Jorah's efforts weren't enough during the Battle of Ice and Fire. Daenerys Targaryen lies unconscious in the halls of Winterfell, uncertain to ever wake again. This changes everything. The survivors of the Long Night survey what remains: Seven Kingdoms yet to conquer...or destroy. But the path to power or freedom will be different in the Dragon Queen's absence, however temporary.

Will spotlight all our main characters, but this will be a Sansa-centric story.
remain compassionate towards them through the entire course of this journey.

While this is an AU, it is an AU by way of a single event, changed. The rest of Season 8, in terms of who these characters are, and what they are capable of, is fully canon. Their motivations, their strengths, their weaknesses remain the same as the show portrayed. So it is likely that they will make the same, or similar, decisions as they did in the show. Unless, of course, there are new events that further change things.
Chapter 1

Jaime

It had been the longest he'd gone without thinking of Cersei. He thought of little else on his long ride north, yet even after all that he still did not know whether he hated her or loved her more. Time spent with others helped. Drinking by the fire before the battle, it dawned on him how much he missed his little brother. They were Lannisters, despite everything that happened. However they regarded the rest of the family, no one else knew what it meant to live their lives under the shadows of Tywin and Cersei. What it meant to love them, despite every one of their cruel words and deeds.

Then it was the battle. Fighting the dead. Jaime would never forget the colors, the flames, the smell, the pain, from the longest night of his life. But they won. He survived. Brienne and Tyrion and Podrick were all among the lucky ones. Yet many did not, and though Jaime didn't bother to dwell too long upon those who had died, he still couldn't help but gasp at the enormity of it all.

"Ser Jaime."

It was the Lady of Winterfell, striding into the small hall where was sitting, so recently cleared of the dead. It was an endless task, cleaning up after the greatest victory for the living had ever seen, and Jaime participated in his share through the morning. But he needed to rest. And to think. But not think about her.

"My Lady," he acknowledged, rising briefly from his chair to greet his host. After Brienne spoke for him, it was Sansa's assent that saved his life, allowing him fulfill for once in his life a promise he gave. What came after, he did not know. And he wasn't sure how much he cared. "I heard you saved my brother's life down there. Thanks for that."

"I don't know about that." The Stark girl collapsed on a chair next to him, exhaustion obviously weighing upon her mind as well. But her eyes were clear, open, surveying the room, studying him even as she rested her head in one hand. "We were stupid for not even thinking the Night King could...it was chaos, any way. I just remember running around, and sticking anything that had a hint of dust on it with the pointy end." She laughed, as if at a joke he would never be privy to. "There was no skill. Just dumb luck."

"Hmm," Jaime grunted in response. Luck was a reason many survived the battle as well, as many with far greater fighting skills died fighting. But Jaime was not any fighter. It was true, he was not the fighter he once was, but even with one hand, he was better than most of them. But not all. Looking back at Sansa, he saw her eyes still examining him, as if probing for any weakness she could find within his countenance. "Thanks for...not letting them kill me, I suppose..."

"Don't thank me," Sansa replied, voice turning cold, no doubt thinking of the family his own had killed. "Lady Brienne is the only reason you didn't die before the battle."

Chapter Summary

The survivors of Winterfell contemplate the bloody aftermath and plan around an uncertain future.
"Ser Brienne," Jaime corrected, unable to keep a wisp of a smile off his face. As he hoped, he saw her anger waver at his words.

"She did tell me that. That was an honorable thing you did last night."

"It was long overdue," Jaime said, thinking back to Brienne's expression when she realized he was not joking. When she realized that she was not dreaming. "I simply righted a wrong."

"Still, you were the only one who did so."

Jaime frowned. He knew the Lady of Winterfell still hated him, and for good reason. She was not here to exchange courtesies, that was clear. Last he remembered, she was a timid mouse of a girl, a wall flower afraid to catch the attention of practically anyone in that pit of vipers where his sister now reigned supreme. From what Tyrion said of her, Ned Stark's eldest daughter had proved their father's words prophetic. She was indeed the key to the North...just not any way Tywin Lannister could have imagined.

"Are we enemies now," he asked, wondering how much he cared about the answer. He had come to Winterfell fully expecting to die. That had not changed, but now that he survived, there was that quiet whispering in his head that he ought to continue to do so.

The Lady of Winterfell thought for a moment. "That's your decision," she said, wasting few words.

"I pushed Bran," Jaime suddenly blurted out. "Out the Tower." He didn't know why the impulse took him. He may have been indifferent towards living after fighting for the living, but he wasn't suicidal, there being a clear delineation between not caring and actively wishing for one's own death. Perhaps after surviving the worst, he wanted to test the limits of this new feeling of invulnerability.

Clearly, the Lady of Winterfell was taken aback by his statement, backing away from him, yet clearly intrigued by why he had chosen to confess this now, and to her, out of all people.

"We always suspected," she finally said, and for a second Jaime thought she was ready to stab him with the sharp end of the chain she always wore around her body. Still, she maintained her composure, letting her mind overrule her heart. "Why?"

"He saw Cersei and I." He thought about justifying it at first, telling her that Cersei was as good as dead if Robert ever found out. But there was no point, considering how little love the Lady of Winterfell had for the woman who would have been her mother by law. "I told your mother too."

The mention of Catelyn Stark brought an inscrutable change to her daughter's demeanor, filling her eyes with fire, and yet a sadness that made her look as vulnerable as Jaime had ever seen this older, colder iteration of Sansa Stark.

"You're lucky she didn't kill you. You're lucky you didn't kill Bran."

"The Hero of Winterfell," Jaime muttered to himself, still in amazement with the rest of the survivors how the smallest Stark had managed to save them all in the end. He would have liked to talk to her
out of curiosity, quiz her on how she acquired all of these mysterious skills she was said to possess, but he knew that would be an impossibility. The war for the living will never heal all the wounds incurred from the wars between the living. "How's your brother," he asked suddenly, just as Sansa neared the door.

"I intend to let him mourn on his own, until he decides otherwise," she said after a longer than expected pause. "I suggest you do the same."

It seemed to Jaime that there was more she wanted to say on the matter, but he was far from the one she would confide in.

"You say it's up to me whether we're enemies," Jaime said, deciding to press the issue once more. "What happened to her...simplify things, does it not?"

The wolf with red hair glared at him, though she did not say a word, leaving him to fill the silence.

"I suspect neither you nor your brother are as keen as she was to wrestle the throne away from my sister."

"Did Cersei send you here as a peacemaker," the Lady of Winterfell asked contemptuously. "You underestimate your sister. And you underestimate my hatred for her."

"The North is secure now, you know. The Lannister armies have never had to fight in winter, much less the Golden Company. Cersei would be a fool to let her armies freeze to death here..." he paused, thinking over his words as he spoke them out loud, "...which may exactly be why she would do such a thing..."

"Tricky isn't it," Sansa said, surprisingly eager to remain in conversation with him close as she was to an exit. "I suspect the Dragon Queen would have marched for King's Landing to rain fire and blood on your sister before we've even finished burning the dead here."

"You disapprove?"

"You're here to play spy," Sansa scoffed. She shook her head once, a subtle gesture that betrayed to him a deeper, hidden frustration. "It doesn't matter what I'd approve or disapprove."

"Tyrion told me you did not trust the Daenerys," Jaime ventured. Never before had he imagined that he would be keen to converse on politics and military strategy with the stupid girl his family had once held hostage, but along with what his brother told him the new Lady of Winterfell when they drank by the fire last night, there was something to her inscrutability that made him want to dig deeper. If Tyrion respected her, feared her a little, even, then she was not someone to be dismissed.

"It's a funny thing, isn't it," she replied back wryly. "Once you imagine yourself wearing that crown, you let the thought possess you, enough so that you can't even bear to sleep until you're the damned King or Queen of all Seven Kingdoms in fact as well as name." She stopped herself short, though it was clear she wanted to continue. "Daenerys fought to save Winterfell. She may never wake because of it. For her sake, for his sake, for Jon's sake...I'll speak no further ill of her."

Jaime looked down. He was testing her, he knew it, and he couldn't help it. With each word, each spur, he was giving her yet another potential reason to cut off his neck. He wasn't sure why he was so keen to do so with this girl he hardly knew, who clearly despised him. Maybe, he wondered, it was because out of all the do-gooders and men and women of honor he had fought with here in Winterfell to save the world, he had found someone who, like him, was a cynic at heart. Not even Tyrion could claim the same now, as devoted as he was to his new Queen.
"Would you rather she not wake?"

The mere fact that she took time to contemplate her response gave him all the answers he needed to know.

"That's what your sister would prefer," she answered after the pause, directing the ire right back at his family. "Tell Lord Tyrion he ought know better than to spread gossip about those who host him."

With those words, the Lady of Winterfell finally rediscovered her resolve to leave the Kingslayer alone with his thoughts.

Sansa

Jaime Lannister was right, though she couldn't admit it out loud. The Lady of Winterfell would thank the Gods she no longer believed in if the Dragon Queen passed quietly into the night. She felt for Jon, of course. She knew he loved her with all his heart, and Jon Snow had the largest heart she knew. That was the problem. At the end of the day though, Sansa Stark would rather see her brother alive rather than happy, if that's what it came down to.

She did lie to the Kingslayer though. She was going to seek Jon out. Likely he would not want to talk about Daenerys, but there was plenty other subjects of discourse between them. The uneasy arrangement of power between the two after Jon had bent the knee had yet been fully addressed when the focus was surviving the dead, but that only made it more urgent for them to work out with each other how to handle the aftermath. All the bodies to clean, giants and dragons among them, walls to rebuild, an accounting of supplies, foodstuffs...it would be a long time before she could rest.

Years, possibly. Sansa knew that she could not truly rest until Cersei Lannister was dead. And Daenerys Stormborn too, if she could be honest with herself. Thankfully, at least one of the two lay at the Many-Faced God's door already.

"Jon."

He turned, and a warmth filled his eyes. He was happy to see her, even in the middle of his brooding. She was still his family, Sansa reminded herself. It should be her that her brother turned to for comfort while he needed to mourn. Would be, in a perfect world, were their relationship not deeply tainted already by that poisonous yet all too painful mixture of politics and love.

Watching as her brother force a smile through his brooding, Sansa immediately regretted seeking him out so soon. Their relationship had always been so complicated, the only simple time being when they found each other again at Castle Black. Since then they had their share of arguments, though Sansa knew that the both cared so much for each other. The problem was, she and Jon had starkly different ideas for what was best for themselves, their family, and the North.

"I'm sorry about Theon," he said softly.

Sansa took a deep breath. It was so Jon, to be thoughtful of others even deep in his own pain. She hadn't seen his body yet. Theon's body lay somewhere atop one of the piling burial pyres outside, and she could still not bring herself to visit him. Doing so meant acknowledging the truth, that his story finally had come to an end. He deserved so much more, she thought, after all he had been through. His crimes, his recovery, rediscovering himself...she could not deny his crimes, but he had done more than enough to atone for them. He could have done so much more, had he lived. Now, it pained her to think that he will never find happiness, but she could only hope that peace would be enough.
"We all lost people we loved," Sansa said, closing herself even to Jon. "Every one of us. But we live, and they would want us to go on."

He forced another smile at her, and turned away. Sansa walked forward and felt the dark coat of his armor, a suit of arms she had sown for him herself. "She may wake. Bran did. We'll take care of her here."

"She may not," Jon muttered. "She sacrificed everything to save the North."

"To save her realm," Sansa added, not able to help herself. She quickly moved to mollify him. "We will never forget her. If she wakes, she will have earned her crown."

"Do you truly believe so," Jon asked, turning his head suddenly. Sansa swore to herself. She was a good liar, but she was not above letting her guard down, because he was family.

She moved to redirect their conversation. "I believe so long as she breathes, even not awake, Cersei will stop at nothing to kill her. Winterfell will not be safe."

"Are you suggesting we cut her loose after everything she did to help us?"

"Of course not," Sansa protested, unable to hide her impatience. It was true, she had no great love for the Dragon Queen, but it hurt her that her brother would think her so dismissive of his feelings. "But we need to plan ahead. I know we're all tired, and there's so much repair and cleanup to do, but we need to call the war council. If Cersei comes, we need to be prepared."

Jon sighed, and Sansa watched satisfied, knowing that he was acknowledging her point. "Then do your duty, and I'll do mine."

Sansa nodded. The division of power between her and Jon in the North had always been an awkward arrangement ever since they retook Winterfell, so she was a fool to think that things would be easy once the Dragon Queen was out of their way, however temporarily.

"I talked to the Kingslayer," she said, as she moved to exit.

"He fought bravely with everyone else." Her hint registered, and he turned to see her again. "Do you think he'd betray us to Cersei?"

"He swore to fight for the living," Sansa said, remembering his words in the Great Hall, when Jaime Lannister stood vulnerable before all the lords and ladies and kings and queens who bore him a grudge and wanted to see him dead. "That vow is fulfilled, and he has no further obligation to us."

She could tell he was trying hard to grasp all the ramifications the Kingslayer's continued presence presented them, and also that he was far too weary to think everything through. "We cannot do him dishonor so long as he is our guest in Winterfell," he finally decided. "But do what you must with him otherwise. You know Lannister politics far better than me."

Sansa nodded. "I honestly think he doesn't know what he wants yet. He will continue on as our guest, but I'll make sure to keep a close eye on him." She walked over to the desk of the former King in the North, opening up and reading haphazardly an old scroll. "We need to keep him away from the ravens, for one."

"Aye," Jon agreed. "Well enough, then."

The War Council was smaller than the one preceding the fight against the dead. The main Dothraki
she remembered was missing, likely a casualty of that first, ill-fated charge against the dead. Ser Jaime was absent too, uninvited considering few knew where his loyalties lay at the moment. Tormund, the wildling, was absent as well. He was busy gathering the bodies of his people, and this southern war was no longer his to fight. No Arya and Bran either. Her younger brother seemed to have no further interest in battle plans now that the fight was against the living once more, and Arya...well, she knew that her sister needed time to process everything that happened, more than anyone else perhaps, considering that she did save the entire gods forsaken world practically by herself.

As each representative removed pieces from the board, she grasped that they had lost roughly half their fighting forces, if not more.

"The odds have grown distressingly even," the eunuch Varys muttered, exchanging a look at Sansa. She remembered him as one of many conniving snakes in the capital, all responsible in one degree or another for her father's death. Yet Tyrion vouched for him, but then, hadn't he vouched for Cersei as well?

Beside him stood the members of the fallen Queen's entourage. Missandei, who had scolded her in the crypts. Grey Worm, who she knew to be devoted to both his Queen and her translator. A burly, older Dothraki, taking the place of his fallen clansman. All of whom she knew would follow their Queen to death and back. And there was Tyrion as well.

She looked especially to Grey Work and Missandei, knowing they would understand her words. "You have served your Queen bravely on both sides of the Narrow Sea. And you fought as one with the North and the Vale and all who stood with us. Be assured, we are grateful, and you will always have a place in Winterfell."

Both Grey Worm and Missandei exchanged wary looks at each other, and Sansa knew that her words rang hollow. They were foreigners, and considering how the North treated even southerners, she could not imagine the two eager to remain here.

"We won," she continued. "The living won. I know that this is a strange and foreign place for you. If you wish to return..."

"We stay with our Queen," Grey Worm interrupted, rather rudely. She saw Tyrion give her an apologetic look, trying to appease her that he did not mean offense.

"So long as she breathes," Missandei continued tensely, "so will we serve her."

"Very well," Sansa said, feeling the tension rise in the room as even Jon took time away from brooding to look questioningly at her, wondering what she was up to. "I was going to say that we could not promise you safe passage back to Essos, considering Euron Greyjoy's fleet still sail the Narrow Sea unfettered."

The Half-Man walked across the table to where the Iron Islands lay on the map. "Yara Greyjoy is sailing at this very moment to the Narrow Sea." Moving the pieces over, he positioned them next to Euron's fleet. "If she can take out her uncle's fleet, the waters will belong to us again."

"That's well and good," Jon said, "but the Kingsroad still lies open for Cersei." He looked over to Tyrion, who was studying the map intently. "Now that we're weakened, won't she move to finish us off?"

"With the Queen out of commission for the moment," Tyrion agreed, "I'd imagine she sees us as a headless chicken, ripe for the picking. My sister is smart, but she is also arrogant. And she is more
arrogant than smart." He looked to Jon. "I don't imagine she thinks much of our former King of the North, except that he's good with a sword." And to Sansa. "As to the Lady of Winterfell, she's not dumb enough to imagine you the same naive girl in King's Landing. But from her standpoint, you may have learned from her. But you're not her. You will never be Cersei, in Cersei's eyes."

"And I'd never want to be," Sansa said, trying to repress her growing fire of her hatred whenever the Cersei's name was thrown around in a personal manner rather than an abstract concept. Squinting her eyes at the map of Westeros, she shook her head, remembering what Ser Jaime had reminded her. "But she would be foolish to attack us now, would she not? In winter? The Lannister armies are summer armies. Golden Company, also?" She asked, looking over at Varys, who nodded.

"The climates of Essos are far warmer than Winterfell, my lady."

Emboldened, Sansa continued. "One storm and they are done for, same as Stannis's army. Let them attack us and dig their own graves."

"My sister makes a good point," Jon said, obviously impressed by her observations. He pointed towards the neck on the map. "House Reed still has reserves in the Neck. If we garrison Moat Cailin, move some of our forces there, the North is protected."

"But not the Vale," a bold, raspy voice interrupted. Yohn Royce bowed respectfully to Jon, forgetting for the moment that he was no longer a king. "My lord. My lady. We fought the dead and won. But Cersei will not forget that we declared for House Stark. If the North is protected, she will punish the Vale for our allegiance. Lord Arryn is safe in the Eyrie, but other cities are not, such as Runestone."

"Lord Royce speaks true," Sansa interrupted, speaking before anyone could do so. Jon aside, there were few she felt more gratitude for in the room than Bronze Royce, who had not just declared for her with Littlefinger at the Battle of the Bastards, but continued to stand by her in his liege lord's name well after the death of her treacherous uncle. "We must consider the Vale under our protection, for all they have done for us."

Jon nodded in agreement, and Tyrion continued to study the map skeptically. "The Unsullied and the Dothraki would wish to stay close to their Queen. Between the Neck and the Vale, our remaining armies would be spread thin."

Sansa looked directly at Grey Worm and the Dothraki, wondering how well the latter would understand her. "Your Queen's security depends on the security of the North," she pleaded. "I know your men are tired. As are ours. We all must rest, but we cannot let our guard down against Cersei. Moat Cailin is a short march from here, the Vale not much further. You must understand that this is the best way to protect your Queen."

To her relief, her brother stepped forward. "Sansa's right. We'll assume defensive positions at Moat Cailin and nearby. With any luck, it will be mostly waiting. Our men can recover but still ward off any attack from Cersei."

Sansa smiled. To win over the hardened knights and warriors at the table, she needed her brother's support. Hesitantly, she looked around, and found another unused piece. Taking it, and doing all she could to keep her hand steady, she placed it on the map. "If we had lost Winterfell to the dead, Howland Reed was to be the last chance for the North. His armies are fresh, having not fought last night."

Aware of all the eyes upon her in the room, a woman with no training in combat or warfare speaking on such matters, she continued, moving pieces from Winterfell south. "If we move half the Unsullied
and Dothraki to Moat Cailin, you will still have thousands defending your Queen here, the rest within a few days' march." She walked over, and continued illustrating her train of thought. "The Knights of the Vale can then keep marching south, along with the most rested of the Northern armies. At the neck, we can call upon House Reed's banners to join us."

She pointed at a spot on the map, and looked expectingly at the rest of the men around her. "The Crossroads here," she said, careful to state rather than ask. "We would in a good...position, to defend against Cersei if she tries to attack either the Vale or the North. And we'll be close to the Riverlands also. I hear my uncle Edmure Tully survives. With the Freys dead," she struggled to hold down a wide grin, thinking of what Arya told her befell those traitors, "we can consolidate support in the Riverlands. Cersei's armies will not be able to raid anywhere above here," she said, squinting to read the label on the map, "Harrenhal, without facing our armies. Every town and road north of the Trident will be secure."

Finished, she looked around and couldn't help but be pleased with herself with the looks of astonishment from all the men. Especially Jon and his man Davos, though Yohn Royce did not seem surprised, having worked extensively with her all these months, especially in Jon's absence, whether physically or mentally, from all that which troubled the North. Looking over at Tyrion and Varys, she observed a knowing wariness from the two Westerosi most loyal to Daenerys.

"It's a good plan, milady," Davos spoke first, looking at her and Jon almost like he was a proud father. "It appears you've spent too much time with us old army grunts. Too much, if you ask me." The Onion Knight had long come to worship Jon, but Sansa realized that this was the first time he looked at her in a similar light.

"Since when did my little sister...," he paused at the last word, making Sansa wonder, "become so keen at military maneuvers?"

Sansa shrugged. She was beaming, though she fought it. "I make no claims of the sort. I don't know where to dig a trench, or when to nock arrows, or send in the horses, but I can read lines and pieces on a map."

Ser Davos continued to study her, a small grin buried under his neatly unkempt beard. "I wouldn't be surprised, milady, that when the Dragon Queen awakes, she'll find that you've already taken everything from King's Landing to Dorne for her."

Sansa smiled, this time to shield her own thoughts, noting to glance over at Daenerys's group again, some of whom were better at concealing their concern than others. "Our soldiers are tired, Ser Davos. As are all of us. Unless Jon wants to take his new dragon riding skills down to the Red Keep, I consider it my duty to secure the lands of my people, my mother's people, and those who helped us in the long night. No more than that." A thought came to her. A troubling thought, but a necessary one. She looked around the room, at a suddenly captive audience who seemed to have a newfound respect for her words now that the Dragon Queen was absent.

"Now, does anyone have any ideas as to how to remove a dead dragon from the castle?"

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**Jon**

*She did not deserve this*, he thought, admiring her pale, delicate features on the bed, covered in sheet adorned by the sigils of his House. Direwolves, the House he grew into, rather than the one he was born into.

They found her next to Ser Jorah after the battle. He had taken more cuts than any man ought ever
suffer, yet his Queen, though heavily bruised from the fall, was relatively unscathed. \textit{She deserved him}, Jon thought, of the man, the son of Jeor, who had protected his Queen until the very end. \textit{Someone who could love her completely. Without reservations, without hesitation. Not me.}

That they were of one blood was never an issue for her. For the first time in his life, Jon wished that he was not raised by Ned Stark, that his morals...his standards, could be different. That he could ignore that Dany was his aunt, and love her like he did before Sam told him the truth.

\textit{My aunt's my mother, and my lover's my aunt. What could be more appropriate for a Targaryen?}

She looked so peaceful now, lying in what had been Sansa's bed when they were growing up. Sansa had their parents' room now, and Jon in Robb's, which left this one open for the Queen who gave everything to protect the North. To protect the living. If she did wake, and Jon Snow believed in his heart she will, how could he not love her, not just as a Queen, but as she would want him to? After what she did, was his own honor not a fair price to pay?

And what would his sisters think, once they knew the truth? He owed them the truth, he knew that, and how would Ned Stark's daughters see him if he continued to share his aunt's bed? He could plead ignorance before, but not now. It was then he heard a soft, demonic voice whisper in his head, that things would be much simpler if she never did wake. He shook his head vigorously, trying to wring that poison from his mind.

"You deserve better," he whispered softly to her, admiring her face, truly at peace for maybe the first time they had met. He brushed his course fingers against her right cheek, across the bow of her lips. "Awake, my Queen."

It was just the four of them by the Godswood. The last of the Starks, if he could still call himself one through his mother. Both Sansa and Arya's minds seemed elsewhere even as they both stood before him. And Bran, was he ever present on the same continent as them, it was hard to tell.

"How is she doing," Sansa asked. He could tell it pained her to say the words. He still wasn't sure why she seemed determined to hate her, after everything Daenerys had done for the North. But Jon could at least appreciate that she was at least trying to hide her distaste more than before.

"Healthy," he muttered. "As much as that's possible considering her state."

"And her dragons," Arya asked. This was the first time he saw his littlest sister, he realized, since the battle. He still had yet a chance to congratulate her for, well, saving the world. Or ask her about where in the seven kingdoms did she learn how to do such a thing.

"They're around," Jon said. "Looking for food somewhere, I'm sure."

"Plenty of fodder for them now," Arya said coldly, eliciting an indignant response even from Sansa.

"Arya!"

She shrugged. "What? The dead's dead."

Sansa shook her head and turned back to Jon, knowing better than the argue with her sister. "You should speak before Winterfell tomorrow. This was your war. Your victory."

He struggled to not scoff. If this was his victory, why did he feel so empty? So useless? So helpless?

"Arya's the one who killed the Night King," he said back instead. "How'd that feel, stabbing him?"
"Cold," Arya said curtly, and Jon couldn't help but wonder at the distance between them. He could take a guess as to why when she turned the question on him. "How'd that feel, climbing on a dragon?"

"Hot," he said, and was happy to see both his sisters smile at the small remark. It had been far too long. "They say, only Targaryens can ride a dragon."

"Dragons are smart," Arya replied. "They know you love their mother." He could tell there was admiration in her eyes, that to her, he was a Stark who rode a dragon, but there was that conflict, same as Sansa, about the mother of said dragons.

He noticed that Bran was now staring intently at him, as was his habit at times, but for the first time during their conversation here. His attention towards their crippled brother brought Sansa and Arya's eyes over to him as well, Sansa looking back and forth between the two trying to discern their unspoken dialogue.

"It's your choice," was all Bran said, betraying no signs of what he wanted him to do.

He took a deep breath, knowing that were Dany awake, this was not something she would want him to do. But blood or not, she was not his family. Not yet. The three Starks standing before him was.

"Bran and Sam figured it out together," he finally started. "Your aunt Lyanna wasn't kidnapped. They loved each other, her and Rhaegar. Your father found Lyanna...."

"You say this like he's not your father too," Sansa interrupted, but Jon ignored her and continued.

"He found Lyanna...my mother...after the Trident. She was dying...because she had a child."

"A child," Arya asked. This was something their father never told them about Lyanna. "Our cousin...," she started, before trailing off, realization dawning even before he finished his story.

"Lyanna named her son Aegon Targaryen. She made her brother promise to protect her child. And he knew the only way to do so, was to claim him as his own bastard..."

He took a deep breath, amazed at how easy it was to tell the truth of his life now, a second time around. Both his sisters, cousins but sisters to him, their eyes were open in amazement. He could see them reddening, tears forming as they thought about the tragedy of their parents. That Ned Stark had no choice but to wear a false stain upon his honor for half his life. That Catelyn Stark died never knowing how truly honorable her husband had always been.

"You can't tell anyone," he said belatedly.

"Why not," Sansa asked, as he predicted. "This makes you the true heir to the Iron Throne. Even more than Daenerys, if you are the son of the Prince."

"I don't want it," he yelled back, unable to control his voice. "I never wanted that throne, or any throne."

"That makes you worthier to hold it," Arya retorted.

"It's hers," Jon said curtly, trying to kill this line of thought in its infancy. "I bent the knee, for the Northern throne and all thrones to come."

"She may never wake," Sansa argued.
"She will," Bran interrupted, startling all three of them.

"Do you know this," Sansa asked, bending down apprehensively closer to her brother. "Did you see this?"

"What else can you see," Jon asked, unable to hide his own desperation.

"It's not like that," Bran said, answering him and only him directly. "When it's what's to come, it's never complete. Or clear. I see glimpses sometimes. But not always. Rarely."

"This changes everything," Sansa muttered, and Jon noticed that she was talking to herself, thinking thoughts that she would probably not care to share with him.

"Promise me you'll keep this a secret," he said, realizing his error in not making his sisters swear to do so before he opened his mouth. Especially Sansa.

"Does she know," Arya asked, her voice cold again.

"Aye," Jon nodded. "I told her right before the battle."

"That makes you a threat to her," Arya continued. Sansa nodded beside her sister, agreeing.

"She knows I don't want the throne. I don't care about power."

"She's still a Targaryen," Sansa continued, frustrating him to no end. He did not want to argue. Not here. Not now. Not about her, when she still lay in her coma for the sake of saving them.

"I'm a Targaryen," he cried back. "We all have work to do, and we don't have time to argue. Promise me."

"I didn't mean it like that," Sansa said, her eyes apologetic. "You're a Stark, Jon. To me, to Arya. Bran. To the North."

"I swear it," Arya said, though he could tell she was not happy about it.

"I promise," Sansa added, rather quickly, Jon thought.

Jon nodded, turning to leave, bemoaning why everything had to be so complicated. Even with his own family. Especially with his own family.

"We'll speak of this no further." He was a king no longer, but he still knew how to give an order.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary


Jon

"Our Queen?"

"The same." It comforted him to know that the Half-Man shared his reverence for Daenerys, providing him an assurance he could not even receive from his own family. Grey Worm and Missandei were dedicated to her too, but they were never ones for conversation, much less the Dothraki.

"That's good, in a way." Ever since the Great War, Tyrion Lannister seemed to have taken to the drink more, reminding him of when he first met the Imp on that chilly night, outside another feast, so many years before.

"Her bruises are healing. Cuts...disappearing."

"She's mending. That gives me hope." He took a large swig of the wine, squinting at the map of the Seven Kingdoms laid before them. "It ought to give the entire realm hope."

"We march tomorrow," Ser Davos remarked. "Should take us a week to reach Moat Cailin, provided the weather stays fair." It wasn't an official war council, considering it comprised of just them three. There was little need for Grey Worm or the new Khal, Madri, Jon thought his name was, as they were staying at Winterfell alongside their Queen. They were brave fighters, all whom Dany had brought over from Essos, but the Unsullied and the Dothraki knew little of the politics involved with the ride south. To be honest, Jon himself knew little of it either. He hoped Ser Davos would be of help. Tyrion too, though as much as he genuinely enjoyed the company of Dany's Hand, even his mind tended to wander when the Half-Man started rambling on about some esoteric subject tangential to whatever subject matter was actually at hand.

"Howland Reed was my father's," again a pause, again the instinct to correct himself, again the reminder that this was his secret to keep, "...bannerman. They fought together in Robert's Rebellion..."

He stopped, forgetting what he was about to say, if he ever knew in the first place. It was a good thing this wasn't an official council, because his head was clearly not in the details. Gods, he was so tired, his body still aching from the fight days before, his head still pounding from the successive nights of celebration for a North suddenly delirious with relief and joy, but it was his soul that wearied the most. The thought of the fighting, the wars to come, filled him with ever encompassing dread. He bent the knee to Dany. He pledged his sword. And though he knew what that meant when he did so, the waiting now only served to remind him how sweet peace was, how good home felt...and how fleeting this feeling would likely be for the rest of his days.

"Howland Reed will march for Ned Stark's son," a deep, feminine voice said, interrupting all three of them. It was Sansa, of course, and the glint in her eye made it clear that she structured her words
purely for Jon's benefit, as if each moment she did not reveal his secret was a personal favor from her to him. "But will he march for the Dragon Queen?"

"My Lady," Tyrion acknowledged. They had been married once. Neither one of them chose to speak much to Jon about the matter, though both made sure to stress only that it had been brief. And unconsummated. "Howland Reed is pledged to the North. Jon Snow, as King in the North, pledged his fealty to Queen Daenerys. That makes Howland Reed sworn to Queen Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen."

"Spare me the children's lecture," Sansa said dismissively, not bothering to hide her scorn. "Howland Reed is honorable, I'll grant you that. They will answer the call, unlike other houses sworn to us." It did not escape anyone's notice the pointed look she gave at Deepwood Motte on the map as she spoke. "Have you met my uncle Edmure?"

Jon shook his head, trying to remember if Catelyn's brother ever bothered visiting Winterfell. He could recall no specific occurrence, and he was certain it was the same for Sansa.

"I haven't either. From what I hear though, it will take all your willpower at times not to bash his head against a wall when you do march with him."

Jon laughed. His sister's contempt for deserving targets did make him laugh...when it wasn't directed towards himself, or Daenerys. "That bad?"

To his surprise, it was Tyrion who replied. "That bad, I'm afraid. I do recall my late father remarking more than once that if it wasn't Edmure's incompetence that won the war for him, it was still enough to keep House Lannister from losing the war outright to your brother."

"No," Sansa said, rediscovering this odd, newfound interest of hers in maps and all military matters. She looked wistful, almost sad, as she scanned the towns and houses dotting the realm between the North and the Riverlands. "Ned Stark may be your father, but Edmure is not your uncle, and Robin Arryn not your cousin."

She looked up, staring directly into his soul, and there was an indecipherable intensity in her blue eyes. "What are you saying," Jon asked, the other two at the table suddenly forgotten.

"It's wrong, you know. To push you back into the thick of things so soon after defeating the dead. You need rest. You deserve it."

"I want it," Jon said, "but we need to defend ourselves against Cersei. You know that better than anyone."

She stood up straight, rigidly, and it was hard to ignore her composure when her pose served to consciously remind whomever present that she was the trueborn daughter of Eddard of House Stark, one of only seven Great Houses in the land. "Ser Davos," she said, summoning his name as if he were a Northern lord and she seated at the head of the Great Hall.

"Lady Sansa," Davos answered, looking at Jon, just as confused as he.

"I will march south with my people. I will march alongside Lord Royce, who helped Jon and I take back the North. Will you march south with us, at the head of the Northern armies alongside Ser Brienne, in Jon's place?"

"My lady," Davos began, not sure how to answer.

"Lady Sansa..."
"You can't be serious," Jon gasped, wondering if this was all a sudden dream. Out of all things, having seen and defeated the dead, this was absolutely the last thing he ever expected to hear. If he were a betting man, he would have put a good amount of coin that his sister would never again step foot outside Winterfell. "Sansa...I know you're not a little girl anymore, but you're not a...warlord."

"No," she said, her features softening, and Jon was relieved that she did not take his words as an insult. It was tough to tell with her sometimes. "And I'm no southerner, either. But I do know the South. Sometimes it feels like I've spent more years there than even Ser Davos..."

"Another old joke," the Onion Knight grumbled bemusedly.

"Stay here with your Queen," Sansa said softly, so that it seemed that her words were loud enough only for the two of them to hear. "Take care of her. She needs you. You need her."

"I can't let you go off on your own, Sansa," Jon forced himself to say, even as he marveled that he never realized how selfless Sansa was, that she would go this far out of her way for him. "It's not safe."

"No, it's not," she agreed, and for a splitting second he could see it in her eyes, the fear, the dread. She did not want to go either. But something was compelling her. Then, they were stone again. "It's not Winterfell. But I'll be at the back of two great armies. Failing that, I have two of the most impregnable castles in Westeros to fall back to. If Cersei is foolish enough to send her armies north, I trust Ser Davos will be able to hold his own. This is not his first battle, you know."

Davos shook his head. "I'm afraid if it's the first battle where I'll actually have to do something useful, then I'd advise you to stay in Winterfell."

Jon stepped forward towards his sister. "I am Warden of the North, you know. I decide who marches with whom."

"And I am the Lady Paramount of the North," Sansa argued back, and it was clear now that this would not be something she gave easily on, "so I believe I have just the same amount of say."

"Not quite," Tyrion interrupted for the first time. "Our Queen has not appointed you Lady Paramount of anything, as she's appointed Jon Warden. In fact, she hasn't even appointed you Lady of Winterfell, for the matter."

"No," Sansa countered, her voice getting more impatient by the second. "The Knights of the Vale appointed me Lady of Winterfell by right of force, just as Daenerys seeks to appoint herself Queen of the Seven Kingdoms with the Unsullied and the Dothraki by right of force." Turning to ignore whatever Tyrion wanted to retort with, she looked to address Jon directly again. "The Lords of the North are loyal to me. And also to you. This isn't about who's more powerful between us, Jon. Please, don't make this a thing."

Her words softened as she spoke, cooling the fire in his chest, leaving only doubt. "What should I make of it then?"

A smile crept upon her lips. A reminder of the kind woman she had become, despite all the horrible things that had happened to her. Despite all the shields and defenses she had to wear day after day as a result.

"Consider it a gift. You've had to bear the burden for far too long, Jon. For once, let someone else do so."
"She's not doing this out of generosity, you know."

"Aye, I get that," Jon snapped, then instantly regretting raising his voice at the Imp. "I don't get what she gets of out of leaving Winterfell though."

He had fervently wanted to say no to Sansa, but she clearly hinted during that entire conversation that if it came to that, while the loyalties of the North may be split evenly between the two, she had far more influence over the Vale than he, and she would not hesitate to use that if she had to. Of course, there were the Unsullied and Dothraki too, who could be easily be convinced to distrust Sansa, but their ire was the last thing he wanted to turn upon his own sister. His concern was for her safety, above all other things, though he had to admit that both his sisters knew how to take care of themselves by now. And though Sansa was clearly not the fighter Arya was, she was smart enough not to put herself in obvious danger, or so he hoped.

"She hasn't made much of a secret to me how much she distrusts our Queen," Tyrion remarked sadly, and immediately Jon understood how much Tyrion wanted Sansa to accept Daenerys, almost as much as he did. "I doubt she's kept that from you, considering her nature."

"She's stubborn, and she's not quiet about it." He respected Sansa's willpower, an unbreakable spine that allowed her to suffer through countless horrors through the years. But why was he always on the receiving end of her displeasure? "You think she's trying to plot against our Queen behind her back?"

"I don't know," Tyrion admitted. "I don't know what she wants. Maybe she does feel a genuine sense of obligation to the Vale. Maybe she wants to honor her mother's memory by protecting the Riverlands from my sister." He took a hard swig of his wine before continuing, and Jon could guess that he would not like what Tyrion was about to say. "Maybe she is looking to build her own influence in three kingdoms where Ned Stark and Catelyn Tully's names carries her the furthest. Maybe it's all of that, and more."

"My sister Sansa wants to be Lady Paramount of the North and Vale and Riverlands?" Jon laughed, taking a glass of ale alongside Tyrion. "Sansa isn't blind to power, I'll admit that. But she was ready to give me Winterfell until I pushed it on her. I can hardly see her going so out of her way to become the next Cersei of the North."

"Gods help us if that's the case," Tyrion remarked with an exaggerated shutter. "But you're right. She is going really far out of her way. And not for nothing."

"If she wanted to hurt Dany," Jon started, remembering the secret that he shared with Sansa, regretting now that he did so. But she kept it so far, had she not? "She'd have a..."

"What," Tyrion asked, eyes suddenly alert.

Jon shook his head. "Nothing." He took a deep breath. "Sansa is my sister. She may not agree with me all the time, but she respects me. And I made clear my allegiance."

Tyrion shook his head in turn. "Incorrect."

Jon glared at him, but the Half Man continued.

"She loves you as a brother. She respected you as a king. But you're no longer a king. And you heard her, she respects your position as Warden only so much as she respects our Queen's authority to appoint you to that position. And I suspect she's not alone in thinking that way, here in the North." He stood, barely standing taller than Jon crouched down on his chair. "Allow me to ride south."
"I definitely have no authority over you, my Lord Hand," Jon muttered.

"If my worst fears are but for naught, at least I can help your sister in her efforts on behalf of our Queen." His sarcasm was apparent with his first remark. "If it's anything more than that, I will also make sure I represent our Queen's interests with the Lords of the Vale and Riverlands."

"I...," Jon stopped, trying to discern between what he actually believed and what he was willing to admit to Tyrion. "I don't believe that she'd actually go behind my back. But promise me, Tyrion...anything that happens, you tell me first. Before you tell Grey Worm, or Varys, or Missandei, or..."

"I will," Tyrion agreed, then paused. "Only if it's not the worst."

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**Jaime**

Some things never changed. Eight years ago when he first visited, Jaime Lannister had found Winterfell to be so terribly, tediously boring. Now that the dead was no longer at its doors, all memories concerning the sheer mundaneness of the North returned to him. That's not to say all the people here were boring, though most of them were, save a few. Spending time with Tyrion was a blessing he never imagined he could enjoy again. He had forgotten his pleasant his wit was, and his fundamental sweetness as a person, under that cynical facade. Only, Tyrion seemed less cynical these days. That could be attributed to the Dragon Queen, he supposed, and Jaime still had yet to decide that was an improvement or not on his brother.

Jon Snow was even less interesting as a former king and, if the whispers were true, a man who had passed through the shadow of death and back, than he was as a disgruntled, angry bastard off to join the Night's Watch all those years back. He may have saved the world, but that did not make him good company. Besides, the man seemed little interested in doing anything these days, now that his Great War was won, beside brood and probably cry behind closed doors over his fallen Queen. The Stark sisters were surprisingly interesting. He had never given them a second thought in King's Landing, even when the older one was married to his brother. Now that they were older, and certainly changed, he supposed he saw in them now what only Catelyn Stark had when she risked everything, even her own son's war, to set him free in order to save them.

He would love to talk to the younger one. Brienne swore she would be a match for him even when he had his good hand. Where did she learn how to fight, he and everyone else in the castle all wondered. Hearsay varied, but most agreed that Arya Stark had somehow made her way to Essos for some time, after Ned Stark died and before the meeting in the Dragonpit. He heard one serving girl say Volantis, a horse boy claim she learned magic all the way out in Asshai, and even the Maester here he overheard say something about Braavos and the Faceless Men. It would be a good place for himself to visit, once the wars died down. If this band of assassins could take in a runaway highborn girl and turn her into an assassin who could literally kill death itself, sure they could do a thing or two for an above average swordsman with one hand. If only he could track her down, but Jaime knew that Ned Stark's daughter would never answer any question from him, even if he were able to corner her.

The older sister was another matter. He had not spoken to her since the morning immediately after the battle, but he found himself under her wing now, his continued stay at Winterfell dependent upon his place beside Lady Sansa's most dedicated protector. They shared something in common, he thought, something he could not name. Perhaps it was just disillusionment at a world that failed both of them at such a young age. In another world, a different history, they may have been friends.

No. Jaime Lannister does not have friends.
But even Cersei had admitted to him, before Joffrey's death, a grudging admiration for the girl, that she could endure so much and still be so...perfect, Cersei had said. Contemptuously of course. Afterwards, she believed firmly that Sansa had a hand in their son's murder for a time, though even then, he had his doubts and even then, he could not begrudge her. Not after what his family had done to hers. There was no honor with traitors like the Freys, he had seen that firsthand, no satisfaction from a battle evenly fought and fairly won...the only battles men like Arthur Dayne and Barristan Selmy ever knew.

And the Lady Olenna had been right, after all. Joffrey was a cunt. He cried for Myrcella, alone in that boat with his lovely daughter's body. His innocent daughter. Tommen was innocent too, but there had never been any warmth between them, the young king too prematurely lost as a pawn for every Great House in the hideous game both his sister and the Dragon Queen were determined to win. But Joffrey...he wouldn't doubt it if Joffrey would have ordered Ser Ilyn Payne to behead him if he ever told him the truth of his parentage. He thought he loved his oldest son then, but looking back, he realized he actually cared little for him, the only emotion he still felt from that day being what her firstborn's death did to Cersei.

It was a blessing then, that they were never close. Perhaps in a perfect world he and Cersei could have raised him differently, had they the chance to do so without suffering fat Robert's wrath. Three children born, three children dead, and he a father for merely a second or two during Myrcella's last moments. There was still a chance, he remembered, and he felt his heart physically ache.

"Lady Sansa is ready to see you."

It was the littlest Stark. He didn't even hear her approach, then all of a sudden she was there, standing still as though she had always been there on the other side of his periphery.

"Lady Arya..."

"Don't," was all she bothered to say to him, before turning abruptly to walk into the solar where her older sister awaited. Lady Sansa stood at her full height, tall enough to look down on many men, including her own bastard brother, and though she did not loom over Jaime, her cold demeanor would still be enough to intimidate many other men, knights, his own size. But not Jaime Lannister.

"Ser Jaime," she said neutrally, gesturing for him to sit across from her. She sat too, and Arya took her place next to her sister, standing and looking at him as if she couldn't wait to cut out his throat as she did to Petyr Baelish not long before he arrived.

"Lady Sansa. I..."

"Sandor Clegane is here," she interrupted, an annoying habit from these Stark girls of late. "You both stood guard over my beloved Joffrey before. Have you seen him?"

"I caught a few glimpses, lurking during the battle," Jaime said, not failing to notice the sheer hatred in her voice when she brought up the former king. "Saw him during the feast too, but he didn't look like he wanted to talk."

"He talked to me," Sansa said simply. "He used to call me a little bird, you know. Back in the capital."

"I'm sure he did," Jaime replied back, wondering where she was leading this conversation, and how it would inevitably lead to his own execution.

"I'm not a little bird any more. I have little birds now. Little birds that tell me you've been spending
many a night in Ser Brienne's chambers. Little birds that tell me you and Lord Tyrion had a visitor from the capital the other night."

Jaime sighed, wondering if this was going to be what he was going to have to deal with his entire life, or as long as he stayed in Winterfell. The constant suspicion, mistrust, questioning no matter how much Brienne vouched for him. "If you're going to accuse me of treason, stop playing around and just do it."

The two sisters exchanged an imperceptible look, but said nothing.

"It was Bronn," he grumbled. "And for what it's worth, he was there to kill us on behalf of my sister."

"Tyrion's man," Sansa asked, clearly upset from having to recall her time in King's Landing.

"Not after Joffrey's death, Cersei made sure of that."

"Why didn't he kill you," the little one asked coldly.

Jaime shook his head. Was there a reason why he shouldn't say? Tyrion was the political one. Why couldn't she interrogate him instead?

"Tyrion promised him Highgarden."

This seemed to surprise even Sansa, though she brushed off whatever she felt about the news immediately.

"That promise can only be fulfilled after the Dragon Queen kills your sister."

Jaime nodded. It was an unpleasant truth, but it was still the truth.

"And what do you think about that?"

He sighed again. He was not ready for this. These were questions he still struggled with every day, and these girls had no right to interrogate him like this. Except they did, he was their guest after all. And prisoner, possibly, depending on their whims.

"You still love her," Sansa continued, "even after she tried to kill you?"

He didn't respond, but he knew his face gave away the answer.

"Do you love Brienne?"

"I do."

"More than Cersei?"

He didn't answer once more, and didn't fail to note the disappointed look on Sansa's face.

"You know she is dead, don't you? Once the Dragon Queen awakes, and it will not be pleasant for her when Fire and Blood arrives upon her doorsteps."

"But she's knocked out, isn't she," Jaime snapped back, feeling his defiance returning. "I'm already a Kingslayer. Say the word, and I'll gladly act as your Queenslayer right now."

He thought he imagined a smile from Arya, but it was gone before he could tell. Her older sister was
completely unreadable now, the subject of Daenerys clearly more troubling for her than even Cersei.

"House Frey betrayed guests under their roof," Sansa asked, finally. "You heard what happened to them?"

"They're dead," Jaime said, remembering how puzzled he was riding past Riverrun, hearing of the absolute chaos and dozens of contradicting stories about what happened to the wretched family he had so recently installed there.

"I killed them," Arya said coldly, sending a chill even down his spine. "Every last one of them."

"How," he managed to bring himself to ask.

Arya shrugged. "Different ways. I made sure old Walder got it worst though. I fed him his sons before I slit his throat."

She may look like a little girl, but her eyes were colder than the Night King she slew, and Jaime knew he must have looked ridiculous right about now, staring at little Arya Stark slack jawed.

"Unlike the Freys," Sansa said, interrupting his foolish paralysis, "the Starks will honor our obligations to those we shelter under our roofs. If you hurt Brienne, however, I will allow her to do with you as she wishes."

He wanted to say he would never hurt Brienne, but he knew that would be a lie. He didn't want to hurt her. She was the best person he knew, and everything he didn't deserve, but there were some things outside his control.

"Cersei's pregnant," he blurted out.

"Yours?"

Jaime nodded.

The Lady of Winterfell stood and gathered the scrolls on her desk. He stood as well, wondering if he was being dismissed now.

"Our armies are prepared to march, as I'm sure you've noticed. I hope you haven't sent word to Cersei."

"I haven't," Jaime said. It was true. A small part of him still wanted Cersei to somehow survive this mess. He may not be the good man Brienne may believe he was now, but even the Jaime Lannister of old had his lines. Betraying his hosts was not one he believed he would have crossed in the past.

And pushing their son off a tower is?

"My brother stays at Winterfell. I will march south myself."

This took him by surprise. "You plan on taking King's Landing yourself," he asked incredulously.

"No. But I have no intention of letting your sister get a stranglehold over North. We will march to the Trident." Speaking as she studied her scrolls, she looked up at him. "The weaker Cersei's position is when the Dragon Queen wakes, the less impulse she may feel towards burning your sister and her unborn child alive."

"Since when do you care about the welfare of my sister," Jaime asked. He felt lost once more, like he did in King's Landing, when the rest of his family made their plots and conspiracies around him and
his only role was to mutely follow their lead.

"You are an experienced commander, Ser Jaime. Perhaps the best we have left after almost ten years of war. March south with Brienne and I. I'm not asking you to fight your sister, but I ask your help in protecting the kingdoms of Westeros from a foreign army."

Jaime scoffed. Perhaps the Stark girl and Cersei shared more than either would care to admit. "You have something to offer me?"

"Not as much as I'd like," Sansa admitted. "If the Dragon Queen awakes, I have no power over her. But what little influence I have, I swear to you I will use all of it to keep your sister alive until your child is born. I will do whatever I can to protect the child until he or she is yours to raise. And if Cersei is to die, as I'm sure Daenerys will insist upon sooner or later, I will do what I can to give you a chance to bid your farewells to her in person, if that is what you wish."

It was a lot for him to take in all at once, confront all the conflicts and feelings he'd been pushing off for so long. Sansa had clearly prepared this all along, and he felt it unfair that he had to answer her at once, now.

"I have no wish to take King's Landing, Ser Jaime," Sansa continued, sensing his indecision. "If she doesn't wake, I just want to make it clear to Cersei that the northern kingdoms are no longer her domain. She can keep the rest."

"If I take arms against her," he finally found himself saying, "she will never forgive me."

"She already tried to kill you. Would fighting a few battles make things that much worse?"

He took a deep breath. He thought he crossed the line when he left her months ago. There would be no return after this. But Sansa was right, this could be the best way to save Cersei, to save their child, even if it meant she would forever hate him. He nodded.

"I'll ride south," he said, barely mumbling his words out. "On your word, I will fight on your behalf. But not anywhere within a week's ride of King's Landing."

Sansa nodded as well, then looked to Arya. "Would you trust him?"

The little Stark stared at her older sister with an intensity that seemed almost like anger to him.

"Not entirely. But more than most."

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**Sansa**

It changed everything, yet she was thankful Bran had told her, because it gave her a chance to think. It did not escape her notice that while Bran's words were directed at Jon, he was looking at her and only her when he said them. The certainty was a blessing, even though it wasn't the certainty she preferred. Because the certainty was what allowed her, pushed her, to act now, while she still could.

"How long are you going to be angry with me?"

Her sister's eyes made little effort to hide her rage. Not when Ser Jaime was still present. Nor after he left.

"You know what Cersei means to me," Arya replied.
"You know what she means to me as well," Sansa rebutted, her voice rising. She did not want to match torments endured with her little sister, not again. "But she's not our only threat anymore. We need him. I'm doing this for the North. For Jon, even if he's going to end up hating me for it."

"He shouldn't have told her."

"He told us as well. He can't help himself. He is Ned Stark's son. To the point where he'll needlessly put himself in harm's way every chance he gets. He already died once for his mistakes, stabbed at the wall by his own men." Sansa covered her eyes with her hands, grateful for once that she was not with Jon when he was betrayed by his own sworn brothers. Had she heard the news at the time, before knowing he would return, she wasn't sure how she would have taken it. For all she knew at then, he was the last of her blood, her family, still alive. When they saw each other again, she thought they were the only survivors. Had she thought herself truly alone, could she have given up? Before she even had the chance to take her home back and rediscover her family?

"The things I'm thinking," Sansa mused quietly, "father will not be proud of me."

"It was mother that let Jaime free," Arya said, surprising her. "To save us. Some things are more important than honor."

"How'd that work out for her,"Sansa said, feeling that bitterness and anger whenever she thought, truly thought, about the family they'd lost, and how they died. "Or Robb?"

"It worked out for you, in the end. Brienne found you. Saved you. Now the power is yours. It's your turn."Arya took several methodical paces around the room, swirling to face Sansa. "You have a plan in mind?"

"Nothing clear," Sansa said, frowning. It bothered her that there were so many things she couldn't control, that she would still be so dependent on others near and far. "But a few ideas, yes."

Arya laughed. "Now you sound like Bran." Her expression turned serious. "You're going to tell them about Jon, aren't you?"

Sansa nodded. "I have to. If all the lords of Westeros know who he really is, what it really means, then Daenerys will think twice before harming him. Should their thing with each other ever go bad."

"And if they do decide he's a better king, wouldn't that put Jon back in danger?"

Sansa bit her lip. Arya was right, it was a gamble. She felt good about the gamble, but she was still nevertheless playing with Jon's life. But he wasn't safe now, and it would be worse if she didn't act. "He has one dragon now. And Daenerys one less."

"He won't do it."

"I hope he won't have to." Sansa looked around the room. She loved Winterfell. After the Battle of the Bastards, she worried that her memory of the place would always be tainted by the time she was forced to share it with the Boltons. But not even Ramsey had enough power to erase her love of her home, a love she never quite comprehended until it was taken away from her, and kept from her for so many years. "Stay with me, Arya. Please. I need you. Cersei can wait. She may be yours yet, but let me honor my vow to Ser Jaime. Besides, you spared all the Frey women and children. You're not a baby killer."

"No," Arya said, agreeing. She laughed. "A Lannister sworn to the Dragon Queen. A Lannister who might still be loyal to Cersei. I guess you do need me with you for a bit longer."
Sansa allowed herself to smile, a rare, real one without any other motives or purposes in mind. "I'm glad to have you, Arya, but as a favor to me, can you at least try to hide your displeasure in having to accompany your older sister while she secures the North?"

"Be careful, sister."

Sansa could tell that Jon was doing his best to put on a happy face for the occasion, to hide all the conflicting feelings he had about her leaving. His fear for her. His mistrust of her, worries that she was planning something he wouldn't like. His own relief at not having to fight yet another war for once. His own guilt at shirking what he felt ought to be his duty.

"Stark men don't do well down south," Sansa said, smiling as she cupped his bearded cheek in one hand, stressing her first two words. Even now, she regretted so much how she had treated him when they were younger, and if that meant overdoing it in reminding him how much he was no different than her or Arya or Bran, so be it. "Stark women do better, I think. This one didn't do too bad, all things considered."

Jon waved his head towards Arya, standing at attention behind her, and studiously ignoring the not so subtle looks coming her way from the bastard Baratheon boy, the smith. Sansa made a note to ask her about that once they were on the road.

"And she'll do fine. That I'm certain."

One last hug, and Sansa allowed herself the indulgence of admiring the walls and hallways of her home from the courtyard, hopefully not for the last time. It wasn't that she was planning to die, just the opposite, but Sansa considered herself enough of a realist to never fully deny that possibility. She was in good company: her sister, the Hound, whom Arya had somehow talked into coming along, Yohn Royce, Brienne, Podrick, Ser Davos, the Lannister brothers, and the eunuch, whom Tyrion likely dragged into their trip as well.

In a way, she felt relief in leaving, in that she could push herself to go through with what she least desired, for the sake her duty. Somewhere in those walls the Dragon Queen still slept. And that made it easier, Sansa realized. Her presence always bothered her. It could not be denied that Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons played a crucial role in destroying the Army of the Dead. But at the same time, this was the woman who could yet still destroy their family, and the North while she was at it. And there she slept, within the halls of their home, a dragon destined to wake again if Bran was right.

And there was Bran. His eyes had not left her that entire morning. That was odd, for he rarely seemed to pay much heed to her, much less anyone else, especially after the Night King was defeated. She walked to hug him.

"Goodbye, Bran. We won't be long."

"You will be," Bran said, soft enough so that no one else could hear, surprising her with his words.

"What do you mean," Sansa asked nervously. "It's a short ride to the Riverlands." She frowned. "Is Cersei sending her armies north?"

"Many things will happen before you return," Bran said, pointedly ignoring her question. "If you choose to leave."

The fear, that stinging fear reminding her of those moments before the battles, memories of Ramsey and his hounds, came rushing back, and for a moment she thought she could not bear to keep
standing.

"Will I return though?"

He nodded. It was subtle, and Sansa wondered if she even saw him nod. He did, she decided.

"Things will have changed then...Sansa of House Stark."

Forcing herself to muster up a smile, she bent down to hug him again, then turned to eye the open gate, and what lay beyond. Mounting her horse, she saw Arya already upon hers, who gave her a reassuring look as they rode forward.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Tyrion assesses the political situation as the march south commences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Tyrion**

"To think, after pleading for your life in Winterfell, after fighting all those smelly corpse fuckers..."

Moat Cailin was just as gloomy as he remembered, even on a bright, chilly winter's day, garrisoned as it was now by several armies, include several advance battalions of the Unsullied who had joined the march south, but no further. Tyrion did not want to leave his Queen, but he was glad to leave the North for the time being. He supposed that there were few places he looked forward to at this point in his life, bad memories sullying most places in the Seven Kingdoms by now for him, but there were certainly places he'd prefer not to be in. And though there was a certain charm now to Winterfell he can't deny, and some semblance of sentimentality towards how they had all come together to defend the realm there, he wasn't a bad person for still looking for a change of pace.

"I'm the one who fought them," Jaime said, somewhat jokingly. "You hid in the crypts with all the women and children."

"I was ordered to hide by the Queen," Tyrion countered, a bit more defensively than he would have liked. "I offered to stand on the ramparts. Besides, it was no less safe down there during the end. I stabbed one or two of those dusty cunts...in between hiding behind graves and trying not to shit myself."

"Didn't you tell me Sansa killed more than you," Jaime asked skeptically.

"Maybe one more," Tyrion admitted. "She's taller, you know. She has far longer reach than me." He chuckled, the sight of the two of them frantically stabbing the wights as they scrambled through the narrow hallway made for a ridiculous sight if it weren't for how terrifying it was. "Father would be proud. I finally killed a Stark. Albeit one that's been dead for probably hundreds of years."

Jaime laughed, and patted him on the back. A welcome sensation for him. "I'm proud of you too. You've survived more than you should have."

"More than I deserve," Tyrion agreed, feeling those dark thoughts creeping up his throat. "My point is...after all this, here we stand. On opposing sides once more."

"Opposing," Jaime asked, eyebrow raised, as if to question his little brother's sanity. "Forgive me, I thought here we were, marching together south to commit murder upon our own kin. Each for a second time no less."

Tyrion grumbled, not wanting a reminder of his last moments with his father, but it was his own fault in bringing it up in the first place. He saw that Jaime himself did not look altogether comfortable either. Even though it was just some cousin he killed, he knew his brother to be a man of conscience,
despite what everyone else thought. And he knew that while Jaime Lannister had done horrible things before, and could do horrible things again, he never committed his crimes without thought.

"You think Sansa is truly marching south for Daenerys?"

Jaime shook his head, and Tyrion regretted bringing the awkwardness of their respective politics into their conversations. They had little time together of late already, and who knew what the future would bring. But the conversation had to be had.

"Of course not," Jaime said, his eyes a tad bitter at the inference Tyrion unwittingly made upon his own intelligence. "She has her own purposes, I'll give you that. But do you really think she'd declare war on your queen? After what she did to save Winterfell?"

"No. But our Queen has been in a coma for weeks now. Who knows if she will wake?"

"What do you think she wants then? Certainly not for Cersei to take back all the seven kingdoms. Nor does she seem like the kind who wants to take her place."

"She wants the North. She said as much to Daenerys." He rubbed his beard. Sansa was harder to read these days. It made him proud, in a way, the poor girl everyone pitied back in King's Landing now acting as a formidable power in her own right. But it bothered him that his former wife, whom he had treated with kindness as much as he could, was now a foe, and openly acting as such more and more.

"So why are we marching down to the Riverlands then?"

"I don't know for sure."

"Why don't you ask her? Didn't you say the two of you had a...tender moment down in the crypts?"

Tyrion shook his head. It was so simple then, faced with the thought of imminent death. But even then it wasn't, politics having come up despite the threat of being hacked to bits by the dead. And it was true, he did feel down in the crypts a positive advancement of their relationship. Not that he held any delusions that Sansa had any interest in renewing their marriage, but her coldness to him now felt like an all the more bitter rejection, though he had to remind himself it was not a personal one, but directed at the Queen he served.

"She's been cold to me ever since the battle. It seems with the Queen's absence, she sees me as even less trustworthy as before. Which means she's plotting." He stopped, and looked at Jaime, who was studying him back with equal fervor. Jaime was his brother, he should be able to trust him. But Tyrion had not been lying when he said that Jaime was sworn to the other side now...a possible enemy. "Allies," he finally confessed. "She's here to build alliances so that when Daenerys does wake, Sansa will be in a stronger position to ask for an independent North."

Jaime shook his head. It was nothing against his brother, but it did take him longer to grasp the subtleties of statecraft.

"They're already her allies."

"In theory," Tyrion explained. "She needs face time with those lords to build up true relationships. She's perfectly capable of it too...look how she already holds the Vale in her hands. Now she comes down with two armies...a show of force, and if by any chance our sister is foolish enough send armies to be destroyed up north during the winter, it will be said that it was Lady Sansa Stark of Winterfell, not a comatose Queen, or Jon Snow, a man who knelt to the said Queen, who defended the northern kingdoms from Cersei."
His brother thought on those words for a time, letting them simmer in his mind, before shaking his head again.

"Yeah," he said, with a smile that Tyrion knew to be the one he reserved for mild indifference, "see, I don't really care about all that."

"What if it comes to war," Tyrion asked. He wouldn't admit it, but he was pleading with his brother. After everything they had been through, not having to fight him against was the only thing Tyrion sincerely wanted out of life at this point. That, and seeing his Queen on the Iron Throne, of course.

"It won't," Jaime said, too quickly for his taste.

"How can you know for sure?"

"She's not stupid," he replied, smirking. "Your Queen has the dragons. They'll burn away whatever alliances she can build down there."

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Cersei

"My Queen, I bring news from the North."

It was odd. Qyburn had always been a creature of convenience for her. Someone she could trust, someone she could turn to when there was no one else, not even Jaime. But there was a comfort to his voice now, a familiarity that in a different life could have come to her from a kindly father, one she never had.

"What is it?"

"The dead are defeated, but at great cost. Both dragons survive, however."

"Good," Cersei said, repeating the same word she uttered when news of the Wall falling reached her. "If the dead won, their armies would have doubled. If the living won, their army halved. I did hope they could have taken out one of those damned dragons." She smirked, stepping away from the window, admiring the rows of scorpions they had mounted onto the city walls while her foolish brother mounted his crusade up north. "But that will make it more satisfying when we destroy both of them."

"There are rumors," Qyburn continued, a shadow of a smile that told her she would savor the news. "The Dragon Queen has not been seen since the battle."

"She's dead?"

"No. She fell during the battle, and was found in a comatose state. They are not sure if she will wake again."

Cersei sighed. It was good news. But it wasn't great news. For the dragon bitch to pass away in her sleep in the icy wastes of the North seemed an anti-climatic end for her. She'd take it, no doubt, but she would have savored being the Queen who gave the order for Gregor to hack off the bitch's head. Slowly, for once. And the kingdoms would love her, for a change, having saved them all from fire and blood from a foreign land.

"Her armies ride south, however. It appears they will march on King's Landing even without their Queen."
"Is that so?" This seemed too good to be true. Such blessings never happened naturally for her, she had to claw and scrape for every advantage she's ever had in life. "Tell Captain Strickland to march north and wipe them out."

"Your Grace," Qyburn began, and Cersei stopped to listen. She was not Joffrey, a fool who could not bear to hear anything contrary to her own whims. As long as the counsel came without an personal agenda, the one thing she could trust from her Hand, she would be an idiot not to at least hear it out. "Are you that is wise? The Northmen have the advantages of winter, and of fighting on familiar ground."

"The North are as weak as they'll ever be," Cersei rebutted, firmly enough to hint that Qyburn's arguments were not strong enough to sustain the debate. "Every second we waste while the Dragon Queen sleeps is every second we rue when she wakes and takes her dragons south. Jon Snow is a fool. He should have lost Winterfell to the Boltons and would have if his sister, and that traitor Littlefinger, didn't come to his rescue in the last minute. There will be no savior for him this time around, we've made sure of that."

"Very well, Your Grace." The old man stopped and moved to leave, before remembering something else. "Oh, and Lord Baelor's sons have arrived in the capital, pledging their swords and that of House Hightower's to the Crown's defense."

This was good as well, evidence that her strategy, one that Jaime had been too foolish to see even in the very last minute, was continuing to bear fruit.

"Alac, was it?"

"Yes, Your Grace. And the younger one, Arthur."

This could be useful. Ever since the Tarlys were burnt, far too few bannerman other than her own had rallied to her side. A prestigious house such as the Hightowers was more she could hope for at this point, though she would never admit that. Regardless, this was too valuable of an opportunity to waste.

"Ser Alac will take charge of King's Landing's defenses. Send the younger one north with the Golden Company, he'll ride alongside Captain Strickland."

"A wise decision, Your Grace. Young Arthur Hightower will give our armies a familiar face at its head."

She smiled and turned, Qyburn immediately taking the signal to leave. Yes, few things panned out her way, but her Hand was one of them. It was good not to have to explain everything, unlike with Jaime. To think, she ever thought he would make a good Hand for King Robert. What a foolish young thing she had been.

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Sansa

She did her best to smile at Meera Reed. The debt she owed to her, to her brother, for what they did for Bran, could never be repaid. From what she heard, the young daughter of Howland Reed had left Winterfell in a huff. She never knew why exactly, but not after long was able to attribute it simply to Bran being Bran. It made her hate Jaime Lannister sometimes, as Sansa often wondered what a grown Bran, a real Bran Stark, not this Three Eyed Raven sitting in its place, would be like. One thing it did mean was that she would certainly not be the current Lady of Winterfell. Would it be worth it? If their lives were anything close to normal, she'd say yes. Perhaps their father could have
made a match between him and Meera. Perhaps Robb could have lived, and she could have enjoyed
taking her first sip of wine with her father and mother, rather in King's Landing with a Queen who
loathed her. All these years later, it was truly pointless to spend too much time wondering what could
have been. And in the real world, Bran the Three Eyed Raven helped saved the realm from the dead,
whereas Brandon Stark would have shot arrows from the walls and likely died with everyone else
when the dead came.

That's what kept her from wanting to murder the Kingslayer, a man she supposed passed for
something of a bannerman for her now.

"I think he wanted you to live," Sansa finally said to the girl. Girl, except she was older than her, she
was pretty sure. "Had you stayed in Winterfell, you would have been in the Godswood, and you
would have died protecting him. That was his gift to you, his gratitude. It may have hurt, but it saved
your life."

"I would have died for him," Meera replied, her eyes defiant and not at all afraid of the Lady of
Winterfell. It was that attitude, Sansa figured, that helped her keep Bran alive amongst all those
horrors north of the Wall. "Happily, even."

"What would your father have thought? Losing both his children?"

She looked down, contemplating that truth of the matter, not wanting to admit that she was right.
And by inference, that Bran was right.

"Perhaps you're needed for the fight to come," Sansa continued. "The dead are dead, but the North is
still at risk. Lead your men here at Moat Cailin, with your father. If Cersei marches north, you are our
last defense before Winterfell."

"With all respect, my lady, I'd like to march south with you, just as my father marched with your
father all the way down to Dorne."

Sansa smiled, regretting what she had to say. Meera reminded her of her own sister, a fierce and
wildness to her found, in her experience, only in women of the extreme norths and souths of the
Seven Kingdoms. They would get along, Arya and her. Sansa liked her already too, and not just for
what she did for Bran.

"I'd like that. But I will not expose the last surviving child of Lord Howland, and his own heir, to
undue danger. If you want to explore the south, I'll take you personally to King's Landing one day.
But today, the North is your home, and your duty to defend."

Leaving the woman at Moat Cailin's gates, she hoped she had won Meera Reed's respect, if not her
love because, like Bran, she just turned her away. Below, Tyrion and Varys were conversing, likely
conspiring as to how best they could undermine her in the name of their queen. Jaime and Brienne
stood awkwardly on the other side of their caravan, trying way too hard to avoid each other in the
light of day. Yohn Royce and Ser Davos seemed to be getting along well, which made her happy.
Davos was wholly loyal to Jon, and Sansa appreciated that. She also knew Royce would put in a
good word for her as well in the eyes of the Onion Knight, and Bronze Royce was not a man whose
opinion could be discarded in the Seven Kingdoms. Arya was nowhere, but she knew her sister
would find them once they departed. Walking the ramparts of the damp, worn down towers, she
surveyed row after row until she spied a stately old man with rich, gray hair and a slight hunch. She
walked up to approach him.

"Lady Sansa," the man said, bowing respectfully. "Your father would be proud of you."
"Thank you, Lord Howland."

"Please, no need for formalities," the old man waved away. He did not seem the talkative type, so Sansa considered it a privilege that he was willing to converse with her.

"Then none towards me either." They left the bannermen and walked down slowly down the steps towards the bogs below, quiet in the freeze of winter, a tangle of frost covered roots growing out of cracked ice. "Your daughter Meera kept my brother alive north of the Wall. And words can't express my sorrow for Jojen."

"We saw dark times in the North," Howland said, every word carefully measured. "You brought back the light, you and your brother Jon. What you went through...what you both went through...I can't imagine."

"Many of us suffered," Sansa agreed, her voice as cold as the wind, the only way she could speak of such things. "Our sufferings allowed us to discover strengths we never knew we had. Every generation has its trials, I think, some worse than others. Ours were not among the lucky ones...but neither were yours." She turned to look intently at the older man. "You were with my father at the Tower of Joy. He told us, how the two of you defeated Ser Arthur Dayne in single combat."

Howland looked away, as if the mere suggestion towards of the secrets of that day was enough to drive him back into the depths of his self imposed solitude.

"They were married you know." As she expected, the words elicited an immediate response from the old man, who spun to look at her with shock. Undaunted, she continued. "I'm not sure if even father knew that. She named him Aegon Targaryen, after the last conqueror who flew dragons onto our shores."

"N-Ned told you," Howland asked, stuttering, his face paler than even before if possible.

Sansa shook her head. "He took the secret to his...whatever oath he bound himself and you to, he kept it. I trust you have too. But there are other ways to know, and my family knows now."

"Jon," Howland asked.

Sansa nodded. "The secret's still that...a secret. But he did tell the Dragon Queen. Jon has no desire for the Iron Throne, or any throne, for that matter. Makes him unique amongst Targaryens, I suppose."

Howland said, nothing, merely staring into the snow covered hills in the distance, probably like Bran, lost in a distant memory.

Sansa continued. "If Jon doesn't care for it all, then there's no need to dredge up history long buried. Unless..."

"Unless what," Howland asked suddenly. If the man had kept the secret for near half a lifetime, she imagined that his barriers pierced, even the most stoic of men would feel a primal need to at least talk of it with someone else.

"Nothing," Sansa said, shaking her head. She turned, facing him, purposefully clutching both his shoulders with her hands. "I ask you one favor, Lord Howland."

"Howland."

"Howland," Sansa agreed. "If the Dragon Queen wakes...if her armies of Unsullied and Dothraki
screamers pass south once more...allow them free passage, of course, but I ask you to send a raven south if I'm still there to inform me of their progress. I must be prepared to greet them, of course."

"Of course, my Lady," Howland said, his voice quivering now. He took a deep breath before continuing. "The North remembers, Lady Sansa. And we remember many a thing...and not just Boltons and Lannisters, mind you."

Sansa smiled at the man, withdrawing her touch. "That's what sets us apart, that we do not forget our history."

Watching the eunuch approach her, Sansa braced herself to hide her distaste. The man they called the Spider had been eyeing her warily the entire trip, and she was sure that Tyrion had brought him along to spy on her, considering that Grey Worm and Missandei remained at Winterfell. Littlefinger had always warned her about Varys, though Littlefinger was hardly a trustworthy source. Nevertheless, the fact that Littlefinger clearly found the Spider to be more than a formidable opponent meant that she could not take him lightly as a threat.

"Lady Sansa," Varys said, sitting down beside the fire as the sun set on their camp. Though the cold still blistered in the gentler woods at the northern edges of the Riverlands, she noticed the eunuch eye the fire warily.

"Lord Varys," she started, keeping cordial. "I believe this was your first time North?"

The Spider nodded his head rapidly. "As you can see, I was more than happy to take you up first chance I get to ride towards somewhere warmer."

"But primarily to serve your Queen," Sansa remarked, purposely ending her sentence as a statement rather than a question.

"The same reason the Lady of Winterfell departed Winterfell," Varys countered.

Sansa looked across the fire at Brienne and the boy Podrick. Both were trying to remain neutral, but by now she could tell the subtleties of Brienne's expressions now, and it was clear her sworn sword held, like her, a similar mistrust of the eunuch.

"I trust you still know the comings and goings of the realm better than any man or woman alive, Lord Varys. Have you heard anything regarding my uncle?"

Varys shook his head. "He was freed after the mysterious plague which killed House Frey to the very last man. But the imprisonment was hard on the man. I believe he has not emerged beyond the walls of Riverrun since. I don't blame him...he does have a young wife and son to tend to. It hasn't been an easy few years for him."

"Not for any of us," Sansa said defiantly, before softening, "though I cannot imagine fearing for your own child as well." Turning her attention to Ser Jaime, she asked him, "didn't Jonos Bracken aide you in retaking Riverrun from the Blackfish?"

"And he was smart to do so. We would have wiped him out otherwise." As usual, Jaime Lannister betrayed no ounce of apology in his voice, and Sansa was no longer expecting it.

"Yet he requested lands from House Blackwood in return, did he not," Varys added. "It make sense, it is unwise to switch sides in a war...a win is not quite a win until you win something for yourself."

"Does he stand behind Cersei today," Sansa asked. Winterfell she had presided over with ease by the
end, whether alone or beside Jon, but it was different here, wielding power outside her castle's walls over all these powerful men, any one of whom, save one or two, who could strike her down with one blow. Or do worse.

"Considering his past habits, he will. Until faced with a larger army."

She considered the Spider's words. She could trust them, considering their aim was against Cersei, a common enemy. "Lord Tytos Blackwood remained true to my brother Robb until the end, and he maintains the largest host remaining in the Riverlands." She looked over to Brienne, and Cley Cerwyn, beside her. "Send a raven to Raventree Hall. Summon Lord Blackwood to escort Lord Edmure and Lord Bracken to the Crossroads. For their own protection, of course."

"At once, my lady," Podrick nodded, leaving diligently to embark on his new task.

"I see you've picked up a thing or two from the late Lord Baelish," Varys remarked, the comment biting as both a compliment and an insult. Sansa swirled around to face him.

"Littlefinger was not without his uses." She deepened her voice, similar to when she last spoke to Ramsey Bolton. "But I made him pay, in the end, for his crimes against House Stark."

She saw a satisfied smile from Yohn Royce nearby, and grudging admiration from Ser Davos.

"He got what he deserved," Varys said, a trace of satisfaction in his voice. "I heard the news on my way to Winterfell, my lady. Out of all the people in the realm, I never could have imagined the gentle dove of King's Landing being the one to serve him the justice he so richly deserved."

Still he underestimated her. That was good. But Littlefinger feared her before he died. Tyrion did vouch for Varys, telling her that as slippery as the man was, his intentions were always pure. She would be the judge of it herself, but for now, she needed to ensure that Varys not only respected her, but feared her as well.

"It was inevitable. With each betrayal, each crossing, he burned his bridges, severed his ties, until he found himself in a corner, rootless, with fewer friends and allies by the day. Thus it always is with his kind, the plotters and schemers." Noting the tension in the air colder than the northern winds now, she spun slowly upon the Spider. "You were close friends with Littlefinger, were you not? You speak of him with such distaste, it does confuse me."

"Friends," Varys responded nervously. "I think that would be an exaggeration of our relationship. More often than not we were at loggerheads with each other."

"Funny," Sansa mused, almost in a joking tone. "I recall the both of you pressing me, dictating my letter to Robb damning my own father, promising me his life would be spared. Which means when my father lost his head, both of you were implicit in his betrayal, were you not?"

All eyes around the fire were on her and Varys now, Tyrion she noted especially. He took his time coming up his response.

"That was all Joffrey, I'm afraid. I hate to make excuses for myself, much less Cersei or Littlefinger, but not even his mother could control him by then, once they put a crown on that head of his. I did everything I could to help your father, I swear..."

"So you were helpless," Sansa pressed, cocking her head. "Just as you were helpless when the Mad King burned the realm. When he burned my grandfather and strangled my uncle. Were you helpless too, when you stood by while Joffrey ordered me, a girl of thirteen, beaten every day before all the lords and ladies of the court? When Tywin Lannister plotted the slaughter of my mother and brother,
the King in the North and the Trident, alongside his wife and unborn child, at the Red Wedding? When Tywin Lannister ordered Gregor Clegane to pillage the Riverlands? When your new Queen burned alive Randyl and Dickon Tarly?"

Without giving him a chance to answer, she shook her head dismissively. "Seems your reputation is a bit exaggerated, considering how useless you've been all your life when it comes to the things that matter. At least Littlefinger never pretended to be righteous."

"And what did you do, my lady," Varys rebutted, stirred to rare, visible anger by her accusations and last insult, "when your father stood on the chopping block?"

"I was a little girl. I did everything I could to save his life. I trusted in you, and Baelish, and Cersei for the rest. Not the last time I made that mistake, but don't presume I should have any reason to trust you now."

"Lady Sansa," Tyrion began, obviously about to engage into a spirited defense of his friend, but Sansa brushed him off immediately, rising to leave the gathering.

"Don't bother," she said, stepping away, before turning to face the group one last time. "Dontos Hollard."

"Who," Tyrion asked.

"The fool. Who showed up drunk to the tourney. Even as a helpless little girl, a traitor's daughter, I did more than you to save those about to suffer the injustice of a cruel king. Even as a woman, Lady Margaery did everything she could to save Tyrion, your friend, a man to whom she owed nothing, from repeated humiliation from Joffrey, because it was decent." She walked back and leaned down at the Spider, and all the lords gathered waited for her to do something dramatic, maybe even slap the man. Instead, she spoke in even terms. "You owe many debts, Lord Varys. To the realm. To the lands in which you sit currently. To House Stark."

She was breathing rather hard by the time she reached her tent. Her outburst was a long time coming, but she had been waiting for the River Lords to be present before going off on Varys, considering all that they had suffered under the monarchs he'd served. But so many years of pent up rage...and she felt bad for him, in that Varys was a convenient, and easy target, who though not innocent, did not deserve all of the wrath she just inflicted on him.

She couldn't control herself. If she did put down the man, it had to be for a purpose, not for her own gratification. At least word would spread, she hoped, once Edmure and his lords were gathered, men gossiping much as any lady. And if what Tyrion claimed was true, that Varys was indeed a man of conscience, then her seeds will have been planted regardless.

She didn't know where Arya was, as usual. Hopefully she heard. Hopefully she was proud of her sister.

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**Tyrion**

"She has a point, you know."

"Please," Varys scoffed, but behind his defensiveness, Tyrion could tell the words cut through them both the same. "If every adviser spoke out against every tyrant every time they did something tyrannical, we'd still have a world of tyrants, except none to advise them but the Littlefingers that remain. It's a false comparison, anyway."
"How?"

"She and Margaery are women, lovely women at that. I may not have a cock, but that does not give me feminine wiles. Not enough at least to sway a king." He gave Tyrion a mournful look, the two of them alone in a tent on the edge of the camp. "Enough about our past failures. Did it escape your notice that she made a point to insult in the camp only the two most loyal to Queen Daenerys?"

"Yet what can we do? We are alone, she made that clear enough, surrounded by two armies loyal to her...just like Littlefinger was before she had him killed."

He gulped, wishing there was more wine at the camp. He never thought it possible that one day, he would find himself terrified of his former wife. But there was a justice in that, was there not? Wasn't his own family the ones responsible for turning that gentle girl, who thought shift was a dirty word, into a paranoid and bitter woman?

"Do you think she would have done it," Varys asked from the blue.

"Done what?"

"Burned the Tarlys. If Sansa were the Targaryen, with dragons at her beck and call."

"She killed Littlefinger, didn't she? Doesn't matter who did the deed, it was by her command."

"She seems to reserve her ire for those who did her wrong. Or her family."

Tyrion sighed. If only Littlefinger had never spirited her away from King's Landing. But then, she would have died by Cersei's hand, wouldn't she? What was better, he wondered. Death? Or Ramsey Bolton? He didn't have the answer, and it scared him that Sansa did.

"At this point, it might as well look to her like the entire realm has wronged her or her family," Tyrion admitted, his own family being among the chief culprits.

Varys chuckled, an ironic sound, and Tyrion looked up, wondering what the eunuch was thinking.

"Sounds like you're describing our own Queen at times, no?"

Gazing at his friend in horror, he suddenly wondered whether Varys was truly as fickle as his worst detractors, people like Sansa, believed him to be. "What are you saying?"

But Varys brushed off his look with a twitch of his lips. "What do you think our Queen will do when she wakes up? When saving the North cost her half her army, and months, potentially years of her life? Then she wakes to find the three northern kingdoms snatched out from under her?"

Grabbing a canteen of water, he drank it and imagined it to be wine.

"That's our job to prevent that from happening, isn't it?"

Chapter End Notes

I know writing a Sansa centric fic is controversial right now. Hopefully if you're still reading it, you're enjoying it, and please let me know what you think.
Introducing a couple of supporting OC's here. Baelor Hightower is canon, and I don't think anything is said about his children, so I decided to create them here...Cersei does need some allies in the realm, after all.

And yes, Sansa was pretty mean Varys here. I think she knows he doesn't fully deserve it, but all the bad memories and genuine resentment over the years came to her at once, and she couldn't stop once she started.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Sansa has to make decisions as armies march in all directions towards the impending battle.

Tyrion

There was a whorehouse not far from the inn, he knew, and it took all his willpower not to let his legs lead walk him to where they wanted to go. Other appendages as well, and it was ever more difficult without the nobler presence of his queen to reign in those darker desires. It had the pleasure of his visit when he first went north towards Winterfell and the Wall, and he had planned on returning...after a good meal at the inn, of course. Catelyn Stark obviously ruined all that when she took him mid-meal, which made it even more tempting now, seeing as it was unfinished business.

So, he thought, memories good and bad at the Crossroads, fitting in a symbolic sort of way. He had low expectations for this occasion, unless his former wife magically converted herself to a comatose queen's cause. Considering she barely spoke to him, or even looked his way the entire trip, his was not optimistic.

"The River Lords have arrived," Varys said, shivering as he sat down opposite him, not looking the least bit hungry. "They are camped on the far side of the fields."

"Do you think she'll even invite us if they gather?"

"It would be odd if she doesn't. She still hasn't abandoned the pretense. Yet, anyway." Another sigh, and Tyrion wondered if the eunuch was going to die of sadness one of these days. "Lord Bracken was swayed before by greed and force. He may be swayed again."

"Force would have been nice," Tyrion said, losing all appetite for the stale bread in front of him. "If only we could have talked the dragons into coming with us. Do you think they're still poaching sheep up in Winterfell? For all we know, they could have flown to Asshai by now."

"Most of our so-called allies would like that," Varys muttered.

"Who knew conquering would be so challenging?"

"Conquering with a conscience," Varys stressed. "That's whole point of it, isn't it?"

Tyrion repeated his words, enunciating each with increasing displeasure. "Conquering with a conscience. I don't think something like that's ever done before. There's a reason men like Ned Stark and Jon Snow are not conquerors. There's a reason Robb Stark failed when he attempted to do so. Our queen is unique. She's not Ned Stark, but not quite like Aegon the Conqueror either. That is why we follow her."

"It's a tricky balance to strike," Varys said, agreeing. He took Tyrion's glass of wine, raising it into the air as if to strike a toast before setting it down without a drink himself. "May she accomplish what no other man has."
"If she ever wakes," Tyrion grumbled, taking his glass less ceremoniously and finishing what was left with one gulp. He put his head in his hands, feeling the wine rush to his head, wondering whether broaching the topic might hasten its way into reality. "Let's say she doesn't. Hypothetically. What then? Do we beg my sister for our positions back?"

Varys shook his head. "The realm needs a benevolent hand guiding it. Sadly, there are so few left..."

"What about Jon Snow?" Tyrion brought up. "He has the advantage of already having been a king. Very few others can claim that."

Varys shook his head. "He's a bastard. That may not matter in the North, because they respect his father's name. Or Dorne, for the matter, because...well, Dorne. But he'll be a bit difficult for the rest of the realm to swallow."

"It's worth a shot." It was clear this was a question that had been festering in both their minds, though neither gave voice to it for now. "Sansa?"

The look he received in return was expected and unexpected at the same time.

"You've been considering it," Tyrion asked, pressing.

Varys cocked his head. "She's harsh. The lords will respect harshness. But contempt does not breed loyalty. Especially when mixed with a particularly provincial attitude."

Tyrion narrowed his eyes, full well knowing that the Spider was practically begging him to elicit from him what he left unsaid. "But you've still thought about it."

"The girl's still young. Quite raw...wounds that may fester further. But she's just, in that northern sort of way. Apparently clever. And she's learning how to show her strength by the second, you've seen quite a bit of that this ride."

"We both have. Only...," Tyrion looked around, beckoning the plump chef for some more wine, "it would be nice to have a King or Queen who actually gives more than two shits about any lands south of the Trident." He brooded for a bit, wondering whether to confide in Varys a trifling thought which may lead the Spider to think him mad. "What about Bran?"

"Bran? You're joking?"

The words cut, but the eyes said tell me more, so Tyrion continued. "Not entirely. He has the Stark name. He won't suffer from petty jealousies or grudges, much less the more violent emotions. He can probably predict any treasonous plots and call out the lords who think them..."

"Perhaps you've spent too much time up north, my friend," Varys interrupted, though it was clear that he was not dismissing his suggestions straight out of hand. "Notwithstanding the fact that he may never have children...why limit yourself to the Starks? The great houses are rather decimated these days, but if you think outside their scope...men such as Yohn Royce may be considered. Or a Hightower, or Velaryon, provided the incentive of a crown can turn them against your sister."

Their thinking definitely fell upon similar lines, and that was encouraging, guilty as he felt about plotting upon the contingency of the death of their Queen. "Yohn Royce is a firm man. With the right counsel he would make for a strong ruler."

"But we're getting ahead of ourselves," Varys said, rising to leave. "If our Queen does pass...or remain the way she is, I doubt either one of us would be in any place to play kingmaker, whether it be Yohn Royce, or even his horse for the matter."
Jaime

Tyrion said he trusted the Spider. Jaime wasn't sure whether his brother was getting soft in his old age, or gullible, but as long as Tyrion vouched for him, he supposed he'd keep his mind open about him. For all he knew, the man was still serving Cersei, in which case, he half wanted to send him a message to give to the Queen. Its contents, he didn't know. There were thousands of things he could or wanted to say, and none of them sounded right.

"Sightings of the Golden Company have been reported along the King's Road south of Harrenhal," Varys continued, not betraying any reaction regarding the new river lords newly present at the Crossroads, many of whom were eyeing Jaime warily. With reason, considering his last campaign against Riverrun. "Cersei has decided to take the opening presented by the fight with the dead. It remains to be seen whether it will be a wise one or not."

"I've words from Stoney Sept too...foreign mercenaries marching past there towards Acorn Hall and High Heart," Tytos Blackwood, the tall, broad shouldered lord of Raventree Hall voiced with concern. He would have to watch his back the next few nights, just in case the old man felt the urge to settle his grudges.

Jonos Bracken interrupted them both angrily. "Maybe they're here to take for me the land the Kingslayer promised me..."

"In return for taking Riverrun from me and locking me back in the dungeon," Edmure Tully retorted back, indignant. "As your liege lord, you're lucky I don't give Stone Hedge entirely to the Blackwoods. I may still do so after this war."

Exchanging an impatient look with Brienne and Yohn Royce, the Lady of Winterfell leaned into the table, glaring daggers at the entire Riverlands contingent.

"Let's not forget we serve Queen Daenerys. The lands of Houses Bracken and Blackwood shall remain as they were before the wars...as I proclaim, in her name."

"Aye, in the name of a dead queen, or nearly dead, makes no difference," Jonos grumbled. "Who are you to speak for her anyway?"

Sansa turned a pointed glance at Tyrion and Varys. "Do the chief advisers to Queen Daenerys dissent?"

"A wise decision," he watched his brother hurriedly agree, "my lady. The wars of the past are over..."

"That they are," Tytos snarled, staring directly at Jaime, "considering I'm sharing bread with the man who tried to destroy Lord Tully's family and mine. Or is that still what you're plotting?"

He tried to maintain his composure as much as he could, aware of the judging eyes, including Brienne and Sansa's upon him. "I no longer speak for my Cersei, or march for her."

"Her twat finally grew dry," Jonos cracked, giving himself a good laugh. "About damn time."

"Lord Jonos," Brienne interrupted sternly. "You will refrain from such language before the Lady of the North."

That was a new one, Jaime thought. "I had a choice to make between the living and the dead. I chose the living. Cersei chose the dead. Should seem pretty obvious."
"The Kingslayer committed crimes against many families, not in the least mine," Sansa said firmly. "As Lord Tyrion said, the past is the past. The North vouches for him. I vouch for him."


Giving her a subtle nod in gratitude, Jaime pointed at the map. "The point here is, the Golden Company has split their forces, one half to fight us alongside the King's Road, another to circumvent us towards Moat Cailin."

"My family's lands have suffered more than most when we fought alongside your brother," Tytos said, addressing Sansa directly. "So has Lord Edmure's. So has Lord Bracken's. On this we can all agree."

Jonos nodded, and Jaime shook his head, knowing this would be a problem. "They will not take Riverrun, or any of your houses. Their objective is to break the North, and they will aim to reach Moat Cailin before the next storm."

"Aye," Tytos added, "and they'll rape and pillage everything in their way until we have no lands or smallfolk to lord over."

"This is war," Jaime insisted, looking around the room and hoping for someone to come to his aid, considering he was the last man the River Lords would prefer to take counsel from. "Even with our combined armies, the Golden Company outnumbers us, and they are rested. This is our opportunity to knock out two smaller armies separately."

"I agree with Ser Jaime," Davos said, thankfully stepping in. "The enemy has divided their forces. We have the advantage. Give them battle along the King's Road, and if we prevail, which we should, we ride north whilst they siege Moat Cailin...their position will be fixed by the bogs, and we can annihilate their rear while Lord Howland leads the frontal assault from the old castle."

"It's a good plan," Tytos said, shaking his head, and Jaime breathed a sigh of relief. Until he continued. "It will likely succeed. But at what cost?" The old lord turned again to Sansa. "Lady Sansa...you rode south on your queen's behalf to defend the realm...not just the North. If you choose to follow Ser Jaime's advise...I can't speak for my fellow lords, but I will follow you, as I did the King your brother. I know, I know, splitting our forces is exactly what the Golden Company is aiming us to do...but believe in me...my men have some fight in us yet, especially defending our homes and wives and children. We'd win with the odds on our side, but we'd win with even odds as well."

"Lady Sansa," Edmure said meekly, continuing where Edmure left off. "I have suffered much in this war...as much as any. If you have any regard left for me as your uncle...if you have any love for your mother's family and our heritage...I beg of you...let us fight. And we will fight together, and we will fight bravely, Jonos and Tytos and all of us, together."

"We'll prevail," Jonos Bracken added, his face still red, but his tone milder than before his scolding from Ser Brienne. "And afterwards, we will be forever in your debt."

Jaime looked at the young girl, still not yet twenty and one years, yet somehow finding herself at the head of three armies and, more notably, all their squabbling chieftains. She chose to place herself here, he reminded himself. But she probably never expected to be placed in such a precarious position, holding the power to decide all their fates...whether thousands of men, women and children of three kingdoms would live or die. Whether she'd make the right decision, he wasn't sure, as if there were any right decisions in the fog of war. But for some reason, he trusted that, at the very
least, whatever decision she made, it would not be out of stupidity. While not ideal, it was not entirely awful. He had followed the lead of many by now, the Mad King being the first of his infamous list. He never cared for Robert, but the fat King was far from the worst of them, and his own sister far from the best.

The entire room breathed in silence, waiting for the Lady of the North to speak. Her face betrayed several conflicting thoughts, and she breathed heavily several times before looking sadly at Edmure and speaking. "The Starks will honor our debts to the Lords and smallfolk of the Trident. You all proclaimed my brother Robb your king as well as the North’s, and he died just as much for your people as mine." Turning towards Yohn Royce, she asked, "Lord Royce, can you lead your men along the King’s Road? You will be placed to ward off any attacks into the Vale as well."

The barrel chested old man agreed. "Aye, my lady. If possible, we'll draw them into the mountains on purpose. Gods be willing, a good storm will see us wipe out the last of them."

Moving several pieces east on the map, she continued, still visibly hyper aware of all the eyes upon her. "Ser Davos will ride with you, along with Lord Manderly’s host. The remaining Northern and Riverland armies will march west along the Trident. Will that be enough, Ser Jaime?"

He sighed. "Makes it a coin flip east and west, I guess." If her decision meant that he would die, so it would be for her too.

"May I speak frankly, Lady Sansa," he said, as he sought her out in her tent after the conference had concluded. As usual, she was accompanied by Brienne and Podrick. Their lady took her time to consider his request before replying.

"You may, Ser Jaime."

He stepped in, bending down then standing straight again under the low entrance. Sansa was a stubborn one, he could tell. But unlike many such lords, she would listen. She may not heed his advice in the end, but not after much thought given to it.

"I respect your decision," he began, choosing his words carefully, "I really do."

"It was an honorable one," Brienne said, standing beside her lady.

"It was." He paused, knowing his next words would cut her deeply. "It was also honorable decisions like that which lost your brother his war, and got him killed. War isn't about honor..."

"I know," she interrupted, cold and not allowing him the pleasure of any reaction to the mention of her late brother's ultimate fate. "It's about fighting and killing, isn't it?"

"It is."

"And you're good at both. So go and kill our enemies then, honorably or not."

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Sansa

"Where were you? You missed several war councils." She had hoped this campaign would at least yield her a chance to spend much needed time with her sister, but more often than not, Arya disappeared for days at a time, though she somehow always knew where to resurface, even if it was several days' march from their last location, as it was now.

"Sandor and I went south," Arya said quietly. "We saw the Golden Company marching up by
Harrenhal. There weren't many of them."

She felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, not her worst since that first time watching Joffrey betray her father in King's Landing, but unique in that there was so much weight upon her shoulders now, so many lives not hers who ought to be feeling that same sensation because of her decisions. This must be what Robb felt during the war. Or Jon ever since he saw the dead north of the Wall.

"Jon would have split the army too," she said, having gained a new respect for her brother in the days after the camp by the Crossroads. "And I would have probably scolded him for it."

"It's different when you're in charge, isn't it? When you're really in charge."

"I think about mother sometimes. How strange it was for her, spending her last days down here, riding with Robb's army from camp to camp. I wonder if she knew she would never see any of her other children again."

She thought about all her family a lot lately, on these lonely rides and lonelier nights in camp. The ones she would never see again. The ones she may never see again.

"At least they had each other," Arya said, her mind brought deep into the past as well. "Her and Robb."

Sansa put her hand onto her sister's. "At least we have each other still."

"I wish we had Jon too."

"I miss him," Sansa whispered, knowing how much their brother's mention stung both of them, but Arya would always be more affected. "I love him, he fought for me when no one else did. But I'm not sure if we'll ever have him again. Not the way we used to."

"He'll remember," Arya said, though her voice seemed less confident than they both hoped. "I trust him."

They both sat in their tent in silence, lost their own uncertainties. It was Arya who broke the silence again.

"How's it feel? Being queen?"

"Queen?" Sansa said, surprised. "What does that mean? I'm not a queen."

"Three kingdoms answer to you now. That's one more than Robb ever had."

"That would be treason, if Varys or Tyrion could hear us." She shuffled her lip nervously. "It was Podrick's idea to get them saying Lady of the North, not mine. Has an odd sound to it, even if it's true."

"They all follow your lead. For a reason. And not just because of Ned or Robb's name."

"They do," she acknowledged. "Why, I'm not sure."

But she knew. She did not love leading, but she liked it enough, because not leading meant leaving her fate and that of her family to the hands of strangers. Dumb ones, hostile ones, or conniving ones it mattered not, the result being so often the same for her. It was why she pushed to march south instead of Jon in the first place. They only had so much time before the Dragon Queen awoke, and
she needed to ensure not a minute of that respite went to waste. She could not trust even Jon in that, not when it concerned her.

"It's terrifying," she admitted, looking her sister clear in the eyes. "I never thought it would be easy, mind you. Some of it actually was, hard work aside, back in Winterfell. But the war part...this war...is terrifying."

"It's not your first," Arya said. "You took back Winterfell. I wish I had been there."

She did remember. She thought little of the battle then, not even of Littlefinger, whether he would arrive or not. Only Ramsey. He was every single one of her nightmares wrapped into one, more than even Joffrey and Cersei at that point, and Sansa never imagined something else to take its place, even if Daenerys did not surpass the Boltons entirely.

"I had nothing to lose then. I have everything to lose now. The North. Home. Two other kingdoms, their lords and ladies and smallfolk. Maybe this war would have been Aegon Targaryen's, Sixth of his Name," she smiled warmly, the thought of her own brother, well cousin, being the rightful king a comforting one...were it not for Daenerys, "but our brother's fight was always against the dead. This is my war now. Completely and truly."

"They'd be proud of you," Arya said, a rare smile appearing on her lips as well. "All of them."

"They'd be proud of both of us," Sansa added, squeezing her sister's hand, which she had yet to let go.

"I miss them."

"I miss them too." Her smile disappeared. "But we may get to see them sooner than we imagined."

"Can we recall Lord Manderly's forces, at least?"

Jaime shook his head. "They'd never reach us in time, and they'll be easy pickings for either army."

"I'd expect us to give battle within the next day or two," Lord Tytos added, surveying the map unhappily. "House Piper arrived just tonight. The Golden Company forces are stronger than expected, with bannermen from House Hightower and some other houses from the Reach."

The Kingslayer gave Edmure Tully a resentful look. "At least Riverrun is safe," he said bitterly. "You may flee behind your gates, if you wish. I'd prefer if you leave your men with us however, seeing as they can actually fight."

Her uncle looked forlornly towards in her direction, as if beseeching her to come to his defense. Part of her wanted to, but she ignored him. Jaime Lannister was her man now, and probably the best military mind they had in their camp, and she needed all the River Lords to defer to his judgment.

"I'll fight with my men," Edmure said rather meekly after no one spoke up for him.

"Perhaps we shouldn't give battle at all," Jaime said, his tone changing from dismissive to intrigued. "That's what they want us to do, isn't it? We may be severely outnumbered..."

Tytos interrupted rudely. "We're fighting for our homes, Kingslayer. You can run if you want. Not us."

"They're not here to pillage," Jaime countered back, voice gaining in confidence with each stride.
"They would have, to draw us out. They're already successful in that. They'll want to destroy us, before we can link back with the Knights of the Vale. If we run, they'll give chase, and we'll lure them north, same as we originally planned."

His words seemed to have rang through the Blackwood lord's initial skepticism, as he considered the proposition. "It's a gamble. But it's our homes and our villages you're gambling with."

"It may be the only way to save them," Jaime said, cocking his head. "If we lose in open battle here, they'll have all the time they want to do what they want in the Riverlands, with no remaining army strong enough to stop them."

Inevitably she felt the momentum in the tent shift back in her direction. It's happening again, she thought, as Tytos spoke. "Lady Sansa?"

Putting emotions aside, it seemed like an easy decision. She hoped it wasn't too easy. She would have to refute the River Lords, of course, though she already deferred to them once. Equal say was no way to run a war, she knew, but in this case it seemed to line up neatly. It came to mind that even Robb may agree with the Kingslayer in strategy here, and she imagined the ghost of his disdainful laugh beside her.

"Ser Brienne," she asked. She knew who her knight would likely side with, but also that she would speak up if she felt it wrong.

"It's not my home that's at stake," Brienne said thoughtfully, "but I believe it unwise to let the enemy determine the time and place of battle."

She looked apologetically at the lords. "Lord Edmure. Lord Tytos, Jonos...I ask you ride north with us in the morning, as early as we are able."

Her uncle looked expectantly at his two main vassals, who both nodded grimly.

"We'd get crushed on our own," Tytos advised. 'And the Kingslayer may be right about it all."

"We ride with you," Edmure said, though his disappointment obvious to those gathered.

"I need to talk to the Kingslayer," Arya said as Jaime was leaving the tent along with the other lords. A tinge in her voice made Sansa wonder.

"Alone?" Sansa was both concerned and curious as to what her sister was up to. "Do you want me to leave?"

Both she and Ser Jaime regarded her curiously, as Arya weighed her options silently. "If you stay, you have to promise you won't try to stop me."

What was left unsaid was that she would not able to successfully do so. Sansa shook her head, having remembered a similar pledge she had to make to Jon not long ago. She kept it thus far, but knew it wouldn't stay that way. Now Arya was pulling the same stunt on her.

"What is it with this family and all these mysterious pledges recently," she asked, joking but not entirely. At least she knew that her sister understood that her priority was protecting her family, more than honor, even. And that was the problem, wasn't it?

Strickland
"The Vale armies destroyed our advance forces."

It was Yoner, his lieutenant, a stout little man from Volantis whose stature belied his lethal abilities with his daggers. Harry was the fighter, and he wasn't bad with strategy, but it was Yoner whom he relied upon to decide where and when to march...especially on a foreign land such as this.

"Good. That means they fell for our trap." He looked over at the young Westerosi lord accompanying them, knowing he needed to impress upon him his hold over the Golden Company. As they rode through the small dirt tracks, he turned towards Arthur to explain. "I sent enough men up the King's Road to make them believe we split the army. They split army too, and now we will outnumber them on the west."

"You didn't expect any survivors with those men?" The fact that the Hightower kid, maybe twenty years old at the most, was the only so called lord Cersei had seen fit to send alongside them seemed further evidence that this Queen was not as powerful as she made herself seem. It added to his concerns about the job, though it was the dragons that truly concerned him. The Unsullied and Dothraki were formidable armies as well, but at least he'd engaged with them before. He knew how to win a fight with them, especially considering how depleted their numbers were seemingly after their battle up north with the dead...still something he wasn't quite sure he believed. But if the dragons had returned, then an army of the dead was not completely out of the question. Regardless, they were no longer his problem. Besides, they told him the Unsullied and Dothraki remained North alongside the dragons, which meant these typical mounted knights should be easy pickings for them.

"We pay them good coin to die. But before, they live a life better than most men can dream of."

The kid considered the implications. "Lys?"

Harry nodded. So he was not so naive after all. "Prove you can fight, and perhaps I'll consider you a place in our army. You are younger son, are you not?"

"I am," the kid said, smirking as if he were privy his own little secret. "But Cersei promised my brother Highgarden. Which means I'll inherit the Hightower. But I do thank you for your offer."

"I see," Harry said, tired already of all the labyrinthine ways the nobles on this continent contracted and traded their meaningless titles. It was as unappealing as their women, all mostly too pale and either too much or not enough skin and bones, Dorne being the exception. "Well, we still welcome lords large and small."

The boy laughed, an encouraging sign that the young lord was not too full of himself, a frustrating Westerosi trait of late, likely because so many of their great lords had died recently over the years, whether in war or otherwise.

"I'll be something in between, so looks like you'll have to pass on me."

"It's not about size or your noble position," Harry said, not exactly sure how sincere he was in trying to recruit this young man. He was skinny, he was untested...but there was something to the intensity in his dark eyes that spoke something to the veteran mercenary, that the kid would not be the type to be killed easily. "It's about how well you fight. And how well you convince others not to fight you."

Turning towards Yoner, he redirected his audience before Arthur could react. "Speaking of, I expect battle tomorrow or the next. That is correct? Then we will wipe them out, the boy getting his first kill, no?"

His balding lieutenant shook his head. "Don't think so Captain. Have reports enemy has retreated."
"Retreated?" He looked at the man in fury. "Why did you not tell me this?"

"You didn't ask, Captain," Yoner replied in his southern accent which at this moment seemed so aggravating. "Think they look to link with Vale armies."

Harry exchanged a look at Arthur, whose gaze swayed intensely back in forth between the exchange, as if trying to grasp every bit of nuance between the two more experienced army commanders.

"And you didn't see fit to tell me this?"

"I knew you would ask," the little man said frustratingly.

"We can't let them rejoin," Harry said, pulling the stirrups tightly as he rode ahead, waiting for Arthur and his second in command to catch up. "Double our pace. We must catch them and destroy them before they arrive at Moat Cailin. Or else this war will last the entire winter."
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A battle commences, and winners and losers attempt to figure out its aftermath.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Strickland

"It's a good bridge."

"This bridge has won and lost wars, made and unmade kings," Arthur added, the two of them looking down at the twin castles on either side of it. The morning frost still lingered on the blades of grass in the meadow which led down to the fortress they called The Twins.

"It's about to fucking lose us this one," Harry spat angrily. Pivoting around at Yoner, he loomed over his lieutenant. "You told me we would catch them before they crossed."

"We were close," Yoner said, avoiding eye contact with him. "Word is they cross last night."

"My scouts saw the same thing." Arthur added, the kid clearly trying to sound confident amidst the men.

"But I have word too the Vale armies are still three day march away. We cross now, we catch them and break them."

He looked over at Arthur, more to be polite than anything else. "Ser Hightower?"

Harry knew he wasn't a ser yet, but the kid had stopped protesting every time he addressed him as such. "We'll have to fight two battles in two or three days. Wouldn't our men be tired? If we beat the Northmen and Riverland armies, they'll just retreat and regroup with the Knights of the Vale anyway."

Yoner spoke up for him before he could. "We train our lives for battles like this, kid. Whether it two in three days or three in two days."

"And we'll destroy them completely so there's no one left to regroup with the Vale," Harry added. "If they have sense, they run too. And we'll catch them and kill the cowards just like we'll do with this one."

"If we win this one," Arthur said. Harry tried his best not to scowl. The kid had not seemed like a coward until now. But then, everyone is brave until the eve of their first battle.

"We cannot lose," Yoner said. "Our numbers are greater, and they are running."

"Very well. It's your army," Arthur looked back at his bannermen, bearing the sigil of his family, some grandiose old building. "But if our victory is anything less than complete, I may look to withdraw my men back across the river. I'd suggest the same for you as well."
They both looked down towards Yoner, slicing and eating an apple as he contemplated their options.

"We come back to river and stay one day. If they advance and their numbers are better than what we think, we can retreat. If they are foolhardy enough to attack with tired and wounded men, we fight. If we have word Vale fall back north, we still have time to march and beat them before they can join with Moat Cailin."

Harry nodded, and Arthur seemed content by the compromise as well. Compromise was not how he preferred to wage war, but the Golden Company's reputation rested upon not pissing off those who paid them.

"But we are all in agreement that we cross now." Both his marching companions nodded, the Westerosi more slowly to do so, he noticed. "Very well. Tell the men we expect battle tomorrow latest, maybe tonight."

"Tonight will be good," Yoner said. "We can catch them sleeping." Catching a disapproving look from Arthur, he continued. "It is not honorable way to win war, but it is winning way to win war."

"Faster," he mumbled to himself. Standing on the south side of the bridge astride the castle, he watched as his men, sluggish from constant marching over the last month now, almost stumble their way across the bridge before finding their way into formation on the other side. Someone needed to whip them into shape before the upcoming battle. "Yoner! Where's Yoner?" Yelling and looking around, he found that his second in command oddly absent. Turning instead towards Arthur, he shook his head. "At this pace they can join Vale knights and all march back to attack us, and we'll still be crossing this damn bridge."

"Our men are tired, Captain. Your men are not accustomed to marching in the cold. Neither are ours. The further North we venture, the more exposed we will be, numbers or not. Stannis Baratheon took a great army and an even better military mind to the North years ago..."

"You think I don't know that," Strickland snapped. Out of all the times the little rat could criticize him, this was the worst, when he was clearly already in a bad mood. "That is why we needed to give battle yesterday! Why my entire plan is to defeat them before they get back north. And fuck your Stannis...I hear too much about a man who has never won a battle."

The kid thankfully kept silent following his harsh words, and Strickland peered through the crowds again, looking for his lieutenant. He called again. "Where's Yoner?"

"My bannermen are crossing now," Arthur said quietly next to him, appropriately humbled by his scolding. "That means we're about half through..."

They heard the sound of horns from across the river. The kid paled.

"Are those yours?"

"No..." Harry mumbled. Could it be? Did the river armies grow balls all of a sudden? As he heard the rumble of horses approaching, he knew that what he decided in the next few seconds meant life or death for all of them. Suddenly, he felt the urge to cross the bridge in order to give orders to the men soon to be under attack to stay in formation, especially with Yoner pulling a vanishing act at this most crucial moment. Before he could do so, he heard Arthur exclaim out as the enemy horses rode into sight.

"Those are Vale banners!"
"Vale? Yoner said they were three days away!" It occurred to him then, had he been betrayed by his longtime lieutenant? He didn't have time to delve deeper onto that horrifying thought.

"Retreat," he called, as the bird banners rode in, cutting viciously through the men in his vanguard. "Retreat! Fall back!"

Riding up to the bridge, he continued directing the men as they stood confused, on the verge of panic. A light snow was falling now, his men and their horses slipping and falling along the increasingly slippery bridge. "Fall back in order! In line! In formation!"

The words irked him even as he screamed them. This was a failure, through and through. The enemy armies joined, and a good part of his would be wiped out protecting the northern side of the bridge. Even assuming they could retreat in good order, they would find themselves in a suddenly hostile territory, pursued by a larger host.

Cognizant of his thinking, Arthur spoke up even as he reared his own horse, directing his bannermen along the bridge.

"We can ride south to King's Landing. Or west, the Queen's family bannermen are closer! They'll shelter us and give us time to regroup."

It was too far into the future. They needed to survive the day first. Continuing to call out to his men, he heard the sound of horns at his back and felt his bowels loosen.

It was a classic ambush, and he fell for it completely. From the woods and hills to the south, another large continent of troops rode downwards, ready to clash against the panicked men who had just fled south to apparently safety on the near side of the long bridge.

"Northern and Riverland banners," Arthur called out, informing him of the obvious. "They never crossed at all."

"The traitor," he spat, clear now that somehow Yoner had been bought off by some rich Westerosi lord. Scanning the perimeter, he looked for any weaknesses in the enemy lines. They were practically surrounded, the only openings along impossibly thick woods on their left and boggy marshes near the river to their right.

"Their lines are thin," he yelled back to Arthur. "Withstand the first charge, and we may break through and form a hole for retreat!"

Girding his horse and sheathing his sword, he rode to the head, just minutes ago the rear, of his army, ready to lead the charge. A swarm of horses, bearing the flags of a fish, were charging ahead of the others, breaking formation and suddenly allowing a small opening between the enemy left and the marshes. It wasn't much, but it was their only chance.

Raising his sword, he cried out behind him. "We charge! Hit their left! Go! Go! Go!"

Sansa

"Your presence is naturally regal. Sit tall, look stern, and men will die for the opportunity to die for you."

She remembered Littlefinger's raspy voice, surprisingly comforting at times despite everything, whispering those words into her ears as she watched the Knights of the Vale ride in and break Ramsey Bolton. So she sat today, stoic, at relative safety atop the hill, looking down at the battle unfolding below. She wondered if it was the same place Arya and the Hound had been, looking
down upon the castles the morning of the Red Wedding.

"The Vale charge is successful, and their infantry will soon reach the bridge," Podrick said next to her. Brienne had left him here to protect her, the newly minted knight eager to give battle with the rest of their armies below. Arya was still missing, her sister likely wreaking havoc in the enemy camp ever since she and Ser Jaime contacted the bare bones of their ambush in the tent, with her reluctant approval that night, and Sansa did not doubt she had plenty to do with the success of their plan to entrap the Golden Company at, coincidentally, this cursed site which had so doomed her family mere years before.

"Lord Tully is leading the charge at the head of the Golden Company," Podrick continued, she barely listening to his narration as the sight of so many men dying, on her behalf no less, wholly disgusted yet fascinated her at the same time at both the vague concept as well as the visceral sight before her. "And that's the Kingslayer, riding towards us. I wonder what's wrong."

It was Ser Jaime, true enough, riding alone towards her up the hill, his face contorted in a rage she had never seen as he got closer, the falling snow covering up the fresh coats of blood upon his armor. Unable to help herself, Sansa shivered.

"Your fucking idiot uncle," he swore the moment he was in earshot.

"What's wrong," she asked. "He is leading the charge, is he not?"

"He broke formation! Our numbers on the southern bank are already low! We needed to hold formation to encircle him, but now he leaves our left vulnerable and also gives the enemy a place to retreat!"

They had sent two divisions, one northern, one river, across the bridge the previous night, to reinforce the illusion that the entire army had crossed north, whilst the rest of their host hid in a small valley hidden by low-lying hills nearby, awaiting the approach and passing of the Golden Company.

"Well, can you do anything about it," she asked.

"I've ordered our center and right to charge ahead and keep pace with them," Jaime replied, exasperated and out of breath. "We'll kill as many of them as we can, but this could've been a complete victory, not this..." He stopped speaking, too disgusted to continue.

Even as he spoke, she saw a finger Golden Company men charge through the opening her uncle had apparently allowed, some attacking his men, others using the opportunity to flee through their encirclement and already trickling further away down the road.

"Well shit," she muttered to herself, Podrick giving her a startled look at her rare profanity, but she did not care about formalities at the moment. "My fucking uncle."

"Milady."

The yell startled her, coming from the other side of the field. She did her best not to avert her eyes at the blood and wounds of the men around her, the loud screams from those whose injuries were more severe unavoidably reaching her ears. Through the blood and grime, she recognized several faces from the previous night, when Jaime, Brienne, and Lord Tytos had escorted her through the camp of the soldiers girding for their possible deaths the next day. She said little, asking only for the most part what village were they from, or what their fathers did. There was little joy in it, knowing many of them would not survive the next day, but it was her duty now.
The man who called her was an older soldier, an aged scar already running across his weary forehead. He had a gash on his arm that was being attended to, but otherwise seemed in healthy shape, compared to many others of the wounded.

"What is your name, soldier?"

"Willem, aye," the man said. Though his dark brown eyes fixated upon her, he did not see so intimidated by her. "You remind me of yer mother, my Lady Stark."

"My mother," she asked, not expecting her mention at all, wondering if her complexion paled just by her mention. "You knew her?"

The man named Willem nodded. "I was at Riverrun when King Robb and your mother came to pay their respects to Lord Hoster. Didn't ride north here with them, I regret that. But then, I wouldn't have lived to fight for you today, my lady."

She needed to get away, the emotions being too much for her to handle right now. But duty called. "The Red Wedding was avenged, Willem," she managed to say out loud. "And today, we made new memories by which this castle will be remembered by."

"Aye we did. Your mother would be proud of you. I know that."

He never spoke to her mother, apparently. Yet his words were unexpectedly comforting to her, bringing her closer to her mother than she could have imagined. She nodded gratefully and clasped his shoulder, blood staining her hands. His blood? More likely, that of those he cut down during battle.

"Thank you Willem. And you honor her memory standing with us today."

She was breathing hard again by the time she reached the tent, seeing Ser Jaime and Brienne approaching from the castle. In the center of the tent was her uncle who, past grudges forgotten, seemed to be in a fine mood, joking and laughing with Jonos Bracken.

"...he was right there, this captain of the Golden Company. I was within five horse lengths from him. Could've had a go at him if his men didn't rush in to protect him...and end this damn war with a single strike of my sword."

"But you didn't, did you?"

Edmure looked at his niece, confusion evident in his narrow eyes. "Excuse me, my Lady?"

"You didn't kill Captain Strickland," she said, doing everything she could to hold her voice evenly. "You didn't end the war, or win the battle. In fact, you allowed nearly half the Golden Company to escape, along with that Captain you thought you were so close to killing."

Inside the tent, she noticed Lord Tytos looking up from the maps beside Yohn Royce, Tyrion, and Varys, the latter two whom she had all but ordered to accompany the Knights of the Vale rather than her own host.

"My lady," Edmure began, looking around in astonishment at being chastised.

"She's right," Jaime said, walking up to him so close their chests almost met. "You disobeyed orders. To maintain formation. To surround and encircle rather than charge. If you had done what you were ordered, they will have surrendered completely, or died to the very last man..."
"Orders," Edmure exclaimed, face reddening. "Who are you to give me orders, Kingslayer?"

"Who is he to give orders," Sansa said, closing in on her uncle, voice raising. "He is the one who won this battle, who saved all of us from certain defeat. He is the man who would have won the war outright if you had done what you were supposed to do."

"I fought on the field, niece. That's more than you did."

The moment Edmure uttered the harsh word, she saw Brienne step up and loom threateningly behind him. Exchanging a look with her, Jaime spoke, contempt risible in his voice. "And we would have been better off had you died in your sleep last night. Or had I let the Freys kill you during the siege."

Now Tytos was approaching their all too tense standoff.

"My lady," he said, and both she and Edmure looked expectedly at him, wondering on which side he would land.

"I'm sure my good Lord Edmure meant well…but his charge was pure folly."

"Lord Tytos, what are you saying," Edmure said, clearly wanting to but not knowing quite how to demand obedience from his vassal lord.

"You're right," Tytos continued, looking at her and Jaime. "The Kingslayer won us this battle. He saved our lands and our people. The past is forgiven, and we will all follow his command for the rest of this war, because I trust him to lead us to victory."

Somehow Arya was next to her as well. Sansa wasn't sure where she came from, but all the raised voices surely summoned her as they did many other men, lords and common soldiers alike, looking on to this rare and public argument between the leaders of the camp.

From nearby, she saw Ser Davos approaching as well, alongside the fisted sigil of House Glover. Her blood already up, she turned abruptly from the Riverlands contingent over towards the newly arrived men.

"Lord Glover," she found him just behind Davos. "You've finally arrived."

"Lady Sansa," the gruff man exclaimed, avoiding her eyes. "My sincerest apologies. We did not receive your summons until late, and it took some time to assemble…"

"Had you answered the call at Winterfell," Sansa reproached, not even bothering to hide her anger now, "you would have been ready to march south with us."

"My apologies…,"

"We could have used your men," Sansa interrupted, standing face to face with him just as Jaime had done towards Edmure minutes earlier. "We found ourselves quite outnumbered you know, and had it not been for Ser Jaime's planning and my sister's…actions, you will have marched yourselves upon our graves."

"Lady Sansa," Robett said, his expression uncertain, as he had apparently not expected this reproach from someone, she did not doubt, he still saw as a harmless little girl pretending to rule the North. That would end now.

"Thrice you refused the call," Sansa said, cutting him off again. "You broke your oath to your House Stark, you broke your oath to your king, and you dare enter our camp now as if you have done
My lady," Robett said, dropping down on one knee, visibly shaken now. "If I have offended you…"

"Arya," Sansa said, and immediately her sister was by her side. "If I may borrow Catspaw."

Her sister gave her a questioning look, as if to ask are you sure, and Sansa gave her a subtle nod in return. Immediately, she felt the weight of the dagger in her hand as she carefully unsheathed it, aware of the exclaims of shock and surprise from around the entire camp.

"You've never left the North before, have you, Lord Glover?"

"I haven't," he said fervently, as if he thought it would save him from her wrath.

"You refused the call of the North. As such, you no longer deserve to be of the North." Slowly, cautiously, she brought the dagger down, brushing it against his beard until the sharp end rested itself against the side of his neck. "I sentence you to die here, in the south, far from you family and your home. And your bones to remain here in the south, until the ends of time."

A slight twitch of her fingers, and she felt the dagger cutting into his neck, and a small pool of blood drip down where the valyrian steel pierced his skin. He winced, but said nothing, apparently the shock of her indignation enough to silence him into resignation, or sheer paralysis. The rest of the camp watched, waiting for her to deliver the lethal cut. As she was obligated to do, remembering what her father taught her brothers.

"But not today."

Just as suddenly, she pulled the dagger away, Robett Glover immediately raising his hand onto his neck to examine the small wound. She felt the rest of the camp collectively exhale as she covered the dagger again with its sheath. She walked up to Ser Davos, whose weathered eyes watched the exchange with both a morbid curiosity and, she imagined, just a hint of the admiration they usually bore for Jon.

"Ser Davos."

"Yes, my lady," he said, finding his voice.

"You are not of the North. But never have you refused our call."

The old smuggler shook his head, as humble as she expected him to be. "For what it's worth, it made little difference."

"Regardless, a debt must be paid." Looking around the camp, barely deigning to register Lord Glover, still cowering in a groveling position on the ground, she took a deep breath. "Deepwood Motte is yours, Lord Seaworth."

He would now thank her profusely, but she had no need for that. Walking back to her uncle, still as a statue now even as she approached, she pushed the handle of the dagger square into his chest as hard as she could, causing him to stumble several steps back, she following him with the dagger's press as he did so.

"And you, uncle, will obey Ser Jaime's orders for the duration of this war. I only have so much tolerance for fools and scoundrels."
Again, she did not give him a chance to respond. Turning back, she walked up to the Kingslayer.

"Ser Jaime. Lord Davos." The latter marched quickly next to the Kingslayer in anticipation. "Leave the bridge intact. But order the men to burn both castles to the ground. Lay salt upon the field after they are reduced to dust."

"Lady Sansa," Davos said, "are you sure? Regardless of what's happened here...it's a good castle."

"It is. But so long as they stand, they stand as a monument to the murder of my mother, my brother, his wife and his unborn child, who would have been a King or Queen. That ends today. The only legacy that will remain of House Frey will be a bridge which may be freely crossed by all men, women, and children for the rest of time."

"My lady," Jaime acknowledged, nodding his head, and Davos doing the same. She looked at Arya, who grinned her approval and pride towards her. They both may have witnessed their fathers death, but Arya had been at The Twins as well the night of the Red Wedding, and she knew how painful it must be for her sister to see these cursed towers again.

"Carry on then," she said, returning Catspaw to her sister, then leaving for her tent. "We will regroup after the meal to discuss the remainder of this war."

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Tyrion

Studiously averting his eyes from the inside, he spoke.

"Lady Sansa, may I enter."

It took several long seconds before he heard the response.

"You may, Lord Tyrion."

He had hoped to approach her at the meal, with the rest of the lords, but she had chosen to dine privately. Likely, with her sister, he thought, who had also been absent.

She loomed over him, and for a second, he forgot what he was going to say.

"That was an impressive display you put out there," he finally managed to say, "my lady."

Her face betrayed no reaction towards his words. Instead, again she waited, thinking, or at least appearing to think over her words, before replying.

"It was necessary."

"Doesn't make it easy," Tyrion replied, suddenly wondering towards the wisdom of approaching the so-called Lady of the North. He needed to break through though. For the sake of his queen. And because he wanted to, because he hated the fact that his former wife hated him, simply because of who he served, when he deserved better. Barely, but he did. "For a second I thought you were about to do it. Really do it."

Again she considered his words. Then she sat, features softening to his relief.

"I didn't actually know," she admitted, almost shyly now, showing bare traces of the poor girl he had married in King's Landing. "For a moment I thought I would kill him. Before I decided not to."

"Could you have done it?" He was treading on shaky ground now, pressing his luck.
"Yes," she said without hesitation. "You're right, I've never killed a man before. And I don't suppose that I would enjoy it at all. Not like my sister at the very least, I'd probably have more nightmares than I usually do...for a long time too, to come. But after what I've seen...killing a man with my own hands, one who deserves his sentence no less, is far from the worst suffering I can imagine."

"But you were merciful," Tyrion said. Looking over at the pitcher of wine, he raised his eyebrows, and Sansa nodded. He rose, and poured them each a goblet before he sat. "You showed the lords your firmness. Then you chose to show mercy, not as weakness, but as a gift.

Sansa smiled, taking a small sip of her wine. "It may surprise you, Lord Tyrion, that I do know what I am doing, as I do it."

"Of course," he said defensively, "I did not mean to imply the opposite." He paused, aghast as how the woman managed to turn every kind word he said against him. He tried taking a different approach. "Neither one of us were raised to rule by our fathers. Neither one of us are looked upon by others as their first or most natural choice as a leader. But we've both come into power of some sort, each in our own way, and we both wield it well. At least I'd like to hope, for myself..."

"Do you think flattery will buy my loyalty to your queen," Sansa interrupted, voice harsh once more the moment the conversation turned towards Daenerys.

"I mean it," he continued to insist, his soul aching to win from her approval for the queen he served, and himself through that. "You don't have dragons. You don't have the gold of my father. Or the strength of your brother or King Robert...yet one day you may lead as well as any of them. You're already well on your way to doing so, now."

He saw the trace of a smile, and took it to mean that she had taken his compliment to heart, one small step for some kind of reconciliation, reaching as he was.

"I'm not really doing much," she confessed, a rare moment of weakness from her, which she obviously allowed knowingly. "I just listen to what they tell me to do, and say yes or no."

"That's what leading is, sometimes," Tyrion said, staring as deeply into her pale blue eyes as he was able. "Finding the right counsel, like you did with my brother. He has wronged you and your family severely, yet you still put aside your history to call him to your service. You listen to counsel. When wise, you agree to it. When not, you refuse it, but with respect. That's better than most of the men I have served."

"Does your queen take well to it," Sansa abruptly fired back, catching him unawares, as he was hoping that she would take a rare moment to digest his flattery, sincere as it may have been. "Counsel?"

"She does," he said, knowing how skeptical Sansa would be no matter how much he pressed her case. Yet he must do so. "I swear it, she does continue to listen to me, even though she has every reason not to, after all the times I failed her."

Her expression was once again inscrutable, her face cold as she regarded him in the dimness of the night, before she took down the rest of her wine in one, surprising gulp.

"I thank you for your kind words, Lord Tyrion. I respect it." She rose, and he looked upon her in increasing dread. "I'm afraid you won't like what I'm about to do now, but I hope you will at least respect it as well."

Without another word, she rose and left the tent, walking so quickly through the camp that Tyrion
struggled to keep up with her. He finally did catch up when they arrived at the main tent, where the rest of the lords were gathered already, along with a bound prisoner, a dark haired boy barely out of his teens, if that.

"This is Lord Hightower," Sansa asked, gesturing towards the young man, whose face was bruised but otherwise seemed to have fared better than most of Cersei's men during the battle.

"It is, Lady Sansa," Yohn Royce replied. "We found him rallying his men along the bridge during the battle."

"He surrendered to us, along with the rest of the men on the bridge," the newly minted Lord Davos added. "A wise decision, I may add."

Tyrion watched as Sansa and the young lord regarded each other curiously, both rushing to assess each other within the span of a few seconds.

"House Hightower remains pledged to Queen Cersei," she asked finally.

The boy nodded. "Our pledge is our bond. House Tyrell is dead. My father doesn't care much for our queen, to be honest. But she is our Queen. She was born in this land, for one. And she's awake, for another."

"You're one of the few who sent bannermen to her aid," Sansa said, clearly caring little for his justifications on behalf of Cersei. "What did she promise your family in return?"

It took him a few moments before deciding to answer honestly. "Hightower, my lady. To my older brother Alac."

Sansa nodded, showing no reaction to the news. "And where is your brother now? Did he accompany you and the Golden Company in invading our lands and our home?"

Arthur shook his head. "He's in King's Landing, serving our Queen," he said stoically.

"Good," Sansa said, and it was remarkable that none of the other lords had seen fit to interrupt her the moment she started their interrogation of the young prisoner. Pausing as if to think for a moment, she then motioned towards Podrick.

"Release his bindings," she ordered, and he watched as his own former squire follow her order with precise promptness. Walking towards him, his hands newly freed, she reached into her dress and pulled out two scrolls. "Send these to your brother, to deliver to Cersei on my behalf."

Realization dawning upon him, he exchanged a look with Varys, before stepping up before all the gathered lords.

"Lady Sansa, with all respect, all of us stand here in service of Queen Daenerys." He took a deep breath, knowing the unfriendly reception his words were about to receive, yet knowing he must say them nevertheless. "I believe all of us deserve to know what you intend to tell my sister."

"Very well," Sansa said coldly, as if her agreement was a gift rather than an obligation. Looking around at the rest of the lords, she announced, "Cersei's armies are destroyed, and expelled thanks to our combined efforts. I ask for peace now. The North, the Vale, and the Trident will be independent, from this day onwards, from whomever sits on the throne in King’s Landing." Looking directly at Tyrion, she finished. "She can kept the rest of them."

This had been her plan all along. This was why she had been so eager to ride south, barely after the
dead had been cleared from the grounds of her own home, so that she could take advantage of every second Daenerys lay sleeping on a bed in Winterfell. He had suspected something of the sort, but never imagined her, or her machinations, so bold. "My lady," he protested, aware of all the disapproving eyes upon him. "You can't do this. You have no authority to negotiate such a peace!"

The Lady of the North looked around at all her lords. "Is there any disagreement towards a general peace with the southern crown?"

No one stepped forward with their disagreements, not even Edmure Tully. Finally, Tytos spoke, and Tyrion noted that it was he, and not his liege lord, who did so.

"I have no trust towards your sister," he began, addressing Tyrion directly, "but my men are tired. We've fought. We've won. Perhaps there are wars yet to come…but winter is here, and it's time for all of us to return to our families. They need us now…more so than a queen who may never wake."

"The realm is thankful for all that Queen Daenerys did to save it," Sansa said, again eyeing him the entire time as she spoke. "But the realm also cannot afford to wait indefinitely for her return."

He found himself entirely alone in the tent, except for Varys, and even the Spider, with his enigmatic silence, deep in thought, was not rushing forward to speak on their queen's behalf. "Your brother won't approve."

"He won't," Sansa asked, daring him to contradict her. "Are you sure?"

"His loyalty is to Queen Daenerys," Tyrion insisted. If there was anything he was sure of, it was the loyalty and honor of Jon Snow, much less his love and dedication.

"Ask him yourself then," Sansa said coldly. "Ride north and plead your case in person…I'm afraid the ravens are…indisposed at the moment."

This was her move, he realized. He would need to race to Winterfell and back, winning Jon's contradiction before she and Cersei could come to some sort of agreement. At least he doubted Cersei would ever agree to such terms…not sincerely, at least…but Sansa was smart enough to understand that. And even if the former King in the North himself opposed such an agreement, which was in question as well, considering the man cared little for political matters south of the Neck, it remained to be seen whether his word would prevail over his sister's. With the Northmen, maybe, but growing doubtful by the second. With the Riverlands and Vale, not a chance.

"My lady," Yohn Royce spoke, surprising everyone with his readiness to contradict a woman whom it was apparent he served now as loyally as Ser Jorah did his Queen. "The Vale would welcome a peace as well. But will Queen Cersei agree? She may be weak now, but she has been weak before. That has never stopped her."

"There is the matter of the second scroll," Sansa said, a gleam in her eyes as she did so. Again, she looked at Tyrion before continuing, as if taking pride in somehow outwitting him. Turning towards their young prisoner, she moved to address him. "I would ask you ask your brother not agree to reveal its contents to Cersei until she has agreed to negotiations. I would trust the honor of House Hightower, but not their Queen, so the truth must be spoken now."

Taking the scroll from him, she waved it in the air before continuing, eyes enigmatic, yet swollen, as if she were about burst into tears at any moment. When she spoke, her words were as heavy as wet sand. "Prince Rhaegar did not kidnap my aunt Lyanna, or rape her. They loved each other. They were married, in secret. She bore him a son, after he died on the Trident, a boy born to become a King. And despite all odds, the nobility of his blood preceded him, and he did become one…for a
time."

His mind rapidly moving with each of his words, he raced through trying to decipher her meaning, running through all the possibilities until his jaw dropped when the truth came ruthlessly upon him.

"Jon Snow," Tyrion mouthed out loud, before he even realized what he said. To his continued horror, Sansa nodded.

"Aegon Targaryen, sixth of his name, was born the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. But he will forfeit his claim to it to House Lannister, or whomever wants to fight for that wretched chair, in exchange for the independence of the three northern kingdoms." He watched as Sansa exchange a discrete look with her sister, crouching in a corner as usual. "I promise this, upon my honor, upon the name of House Stark."

No one spoke for a time, before the various lords began mumbling amongst themselves as Sansa handed the second, much more impactful scroll, back to Arthur. For a moment, Tyrion though to snatch it from the boy himself, tear it up and rip it and throw it into the fire, before realizing that it was fruitless, that not even his brother, who even now watched over the entire scene with his own usual detached amusement, could protect him. Even Varys's eyes seemed as distant as ever.

Regarding the two scrolls, Arthur grasped them, as if trying to feel personally the sensation of such monumental papers upon his own hands, something obviously new to the young lord. Abruptly, he knelt before Sansa, as if she were a queen rather than a mere Lady Paramount, or something of the sort.

"My lady, upon the honor of my family, my father Baelor, my grandfather Leyton, I will ensure these scrolls are sent to my brother to deliver to Queen Cersei."

Sansa nodded approvingly. "You will ride south with us then, back to the Crossroads. Tell Cersei to send her emissaries to meet us there."

She left the tent to leave all the lords, Tyrion amongst them, aghast at the reveal of the apparently decades old secret, and all its various implications. It was not that he thought there any chance to rekindle his old marriage, but he had hoped to reach some sort of understanding with his former wife. Now he realized how impossible that effort was. As long as the Dragon Queen breathed, at the very least.

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**Daenerys**

She woke to the dim light of candles under a wolfskin blanket. Sweat covered her body, and it had been apparent that she had been hyperventilating in the minutes before waking. She looked around, mind still in a daze, trying to grasp the place and the meaning of her surroundings. A memory, a dark and terrifying one, surfaced.

"Ser Jorah," she cried with increasing franticness. "Ser Jorah!"

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**Chapter End Notes**

Whew, that was a big chapter. One I've had in mind for a long time now. As usual, please let me know what you think about this little story.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

War or peace is decided upon the Crossroads.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cersei

"She's cleverer than I thought."

"Your Grace, do you believe these words to be true?"

She looked at Qyburn, one of the rare occasions she could not quite figure him out. Was he testing her, or did he truly not understand?

"It doesn't matter. We ought to believe them true, and spread it across the realm." Qyburn's expression did not budge, but she did see Euron's eyes gape in confusion. "This is her gift to us. In exchange for her little peace."

"My Queen," Euron spoke, and she wished he was still minding the ships somewhere. "I don't understand. Doesn't this threaten your claim, our claim, to the throne?" True, he kept things interesting sometimes in the Red Keep, now that Jaime had fully turned traitor, but strategy sessions were not the occasion in which he excelled. Neither had they been for Jaime, for the matter, but he knew better to keep his mouth shut.

"I have no claim on the throne, Lord Greyjoy," Cersei said, rolling her eyes, and wholly unhappy about having to explain this to the idiot pirate. "Yet I sit on it anyway. Jon Snow would never fight me for it, not for himself. The claim matters only to one person, and that's the dragon bitch. This hurts her...if she ever wakes...far more than it hurts me." In the corner, she saw Alac Hightower following her words carefully as well. He was young, but sharp enough, and a valuable man to cultivate. Euron? Well he had his ships, and he was Euron...and that was pretty much the extent of everything about him.

"You're thinking of agreeing to their terms," Alac asked.

"You'll lose half your kingdom in one fortnight," Euron said, almost threateningly, as if they were his realms already.

"For now," Cersei said softly. She frowned, looking to turn the blame against him. "My brother managed to outwit the fool captain you sailed over from Essos. If I send them back north, they'll be crushed completely. I can't win this war with ships alone. We need time."

"What should we do about Captain Strickland," Qyburn asked. Never questioning, always looking forward, following her lead.

"Remind him of his gross failure. The Golden Company will man the defenses of King's Landing, should the Dragon Queen awake. She'll never agree to this peace. But sign it, and it weakens her, as
does this rumor of Rhaegar's son."

She turned towards Alac. "In time, we will be able to rally more men from the Reach and Casterly Rock. We should make contact with this new Prince of Dorne, see where his loyalties truly lie, now that there is no Dragon Queen to use for his own purposes."

"I say we attack," Euron broke in with his unbearably cocky smile, as if he were about to give battle in the throne room now. "I sail the Ironborn and the remainder of the Golden Company to White Harbor. We burn Winterfell to the ground, and I give you this wolf bitch as yet another present to my queen. And both your brothers' heads, while I'm at it."

She smiled. His worlds were foolish, but they did sound so good to her ears. "The North and Vale may take more time. But the Riverlands are naturally vulnerable. She thinks she's won now...." she stopped, thinking things through, "she's made the right moves, I'll give her that. Jon Snow's secret helps no one but herself and her bastard brother. But by demanding the Riverlands she'll now be obligated to defend it. Once we reinvigorate our numbers, we'll draw the Northmen and the Knights of the Vale south. So long as we don't fall for another one of my brother's tricks, we'll destroy them and take back the kingdoms."

"And if the Dragon Queen does wake," Qyburn added, turning towards Euron and Alac to thankfully explain her thinking and save her own breath, "she and Jon Snow and Lady Sansa may find themselves too preoccupied with each other to even turn their attentions down to King's Landing for some time. When she does, she'll do so with suspicion, constantly aware of Prince Rhaegar's trueborn son in her shadow."

"Lord Alac," she called, after the meeting, towards the soon to be Lord of Highgarden. He turned immediately to attention, still seemingly in disbelief at having risen to the Small Council at his age, and clearly eager to please his new queen. From behind, Euron turned as well, but Cersei nodded harshly at him, signalling him to leave. He did so reluctantly, shaking his head in disgust. Or at least she thought it was disgust, she had a hard time telling, sometimes.

"Your Grace," he said, kneeling before her in private. "You wish to ask something of me?"

Gently, she brushed her hand along his shoulders, near his bare neck. He would be much easier to manipulate than Euron. For now at least, though it would be awhile before she could be rid of him.

"Ride north to the Crossroads, Lord Alac." His eyes widened as the enormity of his assignment dawned upon him. "You will represent the Crown. Give them a just peace, so that the realm sees that their Queen cares only for her peoples...not lands or kingdoms which don't want her."

He cocked his head, hesitating to question her further. She nodded, giving her permission to do so.

"Wouldn't that make retaking the north harder?"

She brushed her fingers along the side of his cheek before answering, as if to say, *sweet child, you worry so. "You leave that to me, milord."

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**Daenerys**

The tea soothed her headache, but made her want to fall back into a deep sleep. She couldn't do that, not with so much time wasted already. Trying to get on her own two feet, she felt her vision blurring yet again.

"Careful, Dany," Jon's husky voice said beside her. "You have take it slow."
"I've taken it slow for months now," she growled, before realizing that he was just trying to help her. She smiled warmly at him, relaying her gratitude, and to show her regret at sounding ungrateful. "I still can't believe it was your sister who killed the Night King."

"Aye," Jon said warmly, and she could see in his eyes the intense pride he had towards his little sister. Was that what it was like to have a family? A real family? "They call her...The Hero of Winterfell."

"Seems a bit fancy for her taste." This was a guess. In all her time at Winterfell, she had hardly seen Arya Stark for more than a few seconds at a time, during a war council, or in the corner of her eye for mere moments before disappearing like like the wind.

"Aye. She didn't even come to the feast," Jon said. He was holding back, she knew. From everything she heard since waking, the former King in the North had doted upon her nonstop while she was out, not even accompanying his sisters south. Which was another subject entirely. But now that she was sitting upright, seeing, hearing, he was distant...like he had been before the battle...but even more so.

As if sensing what she was feeling, he closed his eyes and spoke daggers into her heart. "I had to tell them."

"Tell them about you," she asked, feeling the dizziness return to her. "Sansa and Arya?"

He nodded. "They're my family. I had no choice."

"I'm your family now too." She was pleading, she realized, even before she realized it. Apparently her words did not have the effect she intended, yet she could not stop herself from continuing. "You did have a choice. And they can never love you, the way that I love you."

"No," Jon said after a pause. "They can't." He avoided her eyes, which meant he was lying, probably by omission. It was his northern blood, the Ned Stark part of the man. The fact that they were blood. Even though it shouldn't have mattered, because they were strangers all their lives up until Dragonstone. She knew that incest was not something the seven kingdoms had fully come to accept, even as they bent the knee to her family for over two hundred years. But they had fallen in love as man and woman, not aunt and nephew, so why should that matter?

"You can trust them, Dany," Jon said, changing the subject back, clearly not wanting to discuss further their relation. She wondered what they would have said to each other down in the crypts, had they more time before the dead came. "She won a great battle for you, in your name," pride still gleaming in his eyes as he did so.

"Arya did?"

"Sansa, actually. They are already calling it the Battle of the Twins. The Red Wedding avenged."

A triumph for the Starks, to be sure. But the idea that Sansa would attribute the battle to her own cause seemed unbelievable. Especially since neither her nor her dragons had anything to do with the victory.

"Sansa?" She tried to speak evenly, calculating and modulating each word as she spoke it. "I must have been out for longer than you've seen fit to tell me, considering your sister has learned to become a master of war in the meantime."

Jon shook his head. "She had the Kingslayer commanding on your behalf. All of them, the northern armies. The Knights of the Vale, the men of the Riverlands."
Something was not adding up. All of a sudden Daenerys wondered if she was still dreaming, that this was just yet another fantasy, or nightmare, which would erase itself before the next one came.

"What about the Unsullied? The Dothraki?"

"The Dothraki are here, protecting their Khaleesi," Jon said. "We sent half the Unsullied south to Moat Cailin, the rest remain in Winterfell as well. I've summoned Grey Worm back, he was riding to scout for kindling."

Everything new word he uttered felt more wrong, yet her lover seemed completely oblivious to it all.

"My dragons," she asked, voice cold now. She needed to assess her strengths, her position.

He seemed confused at her change of tone. "They roam the North...they disappear for days at a time, but every few days we spot one in the distance from the walls."

"They should return soon," she muttered, more to herself than anyone else. "They should feel their mother..."

"I'm sure they will..."

She snapped at him. She couldn't help it. It didn't help that he was acting so awkward around her. "Your sister has no love for me. How did she become my strongest champion?"

He seemed almost confused why she would ask the question. That was genuine enough, then. Jon Snow was not a good liar, much less actor. "You almost gave your life defending Winterfell, Dany. Defending her home. Sansa's stubborn, I know that...far too well. But if that can't change her mind..."

"Did she tell you so?"

He stopped speaking, clearly racking his memory, dismay dawning upon his face as he obviously could not draw upon any clear instance of Sansa declaring her dedication to the rightful Queen. "She hinted at it. I don't think she likes to ever admit being wrong."

She felt her head throb again, and the last thing she wanted now was an argument with Jon. "You know your sister better than me," she started, but it still all felt wrong. And did he really know Sansa better? She and Sansa shared more than either one of them would care to admit...which gave her insight into her, as a woman, that Jon would never understand.

Before she could continue, footsteps stormed down the hall. It was Grey Worm, accompanied by Missandei, who both knelt immediately before her, too dramatic for her tastes, as they had no need to prove further where their loyalties lay.

"My Queen, you've awakened," Grey Worm spoke. She wanted to rise, to take his hands, but she was much too tired to do so. Fortunately they both recognized the fact, and rose immediately. "Your Hand is here."

"Lord Tyrion," she asked, confused, looking back at Jon. "You said he rode south, along with your sisters."

He did not have an answer.

"He says he has urgent business," Grey Worm said, while Jon pondered wordlessly, likely sensing the same dreadful thoughts as she was now.
"Send him in here," she ordered. "I'm afraid I'm not well enough yet to greet him in the Great Hall."

As they waited, she sipped her tea and exchanged uneasy glances at Jon, who seemed as apprehensive as she towards what news Tyrion was to bring. Which meant that he knew his sisters far more than he claimed to know them. He was trying to protect them, probably, but he couldn't keep straddling the line between them forever.

Tyrion Lannister seemed as worse for wear and as haggard than she'd ever seen him, his beard as unkempt as when she first saw him in the fighting pits, the bags under his eyes as weary as they had been when she returned to a Mereen under siege.

"My Queen, I bring news," he started, still out of breath from his ride. He eyed Jon warily as well, which spoke towards the likely reason for his anxiety.

She tried to put on a smile, for appearances sake. If only for Jon's behalf. "Good news, I hope? I believe you were beside Lady Sansa at the Battle of the Twins?"

"We were on opposite sides of the river during the battle," he began. "Appropriate..." then, he stopped, before kneeling. "It's a miracle you are awake, Your Grace."

"What is it," she asked, all pretense gone.

His eyes shuffled apprehensively between every person in the room again, even Grey Worm and Missandei's. With one last sad look at Jon, he turned his attention completely upon her. "I'm afraid that Lady Sansa has declared the independence of the three northern kingdoms from the Iron Throne, Your Grace. And my sister may even be inclined to agree to it. For a time, at least."

Her first move was to look at Jon, whose jaw dropped in complete shock, even as his mind raced to somehow come up with an excuse for Sansa. Before he could do so, Tyrion continued, asking Jon, gesturing at Daenerys as he did so.

"Does she know? Does she know...it?"

"She does," Jon said, his face paler than the snow now.

"She told Cersei," Daenerys said. Ironically, she felt her energy, her lifeforce return to her even as she fought with every effort to contain her building rage.

"All the lords, after the battle," Tyrion added mournfully. "It was all the talk even in Moat Cailin as I rode north."

"I can't believe it," Jon whispered, completely alone in his own thoughts. "She swore to me."

"Perhaps she acted presuming our Queen may not wake," Tyrion said, coming to his former wife's defense the moment he sensed her rising anger.

Daenerys shook her head. It was so like her Hand to be defending their enemies, taking their side, even when it strained all credulity.

"She knew...," Jon started saying, before suddenly catching her eye and stopping himself.

"She knew what," Daenerys asked, sensing something vital in what he just left unsaid.

It took him yet again some time to answer, and when he did so, he was averting his gaze again. "She knew you would disapprove of this were you to wake. That I would disapprove."
"She holds all the lords of the three northern kingdoms in her palms now," Tyrion said. There was almost a hint of pride in his voice, and not for the first time, she wondered whose side he was truly on. "It did not take her long to do achieve that."

"Then we do not have time to spare." Even as her knees shook, she rose to stand. Holding onto the table, it took her several breaths before she felt like she could stand upon her own two legs. Looking at Grey Worm, she spoke as harshly as she was able. "March all our men south to the Crossroads at once."

"What do you intend to do," Jon asked her, standing cautiously as well, no doubt conflicted as he would be about his sister's treasons.

"What I have always intended to do," she replied. "Take back all seven of my kingdoms." Walking towards Tyrion, she felt the strength return to her muscles with every step.

"As soon as my dragons gather, you will ride south with me upon Drogon," she ordered him. Turning towards Jon, she ordered him as a queen rather than spoke to him as a lover. "You will ride Rhaegal by my side, and we'll see about this peace between your sister and my Hand's sister."

He started to say something, then stopped. Same with Tyrion, who followed Jon Snow's lead. Good. It was time they both decided where their loyalties truly lay.

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Sansa

Like at the feast she sought him out. He was usually on the edges of their camp, she knew. Usually not too far from Arya. Neither one of them spoke much upon their time spent together, but Sansa was glad her sister had managed herself some kind of friend. As odd as their relationship was, it seemed to fit both of them.

"What," he growled at her as she took a seat upon a large rock across from the Hound, sharpening his sword even as he chomped on a hamleg.

Honestly, she didn't know 'what'. This was the day, she knew. She was so close, to accomplishing everything she ever wanted. Perhaps it felt too good to be true. Perhaps she needed someone to bring her back down. If that was the case, there was no one better.

"Once the peace comes," she decided to say, "Cersei's guard will be down." He looked up at her, his dark eyes looked as if he were about to shove his hambone through her throat. Yet she continued, knowing he wouldn't. "You'll have a chance to go at your brother then."

He glared at her, before biting off a chunk of meat, chewing it intently and ignoring her. "Your sister should keep her fucking mouth shut."

"You should learn how sisters work," she countered, knowing that pushing him was the best way to break through. As she expected, she elicited a light chuckle from the old man.

"Yer gonna be queen soon, little bird," he asked, piercing through her shields effortlessly and leaving her speechless at his audacity. "I don't reckon the little one will like being called princess much."

"Jon should be king," she said, far too quickly. "He's the rightful heir to the throne."

"But that doesn't make you want it any less." She didn't respond, so he continued. "Aye, I see the way you look. When all these fancy lords ask ya fer permission before they even go about takin' a piss. Don't blame ya, won't be soon before they're bendin' the knee."
Wasn't this what she wanted? Someone to speak frankly to her? Except this was too frank, his words too grounded in truth.

"Jon would be a good king," she began, before she saw him rolling his eyes. "But I would be good too," she found herself admitting, before she could stop herself. "If only both of us...could rule the north...each in a different lifetime."

She didn't know why she was admitting this to him. She had yet to admit this to anyone, not even Arya, though her sister probably suspected as much. For all she knew, this was what she and the Hound discussed when they disappeared for days at a time. But it was all true, for all the pride she felt for him, as she watched all the northern lords proclaim Jon their king, for all the love and admiration she felt for her brother whenever she saw him stand tall before before his people...she sometimes bemoaned that they did not look at her the same way. Because she was a girl, who could not swing a sword, who did not have dragons, who could not sneak up and slit the throat of the strongest man. But they did look at her this way now, and it would be a difficult thing to let go. But if there was anyone she would give it all to, give it all back to, it would be Jon.

"Yer afraid." His voice broke her thoughts.


"Takin' what you want."

"Cersei takes what she wants." So did Daenerys, though she didn't trust him enough to say so in front of him. "So did Joffrey. And Ramsey. And Littlefinger." And Daenerys, she said to herself again.

"And they'll all keep doing so, if you don't." He took another sloppy bite of his ham.

"Do you see me as bad as they are?"

The Hound spit out a piece of bone, hitting the dirt not too far from her dress.

"Bad people like them eat what they want. Fuck what they want. Kill who they want."

She thought about his words. They were true. But also misleading.

"For a time," she replied. "But they all get theirs. In the end."

"Not all of them," Sandor said nonchalantly. He looked up again at her, the scars along his head popping out vividly at her. "I'll bet ya that Aegon was a real prick, with his dragons. Yet he lived to a ripe old age, didn't he? Fucking and killing as he went?"

A historical debate was not what she expected to engage in when she sought him out, yet here they were all the same. Arya used loved all that, the early Targaryen conquerors. Funny how her opinions towards them changed now.

"He died alone," she said, remembering what she could from her lessons so long ago...things she learned while her family still lived, and while she still resented them too often. "He lost the ones he loved. He died paranoid probably...never forgetting all the enemies he made...that half his kingdoms yearned to kill him, if it weren't for his dragons."

"Aye, and how did your father die? Knowing he left his daughters helpless to all the roughest men..."
She stepped away, not wanting to hear more. As she left, she thought she imagined his shoulders slump, as if he didn't mean to go so far, just like he did at the feast. But such illusions were better not kept.

"I reckon you'll have yourself a throne? When this is all over?"

"Excuse me?"

It was the younger Hightower lord, the one they captured on the bridge. He kept quiet during the negotiations, his old brother Alac doing most of the talking. Both of them seemed nice enough, especially Alac, the younger one bearing an intense glare sometimes, albeit one that occasionally reminded her a bit of her brother Robb. They both seemed decent, as befit their family name, and she couldn't imagine either of them serving Cersei. Well, she did have a whole realm of lords to choose from, and at least some of them were bound not to be complete shits. *Half a realm*, she remembered, with half a smile.

"You'll be their queen," Arthur said, pressing forward, speaking as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"Jon Snow is the rightful king," Sansa said to the young stranger, rebuffing his boldness. "Of Westeros, or any other realm."

"Excuse my brother," Alac said, stepping in. He smiled, a sweet smile, this new Lord of Highgarden. "He's been in your camp for some time now. Think he's impressed with you, like a lot of them are." Somewhere out there, Sansa wondered whether Margaery's ghost, yet another one of Cersei's countless victims, would approve of this man with kind eyes who yet served her murderer and took from her her family's castle. But better he than some wicked southern equivalent of the Boltons.

"I do appreciate the kind words," Sansa said, sidestepping the subject as she watched more and more northern lords approaching. "I promise I won't tell Cersei you said them."

They all shared a laugh, before Yohn Royce's voice broke through the din.

"My lady," the old warrior said, his loud voice drawing the attention of all, as they stood outside the doorways of the Inn. "Jon Snow may be heir to Aegon Targaryen's throne. But we just fought to free ourselves from Aegon Targaryen's throne. And he's still got the Conqueror's blood running through his veins."

"Aye," Wyman Manderly agreed, stepping up beside him. "Jon Snow is a Stark. He's just, he's honorable, and he'd be a good king. But what about his sons, and his sons to come? Will they be as just as him, as good as him?"

"What if the Dragon Queen wakes?" This was Lord Cerwyn. "Would he not bend the knee again, and give the north right back to her?"

The mention of Daenerys made her veins throb, as she wondered how much time she had left, and whether it would be enough. Whether it had ever been enough, in the first place.

"I don't know Jon Snow," Tytos Blackwood added, and she watched Lord Davos surveying the scene as apprehensively as she was, sensing what was coming. "Everything I heard of him, he's a great man, like your brother and your father. But you rode with us, my lady, while he sat in a castle..."

"Enough," Sansa cried out, teeth chattering, and not because of the coldness. "Jon Snow earned his
rest, more than any of us, in ways we cannot imagine." She turned towards Tytos, bowing to her, so as to convey that she had not meant to be sharp toward him. "I thank you for your praise, Lord Tytos."

"They are well deserved, my lady."

Looking around the scene, including the two Hightowers, watching with great curiosity, she rose her voice to proclaim, "we will discuss the rule of the three northern kingdoms, after they are made. After all who have an interest in their ruling is present." Pointing her left hand at the door, she continued. "Let us go first and finish the deed."

"You'll finish nothing!"

The protest emanated amongst the clang of armor, as a plain haired woman broke into the circle with a dozen of her men. From the sigil, she recognized that this was Theon's older sister.

"Yara Greyjoy," she said diplomatically, swearing to herself the ill timing of her arrival, "I heard you docked at Maidenpool days ago."

"Aye, and marched without rest here to put a stop to all this."

"Put a stop to what," Wyman Manderly asked, stepping in between her and the self proclaimed Salt Queen as Brienne braced herself to her left. "It's done, woman. And you're outnumbered here."

"Lady Greyjoy," Sansa said, stepping forward, secure that, even as much as Theon's sister may want to kill her right now, her and her men would not get far. "I'm sorry you were not consulted about this...the battle being given and won before you arrived. If the Iron Islands would wish to join the northern kingdoms...or if you would like to remain on your own...it will complicate the negotiations a bit, but I'm sure we can work it out." She looked at the Hightower brothers, who nodded their agreement as well.

"These are not your kingdoms to split," Yara spat out. "These are Queen Daenerys's, all of them."

"But where is she now," Sansa asked.

"Knocked out defending your home," Yara argued back. "Theon died defending your home. Your duty is to take the seven kingdoms, and hold them together for our Queen until she does wake."

"Would you have us march on King's Landing," Tytos asked. "My men are tired. They've been fighting for years now. We may have won the war and taken that damned city years ago, if it weren't for your traitor brother."

She stepped in, not wishing to hear more ill about Theon, though she could not fault the words. "Lady Yara, you may sail and set siege to King's Landing if you wish, we have thinned their armies for you. But after today, our war is over."

"We still need to decide Harrenhal," Arthur objected, clearly feeling left out of the argument and wanting in.

Tytos looked back at Edmure, who nodded. He spoke. "Your Queen can keep that cursed castle. May it serve her well."

"Then the last item is agreed upon..." Sansa started, before a vast shadow cast upon all of them from above turned her words to dust.
Daenerys

She saw them all gathered outside the inn. Good. Then they can all bear witness. They all gawked, of course. Even the ones who'd seen the dragons before. But she could tell the new lords, their jaws were dropped ever lower.

She saw her standing in the middle of all the lords, her fiery red hair flying above the heads of several of them huddled protectively around her, as if she was already their queen. Behind her, she sensed Sansa's brother, following her, having landed Rhaegal in a nearby field. Along with a very shaken dwarf. Jon would not be pleased with his sister, she knew that. He made that clear enough before they left Winterfell. The circle parted as they walked through, and Daenerys noticed that she did deign to bow to her, a small, slight bow upon her tall frame, when they finally stood before each other.

"Your Grace," she said, as if the words were poison to her. "You've awakened."

"I have." She saw Varys in one corner, studying the scene intently. Tyrion swore that he remained loyal to her throughout. There was Yara Greyjoy too, glaring at Sansa as if she were about to throw an axe into her neck. She turned her attention back to the traitorous lady. "I hear you've been quite busy while I lay sleeping."

She smiled at her, a contemptuous one. "I have, Your Grace. I've been taking back the three northern kingdoms. In your name, of course."

"Just three?" Sansa was bold as she lied. There was none of the Stark honor in her, she would have to remember that. What a difference that was from Jon, who could not even lie in the Dragonpit to Cersei, out of all people. "What's this I hear then? About independence for my three northern kingdoms?"

"I did not know when Your Grace would awake," Sansa said guilelessly, no trace of guilt upon her voice, no sign she was going to kneel and plead for forgiveness for conspiring while she slept. "Our men are tired. We have all given so much, protecting our homes from our enemies. None of us here care for King's Landing. I thought peace was much preferable to more war."

She heard the echo of 'ayes' and mumbles of agreement behind Sansa, and realized this would be more difficult than she anticipated. She could burn them all...she wanted to burn them all, but even as she thought that, she could hear Tyrion whispering into her ear, counseling mercy, diplomacy, before he even spoke up. Remembering what little he summarized for her before she flew from Winterfell, Daenerys surveyed the gathered lords until she saw two young ones bearing the sigil of the tower.

"Lords Alac and Arthur?"

"Aye, that's us," the older one replied.

"I'll assume you rode north to bend the knee to Daenerys Stormborn of House Targaryen?"

"I'm sorry, Your Grace," Alac said, "but I'm afraid not." His voice was polite, but his words defiant. There was fear in his eyes, but his voice remained bold.

"We are loyal to the Crown," the younger one exclaimed, with all the fearlessness of youth. "We kneel to but one throne."

"Do you now?" Leaving Sansa and her men, she walked over to them. Both were tall, looming over her, yet both shirked as she neared. "Do you know what happens to lords who don't bend the knee?"
"Yes," Arthur said, stepping up to her. "You burnt the Tarly's. We all remember."

The last word he uttered as if cursing her, gritting his teeth as he spoke.

Looking up, violet eyes matching his dark ones, she challenged him. "Do you think that's all I am? Fire and Blood?"

"Your nature is not ours to decide," Alac said, pulling his brother back.

"It is not," she said firmly, fire in her eyes. Then, she allowed herself to smile. "But I have decided to show mercy today. Ride south, my lords. But tell Cersei there will be no peace, not until the rightful Queen sits upon her rightful throne. The seven kingdoms shall remain as one, as they were meant to be, forged by the fire and blood of my ancestor Aegon."

"Your Grace," came the voice she was growing quickly to resent, from behind her. She wheeled back to face Sansa. "The realm has chosen peace, all of its kingdoms, save the Iron Islands. You choose to reject this now, and choose war?"

Taking a deep breath, she struggled to measure her words, knowing not only was Jon Snow watching, but also all the lords of the three northern kingdoms. Her three northern kingdoms.

"I choose to free the people of all my lands from Cersei's tyranny. It's clear you don't care for them, not after what happened to you. But you don't speak for me."

Her infuriating voice continued, as she stepped back to address the entire crowd. "My lords. I have made my bid for peace. For our men to go home with their families, and care for them and shelter them from the winter. But our Queen chooses war. There is nothing further I can do."

Grumbles from the crowd, and it was clear how deep this northern, paler version of Cersei had her claws dug into all these lords. She looked at Jon, as if casting blame upon him for his sister's failures, and he looked shamefully upon the ground.

"Our Queen came north to save us from the Army of the Dead," Jon said, his booming voice louder than Sansa's as he spoke.

"To save her own realm," Sansa said. There was some uneasiness in her eyes as she argued with her own brother, yet she did it all the same. "As is her duty, her obligation, as our Queen."

Glaring at his sister until she stepped back into silence, he continued.

"She lost half her own armies to the battle. She lost men she loved. She almost lost her own life." He walked over, beside Sansa, stepping between her and the lords even as Sansa's eyes protested his words. "We all owe her a debt. We shall repay it by taking King's Landing for her."

"Then I'll leave you to your war, brother." Sansa curtseyed him, a deeper one than what she gave her, then turned to leave, her tantrum as methodical as the rest of her plotting. She could not let her off so easily. Jon's words brought back to her mind Ser Jorah, and she thought about him. How he died protecting her. How he died, probably thinking that he failed. How she had never even had a chance to say farewell before they burned him with the others.

"You're wrong." She spun around, caught off guard for once. Good.

"Your Grace," she asked, questioning, unsure of what was to come next. Does she fear fire, Daenerys wondered.
"There is more you can do, seeing how eager you are to win me back my kingdoms."

"I have done my part," Sansa said evenly again, regaining her bearings. *Oh you have, girl. "My place is in Winterfell. I shall..."*

"You will ride west," Daenerys commanded, surprising even Jon.

"West?"

"Take that *loyal* bannerman of yours, Ser Jaime, whom you trust so much." She saw the Kingslayer in the crowd, at the very back. Their eyes met at the mention of his name, and she did not budge. "Ride to Casterly Rock. I'm sure if there's anyone who could help you convince the lords of the Westerlands to withdraw their support for Cersei, it's the Kingslayer."

She seemed much less sure of herself now, looking at Jon, who avoided his sister's suddenly fearful eyes. "Your Grace, is this an order?"

"It is," she said, as coldly and firmly as she could. Putting on a hard smile, she decided she would tempt her. Play with her, as Sansa tried to do with her kingdoms. "Were I to take King's Landing without bloodshed, thanks to your efforts...perhaps I may reconsider your position on the lands north of Moat Cailin."

Again, Sansa looked at Jon. Again, he refused her without a word. Without acknowledging either one of them any further, she turned and left the gathering.

*That's who you would have followed, in your folly,* she thought, looking around at the fickle lords surrounding her.

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**Jon**

He knew she would come to him. He dreaded it. And as he expected, she barged into his tent without a word.

"You can't let her do this!"

"She's our queen," he whispered quietly, staring into the fire as the cold came preceding the night. "You'll do as she commands."

"I'll die," Sansa said plainly. "They'll kill me in the west. Or bind me and bring me before Cersei. Who knows what she'll do to me?"

"You're clever," Jon said, though she was right. "You'll figure it out." Daenerys was sending her into danger. On purpose. It was harsh. Too harsh, perhaps. But it was not completely undeserved. "You'll have Ser Jaime and Brienne by your side. Probably Arya too. With any luck, Dany will rid Cersei from this world before she can hurt you."

His littlest sister had not said a word during the gathering, but it did not escape his notice the hatred upon her eyes as Daenerys made her pronouncements before the lords. Or the disappointment when she looked at him, clearly expecting him to speak up for Sansa. He realized then, that standing by Daenerys may cost him everything. But hadn't it cost her everything as well, when she came north with him?

"Jon," Sansa continued, eyes watering now. "I want to go home. I miss it..."
"Then you never should have left," he snapped at her, losing his temper. And he did not stop himself. "You never should have plotted against your queen. You never should have played Cersei's and Littlefinger's game with these lords, you never should have broken your oath to me."

It was the last mention that brought visible shame to her cheeks, and for a moment he regretted speaking so harshly to her. Until she continued to speak.

"I didn't break an oath."

"What do you mean," he asked incredulously.

"I never swore. I promised."

"It doesn't matter," he erupted. How could she justify her crime this way? Did this mean that she had intended to break the secret the moment she heard it? "This isn't a child's game, Sansa. Promise or swear, you broke your word all the same." He stopped, wondering if he should continue. To hurt her. "You knew she was going to wake, Sansa. Bran told all of us. Yet everything you did...father taught you better. I know that. He'd be ashamed of you, the way you dishonor his name."

It felt like he slapped her. His words chastened her. Thankfully, she did not speak for awhile, as the full weight of what he said sank upon her.

"I did it for you," she whispered quietly. Of course she would say that. When she had no further arguments left. "I would have asked them to crown you king. Of three kingdoms. It's what you deserve."

"It's not what I want," he said, her words softening him. Yet, it bothered him more than ever, as he wondered whether she was sincere, or just saying these things to appease him. "I won't tell Dany the truth. The full truth, consider that one last favor I can give you."

There were tears in her eyes now, but Jon could tell she was holding many more back.

"That's where you stand? Brother?"

It hurt him more than she could understand. He loved her, because she was his family. Because of all they had been through together. Damned if he didn't like her at times, but hurting her hurt him far more. But it would save her, in the end.

"The Queen will honor your gift to Lord Davos, she knows he deserves it," he said, staring back into the fire. "Now go. I wish you good fortune. Cousin."

Chapter End Notes

Welp. If you thought things were going so easily for Sansa...this may not be GOT, but it's still the GOT world.

Thus ends the first third of this story, a sort of Act I, if you will. I hope you continue to stick with it as we move into its next phase. As usual, thank you so much for reading, and letting me know what you think about it...good or bad.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Sansa and Jaime think about the past, while Tyrion and Cersei plot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

The next morning she wandered the camp long before the other men woke, as if in a daze, still dreaming, though she barely slept. Fortunately there were no tears left, she having cried them all out without restraint the night before, sobs and what little sleep she had a blur in her memory. Everything she had worked for, everything she had built, the battle, the dead men, the weight of three kingdoms upon her shoulders...all of it burnt to ashes in one day. Thanks to her.

No, not everything, she reminded herself. Sansa always knew this could happen, that Daenerys would wake and tear from her all she held dear. But the lords bore witness. They knew where she stood, and what she did for them. They understood what Daenerys took away from all of their houses as well, not just her. It hurt, but she comforted herself in that she had accomplished more than what she had vaguely hoped for the day she rode out the gates of Winterfell. Now all she needed was patience. Patience like Littlefinger, like Varys, like Tywin Lannister. She did not admire those men, not by far, but she could remain different from them while still using their lessons she had so painfully absorbed. The thing was, she always imagined herself back in Winterfell to await the fruit of her works, safe from the schemes of all the wretched queens of this world. But the wretched queen proved equally as clever, using her own pretense against her and now she may never live to see it through.

"You want me to kill her for you?"

It was the Hound. She turned to face him, maintaining carefully, with some difficulty, the same composure as she had with him the day before when she held all the power still.

"Who?"

He snarled at her impatiently. "You know who I'm talking about."

The fantasy felt so nice, and the idea, once burrowed in mind, was hard to discharge. "You'd do it? For me?"

"I've killed women before. It ain't nothing for me to kill one more."

Could it be done, she wondered? Could it be accomplished, won back, so easily? Her peace, her freedom, won with one most dishonorable act? Littlefinger knew the answer to that question, no doubt. Tywin Lannister would have had it done already.

"You'd have to kill Jon," she realized. "Even if you could do it, if you could escape her dragons, he'll find you. You'll have no choice but to fight him."
"Where was the hell was he yesterday then? Whose side is he on?"

His rejection of her the last night still stung her deeply. But it did not change a thing for her.

"Whose side are you on?"

He looked away, not answering her. Sighing, she set her hand gently upon his wrist, feeling his coarse skin. "I thank you for the offer, Sandor. But we must obey our queen, now that she is here."

He grunted, and pulling away his hand, stormed off. "Still a little bird, I see."

Her daze returning, she continued to wander through the camp, trying to find her soon to be erstwhile, small band of companions.

"Lady Sansa," a voice called to her. The soft voice of Alac Hightower, his taller brother behind him. The fact they both survived the day was a miracle, as she fully expected them to burn, just like the Tarlys. Just like she had half expected for herself, were Jon not there to protest. And would he have? What's the difference between burning me, and sending me to the Lannisters, besides a slow death or a quick one?

"Lords Hightower. I'm sorry all our work together was for naught."

"I'm sorry too," Alac replied. "We ride south. You ride west. We find ourselves at war again."

"It's unfortunate," she said back. An understatement, if that. "You'll need Cersei to win if you want to keep Highgarden."

Alac nodded, while Arthur stared wordlessly at her all the while. "Two dragons. I'm not looking forward to it one bit."

It was a stark admission from him. "What's the name of those things," she asked, trying to recall herself. "That they shot at her dragons, along the Goldroad?"

"Scorpions, my lady," Alac volunteered.

She laughed, the bitter sound reverberating back into her own ears. She wondered if they were already dead men, despite the brief, obviously temporary mercy Daenerys thought to spare for them. "If I were you, I would advise your queen to build as many of them as possible. Sneak away a few for yourself too, while you're at it. For Highgarden. And Oldtown. And every piece of road in between."

In that moment, she realized that she wasn't sure who she wanted to win in this war now. She had never thought there could be someone she feared more than Cersei, especially after Ramsay and Littlefinger were gone. Jon still fights for her, she remembered. If Cersei wins, he dies.

"My lady is wise." Alac bowed, blissfully unaware of her conflict, and turned to leave. It surprised him that Arthur stood still, not following his brother.

"My brother has charged me to secure Highgarden while he serves our Queen in King's Landing," Arthur said, breaking his silence.

"I see," Sansa said slowly, not sure what he was aiming to say. His brother looked back at him too, perplexed. A grin appearing on his face, he faced Alac.

"There's more than one road to Highgarden, brother. One of them passes through the Westerlands."
He turned to face her. "You ride later today, my lady?"

"I do," wondering if she should be comforted or frightened by the young man's intense eyes.

"We'll march this morning, half a day ahead of you," he proclaimed, yet still looking towards Alac for permission. He nodded, and Arthur continued. "Our men are not many, but you spared enough from the battle to make anyone give a second thought before they give us trouble."

His older brother frowned, concerned by his pronouncements, though not rejecting it outright. "This could be treason, Arthur...if Queen Cersei finds out."

"I bend the knee to her, until my dying day. I ride through the west, in her name. But it's not my fault if Lady Sansa manages to keep pace behind us the whole way, how are we to know?"

Sansa watched as the two brothers smirked at each other, the younger one's brash plan clearly not a total surprise to Alac. Nor was the older brother's silent assent wholly unexpected to Arthur.

"Careful brother. And take care."

She went to her tent to gather the remainder of her belongings, making a note to send back to Winterfell many of her more meaningful dresses, considering that she may never wear them again. Bran's words echoed in her mind, that she will return home, but not until much time had passed, and much had changed...what were his exact words again? She had been so close, as she would have ridden north the moment the peace was agreed upon. Did he see this happening? Were his words a comfort, or a warning? Could they be twisted to mean that when she did return, she would do so as bones or ashes? She shivered, despite herself.

"He chose her."

Sansa turned to face her sister. "Do you hate him for it?"

"You don't either. But it saddens me too."

Ruffling through her luggage, she found the purple dress she had worn at the feast, in honor of her mother's family and sigil. That she would send back to Winterfell, a reminder of a simpler, happier day.

"I've never been to the Westerlands," she said, wondering how much she could bear to say, even to her own sister. "It's been a long time since I've felt this alone. I'm afraid, Arya. I told myself, after we took back Winterfell, after I watched Ramsey die, that I would never be afraid again. That was a lie. There were many times I felt fear afterwards. For Jon. From the dead. From you, even. But I always had the comfort of home. Not anymore."

"You're not as alone as you think." Arya walked over to one pile of dresses, flipping through them for a second before dismissing them. "The lords may march south with the Dragon Queen, but it's you they follow in your heart now. You know this."

"Aye, but take one step towards me and she'll burn them." Sansa shook her head. "Besides, you see how fickle these lords are. They'll forget about me, after a battle or two. Once they get their blood up, standing on the walls of King's Landing with Cersei's head at their feet."

Silence engulfed the tent, Sansa continuing to pack, while Arya stared outside.

"I don't know politics," Arya said. "I know killing. I can't kill the Dragon Queen though. I can't do that to Jon. But you, I know. Since when do you give up so easily?"
"I haven't given up," Sansa said, defensively. "But I won't fool myself into the impossible. There's no love for me, not where she's having me go. The lords may turn against her one day, when they've had enough of her fire and blood. When they do, they'll do so in my memory, I'm certain.

Just like I tried to win the freedom of the north in Robb's memory."

"There's the Hightower lad," Arya said, smirking.

"He scares me, Arthur does," Sansa said, hoping Arya wouldn't press her more on it. Not like she did to her with the Gendry boy. "His brother is far more amenable."

"But he swore to keep you safe. So use him."

"You heard? You were there?" Her sister never ceased to amaze her. As curious as she may sometimes be, she could never quite decide just how much of Arya's secret life she would have liked to know in more detail. What she did in the Golden Company's camp, for one. How she got to be this way in Braavos, for another.

"I'll be with you," Arya said, "for awhile yet. Sandor will be, too. He's not as mean as you think."

"I know," Sansa said. She wondered if Arya knew what he offered to do. Could it be that she was the one who spurred him to offer in the first place?

"We'll get you home."

But she did not promise it.

Jaime

Things were no longer boring, at least. They had been while the lords talked peace. He held the urge to go up to one of the Hightowers, ask them about King's Landing. He shouldn't wonder, shouldn't think about it, he knew, but he couldn't help himself. Did Cersei ever speak of him? How much did she hate her now, fighting for a new woman, sleeping with another? What about Euron? Had that grubby pirate truly taken his place in the Red Keep? His thoughts should be preoccupied on Brienne, but...

"Give my regard to our cousins."

"How was riding the dragon," he asked Tyrion, who had returned far sooner than he expected. Sansa had not been nice to his brother, but he knew it was due to politics, that she never chose to be cruel to him. It wasn't in her nature, though forcing him to ride to Winterfell was as close as it came. He couldn't fault her, it was a minor insult, true, but she was also fulfilling her vow to him. Two kingdoms at peace, and that meant his child would live. As would Cersei...until she made war again. But it meant more time, for all of them.

"Terrifying," Tyrion replied, though his eyes were not without a hint of pride at having done the deed. "I thought the entire time I was going to fall to my death."

"What a life you've lived," Jaime remarked, not at all eager to say goodbye to his brother again. Especially with the war resuming once more. "Hand to kings and queens alike, you've pissed off the wall, fought and killed the dead, ridden a dragon...born in the west, yet ruled over the great slave cities of the east..."

"...shot my own father," Tyrion added unsolicited, "strangled to death the woman I loved. No, I
wouldn't wish it upon anyone." He looked down mournfully, before giving him a hopeful smile. "But I appreciate you going all poetic about me."

"There's one thing we still have in common," Jaime volunteered.

"What would that be?"

"We both still want Bronn to be the one to get Highgarden."

They both laughed. "If she weren't asleep, I could have convinced her to take you into her service."

"Sansa's not all bad," Jaime, feeling a strange urge to defend Brienne's charge. "I wouldn't count her out yet."

"I wouldn't either," Tyrion said, deep in thought. "If only they could have gotten along."

"She's been through far too much to trust anyone."

"So have you," Tyrion said, one of the few who really knew his own trials. "Yet you trust her." He paused, realizing. "You both trust each other."

"As much as Starks and Lannisters can." Remembering that she had once been his wife, remembering how Tyrion was the only one who was kind to her in King's Landing, and who suffered for it from Joffrey, Jaime reached out to him. "She'd trust you too. If it weren't for your queen."

"I don't think it'll come to war between the two. Sansa's too smart to oppose her outright. But...I fear Daenerys has pushed her too far. They both pushed each other, really...to a point where neither one of them may forgive the other." The way Tyrion spoke, it was as if he felt personally guilty for not being able to bring the two women together. "If Sansa does make her move...I'm guessing I can't count on you to confide in me."

"Probably not," Jaime admitted. It wasn't because of Sansa's pledge to him, not entirely. He knew she held an almost instinctive, maybe even irrational distrust of the Dragon Queen. Though he had little interaction with her, he couldn't altogether blame her, not after yesterday's display. And what interaction he did have with Daenerys before the battle with the dead would have ended him, had Sansa not changed her mind, because she took Brienne's counsel.

No, it was something deeper that made Jaime wary of her. Just now, he realized how he flashed back to his days with the Mad King in her presence. It wasn't obvious at all, as it only just dawned upon him. But the little things, the twitches of the mouth, the sudden violent glare of her eyes...all signs which disappeared as quickly as they appeared to him, yet their very existence unquestionably reminding him of her father.

"A War of Three Queens," Tyrion mused, not entirely joking. "Appropriate...has a certain ring to it."

"And one Lannister on each side," Jaime said sardonically. "If it does come to that, at least one of father's children may survive it."

"Maybe," Tyrion said. He chuckled. "Be funny if Cersei was the one."

"It'd be a joke if it's any one of us," Jaime shot back. "We all deserve to die. We've all committed crimes past the pale."

"Then maybe we all live. And years from now, we may all sit beside a fire and laugh about the times
we tried to all kill each other, just before we all go to whatever hell the Gods have long intended for us."

Jaime shook his head. "I wouldn't bet on that." He wasn't talking about the hell part.

They had been riding for two days now, and the poor girl said barely a word, almost as if she had regressed completely to the scared little hostage of King's Landing. He almost found himself feeling sorry for her, having flown so high only to be struck down to crash dramatically into the ground. There was something pitiful to that, especially in having to witness it with his own eyes. And through the eyes of all the other lords, she was certainly aware of that.

"A vow of silence won't help any of us," he ventured to her, "especially not after we get to Casterly Rock."

She looked at him, quickly retracting the initial scorn in her eyes, though not able to help it in the first place. It was just the two of them, Brienne having ridden ahead to confer with Arthur Hightower their marching plans for the coming days.

"Sorry I haven't been great company." She was about to turn her back on him again, before she actually decided to speak further. Civilly. "I was thinking of Robb's wife. I never had the chance to meet her. They said she was kind. And beautiful. And gentle. She had even won over my mother in the end, despite everything it meant. Yet she cost them all their lives."

"We can't help whom we love," Jaime said almost reflexively, and he instantly wondered whether she would get the full meaning of his words. She would, he decided.

"Better to not love at all then," she said, the bitterness in her voice raw, more recent than the consequences of the Red Wedding.

"Are you mad at him," Jaime asked, having guessed who she was really thinking about, "Jon Snow?"

"He hates me now. I did what I did for him. For the North. And he hates me for it."

"Not for yourself? Not a little bit?" He was testing her, and he couldn't help himself from doing so, especially in Brienne's absence. It didn't escape him how she did revel in being in the center of it all, of learning how to tether the lords to her side, or wield them against each other, including his own self. The game never had any appeal to him, but time and time again he watched as it ensnared souls of all sorts.

"More than a little bit," she admitted, back to him. "But not just for myself. There is a difference, you know."

Jaime continued. After riding two days in silence, days to do nothing but think, he felt himself speaking out in a way that he rarely did. Sincerely. Introspectively. "Everything Tywin Lannister did, he claims he did for his children, for House Lannister. Including that wretched Red Wedding business. In the end, I think we all hated him. Not as much as his enemies, but his deeds won him little love with his family, I know that. And I think some time along the way...much earlier than he would care to admit...he'd forgotten that he ever loved us at all."

This got her attention. As she turned back, she looked at him with anger...but also interest. "Are you comparing me to Tywin Lannister," she asked indignantly, but not wholly angrily. "I love my brother," she said, when he didn't reply. "That's the difference...I don't want to see him hurt, or worse."
He continued to avoid her question, for now. "It's a shame, really. My father had to suffer the insults of lesser men all his life. I do wonder sometimes...he would have made a good king. Had Robert and your father, by some strange magic, handed him the throne after the fall of King's Landing, and sworn absolute fealty to him. All the realm would have been better off for it. My father would have been better for it."

"You would have better for it," Sansa said, amused, wondering where he was going with this. "That would make you the next king."

Jaime laughed, a genuine laugh he allowed to few. "I would have probably fled to Essos in that case." His thoughts returned to his own father, their filial relationship no less complicated than Tyrion's. "Instead, he continued to stew in his own anger and bitterness for years in Casterly Rock, the wounds festering, watching as the new King give your father more love than his own daughter, the queen.

My father wasn't born Tywin Lannister, you know. True, he was always ruthless, even when he was young. But once, he was capable of love. Friendship. But there was none of that left, I don't think, by the time our families came to war with each other."

He didn't know whether it took her time to comprehend his meaning, or acknowledge it. But she did acknowledge it, later.

"You're suggesting there's no choice but to declare myself Queen of the Seven Kingdoms, if I don't want to turn into your father one day?"

"It's not the first time you've thought about it. Not all seven kingdoms, at least."

This time she didn't acknowledge him. Minutes later, she changed the subject. "Brienne told me what really happened," she said. "When the city fell. When my father found you sitting on the Iron Throne."

"She did?" This surprised him. But then, he had never sworn her to secrecy. And in all likelihood, Brienne was trying to speak well of him, before her lady.

"It's personal for you, isn't it? Tywin was not the only Lannister who let their wounds fester through the years." Her eyes dropped, before meeting his again. "For what it's worth, I apologize. On my father's behalf. For judging you. For cursing you in his mind. For..."

She stopped, but her meaning was evident.

"For making me what I am?"

Sansa didn't answer, but her eyes did.

"For what it's worth," Jaime said, repeating her own words, his throat suddenly feeling tight as he spoke, "his blow was far from the first."

They continued riding in silence, and this time, neither one of them were eager to speak.

"Don't follow my path, Sansa," Jaime suddenly spoke, surprising her, his words leaving her without a response. "It's not a pleasant one."

She answered him with a dim smile, and they rode on.
Arya

She found her sister still quiet, but different than she had been in the morning. Less brooding, more just...contemplating. Hopefully planning, using her mind to think of some way to get Jon back to them. But that was a useless hope, she realized immediately. Jon did not care for plots, and anything they did behind his back he would resent them more for it. Possibly forever. He already resented Sansa, and Arya was shamefully thankful that she was the one who bore the brunt of his anger, rather than herself.

Arya cared little for plots either. It was the southern way, and she would mistrust all of them, if they weren't coming from her own sister. They had enough mistrust between them already for several lifetimes, and whatever Sansa's flaws, she cared just as deeply for Jon as she did herself. And they both feared the Dragon Queen, what she may do to Jon. To the North.

"We ought to skip over Casterly Rock," she heard the Kingslayer say. He sat huddled next to her sister, both of them studying a map by the fire. "Lannisport too."

"Why?" Sansa asked, as Arya crept up next to them.

"The Rock is a useless building at the moment. Not even my sister has bothered to retake it since the Unsullied marched for King's Landing. And my enemies will outnumber yours in Lannisport, I'm afraid."

"How so?"

Sansa was questioning him, but not questioning him. There seemed to be a great deal of trust between the two...was it because of one battle? No. Sansa was not naive, nor given to trust a man's loyalty just because he had remained loyal thus far.

"I killed one of their own, when we were both captives to your brother."

The significance of his words dawned upon her sister the same time as her, it seemed. Sansa was the one who spoke, as Jaime seemed to not even be aware of her presence by the fire at the moment. Which suited her fine.

"That was when you killed the Karstark boy as well. Which cost my brother the war."

He didn't respond, but she also didn't press him upon it. Arya wanted to...but they were allies now, for the moment. And the Kingslayer would have won them the North, if the Dragon Queen had not shown up at the worst moment.

"We'll go to Crakehall. I think Lord Roland has a sort of respect for me."

"Respect for the Kingslayer," Arya chose this moment to speak, inevitably surprising them both with her presence. "Because you didn't slaughter one of his kin as well?"

She saw not defensiveness in his eyes, but a distant look, almost mournful.

"He was the first to find me, after my father took King's Landing. He saw me sitting on the throne, the Mad King's throat slit beneath my feet." His words trailed now, the pace of his speech slowed to a snail's pace. "He asked if I were to be the new king...and I told him he could name whomever he damned liked. I think...there's more Stark to that man than most of my late father's bannermen."

"Shame my father was not there to hear that," Sansa said, sympathetically to the Kingslayer, to her shock. Sansa noticed her confusion, and said cryptically, "it's a long story, and I doubt Ser Jaime
would like to revisit it now. With his permission...we'll speak of it in the morning, before we ride."

"But you trust him," Arya asked, knowing there was an explanation, yet still in disbelief at the same time. Scanning over the map, she saw where the Kingslayer was bidding them to go. "Crakehall is much more south than Casterly Rock. You're sure he's not leading us into a trap?"

"I do," was all her sister said.

"Very well," she said, not approving, but not fighting them either.

Jaime continued, but not before flashing her an amused look. *Traitors would be fearful, or defensive,* she thought. *Not amused.*

"I doubt we can turn him against my sister. But he'll provide us safe harbor...perhaps all the way through the end of the war." His eyes were distant again, as he finished.

"Even if your sister wins?" Arya asked, watching his expression as he did so. But she could not truly tell what he thought, except that he both hoped she would win, and feared she would win.

"What would you prefer," Jaime asked, turning the tables on her.

"Maybe they can kill each other," Arya answered without hesitation, not forgetting her own sister's pledge to the Kingslayer.

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**Tyrion**

"She survived."

"You seem relieved," Varys replied, as they awaited the loading of the ships for the trip to Dragonstone.

"I am," Tyrion insisted, maybe too quickly. "She's stubborn as a mule, she harbors an irrational distaste for our queen, she's fast learning more and more tricks to wield against her...but that doesn't mean she deserves to die."

"It doesn't?" Tyrion recognized that this was going to be one of those conversations. "Men have died for much less. Are you sure you're not swayed by a pretty face and fond, yet unfulfilled memories from a different life?"

"Of course not," he said, sighing. "Perhaps I am to bear the burden of my family's crimes. She would not be like this, had it not been for what we did to her."

"I share your guilt," Varys said, a rare, sincere confession from him, "I really do. She may yet die in the west, your sister may see to that."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Tyrion said, taking a sip of his drink.

"I hope she doesn't."

"You don't?" He cocked his head at the Spider, wondering where he was aiming now.

"I truly don't. And not for why you think. I've never been in the business of saving Starks, clearly. But I've no wish to see them die, one by one...all under the men...and women, that I serve."

"Even if she betrays our Queen?"
"She already has."

It was the harsh truth, but it was the truth. And once spoken out loud, it made Sansa’s fate seem like mercy. But was that right?

"Not so openly, or boldly, just yet. Enough so, anyway, to leave her no choice." The thought haunted him, ever since he arrived and Winterfell and saw Daenerys awake. Whatever Sansa was, he did not want Daenerys to kill her...it would be so unfair, after everything she'd been through. After everything his family put her through, and like Varys, he himself would become wholly complicit in the slaughter of another Stark. That was why he so fervently wanted her to make peace with Daenerys, to come to an agreement, but day by day it seemed like it was slipping out of his control. First, Sansa's actions. Now, her very life.

"If she does, even Jon Snow may not be able to hold our Queen back."

"I'm not sure if he even would," Tyrion said, as he recalled the action from a few days ago repeatedly in his mind. "He is honorable. To a fault, he couldn't even bring himself to lie to my sister, of all people. And he has pledged himself to Queen Daenerys, along with all his peoples."

"That's the problem, isn't it? Sansa does not believe the North was his to pledge." Varys looked down at this feet, sadly. "But he did pledge it, and he may honor that. Over his own family, even."

"It is admirable though," Varys continued, when he did not say anything in return. "Kingly, even. In a way the realm has rarely seen."

"What are you saying," Tyrion asked, fear creeping into his voice. "Not this. Please, not this from you, my good friend."

"Our Queen will soon ride south to take King's Landing. Do you have any concerns regarding just...how, she might take it? Especially considering her anger towards Sansa Stark to be not fully...consummated, because of her relation to Jon Snow. Who just happens to be known now as one with a stronger claim to the throne than her."

"I've had my thoughts yes. But I trust she will heed the advice of her loyal advisers." He gulped nervously. "I'm afraid that if you continue to insinuate what you are insinuating...you may very well hint it into existence."

"But say we were loyal advisers to Jon Snow...do you think we would harbor such fears over the man we served? Would there be any demons to speak into existence?"

"You weren't so keen upon him last time we spoke about this. And then, only because we feared our Queen may never wake."

A smirk. Too brave, by half. "He was a bastard, then. A Targaryen, now. Yet also a Stark...a family whom both of us have wronged so many times."

"A family we also helped save, when we defended Winterfell from the dead." Seeing no reaction from Varys, he tried a different tact, modulating his tone carefully to warn, rather than threaten. "If you speak further on this, and our Queen overhears, you may inadvertently finish the job and help wipe out what little remains of their line."

A grin, which only brought him unease. "That would be a shame, wouldn't it? It really does make you think."

He left, leaving Tyrion to this thoughts. Their thoughts, all of them dangerous.
Cersei

If she were honest with herself, she would have preferred the dragon bitch not to have woken. It would have given her more time, to restock her supplies and rebuild her armies. But nevertheless, Sansa had helped her greatly, knowingly or unknowingly. More likely the former. The whole realm now knew that between her, the Lady of Winterfell, and the Dragon Queen, there was only one wished for war. At least openly. And what for? To covet a throne that was not even rightfully hers.

"They say the Dragon Queen sent her west."

"They do, Your Grace."

It was just her and her Hand, speaking in private. She enjoyed these conversations. It calmed her, he had a way of making her feel like everything was taken care of, under control. She didn't have her wine now. Not with Euron aware of her child, starting to show in her belly.

"They say they argued before the Crossroads, that Sansa rode west with my brother unwillingly."

"I have heard the same as well," Qyburn added. "Your Grace," he started, pausing long enough to garner her permission to continue, which she gave. "They are both our enemies, but the Lady of Winterfell a far less dangerous one than the Dragon Queen."

She agreed. But she would not allow him her blessing so easily, so she waited, before snapping at him. "If I still believe that the wolf bitch had a hand in killing my son, I would have your tongue right here and now." Her words did not affect him visibly at all, both of them knowing how the game was played. "My brother insists upon her innocence. Do you believe him?"

Qyburn considered his response carefully. "He claimed it long before he entertained any thought of betraying you, Your Grace."

"So he did," she replied, giving away nothing. "You're suggesting an alliance with Sansa Stark?"

"A temporary one, to be sure," Qyburn replied, always hedging his words cautiously with her. "But she has willingly created a divide between our enemies. We ought to make good use of it. Even the...appearance of an alliance could be useful. Whether or not it rests in truth."

"Very well," she said, not budging one inch upon the throne in which she sat. "Send ravens west. Tell the lords the Lady of Winterfell will be a guest upon my realms. That by my orders, she will not be harmed, but treated with all the courtesies due her station. Send word that I will continue to honor our peace, and I won't even begrudge her queen for breaking it. But also tell the lords," her voice lowered to a whisper, in order to convey the differences in her messages, "that she is not to leave the realms of the rightful Crown."

Qyburn bowed before her, and left. "As you wish, Your Grace."

Chapter End Notes

I really enjoyed writing this chapter. It took awhile, but I finally got to write a meaningful scene between Jaime and Sansa...two such interesting characters who never really had a chance to interact on the show due to circumstance. Hope you all enjoyed it
as well.

From what I gather, Roland Crakehall is book canon, btw...as is his exchange with Jaime, as relayed by Jaime this chapter.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Jon finds difficulties on the way south, Sansa and Arya find difficulties in the west.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

_I'm at the edge of the world_, Sansa thought, watching the waves of the Sunset Sea roll to and from beneath her, their cold breeze stinging her face. Beyond them somewhere lay the Iron Islands. Where Theon had once lived. Damn those islands. If it weren't for them and their wretched ways, Theon would still be her brother. Robb's brother and loyal friend. Those islands damned him instead, to a fate few deserved except the worst, like Joffrey and Ramsey.

Tywin Lannister as well, she thought, except Jaime Lannister had told her plainly to her face, that he saw his own father in her. How close was he to the truth? Just how far would she go? To protect Jon, and Arya, and Bran? To protect her family, a task in which her father and Robb failed miserably at. She hated to admit that, but she had to admit that.

She loved them, that was the difference. Even if they hated her for what she did, she would continue to love them, though she doubted that Bran was much capable of hate at all. And because she would always love them, she would never be cruel to them, no matter what they thought of her. That's what separated her from men like Tywin Lannister. But to herself she confessed, though she would never forgive him for the Red Wedding, though she would personally slit his throat, or do much worse, were he ever alive again and were she lucky enough to have the chance...she could admit to sympathizing more with Tywin Lannister than she ever thought possible.

And where did Tywin end and Cersei begin? Had that wretched Queen not been a sweet girl once, dreaming of marrying a Prince, just the same as she? It seemed they had more in common these days than not. They both hated the Dragon Queen, for one. And she did hate her now, having come to that understand sometime along their ride west. Maybe she merely feared her before, but after Daenerys ripped apart everything she had worked to build...same as Arya, Sansa had never been above hatred.

_But I can't let hatred become me_, she swore to herself. _I won't become Cersei_. Jon was wrong, she decided. If father could see her now, he would understand her actions. It hurt to hear it, but the Hound had spoken true, Ned Stark had indeed failed. But he would want his children to learn from his mistakes, like any good father. _Great father_, she added. And she wondered too, if he could watch her journey, her every moment, did he realize his mistake in judging the Kingslayer too harshly? Could this feud between their two families have been avoided had Ned Stark been more charitable to the lions to the west more than twenty and six years ago?

_I dwell too much on the past, even when so much is at stake now._ But the past's mistakes, she must learn from, and grow upon. Not just her own mistakes either, there were fresh, recent ones to choose from. Ones she made in underestimating the Dragon Queen, underestimating her spite, her witchly hold upon Jon. But what more could she do, standing here, cold and alone in the west? Dragons
were dragons. No amount of cleverness could deny the world that fact. Not even Arya could kill a
dragon.

_Could she?

"Many admire the ocean." Jaime Lannister's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Some even consider it
romantic."

"The Ironborn practically worship it," Sansa replied, in return. She thought about Theon less now,
but she did not forget. Nor did she forget his sister, who she had no doubt would murder her the
moment she could. And in Daenerys's name, no less, but not completely for her cause.

"I grew up with it, same as them. But I've always found it to be quite boring. Always the same
sounds, the waves, repeating themselves again and again."

"What don't you find boring, Ser Jaime? Besides war? And killing?"

He thought about it for awhile. "You." He finally said.

"Me?" She had expected him to answer with anything else in the world. Such as Brienne, for
example. "It's you're interested in _that_, Ser Jaime, I assure you..."

"I'm not," he spat back, coldly. "You may be Lady of the North now, but I'll always remember you
as a child. A dumb, boring one at that. But you've become quite good at changing, haven't you? That
makes you interesting than most. Ned Stark, he was the same man I remembered, from when he first
stepped into the throne room, to the last time I saw him in the streets of King's Landing. I picture Jon
Snow in my mind, five years from now...the Dragon Queen...even my own damned brother...I can
give you a pretty good idea who they're going to be. But you...I haven't a clue."

His words changed her from indignant to contemplative. They cut both ways, she realized, but she
understood he meant it as truth rather than insult. "And you...you're a different man than the one who
pushed my brother out the tower."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," he said, scowling, his face entirely serious.

"Perhaps we're both more similar than we'd think," Sansa said.

"That would make me clever," Jaime replied, a grin forming on his face now. "Trust me, everyone
I've known has made it a point to constantly remind me how much of a clod I am."

"You know people," Sansa said, recalling their conversations through the Westerlands, "better than
you think. You saw through me. You saw through clever men like your father. Or Cersei." She
continued, more revelations pouring upon her mind. "You saw through the Mad King...earlier than
you could admit, probably. You knew what he was, but you were sworn to obey him anyway. You
ignored your own instincts, your sense of good and evil...for honor, for your duty, until you couldn't
anymore. Afterwards, you learned to ignore yourself. I think you hold yourself back on purpose.
You don't trust your own mind, your own instincts, the ones that don't have to do with swinging a
sword, on purpose."

She saw that her words were cutting him deeper than she had intended.

"I'm sorry, I did not mean to offend. You spoke honestly with me, I thought I could do the same with
you."

"You can," he said quickly. "I just...I never thought about myself in that way," he admitted, and for a
second she thought she would see the Kingslayer cry.

"You gave me cause to see myself in ways I never would have." She smiled at him, a rare thing. "Perhaps we are good for each other, in a weird, odd sort of way."

"You may regret those words, Lady Sansa," he replied. Turning back towards the small castle above the waves, he said, "I'm afraid my old friend Roland is ready to play the welcoming host now."

She looked the hill and sure enough, there stood a squat old man with long, light brown hair, almost Lannister golden, but not quite, carrying a sword that seemed to be half the length of his own height. Next to him stood Arthur Hightower and beside him, a dark haired boy, who might have been Rickon's age, had he lived. She had thought he had been Lord Alac's squire when they all were at the Crossroads, which is strange why he was here now, west with them.

"Lord Roland," she bowed politely. He did not seem mean, or cruel. Yet Robb had trusted Roose Bolton initially too. Her brother did not question the loyalty of the man who betrayed the North until it was too late. "Lord Arthur. And...I'm afraid..."


"I thought that," Sansa said. The name Dayne rang familiar with her. Arthur Dayne. Her father had defeated him in single combat. Arya and her brothers loved that story, she less so, never wanting to think of her father as what he was...a killer.

Sansa wondered what this boy's relation was to the great knight, and how much he knew about that piece of unfortunate history between their families. It seemed like she would be confronting Ned's ghosts from the rebellion this entire ride.

"Alac charged him with me," Arthur explained. "He didn't think King's Landing was a safe place for children, not with two dragons coming its way."

"Plenty of children still in the city," Sansa said before she realized it. Catching herself, she smiled at Arthur. "Your brother is a kind man. I hope...he is well treated by the queen. Both of them."

He nodded, but didn't speak, eyes clearly apprehensive about his brother's role in the upcoming war. Turning back to their host, Roland bowed to her as well.

"Lady Stark, I offer you my house and hearth. Be assured that you will be well protected within my walls."

"Thank you, Lord Roland." She hoped Jaime was right, that there was some of her father's honor in the man. Even though hope was for fools.

As they walked up the hill towards the small castle, she thought she sensed nervousness in the small man. Soon he revealed his reason. "I'm afraid I have other company as well, Lady Sansa."

"Who would that be," Brienne asked, having joined them from the other side of the hill, concern marring her eyebrows.

"Ser Marion Lannister."

Sansa looked at Jaime. "A relation you know, I presume?" He nodded, mouth slightly widened in a way to show that he was not at all happy about this development. "The one who hates you?"

"No," Jaime said. "That's another branch. I think he may actually like me. But Marion
"Lady Sansa," Roland said apologetically, "Lord Marion is here on the Queen's orders, but he has instructions to relay to you that our Queen's peace with you still stands, even if the Dragon Queen refuses to acknowledge it. Queen Cersei understands there were some events that were...entirely out of your control."

"And you believe her?"

"I do not have any reason to believe otherwise," Roland replied, and they walked the remaining distance to Crakehall without much further converse.

She wouldn't have called him fat, but Marion Lannister looked...in one word...soft. He resembled Jaime a bit, really, with ten or more so years upon him...and not a day of exercise or swordplay in those intervening years.

"He may seem friendly," Jaime whispered into her ears, "but don't underestimate him. He's almost as clever as my late father, if lacking his responsibility."

"The Lady of the North," the older Lannister pronounced, a joviality in his voice, "who finds herself west. A strange thing, is it not?"

"Not by choice." Once again, she found herself speaking the words before she even realized it...though this time, she wondered if there was more purpose than she consciously intended.

"I've heard," Marion said sympathetically. "The Dragon Queen...she's really pushed everyone in these realms into corners that don't fit, hasn't she?"

"So has your Queen," Sansa said. She would not allow him to bait her. Not this easily, yet.

Marion Lannister laughed, not showing the least bit of insult, and sat following Roland's lead beside him, gesturing for the remaining of them to take their seats along the table, rich plates of meats and fruits already before them. Servants immediately sprang forth with wine, and Sansa supposed that it would be good wine at least, coming from these rich lords of the Westerlands. Tyrion had to have acquired his taste somewhere.

"Maybe that's the problem, isn't it? Too many queens, not enough kings these days."

"Jon Snow," Sansa said, forcing down memories of their last conversation as she uttered his name.

"Ah, so I've heard as well." He leaned in, almost conspiratorially. "Is it true?"

Sitting up straight, she mustered as much seriousness as possible. "On my honor as a Stark, it is."

"On your honor as a Stark," Marion repeated, as if her words amused him. "Do you consider him your king then?"

"He was my king," she replied carefully. "Then he bent the knee to Daenerys. That makes her my queen now."

"But you don't agree with his decision? Your king's decision?"

He was sharp, she thought. Or she was being purposefully obvious, she just couldn't help herself when it came to the Dragon Queen. It bothered her now, that she could not tell which was the case.

"Jon is a good king. But not even good kings make good decisions all the time."
This time it was Roland who laughed, but it was a nervous laughter.

"I beg your pardon, Lady Sansa. But I thought you were here to win us over to the Dragon Queen's side."

"Which is to say," Marion added, all joviality vanished from his voice now, "you rode into our lands, our Queen's lands, to ask us to commit treason against her."

She gave them a smile, a false one, this time purposefully. "My lords, I ask you to simply consider the reality of your situation. Cersei Lannister is facing two dragons who will burn her city to the ground if she doesn't yield."

"She can't win," Jaime spoke up for the first time at the table.

"Aye, you made certain of that, didn't you boy?" Roland seemed less than pleased with his old acquaintance at the moment. "When you won a great victory against your own sister. Your own house."

"I know my sister," Jaime said, unfazed, "better than all of you." It did not escape Sansa Marion chuckling, then biting his tongue at the remark. "She outsmarts many people, true, but she outsmarts herself the most. I fought against her so she would see the reality, harsh as it is. That her throne was lost the day the Targaryen bitch flew three dragons into Westeros."

"But there's only two now." This was Arthur, whose remark surprised all of them.

"There is," Jaime said. "And it'll stay that way. My sister is not the Night King. Just a very human queen."

"Withdraw your support," Sansa continued, "and Cersei may finally understand that there is no way she can win. She and Daenerys have been at war now, I know, but she has not wronged her personally, not yet. It was Ser Jaime who killed her father, after all. If the Queen Daenerys can spare his life, perhaps she may allow Cersei to flee with her life in tow as well, to somewhere far away."

Roland asked. "Those are her terms?"

"Those are my terms," Sansa replied, truthfully. "But she did send me to speak on her behalf."

"With great enthusiasm, I can tell," Marion said, his voice light again.

"She has two dragons," Sansa said bitterly. "She doesn't need any of her subjects to love her."

"Neither does Queen Cersei," Marion said, kindly now. "But the realm will come to love her one day, in time." Ignoring her skeptical look, he continued. "My dear lady, I know of your past grudges with our Queen. I also think you're smart enough to know who amongst the two are more dangerous not just to yourself, but to the realm."

"To the realm? At least Daenerys flew north to fight the dead while Cersei held her armies back. It was true, after all. Just because she disliked Daenerys did not mean she liked Cersei any better, and it was foolish for these lords assume so.

"The Army of the Dead," Roland asked. "I wouldn't have believed it, but I believe less that Ser Jaime is creative enough to fabricate such a thing. But is Daenerys done fighting? Cersei is. You are. She may have saved the realm, but she'd destroy it anew with wars after wars after wars, and her children after her...that's the Targaryen way, isn't it? They are dragons, after all."
"Believe you me," Marion continued pressing, "Cersei Lannister does not bear any great love for any Stark. But she has judged you to be preferable to Daenerys."

"Because I'm weak."

"But you're not," Roland said, with grudging respect. "Three kingdoms followed you to war. Three kingdoms were about to follow you to peace. Call back your armies. Tell your brother to withdraw his support for the Dragon Queen..."

"I've heard words from the Northmen," Arthur added again, "that he rode a dragon during the battle with the dead. Makes sense, considering he may be half a Targaryen."

This caught both Westerland lords' attention, and Marion paused for a bit before continuing.

"In exchange, Cersei will grant your independence. She'll want the Riverlands back, but you'd be a fool to try and hold them anyway, they have no natural defenses. A full amnesty will be offered, of course, to all the lords, including your uncle, provided they pledge to never again rise against her."

"Our Queen is a practical woman," Roland said. "She knows that it's impossible to hold the North and Vale if they are unwilling. Failing dragons, which she doesn't have. And from the sounds of it, your brother can take a dragon and even things out."

It was tempting. She was tempted to believe them. But even if Cersei was completely trustworthy, it was impossible.

"Jon would never do it. Or else he would have supported the peace, rather than ride down with the Northmen and the other armies for King's Landing. Even if some of the lords followed my call, it wouldn't matter. They would burn first, before they get anywhere. And then it makes no difference who she burns next, Cersei, or all of us gathered here, we'd all burn just the same."

"That's the choice we face if Daenerys wins," Marion asked, fear visible in his eyes for the first time. "Kneel or burn?"

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"She can't burn the entire realm," Roland said, conferring with Marion, "can she?"

"No," Sansa said, surprising them. "Because the rest of the realm will learn from our stupidity. And Cersei's." She rose. "I'm afraid that's the only understanding we may be able to come to, my good lords."

She rose to leave. "I believe we have a good understanding of each other now, of the Dragon Queen, and your part to play in things when the war is over. My part is done. I must return home now to look after my people. Winter is here, after all."

As she feared, she saw genuine pity on both their faces. Pity for her. Exchanging a look at Jaime, he shrugged helplessly.

"I'm afraid we can't let you do that," Roland said. "As I said, as long as you remain under my roof, you will be safe. I will honor that pledge, I assure you. But upon my Queen's orders, I can't let you leave her realms. What's to stop you from raising another army against her?" Even as he said the words, it was clear he didn't believe them. But honor was honor, and if Roland Crakehall was honorable, as Jaime claimed, honor did not care whom it cut.

"I'm a hostage," Sansa said, her worst fears realized. Again. After all those years, escaping King's
Landing, escaping Littlefinger and Ramsey, here she was, back where she started.

"I wouldn't say that," Marion said, genuinely trying to be conciliatory. "I'd say you're an honored guest of our Queen, the Lady of the North, to be treated as befit her great station. Food, wine," he looked over at Arthur, "whatever you prefer, all brought down from Lannisport on your behalf. Make the most of it, my dear Lady Sansa. You've had a tough go of it, from what I hear. Let yourself rest a little, for once."

*I just want to go home.* Again, she remembered Bran's words.

"It might not last as long as you think," Roland added. It was odd sight, for once, to see her captors so apologetic and regretful, bending over backwards to please her. That was new, at least. "The battle is coming, after all. Whatever happens, I'm sure the circumstances will change quite soon."

"I'll protect you," Arthur stood, as gallant as a knight. Beside him, the young Beryn Dayne stood too, mimicking the older boy. "I promise you, Lady Sansa."

She smiled at him, not having the heart to tell him how useless his words were.

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**Jon**

He tried to avoid it the entire ride, but he could not ignore it. Ser Davos...Lord Davos's pleading, mournful look, aimed at him at all times during the day. Finally he confronted him.

"I know! I know what you want me to say!"

Infuriatingly, now that he finally brought the subject up, Davos did not say a word.

"I was too harsh on her, I know."

"She meant well," Davos finally replied. "She did well, too."

"She needs to respect our Queen," Jon insisted back. "She needs to learn, and this was the only way to get through to her!"

"What if she doesn't?"

"Doesn't what?"

Again, no response. Just the look.

Frowning, Jon turned, and they continued riding.

"She doesn't deserve to burn," Davos voiced out, about an hour later. "No one does, save maybe the likes of Ramsey."

He supposed they had to address it. It was a long ride south, after all. If Davos was thinking this, Davos, perhaps the dedicated out of all the men who followed him, who knows what the Northmen were whispering amongst themselves? Much less the Vale and Riverland lords. At least the Knights of the Vale fought with Dany at Winterfell, and they saw what she had done for all of them. To Tytos and Jonos and Edmure, the Army of the Dead may well still be a bedtime story. "She let the Hightowers go, didn't she?"

"For now. What happens when she catches them a second time, provided they survive the battle?"
"They'll have a choice. Same as the Tarlys." He tried banishing Sam's mournful eyes from his mind, down in the crypts. He couldn't.

Davos wasn't finished, unfortunately. Swiveling his head back towards all the lords riding behind them, Yohn Royce among them, he turned to look back at Jon.

"Look around you, Jon. I've never seen such an unhappy army. But then, I wasn't there with Stannis in the end, either. If these are the lords that support Queen Daenerys, how do you think the lords who don't will feel? After the war?" Ignoring the impatient look he gave him, Davos continued. "I know, I know, she saved us from the dead. They all know that too. But men aren't rational. Nor can you expect them to always pay their debts. Most of them probably don't even believe they owe one. That's the kind of country she'll have to rule...not a paradise, but seven kingdoms shattered by war, filled with imperfect men. And women. She needs to accept that."

"She will," Jon grumbled. He was moving his lips to speak again, and Jon snapped, unable to control himself. "You don't give up, do you?"

"Would your sister? Sansa? Or Arya?"

Why did he think he didn't want to talk to Davos, or anyone right now, for the rest of the way to King's Landing, for the matter? Did they all think he was dumb, that he had no recognition what a perilous line he was walking? Did they think he hadn't been racking his brain day after day, trying to think of some way to control three women who could not be controlled?

"We have a war to deal with first. When we have peace, then we'll all have time to let our blood down. And think. And forgive. Including our Queen."

"We had peace." He did not notice Wyman Manderly catch up to them, and wondered how much of their conversation he had overheard. Davos didn't add anything further. He didn't have to.

"Robb Stark lost his crown because he loved a woman. Jon Snow lost his crown because he loved a woman. Yer sister, on the other hand...I don't reckon she'll love anyone anymore in her life."

He was startled to be spoken to in this way. But then, Jon was no longer Wyman Manderly's king, was he? "That's a good thing, Lord Manderly? Not being able to love?"

"Aye, maybe it is, when it comes to kings and queens."

"Would you have named me king," Jon asked, genuinely curious, "had you known I would have bent the knee to Daenerys?"

"No," Wyman replied without hesitation. "And I don't speak for just myself, either."

"You'd be speaking for corpses then," Jon muttered. Sansa was right in one regard, these northern lords were fickle. And ungrateful. And forgetful.

"She lost her dragon. Her men. I get that. She sacrificed, but we all did. I lost a son and a brother to the dead. You don't see me askin' to be king. None of that would have mattered anyway. What she lost. What I lost. What you lost. If it weren't fer yer sister killing the Night King. The North provides for our own, Lord Snow. We don't need others."

"You did," Davos said, surprising Jon, as he wondered if the Onion Knight was going to come to his defense after all. "Most of the North sat out the Battle of the Bastards. I saw that myself, we begged from house to house, doors slammed in our faces. The Knights of the Vale saved the North from the Boltons. You fought bravely Jon Snow, far braver than me. But we'd all be dead men if it weren't for
"You want to name Sansa your queen then," Jon snapped back. He respected Davos. Apparently he never spared Stannis's feelings while he advised him. Apparently he hadn't had reason to criticize him until now. After spending several months with his sister. "She doesn't trust you. She doesn't trust anyone. She didn't trust me to tell me about the Knights of the Vale. She almost got all of us killed, before she rode in with Littlefinger to save us all."

He knew he wasn't being fair to his sister. They were still practically strangers before that battle, and she was far too traumatized from Ramsey to trust. But how much of that has changed since then?

"That's not my point," Davos replied, impatience showing through. "My point is, we can't keep dividing ourselves between North or Vale or Dorne forever. We need to listen to each other, if we're gonna try and have a halfway civil country when this is all over."

"Aye, I'm listening! Am I not?"

"Then listen to your people, Jon. They're tired of fighting."

"I'm tired of fighting!" He screamed it. He didn't mean to. He wasn't just tired of fighting...he was tired of damn near everything at this point.

Wyman Manderly laughed bitterly. "Then what in the hells are we doing then?"

Arya

"Do you want me to kill them?"

It took her longer than she had expected to respond, but Sansa did shake her head in the end.

"They've treated us well. And they are our hosts. It would almost be as bad as killing guests."

"Except they're our captors as well. Yours, anyway." There wasn't a way in seven hells they could keep her here. Or her sister, or anyone else she didn't want held captive. No, there was no danger in the west for Arya Stark, not from some old, senile lords and half grown knights, but she would wait for her sister's lead before acting.

"I'll be as safe here as I'd be anywhere," Sansa said after more consideration. "At least until the battle." She looked at her apologetically. "I'm sorry, Arya. I know there's other places you'd rather be right now, than guarding your older sister."

"There are. But I have to wait on those anyway." Once she has the child...

"He almost won us our freedom," Sansa said, referring to the Kingslayer.

"Almost."

Arya didn't know how exactly she should feel about Jaime Lannister. Sansa told her the real story about what had happened in King's Landing. It changed her view of the man, but it mattered less than the fact that Jaime had fought and won for the North, twice now, and also that Sansa had grown to trust him. Like him, even. More than maybe even their own brother. There was something she wasn't telling her about him though, and Arya sensed it was important.

"I wonder if Bran can see us right now," Sansa said, bringing up their other brother out of nowhere.
"Or if he even cares."

"I think he does," Arya said, though it was a guess on her part. "They haven't wiped all the Stark out of him just yet. If we were truly in danger he'd...he'd do something."

"You think or you hope?"

Arya laughed. It was easy to forget sometimes, with her pretty face, that Sansa was just as bitter as she was, their hearts both as cold as the White Walkers, it seemed at times. Very few people would understand that. Not the Sansa who left Winterfell to marry Prince Joffrey, to be sure.

"Sandor's going to leave soon," Arya told her. "He'd want to get to King's Landing by the time the battle starts."

"You want to go with him?" She wasn't asking about her vow the Jaime and its implications. She was asking about Sandor and her. How she had found a friend in the strangest of places, just like Sansa did with the Kingslayer. How Arya may soon lose that friend.

"You could ask him to stay for you. He might."

Sansa shook her head. "If they're determined to kill me, one man wouldn't make the difference, however good he can fight. It's up to you. All of it, if you want to go too."

She'd given up. She had been so strong with the all those lords from the three northern kingdoms, but losing everything to the Dragon Queen (and Jon) hurt Sansa like she haven't seen her hurt in a long time. Arya wondered how she could spur her to fight back again, but for once, she was out of ideas. Especially considering there were lines she wouldn't yet cross.

"You're pouting," was what she did say.

"I'm the Lady of the North," Sansa said, knowing how meaningless those words were now, "and a hostage for what feels like the hundredth time in my life. I'm allowed to pout."

"They're dragons," Arya said, thinking about when she used to read of them with awe. "Don't feel bad you can't do anything about them. Torrhen Starl couldn't deal with them, he knelt. None of the seven kings could, when the Conqueror flew here."

"Except Dorne," Sansa said. Apparently she still remember some of their old Septa's lessons.

"Do you want the North to burn like Dorne did?"

"No." She watched as Sansa tried to hold it together, before giving up as her eyes reddened. "I hate the dragons," she cried in a fit, "I hate them so much."

"I used to worship them, Meraxes and Vhagar. Not so much now though."

"Everything I went through, I thought I could at least learn from...and use. To help myself, help my family...help the North. But what can I do, what lessons could Littlefinger or any of them have taught me that I can use against those fucking dragons? It was all useless, all the pain, and torture, it was all just the most horrible waste of time."

Arya moved to hug her sister. Let her rinse it out, all her tears. She knew Sansa had cried all night as well, before they had to ride west, yet she had stood strong before the Westerland lords all the same the next day. Because she was strong, despite how painful being strong was for her. That's why she would stay with her now. Sansa needed her. And Sansa could never allow herself to break down like
this in front of anyone else, not even Brienne or Jaime. Nor would Brienne or Jaime be able to comfort her. The pack was dwindling now, but what remained needed to stick together, and stay strong.

"She says she doesn't need you."

"She's lying," the Hound grumbled. He leaned roughly against a tree a ten minute walk outside the castle, and she half thought he had drank himself unconscious until he responded to her, muddied eyes barely open. "She tried being one of them. But one prick of blood and she lets them eat her up all over again."

"It's different," Arya said. She didn't expect the Hound to understand. She barely understood herself, the games Sansa played. "It's a different kind of pain, I think. It's like they stab her and drain her of all the blood. Then they expect her to get right back up."

"Sounds like a pain in the ass, is what it does."

"We're killers," Arya said. "Jaime Lannister, my brother Jon, Brienne of fucking Tarth, all killers. Even Cersei and the Dragon Queen. She's not what they are. I saw her, after the battle. Thousands and thousands of men killed, because of her. It took a lot out of her...for it to be all for nothing..."

The Hound shook his head impatiently. "Aye, you gonna suck her dick all night, girl?"

That's what he did, when he got uncomfortable. When she poked the needle too close to him. She knew not to take offense. Even Sansa knew that, she was pretty sure.

He was testier than usual. They had ridden not far from Clegane's keep several nights ago. Home had a different meaning for the Hound as it did for her or Sansa. Home brought him only further feelings of revenge, Arya figured.

"Would you stay? If she asked?"

"She won't ask. You shove the question right in front of her pretty face, and she still won't ask. She's not a killer...but she's as proud as any of 'em."

"Any one of us," Arya corrected.

"Tell her to ask me," Sandor said. "Like I asked her when Stannis and them were burnin' in the Blackwater. I ain't askin’ more than once."

"You're right," Arya said. Was he talking to her now, or Sansa? "She's too proud now. They took everything away from her, 'cept her pride. If she knew what we're talking about, she'd probably order you go to King's Landing."

"Aye, cause I'm the last person she thinks she can still order around." He shifted uncomfortably against the tree. "Yer comin' with?"

That damned oath. To not kill Cersei. To Jaime Fucking Lannister, of all people. But in her heart, she knew that, even if Sansa owed him nothing, her own answer may still be the same.

"No. She needs me."

The Hound scoffed. "Good."

"Good?" She had thought he would be disappointed. Maybe hoped he would be.
"I've got revenge, what else? And look at me, ridin' around east to west with two spoiled little cunts, drinkin' till I piss myself every night, cause I've can't think of nothin' else 'cept sticking a sword through that fucker's neck. You can kill? Great. Any old cunt like me can kill. Be better than me, girl."

Arya wasn't sure how to respond to that. He probably didn't want her to say anything back, to be honest. So she motioned for him to hand her the canteen, and gulped down his ale, not flinching as she drank it down.

"At least he won't shatter when you kill him. Tell me what his face looks like when it happens."

Chapter End Notes

Yup. Sansa's more than just a little depressed in this chapter. Hope she snaps out of it.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Events in the east spur events in the west.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jaime

"I always thought I'd be bowing to you as Lord Jaime," Marion said, another awkward dinner between the unlikely guests of Lord Roland Crakehall. "When I heard your father took the city, I thought for a few weeks it'd be Your Grace."

"I'd have been an awful king," Jaime grumbled, not wanting to revisit that tedious history. Out of all the doomed scenarios he envisioned in his head when left Cersei for Winterfell so long ago, having to sit with the same old dull relatives he'd grown up with and listen their same old stories was the last thing he'd envisioned he'd have to endure. Would any of the seven hells would be as ironic, when he inevitably landed himself there?

"Better than most of the ones you've served," Marion said, prompting an "aye" from Roland beside him.

"Even our Queen," Jaime asked, gleefully catching his hosts in a trap, a rare interesting moment. "That would be treason, wouldn't it?"

"I referred to kings only," Marion said glibly. "But yes, if I had to pick a Lannister to sit on that damned chair, I'd pick the only one that's not a complete cunt."

"Lord Marion," Sansa said in faux shock, not able to help herself. She had withdrawn back into her shell again, after this latest setback, but at least some of the conversation amused her. The girl fooled no one with half a brain years ago in King's Landing, though she did enough merely to maintain enough pretense for Joffrey and Cersei to keep her alive. She was better at the pretense now, occasionally opening herself up to act as if an honored guest rather than the unhappy hostage.

"It's true," Marion said, glad for some spirit from their guest of honor as well. "Tywin was a cunt. Joffrey was a cunt. Cersei...well, you know."

"What about Tommen," Jaime asked, daring the old Lannister to insult his youngest son, though he'd admit that Marion was better company than he remembered, without Tywin present, but who in this realm had dared to show off their wits at the expense of his father? Who in their right minds, that is.

"The late king never struck an impression upon me. I understand there's exceptions to the rule, of course. Myrcella...she was a sweet girl. I was devastated when I heard the news, my wife cried for days. And your brother...he's something, isn't he?"

"He's a lot of things," Jaime said. Once again, they found themselves on opposite sides of the world. They had little news from the east since riding off, and he supposed Tyrion had little time, nor inclination, to send him ravens just now, whilst he plotted to destroy their sister.
"A traitor, first and foremost," Roland said.

"Traitors can be charming," Jaime said. He liked Roland enough, but he would not allow him to insult Tyrion. Even the best of their relatives and vassals had not bothered to treat him with any semblance of respect when they were children, and Jaime forgot few of those insults.

Sensing the unease, Marion stepped in. "Fat Robert was a lot of things too. An ass, to be sure. But not a cunt. But like I said, that trait seems reserved for our happy family."

"Am I a cunt, Lord Marion?"

Sansa’s vulgarity accomplished their effect, shocking them all, Brienne especially, face turning wholly red. Podrick looked down at his food, though Jaime thought he saw him holding back a grin. He laughed first, and to his relief, Sansa laughed, across from him. A joke here, a few snide comments there...it was an improvement.

"If the Queen Cersei asks, then categorically yes." He raised his glass up for a toast, and they all raised theirs, even Brienne, who followed Sansa's lead. "But truly, you're a remarkably pleasant guest..."

"Hostage," Sansa corrected, even with the courteous smile still plastered upon her face.

"I regret this, Lady Sansa, I truly do," Roland said remorsefully after yet another awkward pause. "I'd ask you again to consider Cersei's offer, but I know your answer already...you are Ned Stark's daughter, after all."

"You'd be surprised," Sansa retorted back, giving her sister a look across the table. The little one never spoke at all, merely intent on gobbling down as much food as she could on the nights she deigned to show up. No moping from her though. "I'd consider it if were the least bit possible."

"Possible," Roland asked, though Marion remained silent. "I don't understand, it is possible. The offer is at hand now, it was commanded by the Queen herself."

"If I could trust Cersei to keep her promises were she to win. If I trust Daenerys to not ride west and burn me were she to win. But neither of those possibilities are possible, are they?"

The table sank back into a sullen silence once more.

"Those dragons scare the shits out of me, if I could be honest," Marion said, ignoring her first point. He took a deep drink. "My ancestors marched with King Loren when he gave battle against the Conqueror." He pointed at Jaime. "His blood may have survived that battle to kneel as a king, rise as a warden. Mine didn't. I read those stories when I was a wee child. Most boys hear about those dragons and dream about riding one, conquering the realm like jolly old Aegon. Me, I thanked the Gods every day they died off, and prayed they would never return." He laughed mirthfully. "Guess piety has never been a Lannister thing, has it?"

"No one should be allowed that much power," Sansa whispered to herself in her corner, though it was heard by all.

"Aye, especially a Targaryen," Roland added. "Cruel trick of the Gods they're the only ones who wield it, eh?"

They all drank separately, and ate the rest of their meal in relative quiet. As Roland motioned for the servants to collect their plates, a grim faced maester stepped into the hall, wordlessly handing his lord a long scroll.
As he read its contents, his face burst into a wide grin. He turned towards Marion. "Your prayers may have been answered yet." He looked around the rest of the table. "Word from King's Landing. Euron Greyjoy ambushed the Dragon Queen and her fleet on their way to Dragonstone. He got one of the scaly fuckers. Injured another too, got its wing, some say."

Marion clapped his hands in triumph, and even Sansa smiled, before she caught his eye. Her smile disappeared when she saw he wasn't smiling.

"Just one killed though," Jaime asked.

"Aye, one less now for her."

"May I," Sansa asked Roland, and after some consideration, he handed her the scroll. Her expression was unreadable as she examined the whole of its contents. When she finished, she looked directly at Jaime.

"The Greyjoy fleet captured Missandei. Queen Daenerys's translator and good friend," she explained to the two western lords who had not been present at Winterfell. Neutrally, she continued through the letter. "The Queen's traitorous brother attempted to plead for peace before the walls of the city, in an attempt to trick the Crown into releasing the foreign invader, but Queen Cersei delivered the Crown's justice before the usurper herself, who flew back to Dragonstone afterwards with her army and Hand."

She looked quickly to Brienne, then back to him. "She's a fool."

They both knew which queen she was referring to. He couldn't disagree.

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**Daenerys**

By the time Grey Worm and the Unsullied brought Jon Snow into the throne room at Dragonstone, she had forgotten what she was thinking about. Was it Missandei, the sight of Cersei's brute ruthlessly slicing off her head whilst she stood helpless in chains, yet defiant until the very last word? Was it a sweeter memory? Of Drogo, when she was young and conquest seemed a shiny goblet easily taken and drank from? Was it the noble Barristan Selmy, telling her of sweet Rhaegar and his songs to the smallfolk, before he was murdered by the slavers? Was it Ser Jorah, who loved her, who she by her own hand had robbed each other of valuable years together? Was it Daario, who still loved her, except his love did not come with an equal claim to the Iron Throne, alongside a treacherous, scheming sister? Was it Drogon, his left wing still shaky, whom she could not bear to look at without remembering his two brothers, the two children she had lost it seemed, in less than a fortnight? As it all those nightmares, blurred into one, alongside ones which she did not even know of...Lannister assassins murdering Rhaegar's wife and children? Her own mother, sad, weeping and lonely when she died? Her father, the Mad King, whose eyes she'd never seen, yet they haunted her from the shadows all her life.

"My Queen." He had taken his time, arriving in Dragonstone. As did the rest of the Unsullied and Dothraki, those behind him who did not sail, who did not suffer the pirate lord's attack.

"I have news from the west," she said calmly, all her nightmares she forced away from her mind.

He reacted viscerally. As she expected him to. But it was still disappointing. "Of my sister?"

She nodded. Beside him, Tyrion narrowed his eyes as well, while Varys looked more concerned than usual. She hoped their worries were rightly placed.
"Word is she has been taken in warmly by the lords of the west...as an honored guest of Queen Cersei. She takes walks with the lords and the Kingslayer along the shores of the Sunset Sea during the day, and dines and drinks with them at night."

"That's...that can't be right," Jon stammered. Of course he would defend her, despite everything she'd already done.

"Can't it? She seemed very amenable to Cersei when they made their peace."

"She hates Cersei," Jon answered back, certainty in his voice. "Whatever she did, Sansa would never cooperate or ally with her."

"Would she not?" She looked over at Tyrion and Varys. They were her strategic minds. Jon was many wonderful things _many fearful things_, but strategic was not one of them. "What if she and Cersei found a common enemy they each hated more than the other? What if Cersei were to promise her the North?"

"Your Grace," Varys said, stepping forward in her direction, "I've had word from the Westerlands as well. It may seem as though Lady Sansa is...taking her time with the hospitality of Lord Crakehall and the Lannisters, but I do hear that she is in fact their prisoner, upon Cersei's own orders."

This news seemed to affect Jon even more so than when she accused his sister of treason, as he stumbled half a step backwards. _Still he takes her side._ "Perhaps we should rescue her then, my loyal Lady of Winterfell. Maybe I should ride west and ask her to her face, myself, just what exactly she thinks of Cersei."

"Your Grace." This was Tyrion now, and she had no doubt he was about to go and defend Sansa, like everyone else in her small council seemed wont to do this day. "This is exactly what my sister wants, to drive a divide between us, right before the battle. I've no doubt she ordered the lords to keep Lady Sansa hostage all the while claiming her a guest, in order to distract you from the throne upon which she sits."

Her Hand's words made sense, even if she did not want to listen to them. And why shouldn't she want to listen to them. They were encouraging, were they not? They told her she had fewer enemies that she had previously imagined. Or were the words meant to distract her, render her blind?

"We should focus on King's Landing," Tyrion continued, "and winning this war." He turned to Jon. "I've no doubt your sister's in danger..."

"We sent her into danger," Jon argued back, guilt evident on his face for his part in Sansa's predicament. "We knew what we were doing." For a moment, she regretted sending Sansa west as well. It clearly hurt Jon, the possibility that she was truly held captive to Cersei. She knew she herself would shed few tears if Cersei changed her mind regarding Sansa's hospitality and ordered her killed, but could Jon ever forgive her that to happen? Could he ever forgive himself? What broken shell of a man would remain, having lost so many of his family already?

This was all assuming, of course, that Sansa was innocent of any further treason.

"We can't change it now," Tyrion said. "The sooner we unseat Cersei, the sooner she'll be safe. Lord Crakehall is an honorable man...you may not believe me, but he is. Sansa will not be mistreated, as long as she's under his protection. Once King's Landing is taken, we may all march west to demand her release."

Jon shook his head. They were all so preoccupied over Sansa now, that damned woman. Even so
close as they were to the real war.

"My fath...Ned Stark...he didn't go and seek my mother until after the war. It was too late then."

His words were expected, yet they cut her deeper than she should have let them. "Do you wish to abandon our cause and ride west?" When he didn't answer immediately, she continued. "I can win a war without you, Jon Snow. I have, many times before."

"I continue to honor my pledge, Your Grace. I will help you take King's Landing first. I have faith Sansa can manage on her own until then."

He made the right choice. It took him more time than she would have liked, but it was better than the alternative. Although, for the first time since learning of Cersei's treachery, she wondered whether she ought to keep Cersei alive. After all, taking her throne did not meant it secured, and she would be curious to learn of what traitors may be inclined to continue plotting behind their rightful Queen's back. But even as she considered it, she remembered the Lannister woman's smug face, just before she took Missandei's life, and Daenerys decided that she must burn.

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Cersei

"Your Grace."

"My new Master of War, what is your concern? Because you do look concerned."

She read him better than he read himself, and Alac Hightower, her said new Master of War, actually blushed before her presence.

"I do not wish to question your judgment, Your Grace..."

"But you're going to do it anyway. So say what you mean to say."

"I...was it wise?" He gulped, afraid to finish his thoughts, even though she knew already what he wanted to say, before he said it. Nodding, she meant for him to continue. "To provoke the Dragon Queen like that?"

"There, that wasn't so bad, wasn't it?" She said, her voice almost comforting. "Once you say it out loud." He didn't know how to respond to this, so she continued. "You may have heard many things about me, Lord Alac. Most of them probably aren't true. Some of them might be. But I don't bite. So long as you are loyal to me, you may speak openly with me, because it's in my interest to heed the best counsel. Both our interests."

"Her Grace speaks true," Qyburn added from beside them. "I have served the Queen for many years now, and have spoken honestly with her near every day."

"How old are you, Lord Alac?"

"Twenty and five years, Your Grace."

"Have you fought in a war before," she asked, surprised by his age. He looked older than he was, apparently. And the truth was, there were few lords from the greater houses willing to serve her at the moment, so she had to make do with those who stepped up willingly. They were all waiting, the treacherous snakes, to see the outcome of the battle, her own Lannister kin amongst them. They would not be rewarded for it afterwards. Younger men, men like Alac before here, were more prone to be loyal. And she intended to reward his, and his family, for their loyalty.
"I marched with King...the pretender Renly in the last war," Alac admitted, quickly realizing and covering his initial slip. "I was but a squire, to Ser Jonas Redwyne. When Renly died, my father called me back to Oldtown."

"And Ser Jonas?"

"He died at the Blackwater, Your Grace."

"Your father was wise," Cersei said. She knew all of this, of course, but letting the young man tell it to her made him feel important. Even powerful. "Had you joined Stannis, had you survived even the Blackwater, you would have died in the northern snows."

"I know, Your Grace. Aye, Stannis was no friend of the Crown, but he was a great commander. It always makes me wonder how he lost to someone like Ramsey Bolton."

She smiled. He was going exactly where she wanted him to go. But he was smarter than he let on. It was very likely that he was allowing himself to be led.

"Stannis had the larger army, the better reputation. To win, Ramsey Snow had to provoke him, play tricks...force to attack before he was ready, while his mind was distracted. We must do the same. The Dragon Queen will be rash, now that we've provoked her. She'll be more apt to mistake, and she will die for it."

"Your Grace is wise," Alac said, bowing. "I must return to the walls, but I will keep your wisdom in mind."

"One more thing," Cersei said, as he was turning to leave. "I hear your brother has been escorting the Stark girl through the Westerlands."

This caught him by surprise, his face reminding her of Jaime, when she revealed that she knew about his little meeting with Bronn and Tyrion all along.

"He has been," he admitted, truthfully. "I'm afraid..."

"Don't be afraid," Cersei said, her voice still motherly. Some things could not be forgotten. Would not have to be, she thought, as she rubbed one hand over her belly.

"I think he's in love with the girl," Alac said meekly. "My brother has always been...impulsive...quick to act...quick to feel. If...if she weren't a, a, a...traitor, I would think he'd mean to propose to her. He may still."

"Your brother's young," Cersei said, containing her anger. Because there was little value in anger. But there was use for this. There was use for anything, as long as she looked hard enough. "He's a man, and men think with but one thing sometimes."

"He's barely a man," Alac said, affectionately. So they did love each other, these brothers. It was a weakness. It had been Jaime's, that soft spot for Tyrion.

"He may marry her yet," she said, and he craned his neck in shock. "Once the Dragon Queen is dead, we allow her safe passage home...with a nice, young southern husband in tow from a great family, the brother of the Lord of Highgarden, no less. In her gratitude, she may reconsider her position. As may her lords."

"That...that is generous, Your Grace." But there was an uneasiness in his words, which meant he understood her completely. And he seemed unwilling to force a marriage upon the wolf bitch, even if
it was his own beloved brother. So he was soft. Pliable, but soft. It was good she knew this.

"Worry not for your brother. Our war is here. Not with him."

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Sansa

"Are you sure about this?"

"I am, Lord Roland." She wasn't sure at all, which was why she spoke so formally to him.

They found the Kingslayer not in Brienne's quarters, but sitting by himself in the solar. He didn't react when the light of their torches illuminated the room. Not at first.

"Come to rub it in?"

"You're worried about her," Sansa said.

"Only one wounded dragon left," Jaime said, as if in a daze. "She has a chance yet." It sounded like it was himself he was trying to convince.

"She doesn't. Cersei should have recognized her how weak she was. Come to terms, take a boat to Pentos...do whatever it is the opposite of what she did."

"She made the Dragon Queen mad. Perhaps she'll make a mistake in her rashness."

"That's a good strategy, isn't it? Making a Targaryen mad."

"Why do you care," he asked defensively, showing his trademark pique which she had not seen for some time now. It meant she was edging too close to the same truth he had acknowledged the moment they both heard the news.

"Why do you," she retorted. "What about Brienne?"

"I love her." He didn't reply too quickly, or take too much time to respond. Which meant he was telling the truth.

"But you still love Cersei." Now he didn't answer. "More than her. Even now. Even after she betrayed you, declared you a traitor. Even after she tried to kill you."

He did not deny it. Instead, he said, "I love our child too."

Beside her, Lord Roland's face paled. "It's true," he whispered. "The rumors were all true." Turning to Sansa, he looked as if he wanted to get on his knees and beg her forgiveness. "Your father...he wasn't a traitor after all. The war...it was all a lie."

If Jaime cared about the magnitude of the secret he just revealed, he did not show it at all.

"Just like Robert's Rebellion," Sansa said, remembering the Godswood, her and Arya listening to Bran and Jon. Thinking of her father, looking at the Kingslayer, slumped pitifully before her, she recalled the truth of what happened in the throne room. How Ned Stark had not been entirely perfect either, not when it came to Jaime Lannister. "My father was many things, but you'd be a fool to believe he was ever a liar."

She sighed, questioning herself one last time before leaping. "Brienne will hate me forever for this."
"What are you saying," Jaime asked, at first confused, then disbelief creeping into his eyes.

"Go. You have some time, you both do, while her last dragon heals. Tell her to flee the city, take her gold and sail to Essos. Save her if you can. If not her, the child."

Roland repeated his words, stuttering as he spoke. "Lady Sansa, are you sure about this?" Her actions already made no sense to him. Now the truth of Jaime's relationship with the queen seemed close to breaking his mind.

"I made a vow. Ser Jaime won me the Battle of the Twins."

"It made no difference," Jaime said, somehow still trying to hurt his own case. "Not in the long run."

"Still," Sansa said, thinking about Jon's recriminations towards her in the tent. About her father, and Robb, and their mother, what they would do in her place now. "Lannisters aren't the only ones who pay their debts."

"I pushed Bran," Jaime said, "out the tower." She already knew, but it another startling admission before Roland.

With every word he continued to condemn himself. Or save himself, depending on how one looked at it. To her right, Roland gasped at learning yet another dark truth behind the War of Five Kings.

"Consider the battle reparations for that," he continued. Sansa shook his head. She was determined, now that she had set upon it. A fulfilled vow did not cancel out a broken vow, but it was better than two broken vows. Tywin Lannister would never think this way, she thought. Nor Cersei. I'm not that far gone yet.

"That's Bran's debt, not mine. I doubt he'd ever look to collect though."

"No...he wouldn't." He understood. Fully, she imagined. He rose, and they walked through the halls of the manor without exchanging another word. Reaching the stables, Jaime found his horse, well rested and well fed after more than a week in Crakehall, and led it down towards the castle's gate. Sansa found herself following him, not even Roland trying to stop her, though he trailed her by several paces. Maybe to keep his eye on her, so she didn't use this as a ruse to escape with him. Maybe because he couldn't just help himself.

He led his horse to where the path east began, before realizing she still followed. His eyes looked more dazed before when he sat in the solar, as if the Kingslayer himself was about to weep.

"I wish you good fortune, Ser Jaime. Champion of The Twins. Champion for the living."

He looked down as his feet, and for a second she thought he was going to ride off without a word.

"What about you?"

"I have no armies for you to command now," she said wistfully, those hectic, nervous days in the Riverlands before that battle a pleasant dream now. "Brienne may abandon me too. I would were I her, ride straight to Daenerys, or Cersei, or all the way back to Tarth. But if they're determined to kill me, what difference do two knights make? One with a broken hand, no less."

She forced herself to laugh at her own remark, even though none of them found any humor in it. Jaime walked back towards her, and she did not shrink back when he took his left hand and cupped the top of her head in it.
"There's a sweetness to you still, Sansa." His eyes were distant as he spoke, as if his thoughts were transfixed completely in a different time. "Cersei had it once too, but our father crushed it out of her far too early, so early that it's long forgotten by both of us. Our own brother never had a chance to know his sister before she...became Cersei." Looking downwards, he wiped his eyes, no doubt thinking about Tyron, and Sansa realized that they may not meet again either. She wondered if they had had a chance to say goodbye before.

Then he looked at her again, and she saw him, truly saw Jaime Lannister, for the first time. Perhaps the only time. "It'll take a far stronger man than Tywin to crush it out of you, but no one can push against it all. Not forever. Don't..."

But he never finished the sentence. Perhaps he didn't know how to finish it. Like a ghost, he vanished into the night, as if she had never known him in the first place.

"You let him go?"

She couldn't tell whether Marion Lannister was more perplexed or angry.

"I did," she answered plainly.

"What could possibly possess you to do such a thing?"

"It was the honorable thing to do," Brienne said behind her, her knight's face a mess of emotions that a woman even as strong as she was could not hide. Yet, she still stood behind her, even though Sansa imagined she would like to plow her sword right through her heart at the moment. 'He may return yet,' she told her, though neither one of them believed it. 'Once he gets her on a boat, perhaps he rides back to you.'

Sansa did not tally long after delivering her the news, knowing that Brienne would never allow herself to reveal, and let go her true emotions in front of the lady she served. Before she left her chambers, Sansa told her she could consider vows released as well. Still, Brienne stayed, and Sansa wondered how horrible that was, to gaze into her eyes and always feel the unspoken recriminations within.

"I swore to Ser Jaime, in exchange for his service commanding the northern armies." She did not need to justify herself further. Not before these men, at least,

Covering his eyes, Marion groaned. "Aye, no wonder you Starks die like flies when you leave the north."

"We can't let Cersei kill her," Roland said, stepping up. She was so focused inside herself that she barely registered his words, his tone. "Not after everything we've done to the Starks. Everything about the war...Joffrey, Cersei...Ser Jaime..."

"Yes, yes, you told me already," Marion said, cutting him off, and she wondered what else they had discussed that morning. Lord Marion glared at Arthur Hightower, who just stood, his face empty and stunned, jaw ajar, across from Roland at the table. "No need to repeat it all again before all of Westeros."

"You have to let her go now," Arthur said, coming to her defense, like Roland, with desperation in his voice. "You can't continue to keep her a prisoner here. Not after what she did for Ser Jaime. She doesn't deserve that. A prisoner for a prisoner, that's what's right!"

"Right it may be," Roland sighed sadly. "But still treason all the same."
"The Lannisters owe you a debt," Marion started to say.

"Like I told Jaime," Sansa said, cutting him off, "our debts between each other are both equally paid." There was little desire in her to think more upon debts and vows and all such nonsense.

"For your brother then, the one in the chair."

She wasn't about to protest that one, but she did not allow herself to hope, as torn as both Roland and Marion were. Though they seemed decent, she knew better to expect, to hope, for anything more than spoken sympathy and kindness.

The last remaining Lannister in the castle looked over to Arthur, an idea obviously forming in his head. "You're charged with securing Highgarden for your brother, are you not?"

"I am, Lord Marion," Arthur replied eagerly, anticipating suddenly that there may be some way he could help. Behind him, his little squire stood up straighter as well.

"We were charged not to let the Lady Sansa leave the Queen's domains," Marion said, pacing the room, thinking out loud. "Highgarden is, indeed, still part of the Queen's domains, is it not?"

"It is," Roland answered gladly, understanding where Marion was leading.

"Were we to accompany you to Highgarden, along with Lord Arthur...well, that would not be defying our queen's orders, would they?"

"They wouldn't be," Arthur replied, the young man too happy about this for her taste. But it was better than nothing.

Marion continued. "And if Lord Arthur were to decide Highgarden fully secured, then ride south to Oldtown to report as such to his father and Lord Leyton, perhaps he can continue to escort Lady Sansa through the Queen's own domains."

A smile appeared on Roland's face, as he went to address Sansa directly.

"Oldtown is a large city, some say larger than even King's Landing. Much larger than Crakehall to be sure, quaint little village this is. Such a large city...it'd be easy for just one ship to lose itself from the harbor, would it not? All the way north to Torrhen's Square, even..."

There would be treason in the end then, except the two older lords clearly trusted the younger one to be impulsive...nay stupid enough to commit it.

"Lord Roland speaks true," Arthur said, beaming, no doubt looking forward to all the time he would get to spend with her with this plan, just the two of them.

"The war may be over by the time we reach Highgarden," Marion said, the crafty look seemingly ingrained permanently on his plump face now. "Were the worst to happen, and the Dragon Queen seats herself on the Iron Throne...well, no one can deny that Lady Sansa did her part in the west, can they?"

"Aye, they can't," Roland said, picking up Marion's sentence as if they were engaged in a most strange duet. "And we'd have no choice to kneel, or burn, do we? Lady Sansa."

"We do. But when we kneel, we would tell the Dragon Queen that we were skeptical indeed, distrustful of foreign invaders as we are. But Lady Sansa assured us the mercy of Queen Daenerys, and her generosity for those who choose to be her subjects. I see no reason why she would not give
you free passage to return home after that."

"She may even carry you herself, had she any dragons left to spare after the war."

Marion frowned. A happy frown. "Though were she to lose her last dragon, her conquest would be tenuous indeed, wouldn't it?"

So it was. She was losing more companions by the day, so it seemed, her choices were between staying put, a glorified prisoner, or riding south, ever further from home, in the company of strangers, a glorified prisoner still. Perhaps she could trust them. They had been nothing but sincere and honest with her ever since she arrived at Crakehall. Could she allow herself to hope, even for a moment, that everything could go as well as the plan sounded to the lords?

It may well be an illusion, she decided, but what was wrong with a little hope, considering she had long resigned herself to the worst anyway?

"My lords," she began sweetly, putting on that familiar mask once more, "I knew Queen Margaery during my time in King's Landing. She was friendly towards me, a traitor's daughter, and her stories about Highgarden and its wonders helped brighten a young girl's days, through the horrors of that war. I've always wanted to see it with my own eyes. It seems that, with your kindness, I may finally get the chance."

_Smile now. Keep smiling. Let them see your gratitude. Hide your fear from them, lest it cast doubt upon their own selves, and cause them to change their minds._

Chapter End Notes

After a brief rest, the plot resumes its march. As usual, thank you for reading and reviewing, and please let me know what you think!
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Sansa finds hope in Highgarden. Tyrion finds treason in Dragonstone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

There was a time when Highgarden was the pinnacle of her dreams, the sum of all her aspirations. Her only aspirations, really, during those dark days in King's Landing. Years later, as she looked upon the walls of the castle from the road below, all she saw was a castle, yet another stop on this road which, if it wasn't a nightmare, seemed was far closer to that than any childhood fantasies she may have once harbored.

"I pity the Tyrells," Arthur said, guiding his horse beside hers as they rode up its gates and pathways. "They were good people. They just chose the wrong side in this war."

"It was your queen who chose to make them her enemy." She had not paid much heed to the goings on of King's Landing after escaping, especially not after Ramsey Bolton entered her life. Rumors came, later. Littlefinger made sure to fill her in on what transpired, though whatever he told her was sure to have been tainted by, well, Littlefinger. Tyrion had his thoughts too, though he had been long gone from the city as well by then. But there was a reason the Spider was able to bring Lady Olenna to the Dragon Queen's side, and from she gathered, it had stemmed from nothing more than petty jealousies which led Cersei to destroy the Tyrell line, along with her own last living child to leave the throne to her. Even the two Lannister bannermen by her side had hinted at it during the ride.

"Margaery was no innocent," Sansa said, more to herself than to Arthur, "but she was a sweet soul. She would have made a good queen, with Tommen, without Joffrey or Cersei to sink their fangs into her. On her own, even."

"Aye, she was," Arthur mumbled, his eyes distant too. "I remember the first time I saw her. Father had sent me to visit Alac in King...Lord Renly's camp. That was the moment I realized that I was a man...that I wanted to do...manly things. I used to think she was the most beautiful woman in the world..."

As his words trailed off, she could not avoid the fact that he was staring now directly at her. As an official 'guest' of Cersei, Arthur no longer needed the pretense of riding apart from her group, and his words and secret glances her way growing more and more bold and less and less secret along their journey. Increasingly she needed to seek the company of Roland or Marion, who did not seem interested in her in that way, but she could not avoid him altogether. He was protecting her, after all, and were Cersei to win, it would just be the two of them on the road to Oldtown. And then she would have to hope, wouldn't she, that he remain true and honorable to his word to commit treason.

Dare I need to hope the Dragon Queen wins, just to avoid the attentions of a love struck boy?

"Queen Margaery was beautiful," trying to pivot the conversation away, "but she was many other
great things as well.

"As are you, my Lady Sansa."

"I swear, I see these walls, smell the flowers, I can still hear that bitch Olenna snapping at me. Making a joke about my hair, or my gut, my lack of wit."

Thank the absent gods, Lord Roland found the two of them before Arthur could further continue his attempt at courting. The old man had a knack for it actually, and Sansa sensed that Roland, who seemed to have taken a fatherly interest in her since Crakehall, possessed a better sense of the moment than he let on.

"She was kind to me too. She served the best lemoncakes. She pitied me, I think."

Despite how kind the Queen of Thorns had been to her, thinking of her now reminded her of how helpless she was then. How helpless she was now still. Except she didn't have to be. It was just that ever since the Crossroads she felt like she'd been struck by a malady, a malady which yearned for sleep and little else. All the fervor and resolve that had led her to the brink of victory had evaporated ever since she'd been humiliated by Daenerys in front of all the lords, then by her own brother in private. Arya was right, she had given up, and she was lucky she had survived thus far, saying little, doing nothing. Except letting Jaime Lannister and Sandor Clegane, two men who would have protected her, leave her instead for King's Landing.

"You're above pity, Lady Sansa," Roland said, her thoughts flowing straight into his words. "You almost forged on your own the freedom of three kingdoms."

"They would have made you their Queen," Arthur added, clearly miffed at Roland's intrusion, but still as persistent as ever.

"Yes...Queen of half an afternoon," Sansa said dismissively. "That will be how they remember me."

"My lady, they are dragons. I wouldn't kick myself over bending the knee. Seven Kingdoms couldn't stand up against them."

"I didn't need seven kingdoms," Sansa replied, bitterly now. "Just one man, who forgets he's my brother."

"What makes you think he'd be a good king," Marion said now, joining them as they dismounted their horses to enter the empty halls of the castle, Arthur dutifully leaving to search for the castellan, "if he can't even stand up to one woman?"

She didn't have an answer to that. She hadn't, ever since she'd ridden from the Crossroads.

"He's still the true heir to the Iron Throne."

"A birthright which stems from the birthright of the Mad King," Marion countered. He smiled at her. "Try again."

"I suppose that makes Cersei a good queen, does it not? That she can no longer be swayed by love?" She wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic, or finally putting to voice a dirty truth.

"She's had to do distasteful things to gain her seat, true. There are rumors the fire at the Sept of Baelor was no accident." Marion exchanged a wary look at Roland, wondering how far he could push the subject. "Even were those rumors true...how many died to put the Conqueror on the throne? Or Robert the Usurper? How many more will die for your Dragon Queen? Tally the numbers up
against one sept. Does slaughter only offend the gods when it occurs on their sacred grounds, and affect them not upon the battlefields?"

Had Tywin Lannister used the same reasoning to justify the Red Wedding? Sansa imagined so.

"Jon doesn't want people to die for him. He wants them to live. He brought together enemies and friends, different armies and peoples, not for conquest...not even to take back Winterfell, but so that we could overcome the army of the dead. He's selfless, he doesn't care about winning a throne. But people follow him anyway, because he is selfless, because he inspires them."

"Aye, that's a good quality, leading." Roland said. He seemed to have little interest in these political debates, simple loyalty to his sworn queen more befitting his nature, so she was surprised to hear him chime in now. "Say the Mad King were a woman, a beautiful one at that, and Jon Snow in love with her. Where would he lead all his people, who follow him and love him?"

"He was stabbed in the heart," Arthur said, returned from inside. Sansa wasn't sure why he said it. Perhaps just so he could add to the conversation. "He died, and came back. That's no ordinary man that can do that."

"A fantastic claim, to be sure," Marion said skeptically. "But the Lady Sansa does not seem prone to fits of fancy, so I do actually believe her. I just don't believe in her king. How will the realm fare, my good lady, if their king gets himself killed one day, then comes back from death itself only bend the knee the next day? Not much of a stable reign, is it? Not much of any reign at all."

"All for the good of the realm," Sansa said, sensing she was losing the argument, but determined not to let them see her admit to losing.

Marion chuckled. "Alas, the realm is a bunch of ungrateful cunts. Just like us Lannisters."

"That's what it looks like?" That's what killed a dragon? The device before her was so simple in its enormity, but Sansa knew it was anything but, a tangled mess of mechanisms and steel and sharp edges and murder that she could not begin to understand. It was also the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen, and admiring its every intricate detail, she felt her heart pound like she had not in some time.

"Aye," Arthur said proudly, beaming at the scorpion displayed in the courtyard. "I think Alac took your advice to heart. He talked the queen into sending us one, along with the plans for it. Just in case a retreat's needed. Along with batches of wildfire too. Not sure what to do with those, but I'm sure we can use them just in case."

"Pierced one dragon in the neck," Marion added, his disgust for the creatures evident. "Clipped the other one along the wing too."

Sansa had breathed a sigh of relief that it was Jon's dragon that they slew. She trust him him to survive any fight on the ground. But not in the air on those strange, terrifying creatures.

"Rhaegal's wings were damaged during the battle with the dead," she chose to say. "He flew again, and so will Drogon." But it gave them time. And they could use that time now.

"An injured dragon gives our queen a better chance to defend the city," Roland said.

As Sansa continued staring at the contraction, she felt her sight return to her, as if she had been blind for weeks. As if she had been asleep, in a trance, not much different from the Dragon Queen's own coma, ever since Jon turned her away.
"Would you bet your life and your family's lives on it," Sansa asked harshly. "She won't. Daenerys considers the dragons her children. She will not risk her last. The battle will not start until she feels secure in his flying." Pivoting sharply to Arthur, she addressed him, the words coming naturally to her mouth. She wondered for how long she had thought them. "Are you not acting Lord of Highgarden while your brother is away?"

"I am, my lady." He seemed stunned, Sansa volunteering him her attention for the first time all trip.

"That makes you acting Lord Paramount of the Reach. Call all your bannermen." She turned towards Roland and Marion. "Yours too, as many as you can gather. You will need men and iron and all the materials to build as many of these scorpions as you can. Assemble them here, at Highgarden, the heart of the south."

Roland and Arthur looked stunned at her sudden turn and enthusiasm, Marion intrigued. "My lady, do you still serve as the loyal emissary of the Dragon Queen, or have you decided to take up Queen Cersei's offer?"

"Must I serve any queens," she asked at first, before smiling, and dipping to deliver the lords the most gracious curtsy her mother ever taught her. "Of course I still bend the knee to Queen Daenerys...do I have any other choice? I imagine I never said these words...my lords ought to make them their own."

"I gather you," Marion replied with a smirk. "Lord Arthur, I hope your ears were receptive."

"They were, my lady," he replied, wholly entranced by her now, but she paid him little heed as she continued, unable to stop once her mouth opened.

"While you're at it with the letters, you may find it useful to tell them the armies of the three northern kingdoms bear no love for the Queen they serve, and no great regard for the Iron Throne. They secretly desire to return home and be with their families for the winter, but once they bent the knee...or rather, once the knee was bent for them...they've no choice but to turn away the peace which was agreed upon, and march endlessly into strange lands, towards one battle after another. You may also want to suggest that Jon Snow is a most honorable man, Ned Stark's true son in fact, if not by blood. He bent the knee and fights alongside the Dragon Queen because of his pledge, made in exchange so that Queen Daenerys could protect her own northernmost kingdom from utter catastrophe and destruction. He will bring death to his enemies, but his cause has always been life, and the living. He has no lust, no want, for the Iron Throne, which is truly his, by birthright. He will serve, if asked by the lords, because it is his duty, but his heart yearns to for home. For the North...Winterfell. All your own words...of course."

"The way you speak," Marion said, noticeably scrutinizing her every word, "it is as if King's Landing has fallen already."

"As you said, seven kingdoms couldn't withstand Aegon's three dragons. I'd imagine one mere city may find it difficult against even one."

"Where will you stand then? If that one dragon comes south after King's Landing?"

Sansa smiled sweetly at him. "My home is Winterfell. I am a wolf of the North. My knee has already been bent...same as the northern soldiers. But these are your lands, your peoples. The injury to her last dragon buys you time, but you won't have forever. When the time comes, the war will be yours, the choice yours. You have been so kind to me, and my only wish in return is that you'll be well prepared for whichever path you do choose."
It was difficult, but she forced herself to walk away from the scorpion, lest she actually believe.

Sleep still took its time in claiming her that night, but for the first night in many nights once she feel asleep, she slept well.

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**Tyrion**

Dragonstone had always been the gloomiest castle he had ever had the pleasure of visiting, even worse than Winterfell. At least there he could find several avenues to venture outside along the walls and balconies, so long as he felt like braving the cold. Dragonstone, on the other hand, seemed like one giant cave, and the longer he waited here, the more he imagined it swallowing him up whole. Not that there was much to swallow, given his specific case.

Varys seemed unperturbed by all the gloominess, shuffling through scrolls painfully, as per his habit.

"The waiting's the worst," Tyrion then said, when Varys did not greet him.

"The rest of the realm doesn't wait."

"You have news?"

The Spider looked up from his stone desk. "Highgarden."

"Highgarden?" That was unexpected.

"A lot of chatter. They say lords across the southlands are riding to gather there...some even bringing their armies."

"Armies they've withheld from my sister."

Varys nodded. "Most of the lords of the Reach. Many of your own fellow lords from the west. Some from the Stormlands, even one or two riding from as far as the Riverlands."

"Good," Tyrion said, questioning his reaction even as he spoke. "All the remaining lords gathered in one place, all to bend the knee to our Queen after she takes King's Landing."

"What if they don't?"

He was dreading the coming battle already, fearing the longer they waited, the more impatient she would get. When he pictured what came after, he could not bear to think of more carnage. Would they really continue to challenge her, even after she sits on the throne?

Varys spoke again, when he didn't reply. "There is word they stockpiling materials there. Wood and iron. Lords bringing forth more from their lands. The lords who have claimed Highgarden are have been busy at work with the materials...coincidentally the very ones needed to build those contraptions Cersei and Euron Greyjoy used to kill our Queen's second to last dragon."

He wasn't sure what sank more...his heart or his stomach. "They're preparing for battle...in case King's Landing falls."

"Do you know who the lords are, who first arrived at Highgarden?"

"The Hightower boy, I'd imagine," Tyrion answered, remembering who Bronn would want to murder in case Cersei won. "His brother Alac is still in the capital, last I heard."
Varys nodded. "He was accompanied by lords Roland Crakehall and Marion Lannister."

"Sansa," Tyrion gasped out. "They must have brought her, as their captive. Our queen herself sent her right into Cersei's clutches...but...you don't really think..."

A smirk from the Spider. "Let's pretend maybe that Sansa is indeed a helpless captive. We tell our Queen this. How would she see it, in light of all the other, many, circumstances?"

He shook his head. He did not need this, not with all he already had to worry about with the upcoming battle. How long had Varys known, he wondered. He was their only spymaster, the northern lords who marched with them only grudgingly obeying orders, the Unsullied and Dothraki utterly useless for information.

"My brother Jaime?"

"He has not been seen since Crakehall."

Tyrion breathed out a sigh. He wasn't sure if it was relief, or horror. But his brother, for all he loved him, was one man. He had a war to worry about.

"Jon can talk sense into her."

"Is there any sense to speak of," Varys said, cryptically. He picked up another batch of letters. "There has been talk between the southern lords. About how the northern armies march unwillingly...how the lords favored the peace...how morale is low, and there are few amongst her armies who truly love their rightful Queen."

"She couldn't...she wouldn't dare...Sansa would never move so openly."

"Maybe they tortured her." Varys shrugged. "There are whispers, quieter still, yet one or two voices escape. The southern lords hold no love for our Queen, as to be expected. Many of them seem to hold little love for their own. Some pray, 'let them both fall', then we may restore the throne to its true, rightful heir."

"He would never do it."

"He may not have a choice." The Spider's eyes were as distant as they'd ever been now, and Tyrion found himself pleading.

"Don't. I begged you last time, don't. We are loyal, there is no fruit at the end of the road you're seeking."

It was as if he never heard him. "What if his own sister stands on the opposite sides of his next battle? Seems not entirely coincidentally that wherever she goes, she draws away support from our Queen. What if she sits on her throne only to find the entire country has risen against her? At what point is it good for the realm to force upon them a monarch they do not seek, when there sits in plain sight one which would?"

"There must be something we can do." Yet in his mind, he wondered just how far he himself would go. He could only hope that this was all Cersei's doing, that Sansa was but an innocent pawn, but those two words hardly fit the woman anymore. Not the one who had nearly won a peace, if not the actual war, against Cersei herself. How much confidence had that given her, were the worst to be true?

"There are things I must do," Varys said, standing up behind his desk. He took several letters and put
it in a tray to burn, an action which did not escape Tyrion's notice. "I'm afraid I may not be able to speak honestly with you much longer."

He was about to argue further when the sound of footsteps down the hallway startled them both into silence. As he turned to face the newcomers, Grey Worm stepped into the room, quiet fury in his eyes, followed by Daenerys Stormborn, who to him, looked more distraught by the day since the day Missandei died before their eyes. He had pleaded to her to eat more, to drink more, to try and get a good night's sleep. She ignored all of his entreaties, and he wondered what further counsel of his she could choose to ignore in the coming weeks.

"The last of the Dothraki and Unsullied have arrived," the Queen announced coldly, no emotion in her voice.

"That is good news, is it not?" Why did it sound like bad news?

If there was a glint of humor in her violet eyes, it was not the kind to elicit laughter. "They found your brother, riding alone. For King's Landing."

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**Daenerys**

Once again, the man who killed her father knelt before her. But they were in Dragonstone now, not Winterfell. No Sansa to interfere either.

"You're telling me Sansa let you go to King's Landing? Out of mercy?"

"A vow. Honor."

She fought her laughter inside. This was the second time the Oathbreaker cited honor whilst pleading for his life before her. She wished Yara Greyjoy were here. She'd have no qualms about slitting his throat on the spot. But Yara was away for good reason, having recovered from the initial attack and rallied more ships to keep her uncle's treacherous fleet cooped in Blackwater Bay. *Ripe for the burning*, Daenerys thought. *Rhaegal will be avenged.*

"Explain to me how that works."

He looked down, refusing to answer her, looking almost ashamed. Across the room, Jon stared blankly at the Kingslayer. He would be no help here. As she half expected, Tyrion walked up to his brother, looking at him as a brother. Rather than a potential traitor.

"Your Grace, I believe my brother feels a degree of loyalty to Lady Sansa. He keeps quiet, because the truth may...not present her in the best light."

"And he told you the truth?"

A sad nod. "He did."

"Tell me."

"Lady Sansa engaged his services against the Golden Company after you fell in battle. In exchange, she promised him mercy, that she would do whatever she can to keep my sister alive."

Daenerys laughed. What kind of silliness was this. Did he think this a joke? "That doesn't sound likely. Not even for Sansa."
Unless these rumors about her and Cersei were true.

"She's pregnant, Your Grace...Cersei is. Sansa promised Jaime she would do what she could to ensure their child lives. With the battle coming and she in the west...I suppose she decided the only way should could honor her pledge was to let my brother go."

"That was not her pledge to make," Daenerys said, glaring at Jon.

"To be fair," Tyrion continued, "she may not have known you would wake when she made the promise."

She watched as Jon's eyes give way as she continued staring into him.

"That was not her pledge to make," she repeated again. Enough of Jon, she returned to the Kingslayer.

"Is your brother telling the truth?"

He nodded reluctantly, but did not answer her any further.

"I'll tell you what I think, Kingslayer." She sank deeper upon her throne, letting them sweat as they awaited her pronouncement. "I think you're riding to deliver your sister a message from your new mistress. I think you're..."

"She wouldn't," Jon protested.

"Wouldn't betray me? Like she already has?"

"You should have let her go back to Winterfell," Jon said, voice weaker with every word.

"Are you saying I shouldn't have given her another reason to betray me? Or another chance to betray me?"

"She hasn't betrayed you," Jaime said, kneeling below her as he ought to be, hands bound behind him. "She pleaded your cause with Marion Lannister and Roland Crakehall. They refused to withdraw support from my sister, and refused her permission to leave north upon Cersei's orders."

"I told you," Jon said, and she really wished she could dismiss him now. "She's her prisoner." As if that mattered, except to ensure Jon's loyalty. But why was his loyalty in question in the first place? Was blood really more important than a vow to him? Would he lie for his sister, when he would not even lie for her at the Dragonpit?

Ignoring him, she questioned the Kingslayer again. "So why did they ride south for Highgarden?"

"Highgarden," Jaime said. He seemed genuinely stunned by the news. Could it mean he was telling the truth? That Sansa was innocent? Or was it because she did not confide with even him her deepest treacheries. "There was no talk of Highgarden when she let me go."

"None, whatsoever? No mention of all the southern lords, lords loyal to Cersei Lannister, all riding to congregate upon there?" Varys looked down, showing no sign of having delivered her this vital piece of information just before they brought the Kingslayer to Dragonstone. She looked at Jon and Lord Davos, clearly not having heard such whispers either. "Even some lords north of here."

"Which lords," Jon asked. She shook her head politely. He clearly had no direct connection with this strain of treason, at least.
"It doesn't matter. Whomever they are, they will be dealt with after I take King's Landing."

"Perhaps they are there to reject Cersei," Varys said. "To all agree to bend the knee to Daenerys Stormborn. After all, were they truly supportive of their queen, they would have sent their bannermen to King's Landing's defense, rather than south to Highgarden."

The words sounded tempting, but she did not miss the reaction of surprise from Tyrion, who looked questioningly at Varys as he spoke.

"Lord Tyrion? Your thoughts?"

"I...uh...," for once he was speechless, when she needed him to speak the most. She wondered why. Also why her Hand kept looking back at the Spider. "Lord Varys, have you heard...more...about this gathering?"

"There's gossip, of course, as there always is. The lords are gathering supplies, for the upcoming winter. They comment about whose army is in better shape to win the upcoming battle. There's talk, of course, about Jon Snow, whose secret Lady Sansa so unfortunately revealed. They speculate upon it. Could it be true? Why would she lie about it? Some seek to use it, of course, for their own advantage."

"Trouble seems to follow your sister wherever she goes," she snapped at Jon, betraying her anger. She ignored his reaction, knowing already what it would be. Instead, she continued to pay heed towards the uneasy looks exchanged between the Half-Man and the Spider.

"Lord Varys," Tyrion asked again, too cautiously for her taste. "What kind of materials are the lords stockpiling? Winter is typically mild that far south, after all?"

"Foodstuffs, I'd imagine. Stone for building shelters. I supposed some if it could be used to used to arm an army, were that their intention."

She would need to ask Tyrion further about this. Either one of them could betray her at this point, so many lords and ladies to pick from, to hand their newfound loyalties to. But based on the unspoken words between them, it seemed that the Spider would do so before her Hand.

"This is not the time for your little birds to fail you, Lord Varys," she said, no room for questioning in her voice. "Find out what's going on in Highgarden."

He bowed, and retreated. "I will, Your Grace."

"Kingslayer." The prisoner looked up. "Cersei's life was not Sansa's to spare. Nor is it yours. The life of your sister...and your child, rests solely in the hands of Cersei Lannister. What does rest within your hands, however, is whether you will live to see what she decides."

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**Jaime**

He should be used to chains now. He missed Robb Stark's chains, actually. *That* King of the north had been a much more hospitable captor, and Jaime Lannister much preferred a clean sword put to his neck rather than fire. No, that did not appeal to him at all.

"I'm not sure what more I can tell her," he said to Tyrion. "Sansa told them to bend the knee. She wasn't happy about it, she wasn't enthusiastic, but that's all she did, I swear."

"Is it because you're loyal to her now? I understand her appeal sometimes..."
Jaime cut him off. "I don't understand her appeal."

"It doesn't matter what you think of her. It matters what she thinks of you now. That's all that matters."

He was talking to him like he was an idiot again. He loved Tyrion, but his brother just couldn't help it sometimes, though he certainly didn't mean to do so. To Tyrion, everyone was an idiot, probably. Sansa knew better than that. At least with him now.

"I hope you're feeding her alright," Jaime said, his mind slipping away from the conversation, "she seems very...Targaryen these days." He was not going to plead for his life. Not that there was anything further he could say to save it.

"We're not helping her, none of us are."

"That's not my job is it? Helping her. I wasn't trying to harm her though."

"Not in her eyes. Helping Cersei is harming her."

"As is killing a child?" He tried not to think upon it. He didn't even care about another son or daughter to place on a throne, Gods knew all the good that did Joffrey and Tommen. No, this one he just wanted to finally raise himself. With Cersei, perhaps. Maybe he'd take the child away, find an island somewhere where no one could harm them. Tarth was an island. Would Brienne make a good mother? He had thought about that for months now, and still wasn't sure.

"How many children of fallen kings have died under the orders of Lannisters?"

Tyrion was right. The last thing any of them deserved now was mercy for their own.

"Doesn't make the next one right," Jaime said, with a small amount of satisfaction. How ironic it was that he would have to wait until his dying day before he finally matched wits with his brother.

"It's not about right or wrong anymore."

"It's not? What happened to building a better world?"

What had happened to his brother since the Crossroads? Had the pressure finally broken him? The war indeed was not going his way, but at least Jaime could no longer take credit for his brother's continued setbacks, though Sansa herself had not made it easy for him. But Tyrion sounded now like he was on the edge of resignation, of complete surrender, even as he was about to win.

"We will. But we have to win the battle. And not..."

"Not what?"

Tyrion shook his head, not about to let him in on one last secret, though Jaime had plenty of ideas what it was he feared.

"Just give me a reason, Jaime. Give me a reason, any reason, to convince her to spare your life. I beg you."

He shook his head. At this point, he didn't even care anymore, definitely not regarding his own life. And it was hard to think that much for Cersei, and their child, with a chain around his neck and miles of sea and walls between them.

"I've none, really." An idea came to him. Recognition of something as the Dragon Queen threatened
him. "Except for her to pay her debt to me."

"Her debt," Tyrion asked, a glint of hope remaining. Jaime shook his head, sorry to have given him that hope.

"I killed her father. I'd imagine she'd want me to watch her kill my sister and child."

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**Sansa**

She stood before the Godswood. It was snowing lightly, a slight chill running down her neck. Looking down at her hands, she gasped, recognizing the sleeves she wore on that night...that night...and felt all the strength give from her legs. Fallen upon the cold, snowy ground, she felt her throat closing, choking, but then, death was better than the dark silhouette standing above her. 'This is a nightmare,' she thought. 'They're dead. They're all dead.' But she felt a cold finger brush against her cheek. Willing herself not to look up, she found herself unable to control her own neck.

It wasn't one of the Boltons who loomed above her, but that did not make it any less terrifying. She saw the eyes of an old crone, hair ragged, clothes tattered, staring lifelessly down at her. She blinked, and the vision changed. The warm eyes and gentle smile many different lifetimes ago.

"Septa Mordane?"

"My sweet girl."

Her touch was now warm, and as she continued to caress her cheek, Sansa felt tears pour out of her chest uncontrollably. No longer wanting to stand, she knelt on both knees before her.

"I'm so sorry...I had been so horrible to you...so awful..."

"Hush, child." Her voice was forgiving, and Sansa remembered the times she hadn't been horrible. When her Septa stood proudly behind her as she presented a dress she knitted. A thin, willowy dress, a southern one, for her southern mother...adorned in flowers of gold, violet, and red.

"You learned from others too. I'm sorry it had to be this way."

"I never forgot you," Sansa said, finding her voice as her sobs slowed. "I don't have time to remember a lot these days, but..."

"Time is all I have now, child. Consider your lack of it a blessing." She pulled her hand away, and instantly Sansa missed her touch. "The hour approaches. Lion. Dragon. Wolf. Blessed and cursed are those who see the seeds of spring." As as suddenly as she appeared, a squall blew in, and Sansa watched in slow horror as inch by inch she disappeared behind the blowing snow.

"Wait! Septa Mordane! I have..."

"Milady."

Three sharp raps on her door brought her back to reality. Stirring awake, she watched as the door creep open, and Brienne's squire, out of all people, shyly hunch his way into her room holding a small torch.

"Podrick?" Still groggy and disoriented, she spoke his name, the inappropriateness of the situation still not having dawned in her mind.
"You have a visitor."

"A visitor?" As her wits returned, she frowned at the sight of the young squire, alone in the middle of the night in a lady's bedroom. "I hope it's not the tall, skinny, dark-haired type," thinking about the current acting lord of their castle.

"She asked for you and you only," Podrick whispered.

"She? Strange." She rose and, wearing only her nightgown, followed him out the room. Only too late, as they approached a sidechamber by the Great Hall, did she realize that this could be one of Cersei's tricks. Seated in a chair was a small person, a woman, if Podrick was correct, her head covered by a long hood. Upon hearing them approach, she stood up, turning around so her back faced both of them. Cautiously, still wondering if she was walking into a trap, she nodded towards Podrick, who handed her his torch and left the room.

Holding it as a weapon, ready to hurl it upon her mysterious visitor if necessary, she approached her. The figure turned, and drew down her cloak.

"Lady Margaery?"

Chapter End Notes

Could it be?
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Gifts are exchanged between two Queens. A former queen confronts the truth and what's to come.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cersei

The young lord trembled as he dropped the golden hand onto the table, unable to look away from it, afraid to look at her, blue eyes quivering as they all awaited her reaction.

"How did they capture him?"

"He was riding from Crakehall, bound for King's Landing."

He would come running back to her. She always knew this, the only question being what she would do to him afterwards. Had he succeeded in his ride, she may have very likely handed him to Euron. Probably not. She wasn't that cruel. The idea of Jaime chained up, however, in the bowels of Dragonstone irked her more than she would've liked, unwillingly bringing back fonder memories of her brother. Not that she would ever let that show. Not that she could, with Euron Greyjoy's eyes observing her every eye twitch.

"Let her burn him," Euron said, taking too much joy in the words. "Tell that to your men before the battle, get their blood up."

"What are her terms," Cersei asked, ignoring Euron entirely.

"Surrender the throne," Alac said nervously. "Tell our men to lay down our arms and open the gates of the city. She will give you and Ser Jaime a ship to take to Mereen."

"Mereen?" That caught her by surprise. She would have expected Pentos, or Braavos, or one of the Free Cities.

"Far to the east in Slaver's Bay," Alac continued. "It is under the control of one of her allies, one Daario Naharis..."

"He leads Second Sons," Euron added. "They're loyal to her. That's why we only had the Golden Company to bring over."

"And what a disappointment they were," Cersei cursed, "a waste of gold."

"They might hold the city yet."

"She means for you and Ser Jaime to reside in the Great Pyramid under his protection." Alac dropped the scroll on the table as well, daring for the others to pick it up and confirm what he just stated before the queen.
"As her glorified prisoner?" She'd rather die.

"We're practically prisoners here now," Euron said, "stuck in this shithole of a city." He was whinging. To think he thought himself fit to be a king.

"Then destroy your sister's fleet so we have the ocean again," Cersei hissed back. "Take Dragonstone, and kill that damned beast while it's resting."

Euron shook his head. "We already tried once."

"And failed."

"And we don't have enough ships now!" The moment he raised his voice, Ser Gregor took two intimidating steps towards him, and he backed off without a word. Really, he was beginning to bore her. "I'm sorry, my queen. I meant no disrespect, only that when the attack starts, she'll need the my sister's men in the battle. They'll be undermanned, and that's our chance to burn them down."

"While she burns us down."

"Your Grace," Alac said, "the city is armed to the teeth with Scorpions. There won't an inch in the sky left uncovered."

"There'd be more if we kept the one you sent to Highgarden." At the time he had talked her into it, because what difference did one make? But Euron was right, the city was beginning to feel like a trap, a tinderbox awaiting its fate, and yes, she wanted that one last scorpion now. Every one could make the difference.

"We're still building," Alac said, "we have enough material for another two or three. My brother tells me they are building more in Highgarden too. If we may consider breaking out of the city...he has called forth many lords to gather in your name."

"Then why aren't they here," Cersei said. The young man looked down uneasily.

"Once they are all gathered, I believe they will march to relieve the siege, if they can get here in time."

"They won't." And he didn't really believe that, she knew, that he couldn't bring himself to acknowledge the many ugly truths. That many of her lords were flirting with treason, just waiting for her to fall to pick at her carcass. That his own brother was in the snares of the wolf bitch now, and even Alac could not predict who knew what they were all plotting in Highgarden.

That had been a mistake. When Jaime told her it was Olenna rather than Sansa who had poisoned her son, she had gone on to dismiss the dumb girl from her mind, foolishly underestimating how easy it would be for her to take advantage of a twenty year old boy with more balls than brains. She would take care of them after the dragon queen.

"We stay in the capital," Cersei said. "If we leave, we'll never take it back. Not without a dragon on our side. So make sure we kill it."

Rising to leave, she was interrupted by Euron, who infuriatingly had taken Jaime's hand into his, tossing it playfully between one and the other.

"What about this?"

Snatching it from him, she shot him a glare of daggers, before turning back to Alac. "She gave us a
gift. We'll respond in kind."

Her only wish was that she could see the Dragon Queen's face when she saw it.

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**Daenerys**

"Your Grace, you don't have to look."

"I do."

So she did, for what seemed like years, so that the grisly sight would burn a hole forever through her mind's eye. Finally she rose, not being able to stomach it much longer.

"Tell Grey Worm...we'll afford her a proper ceremony tonight."

When she turned to Tyrion, she could help but direct her rage at him.

"One last mercy, you tell me. One last chance for your family. Look at her!" She pointed at the box containing the remains of Missandei, poor dear Missandei.

"I have," Tyrion said. "She was your friend, she served you faithfully...she did not deserve this."

"None who suffer under a tyrant deserve it. Yet they suffer all the same, until the tyrant is destroyed." Walking up to him, using her stature to intimidate him from above, she asked him, "give me one reason I don't return her the favor with your brother."

"I'll do it," Yara Greyjoy said in the corner of the throne room. "Can't promise you it'd be clean. Can't promise I won't enjoy it either."

She was liking this Salt Queen more and more these days. The thought had occurred not more than once that were she not a queen herself, that she would make for a great Hand. Perhaps both be possible at once.

"Because you're not her," Tyrion said. "Because you're not a tyrant."

His words had their effect, giving her pause to breath, to remind herself that she had to be better than Cersei. Trying to think of a different subject was not much help.

"Anything further from Highgarden?"

Her Hand shook his head. "Only what I get from Varys. It's not much."

It surprised Tyrion more than it surprised her that their spymaster was yet seeking his next crown to serve. But he was too sly, and she needed proof, which Tyrion was obviously slow in gathering. She would suspect him as well, had it not been for the fact that he was the one to inform her in the first place. The question was whether he was serving Jon now, or Sansa. She had faith yet in Jon, that he would turn him away the moment the Spider approached him. But Sansa...she'd welcome Varys with open arms, no doubt there, and as for Jon...he would be more likely to betray her for his sister rather than himself.

"And you have no sources of your own?"

"I didn't flee halfway across Essos to find the Mother of Dragons because I had an excess of friends in Westeros."
"Dragon," she found herself muttering, correcting him. Tyrion cocked his head, not understanding her. "Just one dragon now."

Sansa

She looked visibly older. Several small scars lined her face, though it had lost little of its beauty. Her eyes were still startlingly intelligent, though much worn by weariness and sadness since she had last seen her, and edged with fear, unconsciously darting towards the dark corners of the room. Eyes much like her own, Sansa imagined.

"You're...I thought you were dead."

"I promised to take you to Highgarden Lady Sansa. I meant to fulfill that promise, alive or dead."

It was a joke, she thought, but neither laughed.

Margaery smiled sadly. "When I heard you were riding south to Highgarden, I knew I must come. I know you barely know me, our time in King’s Landing was colored by...by all the politics...but...I feel I can trust you all the same. I can't say that for a lot of others."

"You can," Sansa said reflexively, none of her questions answered. "You were kind to me in King’s Landing. Kinder the most. You didn't have to be."

"But I did. We were all so caught up in the game, my grandmother and I...it's what I thought I wanted at the time." She took both her hands, as she did years ago, and squeezed them. But her hands were coarser now, her grip firmer, a desperate cling to them. "You were a poor girl we used selfishly. I apologize for that."

"If that was meanness in your eyes, I can't imagine...," she stopped, her mind still racing in several unpleasant directions. She went to bow. "This is your home, I am but a guest..."

Margaery's grip stopped Sansa from completing her etiquette. "The Queen."

Sansa's jaw dropped. In the excitement and surreal dreamlike state of the moment, she had forgotten about Cersei, out of all people. "You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't..."

"This is all a lot for you, I understand." Reaching up, she cupped one cheek with her hand, and Sansa realized how small the woman before her was, now that she had grown even taller, yet she still felt like a little girl before her. "I just wanted to see my home one last time." Still gripping her hand, Margaery pulled her forward. "Walk with me, Sansa. There are some gardens here our new lords don't yet know about. I promise I'll be out of your hair before the sun comes up."

She left her torch by the door. The outdoor awnings were bathed in the pale gray light of a full moon, a comfortable southern night even in winter, enough so that Sansa did not shiver under just one nightgown. Beside her, Margaery's entrancing voice told a less than graceful tale.

"...the High Sparrow decided he did not even need her present, but the King had to bear witness to his sentence. Whatever was holding dear Tommen back, he thought I was the key, and sent me to bring him to the Sept. I walked at the head of my Kingsguard, and the sparrows behind them. That's what saved my life. When the Sept erupted, it took them all. I fell forward...I kept stumbling forward, afraid to look back, to see the truth of what happened, what she did...until my legs just gave and I fell into one of the nearby houses..."
"That's horrible," Sansa said. They all knew about the explosion, but to hear it recalled by the one who survived, a once close friend at that, painted the picture much more vividly than she needed. Suddenly, she could imagine Margaery in the sept, blown to dust with the rest of the them. Or herself, had Margaery not taken her place beside Joffrey, then Tommen. "To burn them all with wildfire, just like the Mad King...it's savage..."

"Fire," Margaery said, her eyes lost inside a flower half colored by the moon. "An awful thing."

They continued walking beside each other, Margaery leading the way, Sansa letting her tell her story at her own pace.

"The next thing I remembered, a kind old woman was nursing my cuts, feeding me water. The wife of a butcher. I had been out for several days. My dress was covered with ash and dust, colors faded, and I don't think she knew who I was...just one of the so many in the city who suffered from Cersei's cruelty, same as everyone inside. When I heard the King died, I knew the only chance I had was to flee the city. Esha...that was her name. She gave me one of her cloaks to wear. Sometimes, I want to go back. Find her little hovel in flea bottom. Thank her, for everything. Reward her as she deserves...after they get rid of her, of course...one way or the other."

All kindness left her eyes, and Sansa realized her hatred so strong, Margaery could not even bring herself to say Cersei's name.

"The Dragon Queen will take care of Cersei. Your grandmother supported her."

"And she died for it. One more Tyrell she killed." Margaery looked up at her, inquisitively, yet cautiously. "I hear you know the Dragon Queen."

"I do." She quieted, deciding upon what to say next. "Cersei's days are numbered. Daenerys may yet honor her debts to House Tyrell. You may not need to hide from your own home much longer."

"What's she like?"

*If only you knew, you wouldn't ask.*

Sansa remembered when she and Olenna had fed her lemoncakes, then quizzed her about Joffrey. This was not just innocent curiosity. When she spoke, she spoke coldly. "You say you played the game in King's Landing before. I wouldn't play with Daenerys. She won't play like Cersei. She doesn't have to...the dragons are her game."

Her tone remained bitter as Margaery considered her careful reply. "Trust me, Lady Sansa, I'm finished with that wretched game. It's cost me everything."

"It's cost everyone everything."

They continued walking, two bitter women, children of war and its tyrants.

"I hear you're under the Queen's grip still," Margaery broached, referring to the one in King's Landing. "If you want, you can come with me. I know all this castle's secrets. One of my uncle's bannermen waits below...he can takes us both back to the Arbor. We can wait there, the two of us, until this horrible war ends."

The Arbor. Sansa remembered, that was the island upon which House Redwyne, the family from which the Lady Olenna was born into, resided. Margaery must trust her greatly, if she were so quick to reveal where she had been hiding all these years. Before they arrived at Highgarden, Sansa would have imagined taking up her offer in half a heartbeat. Now, she wondered which road was closer to
"I thank you for your generous offer, Lady Margaery," Sansa said cautiously. She should be thanking the gods for this chance, this opportunity. So why wasn't she?

"My husband is dead," Margaery said sadly, and Sansa wondered if she had come to love Tommen. He was a sweet boy, obviously much more lovable than Joffrey. "I'm barely a lady these days, Lady Sansa."

"It still fits you," Sansa said, smiling. "I'd like to go, I really do. But...my situation is a bit complicated here."

Margaery knew better to ask, so she continued.

"I may be a captive of sorts of Queen Cersei. But it was Queen Daenerys who sent me purposefully into harm's way."

She looked at her with genuine surprise, but Sansa wondered just how much of it was still part of her act.

"I heard you won a great battle for her, before she woke." Margaery laughed warmly, a sound that could still melt hearts. "I was overjoyed when I heard the news. I tried to imagine little Sansa Stark...all grown up, leading thousands of men into battle, and winning soundly. Believe it or not, I was so very proud of you." She took her arms in hers again.

"It was nothing so glorious," Sansa said, remembering the bodies and the blood and the stenches and the ugly gashes and wounds and the cries of the dying men around her in the camp afterwards. "It was enough for me to ask for peace. The Dragon Queen didn't like that peace."

Dismay filled Margaery's face. Again, Sansa wondered how much of it was genuine. "That's horrible." Her pace quickened. "Whichever queen you're hiding from, my uncle will provide you safe shelter, I promise."

She stopped walking, and Sansa followed her lead. The former Queen gazed off into the distance, back in the direction of King's Landing, Sansa would guess. How many times did Margaery stare off into the same direction when she was a child, only with the same, silly dreams as she herself once harbored?

"I don't know where my crown went. I can only hope it was found by a mother in Flea Bottom, that she sell it for enough to feed her family for a lifetime. I have no wish to wear one again. I meant it when I said I'm finished with that game, that awful throne...no matter which queen or king plots to sit upon it."

Sansa considered the idea again. A ship from Oldtown. A ship from the Arbor. Either one could take her back to Winterfell. Either one put far more distance between her and Cersei and Daenerys. The lords were already coming to Highgarden. Marion Lannister was smart, perhaps as smart as his distant cousin Tywin. Roland Crakehall could command respect from any great man. Arthur Hightower had the name, and his family the influence over the entire Reach. They knew what she meant them to do, they understood Daenerys and Jon and all of them as well as she had told them, and she could safely let them finish the war she helped start, without the risk of burning with them if they failed. This was not her people, not her war...so why was she finding it so difficult to pull herself away? Especially when every minute she stayed was putting Jon more and more at risk.

"You're unsure," Margaery asked.
She didn't answer.

"It'll only get harder. Escape. Arthur Hightower has summoned forth all the great lords of the south. My uncle himself received the summons and is already riding north."

_She doesn't mean it_, Sansa knew. But when Margaery spoke to her, it was as if she was still speaking to that dumb, slow traitor's daughter of King's Landing. The naive Northern girl wholly ignorant of the intricacies of the southern ways.

"I know," Sansa said sadly. Should she keep talking? She shouldn't. But she couldn't help herself. And Margaery felt like a friend, even though she knew better. "Many houses from the Westerlands too. And Houses Piper and Smallwood from the Riverlands, to be precise. House Dayne from Dorne. Houses Estermont and Foote from the Stormlands, more if Lord Aemon can convince them into following him."

It appeared Margaery Tyrell was yet capable of being caught off guard. That was enough now, Sansa knew. _Now just shut up, before you ruin yourself._ But the confusion, perhaps admiration, in the former queen's eyes was a sight so delightful, acknowledgement the fact that they both could play the southern game on equal footing now.

"Did your uncle tell you about was else the letter containing his summons read? It praised the honor of my brother, Jon Snow, true heir to the Iron Throne, though he is the sworn enemy of House Hightower of Highgarden at the moment. Though he covets not the throne, not it all. It suggests morale in the northern armies low, that even were Daenerys to take King's Landing, few would wish to march south against more of their own countrymen, were that to be necessary, for a foreign invader. They only do so out of fear for her dragon, and because they follow Jon Snow...for now..."

"I see," Margaery said. She wasn't angry, or disappointed, or scared of her, or scared for her. Just sad. "You're in it now."

"It's personal," Sansa said. _It has been since the Crossroads_, she realized. _When she took from me everything._ "Both of them, it's personal."

Margaery let go of her. "I understand." Looking over the balcony down towards the trees below, they both saw the glint of the sun alongside the eastern horizon. "I haven't much time. Can you find your way back to the castle?"

Sansa looked around, not sure if she recognized the surroundings. Perhaps she would in the clear of day. "I'm sure I can wander around until I find my way. Your gardens are pleasant enough. If I truly lose myself, I can always wait for the sun to come up...one of them will find me."

Margaery took her arm again, her grip lighter this time. "Come. I've taken up too much of your sleep already."

Already regretting her outburst, she didn't speak further on their walk back. House Tyrell did pledge itself to Daenerys. What if Margaery still honored that pledge after all? What if she always had, and was here to spy on her on behalf of the Dragon Queen?

_You're so stupid, stupid, stupid. You tell yourself you've learned, but you never do._

"I imagine you wouldn't want to marry Bronn," Sansa said, the idea materializing from the crisp morning air.

"Bronn?" She watched as Margaery searched her memory, no doubt recalling events good and bad. "The sellsword?"
Sansa nodded.

"Why would I marry him?" Her lips was already cracked, as if ready to laugh when Sansa finished her joke. There was no finish, this was no joke.

"Highgarden was promised him by Lord Tyrion." Margaery's smile vanished. "It wasn't anything that clever, really," she continued. "Bronn threatened to kill him. Tyrion gave him Highgarden to save his own life."

"I can imagine worse weddings." Sansa watched her absorb the news, nibble upon it in her own way.

"I wanted to see the dragons, when I heard my grandmother was to go to war alongside their Queen."

Another silence, her mind audibly calculating her next words.

"I heard they burned the Tarlys. They betrayed us for the Lannisters, an awful thing. But Dickon was always a nice boy. His father wanted to marry him to me...Lady Olenna would have none of it...but burning...Dickon didn't deserve that. It's a shame."

"I heard of that too," Sansa said. "Samwell Tarly is my brother's friend. Perhaps Jon's fondest. His father was awful to him, they said, but Dickon always treated him right. He was in Winterfell when he found out from the queen herself, just before the battle. I heard he didn't take well to it, especially when he heard Dickon burned alongside Lord Randyll."

Immediately Margaery caught her meaning. Gods she was sharp indeed.

"What did Jon think about that?"

"He loves her. He bends the knee still."

"I see," Margaery said, her eyes warm again.

"He let her feed his own sister to the lions." Again, Sansa found that she could not help herself.

"Yet some of those lions follow the wolf now." Margaery closed her eyes, sealing the depths of her soul from her. "Fire...it's such a horrid way to go. The Targaryens brought it upon our shores, and all these centuries later in remains more the fashion than ever. My father burned in the sept, along with sweet Loras. I would have too, if it weren't for a mere stroke of luck. Sometimes I wish I had been inside with them, so I don't have to dream of their ashes at night."

"It's personal for you too."

A sad nod. "Too personal. Too much so."

They arrived back at the entrance from where they emerged, and Margaery went to clutch her hands one last time.

Their eyes met, Margaery's earnest. "Don't get burnt, Lady Sansa."

As the former Lady of Highgarden turned to leave, the sound of boots caused both of them to freeze.

"Lady Sansa," Arthur Hightower said, bowing, no doubt overjoyed to find her alone in the early morning, Marion Lannister behind him. Then, both their eyes widened. "Queen Margaery?"
"Upon my honor, I won't say a word."

"You speak of honor to Ned Stark's daughter," Margaery said, an uncomfortable word for Sansa ever since the Crossroads. "That's an impossible thing to live up to."

_Honor got them all killed_, Sansa reminded herself. _Honor burns, just like everything else._

"Aye, but I will," Arthur replied, looking at both women with the faith of a child of summer. She'd never seen him drink before this early, slurring his words before such important company. Then again, this was likely the first time he'd seen a ghost. "I swear, I've been with Lady Sansa every second since she captured us and gave us mercy at The Twins. It's no easy thing, her honor, but it's what I've learned to strive for."

She exchanged a look at Margaery, both understanding. The boy meant it now, he could imagine nothing else. But what happens when he finds himself before smarter, cleverer, more ruthless lords? What happens if by some odd chance Cersei wins the war and rode down to Highgarden herself?

They all looked at the plump Lannister lord. He shrugged. "My own cousin Kevan burned with the rest of your family, Lady Margaery. We were friends once, a first son of a second family and the second son of a first family. I'm loyal to Queen Cersei, till some dying day, mine or hers. Be it hers after this battle, I'll rely upon the Lady Sansa's charity to speak a word for me if it pleases, to the Dragon Queen. But until then, tis still treason...you. Here. Not dead."

"Lord Arthur, if you may," Sansa said, mind racing, "if I need to lose myself on a ship from Oldtown, perchance Lady Margaery may find herself upon the same ship." What a turn it was. Just moments before Margaery offering her an escape. Now, the opposite, because she couldn't keep her mouth shut, couldn't forget her petty grudges, because Margaery couldn't forget her simple courtesies even when her own life depended on it.

"Winterfell is cold," Sansa continued, "but better to freeze than die."

"It's only fair," Margaery said, her voice resembling a song even in such dire straits, "I promised you you'd see Highgarden. How I'd love for you to take me to Winterfell, were that to be necessary."

"It's not fair," Arthur suddenly protested, sounding much younger than he actually was, especially next to the two weathered women flanking on either side of him. "None of you should be fleeing, from dragon queens or lion queens or any other."

"Young Lord, be careful your words," Marion chided, warning him, but not too severely.

"Aye, Lord Marion," Arthur said defiantly, forgetting his highborn words in his half-drunken state, the alcohol heavy on his breath. "My brother stands beside our Queen. I love my brother. I love our queen. But there's a reason we're calling all the lords here, callin' them to build all these scorpions. It's 'cause the Dragon Queen may win, and you and I and her don't aim to bend the knee."

"A queen 'fer the north. A queen 'fer our south. Born in our lands. Loved in our lands. It's meant to be...there's no losin'."

Gently brushing his hand off her shoulder, Sansa smiled sweetly at him so he wouldn't notice. "Your brother's Lord of Highgarden. Queen Cersei wins, and it's simple enough...we sneak Lady Margaery away however we can. She won't though. If Cersei's word no long holds on Highgarden..."

"I don't care," Margaery said suddenly, plainly, a rare break of form. She had taken several goblets of wine from her erstwhile host as well. So did Sansa, but after all that she had let slip earlier that
morning, she drank the most carefully out of their three. "Take it. Give it to the sellsword, it's just a
castle."

"I'll fight for it! Aye, even if I bend the knee to Daenerys I'll have his head, he won't have my
brother's castle! Your castle...a damned sellsword!"

But even as she spoke, Sansa sensed that Margaery did not believe her own words. Sansa herself had
once not a care who wrestled over Highgarden but, as she thought of her own home, how she much
she yearned for it, how far she was from returning, she couldn't help but think about Margaery now,
hiding at the edge of the continent, at the edge the domains which once belonged to her own very
proud family, watching her home be passed on from one brutal man to the next...same as Winterfell.

Feign indifference as she may in front of them, Margaery had risked her own life to travel here, to
trust a woman who might as well be a stranger, just to walk half a night through her favorite gardens.
No, Margaery loves Highgarden more than she ever would admit...she was far just too smart to admit
that with Cersei still alive. And how cruel would it be to cast her away again.

"I met Lord Alac once," she said. "He composed himself well at the Crossroads. He'd make a good
lord, Highgarden or not."

It was obvious Margaery had to dig deep into her memory. But she remembered. "He had kind eyes.
He was young, yet he fought valiantly at King Renly's tourney."

"It's a shame, the queen he serves. I pray not for Cersei, but if any of her men would survive the
battle," she looked kindly upon Arthur, "I would wish it upon him."

They were meaningless words to most. Certainly to Arthur they were. Marion may have caught the
meaning, though his eyes revealed nothing. Never breaking eye contact to Margaery as she spoke,
she saw recognition in her eyes. It was up to her now. Margaery could leave the thought unfinished,
and let the implication dissipate into thin air.

"My mother was a Hightower," she began. "The friendship between House Tyrell and House
Hightower has been most important to the peace and happiness our lands have enjoyed for hundreds
of years...a friendship sealed by the constant renewal of the bonds between our two houses."

"You can get married," Arthur said, the last to understand. "You, Lady Margaery, and Alac!"

It had been but an idea. A possibly repulsive one to Margaery, considering the marriages Sansa had
been forced into, or almost forced into. But Margaery understood, and Margaery chose, and she felt
less guilt for it.

"Perhaps with our powerful houses joined," Margaery smiled, a coldness upon her eye, "Ser Bronn
may find himself not so inclined to pursue Lord Tyrion's debt."

"And Lord Tyrion may not wish to further inflame all the Reach." Sansa thought of the scorpions.
"Though that may prove beyond him regardless."

"Let's remind ourselves this is but a contingency," Marion said, putting a slight damper to the
budding talks. "Queen Cersei may yet win. She may yet lose, then retreat to Highgarden, where her
loyal bannermen have prepared the walls to continue defending her kingdoms...what remains of them
anyway."

The young lord sat deep in thought, clearly the first time facing such a monumental decision. An
awkward decision too, they all understood, considering he was suddenly called to decide upon his
own elder brother's marriage.
"I love my brother," he finally said, trying his best to speak soberly. "Everyone who knows him loves him...he's easy to love. Lady Margaery...I consider myself a lucky soul to love him. Perhaps you may wish for the same. If it came to that...possibility."

She brushed his hand with hers and Sansa could tell, even through the drink, she was playing the same Margaery she knew in King's Landing. "It would be my honor, Lord Arthur."

"You should stay," the young man said suddenly. "I know I promised I can get you back south, and if that's what you wish, I'll set things at once. Highgarden may belong to our family now, but we remember House Tyrell, you're the last of yer great family...we'd do you honor. There's chambers we can hide you in, aye, you know better than me. The lords are coming to discuss the fate of the south. Your word ought yet count, especially if you be betrothed to my brother. We can keep you in the fold...tell us which lords you trust, which you don't."

She felt bad for Margaery now, having to decide her entire future here, alongside three strangers intruding upon her own home. How much of the Margaery of King's Landing had been herself, and how much of it was Lady Olenna, no longer by her side to advise her? She knew what guided Arthur just now, this great idea that he could somehow keep around the two alleged great loves of his life under his roof, and as his guests, too tempting for the young man.

"If it please, my lord," Margaery said, settling perfectly the role of the coy lady, "I may wish to breathe the airs of my childhood home but a bit longer. My uncle Paxter will be here in but a few days, and I may always return with him when gathering is complete."

She would stay, and Sansa was secretly happy for a presence of someone friendly, if not quite a friend, to accompany her in these strange hallways. But she wondered what was tempting Lady Margaery to stay? Was it her home, or the game yet?

Chapter End Notes

Yup. I did it. I couldn't help myself. I loved her character, and had to find a way to write her...she's too brilliant to miss out on everything else going on! I can only hope that I "brought her back" in a way that was somewhat realistic.

The story is picking up towards its endgame...yet I'd say it is only a bit more than half completed, so there is still much that could happen to all our characters, even if some things do seem inevitable at the moment. As usual, thank you all so much for reading, and please continue letting me know what you think of it!
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Secrets are exchanged between Dragonstone and Highgarden.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

"Lady Sansa, if I may..."

Another lord, a tall man of middle age, his face gaunt, yet eyes leery. A good number of the lords called to Highgarden had given her such eyes. Few dared to say more or act upon their urges, considering that she was still nominally a guest of their Queen...not to mention, understood to be under the protection of their host Lord Arthur of the great name Hightower, as well as two of the more respected lords of the Westerlands.

"I'm sorry, I haven't..."

"My apologies. Warryn, of House Beesbury."

"Of Honeyholt," Sansa asked sweetly, curtsying, the fruit of her hours of childhood practice paying off. This was a new face. Some of the lords and ladies hadn't been. Many of their faces she remembered from court in King's Landing, some of them she remembered laughing at her or, at best, watching wordlessly, as Joffrey humiliated her and Meryn Trant beat and stripped her again and again before the court. Some of those phantoms of her past were the very ones Margaery said she also could not trust. But not all of them, and she had to don her courtesies regardless. Some courtesies irked more than others.

"I'm flattered you know of my humble house, my lady." Trust this one to fear Daenerys, Margaery had said. Don't trust him with my presence here, he was among the first to declare against House Tyrell alongside House Tarly. "Word is, my lady, you've met the Dragon Queen."

It was always the same question. It seemed she could never escape her shadow. But was that not true for the entire realm, not just her?

"I have, my lord," she replied meekly. Usually she was meek. Sometimes she changed her demeanor to act strong, or contemptuous, or cold, depending on what Margaery told her, though her uncle Paxter as well as Marion himself could occasionally provide her insights into the men and few women congregating at Highgaren.

"What's she like, if ye don't mind me askin'?"

"A true Targaryen," she smiled. Warryn Beesbury, they told her, was a petty lord. Not happy to be one either, and he often took it out upon his servants and squires. The squires survived, because he'd hang if they didn't. Many servants weren't as lucky. "She is just too. On the road to the great city of Mereen, the masters covered the way for miles with slaves they crucified, a hundred sixty three of them in all, to scare her away. It affected her deeply, great her heart is, and after she took the city, she
gave the masters their own justice, having the same number crucified in return."

"Thank ye, milady," Lord Warryn said, face paling as he stumbled away. "Yer insights are...uh, wise."

To be fair, she did not begrudge the Dragon Queen for it. Justice was justice, especially where it was needed. She had seen to that with Ramsey Bolton. Would she have done it? Perhaps less harshly, but the end result would be the same. But what mattered now wasn't right or wrong...not when it came to her home, more than half a continent away.

She had little wish to converse with all these strange lords these days, though she fulfilled her obligations as they came, dutifully answering their questions about the Dragon Queen, Jon Snow, the Army of the Dead, Jaime Lannister's victory at the Twins, and the own peace she had almost forged at the Crossroads. Most of the time she wandered the armory, watching as the smiths and builders assembling the giant scorpions one by one, as soon as they received the materials they needed. It wasn't long before she could recite each step by memory, and as each lord or lady arrived, her first prerogative after the usual niceties and introductions was to ensure that they sent their lumber and iron to where they needed to go. If she had any gods now, it was these weapons, and she imagined she felt the joy of childbirth each time one of them was brought to completion.

"Lady Sansa, a word."

Talla Tarly. A nice young woman, a bit naive to the ways of the world, as she had once been. And like her, thrust too quickly into the game because of the spoils of war. Smiling warmly, hoping it would treat Talla better than it treated her, she spoke, "my lady, I hope you did not take offense to Lord Morwyn this morning. They say House Crane is not known for their niceties."

They had yet to decide whether they could trust the late Randyll's daughter yet. She was most pleasant, reminding her of a smaller, flightier, Samwell, and the young Lady of Horn Hill delighted in hearing stories of her brother, whom Sansa constantly assured her was safe and happy at Winterfell. She told her of how big Little Sam grew by the day, and of a younger Tarly on the way, yet to be born. But her father had betrayed the Lady Olenna, after all, all but killing her in Margaery's eyes. Talla herself did not seem too interested in politics or war, offering little insights when the rest of the lords discussed the upcoming battle.

_Her father was a killer. A brute. A horrible man who likely deserved his fate. Like all these lords I have to please. Brutal men. Men who would kill or rape the fangless wolf had they a chance._

"My Lady Sansa, my apologies, I was on a hunt with Lord Roland this morning. I have word our fifth scorpion is close to completion?"

"Lord Aemon." Of House Estermont, sent to represent his house on behalf of his elderly father, too sick to travel, one of the few to have arrived from the Stormlands. "It is done, as of this morning, and I expect the sixth to be ready by mid day on the 'morrow."

"Aye, give my lady a hammer, and I've no doubt there'd be twice as many by now."

"You're too kind, my lord. Have you heard of House Buckler yet? They are close neighbors of yours, are they not?"

"Not close enough, Lady Sansa. I'm afraid they have declared for the Dragon Queen."

Sansa bowed nicely, smiling sadly. "As the Dragon Queen's most loyal subject, I must be pleased. If you will excuse me, I must return to the armory to ensure the builders don't take too much to drink
before the sun sets."

"My lady." Aemon's voice lowered to a whisper. "Give my regards to the Lady."

He had no great love for Queen Cersei either, Paxter said. They had been friends when they were younger, Paxter having spent many years of his youth in Greenstone. "Aye, I could always out hunt him, out run him, out fuck him...excuse my language, milady."

"I will. And do inform me when House Fell announces their allegiance."

Aemon bowed. "My lady."

"Ser Mortimer Dayne, I believe?"

"Aye," the tall, dark haired man replied. "I believe you're well acquainted with my nephew already."

"Little Beryn," Sansa said, recalling the youth who accompanied Alac Hightower first at the Crossroads, now Arthur the remainder of their journey. "He fares well on these rough roads, a boy of..."

"Almost ten and three," Mortimer answered. "It's good for him, and he speaks well of you."

"I'm glad to have made an impression," Sansa said uneasily. "I'm afraid our houses have been at odds in the past..."

"War is war. Ser Arthur was my brother, and he the best man I knew. Then, so you can say the same for Ned Stark."

"He is," Sansa replied, looking to steer the conversation away from the past, not when so much present still lingered. "I hear you proved instrumental in securing Dorne for your new Prince, after Cersei killed Lady Ellaria."

"She was no lady," Mortimer replied bluntly, "but we followed her just the same. The new Prince is a good friend of mine, aye the best, we grew up together in Sunspear. He has vowed to follow the Dragon Queen to avenge her death."

"I wish him the best then," Sansa said, turning up her coyness. "Believe you me, I'm one of the few here who has no love for Cersei."

"So I've heard," Mortimer said, then narrowing his eyes. "What I've seen though..."

"We do what we must to survive," Sansa replied. "I assume Lord Edric sent you here to speak for the Dragon Queen's interests?"

"You assume true."

"Then be assured I'm here for the same reasons. Yet I find it odd, your nephew riding with one of Cersei's bannermen."

"Lord Edric is young," Mortimer began, uneasy for the first time. Was it a crack in the armor, that his prince perhaps was not as loyal to Daenerys as he so claimed? Or was it just dissension within their noted family. "His control over his house...." he stopped, not wanting to reveal too much to her. "I care much for the boy. When his father died in the war, I raised him as my own. But his mother is a strong woman, and her mother a Hightower. It did not seem a problem then, when our houses all served the same queen..."
"I understand," Sansa said, putting as much kindness into her voice as she could. "These horrible wars...one after another...have been most confusing for us all. May they end soon...and in our favor."

"Aye," Mortimer said, agreeing, and suddenly looking to leave her presence. "May the Gods will it so."

"They say one of the things which drove the Mad King mad," Marion Lannister said, finishing his goblet of wine as they ate in Lady Margaery's own solar, "were the whispers that my cousin Tywin was the true king of the realm, reigning in the shadows." Moving quickly to pour himself another glass, Sansa wondered if he realized his drinking habits were far too quickly resembling his much shorter kinsman. "It's a good thing you have no Aerys in Highgarden, Lady Sansa."

His praise was given too freely, and Sansa reminded herself to not give too easily into trust. "I'm afraid your comparison is incorrect, Lord Marion. I believe that would make me the Mad King, would it not? And Lady Margaery your cousin Tywin...well, the both of you filling well into that role."

"We work well together," Margaery said, raising her glass but drinking little of her wine, as she was wont to do. "Had you stayed in King's Landing after Joffrey's wedding...we may have sent Cersei to spinsterhood at Casterly Rock after all."

Thankfully Arthur was too often occupied lately as every lord's host. The young man meant well, but the impetuousness of his youth could only carry so far the subtleties and secrecies of their planning...nay plotting, for that's what it was. Lord Roland joined them sometimes as well, but such talk made the man uncomfortable, so he tended to avoid their meals as of late, even as his devotion towards her grew. Paxter was a rough man, a good soldier, but a keen mind, no doubt having learned some of the late Lady Olenna's craft. His insights into his peers were valuable as well, but his presence was needed before the lords rather than the shadows, enforcing his own blunter form of diplomacy with the other men.

"Careful, my lady," Marion said, almost finishing his new glass immediately after refilling it. "These old ears can only hear so much treason before they break."

"Is anything treason," Sansa asked freely, wine coursing through her own blood, comfortable as she was now with her companions, "if everything is treason?"

"May our watch end soon," Marion said, slumping in his chair, "far too much for a honest man to bear." Reaching into his robes, Sansa thought the old man about to fall asleep in Margaerys own quarters, before he pulled out a scroll. "Sent from Dragonstone. To the Lady of Winterfell."

"You read it," Sansa asked. The old lion nodded. "Then tell me what it says."

She took the scroll, a lengthy, and read it nevertheless as he spoke.

"The queen's dragon is close to healed, as determined by the Dragon Queen herself. The Unsullied and Dothraki have already docked outside of King's Landing, the rest of her armies to follow. Daenerys herself eats and drinks little, but assures her advisers she is well prepared for the battle. Dorne marches north, and the Kingslayer has been taken for questioning by the Queen. Signed by Lord Varys."

It was so much to unpack at once, and Sansa wasn't alone in not knowing how just to react to it first.

"We're running out of time then," Sansa said, feeling all the wine slip out of her as she digested everything the scroll meant to say. "Any word of Jon?"
Marion shook his head sadly, and in that moment there was something to the man that did remind him of the Spider.

"Interesting the Spider would send correspondence to you," Margaery remarked, "considering your...captive state."

"We've had words," Sansa said curtly. "We should send something back."

"I thought we should," Marion said, handing her a blank scroll.

"What of our numbers, Lord Marion?"

"About even with her men from Essos," he replied, Margaery hanging on to his every word also. "Assuming the usual losses with the Dothraki and Unsullied in the event they win the siege. We hope for more, of course, there are few remaining to yet ride arrive at Highgarden."

"I have news House Buckler has declared for House Targaryen," Sansa said.

"Not a surprise," Margaery said, "Lord Ralph switched sides more than...well...my own family did...during the last war. Such men are not to be trusted in light of our odds, anyway."

"House Velaryon to the dragons also," Marion said sadly. "Old Valyrian blood and all that nonsense. Their hosts are not inconsequential...but a far cry from the other native armies serving her at the moment.

Her mind raced. She should take her time, yet she felt the need to match wits, in the presence of the lesser lion and the rose. Yet, the words came too easily in her mind, and Sansa wondered just how long they had lay dormant in her heart, waiting for its moment. She handed the scroll back to Marion.

"They won't recognize your writing." She dictated the words, looking at Margaery with each pause, who approved them with a nod, or suggested some minor changes. But most of the words were hers, considering she knew the composition of the Dragon Queen's army and men better than anyone else in Highgarden, save Arya or Brienne.

The Lords of the South remain loyal to Queen Cersei and await the results of the coming battle. If the lion falls, some will bend to the TRUE heir, but not enough to overwhelm. Most wish only for peace, but they will FIGHT to defend their homes and NATIVE lands; in that they find common ground with our friends upon the MOON and the broad WATERS. I pray Northmen follow their TRUE heir to the throne.

It was a start, for sure, though she had no idea how Varys would respond. If he would respond, if he would respond genuinely, or whether this was another trick of his.

"You should speak to Ser Mortimer," she said at Marion while he rolled the scroll up, "while he's here. I can't, because we both bend the knee to the same queen. But Ellaria and the Sand Snakes are dead, and I hear the Prince had no personal fondness towards them, not after what they did to the last Prince. Surely their dedication may not be as firm as we all think."

"We'd have to offer them something."

"Highgarden," Margaery asked, chuckling bitterly. "You may as well, Lord Marion. I won't be satisfied until it has been promised to a lord from each of the Seven Kingdoms, what an honor it will do the memory of House Tyrell."

"Yes, I'm sure you'll think of something, won't you," Sansa said, an edge in her voice to follow
Margaery's. "After all, House Lannister seems to have found a wonderful habit of late in granting castles not theirs to give."

Marion groaned. "Must I suffer the sins of my kinsmen forever?"

"No," Sansa replied, "but don't let their actions hold back your own."

Her words seemed to strike too much of a chord in him, and as Marion disappeared into himself, Sansa worried. Unbeknownst to herself, she was biting her lip when Margaery spoke.

"You're concerned for the Kingslayer?"

The woman had an uncommon knack for reading her mind.

"He made his choice," Sansa replied. "I gave him the choice, but I didn't force him to ride to King's Landing."

"Men," Margaery said, shaking her head. "They can't help themselves, even when they stare fire in the face."

"He may be the smart one," Sansa replied. "He'll meet his fate first, while the rest of us wait."

"You trust her."

It was a statement. Not a question.

"She was kind to me in King's Landing."

"For a reason," Arya said. Again, not a question.

"For a reason, yet kind all the same. I couldn't say the same for most."

Arya allowed herself to smile. "She's nice enough to me. She has a reason too...to please you."

She knew her sister would never feel comfortable in Highgarden. Arya would never be happy as a lady even in Winterfell...how would she feel wandering a castle built upon layers and layers of southern courtesies?

"I know Highgarden must be dull for you..."

"The flowers are pretty," Arya said, a wry smile to her face. "I can still see colors, you know."

"Sometimes I wonder," Sansa said, half joking, waiting for how her sister would respond in turn. "The food is good, you must admit that."

It was as if Arya didn't hear though. It didn't matter, her words were meaningless anyway. Meant reflexively to appease the southern lords, not to convey anything important to her sister. Arya never minced her words.

"You and her fear the same people. Cersei. But the dragon queen, she would have to betray..."

"Her grandmother was the one who bent the knee to Daenerys. Margaery was already hiding on the Arbor when that happened."

"And now she wants to take back the south. You want to take back the north. So you share common
ground."

Of course she had been testing her. As they spoke before, Sansa wondered whether Arya had acted obtuse on purpose. She should assume better of her.

"You know the game better than you pretend," Sansa said, half a wink in her eye.

"I learn from my sister." Arya's smile disappeared. "Aemon Estermont."

"Decent man," Sansa recalled. "A bit shallow...his name carries weight, but he's a follower, I think."

"I wouldn't trust him." Her words caught her attention with a stark urgency.

"Lord Paxter vouches for him," Sansa said. Yet who ought she trust, a near stranger, or her own sister? Her own secretly brilliant sister? "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know." Arya shook her head. Did she doubt? Most of the time her opinions of lords matched those of Marion or Margaery or Paxter. "It's nothing solid. I just hear him speak...he says different things to different people."

Maybe she was wrong, if Arya herself wasn't sure. Nevertheless, she couldn't afford to ignore her words, not when they were surrounded by so many strangers. "I'll remember it, thank you."

"It'll be war, then." She looked into her eyes, and saw the rare tremble of fear in Arya's.

Shaking her head, she tallied up all the lords and ladies in her head. "It'll be a close thing. Many fear fire and would look to burn the knee. Some wish to fight back. Most can't make up their minds. Even the ones who will fight, I can't think of a reason to tell them why they ought to fight for a bastard whom they've never met."

"Especially if it's the bastard they'll be fighting against. While you have them fight in his name."

Their eyes met, acknowledging the ugly, yet unspoken, truth.

"You'll be safe here," Arya continued, when Sansa could not think of further words, words that would make the truth smell better. "These men fight more with words than swords."

"Doesn't make them anymore dangerous," Sansa said. "They'll stab you in the back and you're just as dead."

"Jon won't see it coming. His next war is here, and he doesn't know it yet. I need to talk to him, make sure he knows what side he's on."

She didn't want Arya to leave. Once she left, there were so few who remained that she knew. Brienne, who probably hated her, who should hate her. Podrick, who would follow Brienne. And Margaery, who couldn't even be safely revealed in her own castle, must less wholly trusted. But it was what was best for Arya. And Jon.

"Every new lord that walks into this castle, who brings with them their men, I give thanks, because it's more men to stand against her. Yet I tremble for breath, because any one of those men could be the one who kills Jon." Her hands started shaking, while she let the truth be heard. "I tell myself, if he only knew who helped raise this army...who stands behind it...me...you...that he'd drop his sword...that he'd run to our side."

"She'd kill him before he gets here," Arya said coldly. "He'd have to try first. I'm not sure if even
family will be enough."

"We're his real family." Yet as she spoke, she wondered if this was her fault. Had she been too mean to him, when they were younger? Was she too critical of him, too mistrustful of his judgment as King, so as to make it easier to forget his own family, to seek comfort and assurance from elsewhere? Arya was different though. They were always much closer. The few moments they all had together, it was Sansa who felt like the intruder. "You may be the only one left who can talk sense into him."

"I don't know about that. But I won't give up on him."

"I haven't either," Sansa said. Though she thought of him less, as she watched the army form in the south...an army that may be used to fight her own brother. More and more it was a truth to be forgotten, better left unsaid. "He may actually listen to you. You'd have a better chance slipping past the Dragon Queen, at least."

Arya moved in for a hug. It was quick, and broken quick, because neither one of them could admit they wanted it to linger more.

"And you're much better at these southern games than me. Much better than you tell yourself, even."

"I do what I must. For the North."

"I know. You may not want to admit it, but it's your needle, and you thread it well. Be careful though. Don't lose yourself in it."

---

**Jon**

He tried avoiding her as much as he could. It was easy actually, considering they had an entire city to take, and sailing back and forth between Dragonstone and the rapidly growing camps outside King's Landing took up enough time to be justifiable. They were right, most of the northmen grumbled and more than a few had deserted and ridden for home, but the presence of their former King by their tents did help cheer up the mood. The Vale and Riverland armies less so, but there was still much to discuss with the lords there. Strategy, the siege, preparations...all talk which can fill up an entire afternoon...all talk that was completely meaningless considering the success of the upcoming battle hinged not on scaling the walls of the castle or storming a gate or formations or trenches...but almost solely upon whether or not their scorpions stood a chance against Drogon.

"You'll stay in the reserves," he told Yohn Royce. "Cut off any retreat should the Lannisters seek to abandon the city."

"And the attack starts when?"

No enthusiasm there. There'd been little since they rode south from the Crossroads, each war council meeting a tedious affair that everyone, even Jon, could not wait to get over with.

"When Drogon is ready. Maybe a week at the most. She'll know."

"And leave the rest of us in the dark," Edmure said, grumbling and gritting his jaw side to side in a way that drove Jon mad every time he did so. Sansa had been right about one thing, at least.

"That's not for you to decide. Just stay vigilant and double guard duty at nights, so if they risk a sortie we'll meet it square."

"Aye, we will," Tytos Blackwood said. He was a dependable man, and Jon would switch him and
Edmure if he could when it came to command. Except his loyalties were...well, he suspected they weren't that much different from the loyalties of Lords Royce or Manderly or anyone else in camp. "But they'd be stupid to waste their men now. They have few enough to defend the city, we made sure of that. It's the retreat I'd be more worried about."

"Or our rears," Edmure added, a rare bit of insight from the man, "if the Highgarden host marches north to break the siege."

"They won't," Yohn Royce said. Then, suddenly conscious of what he said, he looked around to see if anyone else had heard him. Jon did.

"You know this," Jon asked.

"A guess," Bronze Royce said in a way that meant no further words could be pried out of him. "Lord Snow, I must see to the archers."

As he left, he saw Tytos, Wyman Manderly, and Lord Cerwyn all too studiously distracted by anything other than that curious exchange. Jon shook his head, needing a breath of fresh air.

"My lords. Keep to the trenches."

"They don't trust me," Jon said once they left, walking between rows of tents and hard men from the northern three kingdoms all glumly preparing for what was to come. "My own lords, my own men...tell me you still trust me, Lord Davos."

"Aye, I do. King or not, I've seen what you've done, what you can yet do."

"There's nothing left for me to do," Jon said, the words sounding strangely hopeful to him, "not after this last war."

"I don't blame ya. Not a bad life, to be honest, sitting in the Keep, the Queen's Queen."

When he didn't laugh, Davos chuckled to himself, then shook his head.

"My apologies, my lord. A bad joke, from an old man."

"It's not that," Jon said. He didn't want to talk about this to Davos, or anyone, but if there was anyone he could talk to, anyone whom he could trust...whom he needed to talk to... "I didn't know about it when this all started. My father...Rhaegar."

Davos nodded, but sensing his reluctance, decided to not pursue the subject much further. Continuing to walk wordlessly through the camp, the scattered words of the soldiers reached their ears while they continued to avoid each other.

"...aye, march us down to Highgarden, then Dorne, then Volantis...then wherever else they don't worship her majestic goddess queen..."

"...Volantis? We've no fight there..."

"...tell that to the unfucked an' the horsefuckers she took across the Narrow Sea..."

"...Jon Snow'll bring us home..."

"...he took us here, after the Stark girl won the war..."

"...they say she's the Queen of Highgarden now, Queen in the shadows..."
"...don't know if I kin march against her, mebbe I can run..."

"...aye, mebbe the dragon chases yer if yer run..."

"...can't chase us all down..."

They both heard, and they both knew the other heard, even as the converse turned to silence like a procession following them through the camp.

"They know a lot," Davos said on the boat back to Dragonstone.

"All camp talk. Like you don't remember."

"Their lords talk. The men have ears."

He was holding something back, Davos speaking in a way beckoning him to ask. "What are you saying?"

"The Queen Cersei is a...unique evil. She sits on the throne now, but not without having made enemies out of all the realms. They may not like it, but none of them'll mourn her death, when we do kill her. But what do they have against the southern lords? They all know each other, rode against each other in the same tourneys, stabbed each other in the back in the same court...all that builds a kind of kinship you don't have...a kind she'll never have, coming from where she came from. Aye, and pretend...just pretend that the worst is true and Sansa's the one speaking poison in their ears, would they march against her? When..."

The abrupt pause in his soliloquy was too obvious, and Jon wondered he meant it this way, to say it without saying it?

"When what?"

Davos shook his head.

"When they love her more than me? Is that what you mean?"

"It's not a lack of love for you, Jon...but they hate this war."

"So they'll fight a war against this war?"

"If they hate the next war more than even this one, yes!"

They were both on the verge of screaming now, and both knew composure needed to be regained before they reached Dragonstone.

"Sansa's their prisoner," Jon said, when they both had calmed. "You heard Tyrion...they're using her. Cersei's using her. She doesn't know anyone in the south, and she wouldn't like anyone in the south."

"I'd think that. But I underestimated her too, before we left Winterfell."

She wouldn't do it. Not to me. But just how much did he actually know his sister? He never expected that Sansa would trust Daenerys from the start, but he'd always assumed that she would come to understand, to respect his decision as a king, to feel some kind of gratitude for everything Daenerys gave up for the North. Yet she continued to push, so why should she stop now, when they both pushed her back so harshly? Had Sansa been in danger when they sent her west? He didn't deny that, he just couldn't see past his anger at the Crossroads, and he didn't need Davos or anyone else to
guilt him for it, he felt it every day since.

_The war will soon be over, he told himself._ Worst case, he imagined Sansa would be held in a comfortable captivity, which turned out to be true. Then Cersei will fall, he said, and he would take Rhaegal himself to bring her back. But Rhaegal died, and Drogon was maimed, and the war continued to drag and yes...Sansa was more than clever enough to turn her punishment back at them. Daenerys and himself.

Grey Worm met him ashore below the castle. He looked only at Jon. "The Queen awaits you." Nodding back at Davos to stay behind, he followed Grey Worm uncomfortably up the endless steps, past the great hall and the council room and all the way to Daenerys's own chambers. Her hair was still unkempt, but not as badly as before. She said little these days outside the war councils, which fit him fine. Part of him did wonder why she didn't seek him out...perhaps she was afraid of the answer when she finally asked the question. Seeing him enter, she gestured at Grey Worm, who left them alone.

She was studying an object in her hands. Walking over to him, she handed it to him, a scroll.

"Sansa."

_"Seven arrows which may sting fire built, more yet to come. Faith in the lioness waning. Little agreement for after. The bees may bend, the grapes and his fruit disinclined but doubt the TRUE heir; the huntswoman keeps an open mind, as does the apple and turtle, but the grapes and small lion hold the castle. What pushes the Sun between night and day?"

"That's not her handwriting."

"They're her words."

"I don't understand." Some of the words made sense. They were obviously talking about him. Cersei. But the other words were a puzzle. Sigils perhaps. He knew little of them, besides the great houses, and the men who came from the smaller ones in the Watch.

"From Highgarden, to Varys. 'Arrows which may sting fire...they're building the same weapons that shot Rhaegal. And why would the southern lords be preoccupied with telling the Spider about which houses would or wouldn't bend the knee to you, the true heir, if it weren't for Sansa?"

"I..."

He couldn't think of an argument against her. It was no clear proof either, but the scales as they stood did not look good for his sister.

"That means Varys is a traitor," he said, confronting a different truth instead.

"He will burn tonight," Daenerys said chillingly. He wanted to suggest another punishment, perhaps confinement, but knew there was no point. Were he to speak of mercy, Sansa needed all of those words now.

"I can talk to her. After the battle, please Dany, let me speak to her first."

His words had no impact on her. "So you want walk to Highgarden and let Sansa crown you king? Do you see how easy it is for her, for men you have never known to be swayed to your cause? They love you already, yet they've never met you. They'll never love me...and these treasons...these weapons they build, thinking they can hide from me in my own lands...they don't even fear me. Not yet."
"I won't accept, you know that!" How many times did he have to tell her this before she believed him? How many times did he have to talk to Sansa before she would trust him? "If they ask, I'll refuse it, they can't force a crown on my head!"

"She won't listen. What then?"

"There's another way. We can keep her in Winterfell..."

"So she can continue plotting against me besides the lords who love her the most?"

"We'll take away her ravens. I'll stay with her there myself, make sure she doesn't plot against anyone."

She said nothing, and Jon breathed a sigh of relief. At least she was considering it.

"Would she really prefer that to death? A prisoner, the rest of her life?"

*She'd hate me forever.* But he'd rather she hate him alive, than love him dead.

"She can't die," Jon insisted. "Not after everything that's happened to her, to our family. She could change her mind...we need to give her time."

"Every mercy I've offered has come back to haunt me. To be used against me. Sansa won't be any different."

Suddenly, she pulled him in and kissed him. Firmly, passionately, like when he had kissed her on the boat...when he had sought her out himself. His mouth responded, because he hadn't expected this. When she had first summoned him maybe, but not now, after all the talk of his sister. He drew away, and he could taste her disappointment.

"Tell me you love me Jon," she begged him, desperately. "Tell me that nothing else matters, that you'll love me like you did before..."

Was this an order? An exchange, love her and she'd spare Sansa? Was it genuine imploring from her heart? Perhaps all three? He wanted so much to say yes, to claim her as his own queen, like he had done before, and then believe all of his problems would go away. But it wasn't that simple. It was never that simple.

"Is it because of your sisters," she asked, when he didn't answer.

"No. It's because of me. Who my father is...and who he actually is."

She shook her head childishy, almost like she was throwing a tantrum. "It shouldn't matter! It didn't matter before, when you didn't know!"

"But I do now." He bent the knee, it being the only thing way he could bring himself to demonstrate his love for her. "You're my Queen. Now. Forever. Always."

It should be enough. He knew it wasn't.
Most of the new lords here are canon either show or book I believe. Warryn Beesbury, Talla Tarly from the show, Aemon Estermont, Paxter Redwyne indeed Margaery's uncle and Olenna's nephew. Mortimer Dayne is an OC, as is his nephew Beryn, introduced a few chapters earlier.

And mentioned before, Marion Lannister is OC, while Roland Crakehall is canon.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

News arrives at Highgarden.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sansa

"Aye, girl, what are yer lookin' at?"

He was fatter than she remembered. She'd never seen him sitting in the chair before, that chair. Transfixed, mesmerized by the grotesque sight of the old King's body wedged in the throne, she thought that he would not be able to rise from his iron chair if he tried.

"Staring won't make me any thinner, girl."

She didn't know what to say to him. She wasn't sure if they'd ever exchanged a meaningful word in life, despite the fact that she was to marry his son. That she once thought she loved the boy whom she thought was his son. Instead, she looked around the chambers, the site of so much pain and humiliation, holding a throne which continues to torture her still, and tried to wish the room away.

"I told Ned to kill her. He was too damn honorable for that. Bet you wish he did now, don't yer?"

"Daenerys?"

The King nodded. He was powerful. He was intimidating, despite the fatness. He had been her father's king, after all, the first king she had ever known, the king of her childhood, for more than half her life.

"She's a child, he said. Joffrey was a child too, look what he did. Child or not, killers kill."

Was he a ghost? Was this a dream? Could it be true, that Robert had ordered her father to kill the Dragon Queen? Would she have begged father to listen to him, were she her, knowing what she did now?

"He quit and would've rode back North, had I not been able to talk sense into him. I wasn't there to talk sense into him in the end. Maybe I should've let him go back to Winterfell."

She remembered that. When her father came to her room not wearing the Hand's brooch, when he was about to take her home, and she had shrieked and fought him so horribly about it.

It seemed thus far he could read her mind. But he wasn't now. Instead, the King's eyes grew cloudy.

"We grew up together. We fought together, took seven kingdoms together. Only appropriate he follow me here. Wish it hadn't been like that, not for him."

"Death. That's what this is, isn't it? Am I to join you soon?"
Will I see father again?

The King grinned at her, a grin she couldn't read.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Margaery gasped, not an affectation for once.

"It's beautiful. You made this yourself?"

Sansa nodded proudly. She had little else but time in Highgarden. There were only so many lords and ladies to work, and only so much she could do with the scorpions without the use of her own hands. And she did find her own hands too idle, so she returned to her needle, a comfort where she could just do, and not think.

"Your uncle's a thoughtful man, but he's not accustomed to winter down in the Arbor. I hope this will fit you better as the north comes south."

The dress, a deep purple fabric adorned with red roses, vividly sown and detailed, was thick, yet as elegant as anything she had ever seen Margaery wear in King's Landing. Even in its fullness, she made sure to leave a plunging neckline for her, something she would never weave for herself. Or Arya. She missed her sister so much already. She would have made her dozens of dresses, were they ever wanted.

"Lord Marion tells me the Lady Talla has been told," Margaery said, referring to Samwell's sister, past grudges against dead kinsman forgotten. This one at least. "Perhaps she may join us on our walk later tonight."

Sansa wondered whether their walks were the only thing keeping Margaery sane, being cooped up in her chambers during the day, while so much went on outside her walls...lords and ladies she had to depend on others to influence.

"Men accuse us women of gossip, yet they indulge far more than us," Sansa said, smiling appeasingly at her. "It's an open secret at this point." She looked sympathetically at Margaery, trying not to pity her, Gods knew neither one of them needed any more of that. "They may have thought Cersei strong before, but the waiting makes them nervous. More and more question whether King's Landing would survive a long siege."

"You don't think it'll be a long siege, do you," Margaery asked. They rarely discussed battle. Or even the politics between the dragon and the lion queens, not unless they pertained directly to their own little circle of lords, the unwitting guests of a woman they thought dead.

"No," Sansa said. "You read Varys's letter, the moment her dragon is healed, she'll give battle. She's been waiting too long, the fire builds in her."

"Could you ever bend the knee to her?" She was asking straightforward questions. That was rare of Margaery, but they had grown accustomed to each other by now, the pretense between them worn down to a thin fabric. "If she did win?"

That had always been an uncomfortable understanding. Neither one of them wanted either Daenerys or Cersei to win. But if it came down to it, Margaery would prefer Daenerys. Not that Sansa necessarily preferred Cersei, but it was still a clear distinction both she and Margaery knew.

"If the lords decide not to fight, I wouldn't have much of a choice, would it?" She looked bitterly at Margaery. "I'd burn anyway. They'd sell me out to her in a second."
She was buried too deep now, too entrenched in the layers of treason, and it was all her own fault. Escape had been a possibility Margaery offered, time enough to feign innocence to all the fruits of her labor in Highgarden. She may yet escape, and Sansa imagined a life on the run, perhaps in some cave in the Arbor, or Lannisport, that would be ironic. Maybe she'd go to Volantis, seek out Talisa's family, tell them of their royalty bestowed by her own brother. But none of those options included Winterfell, seeing the comforts of home again, or having the power to do anything for her people.

"Then you only have one choice, don't you?" Rather than push her further, Margaery began examining the dress, running her fingers over the garment, feeling the texture of the petals she had so carefully sown. "She may spare you because of Jon."

Was she saying this just to make her feel better? Or did she not truly understand who Daenerys was, having never met her?

"Jon will burn too. Not today, maybe. Not tomorrow. But one day." That got her attention. "I'm a threat to her because of what I say, what I do. Jon's a threat to her because of who he is. And he had to tell her."

A knock on the door. At just the right time, Sansa thought thankfully. It was Paxter Redwyne, Margaery's uncle and protector. If Sansa did her part to win over the lords because of her sweetness, helped by Margaery's information, if Marion did his part with his name and cleverness, Paxter won them over for being a better man, in that he could hunt and drink and ride better than all of them. Kill better too, she imagined, if it came to that.

His face was grim. Abnormally pale. It caught both their attentions.

"The lords are all gathered in the great hall," he said. Then looking at Margaery, he nodded. "You can come as well."

Many of them gasped, despite the fact that it was indeed mostly an open secret. Murmurs at once, the few who did not know looking as if they were about to faint.

"My lords," Paxter shouted, taking his seat at the head of the table beside Marion and Arthur, already seated, beckoning Margaery and Sansa to join them. "You see the Lady Margaery," he said, trying to get in front of the obvious. "I've had to protect her, because of the Queen we all served. But the war between Houses Lannister and Tyrell is over."

As Sansa took her seat at the edge of the head table, Paxter gestured towards Arthur, who looked as if he had just witnessed death itself. Seeing the scroll he was holding, Sansa felt her heart melting, her stomach queasy. Whatever its contents...she dreaded it, yet she needed to know. Leaning forward, she saw Marion sitting at the opposite end of the table, giving her a knowing look.

"A raven, from King's Landing," Arthur began, his voice soft and barely held together. "King's Landing has fallen. The Red Keep has been destroyed, along with most of the city."

"Destroyed?"

"The city?"

"How?"

"Dragonfire," Arthur said, answering the crowd of lords, getting uneasier by the second. "The battle was won. The bells rang in surrender. Then she burned it all."

"All," Talla Tarly gasped. "The Keep? The City?"
"All the city." Arthur said. "All that he could see in every direction. Alac...my brother's not prone to flights of fancy. He wouldn't lie to me..." His voice trailed off sickly.

Breathing was an afterthought. She'd feared this moment, the second she heard of three dragons landing in Dragonstone, when Jon was still a King. Yet this was the rare moment where reality was worse than the worst of her imaginations. Daenerys was going to burn King's Landing, she'd assumed that. But burn it like this? Burn everything? All the houses, the slums, the angry mobs, the hungry mobs...the hungry children...mothers...daughters...whatever she had imagined, this was a thousand fold worse.

Arya. She did the math in her head. How long was the ride to King's Landing from Highgarden? She had to be still on her way...right? It was too close.

"The Queen," someone asked.

Arthur shook his head. "We have no word. On her, or any other..."

Unable to finish, he rose abruptly and almost ran from the room. Exchanging a look at Margaery, Sansa whispered to her. "They're your lords now." Then she went to follow the young man. Sansa wasn't sure why she did so. Perhaps it was because he'd been kind to her, and tried his earnest best to protect her every day since Daenerys had cast her away at the Crossroads, and she felt guilty for avoiding him as much as she could despite everything he did for her. Or because she couldn't take her mind off of her own family, and how they may have burned with the city along with his.

"He may still be alive...Alac." She found him in the small sept near the hall. Poor boy. Prayer won't help you now.

"Probably not," Arthur said, handing her the scroll. The handwriting was scattered, the last words barely legible.

"...you will carry on our name," Sansa said, reading the end. "I will continue the fight for our Queen."

"I'm sorry," she said, handing the piece of paper back to him, as if it were poisoned, damned. She couldn't think of little else to say. His head was buried against the wall, and Sansa was grateful she did not have to witness all of his pain. Looking away from him, she wondered if she should return to the hall. Their present demanded her attention now too, more than just one lord, with the worst having happened.

"Marry me."

She nearly jumped at the words. Before she knew it, he was at her side, dark eyes looming over her, pleading, as if she was the last hold upon his own sanity.

"My Lord," she said, lost for air and words. "I understand this is hard for you..."

"It is," and suddenly both his hands were clamped over her shoulders, and she dared not move. "It doesn't change things. I love you Sansa. Gods, I love you." One hand moved down to take her waist. Somehow, she willed herself to shrink, to give her body enough room to slip shyly away from him.

"My dear Arthur," she said, looking back towards the hall, wanting to do anything but stare into his increasingly desperate, dark eyes. "You're a good man. You'll be a great lord. But you're young. And you don't know what you're thinking, what you're asking."
"I do though," he insisted, even as his initial burst of enthusiasm was beginning to fade when it met her cold reality, it made him push even more. "I know I love you. That's all that matters. That's all that should matter."

"You don't know me."

"You're strong. You're kind. You're smart. You're brave. I've seen all of this in you, the moment you spared my life at The Twins."

_I'm bitter. I'm hateful. I'm loveless. A liar. A manipulator. An oathbreaker._

_A killer._

"You've only seen what I've let you see," she said. A soft smile, then she shook her head. "I'm sorry Arthur. It's not that I can't love you. I can't love anyone. Not for a long time."

He truly didn't understand. It's not that she didn't want to allow herself to love him, to love anyone other than her family, to enjoy the happiness she saw her father and her mother give each other. But what wasn't possible simply wasn't possible.

"I'll wait. For you, I'll wait as long as I need to."

_You don't know what you say._

"You may wait forever." She moved to touch him, brush her hand against his face. "You deserve better."

Withdrawing her hand, she moved to return to the hall, feeling shameful already for leaving him aghast and disappointed, for adding so much more to his hurt. She allowed one last glance, forcing herself to look upon the raw heartbreak she sowed. "Your first love may yet be your true one. She's a better person than me. Talk to Lady Margaery. Highgarden is hers now, it's her home, it's always been hers. But it could be both of yours."

All the lords reassembled at the head of the great hall. It had been apparent that Arthur was not the only one who needed a moment after hearing the news, and it took some time to gather all the attendants back into their seats. Sansa herself talked to few during the break, only seeing Talla and then assuring her that thank the Gods Samwell was safe in Winterfell. How many of these lords wondered the same, whether they had brothers or sisters or sons or daughters or fathers or mothers or friends or loved ones serving their Queen in the capital?

She took her seat at the edge again, with Margaery next to her, Arthur in the middle, and past him Paxter and Marion. A table of strangers in a room and castle full of strangers, save Brienne and Podrick in one small corner. She noticed that Margaery and Arthur were seated closer together now. Did they talk? She felt some measure of relief. For the young man's feelings, of course. But also for the release of an unwanted burden from her shoulders.

"This cannot stand," one of the lords began. It was Lord Piper, a bannerman of her uncle's, from the Riverlands. "She can't come here and burn our country! Our people!"

"What choice do we have," another asked. Warryn Beesbury. "We bent the knee to them for centuries because of the dragons. We threw them out when the dragons died. But they've returned, haven't they?"

"Are we men? Or are we slaves?" Roland Crakehall. She couldn't tell if he was more angry, or more
frightened. "Are we a realm ruled by men, or creatures?"

"Better to live a slave than burn..."

She lost count, as the assembly dissolved into chaos. Though he sat in the middle, she watched
Arthur slumped into his seat, the weight of the responsibility too much upon his young, grieving
shoulders. Uncle and niece exchanged a look, and Paxter Redwyne banged his fist upon the table
until the room fell into silence.

From the corner of the room, it was Brienne who rose unexpectedly, and Sansa could not help but
remember that she too had one whom she loved dearly who would have burned, whom her heart
must be crying out for still, despite her ever constant composure since he left her.

"My lords," she began, addressing the room. "When Jaime Lannister killed the Mad King, it was
because he ordered King's Landing burned to the ground." Many gasped, obviously never having
heard the truth of the Mad King's death before. "He was an honorable man, yet he bore the name
Kingslayer for the rest of his life. He told no one, and none knew of the half million people he
saved."

The room drowned to a hush, the weight of death heavy upon all.

Brienne continued. "Many of you fought with King Aerys during the rebellion, because you feared
what he would burn next. Some of you fought against him, because you feared what he would burn
next. I had no love for Queen Cersei." A subtle pause in her speech, one few others noticed. "I
feared she would do a great many horrible things. Maybe she could have been capable of burning
King's Landing, same as Daenerys.

But she didn't.

Jaime Lannister gave his name to save that city. Those men and women and children he saved are all
dead now. I know what I would give, to save what's left of the realm."

Watching the rest of the room take in her words, Sansa smiled at Brienne, who smiled back. Her
knight's speech came as a shock to her, the two of them having exchanged few words ever since she
let Jaime go, much less upon politics. Was Brienne doing this for her, Sansa wondered. Or to damn
her?

"She has an army," Paxter said. "We have an army. She has one dragon left, we have the tools to kill
it. She has dragonfire, we have wildfire."

"Lady Sansa brought the north together," Marion said, picking up where Paxter left off. "Are we
such cowards in the south, or sheep, in that we cannot speak as one?"

She wondered if the two men had talked and planned when she went to comfort Arthur, all their
prior conversations, made in the privacy of Margaery's solar, seeming mere children's words now, hit
hard as they all were by the truth of the present.

"Lord Marion speaks the truth," Arthur said, seemingly rising out of his funk, a sharp, determined
gleam in his eye like she'd never seen in him before, staring at her as he spoke. "Lady Sansa brought
the north together. She brought us together too. I sent the summons, but the words were hers. She
held us together as we waited. The northern kingdoms followed her to war, then peace. May she lead
us to the same as well!"

*This can't be happening. Please don't.* "Please, you give me too much credit, Lord Arthur," she
began nicely.
"But it's true." He stood. "I will follow no invader, no matter how many our cities she burns, no matter how many of our brothers she kills! Lady Sansa saw this war coming. We're prepared because of her. And I will fight for her, from this day until my dying day!" He moved to pull out his sword.

Shaking her head, backing away from him, she raised her hands in his direction, as if he were about to physically assault her. "You can't," she started rudely, before making an attempt to compose herself. "I can't. I'm of the north. These are your lands, not mine."

"She may not be a queen by any right," Roland shouted from the crowd. "All the realms wronged him, Ned Stark, all its damned kingdoms. We could've used more of his kind, aye, we'd be better off for it now. But it's not too late to right our wrongs...," he pulled out his sword, and Sansa sensed that it was truly over.

"We were all wrong," Roland shouted from the crowd. "All the realms wronged him, Ned Stark, all its damned kingdoms. We could've used more of his kind, aye, we'd be better off for it now. But it's not too late to right our wrongs...," he pulled out his sword, and Sansa sensed that it was truly over.

"Aye," Paxter said. He had watched the proceedings silently, as if he were still making up his mind. She suspected he would have wanted this for his niece Margaery, based upon all their talks. How quickly his mind changed, when he came to the same horrific realization. "First of Her Name, the Wolf who came South...our Queen of the Seven Kingdoms!"

Marion. "Protector of the Realm!"

Margaery. "To Sansa, the Kind!"

Arthur. "To Sansa, the Beloved!"
Finding Brienne in the back of her room, she saw her sword raised, her eyes grim, serious, yet reinvigorated for the first time since Jaime left, as if her focus and purpose had finally returned to her.

Closing her eyes, she found that she still could not drown out the sounds of swords unsheathing, no doubt for her, the lords chanting her own name as if it were a hymn that belonged solely to them now.

"Sansa of House Stark!"

"Queen of the Andals and the First Men!"

"The Queen that we want!"

"The Queen we choose!"

"Long May She Reign!"

 Appropriately, perhaps knowingly, she heard that last chant much less than the others.

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**Sansa**

The din died down, the cries faded, and when she opened her eyes, she saw Arthur holding out his chair in the middle of the table, waiting for her to take his place. Her mind frozen, she felt her legs betray her and bring her to the seat, aware of the eyes of half a country upon her now. The hall stilled to a silence, awaiting her first pronouncement as a Queen.

"Lord Marion," she said coldly, angry at him for his part in this, angry at all of them for setting this in motion, even Margaery, especially Margaery, not sure if she could ever forgive any of them.

"Your Grace," he replied, and for a second she wondered whom he was addressing.

"Prepare ravens to King's Landing. We know Lord Varys supports our endeavor in secret. Tell him to deliver our words to Yohn Royce and Tytos Blackwood. Write them of all the lords in the south and west who have declared against House Targaryen. We need their men, and they'll know to send them south. They'll also know to which Northern lords they can speak to.

"What about your brother," Paxter asked. "Will he turn to us, now that his sister is Queen?"

"I can't speak for what decision he'd make," she said, quickly and coldly. *Arya, you don't even know...you leave me for but a week and they make me a Queen...you'd probably find this funny, you'd know how much I hate this. But don't laugh too fast, this makes you a princess as well."

*Please don't fail me now. Or Jon.*

Seeking to change the topic, she addressed him back. "Lord Paxter. Lord Roland."

"Your Grace."

"Your Grace."

"By my last count we ought to be nearing eleven scorpions by now. Gather all your fighting men. Train them how to use them. Train them to shoot truer than Cersei's did."

"At once, Your Grace," Roland Crakehall said, bowing and leaving immediately to set upon the urgent task.
She stared at them all, dead eyed, awaiting her next pronouncement, seeking now to be led by her. Perhaps if she said nothing inspirational, they may yet retract all this horror. But it was too late, wasn't it? The moment she was announced Queen, she became a true rival of hers, an enemy who could no longer receive the smallest mercy.

"Lord Arthur."

"My Queen." His eyes seemed to proud of this atrocity he started. Had this been how Jon felt? Like he wanted to shit himself every second it was true? No wonder he bent the knee so quickly.

"Daenerys burned much of your grain during the battle along the Gold Road. Gather all the foodstuffs now and move them south of Highgarden, so that they do not stand in the way of her attack."

"Very wise, Your Grace."

"My lords," she said, addressing the entire room, a hall full of strangers, not trying to hide the resentment in her voice; they would think it meant for their enemy, rather than themselves. "The war is here. Most of you know well of war. For all our sakes, I hope you know it well enough."

Rising, she left the room before anyone else could get in a word, not caring who followed. No one, with any hope.

_____________________

Her chamber pot was full. As she vomited, she wished she could hide her face in there forever. But there was no more hiding for her now. Possibly not for the rest of her accursed life.

She says she's done playing the damned game, yet she outplays me still.

The castle was much emptier, most of the lords rallying their men in the camps outside, to proclaim their new 'one true queen'. She wandered the hallways, searching for a rare familiar face she did not hate. Brienne, hopefully, though the same was probably not true in reverse, barely noticing the boy walking opposite her until she heard him speak.

"Your Grace."

It was Beryn Dayne, bending the knee to her awkwardly. His uncle had not been present during her coronation of sorts, no doubt riding back to Dorne to relay Marion's message to his Prince. Her message, it had been. And her message, it truly was now.

Seized by the compulsion, she heard her own voice come out bitterly at the boy, breath still probably smelling of vomit. But she was the Queen now, and breath of bile her royal prerogative. "You know why the Lannisters always pay their debts?"

"I...I...don't know?" He did not expect her to actually speak to him.

"They make sure you're always the one who owes them." A bitter laugh. She remembered Cersei during the Blackwater, how she wouldn't leave her alone, her breath reeking of wine left in a barrel for a hundred years. Was she dead yet? If so, perhaps that was why she heard herself channeling Cersei's ghost.

The boy squinted at her, confused, one last innocent in this rotten world. "He helped name you queen, didn't he?"

"Yes, they all did, didn't they. They, who refuse to kneel to Daenerys...why do you think they're so
"eager to bend the knee to me?"

"Because they believe in you?"

She fought the urge to laugh. Or cry. Which it would be if she gave way, Sansa, First of her Name, wasn't sure.

"Here's your first lesson in this world, child. Men care only about themselves." Sensing he had no response, she continued. "They wish to defy Daenerys, so they do so in my name. If we win, I owe them a debt for naming me, I owe them my very crown. If we lose, they'll kneel because they're truly out of choices. And Daenerys will accept, because she can't burn every single lord in the realm, not when she needs them to rule the realm for her. But then, she wouldn't have to, would she? There's only one person she would need to burn...the false queen, the queen who came from the north, who lied and spread false words until the southern lords went into war against her...a queen who she despised before her crown. If she's the Queen of the Ashes, I'm to be the Queen who became Ash."

She had apparently given him enough cause to think, and Sansa felt guilty for corrupting this young boy, just as Cersei had corrupted her so long ago.

"But didn't you try to make Margaery queen?"

A pointed question. A good one, an unexpected one, one which she did not have an answer to.

"These are her people," she started, gaining confidence, though puzzled why she felt she needed to justify herself to this child just now, cutting as his question was. "This is her fight. I would die for my people, and happily too. But I'm an outsider here."

Yet she had sought to use Margaery's people for her fight, as a tool to help free the North, his words made her realize. Did she have any right to be upset by the fact that they turned it around upon her?

Narrowing his eyes, he suddenly, awkwardly pulled out his sword, raising it in the air even though he seemed barely able to handle its weight.

"I don't care about them. I'll fight for you, until my dying day. If you burn, I'll burn with you. Can that make me one of your people now?"

Ned Umber. She remembered his eyes, saw them in this child. Ned had been younger than he, of course. Ned had been named after her own father, before all the horrors began. Ned had almost been stripped of his ancestral home because of her. Ned had been loyal to her in Winterfell despite that, the innocence of a child overpowering a feud born by war and death. Ned died anyway, when the dead came. She would've cast the boy out of the North, had she her way, but he died still sworn to her, following her own orders.

When she didn't answer, Beryn suddenly remembered his place. Horrified, he quickly placed his sword back into his sheath, and looked around nervously.

"Your Grace...I'm sorry...I didn't mean to offend...I've never spoken to a Queen before..."

"Your words made your Queen uncomfortable," Sansa said. Gods, she was already speaking of herself that way already?

To his visible relief, a smile appeared on her face. "That is why your Queen needs to hear them, more than ever." She leaned down at him, his face still petrified, and Sansa regretted scaring him so. She needed to understand what impact her words had now upon others; the poor kid probably thought himself dead for half a minute. "Make me a promise, Beryn of House Dayne?"
"Wh..whatever Your...Your Grace com...commands?"

He was a sweet boy. Perhaps Bran would have resembled him. Or Rickon. If either one of them could have survived, truly survived, their ordeals.

"Always speak honestly with me. And I don't command this of you. I ask."

Instantly he knelt again, lowering his head in reverence. "Your Grace."

*And stop saying 'Your Grace' every other word. But that wish was beyond her now.*

"Maybe I should've said yes to him. That would've dampened his flame. I'm not sure what would be worse...marrying him...or this."

"He's a good lad," Brienne said, Podrick nodding beside her in agreement. "I don't know why you insist on not giving him a chance. I don't think it would have changed things either."

Sansa raised her eyes at her angrily. But it was only fair, if anyone had a right to pick at her personal life other than Arya, it was Brienne. Especially considering the damage she did to her love life.

"Lord Marion had things in hand anyway, though no doubt the heir to the Hightower name carried enough weight to put it through."

"You'd make a good match, the two of you," Podrick said, "two great names...North and South."

"He's just a boy."

Brienne frowned. "I don't understand. He's practically your age."

Sansa shook her head. How could she not understand this?

"He hasn't been through what I've been through."

"My lady," Brienne said, after considering her words for a moment. "Your Grace," she corrected, "if that is your requirement, you would find none except the dead or the insane."

"You're right. If we don't win this war, I'll wed nothing but ashes." She looked at Brienne's steely eyes, trying to find her inner strength, trying to draw some out for herself. "I suppose this makes you the head of my Queensguard."

Suddenly she knelt on the ground, Podrick following suit next to her, a reaction Sansa was already tired of eliciting.

"It would be my honor, my Queen."

"You started this, you know."

"Your Grace," Brienne protested, terrified. Again, Sansa reminded herself that she needed to be mindful of the effect of her words as a queen. Even with Brienne. "When I spoke, I had no idea the lords would react..."

"When you found me in the snow, I meant," Sansa said softly, her voice trembling. "You were the first to pledge your sword to me. I couldn't even remember all the words..." Theon had been there too. What would he think of her now? What would they all think of her, all whom she'd lost?
"And I stand proud to honor my pledge to you in the war to come," Brienne said, rising again. "If you burn, I burn beside you."

Podrick nodded, but Sansa thought she saw some doubt in his eyes at her remark.

"I'm not afraid to burn, not after everything I've been through," Sansa said, looking out their small window.

*An A Queen looking over her domains.*

"I've no right to fear it either, not after so many innocents have already suffered the same fate. I deserve it more than they."

The winter sun was already low, and in the distance, in the direction King's Landing was, she saw one lonely cloud in the sky, and wondered if it could be the last dragon.

"It's everything else I'm afraid of."

Chapter End Notes

Shit. That happened. And to clarify, Sansa is not happy, this is not what she wanted. But this is what she got, especially after she refused Margaery's offer of escape.

But that was a hell of a fun chapter to write.

I know some of you may have been expecting to read of the battle at King's Landing. It happened pretty much same as canon, and it's in the past by the time of this chapter, and I try to avoid writing scene mimicking ones in the show.

However, this concludes act II of this little story, as we are near the end of Season 8's events. There's more action to come, and plenty more places for all the characters to go in the final act.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Jon and Sansa make plans.

Chapter Notes

I'm a big sucker for military maneuvers, and got a bit carried away in this chapter. It may be easier to follow if you pull up a detailed map of Westeros, especially one showing mountains and rivers, etc.

The mountains of the Westerlands don't seem to have a name in canon, so I'm just referring to them as the Western Hills here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jon


He understood little of the words in her speech, delivered in foreign tongues, but he recognized those words. And her voice when speaking of those places had been been neither conciliatory nor peaceful.

He knew what he must do. He *thought* he knew what he must do. Tyrion thought he knew what Jon must do. Tyrion, the Half-Man, who could not do the killing himself, who could only speak murder into others with his words. The guilt oozed out of his skin when they spoke in the cell, that the Hand could not compel his queen to listen to his counsel upon this last, and most critical occasion.

Tyrion wasn't the only only at fault though. Jon knew he held his share in this bloodshed as well. Tyrion had expected it, feared it, for better or worse, as did Varys. But he had not seen it coming at all. Charging through the gates, he expected the slaughter of the Lannister forces, the Golden Company. He expected that she would melt the Red Keep itself, along with Cersei Lannister and the Kingslayer, whom Tyrion had let escape one last time, a treason that, in hindsight, should not have come as a surprise to anyone.

Though freeing the Kingslayer was his crime, a futile one, considering he would've likely died with his sister had he even made it to the Keep, Jon suspected that Tyrion's end was inevitable, even were Jaime Lannister was still chained up on Dragonstone. The Half Man quit his position, he quit her before all her armies, and he embarrassed her in doing so. But should it be this way? Could no one walk away from their Queen without dying? Was this how Aegon, his namesake, had subjugated the kingdoms in the first place, to be sung and praised over the next two hundred years?

He knew where to find her. She made sure her damned chair survived, that was clear, looking up the steps to what used to be the throne room. There was no Drogon though, that was strange. Dragons were intelligent, and perhaps even her last dragon had had enough of the bloodless ashes it left in its
wake. Did he share her bloodlust, or had Drogon no choice but to follow her, same as him?

Had Arya gotten to her before him? He had been surprised to find her at the gates, after the battle. Apparently she had arrived just after the slaughter, thank the Gods. He didn't know how he could live with himself had she been caught in that conflagration. He saw death in her eyes, but Arya respected him, he suspected, and she would give him a chance before committing the deed herself. And he would do it for her too, because whatever his sister was now, she did not have the blood of a dragon.

But neither Arya nor Sansa were blameless in this slaughter. They had to provoke her, had to look down upon her, until she started imagining from them impossible treasons...except they turned out to be very possible, hadn't they? He should have fought Dany there, at the Crossroads, and just let Sansa go back to Winterfell. Daenerys may have continued to suspect, she certainly did when Sansa was in the west, but they would not have given her the chance to sow the seeds of discontent in every direction. But Jon had been blinded by his own rage towards her at the time as well, for her betrayal of her vow, for her defiance of Dany and himself. He had wanted to punish her, to teach her a lesson, that she must obey her new Queen, because that was her duty, just as their father bent the knee to King Robert. Just as all the lords who fought for the Mad King bent the knee to King Robert, else none of them could have enjoyed the long peace of their childhood.

Walking up the steps, slowly, one at a time, he wondered if he could give her one last chance...one last chance for her life...one last chance to not force him to become an oathbreaker himself. He owed her that, for what she did for the North, for her love for him, for his love for her. If only she could show a hint of regret, acknowledge she had gone too far, vow for an end, a true end to the war, promise to treat with rather than burn the lords in the south...spare Sansa...

A rough tap on his shoulders.

"Snow."

"Khal Madri?" Where had he come from? This complicated things for him. He would have to kill him first. Who would that alert? Certainly Dany, up in the throne room. Perhaps Drogon too, wherever he was lurking.

"Dragonpit," he said.

"Dragonpit?"

"Queen summons you. Dragonpit."

She wasn't here. She had gone to the Dragonpit, where they had once met as one realm, before all the many betrayals. Was it time to pay the price for his betrayal now? Did she know, had word of his conversation with Tyrion spread to her ears? Or did she merely suspect now, and that was all she needed to deliver the sentence?

"Why?"

"Bad queen caught and brother. Fire."

So they had survived the collapse of the castle after all, though it didn't do them much good. Jon shuddered. He was tired of seeing fire. Cersei did deserve it, he didn't doubt, and he caught himself thinking that Sansa would want be present to see it happen. But she and Cersei had more in common now, didn't they? The plots, the schemes...the fate they may both face, and Jon wondered whether he had lost his last chance to end this war. Not without having to kill the Dothraki guards, Grey Worm,
and whomever stood in his way, only to feel the dragon's fire before he got to her.

The rough hand pulled him back as he walked down the steps, and for a second he wondered if the Khal could read his poisonous thoughts. But his hand held out a scroll rather than a weapon.

"Varys."

One more soul he had watched burn. The first of the battle, really. And all that Varys had feared had come to pass. He took the scroll. They must have intercepted it, with no Spider to deliver it to. There was no mark or sigil on the seal, but instantly he knew from whom it came from. Even if it wasn't her handwriting, the words were likely hers. If he read it, he would have to stare her treason in the face.

He handed it back to the Khal, unopened.

"Give it to Yohn Royce of the Vale." Extending both his arms facing outwards in a way that resembled a woman's breasts, he balled one hand into a fist and pounded it against his chest to convey as best he could the giant breastplate the old lord always wore. "We can trust him."

The Khal nodded dutifully, understanding his message, and left for his horse at the foot of the steps. There were plenty of open spaces for a horse to ride through in King's Landing after the battle.

It was still snowing lightly when he reached the Dragonpit. He was almost the last to arrive, the Khal riding in several minutes after him after delivering the scroll. This time he came bringing something else: the former Hand, bound on the back of his horse.

Davos was already there, and Jon took his place by his side. He couldn't bear to look at the old man's eyes. He had been expecting Davos to deliver him the same speech Tyrion had. He didn't. Was it because even Davos had finally lost faith in that he would listen?

He saw the Kingslayer, face mixed between disgust and indifference as usual, the Khal dragging Tyrion next him. At the head of the small circle stood the queen, the woman he loved...the woman he had just gone to murder. He had never seen such hatred in her eyes before, not that the person of the ire, standing before them all in the middle of the circle, wasn't a worthy recipient. Cersei Lannister, formerly the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, was not bound like her brothers. It mattered not, there was no escape for her. He could see the small bulge in her stomach, and while he had known of it ever since they took Jaime the first time, it still jarred him to see it with his own eyes, knowing that he was about to witness yet another child burn.

He would give her credit, the former queen stood stone faced before her conqueror. Yet he saw cracks in her facade, eyes not as hardened as the rest her face, eyes that trembled just like her lips.

As the Dothraki set Tyrion down, the queen chose to address him first.

"It looks like your treason was for naught." Turning towards Yara Greyjoy, who stood beside her now, Daenerys beamed, as she did when she spoke before the city earlier, her harshness taking little away from her beauty. Enhancing it, even. "Queen Yara found the usurper and her brother trying to escape the harbor, after refusing our terms before the battle. More than anyone, she has earned her crown, and my gratitude."

The Ironborn Queen was steel faced, but even she seemed touched by the high praise. "My crown serves your crown, my Queen."

"My life is forfeit, I know." She spoke without prompting, though it should have been no surprise the former queen did not yield the precedence to her captor, even as she stared at the face of her own
death. "I have blood on my hands, as do my brothers. Do with our bodies what you wish. But my child...my child is innocent, my child has not harmed anyone."

"Your pupil did well," Daenerys interrupted, catching Cersei off guard. "She learned from you. She's eager yet to replace you."

When she next spoke, she did so with violet eyes staring directly at Jon. "Sansa Stark has declared herself Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. She has no blood. No right. No justice. No dragon. Yet she declares so all the same." He barely heard her next words as she turned to address Cersei again. "I have good faith that the child of Cersei Lannister will be no innocent. That more blood will be shed to defend a usurper's memory."

"It can't be," Jon protested, aware how everyone in the pit, including the three Lannisters...especially all three Lannisters, were struck dumbfounded by the news. "This must be a mistake."

Daenerys nodded, and Grey Worm handed him an opened scroll. At first he wondered whether it had been the one he held by the steps of the Keep, but then he saw the broken seal, this one two halves of a lone direwolf. Opening it, he saw that it was indeed his own sister's handwriting, neat, perfect...damning.

"The Targaryen invader has burned King's Landing and all its peoples. If you would burn before you kneel to hundreds years more of subjugation, I ask you to call your banners one last time across the Realm, from Sunspear to the Wall, as the lords of the South and West have declared so in Highgarden, as the lords of the northern three have declared in spirit.

Sansa I of House STARK, QUEEN of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the REALM, as named by her PEOPLES."

The small piece of paper slipped from his hand and fell upon the sandy surface below.

"A mistake?" She had watched keenly his entire reaction. "A mistake which will soon be corrected. Like the one before me."

"Please," Cersei began, her composure suddenly fracturing into a million pieces, "I had nothing to do...I told her nothing...please...I want my child to live. I want my child to live."

Her words moved neither the dragon or its mother. Behind her, Jaime looked mournfully at the ground, having already accepted what was to come. Even Tyrion's face was contorted in sorrow, despite all the unreconciled grudges between them. Cersei's legs looked as if they may give, but yet she continued to stand while Drogon bent his head forward towards her, the terror of the beast no comparison to the terror she felt for the child in her womb.

"I want my child to live. I want my child to live." If it were a prayer, it would never find its answer.

"Cersei of House Lannister," she whispered, in a voice even softer than that night in Dragonstone when Varys burned, "usurper of the throne, tyrant of the realm...I sentence you to die."

She continued crying as the flames engulfed her, and Jon imagined the sound of her weeping for several seconds before they transformed into screams. Then thankfully, nothing but silence except for the crackle of the flames. The Kingslayer averted his eyes the entire time, while his brother stared at the entire execution in horror, just as he had at Varys. And the Tarly's, he imagined. And all of King's Landing.

As what remained of her body collapsed onto the ground, a ground where they once all met as one realm, two Queens and one King, he heard a yell, a primal screech of pain and rage and grief. It was
the Kingslayer, and it lasted for several seconds, though it felt like hours. Then, blessed quiet, Jaime's face blank and dull, as if he had witnessed none of the horrors before him.

"This is enough," he said, stepping forward. "Enough people have burned. Enough people have died. Cersei is dead..."

"Yet another takes her place." Her eyes were ice cold now. He dared not remember the Night King, so as not to have to compare the two. "I could have spared Sansa before. Allowed her small treasons within the confinement of a castle. But her crimes are beyond mercy now. Before which queen do you kneel, Jon Snow?"

*Neither*, he thought. Sansa...a queen? Of all Seven Kingdoms? The idea was absolutely ludicrous, and he would think it a joke still, were it not for the scroll he just read, unquestionable proof of it. Part of him still could not declare against Daenerys, even as he had been about to kill her near an hour ago. Even if he did declare for Sansa now, what good would it do? It was a futile cause, Sansa had no chance at winning this war, and Jon couldn't help but think her new lofty title as one last childish tantrum from his sister, denying the truth until the very end. And if he were dumb enough to declare his support for Sansa now, out of all places, that would end any chance at him...*doing his duty? Breaking his vow, his word? Protecting the realm?*

Aware of all the eyes in the Dragonpit upon him, he was no closer to a response when one of the Unsullied watched up to Daenerys and whisper into her ear. Though her eyes grew with rage, they still remained fixed upon him.

The Unsullied soldier stepped away. When she spoke again, her voice was a barely held scream. "All my armies have left me, Jon Snow. The armies of the North, the Vale, the Riverlands, have abandoned their camps upon, I imagine, the commands of your traitor sister." She took three steps towards him, Grey Worm trailing her every step.

"What do you know about this?"

*That scroll.* The one he had instructed the Khal deliver to Yohn Royce. He had suspected its contents, hadn't he, though the depth of the treason he could have never guessed. She'd find out the truth anyway, once she spoke with the Khal, once they put everything together, any lie he told now would be meaningless.

When he still didn't speak, Daenerys turned to Yara. "Consider the three northern kingdoms in open rebellion against the throne, along with their Lady. House Stark has forfeited Winterfell by way of their rebellion. It ought to be held by a much worthier, loyal House."

Immediately Yara knelt before her. "What do you ask of me, my Queen?"

Gently, she could still be gentle, she beckoned her to rise. "Sail your ships north. No reaping. But make war along the coast of the rebellious kingdoms. White Harbor. Runestone. Gulltown."

"With pleasure, Your Grace."

"You can't," Jon said, suddenly.

"I can't," she answered incredulously. "I'm the Queen. My kingdoms have declared war against me."

"They fought for you! At Winterfell! At King's Landing! You can't go and burn down their homes!"

"Their lords should have considered that before betraying me." She looked towards the remaining Lannisters. "Lock them in the Black Cells. Give the Kingslayer some time to contemplate the sins of
his family tonight." Raising her voice to address the hundreds of Unsullied and Dothraki standing
guard outside their smaller circle, she proclaimed. "The last of the traitors will be punished tomorrow. I will ride and destroy the armies who chose to run, and we will take back this realm from any who would proclaim themselves an usurper..."

"Are you going to burn the entire realm?" The anger in his outburst came as a surprise to him. "Are you going to burn every man, woman and children just like the hundreds of thousands you burned here? Do you really think that will win you the hearts of all the realm, win you their love, their loyalty? Is that the kingdom you wish to rule, is that the wheel you wish to break? The living itself?"

She regarded him coldly, almost finding humor in his words, in the fact that he could finally speak so harshly at her, and in this moment he felt an intense hatred, for what she was, for what she could have been, for what she had become, this monster, yet the woman he still loved. And he hated himself for still loving her, even now. His hand found itself moving towards Longclaw, as that primal, that instinctual part of his mind studied his surroundings, taking count of the Unsullied and Dothraki and all of them, calculating how long it would take to reach her, before they stepped in to defend her. Whether he had a chance against every man and dragon in the Dragonpit.

"I see Jon Snow has chosen the path of treason as well," she said coldly, though he saw the fear in her eyes. Suddenly a dozen Unsullied soldiers surrounded him, and he heard the shrieking of the Dothraki warriors. He could fight them all, yet he would never get close to her. Never again. Yet he breathed a sigh of relief, because he still didn't know whether he could've done it, even had he slaughtered every Unsullied and Dothraki gathered to stand before her, sword in hand.

"Take Jon Snow to Dragonstone. He will be dealt with when the war is over."

As Grey Worm unceremoniously grabbed Longclaw from him, as he felt the prod of spears at his back, his mind turned to one last hope.

Arya. Do something. I don't know what you can do, but do something.

Save your foolish sister.

Save us all.

Sansa

The map. The board. The pieces. That's what had started all this, hadn't it? When she looked at the map and thought of the dragon asleep and wondered if that gave her a chance. She had thought it so easy then, the lines, the armies to move at will, just pieces on board. She knew better by The Twins. She knew much better now.

"Your Grace..."

If she heard those words one more time she would need to step out and vomit again. She needed a stronger stomach.

"...we need to vacate Highgarden at once. Send them to the mountains, scatter them in each different valley and ridge, so she can't burn us all at once..."

"With all respect, Lord Paxter," Roland said, "that'll leave us vulnerable to her dragons and her armies. At least together, she can't beat us with a clean battle. All we need is one lucky shot."

"Like Cersei had when she took King's Landing," Paxter rebutted. "Give each command several
scorpions. Make her chase us, find us in the hills." He pointed out to the mountains south of Highgarden. "The Red Mountains will eat up her armies, and we can hide the scorpions in forests and cliffs."

Marion shook his head. "It's too close to Dorne. I've yet word from Ser Mortimer."

"What did you offer them?" Roland asked Marion, who looked naturally now, Gods the man was smooth, to her for permission. Which she gave.

"The West. Casterly Rock."

"It's a good offer," Roland said, after considering it. He himself was a western lord, after all, and this determined who his new liege lord would be, his and Marion's. "Cersei would not have liked it, but it's a good offer."

"Cersei's not much in a place to like anything now," Marion said, his voice not at all unaffected by his queen's death. Pointing near Lannisport, he said thoughtfully, "the Western Hills are more secure were Dorne to reject our advances. They would be a longer march however, through exposed terrain."

"If the northern armies do desert her," Brienne said, Sansa insisting, with little objection encountered, of her place at the table, "they'll reach the Western Hills before the Red Mountains."

"Have we heard from them," Sansa asked. It was ironic, the mystery being her own lords, the men who respected her the most, the soldiers who fought for her at The Twins, yet there was still the chance that they would become her enemy, while she led a group of strangers. She hoped they remembered her, that they did not forget the cause she led through the flames of King's Landing.

"Not yet, I'm afraid. If they do abandon Daenerys, we may not be able to fix upon their locations. It'll all depend on the standard of ravenry in their camps. If we leave Highgarden...we may lose all contact with them."

"If they're smart," Paxter said, "they'd divide their armies too, same as us, in case the Dragon Queen decides to chase them first and burn them before they can reach us."

"Why not stay here," Arthur suddenly said, after having maintained a relative quiet observing his elders discuss the war thus far. Next to him stood Margaery, who shot a sudden worried look at him, one which he obviously failed to notice. "Let them try to take us in a siege."

Paxter scoffed. Almost too meanly, Sansa feared. "Highgarden couldn't hold against the Lannisters. And the Lannisters couldn't hold King's Landing against the Dragon Queen."

"It's different though," Arthur insisted. "The Lannisters had the Kingslayer. He's worth five thousand men in the field, I saw that myself. Highgarden is small, but the gardens offer tree cover for the scorpions. We have enough to cover every direction."

"The top," Margaery asked. She was clearly biased. Having just reclaimed her home, she clearly had no urge to present it as an easy target for the last dragon. Sansa knew she could not allow sentiment to sway her decision though, regardless of whose homes or men were placed in harm's way.

"We may have one or two to spare, depending on her approach," another voice, Lord Dremin Ashford, one of the few lords to have survived Stannis Baratheon's last campaign. "Highgarden gives the northern armies a place to meet. By the time her foreign scum arrive, we'll far outnumber her."
"One place to all get burnt together," Paxter protested.

"Not if we engage them in battle on the field. She wouldn't burn her own men."

Marion was skeptical. "She wouldn't?"

"Your Grace," Roland asked now, and Sansa thought about how simple it had been, when it was just Jaime arguing with her uncle. More armies, more strange lords, more names of mountains and rivers and cities she'd never seen, it had been a struggle for her to follow at first, but she forced herself to learn quickly. She had no other choice.

"Are these our only options," Sansa asked.

"Aye, there's thousands more," Roland said, looking back at the map and she almost thought he would go ahead and list them all. But then he shook his head. "Not many more that make a lot of sense though."

Wolf. Fish. Falcon. The sigils representing her own home. Her blood. The pieces furthest away from her.

"Send as many riders as you can. Ride all the roads between King's Landing and here. We need to know as best we can what help we can get, and where they are."

"It will be done at once," Paxter nodded, and Sansa gulped, the finality of the first men she would send to their possible deaths as a Queen.

"It seems the success of any one of these plans ultimately relies on getting a lucky shot on the dragon."

Marion swallowed uncomfortably. "I'm afraid that would be close to accurate, Your Grace."

"If we stay at Highgarden, we can build more," Arthur said, rather uselessly.

"If we send half the armies to the western hills and the other half to the southern hills," Sansa said, talking herself through all she had just heard, "I imagine the difficulty would be to recombine them."

"Correct, Your Grace."

"Would there be any advantage to that?" It combined Roland's and Paxter's suggestions. She remembered the last time she had split her armies, when Jaime Lannister argued against it. It had been a bad move then. But was that always a bad move? Hadn't the Golden Company gotten an advantage over them by doing the same?

Paxter thought through her idea. "Confusion. It'll force her to chase us on opposite sides of the Reach. She won't be able to wipe us out with one breath of the dragon."

"Aye, she'd only need two," Warryn Beesbury said. A useless comment, which few at the table acknowledged.

"If we send the larger of our hosts to the west," Roland said, moving the pieces around, "they may yet outnumber her men, provided they can join with the Northmen."

"Send them in two different directions," Warryn snarled, "hells, why not three, or four, or five?"

He was a problem. She wished she could remove him from the war council, except she could not ignore the men he had indeed brought to Highgarden. Nevertheless, Sansa was about to reprimand
him for his insolence when she observed Aemon Estermont frown, staring further upon the map.

"I've more men I can call from the Stormlands," he said, deep in thought, "more lords that may answer the call once they hear of what she did to King's Landing...and once they hear of the Wolf in the south." Moving one piece towards Storm's End, he continued, "give me some men to take east, and we can join by the old ruins of Summerhall. The hills will give us shelter there as well. We may then ride back west back to Horn Hill, or north to the Westerlands."

"Three armies then, each division weakening each further." Marion was skeptical, but he was her most clever adviser. She studied Aemon's manner. That was a Targaryen name, wasn't it? Could he be trusted? Arya thought not. He was from the Stormlands, which meant Margaery knew less of him, everything relying upon Paxter's trust of the man from a long lost youth. And to further split...hadn't she almost lost the Riverlands when she didn't listen to Jaime and divided her armies? How much worse was three?

"Aye, but numbers matter less in the hills. And less against a dragon." Exchanging a look with his friend, she noticed Paxter biting his fingernails while he considered the varying plans, a habit she hadn't witnessed from him before. "It gives us better maneuverability. It makes her underestimate us. If she ever separates her men from her dragons, we can attack her armies from any direction, chip away at them, and run back to the hills before her dragon can find us."

"Summerhall is closer to Dorne than Horn Hill," Marion countered. "We'll need to be sure of their intentions..."

"We know our hills better than they know our hills," Aemon replied. "I trust Paxter and Lady Talla's men know their side of the Red Mountains better than the Dornishmen."

They both nodded, the poor Lady Talla standing silently and looking terrified. Sansa sympathized with her. How long ago had she been the same shy girl? Was it before the Battle of the Bastards, when no one, not even her brother, not even the kind Ser Davos, thought to ask her how to wage the war against a stranger they'd never met?

"Lady Tarly," she said, startling the woman to jump. Sansa smiled warmly at her; had they not talked as mere equals, lady to lady, just several nights prior? "I apologize, that we may need to intrude upon your ancestral home with an army."

"Your Grace," she said bowing, "no, it is an honor. My father was a military man himself and he would be proud if...he would be proud."

"Thank you, Lady Tarly." Sansa wasn't sure what Talla didn't say about her father, but based on the stories about the late Randyll she'd heard from Samwell, as well as Margaery and the other lords here, it'd likely have to do with herself, a woman, leading an army into Horn Hill. "Dividing the army into three works," she said, looking at Paxter. "As Lord Paxter says, numbers matter little against a dragon. Were she to wipe one out, the war still continues."

Marion was clever, but Paxter knew better of war. He was no Jaime Lannister, she didn't think, not without having had the chance to lead rather than follow, but she would have to trust these strange southern men, at least until her northern armies came. If her northern armies came.

"If Dorne turns," Marion said, recognizing the way she was leaning now, "we would have two armies in the south they could join with, and we can dictate better where they would turn up so as to be more impactful."

"But who goes where," Warryn grumbled, apparently not satisfied that his haphazard insult had
actually been heeded, that they had, however indirectly, led to a plan. "It's enough to lose count, twistin' yerself around like that."

"For some men perhaps," Sansa said, eyeing Warryn meanly, having had enough of his impudence. No one laughed openly, but she noticed a few chuckles. So did Warryn, who backed away from the table. "I imagine we would want to send men to grounds they are familiar with. Lord Estermont goes east. Lord Crakehall, you ought to accompany the western army north."

"Aye, I know those mountains," Roland replied. "We'll camp near Silverhill. Send yer ravens there, and we'll get the message."

"Lord Paxter, you used to hunt with Randyll Tarly on his lands?"

"Aye, Your Grace. I'll take charge of the retreat south. Lady Margaery and Lord Hightower can ride with me as well."

"The terrain in the Riverlands is similar to the Stormlands," Marion added. "Lords Piper and Smallwood should accompany Lord Aemon east." He turned to her. "Most importantly, Your Grace, is where you will ride."

There it was, the uncomfortable knowledge that she was the most important piece on the Cyvasse board, the one Daenerys would pursue before all else. Recalling Bran's words at another war council, she said, "Daenerys would want to burn me first, I'd imagine. Kill the rival queen, the war ends, the southern lords will bend the knee."

"Not an unreasonable assumption," Marion said.

"She'd expect me to ride north, to join as quick as I can the same lords who followed me to war against Cersei. The closest position that would be is Silverhill, with Lord Roland."

Realization dawned in his face, but to his credit, he met it bravely. "We'll take care of the dragon for you, Your Grace. Or die tryin'."

"There's no need for a meaningless sacrifice," Sansa said, feeling a reluctance to part with a man who seemed may be just as dedicated to her as Brienne. Looking at the map further, she said, "there are mountains still, further north from Silverhill."

"Aye, and caves and plenty of places for men to hide." Roland blushed. "Queens too."

Sansa nodded. "Then we trick her. No open declarations, but whispers that the Queen rides north will do. With any luck, she may spend days scouring the hills for me. That gives her more time in the air for that lucky shot."

"It tempts her to leave her armies behind her too," Paxter said. He turned to Roland. "And it buy's time for Aemon to return south with more men, and for us to regroup. Spare a few legions north with some scorpions, so that she may believe the Queen is with them. Leave most of your men closer south, between the Gold Road and the Rose Road. Join with any northern armies as they arrive, and we may be strong enough to attack any of her remaining men while they trail her."

"I'll accompany you, Lord Roland," Margaery said, to the surprise of everyone, her own uncle most of all. Ignoring him, she continued. "The Queen would not ride openly north. But let them see me and think they sent both of us useless women together," she said, winking at Sansa. "I'm sure I can help Lord Roland convince the northern lords the safety of their Queen."

"My ni...Lady Margaery," Paxter protested, unhappy at this new development, "this makes you
dragonbait. The Arbor will be much safer for you."

Margaery smiled. "We're all dragonbait, dear uncle. And I don't deserve to be any safer than anyone else." They all looked to her again, and Margaery bowed. "With Your Grace's permission?"

"Lord Roland, I presume there are plenty of caves and holdouts where Lady Margaery can hide?" Sansa would have preferred to have her friend accompany her instead, but the idea made sense. As long as she could be assured that the danger was not too significant, considering Margaery would be drawing the Dragon Queen's ire on her behalf.

"Lady Margaery will be safe, I promise."

"And I trust the sword of my own betrothed will protect me as well," she said, putting her arm around the blushing Arthur. Thankfully, if anyone could induce the young man to forget about his most recent declarations of love, it was the former queen.

Paxter grumbled, but said no more. "Your Grace, you'll ride with me to Horn Hill?" She nodded. "If we hear word of success in the north, we'll combine with Aemon's men to finish them off. If not...," he paled, "we can give battle in the mountains for some years to come."

That was wishful thinking, and Sansa wondered if he knew it as well. Paxter Redwyne may fight until the end, but the longer the war dragged, the more likely more and more of his own lords would abandon them bend the knee one by one. They needed that lucky shot.

"If by chance she does not fall for the northern trick," Sansa said, "then Lord Roland's armies and whomever comes to our side may attack her armies in the rear?" The language of war was becoming more and more familiar to her with every word.

"We'll come out screamin' from the hills," Roland said, his eyes actually beaming at the idea. "Then we'll run screamin' back, hopin' her dragon don't catch us."

The pieces that had once been tidy lay scattered now, a mess upon the lower half of the map.

"It's a plan," Roland concluded. "Not much of one, but no plan finds itself carried through anyway. This one at least gives us more ways to run."

Chapter End Notes

One war ends, and a new war begins.

So there were some changes to how the battle of King's Landing went. And as Jon mentioned, Arya managed to get there just at the tail end of the battle, so she was never caught up in the action like in the show. Still doesn't make her any less pissed at Dany though.

As usual, thank you to all for reading and reviewing this story!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Tyrion feels sorry for himself. Arya tries to help her family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Tyrion**

Failure. That would be the only legacy he'd leave behind in this rotten world. King's Landing, whose people he had once damned, a city which he tried to protect twice, once from within its walls, once from without, was all but gone, save for perhaps a few hundred or thousand, unlucky survivors who would inherit nothing but ash and death at the feet of a mad queen.

"I'm sorry," he said. Neither he and Jaime had said a word since the Dragonpit. Cersei's death had always been inevitable. In fact, he had long suspected she would burn, exactly as she did, even as they were setting sail through the Narrow Sea, when the idea of his sister burning did not take on such dreadful understones. But witnessing it himself had been more than what he thought he could've stomached. Perhaps it was made harder by the thousands of bodies he waded past in the aftermath of the battle, stepping through them as what used to be men and women turned to as at his own feet, any appetite he ever had for fire permanently quelled by that experience.

He would not have watched her die though, had he the choice. That was the price of his last treason, he supposed, that he would have to watch with his own eyes the inevitable fruits of all his labors ever since the first time he spilled the blood of his kin, watching his own father succumb to the wounds he inflicted with that accursed crossbow.

"No need to dwell upon it," Jaime muttered beside him, even though that was exactly what his own brother was probably doing. "We'll be getting the same treatment tomorrow."

"It'll hurt," Tyrion said. "It'll be quick, I think. One blessing of Dragonfire. Really bad, but quicker than the way Stannis burned them."

Neither one of them were strangers to the cells, though Jaime had only been a visitor, this being his first extended stay in the bowels of the Red Keep, what was left of it, anyway. Not that it would be a long one. In the corner lay another prisoner, clad in armor, head slumped in defeat yet chest still heaving, intruding in to their conversation. Not that it mattered, for any one of them. What use was privacy before death?

"It would have been simpler had we died at Winterfell," he continued. "We could have died thinking that we saved the world, blissfully unaware we would ruin it anyway."

"You're the one who ruined it," Jaime said, not angrily, but just making sure he wasn't going to bear the weight of his brother's sins on his own shoulders.

"I brought Daenerys upon our shores, that's true. She probably would've come anyway, but I brought her to this point, I don't deny. But Cersei was all yours, and had she not continued to push
her...had Sansa not continued to push her..."

"Daenerys burned the city. Not Cersei. Not Sansa. You're smart enough to understand that."

"I know," he said, afraid to meet his brother's eyes. Had he not lectured Jaime himself in Winterfell about Cersei's true nature? "Can you forgive me?"

"We're all beyond forgiving...but yes." Their eyes met again, Jaime's gentle, sad but as peaceful as he'd ever seen. "Between us...there's no debts. There never were. You're my brother."

"Do you fear what comes after?"

It took awhile for Jaime to shake his head. "Can't be worse than this."

"The septons were all lying idiots and cunts anyway," Tyrion said, trying to comfort himself, "hypocrites, the whole lot of them."

Jon Snow said he felt nothing in between his lives. If only Tyrion could be so lucky. He wondered if whatever brought Jon Snow back from the dead would laugh at how the dumb boy had brought himself to its brink once more, out of the same symptoms of foolishness and honor.

"There's something though, I think. After we die. Be ironic if I came back as her next dragon...doomed to obey her every bloody command until the end of time. Not unlike those dead things you made deader at Winterfell."

"She'll die too," Jaime said plainly. "She's made too many enemies now...too many reasons for everyone to want her dead. Maybe Sansa will actually be the one who puts her out of her misery."

"Queen Sansa," Tyrion said, still incredulous at the very idea. "She doesn't have a chance. Yet I never would have imagined her calling herself a Queen either. At least not claiming all seven kingdoms." He blinked, looking at Jaime. "Where did that come from?"

His other words got the attention of the third prisoner in the cell, and Tyrion thought he could place the face from somewhere, in his recent past no less.

"Hells if I know," Jaime said, shrugging. "She was a sad, moping girl when I left her. Probably something to do with our uncle Marion though. He seemed quite taken by her."

"Ah, uncle Marion. What our own father could have been, had he even half a soul."

"Lady Sansa...," the other man said, a young voice. "She's...she declared herself queen?"

Jaime recognized him. "Lord Alac. That...yes she did...that's what they told us at the Dragonpit."

"Arthur," he gasped. "He'd be right at her side. He's been devoted to her from the moment he laid eyes on her."

"Too bad we can't send him a raven, tell him to smarten up," Tyrion said, "so he doesn't follow his brother into the fire."

"How did they get you," Jaime asked, confinement not dampening his idle curiosity.

"We were defending the throne room," he explained, "the last of us. I told my men, we die fighting. Some of us did. But when that dragon popped that hideous head right in our face...well, all the courage and shit just came right out of me...it was like I couldn't even move. They killed some of us anyway. The others, I imagine they're around, till the next round of burning, at least."
Jaime raised his eyes, looking bitterly at Tyrion, in a way that told him he still blamed him yet a little for the Dragon Queen's crimes. "Sounds like she wants a few more days of kindling."

"She's got seven kingdoms of it." He heard his own words, and recoiled in horror. "I gave her seven kingdoms of it."

"You're too hard on yourself," Jaime said, words filled with vinegar if not piss until the very last. "You were losing her the war until she unleashed the dragon. In the end, it was mostly the dragons. I'd say, actually, all the dragons."

"Yes," Tyrion said, "my counsel proved to be unhelpful or unheeded. A failure to the very last...father would be laughing in his grave."

"Are you shits going to just keep talking? Or would you actually do something if I let you go?"

A girl's voice, materializing out of nowhere. Tyrion swirled his head to see the door to the cell open, a small woman standing where it had stood.

"Lady Stark."

"Guess it's Princess Stark now. Would've been nice if she could have given me fair warning."

"What happened," Tyrion asked rather stupidly. "How did it happened?"

Arya Stark shook her head. "I don't know. She was playing your southern lords when I left. Too well, I'm afraid...this isn't what she wanted."

"I'd imagine not," Jaime said knowingly. "First in line to burn...Sansa's too smart for that."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Tyrion said. "I half expected her to burn at the Crossroads."

"Didn't stop you from bringing her. Don't let her burn now."

"And how do you intend we do that," Jaime asked. Scornfully, but intrigued nevertheless. He wondered if his brother still felt any sort of protectiveness for his former charge.

"Kill her. Kill her dragon. The dragon will have to go first, I think."

"There could be still a scorpion or two left," Alac burst out suddenly. They all looked at him. "We had a few built, but not enough time to get them up on the walls before the battle."

"Where," Arya pressed, stepping forward with lethal intent.

"The armory. She may have destroyed it. But it's near the main gates, if somehow it escaped damage during the first assault, the building may still stand."

"It does," Tyrion said, feeling a spirit return to him. "The outer ring of the city, much of it escaped the flames. She was going for the Keep when...when she...when it all started."

"Some of my men could still be alive in the other cells," Alac said, bursting upwards with all the vigor of youth, even in defeat. "If we could all sneak out, make our way across the city..."

"I can get horses," Arya said, "slip by some of the Dothraki."

"Where would the dragon be," Jaime asked, eyes alert and dare he say, optimistic...surprisingly so, so soon after Cersei's death. Why, he wondered? Why was Jaime so eager to help all of a sudden?
To avenge Cersei and their child? To protect Sansa? That odd sense of inborn decency, often repressed by their own father no less, that had nevertheless pushed him to slay the Mad King in the first place?

"Probably near her so...close to the keep. Good thing there's not much of a roof over it now."

"Or off flying," Jaime said, "in which we're still fucked."

"It'll be back tomorrow morning, if not to burn us, then to burn the deserting armies and your sister after," Tyrion said, looking at Arya. "It'll be harder during the daylight, but not impossible."

Without another word, Alac stood, and marched past Arya into the outer hallway.

"Where're you going," she asked calmly.

"Enough talk," the young man said, voice filled with a calm resolve beyond his age. "Let's go kill a fucking dragon."

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**Jaime**

Love her, hate her, she was always there, a constant in his entire life, an anchor. There were times, during his lonely ride to Winterfell, when he thought it would be freeing, knowing the truth that Cersei's days were likely numbered. The thought occurred too as he rode with Brienne and Sansa, what it would be like to be alone in the world, the feeling of being alive when she wasn't. Did she harbor the same thoughts, did she worry about him when he was off to fight the dead? He'd never know.

He'd found her in the Red Keep, but they had little time to exchange words while the world crashed down around them. The dinghy was there, as Tyrion promised him, but they'd barely made it within swimming distance of the coast before running into Yara Greyjoy's fleet, fresh off destroying her uncle Euron...the death of dumb pirate who called himself a king the only good thing, he mused, to have come out of the wretched battle...nay, massacre.

"Brienne?"

He whispered as their small group crept through the empty streets of King's Landing. There were no ghosts, Jaime thought. Not when the charred remains of the dead lay before them in every direction, much more terrifying than the stories he and Tyrion heard as children could ever be.

"She's stronger than you'll ever be," Arya said plainly. "I wouldn't go back to her. Just leave her alone, don't try to make it better, you won't."

"I don't think any of us are going anywhere after this." He regarded the girl curiously. "Sansa and the Arthur kid..."

Arya shook her head. "No. Not for her." She looked back at Alac, who seemed actually disappointed for his brother. "You're to marry Margaery Tyrell though."

"The Queen," Alac stuttered out, all of them stopping in their tracks, shocked at the news. "She's alive?"

Arya shot Jaime a dirty glare. "No thanks to your sister."

"I'm sure it's a scintillating story," Tyrion said. "It may have to wait until after the dragon."
"I'll leave the dragon to you all," Alac said, a sly grin on his face, "I've got a bride to claim in Highgarden."

Arya shot him a murderous glare.

"I was joking. It was a joke!"

"It wasn't funny," she said, and they continued running, dodging the remains of an entire city's inhabitants as they ran.

They arrived at the armory, and Arya disappeared out the city gates while Jaime and Alac explored the interior, Tyrion lighting a torch behind them.

"The wheels aren't ready on that one," Alac pointed out.

"This one good to go?" There were only two which looked fully built, which left them with only one to spare.

Alac nodded, walking to the back to begin pushing it out. Jaime looked skeptically at him, raising his stump.

"Can't help you much with one hand."

"Do what you can."

"She treated me well," Alac said, as they pushed. "She would have been a good Queen, I think. I know she'd done awful things to get where she was, I know people hate her, but she was good to me, and I would have died for her. Should have died for her. Still have a chance yet."

Jaime scoffed, pitying the poor kid. He gave his dead sister credit, that she could still play around with the minds of feeble boys even before their imminent collective dooms, and hoped she got some enjoyment out of it in her final days.

He wondered. "It's revenge that has you doing this?"

"It's not revenge for you?" Alac looked confused. "When I heard she burned, when she made her burn in front of everyone...it gives me rage...that's...that's not how a Queen should go. Not how anyone should go."

"Yes, I saw it. No need to bring up the past." It happened mere hours before, but he would consign it to history as much as he could. "This isn't revenge for me."

"What else could it be?"

"Nothing. Nothing. Reasons are for children. Stay long enough in this world, and you don't need a reason to do every damned thing...you just do it."

They made it as far as the entryway when they were met with several of the Lannister men that Arya found in the adjacent cells, and together they managed to drag the scorpion onto the street outside.

"It's in the city," one of them said. Jaime thought he recognized the man...perhaps from when they took Highgarden. Maybe even going back to Riverrun.

"Sleeping, on the ruins of the old sept."

One last legacy from Cersei. A favor, perhaps, from beyond the grave? Or a curse? Running back
into the building, he grabbed a sword, several of the other men doing the same, and hoped that the lack of his golden hand wouldn't affect him too much.

"Can wildfire burn a dragon," Tyrion asked next to him.

"I don't know. Why?"

"The caches under the tunnels. Cersei couldn't have used all of them for the Sept...there may be a few barrels left. If we could blow the fucker up from under..."

"Not worth it," Arya said, emerging from the darkness with two horses she had somehow found, probably in a nearby Dothraki camp. Which meant they were nearby. "If it doesn't burn, then it'll fly away, and we lose our chance."

They hitched the scorpion to the horses and tried as best they could to bring delicately the hulking weapon along the ruined streets. Jaime and Arya ran at the head of them, encountering a few of the Unsullied patrolling the city, and dispatching of them easily, none of them much expecting much resistance, not when they thought all their enemies already dead.

"Keep it quiet up there," Tyrion whispered, all the while Arya motioned of an enemy coming up on his left as she leaped in the air, dodging a vicious strike of a spear to stab the Unsullied soldier in the neck with her dagger. His own attacker came at him, and he absorbed several blows with his sword before kicking viciously at his knee. Bringing his sword down towards his neck, he struck true, but not before the man manage to poke his spear in the direction of his right shoulder. It grazed it, but the cut still bit deep.

"You okay," Arya asked, concerned.

"I've had worse," Jaime answered, raising his stump.

"There's more of those dickless cunts by the Sept," one of the Lannister soldiers said. "We saw them on the other side of the ruins, didn't dare get closer cause of them...and the damn dragon."

"Good," Jaime said. "It'll be a good distraction. We'll engage the Unsullied, maybe catch that lizard's attention. You men come up from the back, get him before he sees you."

"Dragons are smart creatures," Tyrion said, growing approval in his voice at his plan, "which means they can be outsmarted."

They split, Jaime and Arya taking three of the Lannister men with them, the other two following Alac left, Tyrion waiting where they parted to watch and see if any more would alerted during the upcoming skirmish.

"I was going to kill her," Arya volunteered as they ran. "I promised Sansa I'd wait until after the child was born, to let her honor her vow to you. Maybe you could have gone to her, to see your child, to say goodbye. But she was going to die no matter what...and if you were there I would have killed you with her."

Jaime shook his head as he ran. What could he say to that? It wasn't a joke, the girl was not the joking type, clearly. He would have dismissed it as a joke, or a harmless remark, before the battle with the dead...not after. She didn't mean it as a threat now, considering Cersei was dead and they were in the middle of running into the face of their own deaths.

He drew the first blood, running up behind an Unsullied guard and stabbing him through his back, just like he did the Mad King. At once, the battle joined, the dozen or so men screaming at alert and
running at them, quickly forming a circle around their small group. Battling them one by one without
the element of surprise, he found the task ever more difficult, parrying off several thrusts of their
spears at once. To his right, Arya was having an easier time of it, matching the former mercenaries
blow by blow and exceeding them in speed, but even she was finding it difficult to pierce their
armor, swinging her thin sword with one hand, valyrian steel dagger with the other, surrounded as
they were by so many of them.

A scream from behind, as one of Alac's soldiers stared down it horror at the spear piercing his chest,
but the Unsullied's moment of triumph was short while another Lannister soldier cut through the
back of his knee, causing him to fall to the ground. Barely a chance to return to his own battle, he
leaned backwards, dodging at the last second another strike of the spear, somehow managing to keep
his balance as he swung his left hand around to cut through his attacker's lower back. He saw Arya
spinning around on the ground, avoiding the downward jabs left and right, disappearing in a swirl
but, hearing the cries of pain and watching each guard collapse one by one, figuring that she had
somehow managed to cut right through the heels of several of them.

*We don't have to kill them,* he reminded himself. *They'll burn along with us when it happens.*

The ground trembled as the head of the dragon moved, cold eyes blinking, waking before the clangs
and screams of their fight. Jaime tried to ignore its glare as he continued, avoiding another strike but
not before the tip of the spear cut through his right elbow. That entire arm was ruined anyway, he
thought, and forcing the pain from his mind, he met the parries of three spears coming at him at once,
taking their attention as another one of the Lannister men managed to cut one of his assailants down
from behind. Emotion overtook him, fatally, as he continued to stab at the body on the ground,
ignorant towards his folly until another Unsullied ran his weapon through his neck.

The dragon regarded them with both curiosity and hostility. As Tyrion said, it was an intelligent
beast, and it knew he was an enemy, as was the Stark girl. But were it tempted towards its fiery
nature, it also knew that there were friends among them as well, the men devoted to his 'mother'. As
the creature hesitated, Jaime heard the sound of shouting from the opposite end of the ruins.

"Go, go, go," Alac's voice echoed across the ancient stone walls.

They only had one shot, no time for the small team to reload the weapon before they would be all
dead, for surely the dragon would recognize the threat of the weapon far more so than a wounded
one handed man and a small girl. Feeling the desperation surge, he elbowed the Unsullied closest to
him, bringing his sword through his neck even as the last of the Lannister soldiers fell behind him.
Watching two hostiles surround Arya, he ignored his pursuer and ran over to her instead, stabbing
yet one more through the back. Even before he pulled his sword back through, he kicked the girl
right smack on her side, knocking her unawares away from the fight. Ignoring her furious eyes, battle
lust whirling in his direction now, he screamed at her.

"Run dammit! Run!" He wasn't sure if she was going to listen, or come back and kill him along with
the rest of the Unsullied. Then he felt the sharp twisting pain as a spear stabbed through his stomach
by his hip. Seeing it happen, she turned to disappear into the night, and Jaime screamed at the top of
his lungs, catching the dragon's attention again just as it was about to turn towards the scorpion.

Ignoring the pain, he twisted his body harshly and felt the spear rip further through his skin even as it
wrenched itself away from its wielder's grip. Ignoring him and the remaining Unsullied chasing him,
he ran right at the dragon, groaning in pain to pick up a dead man's spear in his path, and threw the
weapon as hard as he could at the creature. The spear bounced harmless off its neck as it craned it
back, ready to breathe fire upon them all, stopping even the two pursuing Unsullied men in their
tracks.
The fire was mesmerizing in its way, how the dragon held it in its throat, a perfect sphere floating, ready to deliver its final, godly judgment. Then it crashed into them, and the last thing Jaime saw before the flames overtook everything as a single steel arrow flying past the flames straight into the beast's neck.

You'll be proud of me, Brienne...I fulfilled my damned vow to the last...

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Tyrion

The Great Sept of Baelor glowed in fire, a second time, Tyrion thought. It was done then, the painful, horrifying screeches confirming their success. Yet even as it died, it wrung its neck back and forth in agony, spewing fire indiscriminately through across every corner of the ruins, Tyrion knew that he was now the last remaining of Tywin Lannister's three children. Tears began streaming down his face. He knew he should run, the rest of the queen's men sure to be on their way soon, but he didn't care. They'd done it, after all. Jon Snow had not been able to kill the dragon queen, but they'd extinguished her flames, and wasn't that enough? Why should he care about seeing what was to come after? More war, then a wasteland of a realm?

"You'd better go," a voice whispered next to him. Arya Stark's face was bloodied, covered with soot, bruised in several spots, but somehow she stood beside him never the less.

"My brother," he asked, voice praying for a miracle. Arya shook her head.

"It's impossible. All of them are dead." He sensed her tone was not as emotionless as it usually was...as she usually meant it to be.

"How are you alive?"

"Jaime." The way she said his name, he could guess what happened, and it made his heart drown all the more. Down in the ruins, he heard Drogon's howl whinny down to a sad cry, and he mourned for him as well.

"It's not his fault," Arya said, echoing his own thoughts. "His mother's a monster. Not right, he has to pay for her sins."

"Aren't we all," Tyrion said, "fathers and mothers alike?"

"Not mine."

"No." He looked at her, staring at the dying dragon with a childlike fascination. There were tears in her eyes too. "Are you going to kill her next?"

Arya shook her head. "That's the Queen's justice now. I need to find Jon."

A new queen's justice. One whose reign they may have just secured as the dragon breathed its last before them. *Does that make me king now*, he wondered. *No. She'll definitely kill me first.*

"Dragonstone," Tyrion told her. "His blood is her gravest threat, far more than your sister. But she couldn't bear to kill him just yet."

"Are you going to run to my sister?" She asked as if her words were a threat. They would be, he knew, if he would serve Sansa as well as he did Daenerys. But then, how much did she really need him, considering how she had gone from exile to wearing a contested crown, all on her own?
"It might be time I find myself a quiet life. Drink myself to death. I tried to do that once. A good friend talked me out of it. Better for both of us had he not succeeded."

"I hear the Tully armies ran north, instead of south. My uncle's an idiot, but even he did not willingly follow the dragon queen to King's Landing, much less lead him here through his clever words. He'll be safe, my sister will forgive him, once all this is over. After all, he just wants to go home, him and his men. But you...I'm afraid this country won't be a safe place for people like you, not unless you choose a side."

"Seems I've made my choice, haven't it?" He gulped out a laugh, an inappropriate laugh for an inappropriate time. Out of all the people to urge him to stay in the game, Arya Stark was the last he would expect. She didn't laugh in return.

"She may or may not need you. But you need her now. Find the northern armies. Pray they'll take you in."

Then she disappeared, leaving him in the darkness, alone, in search of one last possibly master to serve.

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**Arya**

She watched her sleep for some time, chest moving peacefully up and down, face serene. The Dragon Queen was beautiful, that much could not be denied. Yet even in sleep, there lay a sheer, deep and raw power in her, and Arya could understand how Daenerys Stormborn could have drawn Jon in. How would she look, Arya wondered, when she found out she had run out of dragons? Would she still ooze power, would she still see herself as a kind of goddess? Or brought down like the rest of the mortal realm, would she wilt away?

She came awake with a start, and recognition then fear flashed in her eyes as she saw Arya standing still as a statue over her bed. Looking around, ready to call her guards, judging the time it would take before her yells would be heard, before Arya would then silence her forever, Daenerys decided to speak quietly to her instead.

"Are you here to kill me?"

"Your dragon is dead."

Her violet eyes widened, big as saucers, and Arya couldn't help but feel sympathy for the woman, watching as she did every emotion cascade through Daenerys's eyes in an instant. *This was worse,* she understood. *She feared her dragon's death more than her own.*

"How?"

Arya shook her head. "It matters not." She pulled Needle out, regarding her blade, before tucking it back into her belt. "I can't kill you. Yet, anyway. Only a Queen can order another Queen's death. Queen Sansa could very well grant me my permission. But she'd rather not, I think. This war is over, we both know that."

Rage. That's what came to the forefront now. Anger, vengeance, determination. Daenerys had been a helpless young girl once, much like herself, much like Sansa. She would not have gotten this far without those qualities.

"This war has just begun," she snarled. "I have my Dothraki and my Unsullied..."
"Against an entire country you lost when you burned King's Landing."

"Ask your sister about King's Landing," Daenerys shot back. "Ask her about the treasonous lords she gathered who would have continued Cersei's war even after she was dead."

"Run," Arya said. There was no point in falling into an argument with her. "Go back to Essos with your Unsullied and Dothraki. They'll die to the last man if you press this war to the end. Save them, save yourself, and never come back. Go back to the cities you freed, the cities that love you. Those are your people. Not here."

Her words struck true, and she wondered whether Daenerys would actually take her up on the offer. Sansa would probably approve of it. Even if she didn't, Arya thought Daenerys deserved a chance, even after what happened here. Because she had come so far, and she had done great good, in Essos...and even in the north of Westeros.

But then the Dragon Queen grit her teeth and clenched her jaw. "Then I'll die with them. Tell Sansa she'll have to kill me herself."

Arya nodded, and left her in the night.

Chapter End Notes

I did it. I didn't want to do it. I REALLY didn't want to do it. I loved the dragons, and they had no choice in any of it. But it had to be done...for the sake of moving the story along in the way I need it to. (Consider the alternatives, either Daenerys burns them all and wins...a bit antclimactic and unoriginal...or Sansa's armies gets a lucky shot...a bit anticlimactic as well). And now, we find out who Daenerys is, who she can be, now that she's reduced to a normal person just like everyone else. If she wilts, or if this can make her stronger, if she can discover or rediscover strengths she hasn't needed...because she had a fucking dragon.

Jon seems to have frustrated many in the last chapter. I'll try to speak a bit on his behalf. He is making baby steps, in that he was on his way to kill Dany, same as the show. He also allowed the scroll to go to Yohn Royce, knowing what it likely said, and as a result indirectly allowed the three northern armies to desert Daenerys. And he finally did have enough, speaking up against her at the Dragonpit. My sense of his mentality now is the same as how I interpreted it from when he killed Dany in the show...he knows it's his duty, he knows it's probably the right thing to do, but he still can't let go of his love and sense of duty towards her as well.

If he seems very dismissive of Sansa in the chapter...he did always underestimate her, and I draw his logic from S8E4 when he rather rudely shuts her down at the war council when she advises rest. But it's also the context as well too...if he heard Sansa was declared a northern Queen, he'd probably think, "damn, this causes trouble for me, but good for her", and he'd know very well she deserves it and earned it.

But...last he saw of her, she was a girl who hated everything southern...so this idea that somehow she would emerge a Queen so far deep in the south can't be anything BUT completely ludicrous...that he would attribute to some sort of childlike tantrum, because he fundamentally doesn't understand how it could've happened (and I'd imagine Tyrion and Jaime are thinking similar thoughts at that moment...how? WTF happened?)
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Daenerys begins a new war. Sansa wrestles with her crown.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Daenerys

She felt like a child again. Was that what it was like, for a mother to lose all her children, to be reduced to such a helpless state? Certainly it hadn't been for Cersei. The lioness lost all her cubs, but rather than wilt and die, she bared her claws to usurp a usurpers' crown and, placed in a similar state now, Daenerys had to admit there was something to admire in her perseverance.

Was this the cost of the bloody throne for anyone and everyone who claimed it? Everything? Everything she'd ever loved, or will ever love? Part of her wanted to run back to Mereen, to find Daario, apologize for leaving him, for taking his love for granted. Maybe she'd take Jon Snow with her. If anyone could forgive her this, it would be Jon. He would come, and he'd be relieved to do so, to follow her in a path that did not involve more war, much less the death of his own sisters. It would be so easy, but when had she ever taken the easy road? And if she fled, wouldn't that mean all that had already died for her cause had died in vain?

"They found the Kingslayer's body," Grey Worm said, emerging in the open throne room behind her.

"You're sure?" All the cells had been empty, and Daenerys blamed Drogon's loss upon her own greed, her own hatred for the Lannisters blinding her, in wanting to extend their suffering.

Grey Worm nodded.

"Tyrion?"

He shook his head. So the dwarf had somehow survived yet again. Another item to add to his long list of betrayals. She should have known better...this land, this wretched land, where blood and family came before everything else, and she had none of her own...besides Jon, who would deny his own blood for the memory of a false father.

"Your Grace. The northern armies are but a day's march from us. We need to pursue them. The Dothraki may catch them yet." Denys Velaryon, uncle to the child lord Monterys, who had rallied his men to King's Landing several days before the battle. She had Grey Worm, she will always have Grey Worm, but she was running out of men who knew this country. Thankfully, not all the treacherous lords had forgotten where their loyalties ought truly lie.

"The Dothraki by themselves will be severely outnumbered," she said, thinking. Dragon less, every one of her men suddenly seemed so much more valuable now, and she could not afford to waste even one. "And they'll be without direction. This is a strange country for them...it will be easy for them to get lost, or fall into a trap laid by our enemies."
"Quite right," Denys said, quickly ignoring his own advice, his wispy gray beard blowing in the wind. "We need all the men we can get." So he was one of those? A flatterer, a man would dared not upset his Queen to the point of disbelieving himself? She would need to keep an eye on him.

"You said Lord Edmund's men will be arriving soon?"

"Within a day or two. Possibly by nightfall. House Thorne fought valiantly for your father in the last war. You may surely rely upon them."

"Surely," Daenerys, wishing to be rid of this man, wishing she could further mourn her child in private. "Any more great houses I may rely upon?"

"House Buckler." Denys replied, a morsel of fear in his voice. "I'm afraid...other than that, if they're to be here, they're already here."

The cup wasn't all barren. While Sansa may have denied her much the realm, the Crownlands had sent forth more banners than she had expected, and the Stormlands not far behind, perhaps regretful of the treasons of their liege lord turned usurper.

"Most of the lords of this country have deserted us," she said, her voice proud once more. She'd been in far worse shape before, wandering the Red Wastes with mere dozens of men. She would fight again, she would rally, and she will win the war, as she had won every war before her. "This means they've forfeited their claim to their titles. The men who support me today, who fight with me today, will reap fully the rewards of our victory."

It was what they wanted to hear. And she had little choice now but to sing music to their ears.

She had to ride horses now. It brought her back, to her first days with the Dothraki, when she had been a girl, petrified by fear, used by her husband and her brother alike for their own purposes. And the men around her, these Westerosi men and their fancy armors and sigils and beards, they'd surely do the same to her, had she not still her own armies. Two days' ride along the Blackwater, and now it was her time to make a decision, her first since fully claiming her throne.

"We've word the Stark girl fled north," Denys began, "up into the Western Hills." They were smart enough not to address Sansa as a queen in her presence.

"The northern armies will surely meet them there," Edmund Thorne added, a grim humorless man, but a man who may yet prove valuable as a fighter. "It's a quicker march."

"And once their armies combine, we'll be outnumbered," Daenerys said, thinking.

"Not by much, but yes," Edmund said. "I'll depend on how many men went with Sansa. I've word they've split, and some of the southern armies are hiding in the Red Mountains."

It would be so much easier were she able to take Drogon to the air and find out in an instant where her enemies were.

"They don't know of Drogon's death yet. They're hiding, from him, up in the hills. It's the smart move."

"We'll root her out," Grey Worm said. He shared her anger, her rage at these ungrateful lords and queens. At Sansa, who had dared play false host while plotting the entire time on how to betray
them. "We'll run through the mountains and kill them all, they can't hide from us."

"The Western Hills aren't anything too steep, or high," Edmund said, "but they go on forever, valleys and ravines and nooks. If she's got Roland Crakehall or any of the other western men, they'll know the terrain. Give them the advantage of the numbers with the northern armies...it'd be too great a risk."

"Your suggestion," Daenerys asked.

"Let Sansa be the Queen of the Caves. Let her hide, let your people see you in the battlefield, with your armies. March to Highgarden and claim what is yours, through open ground favorable to your Dothraki. The southern armies...I'll be we have the numbers over them. We'll draw them out, give battle, wipe out her armies one by one. She can continue hiding and calling herself a queen, while you sit upon your rightful throne."

Daenerys nodded. At least this was an enemy she knew...one she did not need Tyrion to advise her, or mislead her, on.

"Sansa's smart. She expects me to go after her, so she lures me north, where her strength is. We ride to Highgarden. Any word from Dorne?"

"Still marching north," Denys said. "Taking their damn time at it. Makes me wonder."

"Sansa must have reached out to them as well. Promise them anything. Highgarden, the Eyrie, Casterly Rock, Riverrun...whatever they want."

"Your Grace," Denys bowed.

"Send a rider east. Tell Yara Greyjoy, once she's sent the message to the traitorous kingdoms, to march the Ironborn to join us. Without my...," she choked, unable to finish the words. Instead, she said, "the war will be won on foot and horse now."

Even as she spoke, even while she allowed nothing but steely confidence in her voice, she could not forget the sight of Arya Stark, the deadly girl having broken through all her elite guards in the keep to stand beside her own bed, sword in hand. What if she did win the war? Sansa would fight her evenly, because she had the advantage now, but what if the odds turned, and the wolf found herself instead on the verge of victory? Would Sansa Stark be desperate enough to send her sister in to end the war that way, to dirty her own hands to save herself?

She could hire a faceless man herself, Daenerys thought. But what did she have to give them now, what price could she pay to kill a Queen, now that the only thing she still loved, the only treasure she had yet to give, were the lives of the men she had brought over from Essos? And therein lay the answer, the likely price...one she knew she would not pay.

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**Jon**

"It may interest you to know that I've spent my share of time in these cells."

"Stannis?"

Davos nodded. "He was a good man, but not without his weaknesses."

Jon grunted. He was thankful to have Davos, not as a bannerman, or an advisor, but as a friend. A friend who would follow him to imprisonment, rather than pick a side in this new war.
"What about Dany?"

He frowned, sensing he was treading on dangerous waters by answering the question honestly.

"A good woman. A powerful woman. One whose weaknesses can overpower her strengths."

"Sansa?" They might as well keep going.

"Clever. But too stubborn for her own good sometimes."

He was about to ask of himself, but Davos continued.

"They're both remarkable women, your sister and her. And men follow them, not despite their weaknesses, but because of them, because they make them appear strong. And you know that men only respect strength. You do, I know. After all, isn't that what drew you to her in the first place?"

"Not really. It's her willingness to burn entire cities that captured my heart." Seeing the befuddled look on Davos's face, Jon shook his head and went to assure him. "A joke."

"Good," Davos said, smiling warmly. "Been awhile since you laughed."

"Not much else we can do here." The smile disappeared off his face. "I wonder if she's dead yet." He didn't have to specify which queen.

"I wouldn't count her out," Davos said. Anyone else would say it to comfort him, but he knew Davos believed it. "If anyone can figure out how to take out a dragon, it's your sister."

"It still confuses me," Jon said. "Whatever she was, Sansa wanted nothing to do with King's Landing, or the Iron Throne. I know she learns from everyone she meets, but...that's one thing I never would have expected her to learn from Dany."

"You hurt her," Davos said bluntly. "It's one thing for the Dragon Queen to punish her. It's another thing for her own family to push her aside. She loves you Jon. Not the way the dragon queen did, but it hurts her just the same."

"She committed treason, Davos. It could have been much worse." He feared even that she could have burned there, at the Crossroads, in front of all the lords to witness. Yet, what did that make Daenerys, willing to burn someone merely for doing what they thought was right?

"Should it be? It's treason in her eyes, yes. But Sansa's? The lords who followed her then, who left to follow her now that she calls them again? To them, it was a chance for peace, to go home."

Jon shook his head. "I'm not made for this world."

"You have to be. Even the Night's Watch...you'd think it simple, wouldn't you, just sworn brothers defending the wall. But it wasn't, not even for you. It's never that simple. It'll never be that simple."

"Dragons are simple." They both turned at the sound of Arya's voice. To Davos, it was a surprise. To Jon, he'd half been expecting her, ever since he saw her at the gates of King's Landing after the battle. And he'd been dreading what they would speak of when they saw each other again. "They burn, or they die. Drogon's dead."

He felt relief and sorrow encompass him at once. Relief for Sansa's life. Sorrow for Dany, because he knew how much her dragons meant to her. And fear, of what she would do now that she had lost all her children.
"I was going to kill her, you know." His words caught Davos's attention, this secret he'd held even from him since they arrived at the cells together. "I talked to Tyrion, after I talked to you. She would have brought fire wherever she went...she could have destroyed the realm." He stopped, remembering what Arya just told him. "She can't do that now. Not without her dragon."

"Doesn't matter," Arya replied, unmoved. "She'll take this war to the bloody end. Only one queen will survive it."

"Why did she do it? I know she wants the North...that she hates Daenerys...but why would she challenge her? Like this?"

"I don't know," Arya said, eyes distant, probably thinking back to Highgarden. "I wasn't there when it happened. It wasn't what she was trying to go for, not when I left her. But I imagine...when they heard your Queen burn King's Landing...I imagine men and women do strange things when they hear the worst is true."

Jon rose, his decision made. After all, hadn't he already made it when walking up the steps to the throne?

"Go back to Winterfell if you want," Arya said. "I imagine all the lording is keeping Bran away from the Godswood."

Jon laughed sadly. "She doesn't need me, you're saying."

"She does. But not as much as she did when you sent her to die in the west. She's a survivor, and she'll survive this war."

He wasn't sure if she meant it as an insult. That wouldn't be Arya, she would never want to hurt him. But then again, that was before the Crossroads. "I'm not a survivor, apparently. And maybe she can win this war on her own. But I'll let her tell me that to my face, I owe her at least that much."

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**Sansa**

"They'll be calling you the Queen of Frowns, Your Grace, if you don't cheer a bit."

"I'm a dead woman riding," Sansa replied to Paxter Redwyne. It felt like she'd been on horse for years...was this what it was like to be a man? A knight? Endless days and nights of discomfort? How long has it been since she's had a tolerable lemoncake? "I may never see my home again, or my family. Do you want me to smile about that?"

"I swear it," Paxter said, undeterred by her harsh tone, "I've never seen anyone so unhappy to be a Queen, or King for the matter. It can't be an act."

"It's not. I don't much have a choice about it, do it?" But she did. She could have gone with Margaery.

Highgarden had good lemoncakes. Did she even remember to taste them, to enjoy the flavor, caught up as she was by everything else?

"No," Paxter acknowledged. "Not now. But we may yet win this war, if we play it smart. Then you can do whatever you bloody well like."

"I can't go home though, can I? Not when I want, not without lords like you and Marion and everyone plotting behind my back for that bloody throne. I imagine you'll be there, whispering to me
while I'm in the privy, about taking a husband, birthing an heir...about which family I'm to bestow my body to."

"All quite right," Paxter admitted plainly. "I don't know why so many men want it, women too...want it so much to die for it."

"I don't want it," Sansa said, wondering how much she sounded like Jon just about now. "Not that throne. My own, maybe, in Winterfell."

"Maybe. But maybe the realm wants you. I've a feeling, you'll do good. Even better than Margaery, perhaps. She would have made a good Queen too. But she doesn't want it now, after everything's that's happened to her, and I'm not one to force it on her, I just want her to be happy."

So you'll force it on me instead. She didn't need to say it, the truth was clear to both of them.

"But it's your duty now," Paxter continued. "Your father didn't want to come south and be Robert's Hand, but he did it, because it was his duty. The bastard Stannis never thought he'd be king, never wanted to be king, but he died defending his birthright, because he thought it his duty."

"Yes. Dead men, all of them." The late afternoon sun glided off his bald head, glistening through what little remained of his orange hair.

"What do you want, Lord Paxter? Why do you ride here with me, why do you risk your life, risk burning, to stand by my side?"

He gave her a sly smile. He was not a man given to smiling, and she wondered what it must mean, and whether she could trust him more or less for it, now that she had no choice but to continue placing her life to the hands of strangers.

"Your father," he said. "I envy him."

That response she did not expect. Paxter smiled further, glad to have perplexed a queen.

"When Mace Tyrell called his banners for the Mad King, I rode with him to Storm's End. I'd no love for Aerys, no love fer his love of fire, but that wasn't my choice, and we lost that war. I was there, in King's Landing, when Robert gave us mercy, and they put a crown on his head. I saw Ned Stark that day, a skinny thing, aye, almost as skinny as your Lord Arthur..."


"Aye, he's all hers now." His words returned to the past. "Your father though, he lived up to his name...I don't think he spoke more than three words his entire time in the capital. I went up to him, to get a sense of this man they called the Quiet Wolf...a Stark in the south a rare sight indeed. Thought I might ask him about the bastard child he brought up from Dorne, was she a whore I wondered? Some stable maid? There were even whispers, of a highborn lady...a Dayne. Aye, but I didn't get close to an answer...he was much like you, actually, said something about going home, Winterfell...not much else. Certainly nothing interesting. Still I thought, better he than Robert. They may have crowned him king, but Robert had time enough to ruin his name yet. Which he did, true to what everyone figured. But Ned Stark...he'll go north, I thought, he'd disappear in the snow, and they'll all remembered him like that...a mere boy like myself...yet forever ingrained in all the books as the man who crowned a king."

They had all been her own age, hadn't they, Sansa realized, when her father and Robert went and took seven kingdoms, a youth's rebellion, fighting old and young men alike such as Paxter, winning only to squander the following peace. And here she rode now, as did Jon and Daenerys, as Robb did
once, all repeating their cycle anew.

"A good father," Sansa said, the mention of him bringing him close to tears, as it always did. "That's how he would like to be remembered for."

"And that he will," Paxter said, in something resembling a fatherly tone to her. "I was glad when Mace declared for King Renly. Here's my chance now, I thought, to put a good man on the throne. And whatever his habits...Renly was a very good man, there was no denying that, a man I'd be proud to serve, till my dying day."

"He gave Robb the North," she said, recalled what Brienne had told her regarding the first time she met her mother. "It takes a great man to give up a kingdom. A generous man."

"So they say, before he died. I wish I had been there...," he shook his head, trying to bury the memory. "The plan I drew up that night, aye, Stannis's a brilliant commander, I faced him myself at Storm's End...but we had the numbers, and I thought...this is what I'll be remembered by...the man who beat Stannis Baratheon, who uncrowned a bad king to crown a good one. I'd weaken my right, lure Stannis to attack my flanks, then move to crush his center. Would've worked, I think. Never got the chance though...be it witchery, or magic, or just plain treachery...aye, the deed was done. Then Mace declared for Joffrey, and I said, I'll support him, but from the Arbor, I'll let him deal with the little cunt on his own, not soil my own name with his."

"And now's your chance again. To use me to make your name." He was a blunt man, she thought. A strong man, who would not take bluntness for an insult.

"That's the way the world is, isn't it. Cold men and women alike, using each other always, for their own reasons."

"Not my father," Sansa said, not without shame.

"He'd be proud of you," Paxter said, softer than before. "I've no doubt, he may never have wanted that throne himself, but he'd be proud for you all the same."

"He'd want me to be happy."

"Even when he married you off to that little twat?"

"It's what I thought I wanted at the time. He wanted to bring me home, when he found out what Joffrey truly was. But I fought him on it then. Maybe if I hadn't...he'd still be alive. They'd all be." Not a day went by did she not think that, rue the day she herself had been blinded by what she thought was love.

"Ned Stark's mistakes were his own," Paxter said. "Strong man like that, can't be letting a little girl protect him, can he? Not when he couldn't protect himself. Or his family, great man that he was, because in the end, he simply didn't have the power. He was stupid enough to refuse it outright, Renly told me that...when they two had a chance to rid the realm of the Lannisters before they became such the plague...but your father said no. Honor, duty, stubbornness, the shits...whatever it was, it meant his grave. But you'll have that power, Your Grace, to protect yourself, protect your family, protect whomever you'd damn like, once you sit upon that throne. Assuming it's still there."

She nodded, because she was polite, because he believed it, and somehow, for some reason, the man actually did believe in her. But she wondered how true it was, considering how kings and queens seemed to have developed a habit of dying quickly as of late.
The planning over for the time being, they were all sitting quietly and eating a small meal in the main tent when he stumbled in, face red and breath reeking of wine.

"My lady grace," Warryn Beesbury said, approaching her, Brienne instantly stepping in between, "I've thought time, yer a Queen, yer needs a King...I've no wife since me loving Ann passed five years..."

"I suggest you return to your tent, Lord Beesbury," Brienne said coldly, wedging herself between the man and the queen he thought himself proposing to. She saw the hatred in his eyes as he considered pulling his sword, as both Podrick and Paxter and even little Beryn braced themselves to her defense. Marion, not a man of swords, merely watched the scene unfold before him with his usual passive studiousness.

"Aye, yer Grace." Seeing he was vastly outnumbered, Warryn grunted unhappily and stumbled back outside.

"Keep an eye on him," Brienne said to Podrick, who nodded and followed him out.

Despite lording over the greatest vineyards in all seven kingdoms, Sansa rarely saw Paxter indulge in his wine much himself, but the man took a deep gulp now, after that embarrassing scene.

"Horn Hill is a great manor," he said, "ample rooms fit for a Queen. You'll be comfortable there, safe from all the..." He gestured outside the camp, where the drunk lord had likely gone to join all his other equally drunk men.

"I know it's more trouble, but the Queen belongs with the men pledged to die for her,"Sansa said, though very tempted by the idea of soft beds and servants. She looked at Beryn, who now accompanied them rather than Arthur Hightower for the rather undelicate reason that they were still awaiting a response from Dorne, the boy serving in the meantime as an all too eager hostage. Podrick was practically a knight now, and Beryn looked to both he and Brienne, thinking them eager to take him up as their next squire for his own sake. "We ought to leave Beryn at Horn Hill, in case the dragon does find us."

The boy shook his head politely, but vehemently. "Your Grace, if it were my choice, I'd like to stay...Podrick says I can be one of your Queensguard when I'm of age."

"Podrick said that," Brienne asked, and Sansa knew she would have words with him later.

"That's a big decision," Sansa said kindly, thinking of her own brother, who had not a clue what he was signing up for when he joined the Watch. Or Jaime, whom the Mad King used for his own selfish purposes. She felt the guilt ache in her heart, that she could be as awful as the Mad King in any way, or the Lannisters when they kept her in King's Landing. "Your Prince has not made his decision yet. If he declares for the Dragon Queen, I will let you return to your uncle or Starfall. Be assured, I want you safe, over everything else."

"I'll stay, if you'd let me," he protested. "I know it's war...but wars end...and my uncle will take me back, I know it, he loves me, and he won't hate me for it."

She smiled at him. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Looking at Brienne, she nodded, and watched as the knight escorted Beryn outside to his own tent.

"The boy's besotted by you," Paxter said, wholly amused by the exchange.

"Yes, they all are, aren't they," Sansa said, her tone more acerbic than she intended. "If I'm to win this war, I'll do it because men and boys alike across all seven kingdoms want to bed a pretty face. At
least Daenerys has a dragon to ward them off."

"Yer pretty," Paxter said plainly. "It's the truth. Don't fear yer crown, and don't fear what can help you keep it. Beauty's a weapon, the Dragon Queen used hers to secure the North, for a time. This is war, and we'd be stupid not to use every weapon we have, so long as we don't rely too much upon one."

"If you don't mind me asking, Your Grace," Marion said, having observed the exchange thoughtfully, "do you keep to the Seven, or is it the Old Gods you pray to?"

"I pray to none," Sansa answered uncomfortably. His question confused him, as Marion had never seemed a godly man.

"I don't blame you," he replied sympathetically. "I may not either had I your life. But there are lessons in the faith. Men must follow someone, it's in our very nature. We want it, we need it, like the air we breathe or the milk we suckle when we're infants. But men follow the Gods, just like they follow kings and queens and lords, for entirely different reasons, each of them. They follow the Father, because they fear what's before them. Some follow the Stranger, because they fear the unknown. Strong men follow the Warrior, because they desire to see themselves in him, and find inspiration in his courage. Yet, other men look upon the Maiden or the Mother, who inspire for different reasons...for purity, for mercy, aye...men follow them, because they find inspiration in them out of love as well...their example of perfection as pure as the Warrior's."

"What about the Crone and the Smith," Sansa asked. "What kind of monarchs do they make?"

Marion smiled cynically. "Alas, the comparison only carries so far. But the point stands. You're beautiful, men see you and are inspired to fight for you. Use it. But know that it's not just beauty that matters, that not every fair maiden can lead the hardest lords, not when they see weakness in her eyes...not when beauty is all she has. But make no mistake, Your Grace, stories of your ordeals are known to the realm by now...they may sing songs of you, sooner than you think. Yet they see you standing and riding proud, strong...how can you not be strong as they, stronger even, when you've endured far more than many of them? No, it inspires, just as much as your beauty. And if they see in you a godly vision, who are you to break their illusions?"

"This isn't the first war for most of them," Paxter continued. He had sat quietly, listening to Marion wax poetic. "They've fought for kings and queens before, they've watched their friends and brothers die, for the stupidity and mistakes of others. They know you're better than that, that you won't waste their lives for no good reason."

"Perhaps the Gods are mere myths," Marion said, "yet men are drawn to them, because while it may be the Gods they follow, it's the story that has their hearts. Kings...and Queens, what are they, except the gods we have in this world? Aegon, his two queens and three dragons. Robert, with his hammer, avenging his lost love..."

"That was a lie," Sansa corrected, having heard the full truth of it from Bran, "Robert's Rebellion, my aunt Lyanna, all of it. How many of those stories were lies?"

"Lies the people wanted to hear," Marion said, eyes gleaming as the fire burned next him. "Lies that embellished the truth, because the truth is usually boring, or awful, or anything but inspiring. Men have enough truth in their everyday lives...the stories they seek so desperately to believe need to transcend truth. And yes, your story, the maiden fair, who endured all the cruelty and brutality of the seven kingdoms, yet who still retained her virtue, her purity, her strength, to bring seven kingdoms together, who stood up against the dragons...it's a powerful one, and it's one men will follow."
She wasn't a story. She was a person, who would much be rather telling a different story of herself, but when had that ever been permitted her? Suddenly, the sound of swords and yells permeated the air in the tent, and they all rushed outside to see a growing number of men gathering around a nearby fire.

"Clear, clear, clear," Paxton yelled, sword in hand, "clear way for the Queen!"

As the men allowed them a path through, Sansa saw Brienne standing tall and defiantly above Warryn Beesbury, collapsed on the ground, his sword fallen away from his grasp and one eye bloodied. Beside her was Podrick, chest heaving from the fight, and even though the fight seemed over, several loud men bearing the Honeycomb banner continued to glare and yell curses at them both.

"What in seven hells happened," Paxter said, Sansa and Marion arriving shortly behind him.

"Lord Beesbury intruded upon Lady Talla's tent without an invite, Lord Paxter." It was only then when she saw the tiny young woman, shivering and holding herself in the cold with a blanket, trying to hold back her tears. At least she was not alone, as a dozen of the Tarly bannermen had already rallied to her side. "He tried to force himself upon her. Her screams must have gotten Podrick's attention, and I found him pulling him off of her."

"Is this true, Lady Talla?"

She nodded, unable still to speak, and Sansa could see the hem of her dress torn. Looking at Warryn, she saw his shirt half open, exposing his chest, and the mark of several bloody scratches upon it.

"She lies, yer Grace," he screamed back, face reddened by wine and rage. "Aye, I was top o' her, but she invited me in...then she went crazy, the devils possessin' her..."

"Stand when you address the Queen," Sansa said, her own fire building. She saw before her not this rotten, poor excuse for a lord now, but the eyes of Ramsey Bolton, and Joffrey, and all the horrible men she knew, memories of the riot of King's Landing resurfacing and weakening her knees, even when she needed them the most. As several of Warryn's men strode forward to help him, Brienne stepped in forcefully instead, knocking them easily away, and grabbed the small wispy lord's frame firmly between her own hands, until she held him upright like a Tyroshi doll.

"Podrick, your sword." Taking it, absurdly heavy in her hands, she raised it and pointed it at Beesbury's neck, not failing to notice his own men standing behind Brienne, eyes still defiant, several of them still hungry for a fight. A glance at Talla, who seemed faint now, barely aware of her surroundings, then at Paxter and Marion, their eyes issuing her their own, silent warning.

She wanted to do it so badly, to imagine Ramsey dying anew, by her own hand this time. But she knew Paxter's worry, that Warryn's men made up more than a significant portion of her own camp, that several of them were itching to fight still, that what she did now could rip apart this small, fragile army of hers. Robb killed a Karstark once, and lost half his men for it. And not long after that, his own life alongside the two women he loved.

"When I win this war," Sansa said with more confidence that she possessed, straining her arm to hold steady the tip of the sword still at the man's neck, "I will remake this country anew. I will bring justice, to those who deserve it." A deep breath, she closed her eyes and opened them, the vision before her unchanged, and forced herself to continue speaking.

"And I will reward amply those who serve me well, provided they do so with honor and virtue." Pulling the sword back, she felt only disgust when relief dawned in the man's eyes, and saw
disappointment in Brienne's behind him. "Buy yourself a whore next time," she said disdainfully, handing Podrick back his sword. No longer able to bear the sight of the vile man, she walked over to Talla and pulled her into a deep hug, raging to herself that she could not give the poor woman her justice.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered into her ear, as the young woman clung to her as if she were her own father or mother. "I'm sorry I failed you..."

"My apologies, Your Grace," Talla said, crying, shaking in her arms, apologizing to her even as she had just been so vilely attacked. Sansa fought desperately her own tears, knowing that this was the last place she could let the men see them.

"You did nothing wrong, Talla." She lowered her voice, so only the young woman could hear her. "Not today. Not tomorrow. But you will have your justice, this I swear."

But was that yet another empty promise? Was this the irony of her crown, her new powers, was this her seventh hell, that she would be forever doomed to protect rapists and other vile men and women for the sake of protecting this crown...for the sake of protecting her own life? She had chided Jon, for being too honorable for his own good, for following the path of honor to his own death just like Robb and their father. Was this the opposite of honor then? Not lying, not breaking an oath...but the knowledge that she would have to stand forever in the shadow of her own cowardice? Was such a fate that much better than burning, after all?

Chapter End Notes

A few more OC's, this time lords supporting Dany, as she needs Westerosi who would rally to her, and I'm sure there are still quite a few houses believing themselves sworn to House Targaryen. House Thorne being one, considering Alliser had been a Targaryen loyalist. The character Edmund here would be his brother, and I imagine a carbon copy of that cranky ranger.

Also regarding Paxter Redwyne's character...I see that in the books he was an eager servant of Joffrey's. Since this goes more by the show, I guess I have more leeway to make him as I need for the story, having been turned off by Joffrey and sitting out the rest of the conflicts since.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Jon and Arya catch up. Daenerys seeks battle. Sansa seeks solutions.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for bombarding all of you with updates...but getting this post out a bit early since I'll be away this weekend.

Again, I'd recommend getting a map of Westeros out for reference for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon

They talked more about their pasts than their present, both on the boat from Dragonstone, and on the ride west along the southern banks of the Blackwater. He told her about the Wall, the Watch, Lord Commander Jeor, Grenn, Pyp, and how he and Sam first met, how Tyrion helped him understand compassion and empathy with his fellow brothers. The business with Craster, he kept to a minimum, as he did mentions of Ygritte, Jon finding the recalling of his time with Mance Rayder a much more pleasant memory in comparison, though still quite difficult to recall considering how it ended. And she regaled him with tales of riding north towards the Wall to find him, of life on the road with Gendry and Hot Pie and Lommy, being held captive by Tywin Lannister himself, and meeting Jaqen H'ghar. He knew that Arya had somehow come to know hardened men like the Hound and Beric by the time they arrived at Winterfell...long enough to harbor deep, unfathomable grudges against them, yet so far in the past that despite her dearth of years, that she'd been able to leave old grudges in the past by then. Now, as he listened to her full story, then deeper still through mysteries he barely comprehended in Braavos, he wondered in horror at how she had survived it all. What was different between what he'd suffered, death itself, and what his sisters had suffered, meeting death and staring it in the face as much as one could without succumbing?

"It's a wonder we still know each other," he said one night by the fire. "Everything our family's been through...it's enough to change us all completely."

"We've all changed," Arya responded. "But we're family, that's why we still know each other. Our bonds are stronger than anything they can throw at us."

But did she believe those words? They spoke little of Sansa, Jon recalling fondly how they'd found each other again at Castle Black, before quieting, then searching out the next villager to ask of the marching northern armies, following their words west, towards the mountains ahead, rather than south to Highgarden.

"It isn't what you think," she said suddenly another night. They talked mostly in the nights, whilst they ate, the day reserved for riding as fast as possible for what they called the Wolf Queen's camp. "This wasn't what she planned. She doesn't want it...not like your dragon queen wants it."
"Why'd did it happen then? At least I have the whole damned Targaryen business. How does one end up on a throne like that, without wanting it?" He chuckled. "Tell me, so I can learn how to avoid it."

She gave his question more thought than he expected.

"They call it a game," she said, chewing on a piece of rabbit. "It's not though. Games end. You declare a winner, a loser, you redo the board, and you play again. But this game...it's real, it has consequences, and you can't reverse them. She's good at it Jon, she really is. But some things she forgot. Her own brother cast her out, for a woman, when it was him she was trying to save. That hurt her. That blinded her. It almost crushed her, but Sansa's strong...and it didn't. And once she pushed away her pain, she saw the game again, but this time...just the game and nothing else...just the pieces, just the goal...just winning. I think she forgets what all of it means...really means."

"And she doesn't like to lose. She doesn't like to be wrong."

"She wasn't wrong. Not about her."

"It didn't have to be like that," Jon said, feeling his heart beat faster. "If she didn't have to worry about the lords turning against her..."

"Maybe not King's Landing. But look at all the wars we've seen in our lifetimes. Lannister and Tyrell and Frey and Stark and Baratheon, killing each other for sport. A good king, or queen, can bring them all together, for a time. Look at Sansa, I know you think her a child still..."

"I don't..."

"You do. You brought the North together with the Dragon Queen, because we faced something unspeakable. But she's brought the realm together her own way too, like no one since King Robert himself. You refused to see it at the Crossroads...that's why you don't see her still, what she can truly do. She doesn't have Robert's hammer. She doesn't have her dragons. She doesn't have your way around men. But she has patience, she knows what games to play with the lords, every move, down the last, precise detail, because it's her only way...it's the only way she's been able to survive. But what do you need patience for, when you have a dragon? Why play the game, when you can burn it all to ashes?"

"Not anymore," Jon said. "She'll never be able to burn our cities to the ground again." There was a relief he felt in saying that, even as he still felt for her, how devastating it must be to lose her last child. But how many millions of children did that one death save?

"It's too late. The seven kingdoms aren't big enough for the two of them."

"She wanted to break the wheel."

"At what cost?" Her penetrating eyes told him that no answer of his could satisfy her. "You played the game, I know, north of the Wall. And it's cost you everything, and you hate it because of that. The game's an awful thing, I agree. But it serves a reason, I think, to hide a more horrifying truth. And what face is so dreadful that it needs to hide itself under such a terrible mask?"

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**Daenerys**

The girl's hair was brown, with a splash of red in it. She sat on the edge of a small creek, her tattered robes dipping into the near freezing water, hands barely holding on to an oddly angled tree branch as she stared mesmerized at the current, hoping forlornly for a fish. Her mornings were early these days,
sleep a fleeting thing as thoughts of her fallen children haunted her, blurring the lines between
dreams and reality. Usually she wandered her camp, watching in a daze as some of the Dothraki take
turns feeding their horses, or two Unsullied men engage each other in a morning spar. She found that
most of her Westerosi men were in less hurry to wake than her own, always the last to gather, pack
up, and ready themselves for marching order.

"Catch anything," she asked, walking up to the young girl. She couldn't have been more than five
years old, arms rail thin, looking as if one fish would be enough to sustain her for days.

"Just this one," the girl replied, pointing at a lone, pathetically small fish in her wooden bucket, and
only then aware of her new companion. Recognition dawned in her eyes, and she shrank back in
fear from her.

"What's your name," Daenerys asked, feeling a sudden compulsion to comfort the girl, to show her
that she wasn't a monster. Did the girl know who she was, what she represented? Or was she just
terrified of any stranger adorned in foreign looking garb?

"L...L...Lanyssa," she managed to get out. "Yo...Your G-G-Grace."

So she knew who she was, recognizing her hair, her eyes, or perhaps the dragon emblem pinned
upon her chest.

The girl's small feet were trembling, sandals covered with holes, barely protecting her skin from the
cold, wintry ground. "What's a girl like you doing out here, getting your feet wet in such cold
waters? Don't you have a family? Brothers who should be doing the hunting and fishing to feed
you?"

"They...they...they went to the ca-capital, Your G-Grace...to buy b-b-bread and b-blankets..."

This time it was Daenerys who recoiled from her, as if the girl were herself a phantom. Looking
back, she saw Grey Worm, standing watch over her as usual, looking for any sign of threats or
enemies.

"Torgo Nudho," she called, and he promptly walked down beside them along the creek.

Bending down carefully towards the girl, as if one swift motion would send her running, Daenerys
found her own voice quivering as she asked her, "does your family live close to here?"

Unsure of whether or not to answer, the authority of a queen proved to be too much, and she
nodded, pointing up the creek. "Near an hour's walk," she said, "up in the hills."

Edmund Thorne had led them south of the Rose Road to avoid encountering the northern armies,
crossing the Blueburn after half a day's march downstream from Grassy Vale.

"And your family...your...mother..."

Lanyssa nodded. "I have a little sister. Janess's her name."

Daenerys listened, then turned back to Grey Worm. "Take a month's worth of our rations, grain and
meat and fruits, enough to feed a village of a hundred. Any robes and blankets and clothing we can
spare, send our men to accompany Lanyssa back to her village. We can always send for more from
Dragonstone."

Leaning back down to the girl, she said, "your family will not starve. Your kin will not freeze. We
will protect you from the winter."
"Th-thank you, Your Grace." Yet even in the relief and gratitude showing in the girl's bright brown eyes, she noticed a different fear...a raw and primal one.

"Are you afraid?" She nodded hesitatingly. "My men, my Unsullied, are good men. We protect good people like you and your family, we don't harm them." Her voice trailed off near the end, darker, haunting thoughts gnawing at the back of her mind, and she dared not continue.

"There's...there's others," she said, after a long pause, looking around her nervously as she did so.

"Others?" Daenerys looked at Grey Worm, then back towards Lanyssa. "Other soldiers...is that who you're afraid of?"

Another pause, then another nod, the poor girl's hands and cheeks now trembling. House Meadows at Grassy Vale had declared for neither queen, and Ser Denys's men in their rear had been constantly on the lookout for an ambush since the crossing, but they were far too south of Grassfield Keep now for such a small army to wander and threaten them. Which meant, as close as they were to Highgarden now, it was not impossible for them to encounter a more significant host which had marched east and north.

"Tell me where, Lanyssa. You'll be safe from them, I promise."

The village's name was Swanton, situated on a small plain alongside the creek up the slope of the rising hills leading towards Summerhall, higher in the mountains. Several Dothraki fighters found the army first, and reported of seeing turtles upon their banners.

"House Estermont," Denys said. "They were among those who proclaimed the Stark girl queen."

She rode with the Unsullied through the village first, posting them between the town and the armies uphill.

"Keep safe these people," she ordered Grey Worm. By the time they arrived, the Estermont army above was already alerted to their presence.

"They've formed defensive positions," Denys said. "My men spy acorn banners and a fair maiden's among them."

"Houses Smallwood and Piper," Edmund added, "traitors from the Riverlands."

He was a true believer, she realized, getting the feeling that this man had been awaiting her arrival ever since her father's death. For once, she was thankful Jon was not beside her, knowing that her former lover had been the one who executed Edmund's brother up on the Wall.

"They have the high ground," Denys added. The hill was not steep, but held a long slope and their enemy was hidden behind its tree cover. "We ought to march southwest, take the hills opposite them and get them to chase us."

"We have Dothraki," Daenerys responded firmly, "and we have the numbers. Mountains matter not to my men. We will not win this war by cowering in the corners like our enemies."

"Aye," Edmund said, coming to her side. "We don't run. If your Dothraki can ride through the trees, we charge them through their center. Send the Unsullied against their left, and we'll flush them off this hill and cut off their only route of retreat downwards."

She looked at Grey Worm, eyes charged and body ready for battle.
"Torgo Nudho," she said, anticipating his reaction, "the Unsullied will remain in the village. Give these people what they need to survive the winter. Let them see that we are not the enemy. Protect them should our enemies aim to use these innocents against us."

She wasn’t sure if he was disappointed, but immediately he left to carry out her orders. She turned towards her two Westerosi lords.

"Your men were late to the fight at King's Landing. This is their fight, to restore the peace in the land they were born. They will lead the charge in the Unsullied's place."

"Your Grace," Edmund said, respectfully. She walked up to Khal Madri, and whispered to him in Dothraki.

"Tell your men to frighten, but don't kill too many. Aim to surround them instead, wrap around their right."

The sound of her men screaming, charging up the hill, brought a comfort and familiarity to her, reminding her of when she rode alongside the man whom she named her largest dragon after, before she herself could soar with him. Watching the battle from below, she felt apprehension as the Dothraki disappeared into the trees, for the first time unable to witness from above the fate of her men. But from the clangs of metal clashing and screams of terror on the hill above, she knew the initial charge was a success. To her right, trumpets blew, as Lord Edmund led the attack with his mounted knights and foot knights upwards, following in the wake of the Dothraki. Seeing the sign from Denys that it was safe to do so, she rode her own horse following the Westerosi, accompanied by a group of ten Unsullied who rode with her, shields ready to deflect any incoming arrows.

Following Ser Denys ahead, her group stopped and started several times as the knight signaled to her whether it was safe or not to proceed uphill, based on the pace of the battle. There weren't that many pauses, and the sound of the enemy blowing the horns of surrender raised a heavy cheer from all her men, especially the Westerosi above. Straightening her back, she rode up, ahead of even her Unsullied protectors and Denys, arriving at the scene of the battle, the sounds of row after row of men throwing down their swords music to her ears. The Khal and three of his bloodriders brought up several men who appeared to be lords, covered in rich armor and heavy broadswords.

Edmund recognized them. "Lord Aemon Estermont of the Stormlands, Lord Theomar Smallwood and Lord Clement Piper of the Riverlands."

Dismounting her horse, she walked up to the three men, now surrounded at spearpoint by her Unsullied. All three were significantly taller than her, except Clement, whose eyes barely rose above hers. But she felt triumph surge through her, and despite the agony still deep in her heart for the loss of her children, there bubbled a sense of pride, that working in conjunction with the lords and knights she was to rule over, she could indeed win a battle without her dragons. If the lords of Westeros would not accept her until she won the war their way, then so be it, she had overcome far worse in life.

"My lords," she began, emphasizing the fact that they were her lords, as she was their rightful Queen. "You fought valiantly. But you bent the knee to the wrong queen. I welcome you the chance to atone for your mistakes."

"Are ye gonna burn us like ye burned King's Landing," Theomar asked meanly, looking as he was barely restraining from spitting upon her. "I dun see yer dragon...rumors are true then..."

"Yet you still stand before me in defeat," Daenerys said, voice no longer as warm. "Seems like I don't need dragons to win this war, do I?"
"A lucky trick," a tall, burly haired man with a dark heavy beard said. Aemon Estermont, who looked the opposite of any Targaryen despite being named after her own kin. "Our queen will win this war yet." He was the larger of the three lords, but despite his defiance, she sensed a fear in him more amplified than the other two, even the short one.

"Not if her lords don't fight to the death for her, quick as you all were to surrender." She smiled at her Khal, and the Unsullied behind them. "Every man I bring will fight every battle of mine until the last man." She smiled at him again. "Who is your liege lord right now?"

"Queen Cersei hasn't filled Storm's End yet," Aemon replied brusquely, and immediately Daenerys knew he was suddenly tempted. But this was not a gift she would grant him.

"I have appointed Gendry Baratheon, son of Robert Baratheon, as the new Lord of Storm's End. He is riding south from Winterfell, where he will rally the Stormlands in support of their rightful Queen. The war between Houses Targaryen and Baratheon is over, Lord Aemon, and House Lannister is no more. Only House Stark continues to defy House Targaryen. Whose side do you stand with now?"

He regarded her for some time, then decision made, knelt before her, to the visible dismay of Clement Piper, while Theomar looked upon the scene with what seemed like quiet disgust. She may win over one of them with time, but she didn't need to.

"Lords Piper and Smallwood...I have decided for mercy upon you. Ride home to the Riverlands, go back to your families." Before they could speak, whether thank her, or curse her more, she continued. "But your men will remain here, under the command of Lord Estermont. When the war is over, I will allow them leave home. Consider that the price of your treason, my lords, that all I seek is to borrow your bannermen to end this war."

Neither lord seemed certain whether to thank her or protest, but she didn't care for their reaction, knowing these men valued their own lives over those of their men. It was the way in Westeros, and she was no slow learner. She turned her attention immediately back to Aemon, so as to show her indifference towards the allegiances of the other two minor lords.

"Lord Gendry is young, and was but a common smith before his legitimization. I'm sure he will need ample counsel, wise counsel, as he grows into his position as Lord Paramount."

"Your Grace," Aemon replied, still kneeling, "I would be honored to serve him under your auspices."

"Good. Call upon all your banners in the Stormlands in his name. Call them to march with us, so we can put down this rebellion."

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**Jon**

The first thing they encountered upon reaching the camp was a large, wooden cage, Tyrion Lannister's forlorn eyes staring wistfully at them from within, hands clutching at the bars of his confinement as he watched them ride up.

"What happened to you," Jon asked, gazing around at the banners of the Falcon flying proudly above the plains.

"He's always wanted to do this to me, I think," Tyrion said, gesturing at Yohn Royce and several of his knights on their way towards them, "ever since Lady Catelyn brought me to the Eyrie. I don't think he was actually there at the trial, though I may have missed him, considering I spent most of my
"He served the Dragon Queen," Bronze Royce pronounced bitterly, his massive armor standing chest to chest with Jon's, "as did you."

"As did you and every man here," Jon said, waving his hands at the entire camp. "He's not your enemy. We're not, either."

Unmoved, the old knight eyed him skeptically.

"Lord Tyrion helped us kill the dragon," Arya said next to him. "Without him, you may all be dead by now."

"So he claimed. That's the honest truth, Lady Stark?"

"I think it's Princess now," Tyrion muttered inside his cage.

"On my father's honor," Arya replied. Royce nodded, and his men moved to set the Half Man free.

"My apologies, Princess," Yohn said, realizing his mistake in protocol, "I'm not used to..."

"Arya's fine. As long as you call my sister Queen."

"Until my dying day," Yohn said, with as much emotion and strength as Jon had ever heard from him. He bent down at the Half Man. "My apologies, Lord Tyrion. I was disinclined to believe you."

"And you had many reasons not to," Tyrion replied, more graciously than Jon expected. Perhaps he was too accustomed to captivity by now. "Had someone told me I'd have killed a dragon...well that's not quite the truth. I stood watch...did a damned good job of it though..."

"We ride west," a young knight interrupted Tyrion to everyone's relief, whom Jon recognized as Harry Hardyng. "Queen Sansa awaits us at Silverhill, and we march south from there to expel and kill the foreign invader and her men to the very last."

He still couldn't help but flinch at the arrogant young man's thoughtless words, but restrained himself from causing any further commotion.

"Lord Davos took the northern path beneath the God's Eye, to learn the current state of the Crownlands. He ought to be no more than a day's ride behind us."

"He can meet us there," Yohn said.

"I was going to," he began, as he and Tyrion rode along with the armies, "I was going to do what you wanted me to do." He couldn't bring himself to say it explicitly. Not yet.

"I know. I saw it in your eyes, at the Dragonpit."

"She didn't. She probably suspected many things of me then, but I don't think she'd ever believe I could do it."

"Could you?"

"Some days, I want to tell myself I could. Then, I hate myself even more."

Tyrion looked at him sympathetically, no doubt harboring similar thoughts of his own. "Don't kill yourself just yet, Jon Snow. I'd suspect I may need you to speak on my behalf to Sansa. Queen
Sansa," he corrected, "that is."

"I'm the last person you should ask that from," Jon scoffed. "You're better off talking to Bronze Royce."

"The gods help me then," Tyrion remarked with sardonic humor, noticeably glad to have his wine once again.

"I haven't seen her in so long. She's probably a different person now." He was still trying to reconcile it himself, the crying girl inside his tent that night, begging him to let her go home...the girl riding west the next morning, eyes red, a pout upon her lips, refusing to look at him as she rode away. Who would was this woman that they were now riding to all bend the knee to?

"So many possibilities...," Tyrion said, taking another drink, "none of which bode well for us." Yet, his tone belied a strange optimism, one Jon had not heard in him for some time.

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Sansa

If the endless riding was exhausting, the waiting was ever more tedious, every morning marked by the dread of the appearance of a winged shadow cast from above. The camp itself remained in a state of uneasy truce, Paxter positioning Warryn's men between his tents and the Tarly hosts. Nevertheless, desertions had been higher in the Beesbury camp since the incident, with Paxter having to order the hanging of at least one or two soldiers a day who were caught running, by the assent of a reluctant Queen.

"If we keep killing our own men, we'll hardly have any left when the Dragon Queen does get here." There had been reports of Daenerys marching south towards Highgarden instead of north. A sign of relief on one hand, giving the northern armies a chance to group with Roland Crakehall's; it also meant that they needed to be prepared for an attack, and sightings of a dragon even sooner.

"He's encouraging it, I've no doubt," Paxter grumbled. "Can't prove it though. Their men grumble, and their bad spirits affect our men all the same."

"It's fitting," Marion said glumly. "We spent weeks spreading rumors of low morale in her camp. Of course the Gods will damn us with the same fate."

Sansa shook her head, staring at the damned map and the damned pieces, each one of hers looking so minuscule and spread far apart. "If the only reason the Beesbury men haven't abandoned us is fear of having our swords turn against theirs, what keeps them from declaring for Daenerys the moment they see her dragon?"

Paxter gave her a forlorn look. "I've in mind an idea, Your Grace. You won't like it."

Sansa shook her head. "Doesn't matter what I like or don't like these days, does it?"

He pointed at the map. "Honeyholt is a short ride from here, closer than Horn Hill. Lord Warryn has one son, aged seven years. I can send the knights I trust the most to ride there after nightfall. They'll summon him forward, and bring him to our camp as your ward."

"Take a child by force, so we can have another hostage?"

"Better than another Red Wedding," Marion said.

It scared her how easily the decision came to her now. "Do it. I'll ensure the child is treated well."
Until what? Until they had to slaughter him should his father rebel?

He was about to give the orders when a rider from Horn Hill, bearing the Tarly huntsman sigil, rushed towards their tent, dismounting immediately his horse and kneeling before her.

"Your Grace. I bring news from the east."

"Good or bad," she asked, willing her voice to remain strong, no matter what tidings he brought. Brienne was asleep, a well deserved rest after standing guard outside her tent all night. It was for the better, her ears did not deserve to hear the unspeakable things they had just discussed. But what of this news now?

"Both, Your Grace. I've word her last dragon is dead, killed in the days after the battle."

To her left, Marion let out a loud whoop while Paxter guffawed spontaneously. Sansa fought the urge to do the same, emotions or excitement below her queenly state now.

"How did this happen? Can you be sure?"

"Tyrion Lannister, Your Grace. He caught up to the Knights of the Vale on their way west, and told them of the news. It was his own brother, alongside Lord Alac Hightower, who committed the deed at the cost of their own lives."

_The Kingslayer is dead_. Arthur's brother too. She had assumed so already, but hearing it firsthand made the news strike harder. And that he had died killing the dragon...whatever reason possessed him to do so, it made her heart heavy, but she couldn't afford to dwell. Jaime Lannister had once been an enemy of hers, only to become something of an unlikely friend, one she had a hard time letting go of that night. And though she could place a semblance of trust in the men around her now, they seemed nowhere as familiar to her as the Kingslayer. Perhaps their longtime enmity had made them close than either of the had realized. Brienne would need to know...his fate, his sacrifice.

"Tyrion Lannister served the Dragon Queen," Marion said. "How can we know this is not a trick of his?"

"No one's seen the dragon between here and King's Landing since its fall," Paxter said.

"Oh, and Lady..."," the messenger cocked his head, "...my apologies, Princess Arya Stark arrived in camp several days after the Half Man, Your Grace. She told the same story."

"Arya!" Finally, she allowed herself a smile before the men. "Any news of my brother Jon?"

"He accompanies the Princess, Your Grace," he said, eager to deliver the happy news to the Queen. "They ride west to Silverhill."

"They must think me there," Sansa said to Paxter, for no particular reason. Frowning, she remembered the other half of the message. "The bad news?"

"Aemon Estermont gave battle to the Dragon Queen north of Summerhall and was captured. His entire host surrendered and he now serves her cause, and he's called forth all the bannermen of the Stormlands in her name."

"That cunt," Paxter screamed, a rare burst of temper from him. "The little sniveling, weaselly cunt, I should have known better!" He looked fervently at Sansa. "Your Grace, I misjudged him. I should have never allowed him east on his own, I apologize."
Arya told me not to trust Aemon. But there was no use blaming Paxter now, or herself. She needed him loyal to her, she needed him believing she trusted him still. Which she did, more than most around her save Podrick and Brienne.

"What's done is done," she said, looking to move on. "What news of their movements?"

"Towards Highgarden, Your Grace. I'd guess within several days' ride, if they haven't secured the castle already."

"If our men know of the dragon's death in the north," Marion said, hoping to give her some cause for cheer, "they would be marching our way. With any luck, Lord Roland's men have already joined with the northern kingdoms."

Sansa nodded, dismissing the messenger. "So we march north to meet them?"

Paxter shook his head as he began pacing the tent nervously. "Her host is significantly improved in numbers now, and they stand in between. Even if they hold Highgarden and we cross the Mander to the west, they can catch up to us, especially the Dothraki."

"No dragon," Sansa said, her initial joy waning. "Fear holds this camp together...fear of her dragon...fear holds all the lords together. What do they need me for, now that the dragon's dead, and they can expel her as they wish?"

"You seem more eager than you usually are to keep your crown," Marion said bemusedly. "Perhaps its taste is not that bad."

Sansa shook her head, sitting back down, while Paxter continued to study the map.

"Margaery had her crown through her marriage. When Tommen died, no one besides Cersei would have cared for what she called herself, even if she didn't hide. I claim all seven kingdoms now, solely by my name. Even if I do so unwillingly, the deed is done, and if we win this war...even if I step aside...I'll never be able to escape this damned crown. Men will pursue me, whomever wears the crown will seek to destroy me, whomever hates the crown will seek to use me. The moment you and all your fellow lords proclaimed me in Highgarden, my life was never to be my own again, no matter what I do with the title. Nor my childrens' lives theirs, should I choose to bear any."

The weight had been more than she could bear since that moment, because she fully understood its permanence. Could she trust Margaery were she to pass the throne to her? Maybe? Maybe not. Jon yes, but only after the Dragon Queen was dead.

"Then press forward then," Marion said without hesitation. "Once men do believe a story, you'd be surprised at the lengths they will go to keep believing it. To deny it would mean admitting themselves wrong."

"You may not keep to the gods," Paxter continued, speaking as he looked at the map, "but the lot of the men you lead do. The dragon died after you took your crown. It's a sign of the gods...they'll say..."

He stopped speaking, and running his fingers up and down the map, he banged his fist upon the table, struck as he was by some wonderful idea.

"South!"

"South," Marion asked, as confused as Sansa.
"Your Grace," Paxter said, beginning by entreating her in a way she knew she would not like his coming words, "I know you've no love for the Seven. But we need our men to rally, here...and across the realm."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Before Baelor the Blessed, the Targaryen kings were crowned in the Starry Sept in Oldtown. Now that Baelor's Sept stands no longer, the tradition renewed will affirm to all across the realm who keep to the Seven who their true Queen is."

"It would be a lie," Sansa said, closing her eyes and imagining how horrid such a ceremony would be, remembering her own last time in the Great Sept, standing beside Tyrion watching the wretched Joffrey announce his vows to Margaery, a mockery of all things holy...were holiness an actual thing. "I may not keep to their gods, but I've seen with my own eyes miracles of the Old Gods, the Red God of Fire from Essos...even the Many Faced God of Braavos. All those faiths seem more real to me than some damned seven-pointed book. It almost killed your own niece, for seven hells' sake!"

"Your Grace," Marion said delicately, obviously moved to Paxter's side now, "much of you belongs to the realm now...your name...your spirit. But your heart belongs to yourself. If you don't believe, then don't believe it. No one's to force you to do so. But what's the harm in standing before some old cunt for a few minutes and giving the people what they want, so long as you know what's inside your own heart."

The logic in his words was impeccable, yet it all still seemed so wrong.

"Aye, it makes sense militarily too," Paxter said. "It gives us a reason to draw the Dragon Queen south, for her to think us weak and vulnerable for the attack."

Sansa looked skeptically over the map. "We're not?"

"We are, but this gives our western and northern armies more time to march south. Let them besiege us in Oldtown...we'd need to hold only long enough for the armies of five kingdoms to come relieve the siege and pin them. Or...," he ran his fears through his meager beard, "I'd call all my ships from the Arbor. We sail after the ceremony, up around Bandallon and up the Mander. It may get us north quicker than they and closer to Roland and yer brother, depending on how far south they chase us."

The Queen grit her teeth. "What of Honeyholt...what we discussed before to handle Lord Warryn?"

"With your permission, Your Grace, it will be carried out with delay."

"We'll need it done quickly if we ride further south," Sansa said, her decision made. This was war. If she was to sell parts of her soul, then why not all of it?

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Along with Chapter 13 (Sansa's coronation), this was one of my favorite chapters to write. And one of the most gut-wrenchingly difficult and painful, whether it be Jon and Arya skirting the heart of darkness, or Dany's heartbreaking conversation with the little girl, or Sansa finding out how much of her soul she can lose.

Swanton is a fictional village I had to make up, as the site for their battle. It would be
located a bit northwest of Summerhall on the map. Sansa, as Redwyne said, is about halfway between Horn Hill and Honeyholt along the Rose Road.

As always, thank you all from the bottom of my heart for reading and sharing your thoughts on this little fic!
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Tyrion rationalizes to one Queen while two other Queens collide towards one another.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tyrion

"Your Grace, you've changed much since I last saw you, at the Crossroads. Are you a faceless man now? Or woman, I'd reckon. If so, are you Sansa Stark, pretending to be Margaery Tyrell? Or has it been Margaery Tyrell, this entire time, except when she's imitating Sansa Stark as the self proclaimed Queen of the Seven Kingdoms?"

The woman who much resembled Margaery Tyrell regarded him with an impassive smirk at the head of the long tent. "Lord Tyrion," ignoring his bars, "I hear you caused our Queen great displeasure at the Crossroads, due to your actions in service to your Dragon Queen."

"A Dragon Queen your own grandmother...ahem, Lady Margaery's grandmother, found herself aligned with in the war against Cersei Lannister."

"Allegiances change," Margaery said, her voice colder, with the weight of command now, "as we all well know." Though she was a Lady now, as a former Queen she still carried with her the weight of her royalty, and Tyrion figured that the woman was something of a Lady Paramount of the Reach now, just as Sansa had been the Lady of the North in all but name.

Margaery continued. "But sooner or later all of us make final our choices. House Tyrell, along with most of the remaining realm, along with every lord whom you rode with, along with every lord and lady in this camp, has pledged ourselves to Queen Sansa of House Stark, for this war, for all wars to come, and for the peace which will bless the realm once the Red Wolf sits upon her rightful throne."

"The Red Wolf," Tyrion repeated, exchanging a look of disbelief with Jon. "Is she a person still, or does my former wife belong to the realm of myths now?"

"No more and no less than your Dragon Queen," Margaery said, a rather ruthless edge to the voice he had never heard before. "It's still your Dragon Queen, is it not?"

"Believe me, Daenerys may be one person who would want me dead more than your Red Wolf."

"The age of dragons is over," a young boy proclaimed, barely veiled anger in his eye directed at him, "thanks to Queen Sansa. Many great things can only follow her reign."

"Thanks to Queen Sansa," Tyrion asked, side-eying the boy sitting beside Margaery. Arthur Hightower, he remembered, from the Crossroads. Wasn't he in love with Sansa, or so his late brother believed? Young men are fickle indeed, at that age. "I was actually the one who killed the dragons, Lord Arthur...not your queen."

"He just watched, to be honest," Arya said next to him to his dismay. "He held a torch for a time. We
did most of the work...myself, the Kingslayer...," she looked sadly at Arthur, "your brother Alac. My regrets on his passing."

The young lord gulped in a breath of air at her words, his grief evident. "I already thought him dead when I heard King's Landing fell. He died a hero, he brings honor to our family name..."

Sensing his discomfort, Margaery set her hand gently on his arm, "and as my dearly betrothed said, Queen Sansa has helped bring to an end to the age of dragons."

Roland Crakehall stepped forward. Wonder if his breath still smells as bad as I remember. Tyrion wondered.

"Jaime Lannister was in the capital because Queen Sansa set him free, to honor a vow to man whose family so severely wronged hers. May her era be remembered with similar acts deeds of honor, forgiveness, and kindness."

Again, he exchanged a look at Jon, then Arya, and even she seemed a bit amused by all these lords who were waxing so poetically about her sister.

Did I sound such like sheep, was I this bad, when I was proclaiming the virtues of the Dragon Queen?

"The point is...our actions ought to clearly demonstrate to my lords and ladies where our loyalties lie now."

"You'd fight for our Queen then, against her," Margaery asked, narrowing her eyes at both Jon and him. She turned her attentions towards Jon. "Jon Snow. I've heard many great things about you, many from the sister you cast away in favor of your Dragon Queen. Yet she still championed your cause after that, and tried to crown you a king in the Great Hall of Highgarden, before that honor was placed upon her head instead. I ask you now, Jon Snow, where do you stand? The Northmen in our camp, they have bent the knee to Ned Stark's daughter now, but they will still all naturally seek to follow their former king...so long as he is in alignment with their Queen. We must know then, will you raise your sword against your former lover? Or does she yet have a hold on your heart?"

It was Jon who exchanged an uneasy look at him now, and Tyrion shook his head in dread.

Lie for once, you damned fool, lie!

"Lady Margaery," Jon began, his voice soft and yet still commanding even in the presence of so many suspicious and unfamiliar lords, "Whatever my parents were...whoever my true father was, I was raised a bastard of the North, and I know of no other life, besides that of being a sworn man of the Watch. I bent my knee to Queen Daenerys to save the North...and because I loved her...both are true, and I will not apologize for her role in defending the realm, aye defending all of you from the Army of the Dead...even as you all sit in judgment of me now.

What she did afterwards, I cannot defend. I cannot defend how I followed her and let her do as she did, except that I did as much I could to hold my men back from the slaughter, after the Lannisters surrendered. I love Daenerys for who she was. I do not love the woman she is now. I had been on my way to...protect the realm from this woman, before I was summoned to the Dragonpit to witness Cersei's execution. My love for the woman who freed thousands of slaves in Essos, who dreamed of a better world for lords and smallfolk alike...who risked her own life and dragons to save me and save the realm from the dead, I will never forget or renounce her, even as I will defend the realm now from the woman she's become."
"You'll raise your sword against her then," Arthur asked petulantly, impatient and unmoved by his speech.

He kept his attention towards Margaery, even Jon Snow knowing who truly held this camp. "My sister spoke of the kindness you showed her in King's Landing. I've no claim to know the politics of the capital, but I suspect Sansa learned much from you. In turn, I trust your judgment of such matters. I've never known my sister to desire the Iron Throne, but if a worthy woman like you believes she the right person to sit upon it...if all the worthy lords here believe she the rightful Queen...then I defer to your wisdoms, and I will bend the knee before my sister, I will beg her forgiveness, and I will ask her what she commands of me."

"So...that's a yes?" Arthur looked confused, and once again Margaery stepped in.

"Your honor and your words bring me comfort, Jon Snow. As by your own request, we will seek the Queen's wisdom in the matter. Until then, you and Lord Tyrion are welcome to ride with us as a guest of the Princess Arya Stark."

"They really believe in her," Jon said to him, sitting next to a fire by their tent, his own legs weary from the constant riding, yet no end in sight ahead. *I'm not made for all this war. Perhaps a cage is actually preferable, so long as they give me wine.*

There was no small amount of pride in his voice, though still not without the same disbelief he had expressed ever since hearing of the news, but it seemed Jon Snow was finally and satisfyingly impressed by his sister, having witnessed lords and ladies expressing their admiration for her in the same way as they had for...well, the former King in the North himself once.

"You believed in the Dragon Queen because she saved you...and because you loved her," Tyrion said, not sure if he could forge through the words ahead.

"I did. I still do."

"I loved her, in a way...perhaps in a way deeper than you." Jon regarded him with an odd mixture of curiosity, along with the natural jealousy of one inclined to protect his own woman. He explained. "You were in danger from the Night King for...a day and a night, perhaps, when she saved you? Me...I had just strangled to death the woman I loved...I murdered my own father. I was ready to die...I thought myself in the seventh hell already, shitting in a crate crossing the Narrow Sea. I traveled for months with companions of varying degrees of pleasantness across half a continent. I thought it a waste of time...that's what I told myself...but...I held out maybe just that small ounce of hope, that there could yet be meaning in my life. When she gave me a reason to believe, I reached and grabbed her lifeline with everything I had, and gave her everything I had, even though it was not enough. She rescued me from myself Jon, she gave me a reason to live, a reason to hope...a reason to exist. And just like you...I held on to her...far longer than I should have."

He choked on the coarse camp ale, hoping for some better refreshments as they journeyed south.

"Look at these lords. They heard the dragons were coming...the return of the Targaryens. And as bad as the years have been, it's been ones of their own making...for the first time since the age of Aegon, the lords and ladies have been allowed to be the cause of their own suffering, rather than having them inflicted upon them by their dragon overlords. Then King's Landing burned, and they had to confront not just the end of their own lives, but the end of the world they wanted to build...the end of the world they did *indeed* build, for better or worse, over the course of the last generation. I'm not sure how Sansa did it...clearly we're the fools for underestimating her still...but somehow she became to them the living embodiment of their collective hopes...she's become their sigil now...a reason for them to fight on, to save not just themselves, but their world. And men hold on for reason...not
reasons, but *the* reason, just as much as they hold on for love."

Jon beckoned him for his ale, and Tyrion handed it over and watched as the former King finish his canteen.

"They looked to you first, when the North suffered from the Boltons. They'd naturally look to you...a man, a powerful warrior...unmatched with your sword."

"I did everything I could for them," Jon said, thinking of his time as a king, he thought, with equal parts pride and loathing. "I think I saved them. I did what I thought was right."

"You had to give yourself up, once you became a king. And you did...you gave up your own crown...your own people, in order to save them." He looked around the fire, grabbing a spare piece of mutton now that there was no more ale to spare. "She's no longer your sister now. She belongs to the realm...she belongs to those lords...for the rest of this war. And if she wins...for a long time to come."

And he had a feeling that it would be a long reign. If her former wife had gotten this far, if she'd been willing to do everything she had to survive long enough to become one of two players left remaining in the great game...then he had no doubt as to what she would do to survive everything that came after.

"You may have fooled the other lords," Tyrion said, when Jon remained silent, "but not Lady Margaery. She's clever, and she knows you never answered her question."

"I thought I did?"

*Bless the poor boy, he's genuine.*

"What if we run into Daenerys before Sansa? What will you do then?"

He took several large bites of food as he considered the question.

"Guess I'll have to fight," he replied, and Tyrion wondered whether for once, Jon Snow had lied.

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**Daenerys**

"Tell me a story, Lord Aemon."

"Any story you desire, Your Grace," the heir to Greenstone said, before further thinking, "although I'm not much of a storyteller, Your Grace. My little sister..."

"How about the story of Robert's Rebellion," Daenerys said coldly, "where you fought with Robert Baratheon at the Trident...did you not?"

The question stunned the man, a tall, proud lord whose brown hair was already half gray, to the point where his own horse seemed to stumble. "My Lord father declared so, Your Grace, and King Robert was my liege lord..."

"And my father your king." She allowed him a smile. "Not a good king, I'll admit...there was a reason the country turned against him."

Aemon rode on in silence, unsure of how to answer her, so she continued.

"Neither was Joffrey. Which is why you declared for Stannis Baratheon, am I right, because of his
right by blood," she feigned confusion, "or...no, you declared for Renly first, didn't you? That didn't last long, so you rode bravely and valiantly for Stannis after all...or...actually, I've heard whispers you and your men abandoned him north of Winterfell...leaving him to his fate, after which you bent the knee for...Joffrey? Or was it Tommen by then? Or Cersei? Either way, a Lannister, whom you served bravely until...well, I suppose Lady Sansa has captured many a man's eye, hasn't she? And she held yours...until you surrendered to me at Swanton."

The man started coughing in a fit, and she couldn't help but revel in his discomfort.

"Your Grace...I...my path through these wars...it hasn't been an easy one to navigate and...I'm not alone, Your Grace...in having to make...touch decisions for, eh, the honor of my house..."

She placed her hand on his shoulder, as firm as she could.

"It has been for all. House Targaryen's absence was felt deeply by the realm, and many have suffered for it. I come to Westeros not to avenge my father, but to right his wrongs, and all the wrongs which came after. I need men like you, Lord Aemon, men who can fight and whom men follow, but I need to know that I can trust you."

He can't fight, men follow him only because they have to, and I won't ever trust him. But it boiled down to a matter of expediency for her, at least until she could rally forth more loyal men...men like Edmund Thorne, the only Westerosi lord with her currently that she felt she could fully trust, but alas he had little influence and lesser bannermen...due mainly because of punishment Robert the Usurper doled out to him for staying true to the crown.

"You're right, Your Grace. The kingdom has sorely lacked a firm hand...aye, the Mad King was a tad too firm but...the Targaryen name endures...and carries more weight, I believe, carried through the centuries..."

He was quick on his feet though, perhaps, a clever man who's spent too much of his life trying to play the warrior. At least that was a delusion Tyrion ever found himself beholden to.

"I intend to remake the kingdoms, Lord Aemon, once the war is won. It has come at a great price, the blood of most of our great houses decimated. But perhaps that blood has grown stale over the years. The fault lies in my ancestors too, perhaps, in that they kept them in place over the centuries, for the sake of complacency. But I see this realm, I've met many of its peoples now, and I see that new blood is needed...new ideas, new ways to govern, to help the people. A great house shan't remain great unless it proves itself with each generation. I hope that I'm right about you, Lord Aemon, in that you'll prove yourself worthy of helping me lead this new world."

It was all an act, but acting was one of the few weapons remaining at her disposal. The words were hollow, delivered by a Queen who did not believe them, to a man who didn't care about them...not like the men and women who followed her truly, so many of the dead now. But words are a Queen's weapon, and she would wield them however she needed to. Soon, more lords from the Stormlands would arrive, followed by those from the Crownlands. She needed to hone her weapon, so that her words were sharp when she finally had a chance to deliver them to those for whom they may still ring true.

"Your Grace," Edmund Thorne rode up, along with Grey Worm. Her faithful Unsullied captain was one of the few true followers who remained, and nominally the commander of all her armies...but he knew little of the lands or people they were to fight. Which meant she had to place her trust upon these strange lords native to the country she was born to rule. "Our scouts intercepted a rider from Oldtown."
"Less than a week's ride, Lord Edmund?" They had just passed Horn Hill, recently vacated by the two Tarly ladies, mother and daughter, both declared to Sansa.

"Aye. Lady Sansa has arrived there."

She frowned. "I thought she was in the Western Hills."

"A falsehood, Your Grace. It was Tommen's wife Margaery they sent north."

So they had made the right decision then, though unwittingly, in taking the southern road. First, gaining Lord Aemon and soon the Stormlands, and now, she had the false queen trapped.

"She is fleeing us?"

"Perhaps, but the rider was sent forth to announce her coronation." The white haired knight said the words with utter disgust, and she remembered that he bore a great grudge for House Stark, considering how it was Jon Snow himself who executed his own brother at the Wall. "She is to be anointed at the Starry Sept..."

"Where Aegon himself was crowned," Daenerys muttered, quickly matching his rage. It seemed sacrilege to her, for Sansa to be violating this space so sacred to her own family.

"Where many Targaryen kings after him were crowned as well," Aemon added, trying to please her with little subtlety.

"I hope the Septon is prepared to crown another Queen, after we win," Daenerys said. She herself cared little for the Westerosi faith, but she would follow the traditions of her ancestors in accepting them...so long as they knelt. "A new High Septon, to be sure...one who hasn't dirtied his hands with treason."

"We've word the enemy armies have made camp along the Last Ridge," Edmund continued, bluntly disregarding Aemon's attempts at flattery.

"How far is that?"

"It's the first of five hills between us and Oldtown," Aemon said, "about a day's ride from us. The Faith Militant hid in these mountains from Maegor the Cruel until well after the rebellion was over."

"Let her wear her false crown," Edmund said. "If we can catch them in the hills, we can wipe out the last of her southern armies without getting bogged down in a siege."

"Your Grace, if I may," Aemon said, leaning his head so he could see her past Edmund, who had wedged his own horse between the two. "These mountains are no child's play, and our supplies are running low, in light of the wisdom of your generosity, of course...it may be prudent to await the arrival of the remainder of your bannermen before we mount an assault."

The ride through the Reach from King's Landing had been enlightening, especially as they followed the southern path alongside the mountains while constantly on the lookout for the wolf queen's armies. Their path off the Rose Road allowed them to visit many smaller, forgotten villages, those hit harder by the winter, milder as it was here in the south, as well as the toils of all the recent wars. And while her lords recognized the political advantages of her charity earlier on along the march, many of them, even Grey Worm, were beginning to express concerns that they were giving away too much of their supplies, that they would not have enough for themselves if the war dragged on.

"You can't feed a country while fighting a war," Grey Worm had said to her.
"Then what am I fighting this war for, Torgo Nudho?"

In every stop she made the effort to talk to the villagers while her armies marched ahead, catching up with them hours or even a day later. She talked to widows who had lost their husbands, Maesters who read to her endlessly figures of harvests going back a hundred years, children who asked her stories about her dragons...stories she told with a firm voice, determined to hold back her grief and sorrow and rage at the cruel fate which befell them. She found hope inside their wide eyes as she regaled them with tales of the Dothraki Sea, the mysteries of Qarth, her own voice proud as she recounted how the slaves stood up against against their masters. As the children listened, she felt their innocence and trust giving her the strength to carry on marching, with each leave feeling better assured that she had left behind newly converted believers of their true Queen, that she could indeed win not just the war but the realm, without the might of her dragons.

Edmund vehemently shook his head, disagreeing with Aemon. "If we wait, we may lose the opportunity. They could retreat into Oldtown and force us into a siege we can't win, even if Queen Yara and the storm lords join us...not with the northern armies bearing down on us. We wipe out the last of her southern hosts now, then let her hide out in Oldtown as long as she wants...we can pivot and turn north without worrying about our rears."

"I'm inclined to agree with Lord Edmund," Denys Velaryon said carefully, having caught up with them at the front of the armies as well. "We don't need the additional men to outnumber them, and we've seen what your Dothraki can do, Your Grace, even in rougher terrain. We had no problems against Lord Aemon, after all."

He proved a pleasant surprise for her, often staying in the villages, talking with the smallfolk next to her, seemingly taking as much pleasure from it as she was.

"I grew up on stories of Duncan the Tall," he had explained, referring to the man who had squired her own great ancestor, Aegon the Unlikely. "The idea of a hedge knight, wandering from town to town, meeting and helping the smallfolk of the realm...it always appealed to me. Alas, these are not the times for such knights."

"I don't expect Paxter Redwyne to be as cowardly as Lord Aemon here," Edmund said contemptuously, further dismissing the man, "but I wouldn't be surprised if some of these southern lords can be persuaded to rebend the knee once they hear the screams of your horselords."

It seems few shared any high regard of Aemon Estermont's military prowess, including Grey Worm, who voiced his doubts to her also in private. His men were useful, true, but were he to stay loyal to her to a point where she could actually trust him, he would prove to be far useful as a political voice in court rather than in the field, where he had already surrendered once rather fight to his bloody end.

"My Lords," she proclaimed proudly, her decision made, "three battles will win us this last war. The first was Swanton, whereby many of the men who march with us now first rediscovered their loyalty to House Targaryen. Our victory at Last Ridge will see our armies grow ever larger while the realm continues to rally to their rightful queen. Then we march North, our men unmatched and undefeated in battle, with all seven kingdoms ours to reclaim."

It wasn't much of a hill, a gently sloping surface slightly steeper than the one they had taken at Swanton, rising up on their left and the ridgeline continuing to the Rose Road where the path crested at a low pass.

"They've stripped it bare of trees," Edmund noted, pointing out the stumps lining the hillside below the enemy banners. "A foolish decision...not that the woods mattered at Swanton."
"Most of their men seem concentrated above our left," Denys said, pointing out the sight of the shields and horses spotted alongside the distance. "Their left," he pointed at the pass sitting between themselves and Oldtown, "seems weaker."

"They're luring us to hit their left, so that they can swoop down from the hills and hit our flanks," Edmund explained. "They're foolish not to have retreated, but they must believe their position much too strong to abandon."

"We should hit their right with the Dothraki then," Daenerys said, knowing they needed to attack strength with strength.

"Aye," Edmund answered. "Send the Velaryon and Estermont cavalry south along the road to pin that flank, and cut off their retreat south. Once both their flanks are taken up, we'll hit the middle with the Unsullied."

"It's late in day for an assault," Denys said, "but come nightfall they may retreat beyond our grasp. We've the numbers and the right men for a quick and decisive attack now."

"After this, one last battle," Daenerys said, giving her assent to the lords' plan. In the corner, Aemon observed detached, clearly unhappy at having been overruled and his counsel unheeded. How would he fare in battle now, she wondered, especially not one of his own choosing?

"Men in formation," Edmund ordered, riding back and forth along the road as every man from Unsullied to knight pivoted leftwards to face the enemy, waiting motionlessly atop the ridge. Horns blew forth, a Westerosi tradition marking the start of battle that her ears would need to become accustomed to, and as per the last encounter, Ser Denys remained by her side while Edmund and Aemon rode forth with the other lords to fight at the front of the lines. The Dothraki, recognizing the sounds of the horns as their signal, shrieked their terrifying worst as wave after wave rode up the hill like torrents crashing alongside a beach.

"Prepare shields," Grey Worm ordered in Valyrian.

"Our center's weak, until the enemies' flanks break," Denys explained. "If they charge downhill, we must be prepared to ride back up the road to safety, until the Unsullied force them back into retreat."

Their current position was out of range for the enemy arrows, and while she would have liked to have ridden ahead, she ultimately agreed with her lords that the risk was too great. It was here that she missed her dragons the most; riding with the men had allowed her a chance to understand her country and her peoples in a way she never could from above, but the view from below in the midst of a battle seemed to her like she was leading blindly.

Nevertheless, it was a beautiful sight to see her horselords flying above her for once, a force of nature ready to crush her foes. Anticipating the sounds of the first metal arakhs clashing against the broadswords, she was surprised to hear instead orderly calls of command from atop the hill, then watched as the enemy lines separated cleanly to the sound of distant rumbling. It looked like a landslide at first, streams of dirt and mud rolling down the hillside, before the brown avalanche parted into hundreds of thin lines, crashing against the vanguard of her Dothraki.

"Logs," Denys shouted, eyes in panicked realization. "The trees they cut down..."

"It's a trick, but it won't hold," Daenerys said, buckling her horse and riding frantically over towards Grey Worm. "Start your advance," she ordered instinctively.

"March leftwards, once the trees fall past you," Denys added. "Support the Dothraki at all costs!"
He turned to her. "We lose our center now, and we'll need Edmund to crush their left more than ever."

As the waves of fallen trees continued their downward progress, she watched with concern many of the Dothraki along the rear riding back in retreat, parting left and right away from the crushing pressure. From above, the sound of trumpets, and the hoof beats of the enemy cavalry starting their pursuit behind the current they set forth.

"Let them regroup down here," Denys shouted, monitoring the battle as the Unsullied charged upwards to meet the enemy advance, spears thrust forward in one hand, shield held over their heads on the other to ward off the oncoming rush of arrows. So preoccupied were they with the battle before them, neither one of them seemed to notice the approach of Edmund and Aemon until they were practically by their side, their entire hosts retreating behind him.

"What happened," she yelled harshly. What else could go wrong for her in this terrible battle?

"We reached the crest," Edmund yelled loudly, face bloodied from multiple cuts, "and the enemy retreated. But the other side of the hill..."

"All of Dorne marching up against us," Aemon said, blue eyes quivering with fear, "near ten thousand men I'd guess...we would have been obliterated."

"Are you sure they were marching against us?" They had not heard much from Dorne, one way or the other, since she'd ordered the ravens and riders sent out from King's Landing, besides vague letters of support with little in specifics. It was still a hope that the new Prince would march to join them, but the longer they rode, the less she knew she could depend on them. But a full betrayal? It seemed that if it were the worst, then surely it would happen to her on this wretched continent.

"Aye, their arrows were shooting true in our direction," Edmund said. "We have to retreat now, else it'll be minutes before they surround us."

She had no time to spare, a decision was needed immediately. "Sound the horns," she agreed, and they all reared their horses to ride back the way they came.

"Infantry," Edmund ordered, "march up and protect the retreat with the Unsullied. Horsemen, guard the rear flanks!"

As they started up the road, the rumblings of the avalanche of logs grew near, and Daenerys struggled to stay upright while her horse bucked in fear. All the men around her scattered, riding and running erratically to avoid the onslaught, and she watched with horror as a pile of four logs, one up above another, fell directly upon Ser Denys, crushing him and his horse to a bloody pulp in an instant. Behind her, a curse, as a stray log clipped the back of Edmund's steed, the stout lord landing ungracefully onto the ground, yet on his feet in an instant, running alongside her. Daenerys herself wasn't sure how she was able to dodge all the falling trees in the chaos of the retreat, but somehow, in the bloody blur, she rode, hanging on for dear life, until the sounds of the chaos fell far behind her, heart racing in panic until a group of Dothraki found their way to her and formed around her a protective circle with their horses. Looking back, she felt a sigh of relief to see many of the horselords running on foot, some limping, their horses likely crushed but the men themselves having survived their falls and the enemy counterattack.

"The late charge was a blessing," Aemon said, riding beside her, somehow having emerged intact from the battle where her worthier men had not. "Night will come within the hour, and they may not further pursue."
He had been right, had he not though, in advising patience? She swore to herself, wondering whom to blame for this disaster.

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Sansa

It was darker than she’d ever felt, even more so than the Long Night. The wind howled, each gale cutting bloody streaks through her face. Above her, a pale blue moon bathed the landscape in a frigid light, a light which terrified, rather than offer warmth. In the distance howled beasts unknown, their screeching worse than any dragon or dead man. She followed a path through barren trees, each branch carving daggers through the dim light, until she came upon an open clearing by the edge of an inclined cliff. Beyond it, she saw a plunge which seemed hundreds of times deeper than what lay beneath the Moon Door in the Eyrie. Near the precipice sat a man, crouched in a fetal position, face buried between his knees. Unable to control her own body, she approached him until the rocks below her bare feet became impossibly jagged, an impassable barrier between her and the familiar silhouette. A boy, she said to herself, whose hair, once brilliantly golden, she recognized despite its tattered and wretched state.

"Is this hell?"

Joffrey’s voice sounded as spiteful as ever. Younger than she remembered, but nevertheless it did not fail to boil her blood, years after she last heard it. "What does it look like, you dumb little cunt?"

"What hell is this," Sansa asked, her voice growing braver. He didn’t answer. She raised her voice. "This dumb little cunt is your Queen now. Answer your Queen, I command you."

As she spoke, each sound coming forth her mouth flew at him and cut deep gashes across his back, through the very same golden coat he wore on the day of his wedding. The louder she spoke, the deeper the gashes split his skin to the bone, and his agonized screaming warmed her heart. The wounds closed back up, his robes as gleaming gold as the day it had been presented to him.

"Hells if I know," he muttered in defeat, once he recovered from the torment, his face still hidden to her. "I didn't think you'd have the power here. It stopped for a while, then you came. The waiting makes it worse."

"You want me to feel sorry for you," she spat. There was no sympathy for her heart, no second thoughts that he deserved every bit of his condemnation. "Whatever this is, this is too kind for you."

She took a deep breath, then screamed at the top of her lungs, channeling all her unrequited hatred not just for him, but for Tywin Lannister and Littlefinger and Ramsey and Cersei and Daenerys and even Jon Snow and all seven of the bloody kingdoms she ruled, watching as his body dissipate upon her command, stretching impossibly until it tore itself into thousands of small pieces, the sight before her only bits of flesh and blood until they reformed again into the shape of a man.

She heard herself chuckling. "I can do this. Again, and again, and AGAIN! JOFFREY!" She spoke his name with certainty, with the confidence that she held absolute power over him.

He turned, and she saw that his eyes were long gone, replaced by two, ancient worn holes, the blood which lined his face upon his death having carved canyons through his skin in the endless ages since.

"Do it then. Doesn't make a difference anyhow. Maybe you'll stay awhile."

Opening her mouth, she went to scream, yet no sound came out. Raising her palm forward, she willed the air to push the wretched creature forward, until he plunged off the precipice through an
eternity of knives, though certain, she knew, to land right back in the very same spot before her. Closing her eyes, she then willed herself to leave before he returned.

"Ser Mortimer. Prince Martyn." The knight stood clad in the same dull armor she remembered from Highgarden, the Prince dressed in the bronze and golden robes she remembered adorning Prince Oberyn at a wedding long past. "I hope your journey long past. "

"Your Grace," Martyn said, his thick beard muffling his Dornish accent, "it was pleasant indeed. We routed the Dragon Queen's armies at the Last Ridge, and they are on the retreat north."

"All your men fought valiantly for your cause, including Lord Warryn," Mortimer added. "I regret the enemy charged early, else we would have surrounded them entirely."

In the corner of her eye she saw a young child, blond of hair. With Paxter needed to lead the army still, Damon Beesbury accompanied her south. Next to him stood the tall, hulking figure of Ser Ben Bulwer, one of Paxter's sworn men, whose unsavory role guarding the boy was one she would never assign to Brienne or Podrick.

"Your arrival augurs well for the Crown," Sansa replied, feeling out warily this new Prince. She wore a simple gray dress for the ceremony, plain enough to fit a septa, with only a long purple scarf hanging around her neck down past her knees, and a smaller gold fleece above it, both scarves signifying her newfound royalty. Inside the chambers of the Starry Sept her new banners hung, a same rich shade of purple, the gray Direwolf still howling fiercely in the middle, falling as freely down the walls her red hair, unadorned by braids, fell plainly down her back.

"She has more men marching in from the Stormlands," Mortimer Dayne said, "along with her Ironborn, so the war's not over yet."

"Yet the Ironborn sail not the Summer Seas," the Prince said respectfully, "clearing the waters all the way north to the Mander."

"I see my new Master of Ships is well acquainted with our situation already." Looking at the head of the Sept, seeing the holy men and women still marching in slowly in procession, the Queen addressed the Prince. "Who is to get Casterly Rock, may I ask?"

Mortimer looked down at his nephew Beryn, and ruffled his hair, the boy beaming at all the important elders surrounding him. "The Prince has bestowed me the West, Your Grace. I will hold it for my nephew Beryn, until he comes of age."

There was to be no crown today, Sansa insisted on that. She would wear none until the end of the war. The ceremony was a simple matter of an anointing and blessing by the new High Septon, picked by Arthur's Lord grandfather Leyton himself, after Cersei failed to appoint one in the aftermath of the Sparrows.

"I'm sure Ser Mortimer told you we were as close as...brothers...in our youth. I can think of no better way to honor our friendship."

"Why Beryn," Sansa asked. "He's a very nice boy, but...wouldn't Ser Mortimer seek an heir of his own?"

"Your Grace," the dark haired knight explained, exchanging an uneasy look with the prince, "I'm nearing the old age now, too old for a young wife, really. Beryn I love like my own son, and believe me, I've no wish or, should I say...desire...to make any new heir."

"I understand," she said, realization dawning as she saw for the first time, seeing the way these
friends stood close to each other, one's hand brushing against the other's arm. Her smile widened, as she touched them each gently upon their wrists, "I'm honored give Dorne their proper voices in the new world to come."

Prince Martyn bowed. "The Dragon Queen offered us many a castle too. I asked Ser Mortimer, whom I trust more than anyone, what should I decide? Which Queen is worthier? Who is better for Dorne?"

Mortimer bowed before her as well. "Ned Stark killed my brother in war, and some say he loved my sister before she died...but having met you, Your Grace, I see the future will be nothing like the past. Let us forget our histories, and may this new relationship between Dorne and the Crown prove fruitful."

"The winter has been harsh and cold," Sansa answered, her voice equally cryptic. "May spring see new fruits for us all, my lords and princes."

One last gentle smile, she bowed at them and turned to the altar, where they all awaited her now. Walking past Brienne and Podrick, opposite them her newest hostage and his captor beside a smiling Marion and two Tarly women, one beaming, the other solemn, she turned her face into stone and body into a statue, floating forward one purposeful step after the other.

*Be what they want you to be. Be what they want to see. The sweet Maiden pure, meek, un tarnished. The Mother incarnate.*

*I'm as far from Winterfell as I could ever be.*

*Father, would you be proud of me still?*

**Chapter End Notes**

The show depicted Oldtown surrounded by mountains, so I figured it made sense for the Rose Road to pass through them. Last Ridge is, again, an invention for the purpose of giving a name to the battle.

Since the new Prince of Dorne still remains unnamed in canon, I decided for a bit of alliteration in Prince Martyn Martell.

Ser Mortimer Dayne here, an OC, is a younger brother of Arthur and Ashara Dayne, as well as Edric Dayne's father. Beryn, another OC, is the younger child of yet another younger brother of Mortimer's, who died early on in the War of Five Kings.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Daenerys marches north. Jon marches south.

Chapter Notes

For reference: the river flowing south into the Mander from the Westerlands, through Goldengrove, is unnamed in canon. I am naming it the Golds Fork here, for the sake of this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys

"My Queen, when I heard the news, I feared the worst."

"Queen Yara, your concern warms my heart." She embraced the woman far more passionately than she expected. Yara Greyjoy was one of the few from Westeros who had pledged herself to her, and out of all her remaining supporters, she had proven by far to be the most loyal. Recalling when they first met in the Great Pyramid of Mereen, she summoned forth memories of a time when the future was filled to the brim with hope, rather than blood and ashes. "This is war. Battles are won, and they are lost, but one lost battle does not make a war."

Yet, did she truly mean those words? Never before had she lost a battle like that, not when she had the unstoppable fury of the Unsullied and Dothraki along with enough Westerosi knights at her command to round out an army...not against the living, anyway. And while she thanked whatever gods still deigned to smile down upon her that it hadn't been much worse, that the trick the southrons played managed to only kill a small amount of her riders, she grieved so heavily the loss of every man she brought over from Essos to this strange continent. Many more were merely injured, though some more severe than others, possessing the wits and ability to escape the trap the moment it was sprung, and the sight of their maimed and wounded instilled in her a bleak trembling, a fear clothed in uncertainty, a feeling she had not felt since...since what? Since she was a child? Since she was sold to a stranger, since she wandered the Red Wastes?

"Your false allies have fallen away," Yara said, clutching her one hand in a closed fist still. "Better that, so you know where you truly stand."

She would appoint her Hand now, except...there was the thought, perhaps, that the war was far from won...that the idea of losing no longer a far flung possibility...and then whatever appointments she would make would seem a joke if she were to lose the war.

"The war is yet ours to win," Edmund Thorne said gruffly. "Ironbound, Stormlands, Crownlands...not all the realm has forgotten their rightful Queen. I wish we had more, but our numbers are healthy enough, and we stand a chance against the enemy so long as we keep them separate."
He was still walking with a visible limp, the result of getting knocked off his horse at Last Ridge. His spirits were dimmer these days, yet his faith in their cause never waivered. 

As he ought to, Daenerys thought, this very castle we're standing in his if we prevail. Highgarden was beautiful, and she half considered making it a new capital to distance her reign from the corruption and mire and shadows of King's Landing.

They arrived at the castle to the disappointing news that, at best, little more than half the men Aemon and Edmund had called forth arrived at Highgarden to swear fealty. As much as some of the smallfolk along a small stretch of the Reach may love her now, lords across the rest of the realm declared for Sansa after hearing word of the High Septon's blessing, and while they refrained from sending their banners piecemeal to her aid, caught as they were on the wrong side of a screaming Dothraki horde, she knew that all it took was one more defeat before the release of all the jackals and crows who would chew up whatever remained of her after.

"Any word from Lord Gendry," she asked Aemon. He shook his head.

"A raven from the Crossroads. Storms, he says, and he's waiting them out at the Inn. But he wishes us good fortune."

Had he heard about Jon Snow's imprisonment, however brief? Did her newest liege lord possess more loyalties she did not know about?

"We'll win this war with the men we have then," she said begrudgingly.

"I've word the Wolf Queen's sailing towards the Mander, her men along Paxter Redwyne and Prince Martyn's fleets," Aemon said. The words 'Wolf Queen' were spoken openly through her camp now in a derisive way...but still acknowledging her rival a queen nevertheless, spoken further across the realm after the events of Last Ridge.

"If only we haven't docked our ships at King's Landing," Yara said delicately, having done so upon her own orders.

"An honest decision, made on the circumstances at the time," Edmund said, preemptively defending her. "No decision is easy in war."

"A mistake nevertheless," Daenerys said, stepping forward, "one which I'll own."

"We don't know where they'll disembark," Edmund said, pointing out the course of the river upon the map. Had Sansa and her men used this same chamber, this same map, Daenerys wondered, before they scattered before what they thought would be the last dragon? "We also don't know which side of the Golds Fork the northern armies will march. The western banks will allow them to meet sooner with her southern armies, but a meeting on the eastern banks will allow them to pin us in the south, and block our progress to King's Landing or anywhere else in the realm."

"We don't want to pick the wrong side, then let them catch us while we cross," Aemon said, always cautious. She should have heeded his caution last time.

What would Jorah have said, she thought not for the first time. He was cautious, prudent, yet far from a coward. Would one man have made a difference in the battle? Probably not. But perhaps Jorah would have advised wariness where the enemy seemed too foolish, their apparent mistakes too tempting to be true.

"They lose the war if they can't combine their men," Daenerys said, forced to take an interest in such details. She had once trusted Tyrion to take care of such matters...his abandonment leaving more than
a few harsh lessons for her to learn on her own. "We'll march along the west bank."

As it has been for her since losing Drogon, she was far less confident than she sounded. It was just a guessing game, really, there was no telling what the right or wrong decision was...that fact seemed clear since the Battle at Last Ridge. And how many of these hardened lords before her, even those she trusted like Edmund or Yara, would admit to her that for all their expertise, for all their experience in war, the fruits of the field boiled down to nothing more than a coin flip for each and every battle to come afterwards. This was war without dragons...wars in which she will have to fight, just like everyone else, for the rest of her life.

"We march at once," Edmund ordered, "there's no time to waste. We win the war, and we'll feast here at Highgarden, and every castle through the realm will join us in celebration!"

She recognized this type of terrain from before, a glimpse of memory to several wars ago, when she had first taken Drogon and led the Dothraki against the Kingslayer aside the Gold Road. It wasn't quite the same, they were a far distance from that last battle, but as the land dried up past the fertile plains of the Mander, resembling closer the deserts she was accustomed to in Essos, she wondered if the soil changing to sand portended well, marking a return to the familiarity of past glories. They were within a day's ride of Goldengrove when they Edmund rode up to her with two captive soldiers.

"Our riders found them on patrol. Bannermen of Lord Mathis Rowan, Lord of Goldengrove."

"Who is sworn to the wolf," Daenerys asked. So many lords, so many houses...and so difficult to keep track of who was sworn to whom, except that most were not sworn to her.

"They must have been up in the hills with Crakehall's men," Edmund said. Looking towards one of the captives, he slapped him hard in the face.

"Talk, soldier."

"We're on the march south," he said. "Lord Mathis rode us ahead to secure his castle...the rest of the armies march behind him."

"Which banners," Aemon asked.

"Crakehall, Lannister, Crane, Serrett, Fossoy, Swift, Blackwood, Royce, Hardyg, Manderly, Cerwyn..."

"Enough," Edmund ordered. He returned his attention to his Queen. "So the northern armies march together with Crakehall, but at least they're still separated from the wolf queen."

"Which is what we wanted," Daenerys asked.

"Aye. They may have a bit more on numbers than us, but we've the Dothraki on an open plain. We catch them on the right side of the Golds Fork, we march, wipe them out, and the wolf queen loses near four of her kingdoms in one battle."

"We march along the river," Daenerys said, having gleaned more about tactics since leaving King's Landing than she had in all her other years since, "protect our right flank, and we can keep an eye if they cross."

"Your Grace learns quick," Edmund said, unable to betray a hint of fatherly pride in her progress. "If they try to cross east, we're close enough to catch up and get them in the act."
She nodded, and scanned the lords around her. "March north, we give battle here." A battle on open ground, a Dothraki charge, her numbers reinvigorated, making up for her losses at Last Ridge...it should feel like she has the advantage, shouldn't it? But as she felt a tingle crawl up her spine, she harbored little of the certainty she was accustomed to, not with the odds so much closer to even.

"Your Grace, they ask for parley."

There was a quiet tension in the camp in the late afternoon, men Westerosi and Essos alike eating their meals tenderly knowing it could be their last.

"Parley," she asked. The last time she entertained a parley she watched Missandei die in front of her eyes. Sansa was above such stunts, she'd admit, as were most of the northern lords who had marched with her to King's Landing. But these western and southern lords, she knew little of.

"They may surrender, or ask us to surrender."

"Very well. We may glimpse upon their numbers as well."

She rode with Yara and Edmund up a small hill overlooking Goldengrove below, both the castle and the town sitting in the small valley. Many of her own men, bannermen of Aemon and the late Denys Velaryon were already posted along the ridge, ready to charge or defend from an attack below. Across the valley stood another low ridge, behind which the river curved away and north, and upon the opposite ridge she could see the enemy digging trenches, the fires of their vast camp unseen behind it in the evening light.

"Can you tell the numbers," she asked, as she saw three lone riders approaching, one dragging an all too familiar black cloak waving in the wind behind him.

"Tough to tell what they have behind the hill," Edmund said, taking advantage of their early arrival to confer, "but I'd guess the same as before, they'd have maybe five men to our four."

"Your Grace," Yara said, as Jon Snow and Davos Seaworth rode into view, "it's below you to treat with two traitors."

"It's a rebellion," Daenerys said coldly, trying to hold back the emotions she knew were bound to resurface upon seeing him again. "Everyone who opposes me is a traitor."

"Some deserve to die more than others." Yara was a hard woman. Yara wanted to kill everyone. She would not have Yara get her wish just yet.

"Your Grace," Jon said calmly, dark eyes staring towards her, but not at her. He leaned back along his horse, looking almost too relaxed for the occasion. Did he not care who he rode for, now that his betrayal was set in stone?

"Lord Roland Crakehall," Edmund whispered in her ears, identifying the third older, stouter lord alongside them.

"Jon Snow," she began. She would not let him hear her hurt. "Do you regret your mistake and come to bend the knee again before your rightful Queen?"

He chuckled, the laugh he gave when he was uneasy, trying to avoid both lying and addressing the truth.

"I've come for peace, Dany. We don't have to keep fighting this war."
"We had peace," Daenerys said, unable to tamper down her anger at his hypocrisy, the fact that he still called her Dany, even on the eve of battle. "Sansa accused me of breaking the peace. Yet she is the one waging war now, after I saved the realm from Cersei Lannister."

"By turning the entire realm against you. They would've fought you in the mountains and ravines if Drogon lived. Now, they fight you openly. Either way, the country would have never submitted to you...not after what you did to King's Landing."

His words hit deep in her heart, words she knew held some degree of truth, that without her dragons, even were she to win the war, she'd have to rule over lords and ladies who would never be loyal to her, her reign forever watching the whispers behind her back, forever having to quell one rebellion after another each time they thought her weak.

"And you, Jon Snow? I thought you better than these fickle lords. I thought you a man true to your word, a man who doesn't look to bend the knee to a new master with the change of each season."

She could tell her words affected him deeply, that he did not truly take his betrayal lightly. Which was why she said them, because she still did know his soul, that Jon Snow could never escape being Jon Snow.

"You don't belong with these people, Jon Snow. You ride with them, but your heart...your heart fights you with every step."

Come back to me, Jon. I don't want to fight you. I don't want to make you fight me. Sister or not, what cruel woman would force you to do such a thing?

"I'll do my duty," he said, and she could tell the words were increasingly difficult for him to utter, "whether I want to or not. Our men may not be your equal, but our numbers are, and our men fight for their homes."

Our men already?

"Then we have nothing to discuss, do we?" Pulling the reins, she readied herself to ride back to her camp, and wondered whether this would be her last image of the man she loved, their last goodbye before the coming day's battle destroyed whatever remained of their love. "I won't tell my Dothraki to fight any differently tomorrow...but I do hope you live, Jon Snow."

He nodded solemnly, and the two parties rode back to their respective camps.

"The dip's the problem," Edmund said, studying the maps that night, one last round of planning for the pivotal battle ahead. She understood her flimsy position, that they had no other chances after this; lose, and no further banners would come to rally for her. "Any Dothraki charge will sustain heavy fire from their archers."

"Once they reach the enemy, they'll devastate them," Aemon said. "Their left is pinned against the river, same as our right. They'll go for the opposite flank, same as us."

"Load up our left then," Yara said to Edmund. "Send your cavalry against their right, and the Unsullied after. The Ironborn and your knights will follow the Dothraki against their center."

"We can't afford to get bogged down in the castle or the town," Aemon added. "The fighting will be heavy there, and we have more to lose than them."

"Whether the Dothraki can break their center on the first wave will determine this battle," Edmund said, slamming his palm down upon the table to signal the end of the council, that there was little left
"Your Grace!"

Edmund Thorne's voice jerked her rudely out of whatever nightmare she was having. She saw her tent flaps open, and he was inside without even her permission. Were they under attack?

"Lord Thorne?"

"Your Grace, I apologize for my brusqueness. But you must hurry!"

Quickly, she donned her riding clothes and rode with Edmund and Yara up the hill where they had met the prior evening. Yet, even as they rode in urgency, all she heard was the eerie silence of the morning. Cresting the hill, she expected to see the enemy amassed and ready for battle. Did they unearth new weapons? Had Jon Snow somehow found himself his own dragon to ride? Had the Night King returned?

Instead, she saw the barren grassy wastes, hills which flew with banners before blowing empty in the frigid morning air, the castle and village itself abandoned as well, except for a small host of maybe a hundred men lined up for battle in the valley below.

Instantly, she rode down towards them without saying another word, Thorne beckoning a few hundred of his cavalry down to accompany her. As she expected, Jon Snow stood stoically on his horse at the head of the small column, though she discerned the barest traces of a grin on his face.

"Your Grace, it looks like we're impossibly outnumbered. I'm afraid I'll have to surrender."

"A fucking dirty trick," Thorne bellowed out, enraged, barely restraining himself from ripping up the map altogether, she thought. He pointed at Jon Snow, sitting sullenly in the corner of the tent, Grey Worm having happily confiscated his sword...hopefully for the last time. "They're going to win this war with these fucking bloody tricks."

Apparently the northern and western armies had decided to march away rather than give battle, crossing the Golds Fork in the night as they slept.

"We may yet catch them," Yara said. "Tell them we have their king."

"They intended for us to take Jon Snow," Daenerys said coldly. "They won't come back for him."

"Our men are forming," Grey Worm said beside her, giving another angry look to her nephew and former lover. "We'll be ready to march by midday."

"By the time we cross," Edmund sighed, "they'll have had almost a day's march on us. We'd be lucky to catch them by the time they reach the Mander. By then, our enemy will have doubled."

The map held little appeal for her at this point, and she backed away, finding herself drawn to the former King in the North sitting in the corner, barely paying heed towards their collective anger. She had ordered his hands free of binding, considering there was little harm he could do in their camp, unarmed and surrounded. Narrowing her eyes, the truth came to her.

"You lied to me. You lied, Jon Snow." She couldn't help but curl her mouth up at him in a furious grin, unable to fail to find the humor and indeed, pride, for her former lover, having slipped one so dramatically by her, whatever the cost to her own position.
"Not really," he said quietly. "I just did what Tyrion told me to do. They didn't tell me anything else, nothing more of their plans."

Disappointment then, that he had not changed as much as she thought he had. "You didn't suspect something was awry?"

"I did," he said, a faint grin as well. Was this slyness coming from Jon Snow? "I knew better than to ask. They marched away before I'd a chance to sleep, told me to stay, man the ridge and keep the fires going. Still managed to get a good night's sleep though, figuring there wasn't going to be much of a battle in the morning."

Daenerys turned at her lords and queen. "They were played for fools, he and his small band of northern men. They'll accompany us on the march as prisoners, to be treated cordially so long as we keep their arms."

They all looked indignant at the idea, Edmund and Yara especially, but they all bowed to her dutifully.

"As you wish, Your Grace."

"Bring him in."

Grey Worm shoved him rudely into her tent, brown eyes beseeching her even as he did, as if to say, *don't do this. Don't fall for it again.* But that was not his decision to make.

"Does it make you feel better," she asked, when they were all alone, "to betray your Queen yet a second time."

"To be honest," Jon replied sheepishly, "I'm not exactly sure who my queen is at the moment."

Her voice hardened. "You'll have to decide one day or another."

"I'm your prisoner," he replied. "I expect I'll remain so for what's left of this war. I think that was Tyrion's gift to me, really."

Primal urges surged through her body. "So long as you're my prisoner, you answer to me. Take off your clothes, Jon...Aegon Targaryen."

He showed no reaction to her calling him by his true name, but he obliged her all the same. As he did so, all memories of their passionate nights together seared back to her mind, summoned by the sight of his angular body, his muscles, each of his many scars a vivid story she could never forget, no matter how she tried. She wanted to see him naked, see him completely bare, vulnerable before her, to see if her mind could yet win the battle over her heart. As she took in the sight, committing every detail to memory for perhaps the last time, she knew that her mind had lost.

"Have you embraced your true heritage yet, Aegon? Will you love me, like the man whom you were named after, loved his sisters? Like Jaehaerys loved Alysanne?"

Her voice almost broke.

"Like you once loved me?"

"I still love you," he said softly, voice shaking as well while he approached her bed. "Whatever happens the rest of this war...what they'll have me do to end it...I will always love you...Dany."
When he took her, a king taking his queen, she thought not of fire, or ice, or blood, but the soft crashing of the sea against their boat, sailing against a freezing current with spring yet to come.

Jon

I'm cursed. I've broken all vows, shirked myself from all duty, betrayed my own family.

But this felt so right, her warm body next to his, her breasts upon his skin, and a soft candle lighting the room to illuminate her beauty into his eyes.

She's a monster. A tyrant. A butcher.

But what did it matter anyway? The war would soon be over. He did his part, as Tyrion intended, to help end the war. It was much better than he deserved.

"I was wrong," he heard her say, lips moving softly atop his chest, fingers clenching his back ever tightly when she spoke, and his entire body tensed at the words.

"You were," he said, feeling his heart break all over again. For a long time now, he had thought the woman he loved dead, consumed by the fire of her own dragon. It did not change his love for who she had once been, but it gave him the strength to leave her side, to ride against her...to kill her as he had meant to do in the throne room. Could he tell her that? Now, especially, that he heard in her voice not the butcher of King's Landing...but the Breaker of Chains...the woman who saved the North? Or was this just an illusion...words meant to deceive and further entrap him?

"I lost myself," she said, and the tears trickling onto his chest couldn't be a trick. "I became the dragon...and in that moment...that horrible moment...I forgot what it was to be human...to feel pain, and grief, and suffering. I saw them running...and they all became my enemies...everyone...your sisters, southern and northern lords, Lannister soldiers and children alike. It was so terrible...and yet it felt so...powerful."

He didn't speak. He had ridden the dragon only once, and his enemy...certainly not human that night. Was there the Targaryen blood left in himself, potent and ready to explode had he merged closer to his own dragon?

"What I did," she continued, her face contorted in the worst agony, "I don't care about forgiveness now. Not from you. Not from anyone. Not when I can never forgive myself."

"You lost your child," he said, unable to help himself from that primal urge to comfort the woman he loved, stronger even than the sated urges within his loins...to lift her from this misery even though she deserved every bit of it. "You lost all your children...Ser Jorah...Missandei..."

"Do they balance out thousands...," he felt her fingernails dig deeper into his skin as she continued, "hundreds and hundreds of thousands? Hundreds of thousands of innocents...of children?"

"No." There was nothing he could say to refute that. He let her suffer in the silence, because he could think of nothing else.

"I didn't see at first," she finally said, fingers loosening but not releasing their grasp upon him. "It took me a long time...I didn't want to face the truth. But somewhere...between Swanton and Highgarden, I vowed to myself, that this will be my punishment. That if I won this war, I would sit not a day upon the Iron Throne...that I would ride throughout the land, ride through every village and city in this realm, and hand to the smallfolk coin and bread and wine and fruits and...I'd force myself to stare into the eyes of every man, every woman, every little boy and girl...and force myself to
remember those same eyes upon every single soul I burned in King's Landing. It's not punishment enough...it never will be...but it's the penitence I will bear, for as long as my reign endures, I would bear its burden."

It was he who clutched her closer to him now.

"Tell Sansa that. Surrender to her. Tell her you mean no further harm...that you only wish to help the people. She'll listen. She's kind, despite everything that's happened to her. She won't forgive you, she'll never like you...but...she cares about her people too. They are her people now...I've seen it in their eyes. And you'll be good to her people."

"I can't."

He craned his neck forward to look down at her. "Why not?"

"This war is lost," she admitted. "I suspected it at Last Ridge, when I saw that Dorne chose your sister over me, just like near every other damned kingdom in this realm. I knew it the moment I saw you upon that ridgeline with a mere hundred men. I accept that now, I accept that I'll die, and even a loser's death will be too merciful an end for me. But I will not surrender, Jon Snow. Not to you. Not to your sister. Not to anyone. I will not be remembered as Queen Daenerys, House Targaryen, First of Her Name...the Queen who knelt. That will not be the legacy I leave behind for my House...our dynasty. Fire and blood made us...and only fire and blood can end us...can end me."

He wished she could think differently, that he could talk sense into her, but he knew her well enough to know her mind will never change. Yet, he loved her still.

She was no longer there in the morning when he woke. Dressing, donning his armor, he dreaded the days to come, and wondered who he would see when he emerged from the tent, the Dragon Queen, or his Dany? Her harsh, unyielding look while she conferred with her advisers answered his question, though he wondered what these men thought about their Queen sharing her bed with an enemy. Aemon Estermont was unreadable, but Yara and Edmund both glared at him with open contempt, as did Grey Worm.

Daenerys walked over to the head of her Unsullied.

"Torgo Nudho," she said, continuing in the common tongue for the benefit of the rest of them, "give him back Longclaw."

Fury and surprise shone through his eyes.

"You can't mean it!"

"I can," she said imperiously, "and I do. I'm the Queen."

"What do you intend by this," Yara asked.

Her voice was loud, Daenerys Stormborn proud and furious as she addressed her followers. "A hundred Northmen will not make the difference in this war. Nor will one sword, however mighty."

Stepping in, she took Longclaw from Grey Worm as he brought it forth, holding it with seemingly little effort despite its weight, gripping the handle almost reverently, before handing it to him.

Violet eyes glared into him. Her voice was the Queen's, but her eyes betrayed the Queen. "Run to your sister, Jon Snow. Bend the knee to her. There's one last battle left to fight in this war." Turning
away from him, she spared him one last stare. "I’d like to see if you have the balls to actually raise your sword against me, when the time comes."

The command brooked no argument, and as unhappy as they were, they spoke no further, the Dragon Queen stalking out of the tent before he and the other lords had a chance to speak further. He wondered where she was going. Back to her own tent to mourn her sins, to repent? To walk the river, enjoy one peaceful morning in her last days upon this world, to forget what came before, and what was to come? His heart ached to seek her out, to kiss her, to feel her, to say goodbye one last time...to beg her not to carry this fight through to its inevitable end. Instead he turned away from them all, dismissed all their angry eyes upon him, and left to seek out his men.

They rode for several nights, the men clearly thankful to have had their lives spared, yet strangely confused as to why he did not rejoice with him. When they sang songs he drank in silence. When they toasted each other he ate in silence, the hole in his heart raw, aching, a bottomless chasm.

At least I'll see Arya again soon. She'll love me for winning the war for Sansa, whether it be by sword or trick. But Sansa...who was this sister of his, whom they all now called Queen? Would she take him back into their family, and still address him as the son of Ned Stark? He didn't deserve it, he knew that, not his family, not the woman he loved, and he laughed at the irony that were there still a Night's Watch, and a Wall to man, that such a fate was tenfold more deserving for him today than when he first left Winterfell to join the Watch.

The fields north of the Mander lay barren in the winter, mild compared to the North, yet the season nevertheless drew from the land its unavoidable toll even this far south. Even the afternoon sun seemed as dim as a summer evening, and the chilling, constant wind took away whatever comfort the sunlight gave them. Twice it snowed in the night, a light dusting which melted away by mid-afternoon the next day. He thought it appropriate, that after the Long Night, it would be the Starks who brought winter down to the south themselves.

But it wasn't him, was it? It was the other Stark who rode south...whom he forced south, and who had arisen in the south anew, over bent knees south and north. It wasn't a joke, he knew that the moment he glimpsed the seriousness in the eyes of the camp, from great lords and ladies such Roland and Margaery and Arthur Hightower, all southrons through and through, all as devoted to Sansa as the northern he and Dany had ordered to march south...as devoted as he had been to Daenerys once.

He saw the tips of banners and shields and the gleam of reflections against the setting sun upon their swords and armor one evening. Reining in his horse, he commanded his men to stop, and broke camp for one last peaceful, quiet night. They were riding north when he approached them finally the next morning, a long procession seemingly without end, the largest army he had seen with his own eyes since the one he brought North to fight the dead. At the head of the serpentine march rode a tall statue, long red hair frozen even as it blew in the morning breeze, pale face rising in stark contrast above her black leather bound armor. Behind her, under banners of direwolves surrounded by purple fabric, rode dozens of strange men, some lords he recognized such as Yohn Royce, Roland Crakehall, Brienne of Tarth, Tytos Blackwood, and many more of the northern lords who had once proclaimed him a King...yet more were strangers, though clearly well known to his sister by now, more perhaps than him.

Riding ahead of his small host of men, he dismounted his horse and knelt before the statue, afraid to meet its eyes, the eyes of a stranger, reborn and reforged in an exile and banishment of his own making, no traces of the girl who cried and begged him at the Crossroads remaining.

"Your Grace," he addressed her formally, "I come to...

"Come to what," she interrupted him, her voice cold, harsh and unforgiving. Queenly. "Come to
Wish me good fortune, cousin?"

Chapter End Notes

Whew. A whole Jonerys chapter. Who would've thunk it?
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Sansa decides Jon's fate. Daenerys makes one last push.

Chapter Notes

A note on terrain. They're not mentioned in canon, but geographically, there's little mentioned for mountains at the head of such a vast river as the Mander. But so much water has to come from somewhere, so I figure for the purposes for this story...the headwaters of the Mander don't come from a huge or high mountains, but some rolling hills that are still vast enough to form its drainage...and also complex enough as a geographic encumbrance for the chapter below.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

Forgive me Jon, I don't want to do this, they must see me strong.

For many nights now she had wondered how she would react when she saw Jon again. If she saw Jon again. The resentment never left her, that he would dismiss her, that he would join the Dragon Queen in condemning her to captivity. So she channeled that anger now, betraying no other emotion because the mask of her crown, like every other awful mask she'd learned to wear, fit too well too quickly. Yet, she did miss him. She couldn't help it, because he was her brother, because she loves him, because he had fought for her when few others would. But in the eyes of the lords behind her, they were not brother and sister, they were a Queen and a traitor, the fact that he was her kin damning him more.

"Your Grace...what I did before..."

"Did the Dragon Queen entertain you well," she asked, voice still icy as the Wall a continent away. "Did you not entertain her well enough, that she let you go?"

Tyrion's trick was a good one, she knew. And while she worried when they told her Jon was a captive in Daenerys's camp, subject to what little remained of the Dragon Queen's mercy, the colder part of her whispered that it was no different than what Jon had done to her. She had no dragon now, and they spoke of a gentler queen here in the Reach, one who spoke at length to the smallfolk, to the children, who doled out food and clothing to the poor. Perhaps her change of tone was genuine...perhaps it was just another cynical ploy. And even if the Dragon Queen had changed her skin anew, it did not wipe out her crimes...no, the lords behind her would seek justice, many more savagely than even their enemy. But she did hope her change of heart was true, so that she would not harm Jon, a man she claimed to love.

A man she does love.
Part of her wished she could feel such a thing now, that she could allow herself to be deluded and fooled so easily again, to believe in another so fervently, so passionately, as to lose all sight and reason. Perhaps in time. But now, not even love for her family could interfere with her duty.

"She knows the war is lost," Jon said, and she felt for him, because she could hear in his words his love for her still. "But she will not bend the knee...that is not in her nature."

"No," Sansa said, "it's not."

It wasn't in her nature either, was it? That was why she was the crown opposing Daenerys, because she had refused to bend the knee as well. They were more alike than Sansa would have cared to admit.

"Then the realm will fight the invader," Sansa said. She already stood taller than him evenly, but he looked so much smaller on the ground...so much like a subject of hers, rather than her own brother. "Under whose banners will you fight, Jon Snow?"

This was what they needed to see, wasn't it? Complete submission to her crown, her authority, by the man who once championed the Dragon Queen...by the man whose own blood right meant he was the one who ought to sitting in her place. She wished she could hand it over to him still, but it was too late, as they would never accept it. At least not until long after the war was won.

By then, she'd be little more than her crown.

"I am the shield that guards the realms of men," he said, and though he laid his sword before her, she wondered if the lords could hear the conflict, the hesitation in his voice, same as she. He would fight against Daenerys, if he had to. And it would break his heart, even as he accepted it as his sentence.

"Your cause has always been for the living, Jon Snow. Go fight for them now." He raised his head, not understanding her cryptic words. "Ride to King's Landing. Help those who survived rebuild their lives. Help them find food, and shelter, help them get a roof over their heads, help them heal with their grief and pain...help them live, Jon Snow."

Their eyes met, and for the first time in what seemed a lifetime, brother and sister saw each other again. He dipped his head again in subjugation, and sheathed back his sword.

"Your Grace."

She allowed herself to smile at him as he rode away, knowing there were yet secrets she could hide from the lords.

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**Daenerys**

Her first inclination had been to pursue relentlessly her enemies, however their numbers, and send all her forces against them in a last, valiant charge, and only after many strong words exchanged had she been persuaded upon a different course. There was little more distasteful than retreat, but there was no choice excepting the meaningless and suicidal assault she reluctantly rejected. The lords all agreed that only the Stormlands and certain sections of the Crownlands would provide safe harbor for them at this point, with the rest of the kingdoms likely emboldened in revolt in light of her latest failures.

With the walls of King's Landing having been destroyed by her own dragon in the siege, there would no longer be any possibility that she would find safe harbor in the capital. Aemon suggested Storm's End, which could hold for a time, while Edmund thought refuge at either Dragonstone or the Velaryon island seat of Driftmark would give them a fair chance of regrouping.
"And thus cede all of Westeros to Sansa," Daenerys asked.

"We could hide out in the Kingswood," Edmund said alternatively, "and give fight whenever they are weak."

"Like bandits."

"Aye, sometimes wars are won through banditry."

"Tell me, which bandit ever won a crown?"

The first decade and a half of her life had been one on the run, begging strangers day by day, dodging assassins and all sorts of other shady pursuers. Would such a life mark the end of her days as well?

They were within a day's ride of the Kingswood, following the Rose Road as it wound back and forth up the narrow valleys towards a high and narrow mountain gap through the mountains called the Rose Pass when an idea struck Edmund.

"Gardener's Crossing," the old soldier exclaimed suddenly, surprising all of them out of nowhere. But Aemon's eyes lit up as well, as he seemed to understand too the meaning.

"Your Grace, the war may yet be won."

"Please explain, my lords."

Edmund started. "You may remember on the march from King's Landing, before we whipped Lord Aemon here, the road between the mountains here a narrow one, enough to reduce their advantage in numbers. If they force a crossing and we hold at the pass, we can grind them down man by man, line by line...especially with the Dothraki. They'll last and push through, but not without losing a fair share of theirs."

"And we'll lose a fair share of ours too," Yara said skeptically. "Better to return to the fleet in Blackwater Bay. We'll ferry the lot of you to the Iron Islands. The North is large, and we can strike her own lands once the Winter's over."

"When has any Greyjoy invasion enjoyed any sustained success," Aemon asked. "I know Paxter, he's smart, and he's known before even Last Ridge that the Rose Pass can be a trap. He'd win the battle, but he doesn't like to waste men and watch them die while more than half his army stands useless on the wrong side of the mountain. He'd aim to split them, bring one half through here, the other half through Gardener's Crossing along the Mander. He knows we have to make our stand at one pass or the other, so he'd let us give battle at one, then move the other to flank and surround us."

"You say you were once childhood friends with Paxter," Daenerys asked. On one hand, knowledge of her enemies was a resource she possessed little of. On the other, she still questioned Aemon's trustworthiness, though she supposed that his instinct for self-preservation may prove ever more valuable to her at this juncture.

"Once we cross the Rose Pass," Edmund continued to explain, dismounting his horse and pulling out a map to illustrate for her, "Gardener's Crossing is a two or three day march north." He began thinking to himself out loud. "We need to choose which site to give battle. The northern route is actually shorter, which means they'll arrive on the eastern side quicker than the Rose pass."

"It means the northern forces can wait and cross at their leisure," Aemon said, "while whichever of her armies pass through the Rose Pass will have no choice but to cross immediately, pushing them
right into our ambush."

"Aye," Edmund said, still thinking. "If it 'tis more advantageous for us, 'tis more likely Paxter already expects it. Waiting at the Rose Pass may also give the Gardener's host the time they need to cut us off and surround us before we even have a chance to give battle." He pointed decisively on the map. "We ride first to Gardener's Crossing, along the narrows of the Mander. Can't let them know and wait us out though, we'll have to lure them to pass, then ambush them before they've gotten all their men through the narrows."

Was this hope she was allowing herself to feel? That somehow, after all her setbacks, after all the tricks Sansa and her northerners and southerners had pulled upon her, she still had a chance to win this war?

"What if we win," she asked.

"We march south, and give battle within the next day or two at those who cross the Rose Pass. Our men will be exhausted, but our numbers even enough to give us a chance. With any luck, the Wolf Queen will be at Gardener's. The terrain doesn't afford her much chance to hide, and we can capture or, Gods willing, kill her in the battle, and end the war right on the spot."

Aemon nodded, and so did Grey Worm and Yara Greyjoy, marking the consensus.

"Good," she said, giving her final approval to the plan. "This war will not end until one of us goes down fighting."

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Sansa

She wanted to lean closer towards the fire, the coldness of the high mountain pass rivaling even that of the North, so far south as she was, as she had been for what seemed to be yet another lifetime passed. But to the lords gathered around her, Paxter Redwyne, Marion Lannister, Jonos Bracken, Yohn Royce, and Wyman Manderly among them, she could not appear dependent upon comfort.

"...some whispers of seeing strange men from Essos on the other side of the narrows," Paxter concluded, "but nothing that gives me certainty one way or the other."

Their men nearly doubling the Dragon Queen's, they had split their armies, with the Dornishmen, most of the Riverlands banners, the Hightower host, and the remaining Northern armies taking the southern pass. Margaery had passed with the south, splitting the current and former queen should the worst happen at one of the two mountain passes.

"There is a possibility of battle then," Marion asked. Paxter had explained, when they split their forces below the Mander Highlands, that Daenerys would likely seek one half of their army out for one last attempt at victory, and no certainty as to which of the two groups would bear the burden of battle. That she chose the northern path was done purely out of chance, and part of Sansa hoped that she would be present for what could be one last encounter with the Dragon Queen.

"This isn't unexpected," Paxter said. "We have a plan. It'll hold till morning."

"I trust you'll win us the battle, if it comes." She wore already the armor she would don for the coming day, the exact same one she wore in Winterfell before the dead, the only change being a leather patch emblazoned with the Direwolf above her heart. "It will be a narrow ground, and any one of us may die even with a victory."

"Your Grace, we'll keep you well behind the narrows until the path is secured and the battle won."
"No," Sansa said, refusing Paxter politely. "It would be stupid of me to lead at the front, clearly, but I will not hide either."

In truth, more than a small part of her sought death here, high on a desolate mountain by a lonely river, if only for relief from the burden atop her shoulders. Especially were they to win, so long as they won, it may be the memory she would prefer to leave behind...the queen who won and died without having actually to rule.

"If I die, but the realm prevails...," she had given the matter much thought on the march through the mountains. Her first thought was to ask the lords grant the North their own freedom in her memory, and damned be what they wanted for with the rest of the realm. But then, why would they fight for her now, when she showed so little regard for their collective causes, for the crown which bound together seven kingdoms in name? She’d name Jon to the Iron Throne then, but the southerners would not accept considering his knee had still been bent to the Dragon Queen when she burned King's Landing. So Margaery it could be, but the Northerners wouldn't care for her, and she still needed them just as much as their faraway neighbors for the coming fight.

"Before the honorable lords and ladies, I name as my heir Jon Snow, hereby legitimized by the crown as Jon of House Stark."

One heir. To inherit what exactly, the whole realm or just its north, let the lords and Jon decide between themselves.

She wished, for her own sake, that she had not sent Arya to King's Landing with Jon. The war seemed assuredly won then, with only the formality of a battle firmly stacked in her favor remaining.

_I should know better about war. Or everything else in this rotten world._

Still, she saw how happy Arya had been when she rode back into their camp, having crossed the country with Jon, and how concerned she had been about leaving Jon in Daenerys's camp. So she gave her leave, because Sansa knew Jon needed her more...and because she herself was far too accustomed now to the company and counsel of strange men whom she could yet fully trust.

"Your Grace, Lord Tyrion is here to see you."

"I bring wine," she heard his voice echo from outside, as if she could not avail herself whatever ample amount she wished in her own camp.

"Let him in," Sansa said, putting away her needlework while Tyrion poured a glass for them both.

"Waiting for death yet again," Tyrion said, raising his glass at Sansa, who returned the gesture and sipped hers. "Something both of us are all too accustomed to by now."

"I don't like not knowing," Sansa admitted, "even though I understand that's how war works. I think I'll be relieved when we ride through, and I hear the shrieks of her Dothraki. It'll all be over then...one way or another."

"I'd echo Lord Paxter and say I believe our plan is solid," Tyrion said, savoring his drink, "but believe me, I've learned my lesson about foolishly believing in things I want to believe."

"You've learned many lessons, Lord Tyrion, yet you continue to make them." She turned to look at the small shirt she was making for Arya, to wear underneath her vests. No dresses for her sister, but Sansa could sew more than just pretty things. "I imagine the same will be true of me."
"Most see a Queen," Tyrion said, regarding her, reading her eyes, "yet I see a Lady of Winterfell too far south of her own liking, saddled with a southern crown she has not coveted for many many years, and I cannot imagine anything else, except that she stumbled upon this southern crown through a series of mistakes. Perhaps it's good, that someone who does not want the crown will wear it in the end."

He has not lost all his cleverness yet, she'll admit.

"Robert didn't want a crown either," Sansa said, "all he wanted to do was to mend a bruised ego. Didn't help the realm much, did it, his distaste for ruling?"

"You're not Robert," Tyrion said softly, and she sensed relief from him, in that she did not treat him as rudely as she did when he still served the Dragon Queen. "There's no mathematician's trick to what makes a good ruler and what doesn't. Sometimes it depends on the realm even, rather than the ruler. Daenerys would have made a great Queen, I think, had the North not suffered so much before she came...had I not foolishly lost what remaining allies she had in the realm. Even the Mad King Aerys...had he died of a pox ten years before my brother slew him...no, he wouldn't have been remembered as a great king. But a decent one, yes. Tommen...perhaps they would've called him Tommen the Great, had the not-so-late Lady Margaery been able to lock my sister up at Casterly Rock."

"Yes, sweet Tommen the Great," Sansa mused, remembering Joffrey's nice little brother, imagining him trying to hold seven kingdoms at their worst together. "Sweet Tommen ruling Seven Kingdoms with gentleness and kindness...until Daenerys and her three dragons show up, his traitorous uncle guiding her."

Though she no longer held Tyrion in as high regard as she used to, Sansa still wished to hear how he would judge her. "And me? What of this reign of Sansa...the Very Unlikely, to come?"

He raised his glass, as if to toast her. "You may fear ruling, more than you fear death tomorrow. But in the case of Sansa of House Stark, First of her Name...I believe it will not be the realm which makes the ruler, but the ruler who makes the realm."

"I don't fear death," she confided in him. "You're right, I fear living...whatever the result of tomorrow, if there be a battle. You've experienced much, Lord Tyrion, and you've seen many Hands, several of which were yourself. But you've never worn it yourself, have you? I'd imagine it quite different."

"Yes," Tyrion said. "It's one thing to contend for a crown...another to hold on to one." He chuckled. "The hill out there...Yurik's Throne...named after Yurik Gardener, the old King of the Reach, hundreds of years before the dragons ripped it away from his descendants. He almost lost his crown, having waged a foolish war against the Storm King. He lost that war easily, and Stannen Durrandon pursued him like a man possessed, until Yurik managed to slip away here across the Mander back to Highgarden. Appropriate, Gardener's Crossing perhaps deciding the fate of more crowns to come, in ways not typical to their usual tales."

"What do you want, Lord Tyrion?" She was not in a mood to be talked to as a child, to be told useless stories by her vassals.

He seemed almost disappointed by her change of tone, having likely thought himself regaining some ground in her favor.

"There is the matter of Highgarden," he began, chastened. "I believe I told you in Winterfell that I had promised it to Ser Bronn."
"It wasn't yours to give."

"No," he agreed. "And I did not know of the survival of House Tyrell then. Still...there is the, well, survival of myself...we were to survive the coming battle...that I can't help but think of."

Podrick liked Bronn. Brienne had a grudging respect for the man's wiles, cunning, and fighting, if not his character, but Highgarden was out of the question.

"Dragonstone," she decided after some thought.

"He won't like that," Tyrion said nervously.

"He doesn't have a choice," Sansa said coldly, wondering if she should call Brienne now to escort her former husband from her tent. "He can call himself Prince of Dragonstone if he wants. If that's not enough, if he comes for you, tell him he bet on the wrong queen. And tell him that if he does kill you, while he'll have my gratitude for ridding me of the man who betrayed me at the Crossroads, he will lose his castle and suffer the full weight of the Crown's justice. We have our own killers too, after all."

"Your Grace," he said, and bowed, sensing that he had overstayed his welcome.

"Yohn Royce is to be my Hand," she said just as he was about to exit her tent.

"Bronze Yohn," he turned back, cocking his head, questioning her. "Interesting choice...for someone who's so clever."

"A clever Queen has less need of a clever Hand. Lord Royce is strong, he's loyal, and he commands respect. And any man, or half man, who would plot behind his back ought know that they are committing the highest treason against not just the Hand, but the Crown who backs him."

"Lady Sans...Your Grace...I would think of no such thing." He shook his head. "I'm done with it all. I'd go back to Casterly Rock...except that's not an option for me anymore, is it? Fair, I suppose, considering I would have done the same to Lady Margaery."

"You'll sit on the Small Council as my Master of Law," she said, glad she could throw one last trick past the Half Man. "You'll watch Yohn Royce's back, and mine. You'll guide him through the intricacies of politics in the capital. You'll help him discover his own cleverness, and you'll watch quietly when rest of the realm discovers it as well."

"I'm not sure how much of a choice I have in the matter...but I accept it, for what it's worth." Taking the half sewn dress, she resumed her needlework, communicating to him without words that his audience with the Queen was finished.

It was getting so much easier, she thought as she sewed, her decision with Tyrion having been made right there on the spot, giving away castles and handing out positions on the Small Council as if they were lemon cakes.

_Probably will be better if I don't survive tomorrow._

**Daenerys**

It was a beautiful spot, Daenerys thought, riding alongside Grey Worm, Yara and Edmund to the top of a small hill overlooking the river Mander below, an appropriate locale for them to turn the tides of the war. The sun hid minutes below the horizon, and her eyes followed the ridge left, from where she
stood, up to yet a higher summit they called Yurik's Throne, its slopes dropping from there steeply down towards the river, ending where the small road followed the left bank of the Mander, the so called narrows. Across the river rose impassable cliffs, allowing passage only along its the side closer to her.

"We let them pass through the narrows," Thorne said, pointing to the road on their left, "until maybe they're halfway across," he pointed to the right, "then we slam the half our Dothraki at their head, followed by my men." He then pointed directly down the hill where they stood. "Once the first assault hems them in at the narrows, we charge the remaining Dothraki along with the Unsullied directly down this hill, pinning them against the river."

"We will drown the river with their blood," Grey Worm said. If he was upset that Edmund had taken his place as the Queen's chief adviser on all things war, he did not complain at all. All men must serve.

Edmund pointed back left again, only up towards the Throne rather than the narrows below. "The slope's gentle on the other side of the Throne, and they'll aim to take the hill while they pass the Narrows. We'll need to take it from them, but once they see the battle dire below, they'll send the bulk of their men to repulse us, both the attack on their front and their flank. Taking the hill should actually be the easy part. I've given that to Aemon's men, along with the Velaryon host and the Ironborn. From atop the Throne, we'll assault their rear and surround them on three sides, the mountain and the river completing the envelopment, and hopefully a dead or captured queen part of the bounty."

"Let's hope she rides with the men below," Daenerys said, agreeing, hoping behind the hill slept more than just a former Tyrell queen. "It will end this war without us having to fight a second battle."

_He would be happy to take her head off with his own sword_, she thought. And if Edmund Thorne were able to win this battle for her, she would happily grant him the wish, the quick, clean death her last and only mercy for Jon Snow's traitorous sister.

"And if they don't fall for our trap," Yara asked. She could read the furious resolve in her eyes, eager and ready for the coming battle, and though her kind were more suited to fighting on water rather than land, she'd no doubt the Ironborn would prove fierce warriors no matter the ground.

"We take the Throne," Edmund said, "pardon the expression," pointing to the high hill. "If they suspect an ambush, they'll hold behind the narrows to await the army coming through the Rose Pass. Holding the hill will give them reason to think us mounting an assault in their camp, and gives us time to march the rest of our men south and trap the enemy crossing along the Rose Road."

"It's a lot of marching," Yara said skeptically, "but we've no choice but to march and win."

"Your brother Theon," Daenerys recalled to her, remembering the taut, almost fragile way he stood beside his sister when they first sought her out at Mereen, against the way he had embraced Sansa at Winterfell before the battle with the dead, "he may have fought for Sansa, had he lived."

"They stole him from us," Yara said with increasing bitterness, "the Starks did...they made him something different than what he was." The Queen of the Iron Islands looked the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms in the eye. "It doesn't matter who Theon would've chosen now...he made his choice to die at Winterfell. My choice is to rule the Iron Islands under your crown, or die fighting by your side."

They were few, but they were loyal, and she would build a new realm with them.
She was blind now, her entire armies posted on the wrong side of the hill, but they could hear the sound of boots and metal on the other side. Edmund Thorne especially kept his ears alert, timing precisely in his mind how many of the enemy were crossing through the narrows as the morning sifted through the day. Their hushed silence, so as not to alert their foes, made the waiting ever more tedious, and it seemed the entire camp breathed a sigh of, if not relief, then readiness, when Thorne gave the nod, riding to the head of the Dothraki along with Khal Madri. No horns or trumpets were needed, just the two commanders bursting forward atop their horses, the remaining riders and knights following like the wind. There were no shrieks this time, not until they rounded the hill and disappeared behind it.

It was Grey Worm's count now, Edmund having instructed him on the time it would take from the beginning of the attack until when they had sufficiently engaged the enemy, so that their downward charge would create the most havoc. When the time came, Grey Worm marched to the head of his men and, with a raise of the spear upwards, the remaining Dothraki rode without further signal up the hill, the Unsullied following at a full sprint. She followed behind them, closely with her horse, angling to the right of the hill so as to bear further away from Yurik's Throne, should any of Sansa's men have occupied already it to oversee the crossing.

Halfway up the hill, she looked left, and saw no enemy banners in sight.

"Take the Throne," she ordered Yara and Aemon, hearing the sound of shrieking and then the clashing of metal from Madri and Thorne's initial charge.

As she approached the crest of the hill, the welcome sight of her Dothraki cutting brutally through the enemy vanguard gave her a surge of zeal that she had not experienced since...when? The last time she had mounted Drogon? As the second wave of her assault burst downwards towards soldiers scrambling panicked to meet the attack, unsure of which way to direct their swords and arrows, she saw riding between her lords an unquestionably familiar wave of red hair, the Wolf Queen herself emerging from the narrows at just the wrong, or perhaps the right time.

Our fates seal itself today.

A grin appeared on her face as she watched the Dothraki charge right into the line of knights standing between the Wolf Queen and the Queen's justice.

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Sansa

"Stand your ground." Yohn Royce and Brienne both bellowed out the orders at the piles of men awaiting uncertainly the coming fight as the Dothraki cut through their vanguard.

"Cut down any man who runs this way," Yohn screamed, "be it friend or foe. No retreat!"

She ignored the sounds of the battle far ahead, where already the blood and bodies spilled into the Mander's currents had passed her by. The sight of her armies' state was not an encouraging one right now, encumbered as they were by cliffs, mountains, and enemy forces in every direction. When the horses of the second Dothraki charge appeared atop the hills to her right, she turned away from them, looking upwards instead and fixating her eyes at impenetrable cliffs rising directly above the opposite side of the Mander.

A glint of fire from atop the cliffs, and she looked over to Yohn Royce, who nodded, affirming what she saw.

"Release," she shouted, feeling her lungs burst, and watched as the men cleared away around the
trebuchets, giving the devices space even as the enemy was shrinking the ground they held. Cutting the ropes, the catapults fired not heavy boulders or rocks at the Dothraki and Unsullied charging down the hill, but barrels, some bound together two or three side by side, landing and spilling its contents amidst the charge, but otherwise doing little damage to the enemy, giving them hardly any reason to pause their attack.

She pivoted her horse next towards the archers and looked at Royce, who nodded again, giving her the second go ahead.

"Nock," she screamed, and wondered if she'd have a voice left, if she survived the day.

One deep breath. Two deep breaths.

"Loose!"

A wave of arrows shot through the sky, and were the sun able to shine through the thick morning clouds, she imagined the thousands of shadows they would have cast upon her. And though they were many, she watched intently only the few with fire upon their tips, hoping they landed not upon the skin or between the armor of their enemy. Some fell true on the hillside, and the ground burst into flames, engulfing swiftly and suddenly the deadly attack that was to come.

"Nock! Loose!" She continued for several more rounds before turning at Lord Manderly, whose own ancestors had tilled the lands by their namesake river until they'd been cast north hundreds of years before.

"The Throne, Your Grace?"

The Queen nodded. "Seize it, and drive through the enemy."

At once, Wyman Manderly rode towards what had been their rear, now their right flank, where the his men and Paxter's awaited, ready to charge up the hill to close out the battle. Paxter himself had ridden atop the cliffs that morning, watching the battle scene unfold below and giving her the signal to catapult the wildfire. She could smell its plunder now, the rotting stench of burnt flesh, and wondered how much worse King's Landing had been. It was cruel way to win a war, but it would win the war for her, and the lords especially delighted in inflicting upon the Dragon Queen what she had done to their realm.

I'm no better than her.

I'm a butcher. The Butcher of Winterfell.

"Your Grace," Yohn Royce asked. He knew what was to come next, but awaited her permission anyway, so that the rest of the realm could witness her power.

"Our center is protected by flame," she said, forcing herself to look upon the agonized burning of bodies and horses before her. "Charge our men left and clear the narrows ahead."

As the initial wall of fire burned lower, she looked back up the hill, and though she could not tell the more distinct features of her face, she saw the unmistakable coloring of her silvery blonde hair, and wondered at the monster Daenerys must think her to be as her own bloodriders burned.

How many men did my father kill? How many men has he seen die?

How many more have I seen die? How many more have died because of me?
Daenerys

Snow was falling upon the battlefield. She wasn't sure when it started, but she felt it certainly upon her skin even as the flames rose before her. It had almost felt orgasmic, awaiting the moment her Dothraki and Unsullied drove their iron through the Wolf Queen's chest, when everything she had and loved exploded in fire.

Winter's here.

Those caught behind the conflagration stopped stunned in their tracks, and horses reared, paralyzed at first by the flames, then seized by instinct to gallop back up the hill, where her own horse buckled unsteadily at the panic. She did not begrudge their retreat, as there was no sense in further suicide, but wondered whether they could still win this battle despite yet another trick of the wolf.

Looking below at Thorne and Khal Madri's assault, she saw that their momentum had stalled, stunned they must have been when the hill above them caught fire, and while they still fought bravely to cut through the narrow finger of the enemy's left, the enemy continued pushing back against them, as endless waves of soldiers marched forth to give battle over the corpses of their fallen compatriots. Turning towards Yurik's Throne, she saw at first furious fighting atop the hill, then the downward trot of Aemon's knights, followed by the Ironborn themselves, Queen Yara barely fending off the pursuing enemy at the rear of their retreat.

"They've overwhelmed us," Aemon screamed, riding past her. "Call the banners back! The battle's lost!"

As she watched the avalanche of battle tumble down towards her, she understood that not only was the battle lost, but the war itself. She felt paralyzed, ready to surrender herself now and let death take her so that she would not have to suffer what came after, before Yara interrupted her melancholy.

"You must leave, my Queen," she screamed, and only then did Daenerys join the retreat, riding her horse furiously down the hill not as if her life depended on it, but as if she still cared for her life.

"We could have fought them off," Yara swore as she rode beside her, "but that cunt decided to run."

"It's over," she muttered, and had it not been for Yara's enraged reaction she wouldn't have thought herself heard. "One hill would not have saved this battle...the rest of our army's still destroyed.

It's over."

Their flight off the hill, Dothraki and Unsullied and Westerosi alike, seemed to signal to Thorne's remaining men, knights and her horselords, the end of the battle, and varying clusters of men, each larger than the one before, turned to escape the triumphant jaws of the wolf. She thought she saw Thorne's massive armor below, his wispy white hair blowing in fury, scolding his men, screaming at them, enraged in failure, before he was engulfed by the deadly tides of her enemy's teeth.

Sanse

There was little left for her to do in the battle, the mass of men clogging up the narrows riding off on either end to pursue the fleeing enemy. She rode her own horse almost aimlessly up and down the river, Podrick beside her, offering meaningless words of assurance at the bloodied, bruised, and victorious men. The blood, the flesh, the already rotting corpses, the burnt ones further up the hill, all this bothered her still, but not as much as before.

They all died because of me.
They died defending their homes.

They died so I can be the one to crush them beneath my crown, rather than her.

What difference does it all make?

As the early winter's night approached, she felt herself fully alone for the rest of the day, and while there were friends in the camp, Podrick, Brienne, who found herself beside her shortly after the battle was won, Tyrion, who had emerged from his tent in the aftermath, and the various other lords, she neither sought them out, or offered them much in conversation when they did approach her, preferring to remain confined in her thoughts. As the march resumed up the road, the survivors of the battle gathered up what remained of their camp, mourned their wounded and dead, and yet rode on to finish the war.

It's done now.

It can't be undone.

Marion Lannister found her as next to Paxter and her other captains, and read her the numbers of the dead and the wounded. As he ran through the list of the lords who survived or died or lay somewhere in between, she paused to listen for several particular names.

"Warryn Beesbury lives?"

"Yes, but quite wounded. Mortally so, they say...the Dothraki did their work on him."

"He's a brave man, to fight in the vanguard. See to it they try to save him for as long as possible. No milk of the poppy...I'm sure Lord Warryn is too much of a noble man ask for such things, not when his own men are suffering."

"Fully understood, Your Grace." Suddenly, before all the other lords, Marion knelt before her, the rest of the tent following his example with haste.

Say something now.

"You fought well for the realm," she began, and took a deep breath, forcing herself to carry through, "and you fought well for your Queen. The wars of our past split asunder all seven kingdoms. Today, seven kingdoms fought together, to take back the realm together. This victory belongs not to the Queen, but to her realm."

It wasn't exactly seven, but it was close enough, and so it should be exactly once they caught up to what remained of the enemy.

"Hurrah!" "Seven cheers!" "Long may she reign!"

She wasn't sure who shouted it first, though it sounded like Wyman Manderly, or perhaps it was Roland Crakehall, or Tanton Fossoy. It didn't matter, the rest of the lords breaking out in cheers of exuberance or relief, the acclamation spreading like a disease through the rest of the camp.

Can she hear this, she wondered.

"They're hoping to outrun them to the Kingswood, and either go south to Storm's End for a siege, or King's Landing, where the Ironborn ships are docked." The architect of her war, Paxter Redwyne had a glow to him that night similar to a woman newly pregnant.
A sentry ran into their tent, consciously bending down fully to one knee before her, apologizing in his way for interrupting.

"Your Grace, my lords...Lord Aemon Estermont has surrendered himself, along with several hundred of his men, and pleads for the Queen's mercy"

"Bind him," Sansa said without pause. "Hang him in the morning before his men and ours. Hang any lords who betray the Dragon Queen now, to surrender to me."

She only looked to Paxter after she pronounced the sentence, and noted his approval, the betrayal by his friend having hit the man hard. Marion nodded in agreement as well, though Tyrion stared to her blankly, as if he no longer recognized this killer who had once been his child wife.

"Any lord or knight who once knelt to me, then switched to her, will suffer the same fate. I will not give them the chance to betray the realm a second time."

"Without Aemon," Paxter said after the sentry departed, "she'll have a tougher time finding her way through the Kingswood. I expect we'll catch her within a day or two."

"She won't go to Storm's End," Sansa said, her mind still lingering upon the men she sentenced to death with barely a thought. "Daenerys is not one who hides, and she knows there'll be no relief for her with a siege. King's Landing and the Greyjoy fleet there give her hope that she may yet return." The map she knew by heart now, each road and house and river almost as familiar as her own needlework. "Let her think that we would give her what she wants. Lord Roland, send skirmishers to engage her rear, as if to cut her retreat south...but hit her from the eastern side of the south if possible. Lord Paxter, send the Tarly host to ride ahead of her. The raids will paralyze her and keep her off balance."

"Aye," Paxter said, their eyes meeting, knowing they were both reading their war the same way, "it'll give her pause, and enough time for us to reach the Blackwater before her and hold the road to King's Landing."

"We'll pin them," Roland said happily, like a proud father on his daughter's nameday. "We'll let your Davos and that Dornish cunt finish them off."

*One more slaughter to come,* she thought as she exited the tent, wearing a mask of approval for her lords.

*Courtesy had been her armor once. Power was her armor now.*

Chapter End Notes

I know Jon probably frustrated many people in the last chapter. I provided some explanations in the responses to comments in the last chapter.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

The war comes to an end, and two queens reckon with the aftermath.

Daenerys

Once upon a time, she remembered telling her brother that all she wanted was to go home. But they had all lied to her. Westeros was not her home. It had never been her home...not after her father's crimes, and her brother Rhaegar's foolishness, costing them seven kingdoms. Wandering this strange land, she felt just as lost and weary as she had been before the walls of Qarth. It was not hunger that ate at her or thirst...but failure, and the death of hope, and the unrelenting disappointment in that she had let down so cruelly the men who followed her across the Narrow Sea.

Thorne was dead. Denys Velaryon dead. Aemon Estermont gave in once again to his cowardice, and most of the remaining lords they brought were deserting her also, one by one. Not Yara Greyjoy, but the strange terrain of the Kingswood was just as foreign to her as it was to Grey Worm and her Dothraki Khals. They had no way of knowing where they were, only that north was the Blackwater, and once they reached the Blackwater, perhaps they might reach King's Landing as well, then sail away. To where? Dragonstone, and rule a measly castle until Sansa gathered enough ships and strengths for a lengthy siege? What of the Iron Islands, to live out the rest of her days as Queen Yara's guest? Yara wore her crown because Daenerys gave it to her, and she would not ask her to hand it back. Nor would Yara do so, no matter her loyalty. She thought about Pentos, the Iron Bank, sailing all the way back to Mereen...could she face Daario again? Would the slavers respect her, bow before her and call her Queen in light of such utter failure and defeat? The slaves she freed may love her still, but would they trust her to protect them, when she could barely protect herself?

Two days after the battle, one of her surviving Dothraki riders came to her, the skin of his left arm still maimed from the fire.

"Knights to the north, along the great river," she translated to Yara, across the fire of the pathetic camp they held, compared to how they had been the greatest army the realm had ever once seen. "They've reached the Blackwater." She remembered a time when Missandei had done the translating for her.

"We'll fight them," Grey Worm said, even though she could see the defeat in his eyes as well, a bruise upon his cheek sustained in their chaotic retreat. "We'll push through their men, we'll run or swim back to the ships, or we'll die fighting for you to the last man, my Queen."

"There's no escape," she said, knowing full well how meaningless it was now to lie to herself. "The Dornish Army will crush us, even if we reach the river. We've been losing men, near twenty or thirty a day...not even counting the ones deserting us."

"They're fools and cowards," Yara swore. "They're not deserving of you."

"They'll never kneel to me. No lord will ever kneel to me again."

Breaking her fast, the Greyjoy woman walked over before her to do just that.
"This queen kneels to you," she said, head bending down towards her feet. "This queen swore an oath, and this queen believes still her oath."

She would feel gratitude, if gratitude had yet any practical meaning left. But seeing Yara's example, Grey Worm ran over by her side and followed her example, bending the knee, having lost none of his warrior's composure even through their last defeats.

"I will fight and die for you, my Queen. You freed us, you gave us new lives...a chance to make our own futures, a chance to love and live as we wanted...it is more than any of us ever thought possible..."

Yet you deserved more.

Seeing what remained of her armies congregating, kneeling before her one last time, at the sight of these last professions of devotion, Daenerys Stormborn knew what was expected of her. She stood upwards, proudly, regally, forcing every morsel of self pity from her face until all she was the very image of defiance itself. The Last Dragon looked around her, Dothraki, Unsullied, Ironborn...some remaining knights and soldiers and most minor of lords, she took a deep breath to deliver them one last speech, one last call to fight.

"Blood of my blood," she said in Dothraki.

"Freemen, of two worlds," she said in High Valyrian, then the common tongue. "We have been beaten. We have been betrayed. We sought to fight honorably, but the enemy chooses a different course. Yet, victory is victory, and defeat is defeat all the same. They'll write stories about the Starks...about how their Queen won herself her kingdoms...honorably or not. But we have yet songs they'll sing for us, our stories are far from over!"

The exhilaration remained, how she could still captivate these last faithful men and women who followed her, how she could still draw her own inspiration from their belief in her, their faith in her.

"What will words will they sing, when they tell the stories of Daenerys Stormborn, and the mighty Dothraki of the great grass seas, and the fierce Unsullied of Dragon's Bay...of the loyal and unchallenged will of the Ironborn? Will they sing of our defeat, our surrender, or subjugation? Or will they sing of our courage, our determination, our bravery, our refusal to surrender...our willingness to die to the last man and woman..."

Her men. Her warriors...many of them limping, maimed by iron, burned by fire, yet standing proud, tall, ignorant of their pain, their wounds...their own very lives...so that they could fight for her one last battle to the end.

"Many of you followed me across the Narrow Sea...to this strange land, of strange and horrible peoples. You defeated an army of the dead! You won your Queen a throne, you saved the realm from a Lannister tyrant! Whatever happens tomorrow...what you've accomplished, none will forget! You've placed in my hands your lives...I regret I've failed to live up to your expectations, your trust..."

Her voice choked unexpectedly, when she uttered the word failed. Meaning to continue, looking into the eyes of her last true believers, still ready to die for her one last time. For the first time since before her brother died, she found herself lost for words.

"...you followed me across the Narrow Sea," she found herself repeating, almost in a trance now, "and I failed you."
I brought you here to die.

Another pause. Some confusion growing, as they all awaited her to finish her last rallying cry.

"...I will fail you no longer." The words came from her heart, yet it felt like she held no control over what was uttered from her mouth. "Tomorrow, I will surrender myself before Queen Sansa."

Grumbles, looks of shock, of betrayal, and anger, as her words were translated into Dothraki and high Valyrian.

"I will give her my life, and plead for yours. I will place your lives upon her mercy, because I do believe her merciful, and I will do whatever I still can so that you did not follow me here in vain."

"My queen," Grey Worm protested, Yara looked just as shocked and echoing him, "surely you don't mean it!"

"I do. The war is lost. Far too many have died for me already, for a dynasty long passed. I will waste no more lives upon this cause..."

"We won't do it," Yara argued. "We won't surrender to her."

"You will," Daenerys said, straining to exert what authority she remained in her chest. "I am your Queen. This is my last order. That you surrender yourselves...that you surrender me. That you may all live, that you may all return home...that you may all make good lives for yourselves...after your Queen is but a memory."

They were disappointed in her, she could smell it in the cold night's air. But they'll forget their disappointment, once their lives passed hers by, and perhaps they may all find new purposes, beyond war, beyond death...beyond blood and fire.

"This is your decision," Yara asked, still unrelenting, wishing she could fight everyone, fight herself even, if her vow didn't prevent her from doing just that. "What makes you think she'll spare us?"

"She's the Queen now. Tomorrow morning, she'll be your Queen. I gave her this war to fight, because I slaughtered the people I swore to protect. If I surrender my crown to her, it will only be because I trust her to not make the same mistake as I."

If there's yet blood to be shed, let it be upon her hand, not mine.

"Torgo Nudho." Grey Worm entered her tent, after giving her time to mourn the end of her time upon her throne...the end of everything she had ever been. He was her last. If he died, who would remember her? Who could recall from their own eyes all the good things she had done...the Breaker of Chains...the Mhysa of the Bay of Dragons?

"My Queen," he said, defeat heavy upon his soul as well, "we surrender tomorrow. If the new queen is merciful, then...we won't forget you. We'll sing your songs forever, wherever we go."

She embraced him with a ferocity that shocked him, allowing herself to cry upon his shoulders for a time, though she quickly forced the tears back.

"Where will you go?"

"Naath," he replied, his eyes distant.

"Missandei," she said, understanding. Her devoted...along with Ser Jorah. Had they lived, she'd no
doubt they'd be with her until the end as well. Was it any type of mercy, that they would never see this last failure?

No. They'd be alive. It'd be mercy for me, not them, that they don't live to witness my failure.

"We'll protect her people," Grey Worm said, his own eyes swollen. "We'll do so in the name of our Queen, the Mother of Dragons...Daenerys Stormborn. Your name, your House...it will never be forgotten there."

"I don't think it'll be forgotten here either," she said absentmindedly. For different reasons. "Do it in her memory too. She deserves it more than I."

"Whatever happens," he said, "I thank the Gods for letting her into my life. And you...I'd lose a thousand more wars for you, than fight another battle as a slave."

She smiled at him, and looked away, because any more would truly break her, and he knowingly left her tent, and her life.

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Sansa

Most of them were in tatters, but one last black flag bearing the dragon emblem flew high and proud, its last Queen standing below it. They were few, and pathetically so, and as she rode closer and closer to them, the disappointment and agony in their eyes unmistakably revealed to her, Sansa had to remind herself that this was the woman who burned King's Landing, and who would have subjugated the North and burnt it along with the rest of the realm had Jaime Lannister not been true to his final vow. Her hair was in shambles, her robes dirtied and barely fitting, and Sansa found herself glad she had sent Jon Snow back to the capital, because whatever her crimes, it would have broken his heart to see his queen like this.

Her remaining lieutenants glared at her, Grey Worm and Theon's sister. The Dothraki were unreadable, and she supposed this was for them their way of life, war, whether it be winning or losing, though it was not defeat they preferred.

You wanted this so much. I did not want this at all. No one wanted me to have this, not until I had it. If the Gods are real, they are worse monsters than you or I.

"Queen Daenerys," she proclaimed, her throat having never been stronger from all the use she put it through now, "I am to understand you seek a surrender."

"I do, Queen Sansa." Behind her, all her remaining soldiers lined up in a broad field on the edge of the Kingswood. "I only ask you spare the lives of the men, and women, who followed me into war, and now to your mercies." When no one spoke, they could hear the currents of the Blackwater in the distance.

She expected her to ask this. She suspected this was the only reason she surrendered in the first place. "Many lords have abandoned you since the battle. You'll be happy to know they've all hanged. Loyalty will not be a whore to be bartered and exchanged for cheap under my reign."

Even through her disappointment, her rage smoldering in submission, Sansa could see in the Dragon Queen's eyes a hint of approval.

"So be the fate of all traitors," Daenerys said softly, coldly. "But the men behind me do not betray me. With my surrender, I hand you their loyalties...and their lives."
"Your surrender is accepted by the realm," Sansa started. She felt relief around her, from all the lords and men behind her, and more than a few before her, that the war, the fighting and death, was finally over. But as all her men and women threw down their weapons upon Daenerys's signal, as her own men rode forth to collect them, she wasn't finished. "The realm also accepts that you had no choice to surrender. As such, the realm will dictate the fates of those you surrender in light of their crimes, and the justice due to them."

"Your Grace," Daenerys said, pleading, addressing her properly only after she realized her own goals were not to be that easily accomplished, "whatever they did...they did upon my orders."

"It doesn't erase what they did." Looking down at all her captives from atop her horse, she summoned forth first one who troubled her heart. "Yara Greyjoy."

Theon's sister stepped forward, yet refused to utter the words which accepted her defeat. Her eyes remained bold and unsurrendering, and Sansa hated her for it, because it was the same stubbornness, the same refusal to let go of their old ways, that clever trick of words to cover up what was piracy in fact, that had damned her Theon, damned Winterfell, damned Robb and her mother and the North in the first place.

_What man could you have been_, she wondered even now, _had you been able to let go what you were, and embrace who you could have become, earlier, before it was too late?_

"You sailed the Narrow Sea," she addressed her, listing her crimes, "plundering the cities of the Vale before your Queen called you back to march against me."

"It was war, yer grace," Yara replied, speaking her title as if it were poison. "You know that as well as I."

"Aye, it was war," she answered her in kind. "But you killed not soldiers, but innocents. That is not my war, and that will not be how war is to be conducted in my name, under my reign."

Let the lords behind her heed her words as well, as she would not be so merciful to them as she would be now.

"Your brother Theon fought for me, and he died for the North, for the Starks, in Winterfell. In his memory, I will spare your life." She looked over at the Ironborn men who followed her, who would follow the old ways, who would continue to savage her lands and her peoples. "Your fleet is forfeit, and belongs wholly to the Crown from this moment. Your people in the Iron Islands will be allowed small vessels to fish and travel. Anything further will be punishable by death."

"You can't," Yara protested. "That's our way of life!"

"Find a new way of living," Sansa said, dismissively. A nod, and newly lorded Mortimer and Beryn Dayne rode forward. "The Iron Islands now answer to House Dayne of Casterly Rock. As for you, Lady Yara, I sentence you to exile in the South. The lords and ladies of the Reach have been most hospitable to me, and I fully expect the same of Prince Martyn's lords in Dorne. You will remain in either kingdom for the rest of your life. You may walk upon the shores of the sea, but you will never step foot upon a boat again. You will never sail. If you do, you will die. Should you flee, perhaps to Essos, do so knowing the justice of the Crown will pursue you across the Narrow Sea, to wherever you may go."

For a moment, Sansa wondered whether she would leap at her, her own life be damned. But she backed away.
'Is that all, yer Grace?'

"Should you ever choose to bear an heir, they may inherit the Iron Islands, after coming of age. House Dayne will return your lands to them. But any children you bear shall be raised as wards of the Crown, from their birthing to their majority."

* I'll raise good heirs to the Greyjoy name, in your brother's memory. *

She nodded, but did not kneel, and walked back to stand by her own queen. With the sentence passed, she felt the hate dissipating from her heart. She did not hate Yara Greyjoy, she hated what she represented, and what that culture did to Theon. Even the Dragon Queen standing prostrate before her she realized that she no longer hated. Not when she had found so much more to hate through her awful war...her lords...her choices...herself.

"Grey Worm."

The Unsullied captain stepped forward, eyes brimming with just as much anger as the Greyjoy woman, though his hatred, thick as it was, was less directed at her.

"Khal..."

"Madri," the Dothraki chief said, stepping forward beside Grey Worm.

"Your men protected Winterfell with ours and defeated the dead. Their deeds will not be forgotten. Yet, you aided in the slaughter of King's Landing, killing innocents and surrendered soldiers alike. Those deeds will not be forgotten either."

She gave a nod to Paxter, who jumped off his horse and gripped tightly the Unsullied captain's hand. Addressing him as well as Daenerys, she continued. "You are a great commander of men, and you know your soldiers. You know which ones have more blood on their hands, and you will pick them in an honorable manner. You will both lose your sword hands...along with fifty of the men each of you will choose to suffer the same fate with yourselves."

"You can't," Daenerys started pleading.

"We are nothing without our hands," Grey Worm said, angry and desperate. "Take mine, kill me...you can not let me pick out my men for such disgrace!"

"Lord Jaime Lannister was once the greatest swordsman in all seven kingdoms," her voice threatening to break again, her eyes afraid of wandering and finding Brienne's somewhere beside her, "...yet Lord Jaime Lannister's greatest days came after he lost his sword hand. I pray you may be so lucky as to follow his path."

Upon her signature after the last battle, she had proclaimed him the last Lannister Lord of Casterly Rock, Warden of the West, first Master of War and Lord Commander of the Queen's armies until his death. Would it always be this easy, she wondered, to change history itself by the stroke of her own pen?

Sensing defiance still, she continued. "Or, you may both live, Grey Worm and Khal Madri. You may keep your hands as well. And you will watch as every single one of your men die."

They looked to each other, unsure, while Daenerys translated her words to the Khal.

"It's what my lords would prefer," Sansa said when they did not reply, her heart trembling though
not her hands nor lips, hoping, praying that they would choose life for their men. "They have many
ideas. Sword. Rope. Water. Fire. If you decline, I place justice for King’s Landing fully in their
hands."

They both looked to Daenerys, who nodded her assent, understanding they had no other choice.

"We accept," Grey Worm said begrudgingly.

"Good," she said, truly meaning the word. "You will receive care from all the maesters available to
you. Once healed, the Dothraki and Unsullied will be allowed free passage back to Essos, or lands in
the North, if you like...provided you leave your weapons forever in exchange for the plow."

"The Queen is fair," Daenerys proclaimed, as if she further needed to convince her followers, "as is
this surrender. I regret many of you must suffer still for my mistakes. But let this be the last blood that
must be shed for the sake of all our peoples. What my ancestors began, so shall I end."

She let the Dragon Queen have her moment, her chance to address her people one last time, because
she had little time left remaining. The new queen watched the old, seeing and understanding how
difficult it was, the finality of Daenerys Stormborn turning away from her people, for her to step
forward below her horse, and lower her body, until one knee touched the ground.

"Though they’ll be no more Targaryens to come," Daenerys said, pain echoing through every word,
"from this day forward...and all days to come...I hereby relinquish any claim my blood has to the
Iron Throne and the Seven Kingdoms."

Sansa could sympathize. There had been a day when she thought herself the last of the Stark line,
that she had failed her family so utterly and completely, so as to erase it from history and all its books
for all times to come.

"There must always be a Stark in Winterfell," Sansa said, less as a queen, more as a woman, a
person, to her. "Though he will not pass down the name, he will pass down the blood of the dragon
in the North...for all days to come."

The Queen who Rode motioned the Queen who Knelt to step forward, and Sansa leaned down to
whisper into the ear of the woman she finally defeated.

"May they remember your name in the North better than they remember your name in King’s
Landing."

Daenerys

Tyrion visited her first.

"Your Grace," he said formally, head laid low. It was good he still called her queen, but he had once
addressed her his queen. "Forgive me, I failed you."

"I failed you too." Her life was forfeit. He had tried, she saw that clearly now. And just because he
failed, did not negate his efforts when he had once believed in her. She could hate him, she could
curse him, but what was the point now, wasting her last days in anger? "I should have listened to you
in the end. I should have known to listen to others when we began."

"Dragonstone was the dagger that destroyed us," he said.

She nodded, their mutual understanding too late. "I sent Sansa away. I should have done the same
for myself. Instead, I sat on a stone chair and berated Jon Snow until he knelt, all the while believing this country could be won by others in my name."

"I know," he admitted. "A tour of the south, the west, the Vale, along with the North...let all the lords see you, know you, and believe in you...King's Landing may not have welcomed you, but they would have, and a whole country would have marched on Cersei for you...just like the whole country marched against you now."

"I would have thought saving this country from the dead would have done just that," she remarked, unable to purge all her bitterness at the North's lack of gratitude. "The nobles would have never accepted me, like they accept her...the dragons would always pose too much of a threat to their power. But the dragons cursed me. I never saw this land through its people, through the eyes of the smallfolk, the villages, the farms and mills. The lords would never have loved me, but they wouldn't have had a choice if the lies they told me as a child weren't lies...that the people truly cried out for my name day and night."

He sat next to her in regret, and she remembered sitting like this with him in the Great Pyramid, when they both believed in so much to come.

"There were so many other ways the game could have been played." His mouth twitched. "Sansa has ordered that you be treated to all the courtesies and comforts due a queen, until we reach King's Landing."

If their roles were reversed, would she had done the same for Sansa?

"Where they'll kill me."

"I get to live and rethink and regret my mistakes, every day, for the rest of my life," Tyrion said. If he was trying to comfort her, he was failing. Again. "Have you heard, the new Queen is demoting me?"

"Master of Law," she said, having overheard the lords talking, now that there was little else left her to do. "Can you change the law to make me Queen instead," she asked. And the dwarf actually stared at her in disbelief, until she laughed, and he laughed too. Was that how far she gone she had been, that her former hand believed her no longer capable of a joke?

"She told me, if I truly believed in what was once our cause, that I could serve it still. 'Break her wheel', she said, 'but with laws, not fire. Help me make this a country of laws, so that no queen or king or lord or dragon may find it so easy to inflict suffering upon others.'"

He had no compunctions now speaking frankly to her. Had he been so afraid in those days before King's Landing? Could he have lumped her in with all the rest of them then? Would she have listened?

She set her hand upon his, feeling him jump at her touch. There were so few people she could make her peace with left.

"Do it then. Tell me you will do it, that you will break the wheel for her, for me, so I can go to my grave believing in something."

Tears in his eyes, he rose and knelt before her on the hard tent floor one last time.

"I swear it then, in sight of the Old Gods and the New, that I will break the wheel, that I will make this world a better place, that I will do whatever I can to atone for my mistakes and yours. You saved me once, when I was at my worst...and that's a debt I still have yet to pay. They'll never build statues of you in King's Landing, where you don't deserve them. Or Winterfell, where you do. But may they
sing songs of you in the villages and the countryside, in times to come."

The sight of him rising was blurred by her own watery eyes, and they hugged, out of all things, clutching each other tightly, before the Half Man staggered from her tent, clearly in search of the strongest wine the Wolf Queen had.

"It can't be poison."

She was about to scold her, for possessing the gall to intrude so brazenly into her tent, before remembering that she was her prisoner now, and would be until her death.

"You have to die of course," Sansa continued, standing tall, this grim, glum woman who would take her throne, who did not even seem happy about it. "You understand why. And the sentence must be delivered before all the lords to witness. Other than that, I'll allow you your choice in how it's done."

Was this what she was reduced to now? Her legacy, to end as a creature to be pitied by others?

"Does it scare you," she asked, sitting upon her bed, "to order a death of a queen?" She wanted to stand, to face her directly, so that Sansa could not look so down upon her so easily, but her legs were so tired now.

"It has to be done, to end the war." There was no joy in her voice, and Daenerys wondered whether she was just that good at hiding her own pettiness. "I've seen enough death for a hundred lifetimes...we both have."

She does look the part, Daenerys admitted, no more and no less than herself. That had been her mistake, to underestimate her. To think that she could get rid of her by throwing her to strangers. And she hated it, how it came so easily for Sansa in this rotten land, the love and acclaim and vows of loyalty, and wondered with a child's rage why it couldn't have been so for herself. Was it her father's sins, that she would never come to escape his shadow? Was it the fault of the lords and ladies, their obstinacy, their own selfish desires? Or was it her own fault, that she thought too much of the throne and too little of the people who follow it? In the back of her mind she remembered the bells. It had to be done, she had thought then, she told herself every night. To save the realm, to secure it from tyranny for all time. Yet she had lost, hadn't she? Did that mean all the innocents of King's Landing she had killed truly in vain, that she could never create a world where their deaths were justified? She could not bear that to be the truth, she would break if it was.

"You'll be better than the lot of them," Daenerys admitted. "You won't be a tyrant, I'll grant you that."

She thought she saw a smirk in her lips. It was there, and it stayed. "I wouldn't be so sure." Walking up to the bed, Sansa took a seat next to her, the same place Tyrion had sat. Could she attack the new queen, she wondered, choke the life out of the wretched woman, and reclaim what was hers? No. It's over. It's entirely over.

"Before the Battle at Gardener's Crossing, I ordered the lords I didn't trust at the front of the line, the first through the narrows, where we knew you would send the Dothraki. Jonos Bracken, Warryn Beesbury...Warryn knew it, and said as much so. He tried to rape Lady Tarly in the camp. I spared him because I needed his men then, but not by the final battle. Lady Tarly would not have been his first, I've no doubt. I told him, I whispered into his ear, that if he survived the battle, I would order him gelded with a dull blade, then sodomized by a flaming hot poker until he died. They all died, all those lords I put there."
"Good," Daenerys said coldly. She approved, of course she did. And it gave her small comfort that only a woman as ruthless as herself could beat her.

"I imagine the rest of my life will be filled with horrible deeds, with ordering the deaths of others. We didn't need the wildfire. The battle could have been won had we charged Yurik's throne, hid behind the hill, then attacked your Dothraki from the flank. But the lords desired revenge for King's Landing. So we flung it upon your men. Your Unsullied, your Dothraki...they're not innocent...not after King's Landing. But they still fought with us in Winterfell. I ordered them burnt anyway, and I would have ordered them slaughtered to the very last man had Grey Worm not agreed."

"It's not easy, is it? Pleasing the men. Making them fear you...making them see your strength."

She wanted to give up, to lie down and dive into the bliss of sleep, her last resort. But she would not break before her.

"No," Sansa admitted, betraying a tenderness in her eye towards her, their first tenderness since they had spoken since Winterfell. "And I'll have to fight it the rest of my life. We both suffered, you and I. Jon, Arya, my family, everyone's family. If I'm to be Queen, if I'm the protector of my realm now, I'll do it. I'll have it so people no longer have to suffer like we did, not if I can help it. So that the rapers and the killers and the plotters meet their justice, a justice so gruesome that other wicked men and women will be too fearful to follow in their example. And I will continue to do horrible things for the rest of my life to make it so. That's the story I'll have to to tell myself, every night, so that I can sleep, for the rest of my days."

"I hate you," she whispered slowly, word by agonizing word, to Sansa, who showed no reaction, considering it was open truth. As she continued she heard her voice breaking, her emotions finally threatening to emerge into the open. "I shouldn't hate you. You shouldn't have hated me. We...we could have accomplished great things together, you and I."

She imagined a word where they had not been enemies. Where her father had not burned the Starks, and there had never been a rebellion. Where she sat upon her throne, proper inheritance be damned, a just and strong queen, and Sansa Stark beside her as her Hand, punishing the wicked men in the world who would crush them both. Who could go against them, the greatest reign the realm could ever know?

"We could have," Sansa said, eyes meeting hers, her voice still soft, a woman's, not a queen's. Jorah had been right, after all. How had she not been able to win her over in Winterfell, or after? Had it ever been possible? "If I wasn't who I am, and you weren't who you are."

It was inevitable, her tears. But if she had to cry, better it before a woman than a man.

"I left a man that loved me, for this. I left a city that loved me."

Daario loved her, with all his heart. Daario was valiant, was violent, Daario would die for her, would kill any man or woman who crossed her path. Daario came without family ties, bloodlines and feuds and grudges that transcended generations. She thought it a weakness at the time.

"All my life, when I was a child, I wanted to see King's Landing. Get away from the cold, and the snow...I imagined my mother's castle...the southern septs, their flowery dresses, their valiant knights. This is our punishment, I think. For forgetting what we had. For wanting what we didn't need."

"Do you claim you don't want it, or do you truly don't want it?" This girl who would replace her, who would take her birthright, her life, she deserved to know into what hands she was placing her legacy.
"I truly don't," Sansa stated. But then, they both knew that wasn't the full truth. "I wasn't meant for it...not this throne. I never asked for it, but I suppose I deserve it...not for my good deeds, but for my sins. I have it now...I truly have it...and I'm stuck to everything it entails so long as I draw breath."

"The Gods are cruel, aren't they? They rip us root and stem from our hopes and our wants, and torment us with what we can't have...high and low alike."

"Fuck the Gods." Her words and her tone would shock her bannermen, of which there were certainly many now. To Daenerys, it only confirmed the mask the wolf had always worn.

"Is that what you said to your High Septon, when he blessed you as the chosen of the Gods?"

The grin she received in return was one she could only receive from a fellow queen. "I won't patronize you. You know better than anyone what you lose, when you wear a crown. I did dream of one though, while you slept."

The woman had the audacity now to place a hand on hers as she continued to speak treason, but Daenerys found her heart so sapped that she could not even bring herself to continue hating her. Was that the true cost of defeat, that she would be robbed of even the ability, the right, to direct her hatred towards those who deserved it?

"Perhaps Jon could have taken it back, had you not waken," Sansa continued. "He would have given it to me though, I think, that's Jon...he wants not for himself. It's his weakness. And it's also why we all love him. And I would have taken it, and worn a crown, but in my own home, over my own people. It seemed so easy then."

"I never had a home," Daenerys said. The woman next to her had suffered much, she knew. It had been the thought of home, the hope of home, that carried Sansa through it all. "You did go back home, and home was a real place for you. That's why you fought for it. That's why you fought me for it. When I suffered, I thought of home too. This land. But this land is a strange one, I never knew it, it never knew me. In the east, Essos, Pentos, the Dothraki Sea...all strange lands as well. Yes, many loved me there. I surrendered to you, so I could save what I could of those people I brought here, what's left of them anyway. But there were many more that hated me, that saw me as you do...a conquering stranger. I do think sometimes though, I never should have left. But I'm glad I did. Even if I did not find a home, even though I lost the throne I coveted more than my own life...there was no one I loved there."

"Jon."

They both smiled at his name.

"I met a man who loves me. I met the last man I'll love. " She looked at Sansa, and summoned what remained of Daenerys Stormborn. "I met the man who will end my life."

Understanding, then horror, dawned in the new queen's eyes.

"You said I can choose how I go. That's my choice...Your Grace."

"You can't," she protested, as if she were still a subject of hers. "It'll break him."

"He'll live though. I heard you already made him a Stark. You'll give him one crown or another. Men will continue to worship him. He'll find new friends, new lovers, and one day, when he's old, and his hair is gray, and his legs limping as he walks, he'll wonder if he even remembers my face. I love Jon Snow. But he's not the one who deserves pity. Not from me at least. He'll kill me, but he's the only one left who'll do so with love."
Sansa nodded, and rose to leave.

"I won't order him. But I'll ask."

They both knew that would be enough.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Ghosts from the past await the two Queens.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tyrion

"Lord Davos," Tyrion said, finding the tent belonging to the man they called the Onion Knight the morning of their last encampment. They would reach what remained of King's Landing this day, and he imagined he could already smell its smoke and ash.

"Lord Tyrion," Davos replied. "I hear King's Landing is where your journey ends."

"I hear you're lucky enough to continue riding on."

"Ah yes, to a castle on a hill, they say. Blood of the North and First Men, they'll say of me one day, this urchin from Flea Bottom."

He'd miss the man. Davos would have been a good friend to have on the Small Council, in more than one way.

"It's not for lack of talent or honor," Tyrion said. "She's sending you back north so you can be with Jon. So he has a friend, so he's not alone. Not after what he has to do."

"Aye, I get that." Gossip spread quickly through their small camp, for what else would all the lords of all seven kingdoms do when all gathered together? "And far be it for me to let the Glovers steal my castle back while I waste away haggling with the Iron Bank, or whatever else she'd have me do."

"That's Tytos Blackwood, I think," Tyrion said, "for my old seat on the Council. The grubbier one, to be specific."

"Who else is to join you," Davos asked, curious. "I'd imagine Ser Brienne for the Queensguard. Paxter Redwyne clearly, for Master of War."

"She'll summon a grand maester from Oldtown, I think. Samwell Tarly she's asking to stay at Winterfell as well, for Jon. Prince Martyn for Master of Ship..."

"Ah yes, the price of Dorne."

"Perhaps not all of it. My uncle Marion I believe will have a large web to weave in Lord Varys's absence." A pause, a memory of the man, the friend he condemned to burn, and for what? For being right? "I believe a chair without a position for Roland Crakehall, as well as for the heirs to Highgarden and Winterfell. Any of her siblings, I think, though I'd take bets as to which ones are least likely to take her up on it."

"A brave new world," Davos said. "Think it'll be better than the last shit one?"
"Stannis offered you his Hand," Tyrion answered indirectly. "You could have taken my head off yourself, had you prevailed on the Blackwater."

"So many kings and queens ago," Davos said. "When I was with Stannis, I thought he would make a good King. He would've. But I've seen better than him since then. And worse. Let's hope this one lasts."

"You know better than to question that." He spoke as an admonishment, rather than a threat, and the old man chuckled knowingly. "I worried about heirs with Daenerys. I'd worry about heirs with other Kings and Queens too. But a Stark on the Throne? We may be lucky enough to go at least a few generations before we get the next Joffrey or Aerys or Maegar."

He would not broach the subject of heirs with her. Not for some time, at least. Daenerys had been so focused on taking the Throne, so absentminded as to what came after...one of many reasons it was lost to her. For someone like Sansa, what came after was the only thing that truly mattered, and she likely already had in mind what, who, or what house would pass for an eventual consort. He had a few hints himself, though the only thing he knew for certain was that it was not to be him.

"I'll be proud to have put her there then," Davos said.

That was odd. When did Davos claim deeds that weren't truly his? That bad habit was his own, so recently formed.

"Figure of speech," Davos said, laughing, "though I did my swing my sword a few times at the Twins...the last time we were on the same side."

"Were we though?" That was when he himself and Varys had last been on the same side, trying in vain to speak for the interests of a comatose Queen, against a woman they never foresaw usurping her. Not like this. "I suppose we were for appearance's sake. You served Sansa, but on behalf of Jon and only Jon. I served Daenerys. At the time, it was the same, we could tell ourselves."

"It was a missed opportunity, wasn't it? Though it speaks to why this world is such shit, when it's impossible for even decent ones like Sansa and Jon and Daenerys to get along with each other."

Recalling, the conversation they had at Winterfell, Tyrion surmised that Davos was far from naive. Perhaps a bit hopeful, an odd trait to draw after years of service to Stannis, but that was why Stannis had him locked up twice, wasn't it? And not all of them held the same appetite as men like he or Varys, in switching from one bent knee to the next. Definitely not Jon, whom he had observed uncomfortable in bending the knee even to his own sister, because of who came before.

"I don't think a woman like Sansa Stark could have united seven kingdoms had she been merely someone else's opportunity. Once she may have been, but not after what we did to her. The North would have never submitted, so long as she lived. Even if we sent her back to Winterfell, if we didn't foolishly give her the opportunity to win over every damn lord and lady left in the realm who didn't already follow her, she would resisted Daenerys. Subtly, maybe, undermining her in ways, perhaps to slip by even a Spider or two. Unless we killed her, I guess...something I'd half thought would happen when we landed at the Crossroads."

"And create a greater martyr for the North than even her father or brother," Davos replied. "Honorable, strong, and pretty to boot? Good luck to the Dragon Queen with that."

The man knew his politics, just as much as he. Of course he would be, Stannis wouldn't have offered him Hand otherwise, but the Onion Knight also knew well enough when to keep his opinions hidden under the cloak of his vest, especially from plotters such as himself.
"Yes, I suppose once the North was won, they would have a hard time kneeling to anyone north or south without Stark blood."

"May not matter for you," Davos mused, "but as a newly minted lord of the North, I'm actually quite interested in whom I'm to bend the knee to, for what remains of this old man's days."

Tyrion patted the man on his back. "She brought seven kingdoms and won the last great war. She's more a captive to the Iron Throne, as was Robert when he won his damned rebellion. She'll keep the realm together much better than Robert, that's for sure, but we'll see whether she fought this war for the North, or her North."

"Does it matter to you?"

Gods did the game ever end? Even with Davos?

Tyrion gulped. "All matters which concern the Queen's temperament concern members of her Small Council." He paused. "What she does with the North will tell me whether I will be handling a wistful queen, or one plagued by her conscience."

"Does it really matter," Davos asked, his voice no longer as light as before. "I've a feeling this one will need far less care of her temperament than the other ones you've served. And that's frightening for you, isn't it? That you may not be needed as much as before?"

Very slowly, he bobbed his own head up and down in a nod. "Terrifying. If she doesn't need me handling her, she may discover that I have a rare talent for handling the sewage drains..."

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**Jon**

"Can you do it? Wearing Jon's face?"

The last of the Starks, those who weren't Three-Eyed Ravens at the very least, sat in Maegor's Holdfast, relatively untouched from the battle. He'd never stepped foot in such an ornate room before, though he had to admit that it was a convenience upon riding to King's Landing, that even the mirrors remained uncracked and bed sheets still plush beyond his wildest dreams, despite much of the upper towers of the Red Keep disintegrated from the battle. What few survivors remained he let in the various quarters, though he couldn't help but keep one of the more...royal...rooms for himself. Not for the comfort, but as a much deserved escape from the horrors he was charged with facing every day...his penitence for his part in letting the slaughter happen.

"I'd have to kill him first," Arya replied, polishing her Needle. Eyeing Jon menacingly, she smirked moments later, unable to keep a straight face for long over such a ridiculous notion.

"I wouldn't half mind it, I don't think." He looked to Sansa, remembering that he never told his other sister what he had been planning to do in the throne room. "I was going to kill her, after what happened with that awful battle. I didn't get the chance then, but I always tell myself that I would have done it."

She didn't look surprised, which meant Arya already told her. Sitting as a family, it would be nice to imagine all things forgiven. That Sansa, and Arya, had forgiven him for sending his older sister into harm's way at the Dragon Queen's orders. That he'd forgiven both his sisters for resisting both a woman he'd bent the knee to as their King, as he had every right and obligation to do so, as well the woman he loved, in doing so, ripping to bloody shreds that love. Yes, most of the forgiving had been done. But the memories would last all the rest of their lives. Families were complicated, weren't they?
Especially when mixed with politics and honor and duty and survival.

"It's unfair of her to ask," Sansa said. Was she indignant because of him, or her? "It's unfair of me to ask for you. I can tell her you said no, I promised I wouldn't force you to."

"Like you promised to keep my secret." His smile told her his words were said in jest. But he was never good at keeping secrets with his eyes, and there were few better at reading eyes than either one of his sisters.

"She did what she did to protect our family," Arya said immediately, defending her. Though his younger sister held little love for the Dragon Queen even before Sansa declared open war on her, Jon knew that she could sympathize with him, even if she didn't agree with him.

"I'm really screwed, aren't I," Jon said, trying to steer the conversation away from politics, though it was synonymous with family for the three of them at this point. "Snow, Stark, and Targaryen, I've royal blood on three sides. It's a good thing the Red Woman's dead."

"Arya would burn her first if the thought ever crossed her mind," Sansa said, joking. It felt good, despite all the death and destruction surrounding them, that they could still jest like this, as a family. "She loved you though. You were her chosen. It'd be you in my place, were it up to the Red Lady."

"Would you rather that?" His words were light, but the two exchanged looks, as only two who had worn a crown could.

"I never wanted this," Sansa said, repeating the words he himself had said many times, sounding rote as it did coming from either of their mouths.

"But, you didn't want this, less than I didn't want this. That's why you have it now."

Instantly, regret stirred in her eyes, and Jon understood just how much she hated the throne, same as he would have. But as he said, not as much as he did.

"I would have stayed home, but..." Sensing they were wading into uncomfortable territory again, she laughed childishly. "Sansa, Sansa, Sansa," she chanted in a playful manner. "Sounds like the song of a foolish girl, picking out flowers in her grandmother's garden, making up stupid names for all the magical fairy creatures and grumpkins her old nan's told her about. Jon. Robb. Simple, dignified. Arya. Even Cersei. Fierce...cutting. Sansa...certainly not the name father would have picked out for me had he ever imagined me here."

"That's not how they'll remember it a hundred years from now," Arya said, looking up from her Needle. "You'll change it...it'll be like Aegon...a name they'll say with love...and fear."

"Do you think so," Sansa asked her, not as a queen, but as a sister.

Arya nodded, and was about to say something, but Jon spoke first.

"You fought her from the beginning, Sansa. Was it right? Was it wrong? I don't know, I'm not one to answer that question. But you fought, because that's what you know, because that's how you survived. That's how she survived too, all the horrors and brutality of the east, because she never gave up either. You both fought first for yourselves. Then, when you came to learn your own strength, you inspired others, people started following you, and your name became their reason, their cause. Then it grew, in ways neither of you could predict. Or control. I know you wanted to fight for our people, Sansa, for the north.

But the North's cause was dead, by the time you rode west. I believe you, when you say you wish
you can give your crown to me. But you forsook that right the moment continued the north's cause by taking up the cause of the south...enough so that they would name you a southern queen. It's not your choice anymore, just like it wasn't my choice who my real father was."

He paused, as he let his words sink in. There was no doubt that none of this was a great revelation to Sansa, and perhaps she had grown beyond the need for her big brother's validation already, but she seemed to need it all the same. At least one last time. Rising, he walked forward to her, and she rose in return to embrace him as fiercely as that day in Castle Black.

Once they let go of each other, he continued speaking.

"Maybe you deserve your kingdoms because you're a flawed, cynical, and stubborn woman. Maybe you deserve it because you're strong, you're kind, you're just. And even when you have to be ruthless...you haven't forgotten the things father, or your mother, held dear to their hearts. That's not for me to decide, I'm just a foolish bastard in the end. Maybe Tyrion and Davos are right, it's a shit world you've inherited. In that case, they don't deserve you. But they're damn lucky to have you anyway."

"You're not a bastard," she said, shying away as Arya approached them as well. "You were a King."
The Queen sighed, and looked down shamefully at her feet. "Tomorrow, I become that chair, with all its curses and blessings. I'd like to make you a King again. But I'm not sure I can."

Her eyes were as uneasy as her words, and Jon preempted whatever she doubts she was having.

"I don't care what I am to you, in that way. A fellow king. A lord. A plain subject. As long as I'm your brother, both of yours...it's all I've ever asked for."

So they hugged, in the bowels of the castle that had caused their family so much suffering over the years, as a family, as a pack today, strong together, knowing they'd stay strong beyond this day and the next, whatever they did, wherever they went. He felt their faces pressed against his chest, his shoulder, and allowed himself to think of only them, remembering those days on the Wall or beyond, when all he wanted was to see again a family he thought lost to him forever. A day before he knew who she was. Daenerys. And the wild one before her. And understood how painful love truly was.

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Sansa

Even now, he could still barely meet her eyes.

"Your Grace," he said, a trembling smile forming.

"Is this real?" It was snowing, snow upon the ground as far as her eyes could see. In the distance, a Godwood standing behind a stone wall. It resembled the one in Winterfell, a home she had not stepped foot in for what seemed a lifetime now. But it wasn't. There was no castle behind it, just an endless mist blending into the snow.

"I don't know, really," Theon replied, letting go of her. "I just know I'm here. And you're here, now."

"You know, then." He had called her by that poisonous title, which meant, wherever this was, it was not wholly strange to her own world. "Yara...I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter. Our blood lives. She lives. She's not happy, but...what you think would make you happy, may not matter as much as you'd think. She'll go on, and she'll what live gives of her."

It wasn't total absolution from him, but what else could she expect? Yara and Theon were family, by
blood. Yara and she were enemies, by politics. Just as Starks and Greyjoys have always been in her life, Theon having been one of many casualties in that war, a small one in the broad scope of things, but everything to him.

He turned his head towards the Godswood.

"They're waiting for you."

"Who?"

He didn't answer, looking down at the snow again.

"You're not coming?"

"I can't."

She wanted to protest, but she understood. Queen as she was, these were not her domains.

"Will I see you again?"

He smiled at her, a rare sight since they met again at Winterfell.

"You won't forget them," he said, looking towards the Godswood. "Don't forget me, either."

"I won't." She swore.

He turned from her, staring at the mist as it engulfed him again, and she walked slowly to the tree and its three shadows. One burst through, embracing her, and she felt like a child again in her arms.

"My daughter. My dear, dear, daughter, my beautiful child."

"Mother," she gasped. She was a child. She was allowed to cry. Closing her eyes, allowing herself just to feel the warm embrace, she shied away from the other two shadows ahead of her. Love her as they may, her own mother was the only one she trusted not to judge her. Not now.

Unable to fully let her daughter go, Catelyn kept her arm through hers, walking Sansa as if she were the bride and her mother her father, until they were before her father and brother. Ned Stark stood slightly ahead of Robb, both their faces gentle, warm, as if all the horrors which befell their lives, which befell their end, were just a faraway dream.

"Your..."

"Don't say it," Sansa said, daring to interrupt her own father. "Don't you dare say those words. Not from you...not from my own family."

Ned Stark smirked. "Is that an order?"

They embraced as well, the feeling of being so small again so wonderful. Then Robb, who looked so young, and she remembered that when he died, he had been younger than she was now.

"I'm sorry," she said, once she found her own voice. "I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry I was so horrible, that I never saw just how wonderful you were, how lucky I was..."

"Shhhhh," her mother whispered, taking her in her frail arms again. It felt so real, her skin, far more so than whatever horrible nightmare awaited her when she woke, and Sansa wished that she may never leave again. "You were never horrible."
"A handful at times," father's voice said. "I'm proud of you, my daughter."

"I'm not the daughter you raised," she replied, afraid to look into his dark gray eyes. "The things I've done, the people I let raise me..."

"Maybe your father would scold you for the things you've done were he still alive," mother said. "But he's not, and he forfeits the right to do so. We all do, here."

"You're alive. We're not. I wish I could have been the one to teach you what you needed to do to survive, but you wouldn't have, not if all you learned was from me."

"I haven't forgotten," Sansa said, sniffing still between words. "I promise you, I swear to you, I never will, even if it may look like it sometimes."

Mother. "We know. You, and Arya. Bran, there's still a bit of him left in your world. All of you...where you are now...gives me peace in how I left the world."

"Jon too," Robb said. Father's face flinched, but mother's didn't. She knew the truth now, and even if she didn't...well this was no longer the place for petty, worldly grudges, was it? "I worried for him. He's your brother, and mine. I'm glad you understand him."

"He was my King," Sansa said, touching her brother's armor, running her fingers through the direwolf sigil upon his breastplate. Was this the same armor he had worn that night at The Twins? "Arya avenged you. And I ordered those damned towers burnt to the ground. In their place will stand statues of our family, blessing those who would cross freely." A thought came to her. "Talisa?" She'd have a statue of her too, but were there any alive who still knew her face?

"She's here. Not here, but here." The fondness in his face told her how true their love had been...and how perhaps, had he another chance, he would choose her, over his own life, over his own kingdom, again and again and again.

"Will I ever get to meet her?"

"Not for a long time, I hope."

"I'm sorry," she said, apologizing again, looking at her brother's feet. "Your cause. I tried to fight for it, I really did. I wished to keep your name alive with my fight. But...I've won now. And I...I don't think..."

She felt his arm grip her again, but rather than hug her, they gripped her arms firmly, a King speaking to a Queen, his equal. "You won, Sansa. It's your cause now, to do as you see fit with it."

"I should give it to Jon," she said, still unsure, "let him have the North, six kingdoms is more than enough for a Stark. But...Winterfell's my home. If I give it away...I'm not...I don't think I can do it. I'd lose a part of myself...the only part of myself I still don't hate."

"You're the Queen now," Robb said warmly. "Whatever decision you make, it's yours and yours alone. I lost my right to judge you when I lost the North, when I lost the war."

A shade of regret and sadness in his eyes, and she understood this world here was not above such worldly sentiments.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," her father said instead. "You were my beautiful little flower, and that's how I treated you. I failed, I couldn't protect you when I left you to fend for yourself in this world. I left you ill prepared."
"I won't deny that," she said, looking into her father's eyes not as a child and daughter, but a lady of a major House, if not the Queen. "But I survived because everything you did teach me, you and mother, kept me strong enough to keep going, even if I did have to play the game the way the Littlefingers and Cersei played it."

"Think not of revenge, or grudges, or regret," father said, he and mother closing in around her, so that they encircled her, her family, "when you think of us. The past is the past, you have a life to live, and seven kingdoms, or six if it be your choice, to guide by your hand."

"Remember us like this," she heard her mother say, "remember that we love you, we love your sister and brothers...both of them."

Was Rickon here too, she wondered. Yes, her mind told her. Maybe he's with Robb's wife. picking flowers for the child they had, a niece or nephew she'd never know. Not for a long time, anyway.

"So long as you don't torture animals like Joffrey," Robb said, laughing.

"And mind how much wine you take," father added, a smirk on his face. "Cersei had a bit of a problem with drink, I think. Not the least of her problems, but..."

She would listen to them scold and nag her forever, if she could. But she knew she couldn't.

Daenerys

The smell of King's Landing touched her senses before the sights, which she chose not to dwell upon from the confines of her wheelhouse as the horses dragged her to towards a throne she dreamed of...and a throne she held, if but for a short time. She imagined the streets were...tidier than before, what with Jon having been placed in charge of cleaning up the results of the siege. Regardless, she did not need to see what she did to know what she did.

Jon Snow never came. Neither did his sister. Apparently, one meeting between queens was more than enough than enough for her, and Sansa had no apparent desire to hear from her the many things brewing through her mind on the short yet endless ride back to King's Landing. She could have advised her, given her ideas, wisdom, on how to handle her lords, how to help the smallfolk...how to rule and keep the peace in such a troublesome realm. But Sansa never came, and Daenerys could conclude that it was her loss, except what if her ideas could help the new Queen even one child's life, or keep one more family fed during her reign? Not that Sansa lacked wisdom in her own right when it came to protecting her people, and Daenerys understood that what really bothered her was the harsh truth that she would never wield power again, that she could never again use her power to help another soul.

Or hurt them.

They told her the room she slept in had once belonged to Prince Tommen, before he became took the usurper's crown. Or was it the usurper of the usurper's? Regardless, it was better than the cells. Although, if there was to be something after death, then perhaps a bit more suffering in this world would have benefited her.

More than anything now, lacking power, lacking friends, lacking any company except guards who hated her, who treated her with coldness rather than cruelty if only to obey their new queen's orders, she just wanted it done and over with. So much of her life had been suffering, the good moments, as good as they were, so rare and in between. Yet, would she prefer a plain life, lived as a wife of a miller, harvesting the grain year after year, watching her face grow old and weary before her time,
watch as her sons die in faraway wars and daughters sent away to be wed to other brutal men? For what miller's daughter or minor lady could have reigned a Queen on two continents, could have been acclaimed as a mother and a savior by the people of an entire city, could have birthed dragons, ridden dragons, and led the greatest army the world had ever seen from north to south, east to west, all as a small woman who had once been sold as a penniless slave? No, she would live this life over and over again, even if the ending were the same. She would not take it back, save for that one awful day in King's Landing.

"You didn't come to see me."

When the day came, it was Jon who came to draw her from her confinement, no other guards, Westerosi or otherwise.

"If I did," he said, gaze cast downwards, "I would not have been able to do as you asked. To see you, to say goodbye, knowing I would have to see you again for this..."

"I understand," she said. She asked for Jon Snow, because she wanted to die at the hands of a man she loved, so she would not begrudge him for avoiding her because he still loved her.

"You claim to love me," she said, as he brought her through the halls of the lower Keep. "Had your sisters not hated me...had King's Landing gone...differently...could you have brought yourself to love me again? Love me like you did, before the truth became the truth?"

The back of his shoulder was all she had to look at while he led her forth in silence.

"I would not have wed you," he finally said. "Bastard or not...whatever Ned Stark was to me...he was the man who raised me, and his name I could not...but you need not have wed, would you? Not if the crown was yours already, not if your realm were true and loyal, and your nobles and smallfolk alike afforded their queen their proper respect, and afforded her dragons their proper fear. Because, as you said, natural heirs will never happen for you. So perhaps, an unwed Queen and her devoted warden could have met, every few fortnights or so, and remembered what had been."

Sparse as that future was, it sounded like downright paradise to her. But would it have been so simple? She imagined that she would have designated Jon her heir, both because she loved him, and because he would be a just ruler after her, were he to live longer than her. Which meant he would have to marry another woman, in order to ensure their blood carried through. And because Jon was Jon, such vows meant he would have lain aside all his feelings and desires for the sake of his duty. Perhaps this was more merciful end, compared to a lifetime of unrequited longing.

"Forget me," she said. "Marry, even if it's not love. Keep alive the blood of the dragon, even if it must be hidden behind the name of the wolf."

"Is that an order," he asked with a faint smile, "my Queen?"

"If I'm still your Queen," she said, memorizing his soft brown eyes one last time, "then yes, it's my last."

Her arms shivered in the winter's cold. They found the blue dress she had worn upon liberating Yunkai, the day a whole city proclaimed her their mhysa, and brought it over from Dragonstone in time for her execution. She wore it now, so that she could remember herself as such, with a few more minutes of cold the least of her concerns.

The mob that awaited her was but a blur, parting in rows to allow her passage through what had been the court of her father and fathers before. At the head, standing at the foot of the steps leading
up to her throne, stood the Wolf Queen, stoic as she always seemed now, in expression and posture. Seeing her brother near, for the first time and the last time, Sansa stepped aside for her, and Daenerys followed Jon up, one step after the next, until the Iron Throne stood in view in all its intimate glory.

She walked ahead of him, and he allowed it, and she touched it, the morning sun reflected against its metal into her eye. She had gotten to touch it once before, after the battle, but never the chance to sit upon it, interrupted as she had been when they announced to her the capture of Cersei. Taking her time, she stroked the arm handle, and wondered what ancient lord the hilt she gripped it belonged to once. Surely his descendant watched her below now, his ghost finally seeing through its revenge against House Targaryen. Perhaps it had never been possible, for she had been doomed all along to pay not just for her father's sins, but all of them, starting with Aegon himself, continuing through all the wheels her ancestors trod through this land one by one.

With Jon standing protectively in front of her, she turned, sat upon the throne, and gripped it with both hands. Looking towards the courtyard, below, she could see none of the lords or their new Queen, just Jon's body blocking them from her view. He stroked her face, running his fingers from her forehead, down her cheeks, cupping her chin, again and again.

"They're not here," he hushed. "They're not here. It's just us. Just us, and your throne."

Closing her eyes, she concentrated, focused, and with all the willpower left in her, felt nothing but the touch of her lover against her skin, and the sun shining against them both. Leaning her head back until it rested against hard iron, she willed herself to melt against it, so that she, her throne, and her love was one, connected and in this moment, unbreakable.

"Nothing else matters," he kept repeating, his words like waves crashing against a rocky beach. In her mind's eye, she saw that beach, and sitting atop a cliff overlooking the water, stood a house with a small red door. Instinctively, she knew it was home, her last home, and she walked slowly up the path leading to the door, wondering who awaited her behind it. Was it Drogo, watching her all this time as she grew from child to woman? Jorah, who shadowed faithfully beside her in the interim, missing only these horrible last months? Or perhaps it was Daario, or Jon, still alive in their worlds, yet somehow, by a miracle of the Gods, already awaiting her in the next. It didn't matter, and turning the small knob, peering inside with trembling anticipating, she barely felt the pain when the knife struck through her heart.

Sansa

It was done. There was nothing that told her so, as all she saw was the dark cloak of her brother standing between her and the throne, shielding the woman he loved from the lords eager to devour her, one last favor he could bestow Daenerys. There was no eagerness in her to watch the act. While she looked, she didn't see, focusing on the tattered ruins of what used to be the throne room's walls instead. Perhaps she noticed a twitch of his arm. Perhaps her mind connected with his. Or the throne's. No matter, she knew the moment it happened, and only then, several seconds later, did she see him bow his head in sadness or reverence.

He leaned down to pick up the body of the former queen himself, carrying it unseen from the lords and into the arms of two of her remaining devotees, one Unsullied, one Dothraki, who took the body from him and exited down a platform she instructed to be raised behind the throne, so that the former queen may see her dignity preserved, until they brought her to be burnt according to the traditional rites of House Targaryen. Why did she go so out of her way to ensure every last bit of respect for her rival? Was it gratitude for what she had indeed done for the North, for her people, for the entire realm when she brought her dragons against the Dead? Was it guilt, a sense that she wronged her, or
esteem due a woman who had accomplished so many other great things, albeit in far away cities she would never see? Or was it, perhaps, the fear that this same fate may befall her one day, and she could only hope that whomever would usurp her would treat her with the same kindness? Not likely, if the last was her hope.

"The Dragon Queen is dead! Long live the Wolf Queen!"

Arthur Hightower helped trigger a wave of similar acclaims from all the other lords. His eyes opened wide and tinged with bloodlust scared her in their fervor. She remembered Littlefinger's words, spoken to her on one of those indistinguishably cloudy days in the Eyrie, as her uncle continued molding her into some kind of idealized protege and lover hybrid he had invented in his twisted mind.

"Be wary of zealots, handle them carefully. Their devotion to you is true, until it isn't. And then, when you disappoint them, when you don't live up to what they wish so fervently to see in you, their hatred will burn just as furiously as what had once been love."

A man like Petry Baelish was aware enough to understand that he would never inspire zealots to his own cause, but that his beautiful young queen would. Even beyond the grave, he had the foresight to prepare her for the horrors to come. Men like Marion or Tyrion, who played the game the rather predictable way, she knew how to play like toy dolls by now. But devotees such as Arthur Hightower, who had loved her, who would have gladly shed his blood and life for her, she wished she could have allowed him the honor, because what happens when his bloodlust towards the Dragon Queen one day inevitably finds itself directed towards her?

At the sight of Jon approaching the bottom of the stairs, Arthur's betrothed left his side. His dagger was missing, and Sansa wondered whether one of the Unsullied had taken it with him. Perhaps they'll burn it with her body? Or keep it, maybe, treating it as a sacred artifact to preserved along with her memory and passed along only to those who deserved it the most. The former King of the North and Queen of the Seven Kingdoms both came to a stop before her and lowered themselves on one knee.

With two fingers of her right hand, she brushed them against Margaery's soft hair, pressing down upon the crown of her skull.

"Lady Margaery, arise, as Margaery of House Tyrell, First of Her Name, Queen of the Reach."

Then to her brother's hair, rough and unwashed from the recent toil.

"Lord Jon, arise, as Jon of House Stark, First of His Name, King in the North."

But it was not so simple. Marion Lannister stepped forward to clarify for all the lords and realms.

"Two crowns within the realm, pledged in fealty to Sansa of House Stark, First of Her Name, Queen Regnant of the Seven Kingdoms, High Sovereign of the Andals and the First Men, Keeper of the Laws and Protector of the Realm, and all her descendants, to the High Crown and its laws, in all perpetuity to come."

Crowns beholden to her crown, which meant they were crowns which could be withdrawn by her crown. Kings and Queens in name, if not much different in fact than what her father had been as a warden, except they would be stronger in fact compared to the remaining Lords or Ladies paramount in the realm outside of Dorne. Edmure Tully, a weak man. Robyn Arryn, a weak child. Gendry Baratheon, a decent man, but also a smith with his closest ties to her own family, whom she knew she could rely upon more so than even her own blood in Riverrun or the Eyrie. Ser Mortimer Dayne, the new Lord Paramount of the Westerlands, was little more than a landed knight, and his heir Beryn...
worshiped her in a rather innocent manner lacking Arthur's unhealthy zeal, and would continue to do so, given the right tutelage she planned for him. The conditions were ripe, as she discussed with Marion, Tyrion and Yohn Royce, for the great houses to become less great, their powers, men and fealty, to be carefully transferred to the High Crown.

There was little doubt that there would be ever reason for her to nullify Jon or Margaery's crowns in their lifetimes. Though both nevertheless gave her pause. A crown put more pressure now on her brother to marry, and he was a Targaryen, and the heirs to the North will always have the blood of the dragon inside them, tempered as they were by the Stark ice. As much as the Northmen would respect and follow the Stark name, they would never accept a ruler in Winterfell more dragon than wolf. With any hope, that would be the saving grace of the dragon's blood the next time the Gods flipped their coins.

Margaery, she could hope that a crown inside her own home would be enough to appease the new Queen of Thorns, considering the former Queen's own experiences in King's Landing buffeted the sincerity in her protestations that her days of ambition were long past. Yet, though the final choice was Margaery's, Sansa couldn't help but wonder how much she had pressured the woman to take for a husband as...difficult, as Arthur could potentially be, however powerful his name was and however politically astute the match was, especially within the lands of the Reach. And what happens when her frustrations with her own lord husband, whether it be his personality, or his eventual ambitions, married to a queen yet not wearing a crown himself, projects themselves away from Oldtown and towards King's Landing instead?

"War makes unlikely friends." Littlefinger again, explaining to her on the ride to the Eyrie the intricacies of the alliance between the Tyrells and Lannisters he helped broker. "War dampens the imagination, except where it involves how to kill and win the war and keep your own life while doing so. But after war, when death is not so close, your new friends may find their imaginations renewed with vigor...and discover new desires...if not for themselves, then for their families, their loved ones..."

Step by step approached the throne, if not her birthright, then that for all her heirs and descendants to come. Behind her, gathered the great lords and ladies of the realm, men who marched with her to war and victory. Some she could trust. Many others she could not. Many more were missing, among them her own kin, Uncle Edmure and Cousin Robin. Where were they, why had they not rode for the capital, when even her sister's beloved Gendry rode like a fevered stag upon hearing of who was to be crowned in the ruins of the old Keep? Were they jealous, perhaps, that she had shown more favor for their vassal lords, both in war and the peace after?

So she did not look back, because there were so many more enemies now.

Chapter End Notes

I was surprised that the Daenerys POV came the easiest in this past chapter. Guess I have a thing for tragic underdogs, and though she didn't begin the story as one, she certainly ends it as such.

One last epilogue to go. Let's hope it doesn't end as bleakly as this chapter did.

With this journey almost over, I'd like to again thank everyone who has followed this story so faithfully. You guys have been wonderful!
EPILOGUE

Chapter Summary

The past is remembered, and the future is acted upon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jon

As apprehensive as he had been when he first stepped foot on Dragonstone, Jon had to admit that he sailed to the island with some semblance of hope that, by a miracle, he could convince a Dragon Queen to help him win the war against the dead. By that standard then, all his hopes from that journey had been fulfilled, yet he felt only emptiness as he returned to the island for what he was sure to be the last time.

"If you think some uppity northern King's gonna prevent me for killing yer, milord, yer mistaken."

"It's a rather big castle," Tyrion said to the former sellsword.

"Empty, dark, dull," Bronn replied sullenly.

"It's a castle for princes and kings to be," Davos said, defending what had once been his own base.

"I ain't stupid enough to think myself a king," Bronn muttered, shaking his head. "Little gold, little grain, few peasants to lord over, even less whores to choose from."

"Build your own brothel then," Tyrion said as they departed the castle's walls, making for the cliffs overlooking the ocean where he and Jon once brooded together. "My brother gave you the gold, enough to sail over half the whores from Lys over here."

Bonn scoffed. "Don't want to be pissin' yer new Queen off. Hear she's something of a prude." He looked over to Jon. "No offense, of course."

"My sister's seen too much of this world, unfortunately, to be offended by the building of the world's greatest brothel on this island." As crass as this man was, Jon couldn't help but like him. Perhaps he reminded him of some of his own former brothers back at Castle Black, most of them long dead by now. "I do thank you for the hospitality, Lord Bronn. Or is it Prince Bronn?"

"Lord's enough. Start calling meself a prince, and yer sister might decide to put a price on my head."

"I'd say she wouldn't," Tyrion said, "but the Queen has expressed to me that the preservation of the head of her Master of Law is of the utmost importance to her."

They all looked questioningly at Tyrion, who shrugged. "Ask her yourself. It's not a good look for the Crown, when members of its Small Council get picked off one by one...even the smaller ones."

"Just the smallest," Bronn said threateningly at Tyrion. "Just one dwarf."
"A dwarf that happens to be the last surviving of Tywin Lannister's children," Tyrion said sadly. He watched both his siblings die before his own eyes, Jon remembered, and he had no doubt that awful as Cersei was, Tyrion mourned both their deaths still. "If you don't fear me, if you don't fear your new Queen, perhaps you should fear Tywin Lannister's ghost. I know I still do."

"I thought yer father hated ya."

"He does," Tyrion admitted. "Though I imagine he may feel some pride, wherever he is, that his last son managed to survive the Queens' War, all while somehow managing to serve two out of its three sides."

"The Queens' War?" Davos questioned him with one eyebrow raised. "I heard the maesters are calling it the War of Five Queens."

"A symmetric name," Tyrion said, "appropriate, as well, though not entirely accurate."

"How so," Bronn asked. "Last I counted there were five queens involved. And if there's one thing I can do besides killin', it's countin'. As in, countin' all the gold yer family still owes me."

"Well, there's Jon here, a once and future king. And I suppose Euron Greyjoy, if we're to count Balon in the War of the Five Kings. Though, the War of Five Queens and Two Kings doesn't quite have the same, poetic ring to it, does it?"

"Piss on that pirate cunt," Bronn spat. "Who was he to look down on me as a sellsword, just because he was fucking the Queen?"

"A queen," Tyrion corrected, "one of five, remember."

"Aye," Bronn said, a grin upon his face, "that Margaery. Shame she's off to marry that little Hightower twat. Give me a chance, and I could have gotten Highgarden after all, along with this piece of shit island."

"You ought to attend the wedding," Tyrion said, drawing a skeptical look from Bronn. "No really. I'm sure she's tired of the boy already, empty as his head his. She'll use him, the Reach will be united with the blood of its three most powerful families in their children, but I'd imagine Margaery crafty enough to think of an excuse to send the man back to Oldtown, perhaps appoint him High Septon herself. If you were to say, leave an impression on the flower queen, then perchance you may find yourself welcome for future visits down south."

"Aye," Bronn commented, a childish gleam in his eye, "useful advice from you fer once."

"Provided she forgives you for attacking her castle," Davos said, mindful of the past.

"Who hasn't occupied her castle at this point," Bronn asked with a smirk.

He let them prattle on, their conversation amusing enough to keep him from his own thoughts. When they reached the edge of the cliff, both the sellsword and the former smuggler stopped to give them their privacy for the occasion. They both brooded there for some time, feeling the cold winter's wind upon their brows.

"I came here a bastard King with Stark blood," Jon finally said, breaking the silence. "I return here a Stark King with Targaryen blood."

"And everything which transpired in between...," Tyrion began, looking down as if he were about to cry.
"We both failed her. I couldn't be there for her, not when she needed me the most. Not the way she needed me."

"When I first met her," Tyrion recalled, sadly and fondly at the same time, "I told her that maybe she ought consider staying in the east. Probably the only good piece of advice I'd ever given her."

"No," Jon rebutted immediately, seeing Tyrion recoiling slightly from the tone in his voice. "I mean, not just for me. We may all be dead men walking, had she not come North."

"Perhaps everything comes with a price," Tyrion said thoughtfully. "One does not get to save the world and then, simply reap its rewards; the gods are far too cruel for a fate so just. They required a sacrifice worthy of the prize. And the price, for saving existence itself...a Queen, and the city she would have claimed. The battle was won at Winterfell; maybe that was the cost of victory for your Old Gods, that the Fire God hand over its champion to them."

"Fuck the Gods," Jon said, feeling the anger simmering in him. He could never again be angry for the rest of his life without wondering whether it came from his own heart, or from his dragon's blood, boiling.

Tyrion smiled. "You sound like your sister."

He looked down surprisingly at the Half Man. "She swears in front of you?"

"Language is her weapon now. To wield it sparingly, is to wield it wisely."

Jon shook his head. Despite the curiosity of his own sister sitting on the Iron Throne, his thoughts still could not flee from the one she dethroned.

"I sometimes wonder whether it would have been better had both her dragons died in Winterfell."

"Me too," Tyrion admitted. Jon half expected a quip about Cersei killing them all were that the case, but he didn't, both knowing full well that a war still could have been won without dragons. Hadn't Sansa herself won one, just that way? "Had she not followed my advice, and stormed King's Landing the moment after arriving at Dragonstone...perhaps tens thousand would have died. But not near a million. And she still could have helped you defeat the dead afterwards."

"Sansa's way isn't Dany's way," Jon said, not for the first time comparing in his head two of the most formidable women he knew...two of the most formidable women the realm had seen since the days of Aegon's sisters. His own ancestors, he reminded himself. "She prefers the lords and nobles, playing the game, scaring off one while keeping the others happy. I think she half enjoys it, knowing how well she can play it. Dany...I don't think she ever could have had the patience for that, dragons or not. And dragons or not, I think it may have doomed her, however she may have taken King's Landing."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Tyrion muttered softly. "Varys and I may be hated by all the lords of the realm. But between the dragons, and coming to an understanding with a traitorous dwarf eager to help them, we could have made it work, especially with Lady Olenna and Ellaria holding up the south. It seems more impossible now than then, but what an accomplishment it would have been...what a great world we could have built, all of us, together."

Jon nodded. Sansa would make a great queen. Daenerys could have made a great queen. To believe in one did not need taking away from the other.

"Your sister may surprise you," Tyrion continued speaking, his voice blending into his own thoughts. "These nobles will underestimate her, as everyone has her entire life. Because she doesn't
have dragons, because she smiles at them the right way, the way Daenerys and even my own sister never would, and they'll play their games with her...all the way until they realize, way too late, that there's no longer a game to play."

"If it comes to the same thing in the end," Jon said, eyes scanning the far horizon, "wherever she is, maybe she'll be glad of it."

Reluctantly, he withdrew the small, jade vase he held inside his cloak, hanging by his heart. One of the Unsullied claimed he took it from a raid on some merchants leaving Qarth, a mystery of the east few had seen on this side of the world, apart from Daenerys. Again, he wondered, how a woman who had seen so much could have brought both worlds together. Once finished, he was tempted to send it to Grey Worm, already sailing south, but Jon knew he would keep it beside as his own personal heirloom, same as one dragon pendant she left for him in her belongings, that he found after her death. After he killed her with his own hands.

"She was born here," Jon said solemnly, opening the vase, and slowly spilling its contents into the air, letting the wind carry it into the ocean below, "before they drove her out by swordpoint. She never had a home. She wanted the throne, but really, it was a home she wanted to return to in the end."

He closed his eyes, to try and keep the tears at bay, but found himself unable to do so.

"Wherever you are," he whispered, his voice so soft that perhaps even Tyrion could not hear it beside him, "...Dany...I hope you're home. I hope you're at peace."

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Arya

Her sister's eyes were pained as they stood by the dock. As much as she was sure Sansa hated this, the Queen had ordered the commission of Arya's own ship, adorned with the images of their house. Sansa had joked about paying the boatmakers to delay its completion, but her own devotion to her word and her family prevented her from applying such mischief. So now they stood, beside each other at the docks of King's Landing, Arya's own handpicked crew ready to set sail with her towards lands unknown.

"Are you sure you want to do this now? We could visit Storm's End first, sail there together, and you can see how your Gendry is doing as a lord paramount."

"It's better for both of us if we don't," Arya said. A new castle would keep her entertained for a time, and watching Gendry try to stumble his way across all his new politics would have been amusing in its own right, but Arya knew none of that would be enough to keep her there. Her own desires weren't the problem, it was Gendry's, and she did not wish to break his heart all over again.

"I could order you to my Queensguard, you know. Or keep you on my Small Council."

"As what," Arya challenged. "All your positions are already filled."

Her sister thought for a minute. "Master of Death," she decided. "You'll be more feared than any Targaryen dragon."

"You can," Arya said, smiling. "But you won't."

"You're right," Sansa admitted. Her sister's face may be able to fool most of the seven kingdoms now, but not her. "Why can't you just be normal, for once?"
"Why couldn't you bend the knee to the dragon queen?"

Sansa smiled, taking in more wine. She was drinking more, compared to Winterfell, having gone to the trouble of sneaking in a small canteen for their outing outside the Keep. The habit took form during the war, and now the peace, her chin fuller, her face redder at night from the drink. Arya reckoned guiltily that she herself was one of those reasons, though maybe the finality of her leaving will help her sister come to some kind of closure with her decision.

"You're right. None of us are much normal anymore."

"We could have been," Arya said. "You, married to a southern knight, or maybe a Baratheon prince had Joffrey not been a cunt and a bastard, drinking wine and growing fat off lemoncakes, while pretending not to hear of those rumors of your lord husband fucking the wetnurse. Me, married off to some Hornwood or Manderly, miserable, refusing to teach my daughters how to curtsy. Jon, pledged for life at the Wall, Bran, pledged for life as Robert's Kingsguard."

"Fucking the master at arms, probably, had I married Loras Tyrell." Sansa said with a wry smile, recalling fondly the man she once loved foolishly. And though she knew Sansa understood that he could have never loved her like that, she still mourned his death at the Sept, one more unnecessary death wrought by Cersei. Her eyes fixed upon Arya with sudden seriousness. "Would you take all that, knowing that father and mother and Rickon and Robb would still be alive?"

It was a difficult question, but her answer came easily. "Yes."

"Me too."

"I'll name a continent after you," Arya said, breaking their uncomfortable silence, uncomfortable not because of each other, but because any mention of their past would always be painful. Which was partially why she needed to sail away from it, away from everything.

"Sansos? That'd be a stupid sounding continent."

"Aryos wouldn't be much better. I'd name it after father...but Eddos? Nedos?"

"No," Sansa laughed, "I guess our family isn't well suited for exploring and discovering new continents."

"But we'll do it anyway," Arya said, bluntly rebuffing her sister's not so subtle suggestion.

"Jaimos," Sansa said, with a reverent tone similar to when she spoke of her own father, letting go of her own stubbornness for once. She then shook her head. "Everything just sounds awful, doesn't it."

"You miss him, don't you?"

Sansa nodded wordlessly.

"Did you love him?" There had been a bond between her sister and the Kingslayer, one that Arya herself could not quite understand, appreciative as she was at Jaime Lannister for helping them win the battles north, and with her last dragon.

"Not that way. No more or less than you loved Sandor."

Arya nodded, appreciative that her sister could put it in a way she understood well.

Sansa continued speaking, the first time she spoke of Jaime to her, since he left Crakehall to save his
sister, the woman who had once stood atop her list. "I don't know if he helped kill that dragon for me, or Cersei, or gods know what, maybe even Brienne, or our mother. But he never feared dragons, did he? That's why he was one of the first to stand with me, when everyone else knelt to the dragon...including my own brother. He almost won the freedom of the three northern kingdoms at The Twins. And when I rode west, when I was at my lowest, he was the only person, apart from my own sister, who seemed to care that I was on the verge of throwing myself off a cliff and just being done with it all. He helped lead me to those in the Westerlands who would have defied Cersei, who would have found it in their hearts to not harm me, at the very least."

"He saved my life too," Arya said, remembering when they fought below the mouth of the dragon, how she had lost herself in the fighting, how she could have lost herself for good, only remembering what she had to live for, Sansa, Jon, herself, after Jaime Lannister literally kicked her in the butt. "They both did, Sandor and Jaime, in their own way."

"We'll remember them both," Sansa said longingly, "along with the rest of them. What's left of King's Landing will be rebuilt. It may be for all intents and purposes a new city. Now that the Targaryens are gone, there's no point in honoring a dead Targaryen king with its name, especially not after it was destroyed by one of their own."

"Maybe Sandos, then," Arya said, speaking half to herself, though minding her sister's pensive look. There were so many of them to remember now. So many her sister, as Queen, will be charged with remembering, before she herself forgot. "What are you thinking? For King's Landing?"

"Eddardton."

Arya smiled. She had mixed feelings about her own sister being the Queen. But it was good to have someone on the throne who remembered as much as she. Gripping her Needle, she wished Jon was here to say farewell with them, but he had a kingdom of his own to rule.

"Whatever hell that rotten little Joffrey's in, I bet he'd shit his pants hearing that."

"At the sight of father's statue, gracing the spot where Baelor's statue once stood. I'll work with the sculptor himself to see that they get him right this time."

"I'd like to see that," Arya let slip.

"I'd like you to," Sansa said nervously.

"Maybe I will, then."

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**Sansa**

The spires grew in the distance, and Sansa did not allow herself to hope, because a Queen does not hope, but merely accepts what is due her. The war being long over, there was no need for her spend every day of the trip on horse, so she endured most of it in her wheelhouse, reading some of the historical tomes Tyrion suggested for her, only riding when they passed towns and villages so that the realm could get a glimpse of their new Queen. She stopped at some of the villages, visiting the schools and septs, and often instructed Brienne or Podrick find a few villagers to dine with her in her tent at night, same as she remembered her father doing in Winterfell. Many of the smallfolk were rather dull, some offered insights, but regardless of the quality of company, they allowed her to understand better her own realms and people.

The sight of her people, out in droves to see one of their own raised to the Iron Throne, warmed her
heart, and she felt she could barely breathe the last few miles approaching the castle, riding stoically but occasionally spying a child here and there, allowing herself to hide them a smile or a wink, a welcome distraction as the castle walls grew larger and yet still so out of reach. Two brothers awaited her inside, reminding her of the sister not present, that, were she to still pray, she would pray for every night.

"I think I heard wolves howling last night," young Beryn Dayne said, riding his horse up to hers. Podrick laughed, and Brienne seemed to roll her eyes. "I couldn't fall back asleep, until near the sun came back up this morning."

"You won't survive more than two moons in the North fearing wolves, child," Sansa replied gently. "Embrace them, imagine yourself running with the pack, leading it, and you'll enjoy the best sleep in your life, I promise you."

"We fought creatures here far worse than wolves," Brienne added. "Talk to the men here who fought the dead. You'll learn some interesting stories from them."

"You fought the dead too, Ser Brienne. I could ask you as well."

"Yes, I suppose you could," Brienne replied, already regretting her own words, though Sansa knew she bore more patience with her wards than she would give herself credit for. But Brienne had little time or need for a new squire as the Commander of the Queensguard, which was partially why they were bringing Beryn north.

Finally she passed through the gates, the first time in over two years, and before her stood the King in the North, alongside with all his own lords and ladies. There was Lord Davos, already dressed in a wolf's pelt cloak, standing next to a wife and several young sons he brought north from the Stormlands. Between him and Jon stood Samwell Tarly and his family, his wife Gilly holding an adorable newborn boy. A young Mormont girl, reminiscent of little Lyanna, a distant Hornwood cousin that Jon legitimized as a Mormont, so that their line and name could continue on Bear Island. She heard he had done the same for Houses Umber and Karstark as well, though which of the gathered represented those houses she did not yet recognize. Those she could pick out included Wyman Manderly, Cley Cerwyn, and many of the other men who had returned with their King north after winning an unexpectedly long war south, all so they could continue bending the knee to a southern crown, albeit with one of their own atop its throne. Surprisingly she saw Tormund as well, Jon's wildling friend, eyeing Brienne hungrily as she would expect. Last she heard, he had returned to his own lands north of the Wall, now that the dead no longer threatened.

She dismounted her horse first, followed by Brienne and the rest of her Queensguard. From a small wheelhouse behind her, Marion Lannister emerged, dusting off his robes and shivering in the cold, though most Northmen would consider this a warm day for spring.

The King in the North stepped up to greet her first, and she already felt a haggard old woman since she saw him last, her dresses clinging ever tighter to her body, the bags under her eyes dripping, the lines on her face forming far beyond her years, and she suspects she may see the first wisps of gray in her hairs within the next few moons, the same as she spied in his beard now. She imagined Jon felt the same weariness, having borne his own unique set of burdens from this last horrible series of wars.

"Your Grace, Winterfell is..."

"Don't," she interrupted, hugging him tightly. Releasing him, she looked him in the eyes. "It's ours. It's always been ours, it'll always be ours."

He bowed his head, and Sansa walked next to Bran, leaning down to hug him, knowing full well he
was unlikely to return it.

"Sansa of House Stark," he said, echoing the same words he had said to her when she last left Winterfell, "First of her Name."

"You knew," she realized, gasping at him in shock. "You knew this would happen?"

"Had you stayed," he said passively, yet regarding her with more curiosity in his eyes as was usual, "I would be the one wearing your crown right now."

As usual, he managed to perplex her completely, queen or not. As unimaginable as the idea of herself ending up on the Iron Throne, she could hardly see Bran sitting atop it, a much less unlikely picture, except that she did not doubt his claim that it would have been apparently inevitable.

"How," she asked first, before realizing that he was unlikely to answer that question, not in a way she could understand, anyway. "Is that what you would have wanted?"

A slight shrug from her younger brother. "There's not really much of a difference, really, between what I want, and what I don't want."

Of course. "I ought to bring you south," Sansa said, half joking. "You could prove quite useful in the Small Council, though my Master of Whispers may find himself out of a seat."

"You can trust no ravens you send me will be intercepted," Bran replied. He looked at Marion, who observed the young, crippled man with an air of uneasiness. "I have your lists. Both of them."

"We have much to discuss in the evening," Marion answered cryptically.

The first list was comprised of names from the three northern armies who participated too eagerly in the sack of King's Landing, those lords and officers who either countenanced the rape and murder of innocents by their men, or committed the deeds themselves, as well as the names of the offending soldiers. For the sake of unity in the last war, she had to turn a blind eye to the crimes her own armies committed. Now, comfortable in her strength, she could bring herself to move against them, as well as those on the second list, one of lords who whispered actively against her.

"Any news of Arya," she asked, and Jon turned his head as well, listening intently.

"She's two moons from Elissa Farman's islands. I believe she'll send a raven north once she arrives."

Both she and Jon breathed a sigh of relief at the news that Arya was still alive and safe, for the moment at least. Looking back, she beckoned the Dayne boy to step forward.

"Jon, I'm not sure if you remember Beryn here, the Heir to Casterly Rock."

Jon leaned down to greet the youth. "Ah yes, I saw you at the head of the crowd in King's Landing, waving your sword for my sister. The Queen tells me you wish to learn the ways of the North?"

"It's what Queen Sansa and Uncle Mortimer think best for me," he said, before hurriedly adding with a smirk, "not that I don't want it myself, I do! I really do, I promise!"

Jon patted his new ward on the back. "I'm afraid the food here isn't as fancy as what you eat down south, though I've made sure we've the best lemoncakes prepared tonight for the Queen. How long will you be in Winterfell, Your Grace?"

Just speaking the words made her feel bittersweet. "Not long enough, I'm afraid. Less than two
fortnights, then a ride to White Harbor, a ship to Gulltown, then Storm's End, where Tyrion and Prince Martyn will accompany me to Sunspear."

Her travels were necessary, though part of her bemoaned, especially now that she stood surrounded by the familiar walls of home, of what use it was to be Queen, when she could not even spend as much time at home as her own heart desired? Jon patted her sympathetically on her shoulder. "You'll see more of this country than Aegon himself."

"There's not much to King's Landing right now. The Queen's time will be better spent visiting her peoples, while they rebuild the Keep and Starkhall."

"You'll have the throne moved there?"

"I don't expect it to be completed for many years, but yes, it will be good to separate the throne from the city itself." She had chosen the site herself after days of inspection, finding an open meadow in the mountains one day's ride north of King's Landing, next to a lake feeding into Blackwater Bay below. "I brought the designs, if you wish to see them."

The King in the North nodded wistfully. "I'll be the first to visit you there."

Even Brienne gave her leave to wander the castle on her own, considering there was little harm that could befall her here, in her home, in Jon's castle. Jon, of course, offered her the lord's room, now the king's room, but she refused. Walking through the room she once slept in as a child, absorbing all the fond and not so fond recollections of her youth spent in that small, cozy space, she decided not to take it either, because she was a woman now, a queen, and because she feared she might lose herself there, making a note in her mind to have it readied for Beryn instead, so as to honor his powerful uncles and patrons and convey to them his place in Winterfell as a steward to its King.

Robb's room was occupied by Samwell and his family. Arya's room was empty, but it felt wrong, knowing Arya was still out there somewhere, sailing the oceans blue. Meandering through the halls, she arrived at the room King Robert once slept in when he visited the castle all those years ago. A room fit for a King, or a Queen.

Or a stranger.

Nevertheless, she took it for herself, and lay upon the bed for several minutes, letting the soft wolfpelt blanket envelop her. As she rested, she vowed that she would sew every morning. A set of clothes for little Jon Tarly. A new cloak for her brother Jon. New robes for Bran, made with ravens' feathers. A comfortable vest for Beryn, fit for a northern spring. Again, she thought of Arya, and wished she was close enough so that she could thread something for her. If there were heavens, this would be how she imagined it, and she wished she could doze off, and wake up with the touch of her mother, running her fingers through her hair, and her father's voice, telling her a story, perhaps one of her aunt Lyanna, or Robert's war. But she rose from the bed, because those stories she remembered had never really been the truth, because Ned and Catelyn Stark's daughter was no longer a little girl, no matter how much she wished, but rather a Queen...the most powerful woman, or man included, in the known world.

Somehow, Brienne had found her way outside her door to guard it by the time she emerged.

"I'm sorry to keep dragging you north, Ser Brienne. I know the colder climes are not your preference."

"I serve my Queen, Your Grace."
As if she could expect any other answer from her most faithful friend. "Do you miss your father?"

Brienne paused, then allowed herself to nod. "I have not seen him since I rode to King Renly's camp."

"Perhaps we may visit Evenfall Hall, upon sailing from Storm's End."

Another pause, as Brienne could not bring herself accept even this simple favor easily. "He would be honored to meet the Queen his daughter serves, Your Grace."

"I know you are Lord Selwyn's only surviving child," Sansa said, finally speaking something she had been considering for a long time. "By the personal exemption of the Crown, I will allow you to claim you father's legacy, and bear an heir to it, should you wish."

"Your...Your Grace...," Brienne said, bowing, and unsure of how she thought herself about this unexpected proclamation.

"You loved Jaime. I feel awful for bidding him leave to go to Cersei, even though I felt it the right thing to do at the time..."

"It's long forgotten," Brienne said, in a voice that told her it was anything but. "Ser...Lord Jaime helped save us all...perhaps it was the will of the Gods that he returned to King's Landing. Just as it's the will of the Gods that you reign over the realm."

"I wouldn't go that far," Sansa said, uncomfortable at the depth of her devotion. "I'm not pushing you, one way or another, but I just want you to know that...should it be something you wish to seek in the future, I will not be one to stand in your way."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Brienna answered, almost smiling, Sansa noted.

"Even if your child should have some wildling blood, kissed by fire..."

"Lady Sansa!" She had finally gone far enough to shock her Queensguard out of her formalities, and Sansa laughed, taking her hand, before Brienne could further protest or apologize.

"I'll make sure at the very least Jon orders him bathed first."

She raised a finger to her lips, as if to convey that whatever happened within the walls of Winterfell would remain their private little secret.

"The men are gathered and ready?"

"Aye," Jon replied, answering his queen, "ready to march in a fortnight. I'll meet them at Moat Cailin and accompany them south as far as The Crossroads."

"The Knights of the Vale and the Riverlands will meet them there," Brienne added. "Lord Crakehall will accompany them to Sarsfield, where he'll lead the training."

"If you wait at the Crossroads," Sansa said to Jon, "the southern armies are already on the march north. You'll all keep Arya's friend Hot Pie quite busy, I'm afraid, and I'm sure Lord Davos will lead the North ably in your stead." As she expected, though it was not a northern custom, Jon had named the Onion Knight his own Hand, to honor his loyalty and steadfast service.

"Dornishmen, Reach, Stormlands, Westerlands...I'll have a handful." Jon placed his head in his hands.
"You'll be helping your sister keep the peace," Marion said. "As much as you and I appreciate the peace, there are many who don't. There's whisperings of a Baratheon bastard hiding out in Tyrosh, another Targaryen pretender in Myr, and even stories of some alleged Blackfyre heir trying to buy sellswords in Volantis. All false claims, to be sure, but all potential threats to be dealt with one day."

"Not to mention ungrateful uncles and other lords plotting on this continent," Sansa added, eager to view the second list Bran prepared for her.

The idea was to gather all the bannermen from across the realm, march them to opposite sides of the country, so that they may train and drill under officers foreign to them, in effect initiating a slow process to wean the loyalties of the fighting men across the realm, away from their liege lords, and closer to the crown itself.

"New wars will arise," Marion added. "Not now, not even in the next two or three years, but soon enough. The Iron Bank is quite unhappy at your sister, you know, and they are just biding their time for someone to emerge, strong enough for them to back."

"Cersei's debts are not mine," Sansa said, her anger towards the bankers in Braavos showing, wishing at this moment that Arya was still here, so that she could sail across the Narrow Sea and cut all their necks. "They backed the wrong queen. I need the gold here, to feed and clothe my people, they've suffered enough for the bankers' wars."

"We'll be ready," Marion said confidently, "when the time comes."

"I have faith we shall," Sansa said, echoing his confidence. "We may be weary from a decade of war, but I have trust in the greatest Small Council ever assembled."

"And a Three-Eyed Raven to boot," Marion said, still visibly nervous at the very concept of her brother. "I don't believe any Kings or Queens past had one at their ready disposal."

"You trust him," Jon asked after the feast, a modest one compared to past celebration she remembered, when it was just the two of them sitting by the fire in the hearth, "your Lannister Master of Whispers?"

"Enough," she answered. "He's aware Bran's keeping some kind of eye on him. His son inherits their hall in Lannisport, and so long as I don't give Tyrion any holdings nearby, he'll be happy of being the primary Lannister house in the west."


"As he said, the next war is inevitable." Eager to change the subject, she grinned slyly at Jon. "You'll see I've brought many of my ladies-in-waiting up North. Many of them were very enthusiastic at this chance to meet the King in the North in person, Jon Snow, the man who came back from the dead."

"Not this," he said, rolling his eyes.

"You're my heir," she continued pressing, "until I have children of my own. It will not do to have my own heir heirless, especially when the next war comes."

"I don't want to sound like all your advisers," Jon said cautiously, "but maybe you should give more consideration towards...relying less upon me as your heir."

"Trust me, you don't sound like them," Sansa said, a cruel tinge upon her voice, "since I don't allow them to speak of that subject to me, ever." Her voice softened. "In time, and I alone will decide that time, because I alone will know when I'm ready."
She wondered if he suspected her intentions already.

"Aye, you're young," Jon said. "We both are, I guess. I'm afraid all your southern ladies will discover in me an old man though. I doubt they'd find Winterfell much interesting, or its King."

"You'd be surprised," Sansa said. "The ones I brought, I brought for a reason. But if it's a northern girl you seek, perhaps the Karstark girl? What was her name, Eliza? She's about your age, isn't she? Not much younger than me, at the very least."

"She's kin," Jon said uneasily.

"Far away kin. And since when has that been a problem for you?" Sansa teased him, taking pride that she could still discomfort her big brother with ease.

"Especially, because of that," Jon spat out, face growing red from embarrassment. "With my reputation...and my blood, I think it's best I stay away from any kin, no matter how faraway."

Sansa sighed. "I just want you to be happy, Jon. I know it'll take a long time for you to forget her. Daenerys, and Ygritte. Love's been cruel to you. Perhaps you may never love another woman. But I know you'll love your children, and I know you'll be a great father to them, just as our father was to us."

Jon nodded silently, and they both took a sip of ale in remembrance of those lost to them, the taste still bitter to her, though she was quite capable of hiding that now. "I'll greet some of them," he agreed. "Won't promise you anything. Tormund's been pressing me too, says he found a golden haired wildling girl for me, says she eyed me ever since I first showed up at Mance Rayder's camp. I'm just as likely to take him up on that, maybe."

"Wouldn't be a bad idea. The Northmen may take better to a wildling queen than a southron."

"He has a gift for you, actually," Jon said, eyes eager.

"What is it?"

Rather than answer, he walked to the door, and whispered to one of his attendants, who left immediately to summon the wildling, she imagined. As they waited, she walked to her chest and rummaged through the books. Finding the one she was searching for, she brought it and laid it before her brother.

Opening it, he flipped through the pages to the last parchment filled with ink.

"A history of the ascension of House Stark to the Iron Throne, as dictated by the Crown for the Archmaester. The list below, all the monarchs of the realm since Eddard Stark's rebellion, as so written and decided by the Crown, to be etched in the Citadel's records for all ages to come."

She watched Jon read through each line.

Aerys II of House Targaryen...the Mad King.

Robert I of House Baratheon...the Fat.

Joffrey I...bastard of Hill...the Cruel. Contested by Stannis I of House Baratheon...the Cold.

Tommten I of House Lannister...the Innocent. - Legitimized by Sansa I of House Stark.

Cersei I of House Lannister...the Bold.
Daenerys I of House Targaryen...the Strong.

Sansa I of House Stark...

As she expected, upon finishing, Jon's eyes scanned the page again, noting especially the last three entries.

"You added Stannis...out of spite?"

"You knew the man, he seemed worthy of a Crown. Far more than Joffrey, I'd imagine." She bit her lower lip nervously. "Apologies to you and Robb...the North will have its own records, that'll be in good hands with Samwell. Renly had neither blood and reigned but a fortnight or two. And Balon...well, I don't think anyone quite cares about him."

"You're kinder to them that I would have thought," he said thoughtfully, handing the book back to her. "Cersei...and Dany."

"They committed many cruel acts, Cersei and Daenerys. Yet...I would not be safe in my crown without them...without all they did, good, terrible, or otherwise. They taught the realm fear our kind, same as they fear men. My heirs will rule after me. The succession of the crown will pass to my eldest, or the wisest, or strongest...be they boy or girl. And be it a girl, the realm needs to remember our strength, that we can be just as horrible as men. That they need to remember to fear us, even as they love us."

"You seem determined to be horrible," Jon said quietly, leaning back in his chair.

"I have to be."

They heard footsteps in the hallway. A man's. And softer ones prattling behind his.

"I know you can't trust anyone in the capital. You know that better than me, to be honest. But I have someone, someone you can trust. A bit of the north to bring back south with you."

The wildling man entered the room, followed by a tiny little direwolf pup following him, stepping into the strange chambers tentatively.

"Tormund found her ranging with some of the Dothraki south of the Wall."

"They smell like horse shit," Tormund said, "but they're good riders."

"She was lost," Jon said, as Sansa set down her ale and crawled upon the floor toward the diminutive pup, "the last storm may have separated her from her mother."

Tormund seemed anxious to leave, and Sansa wondered if they had interrupted a conversation he may have been having with the head of her Queensguard. If so, she wondered if Brienne was thankful. Or perhaps just a touch upset at the interruption, though she would never admit it.

Slowly, the wolf approached her, step by step, sniffing her outstretched finger shyly, running its nose up and down her hand. Appearing to warm up to her a little, she nuzzled her finger with her nose, and licked it several times. Just as tentatively as the wolf, Sansa slowly brought her hand down, scratching the wolf's head, along its ears, under its neck, until it happily lay down and allowed her to rub its belly.

"Seems she likes you," Jon said, watching the scene with a smile on his face. "What will you name her?"
Her eyes were yellow, but this wolf was not Lady. Though she was timid now, Sansa discerned in her eyes a fierceness, hidden perhaps to most observers, and anchored by the wildness of the north. It came to her in an instant, and she realized there could have been no other name possible.

"Winter."

Chapter End Notes

And it's done. I'll admit, I wanted to see Sansa sitting upon the Iron Throne. After Season 8, I realized that was impossible, the fact that she despised that southern throne same as Jon...unless I put the poor girl through every bit of pain and torture as I did in this story. And she sits there, and she hates it, and she'd probably hate me were she to break the fourth wall...but despite her own misery and paranoia, as displayed in chapter 22...this last epilogue hints that she will end up making for a strong and powerful Queen.

To be honest, I think both Sansa her and Dany, whether in this story or in the show, would have achieved similar ends in Westeros, though by different means, and assuming that Dany actually stayed and governed, rather than go forth and liberate the world. With the weakness of the nobility from generations of war, they would have crafted a more centralized state, similar to France under Louis XIII and XIV, formed a standing army (which is clued at in this Epilogue), and ushered in an era of enlightenment which will see a blossoming of artistic and scientific progress under their reign and the immediate generations afterwards. And whatever you may think of a centralized state and bureaucracy in our world, within the context of a medieval society such as GOT, they represent a step forward towards a more modern era, and I see Tyrion as helping Sansa (or Daenerys, had she had prevailed without destroying KL), craft the first version of a Westerosi common law forming the basis of a future constitution, and possibly constitutional monarchy.

As I've mentioned, there will be wars to come for Queen Sansa I, but I think she'll overcome them easily. Let's hope that she is able to craft a dynasty which will last a few hundred years at least. With the North secured, with the central 4 kingdoms centralized completely under her own grip, she'd likely marry her firstborn or heir to a Tyrell to solidify the South. There's a few other ways I'd imagine her securing her hold over the realm...but I may reserve that for a future vignette or one-shot, were it to find itself worth writing.

Again, for all of you who read this, who enjoyed this story, who reviewed and commented upon it, I thank you for joining me on this journey. This story was my own way of coping with the end of a show I loved, of characters I loved. As you can probably tell, I am definitely partial to the Starks (though I do appreciate Daenerys as a great tragic character, and I didn't want to treat her as a boilerplate villain, but as a great, complex human being who rediscovered her own humanity in the end, at the cost of her own life and war). Seeing these characters grow up from children to adults, I despaired at their stories ending, at least on screen, and writing this story helps me hopefully move on from such a monumental part of my own life.

Clearly, you can tell that Sansa was one of my favorite characters, and as much as I would have loved for her to become magically lethal overnight, or become some kind of
military genius after half a battle, I wanted her to stay true to her character, and win 7 kingdoms by being who she is: strong, stubborn, independent, kind, petty, gentle, unyielding, crafty, forgiving, manipulative, but ultimately guided by a decent heart and devoted to her family, and without the need of any man beside her. I loved show Sansa, which is why I wrote this story, but I've come to love this own version of Sansa that came about in this story as my own, as an extension of the great character already developed through 8 seasons of the show. I hope you enjoyed her story as well, along with all the other ones that found themselves a place in this story.

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