that day. The khaleesi had been at his bedside through the night, and she would still, had the maester not called her away for some reason or another, and Jon Snow with her.

Now, only the girl sat before him, sitting by the fire as she was wont to whenever she entered this place. She could walk now, supported only by her own two legs and her bandaged arms on the walls. The maester had called her in not an hour’s past to practice her walking, after too many days spent prone. Jorah watched her, and the wolf at her side, without the wariness he once held. A faceless man, she might be, but she had saved the khaleesi as much as he had, and some things weighed more than others.

She had not spoken a word to him, nor any other. The wolf spoke for her, growling when she needed it to and otherwise remaining as silent as its master. Jorah knew enough about the girl’s wounds to know that it would be so for many moons to come. For now, she was no more than a shadow on the wall – keeping him company, but contributing nothing. In all reality, he was alone.

Alone with the gods and this girl, as his life slowly fled his bones.
There was no weirwood in this cruel kingdom, nor was this godswood made for the gods of the North. But nor was there a Sept of Baelor, and, through the slight window, he could still see knights crouching in the ruins. Men search for absolution wherever it may be found.

What better absolution than from the Bringer of Dawn?

He cleared his voice before he spoke, and it clearly caught the girl on edge. She lurched forward, reaching for that Valyrian sword, as her eyes roamed wild. With the darkness sprawled across her face, she looked positively feral. He paid it no mind.

He laughed, a cold bitter thing, stricken with weakness and sorrow. “I would die with a sword in hand. Nobler,” he told her, softly. “But your father would have been pleased to see this.” He twisted his lips. It took longer than it ought to. “Ned Stark.” He did not spit the name, as he once might have. It was merely another name among millions. “It was he who exiled me from Westeros, and my father who pleaded for me to return, pledge my honor to the Watch.” He frowned, let his head fall back against the beaten pillow. The move was enough to make his wound screech, but he lacked the energy to do much more than grunt. “I joined the Khal Drogo’s khalasar instead.

“I’d sold men into slavery,” he went on. The girl’s gaze hardened. It was more of an expression than he had seen on her since she had fought Jon Snow on the island. Before that, since he had said her name in Harrenhal, when her eyes lit like a thousand suns, filled with pleasure, sorrow, and a million things more. “It was wrong of me, I know, but I had a wife. She was beautiful. Blonde as a Lannister, sweet as a Tyrell, but she had the tastes of a dragon, and I had few coppers. I needed coin, and I found myself in Essos for it.”

She drew her sword some, but seemed to lose her drive halfway through the drawing. Instead, she slumped against the wall, wincing, and Jorah had never felt so akin to a Stark of Winterfell.

“I thought that I would spend the rest of my days toiling for a pardon that would never come. I thought that my honor had died the day I fled, but I met the khaleesi, and my honor was restored.” A hint of a smile settled on his face. He did not look to see how the girl would respond. “I helped free the unsullied in Astapor, the slaves in Meereen, and the many slaves of the dothraki. I fought beside freedmen, and they fought beside me. I served in the fighting pits of Meereen, fought grey scale, White Walkers, and a dragon, all for her.” He paused to cough. He hardly felt the pain. “Everything for her…”

It was the most he had spoken at once for years, and it hurt his throat to try. But Arya Stark was not likely to interrupt, except to kill him, and Jorah would be lost soon, as it was. There was little he could bear to do, but lie there, speak his tale, and await his coming death. At least this would pass the time.

For her part, the Stark looked interested enough. Her hand had left the sword, at least, and was instead scratching at the many bandages on her cheeks. There, Jorah could still see the faint outline of darkness, like pools of black blood, though now he could see hints of a thick dark blue, like the deepest ocean waters of the Narrow Sea.

“It must make you uncomfortable,” he said, shifting his head to catch her eyes. They did not hold. She looked away too soon. “To be sat with a man like me. A slaver.” Then, as an afterthought, he added, “and one who chained you.”

There went the darkness from her cheeks to her eyes. Anger, as fiery as it was when she held a sword to a man’s throat in Harrenhal. Perhaps, she hated the reminder.

“I am not one to apologize,” Jorah said, “but you saved the khaleesi…” He grunted, pained. “When
“Saltpans…” He shut his eyes, and then pulled them open when he felt the rot leaching at his lungs. “The khaleesi has been threatened by assassins before. It was my sworn vow to keep her safe.” Sworn it by all the honor he had left in him. There were so few scraps to spare. “I would ask for forgiveness…” but I never will.

He went on and on, praying to the gods and the girl alike. He spoke of his once-wife, of Samwell Tarly at the Citadel, poking and prodding. He spoke of Viserys Targaryen, Khal Drogo, and the only woman he would ever love. He spoke of his betrayals, and his redemption, and fighting a thousand different battles in a thousand different days. Somewhere along the way, he found that his voice had fled him, and he was mouthing empty words to the black spots that danced in his eyes. He did not see the girl at all anymore. Not at all.

His heart beat on, though. As the festering wound reached for it, still it went. It would not stop until he could see his khaleesi’s face again. One last time, before he slipped into whatever life awaited him when all the trees were gone.

“Khaleesi,” he tried to say, but his voice betrayed him, and the word was scarcely more than a whisper. Somehow, the girl heard him, though. He could hear her shift. “Find the khaleesi.” It was a mad request, and one that he never would have made on any other day. Sending an assassin to find his queen? After all he had done against her? He may as well have called for his own head. Or, worse, hers.

But delirium was strong, and he knew it as well as any. Even the girl had paused to stare, her dark grey eyes studying him the way Ned Stark’s had, when Jorah was no more than a knight in a tourney. He wanted to hate her for those eyes, but he could not hate her any more than he could hate Ned Stark. It had not been Stark’s decision to sell men into bondage, nor to send him into exile. Jorah’s. It was only ever Jorah’s.

For a long while, he thought that the girl would not move at all. Her labored breath remained as short as ever, but without the hitch that came whenever she moved. She simply stared and sat, as if she had not heard him at all.

Then, like a blessing from the gods he had betrayed, he felt her rhythmic breathing catch. A hint of a groan tore from her lips as she stumbled to her feet. Jorah barely had time to turn his head before the direwolf leapt forward to catch her, but the girl merely shook her head and stood tall as a queen, for all that she lacked the height. Tall as a Kingslayer.

It took another few moments for her to take the first steps, but the next came no easier. She made it no further than the door before she fell, her bandaged hand scrambling against the wall, but sliding all the same. Though the wolf did its best to catch her, the girl fell too fast. The ground was too hard. As Jorah watched, her face struck the stone, and her mouth surged open in a scream that was no louder than a mouse’s squeal.

The direwolf pushed its muzzle beneath her chin, but even that touch was enough to make the girl writhe. The wolf pulled back, meek as a woman, and whimpered as her master twitched.

It was only then that Jorah remembered that he was not the only casualty of the battle. This girl suffered her death just as he did. The only difference was that the gods had seen fit to bring her
back, and Jorah doubted he would be so lucky. No god had ever looked at him with favor. For her,
every suffering led to this – a victory foretold by all the priests and men. For Jorah, it would all
lead to a corpse in a grave, if he was even so lucky as to have that. If there were any Mormonts left,
he doubted they would have him in their crypts, on their island, or anywhere close. The khaleesi
might have insisted once, but she was no queen, and she had no more say than he.

“Sit,” he told the girl, when she had recovered enough to breathe. His voice was nearly as weak as
hers. With every second that went by, it seemed the world sapped more of his strength. Within the
hour, he thought, he would have none to spare.

She looked at him for a moment, eyes wide and gaze suspicious. Yet, beneath her markings and her
scars and the fear that never seemed to leave her, she looked for all the world like a child. The way
the khaleesi had, when she was sold off to the khal. He would almost call her innocent, if she were
not the furthest thing from it.

Innocence did not kill gods. Innocence did not kill death.

“Sit,” he said again. More forcibly, this time.

She might have knelt there forever, staring, but the direwolf came to push her back. It prodded at
her chest, and its touch nearly drew another scream. All the girl did, it seemed, was breathe and sit
and scream.

Perhaps death was not the worst of fates, he supposed. It might be worse to live like this than not to
live at all.

But, as she stumbled to her feet, leaning on the wall and the wolf for support, her gaze never once
left him. Her lips moved – jerking, quick, uncontrolled. Somehow, he understood every mouthed
word. “What about you?”

His smile was no more than a sneer. “I will die,” he told her. “Dead men need no friends.”

The direwolf pulled her back to the flames. She slumped as the wolf bid, knees pulled tight to her
chest, and arms trembling where they wrapped around her legs. She trembled much the way he had
before, when his flesh had still been warm. But the world was cold now, and Jorah could see
darkness dancing behind his eyes.

“Sorry,” she mouthed.

He let his head fall back against the pillow. He was tired of holding steady. He was tired of dying.

It was that thought that had him tilting his head, waving a weak hand in her direction. Bolts of
agony jolted from his shoulder, but it made no matter. There was a numbness to the pain now.
Everything was just a little fuzzier. Just a bit more blurred. Like staring through the green waters of
the Westerosi and hoping to see an eel.

“What was it like?” he asked her. He made to clear his throat. “Beyond the grave…”

The wolf cocked her head. The girl only stared, her eyes white as snow. Then, after a long moment
passed, with Jorah gritting his teeth against a fresh wave of rotted pain, Arya Stark’s head shook,
ever-so-slightly. Like him, she bared her teeth against the pain that set in, but both knew that
neither of them would crumble to it. They were warriors, and warriors knew pain like a lady knew
her sewing. Like an assassin knew her steel.

He smiled at her. A sad little smile. It was all he could do to let his mouth fall open, and to say, “I
look forward to learning.”

Against the next wave of pain, he shut his eyes. This time, he could not bear to bear it. All men deserved the chance to rest.

Even disgraced exiles.

They were men too.

Forgive me, khaleesi, he might have whispered, if his words did not flee him. The dark spots were getting larger. The wound was growing numb. The fear was fading, moment by moment, spasm by spasm.

He could taste sickness on his tongue, and he could smell the terrible scent of rotted blood, all around. He would succumb to this sickness, he knew. The only question was when.

He could not say how long he sat there, waiting for the cold hands of death to claim him, as it had refused to on the battlefield. It was a gift, he reasoned. The gods had given him the chance to see his khaleesi safe. What man could ask for more?

Yet, if they asked him, he would ask for a thousand things. The chance to see her smile again. The chance to stand at her side. The chance to crown her, before a sea of adoring Westerosi, as her dothraki and unsullied stood by. The chance to serve her for a dozen years, a hundred, a thousand! The chance to see her grow old. The chance to see her happy.

But, to the gods, Jorah Mormont was worth no more than the dirt beneath Daenerys Targaryen’s feet, and his wishes would never be fulfilled.

It was when his vision had fully gone black, but when he still clung to life with a childish stubbornness, that he felt the weight press against his hand. Fingers latched through his – each small and calloused and unburned.

“Mercy,” she told him, with a voice as silent as the summer snows of his youth, when all that was was an island for bears. It took him back there, to a place where he had been no more than a boy with a stick sword, and the troubles of the world were the daydreams of tomorrow.

He smiled. “Mercy,” he answered, and his voice was no louder.

The hand stayed, wrapped in his own hold. But, before too long had passed, there came a weight, pressing above his face. The breaths, they halted, each stuttered as they already were, now smothered out by a soft death. His head came down on a hard bed, as he choked and whimpered a died. A single terrible burning tore through each surviving string tethering him to this dying vessel. And, when they were all gone, he stared into the darkness, and the darkness swallowed him whole.

The pain fled before the end, and he had never been so pleased to see it go. He whispered her name, one last time, with the few dregs of air still stuck in his undeserving lungs.


And Jorah the Andal was no more.
RIP Jorah the Andal. We hardly knew yee. Half the readers despised you. It was mostly unintentional on my part. You were a solid guard, saved some slaves after selling some, and ultimately defended the woman you love. A tumultuous life, but a redeemed man.

Anyway, it’s about time we return to our favorite smith as we ramp up the action just a tad. See you then!
Chapter Notes

Oh, yeah, we've got a chapter count now. We're nearing the end, folks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-Nine: Terrible Times and Terrible Deeds

Arry’s Chambers

Gendry

Since the battle, Gendry must have slept for only a few sparing hours. Between watching over Arry, licking his wounds, and answering the questions of a thousand lords and knights, there hadn’t been time. Most times he’d slept, it had been at her side, his hand in hers and his head in her lap.

He hadn’t heard her speak since the battle, when she’d been begging for Jon, asking after Nymeria and hardly looking to him at all. Before that, since before the battle began, when they had been together at the Mud Gate. He’d told her to stay safe, and she’d called him stupid. She’d been spinning that staff of hers. The one he’d made for her out of the few scraps of dragonglass he’d carried with them. The one that failed her.

She died because of that staff. She hadn’t said, but he knew it. If he’d just made it a bit stronger…

The black scars had faded to a deep blue, like the waters between Dragonstone and the main shoreline. He’d been surrounded by it once for days undying, and now he saw it whenever he looked to her face. Whenever he looked to the grasping fingers on her throat, the bruises stretching up to her eyes, the scarring on her right arm. Whenever she tried to speak, and all that came was chokes and coughs.

But worst of all wasn’t the marks, or the staring, or the throat that must have hurt like all the seven hells. No, the worst was her. The way she refused to move, unless someone came to move her. The way she never even tried responding, ever since she’d gone for the damned sword. The way she wouldn’t look him in the eyes anymore.

He’d seen her in many different states. He’d seen her hungry, and mourning, and afraid, and he’d seen her angry, and vengeful, and strong as anyone could be. He’d never seen her lost. Never. That, more than anything, was what scared him.

And with Lord Mormont’s death, it had only gotten worse. She was even twitchier than she’d been before, and, whenever Jon and the Queen came by, she wouldn’t look to them at all. She hardly even looked to Gendry now, no matter how he tried to help her. Only the maester. She only ever looked to him, and it was never with pleasure.

The next time the maester came to offer her a drink, she took it. Drank it down without complaint. Never in his life had Gendry been more relieved, and never in his life had he been more suspicious. Arry was as stubborn as they came, and for her to drink down milk of the poppy when it had been
offered to her a thousand times already? Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

Maybe she was tired. That would be the easy explanation, he knew. For as long as he’d been with her – only ever trading places with Jon and Lord Edmure because she got nervous when there were too many of them around – she had never slept once. Now, with no more than a quick smile from the maester, and a few careful words, she was slipping into sleep, as if nothing at all was the matter. Maybe it wasn’t. Maybe he was just paranoid.

He might have been relieved to see her eyes slide shut, if she hadn’t been grimacing as she’d done it. If they’d not found her an hour past, staring at the corpse of Lord Mormont, his eyes sightless and staring.

Jon had questioned her a thousand times, but Arya only stared and shrugged.

And so, they had taken her back to her chambers, and now she sucked down milk of the poppy the way she’d done the ale before the battle. He’d laughed then, so much that he hadn’t even punched the Codd when he’d said her ears were too large. And, when she’d returned from the queen’s side, he’d held her so close, even as the men watched, that she’d mocked him for hours. Even when they’d spent the night in her bed again, and again, and again.

Good memories. Happy memories. Memories from before the battle, before she’d died. Memories that were gone now.

He wanted to help, but he wasn’t sure he knew how. He wanted to do a lot of things, but he wasn’t sure he knew how.

He wanted to go back before the battle, and he wanted to keep her as far away from the beach and the Sept as he could. He wanted to stab the Night King himself, a thousand times over. More. For all that he’d done to her, to Gendry, to the world. He wanted to kill the one who’d given her the scars on her stomach, and he wanted to kill their wight too! He wanted to her smile again, the way she had on Dragonstone, the way she had when he took her to bed, and showed her all the ways she was beautiful.

But, as Arry’s head settled on the pillow, Gendry could do nothing more than stare. He felt for her hand, just to reassure himself that she was there, even if she was sleeping, and- #

Stars. Crimson stars on a blank black sky, while a bleeding sword soared overhead.

Lights of all sizes and shapes and colors spun above, some in circles and some in squares, and some just danced everywhere.

“Arry,” he whispered to the dancing stars. He turned his head to the side, searching for her steel grey eyes, but there was nothing there but floor. Floor, shattered shards of clay, and an empty bed. Empty. Empty. Was it supposed to be empty? He forced himself to roll, half his head shrieking with his every move. And, as he settled on his forearms, he looked up, doing his best to ignore the thump, thump, thump like hammers on a helm. There was still naught but food and gifts and nothing at all. “Arry!”

Seven hells, why did his head hurt so much?

His feet were unsteady, but he climbed onto them all the same and stumbled over to the other side of her bed. Nothing. To the wall. Nothing. It was only when he looked down that he saw it. Blood. Blood on carpet and dripping off of the shattered bits of clay that had been scattered around him.
“Arry!” He screamed it, this time. The door was wide open, but the guards – the guards, the guards, where were the bleeding guards? – did not answer. Nobody answered.

With the wall as his only support, he staggered through the door and out into the long, winding halls. There were supposed to be guards at every door in this wing, and guards at every corner. So where in all the seven hells were they?

Each time he took a step, bile swelled in his throat, but it didn’t matter. None of it mattered now. He’d just gotten Arry back! He couldn’t lose her. Not again! Not now! Not while she still needed him, not while she was still hurt, not while she couldn’t defend herself…

He fell back against the wall, head in his hands. A sharp pain danced wherever his fingers touched, but that didn’t matter either.

“Where are you?” he whispered.

She’d been on the bed, last he’d seen her. The maester had given her poppy milk, and Gendry was beside them both, and then nothing. Stars on the ceiling.

He pulled his hands back and caught a glimpse of red as they crossed over his chest. Blood. On his fingers and in his hair. All over. Was he bleeding? Was she?

What had happened between the milk and the stars? Where could she have gone, why was he hurt, and where was the-

The maester.

He grit his teeth and forced himself back onto his feet. The bastard must have taken the guards with him. Tricked them somehow, or killed them. That could explain why the hall was empty. But why? Why take Arry? Why take the guards? Why hit him?

He forced himself back onto his feet and set off down the winding hall. It was a difficult walk. One foot in front of the other, only every step had him swaying and stumbling. He was shaking with fury and pain alike, and it only made things harder.

This all went back to Arry, and he knew it well. The maester hadn’t wanted him anymore than Melisandre had. Their sort – the bad sort, the evil sort, the bloody noble sort – wanted power, blood, magic. Was there magic in the blood of the undead? Would he put leeches all over her and bid her to her death?

Back then, Gendry had Davos. Arry had no one.

He picked up his pace. It didn’t matter if his head would kill him for it later. He needed to find her like he needed to breathe.

The last time he’d lost her, she died. The time before that, she’d disappeared for five years, and he’d thought her dead then too.

Not again. Not again.

He stumbled down the hall the same way he’d stumbled through the Eyrie on his way to Lady Stark. Unbalanced, uncoordinated, unprepared. There was less smoke this time through, and fewer fires. That helped, some, when he wasn’t toppling into walls and watching the world spin before his eyes.
The last time he’d been this uncoordinated had been after he’d finished rowing. His legs had been liquid, he couldn’t move his arms, and he’d been so desperate for water that he’d thrown himself into a river and drank until the sun rose. When morning came ‘round, he’d stumbled into a blacksmith shop and promised to work for a cool sip of ale. He’d worked through the day and night, and he’d drunken more than his share. He felt just as sick back now as he did back then.

Only, there was one tiny important detail. Back then, he hadn’t a goal in the world.

Now, he did.

He stopped against a wall, took a long, shaken breath and reached for the sword on his hip. And then, he set off. To find Arry. To make it right.

He was halfway to the maester’s turret when he heard the scream. A loud, shrill cry that might have driven him mad, if he hadn’t known that Arry could hardly even whisper. Even so, he picked up his pace as soon as he heard it. In his experience, screams seemed to follow where bad things went, and both followed him everywhere.

At least this time it would help. It never had before.

His head had cleared some in the time he’d been walking. The black spots were gone from his eyes, and his vision wasn’t swimming as much. It made it easier to move. It made it easier to run.

So run, he did. He ran towards the screaming, bouncing off the walls and tripping over his feet, but none of it mattered, because Arry needed him. Arry had saved the lot of them, and she needed him now.

Milk of the poppy, he thought, as he bounded through a corner. I shouldn’t have let her drink it. I shouldn’t have done a lot of things.

But should-haves were nots, and Gendry had failed her. Gendry had failed them all. He was supposed to protect her, while Jon was tending to whatever it was he tended to, and while King Tully was gathering the Riverlords to march. The man had been more than friendly, for a king in the company of a bastard, but he hadn’t been much for protecting. His arms were skinnier than Arry’s had been when she was a girl, and he hadn’t been much smarter. But he’d trusted Gendry with the watch, and it had been Gendry that let the maester in, hadn’t protested the way he should have. He should have at least watched him. Should have at least checked the poppy milk. But he hadn’t. Why hadn’t he?

There were people surrounding him. Women, children, and a few scattered survivors of the war. Men still wearing bloody armor, though the battle had been done for over a sennight. His was just as bloody, and his sword too. Beside them, the lords dressed in their fanciest cloaks, posturing like birds in the spring, posing themselves for their kings and their queens.

They were screaming. All of them were. Shouting about a wight, about a monster the guards were sheltering. A rotting corpse, he heard one man say, as Gendry pushed him back into a wall. Gendry was gone before he could say another word.

More than one tried to stop him. Some with hands, some with words, some by reaching for their swords. Gendry didn’t see them, hear them, or even think to stop of them. He charged past. If they were in the way, the smarter ones got out of it. He didn’t have time to wait.

As he pushed down the hall, he wondered if he shouldn’t have told them what he was doing. They
would have helped Arry, wouldn’t they? She’d saved their lives as much as his.

*It’s different,* he thought, but for the life of him, he didn’t know why.

So he ran, and he ran, and he ran. In truth, he needn’t have bothered. For, he found them after three more corners.

Arry.

Arry, and the maester, and the stupid bastards they’d set to guard her. *Oh, thank the gods. The old gods, and the Seven gods, and even Arry’s death god! They hadn’t taken her! They hadn’t gone!*

She was lying limp off of the shoulder of one of them. He had her by the waist, and the rest of her was slung against his back, her head dangerously close to smashing into the wall.

Her face was bare – devoid of even the bandages – and so too was the blue burned skin of her arm, and suddenly Gendry realized exactly what the smallfolk meant, when they screamed of a corpse in the hall. It made him want to turn back and beat the beards off their faces. He might have, if Arry hadn’t still needed him.

She didn’t look hurt. At least, no more than she’d been since the war. She just looked like she was sleeping. Just like she’d been the night they laid together in her bed. Only then she’d started kicking and howling midway through the night, and Gendry had woken with bite marks on his arm. Now, she was limp as heated steel.

When he was sure that she was alright, he looked to the maester and let the fury claim him like the stupid bull she’d always known him to be. A wrinkled face stared back at him, so nervous and careful, it might have made Gendry sick. He looked small in his robes, like a skinny child, but it was a front. There were knives hidden beneath those robes, and poisons, and treasons. There had to be.

As fury dripped from Gendry’s tongue in tiny little sounds that barely even counted as words, the man backed into the wall, fingers fumbling on stone.

If he could kill him, she’d be safe. The guards were fools, but Gendry could catch them. This man needed to taste a sword.

Gendry started for him, but he was not quick enough, and only then did he notice that they were not alone in the hall. Instead, the King in the North and the King of the Riverlands stood before them, both eyeing Gendry as if the boy had sprouted a second head sometime during his run. Jon, in particular, had seemed frazzled enough before he’d seen him, but now, the confusion was all across Jon’s face.

“Gendry?” the once-king asked, cocking his head some. It stopped Gendry midway through a step, if only by distracting him. “Are you bleeding?”

The blood still stuck to his fingers answered that enough, and all the blood that still clung to the side of his head.

*No,* he wanted to say, *I punched a tomato. It fought back.*

“Arry,” he said, instead, reaching for the heavy sword hanging from his hip. “The maester, Jon-”
The man in question stumbled back, feinting surprise at the sight of him. “My Lord Snow, this is what I was warning you for. I found him working to poison—”

“Bullshit!” Gendry roared, charging forward like a bull on the hunt. He might have cut the man in half, if one of the guards hadn’t drawn his own blade. He was halfway through a swing, when the man’s own came from below. And, while Gendry could wield a hammer with the best of them, he wasn’t quite so good with the things he made from them. The sword flew from his grip, and the guard had a sword at his throat before another word could be said.

Gendry froze. Swallowed. The sword bobbed where it sat above the bulge in his throat. Through the thin slit in the man’s helm, Gendry saw two dark eyes narrow. His foot shifted, wrist pushed forward, and-

“Enough.” As soon as the word left Jon Snow’s mouth, the guard was drawing back, and Jon was stepping forward. In that moment, he looked like all the things a king should be. Strong, brave, determined, honest, honorable to a damned fault. And, as he looked at the maester, so too did he look furious. “Whatever your game is, maester, I am not here to play.” He drew the sword from his belt with a sickening shieeeek, and valyrian steel lit the hall. “I don’t know what Gendry has with my sister. I don’t think I want to know. But I do know this—”

He stepped forward, and the maester stepped back. He might have turned to run, but his motion had put him right in King Tully’s path, and the man had drawn his sword when Jon did. There was nowhere for him to go.

Serves him right.

As the guard stepped back, Gendry scrambled for his fallen sword. “He poisoned her,” he hissed. “Poppy! Milk!”


For their part, the guards showed no hint of doubting him. If anything, they looked no less furious than Gendry felt, which was a difficult thing to match. The one holding Arry even set her down. He took care not to let her head hit the wall, before he turned and drew his sword. He faced the maester, and hissed the fool’s name with as much hate as a man could muster. Gendry did not know his name, but someday he would, he swore to himself. And he would thank him.

Gendry made to move to Arry, but he was far across the room. Already, his head spun the way it did when the Tickler had him in that damned bastard chair. This was too much. Too much.

It might have ended there, if the maester hadn’t been a fool. He might have had the chance to escape this without losing his head. They could have sent him to the Wall – if there even was a Wall – or at least made his death a bit less painful. But instead of all that, he drew the tiniest of knives from his belt, and fell to his knees over Arry. His hand went to her hair, and his knife to her throat.

As one, they froze. Gendry, with his sword out in front of him. Jon, with his own swinging. King Tully was stood too close to Arry to have moved at all, but the guards dropped their swords as soon as the blade touched her.

“This has been more difficult than I expected,” the maester observed, as casually as a man dwelling on a dying plant, and as sinister as Cersei Baratheon slaughtering the children of King’s Landing.
The steel bit deeper against Arry’s scars. The only thing it did was make Gendry bear his teeth and growl. “I truly did only ever mean to run further study.”

“Further study?” Jon hissed, his knuckles white around the bastard sword’s hilt.

“Further study,” he agreed. “Now, I think I’ll have to be taking my leave. I assure you, the girl will be quite-”

Whatever the maester intended to say would never be heard. For no words left his wrinkled mouth that day. Only a shower of blood burst that through his throat. With it came the sharp end of a thin steel blade.

And, as the maester crumbled like a stone, King Tully stood behind him. Bloody, shaken, and wild-eyed, but wielding his sword before him. Panting like he’d run from the lake to the Wall.

Later, when the tension settled some, Gendry would thank him a thousand times over. He’d tell him about how Arry always wanted to get to Riverrun, that she’d trusted the Tullys with her life. He’d tell him that she would appreciate it, when she woke, and he’d tell him that he’d done what Gendry couldn’t. And then, he’d scream at him for a day and a night for stabbing a man with a knife at her throat, when the maester could’ve slit it in a half second’s draw.

But all that would come later. For now, there was little more to do but push past the maester’s body, and check Arry for wounds. To take her back to her chambers. To burn the maester’s corpse, and search the turret for any hint of his plan. And then, to sit beside her and wait for her to wake.

Wait, he scoffed. I can wait. Been waiting since I left, haven’t I? Waiting for a purpose, waiting for a duty, waiting for Arry to come home.

Aye, he’d done his waiting. There was nothing wrong with waiting some more.

He found no wounds, as he, Jon, and King Tully returned her to her bed. The guards Jon had sent for had found no clues, either, though they spent the whole of the day of searching. All the while, Gendry sat and waited. It was all he ever seemed to do anymore. He wouldn’t have wanted to do anything else. Even if he did, he couldn’t. There was no maester to tend to his wounds. Only Sansa Stark, who had come as soon as she heard the shouts. She wiped the blood from his head, sewed his wound shut, and took the seat beside his own as the four of them lingered around her.

And only then, as the hours passed with them settled beside the bed, and as silence crept over the chamber, leaving him with nothing more to do but think as he stared at the floor where he had lain not a few hours prior, did Gendry let the fear swallow him.

They needed to leave. Before anyone else could strike, they needed to find somewhere safe. Somewhere where Arry could be alright, and where no one would ever harm her.

That night, when it was just the five of them – Gendry and Arry and Lady Sansa and Jon and King Tully – he picked his head up from his bloodied hands, and said, “Winterfell.”

Only Jon answered him, while the other three nodded. “Winterfell,” he said.

And so it was.

Chapter End Notes
Quick one, but supremely important in pushing us towards the end game and out of King’s Landing. Qyburn’s made his move, as I think everyone under the sun knew he would, and it was a bad one. The first violent Azor Ahai kidnapping has been attempted, and our heroes are going to need to figure out a way to deal with future incidents.

Good news is, my finals are over, so I'll have more time to focus on Prince! Which could mean a potential return to a biweekly schedule :D

Anyway, time for Jon to figure out what to do now that the Bringer of Dawn worship has gone from “let’s give her some food” to violent murder attempts. Also, time to start planning the expedition back home, finally!
Chapter Fifty: Claims on Claims

The Small Council Room

Sansa Stark

It had been many years since she had been in this place. A century ago, perhaps, or a millennium. Long enough that she might have lived through the first Long Night and the second, and survived to tell both tales.

It had only been two days since Arya had been attacked, and it had only taken that long for the rest of the kingdom to hear of it. Worse still, they had heard more. Stories of Arya Stark dead in her Uncle Edmure’s arms. Stories of a girl with a face as blue as a frozen corpse, with black fingers engraved around her throat. Stories of the failure of Sansa Stark, Jon Snow, Edmure Tully, and Daenerys Targaryen. Four people entrusted with keeping the Bringer of Dawn safe, and four people who’d failed at it.

No one had spoken yet, but she could see the fury on their faces. The High Priest of the fire god was shaking with rage, and each tremble made red flames dance, wherever they were inked into his flesh. To his side, a man cloaked in monochrome robes watched them with far less anger. His face might have kindly enough, but he stared with an intensity that could have set Sansa shivering, if she had not already faced worse on the battlefield and worse outside of it.

To his side stood the Westerosi: Queen Yara Greyjoy, frowning instead of smiling for once. She had deferred to Daenerys upon entering, but now she had eyes only for Jon and Sansa, and they hated.

Beside her stood Prince Ryndon Martell, toying with a golden dragon as a petty king of the Stormlands looked on. Beside him, Tyrion, King of the Westerlands now, was watching Sansa as much as any. King Farman’s chosen vassals, too, looked on, one with his scrawny fists no bigger than pinpoints at his side.

The Braavosi had come last, and it was he Sansa, Jon, and the rest had pretended to wait for. But now that he had come, it was difficult to find the words to address the wolf in the castle.

The war had only just ended, but one false word could start another. It was no different to treating with Joffrey, hiding behind her courtesy like armor, only the stakes were even higher. This time, she was not alone in the path of fire. Jon was there, and Arya, and all the rest of the realm.

It felt like King Robert had died again, and her life was about to fall apart once more. Only, rather than it all starting with Robert, it would start with her bratty little sister. And, instead of a war with five kings, it would have dozens. She couldn’t let that happen. She couldn’t.

“My lords-

“Your Grace,” one of the Crownland’s many petty kings proclaimed.
“Your Graces,” Sansa said, careful not to speak through her teeth, “as I am sure you are all aware, my sister was attacked two days ago by her maester.”

“‘Maester’, she calls him,” Archmaester Harodon said. Why the Citadel had even bothered to send an archmaester, Sansa could not say. Still, she could not insult him. They would need the support of the maesters as much as the kings.

Thankfully, Jon answered in her stead, “He was the closest we had to one. It was either trust him or let Arya die.” He clenched his fists. “That wasn’t going to happen.” Again, Sansa heard, and she wondered if anyone else might have. Daenerys, certainly, from the frown on her face.

“Regardless, your trust nearly killed the Savior of Westeros,” the Archmaester said.

“The gods blessed us with this girl, and the North might have lost her,” said a rat-faced septon with hair that hung from his head like strings of webbing, emanating from somewhere beneath his crystal crown. His fine robes cloaked any wounds he might have worn, but when he pressed forward, it was with a limp. “Shame,” he said. “Shame and heresy!”

“Heresy?” Daenerys repeated, frowning.

“It was not the Faith that foretold her coming,” the red priest said. “If anyone has rights to Azor Ahai, the Lord of Light stands tallest.”

“No one is taking my little sister,” Jon said through his teeth. When Sansa turned to face him, his hand was at his hip, hovering over his sword. Several of the kings seemed to have taken his cue, including her ungainly uncle.

“No? Then I imagine the maester story was a lie.”

“Not a maester!” the archmaester shouted, so enraged that his jowls waggled beneath his many chins. “His experiments-”

“Oh, spare the lecture,” Prince Ryndon drawled. “As if you would not do the same with the Stark girl.”

“Seven-”

“How fares the girl?” Ryndon asked, facing Sansa, instead of the rest.

“Recovering,” Sansa answered, before Jon could grow any angrier.

“Recovering,” Lady Greyjoy mocked. Sansa found herself tensing every time the woman spoke, and it only seemed to make the Greyjoy more pleased with herself. “She’s been recovering since the battle. Do forgive me for asking it-” She hardly seemed to care if they did. “-but will she ever be recovered?”

There was an answer to that question, but Sansa did not know how to voice it. Nor did Jon, who clung to Longclaw as if this was a fight, and his blade could offer him some semblance of aid. Nor did her uncle, who kept his gaze affixed to the floor. Nor even Daenerys Targaryen, who looked to Jon the way he looked to Longclaw.

How was one to tell a council of kings that their savior might never recover? How was one to
explain magical scars, incurable damage, and a throat that had not recovered even in the fortnight since the battle had come and gone?

*It might be a moon,* the maester had told them, back when they believed him to truly be a maester. *It might never come. I’ve dealt with cases of this sort before, but never so severe.*

But if she told these men, they would laugh at her for daring to listen to that man. They would drone on and on about how foolish the Starks were, how dangerous it was to leave Arya in their custody.

But Arya was Sansa’s sister. If they lost her again, Sansa feared they might never find her. Eight years, it had taken, the last time. Not again. Never again.

They were Starks. They could not lose another member of their pack, when it had already shrunken so.

“*The girl should be sent to the Citadel,*” the archmaester said, when they did not answer. “*We have the resour—*”

“No,” Jon said, again through his teeth. Every last inch of his face was drawn with fury, of a sort Sansa had not seen since he was ripping Ramsay to pieces with no more than his fists. It had scared her, then, and it might have scared her now, if Sansa had not faced a thousand things more terrible. But her arm was charcoal, her sister and bastard brother were walking corpses, and Sansa had seen White Walkers roaming Winterfell from her perch on a dragon’s back. There were few things that could scare her now, and Jon was not one.

“No?”

“No,” he said, again, and it was enough to draw the room to stunned silence.

He looked every bit the King the North had raised him to be. But, for all his regality and all his strength, he had not been enough to save them. Nor had Sansa, playing her game of thrones and toying with the lives of men. Nor had Daenerys, standing beside three grown dragons, enough to topple seven kingdoms.

These kings had not been there to see it all. They had not fought in Winterfell, burned in the Eyrie. They had not lived and loved and lost all in the span of moons. To them, the Long Night had lasted a moon and no longer. Many had not lost lands or food or even very many people. Oh, their armies had gone, but their wives and sons and daughters were safe in their castles.

They had not known fear. They had not known the Night King well enough. And, surely, they did not know Jon Snow enough to know that he, too, might have slain the Ice King, had he only the chance.

Sansa was not often proud of her siblings as a girl. Oh, she liked Robb well enough, and Bran and Rickon, but the two that had survived the war? They were loud, obnoxious, and seemed to only take pleasure in seeing her shriek. They were not bred as she was. Arya had spent more days wandering among the smallfolk than she did sitting in the sewing room. Jon Snow had been a Snow. A bastard boy with a bastard’s heart, and Sansa knew well not to disgrace herself with his friendship. No, as a girl, she had never been proud of these siblings.

But now, after Arya had saved the world, and now as Jon stood fierce as a king, she could feel nothing more.

*It should have been me,* she thought, but the thought did not come as convincing as it might have
before. *Spare me queendom*, she thought instead. *I only wish to see Winterfell again, safe and whole.* Still, the question remained in the back of her mind: *what do I have left to do that can rival them?*

For the next hour, they would stumble over proposal after proposal, threat after threat. The followers of the Lord of Light insisted that they should take custody of her sister. The Faith of the Seven had argued for a new Great Sept, where Arya could be housed, at least until she recovered (and then, the matter would be revisited, and the Sept would claim a fostering, of course). The Crownlands had put in claims, and the Stormlands, and even her own uncle – though his request had been laughed away when Yara Greyjoy had asked him which army he intended to protect her. The maesters fought on, and all the kings who had sought to be her suitor, and even a few who claimed they had saved her in the field of battle. Claim after claim after claim. And – though Jon, Sansa, and even Daenerys rebuffed their every attempt, each response more aggressive than the last – it might have gone on forever, if not for the man in the black and white cowl.

He spoke when the others had all said their peace, his voice like the sweet honey that Sansa had rubbed into her burns for hours in Duskendale. “These are a great many claims,” he told them. He spoke so softly, no louder than a cowed child, but his words carried all the same. “But none are enough to overrule a solemn vow.”

There were some who ignored his words, and others who rolled their eyes and carried on, and there were some – namely the Braavosi – who backed away from the table as he spoke, but it was the archmaester who silenced them. He fell back, away from the table, and stuttered until every gaze in the chamber was fixed on him.

“A vow?” he sputtered, after what must have been a dozen tries.

The cloaked man nodded. For all that Sansa tried to catch the expression on his face, there was nothing there but that kindly stare. “*Valar morghulis,*” he said, softly, “and *valar dohaeris.*”

Sansa had to pause, for a moment, to recall where she had first heard those words. They were Valyrian, she knew, and old. Maester Lewin had rarely ever worked to teach them the dead languages of Essos, but perhaps he had mentioned them somewhere along the way? But, if he had, why was Daenerys reacting so strongly – every muscle in her body rigid and flaring? Why would Jon have drawn his blade partway from its sheathe, a terrible sneer twisting on his face?

And then she remembered it. In the cave, under the Red Keep, when they had first met Bran again. The words had been in the letter, and Arya had turned as green as wildfire. *All men must die,* she’d told them. *All men must serve.*

Suddenly, Sansa knew who this old man truly was. It scared her more than she ought admit.

“She has fulfilled our oaths quite well,” the man told them all. His soft voice had grown more terrifying than Sansa knew a voice could be. Was this truly his true face or some cruel magic masquerading this man as another? Was he even in the room with them, or leagues away across the Narrow Sea, using his strange magics to speak to them all. Sansa didn’t much like magic. It had only ever brought her family to ruin.

If the man noticed her discomfort, he did not show it at all. “But the Many-Faced God does not work in half-measures. The oaths in our House are oaths for life.” He looked to Jon as he said it, and the once-king grit his teeth as soon as the words touched his ears.

“Out,” he ordered, cold and biting like the winter’s wind. But not to the cloaked man. Instead, his
words were meant for all the rest, and they knew it as Sansa did.

“I beg your pardons?” King Cafferen of Fawnton rose, his pale white fists slamming hard on the table. He wore no armor, and bore no sword, but he seemed to think himself intimidating all the same.

Jon turned to him with his lord’s face and their father’s eyes. “Out,” he said, and no one dared question him again. For all that they were kings and queens, Jon Snow was his father’s son, and few men questioned their father when he was playing the lord.

“We can reconvene when this matter is settled,” Sansa told them, and that was all it took. Oh, Prince Ryndon took extra urging, and Yara Greyjoy seemed of mind to toss the table across the room, but within minutes, they were gone. Even Lord Edmure had slipped the room to ensure that none would feel affronted.

Now, it was only the four of them: Sansa, Jon, Daenerys, and the Braavosi. Now, they had no one who could save them if the man deemed it their time.

Sansa inched her way to the door, and none seemed to notice.

“Was it you?” Jon snapped, shedding any illusions of preamble.

He needn’t clarify. A hint of a smile broke on the Braavosi’s face. How he could smile at a moment like this, Sansa would never know. How he could smile at all…

“I assume you refer to the girl’s wounds.”

“Three,” Jon said through the crack in his voice. Daenerys took his arm before he could draw his sword. It seemed that was all that was keeping him from skewering the man.

It seemed strange to Sansa that she was responding so strongly. When Theon had died, Sansa had been devastated for days undying. But Jorah Mormont, Daenerys’ closest confidant had succumbed to sickness, and she hardly seemed to respond at all.

“It was not me,” the man explained. “The one who did it is at peace.” He seemed to take no pleasure in it, and that upset Sansa nearly as much as the scars she’d seen on her sister’s stomach.

This was the sort of man who had raised her sister, while Sansa had been playing the Game in the Vale. Building snow castles, scheming, and slapping motherless children. Arya had been with a man who watched others stab children and pitied the assailant when they died. And I was with Littlefinger, Joffrey, and Ramsay, she reminded herself to smother the guilt.

She wondered how her father had angered the gods, that their family had faced so much terror in so few years. She wondered if they even still lived at all, or if all their lives were merely the terrible world they had been given, and there was nothing for them after. Perhaps that was good. Perhaps they would all be at peace when it was all said and done. It is better than being wights.

“You’re not taking her back there,” Sansa said, slowly.

The man only nodded. “Our order is not one for slaves.”

“You tried to kill her when she left,” Daenerys said. For all the life of her, Sansa could not say why she did. There was no boon to supporting the Starks now that her throne was lost. They had no army to guard her, no crowns to give her, and no castles to offer her. Why, then, did she still offer her aid?
Because she is not playing the game, Sansa realized, uncomfortably, and I have played a fool.

“When a name is chosen, a gift must be given,” the man said. “The god called for a name, and death is not to be mocked.” He looked to Jon once more, as the once-king surged forward. The faceless did not move a muscle. ‘Those who sing the song of earth toyed with it. Took corpses from their crypts, tore the peace from flesh, stole the gift from men who earned their rest. It fell to us to restore order.”

“You killed my sister,” Jon said, cold as a White Walker. And then, he was surging forward, Longclaw slipping from its sheathe and cutting through the stagnant air of the small council’s chambers. It was doubtful that this was the first time blood would been shed here in these chambers.

On any other day, she might have stopped him. Dragged him back, shrieking like a child and chastising him for his diplomacy, or his lack thereof. She might have reminded him of Arya’s newfound talents, and where else might she have learned it than this- this *guild*? She might have shared with him everything that she knew of the Faceless Men – their skill, their ruthlessness, their seeming inability to fail. She might have told them that Littlefinger had feared them once, and Littlefinger had feared none but the dragon.

But on this day, Sansa was as hateful as he, and she might have let him tear this faceless fool to pieces, if it meant she would never have to look upon his black eyes again.

Thankfully, Jon was quicker than Daenerys too. Though she reached for his arm, the limb slipped through her fingers. He was surging forward. His sword was too fast to track. There was no one between he and the man. No one to stop him.

And then, the blade was on the floor, and Jon was still. A knife sat at his throat.

The Faceless Man let out a terrible *tsk* and drove the blade just a bit deeper. Little drops of red slipped down the edge of the steel.

When Sansa looked to her right, Daenerys was just as frozen as she was, halfway through a step and a shout.

“My name has not been called for today,” he told them. “Nor hers.”

He drew the blade back, and Sansa’s heart began to beat again. Wherever he replaced the knife, she could not say. She had not known he had one at all.

Somehow, Jon recovered more quickly than any of them, though bits of blood were still trailing down his throat. He pawed at it, in hopes of sealing the wound, but the Faceless Man had cut too deep, and the blood ran too quick. “Why?” he demanded, as if he could demand a thing at all.

The man only smiled. That, more than anything else, terrified her. “*Valar dohaeris,*” he said, simply. “No servant serves the same. Some bear cups, some cook meals, some claim names, and others faces.” He showed them his palms, and his smile grew wider. “Some fulfill prophecy.”

“Prophecy?” Daenerys breathed. When Sansa looked to her, her teeth were grit and her skin pale, but she stood stalwart all the same. “What prophecy?”

His face did not move as he turned to look at the Dragon Queen, but his eyes spoke his hate better than anything else could have. He stared at her for a moment, and then to the rest. “It is time my guild takes its leave. By now, my brother will have spoken with her, and we will have her choice. Should she choose to come with us, we expect none to interfere.”
Jon, somehow not awed by the blood spilling around his fingers, stepped forward and said, “What do you mean ‘spoken with her’?”

The man only raised his brows. “I had known the father’s genius and the brother’s honest word, but you…” He clicked his tongue. “You may be wiser than any man.” Even with his face as kind as Maester Luwin, his sarcasm was as clear as a summer day. “Take care, child. The Many-Faced God will not lose you twice.”

And, where Jon failed to react, Daenerys’ face said it all. Fear. Utter fear, lined in every last wrinkle of her worn, tired, perfect face. But whatever it was she was afraid of, Sansa did not know.

“What do you want to do with her? My sister?” Sansa asked.

The man tilted his head. His grey hair settled on his neck. “Only what she wishes. Our guild keeps no slaves. Only servants. Should she deem it better to serve in Westeros, just so; it is done. If she wishes to join us again, we sail for Braavos.” His eyes narrowed, but his smile stayed steady. “The child has served the god well. She will be treated kindly if she so chooses to come. If not—” He said nothing more, but his silence seemed no more threatening than anything else he had done.

“Why are you telling us this?” Daenerys said, before Sansa could ask what it meant, before she could ask why Arya would possibly go with them, before she could ask about slaves and servants and his strange god. Daenerys was too quick, and Sansa’s questions went unanswered.

“You have all served the god, whether you know it or not. When the gift was stolen, and living corpses of men wandered these lands, you three stood against it. For that, a favor was owed. A favor is given.” He stepped away from them, backwards. His bicolored cloak swept the dusted floors. Little bits of grey kicked up into the air, shimmering in the light of the dying sun.

Sansa had hardly even noticed the time pass. It could have only been minutes since she had broken her fast, yet now dusk had come. She wondered how much else she had missed, while they had been in these chambers, tending to a thousand whims and whines, and treating with this assassin who had raised her sister.

Father would be furious, she thought. Then, No, disappointed. Father was never furious. It was what she loved about him, and what she missed the most whenever Meryn Trant drove his fist into her belly.

They waited until the man was gone to take another breath. Jon retrieved his sword, as Daenerys surged over to his side, and Sansa hurried to shut the door behind him. Somewhere on the other side, a dozen kings and queens stood, angry and waiting.

But inside, there was only the three of them. None were much inclined to invite the rest.

Jon collapsed into a chair, hands shaking around the pommel of his blade. He dropped it on the table, and the steel cut slivers from the wood. As a girl, she had always wondered how her lord father’s sword could cut clean through a man’s throat without even a second swing. She had never seen it herself, and she could not say. When she had finally seen it, she had taken care not to think of it. Now, though, she understood. Valyrian steel was sharper, quicker, and stronger than anything in the world. And Arya’s master had sent it flying without even a moment’s notice.

She sat beside Jon, her limbs like liquid. When she finally pried her eyes from the table, Daenerys was sat too. Her hand was on his, and she was gripping it with a strength that Sansa had not known she had.
“Seven hells,” Jon breathed.

Sansa would never have said it, but she was thinking the same.

“I am thankful,” Daenerys said, after a long and painful pause, “that they cost so much.”

Whatever that was meant to mean, Sansa would never know. For, before Daenerys had even finished, she was thinking back on what the assassin had done and said. Every last word, every last grin, every last kindly glance.

He could have killed them in an instant, but he hadn’t. He could have stolen their faces and left their corpses out to the world, but he hadn’t. He could have done anything, but he hadn’t.

She shivered a thousand shivers. A shiver for every stare. A shiver for his every step. A shiver for every moment her heart still beat. A shiver for every hour her sister had spent among men like him. She shook until the set rose, and she shook long after.

Chapter End Notes

Before I start this ridiculously long author’s note, let me just say, happy holidays, y’all! Hope you all enjoyed/enjoy them and, if not, hope this helps give you just a little reprieve!

Man, this chapter felt like splitting worlds. Like a crossover in a Disney show, only much darker and with a lot more knives. Never really pictured a Faceless Man hanging out with Jon, Dany, and Sansa. Weird as hell to write. (I really should have finished AFFC before writing this chapter. Whoops)

If anyone’s wondering why Dany doesn’t say much here, I can’t imagine she’s having much fun in the company of an assassin. She’s got bad experiences with his sort, and I figure she’s a bit pissed to be in his company. Her newfound tolerance of Arya is an exception, not the rule. This probably should’ve been in her POV, but I’ve got another Dany coming up after the next, and I feel like it’s a bit too close for comfort. I still regret doing those two Aryas in a row way back. It’s better to keep them spaced out, I think, unless it’s an extremely significant moment. This… isn’t, really. Not for Dany, at least.

Anyway, who better to close out this 19-chapter overarching… arc than the one who started it?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!