knight of the dreadfort (the ballad of the red king)

by losgar

Summary

He’d rather be known as the one who rescued the Queen in the North from the lions’ maw and restored Winterfell to the Starks, but if the singers insist on calling him Ser Domeric the Kinslayer, Domeric of the Red Smile, and only tell of how he ran his sword through Ramsay Snow and hung his flayed corpse from the heart tree, so be it. The old gods’ curses be damned, he would fit in just fine with Rogar the Huntsman and Royce Redarm.

A Domeric Bolton Lives AU. Part war story, part chivalric romance, part tragic irony. A look at the weight of curses and at Roose Bolton as a husband and a father. Sort of inspired by Dante Alighieri’s La Vita Nuova.

OR: Frustrated with the War of the Five Kings, Domeric Bolton deserts the Northern army and rescues Sansa Stark from King’s Landing.
This mostly follows book canon until midway through ASOS, but I have used the ages from the show. Fun fact, if you play the Game of Thrones CK2 mod and start at Robert’s Rebellion, take a look at Roose’s court and you’ll find Domeric, a poet from the tender age of four.

Notes

So gentle and so pure appears
my lady when she greets others,
that every tongue trembles and is mute,
and their eyes do not dare gaze at her.
She goes by, aware of their praise,
benignly dressed in humility:
and seems as if she were a thing come
from Heaven to Earth to show a miracle.
She shows herself so pleasing to those who gaze,
through the eyes she sends a sweetness to the heart,
that no one can understand who does not know it:
and from her lips there comes a sweet spirit full of love,
that goes saying to the soul: 'Sigh.'

- Dante Alighieri, 'So gentle and so pure appears', La Vita Nuova
My son. Robb Stark is calling the banners. You are needed. Come to Moat Cailin posthaste. Roose Bolton, Lord of the Dreadfort.

The raven arrived at the Redfort barely a fortnight into his visit, his first since he’d earned his spurs nearing on two years past. There was no real business he had at the Redfort, but living at home at the Dreadfort he was going stir crazy for someone to ride with, someone to talk to, someone – anyone – who wasn’t his father Roose or a cowed, tongueless servant.

When he’d first returned home, he’d thought to go ride up the Weeping Water to meet the Bastard, despite his father’s advice. Winterfell had a bastard. Hornwood had a bastard. He’d met them both, and by his lights they’d seemed agreeable fellows. Along the way he thought to call on Old Lord Overton’s holdfast at the base of the Lonely Hills. Old Lord Overton had clapped him on the back, sighed and disabused him of the notion that Ramsay Snow was any sort of an agreeable fellow. Lad, he’d began in his rough way, I like you lad. In fact, I’m more than passing fond of ye. Trust yer father on this one. Then Old Lord Overton shook his head and whispered in his ear about hunting horns and smallfolk girls disappearing in the dawn, of blood found against tree trunks, barking hounds and a scheming stinking servant and a bitter, jealous miller’s wife.

Domeric had never met the Bastard. Now he hoped he never would – certainly he would never call him brother, Jon and Larence Snow aside. Stark and Hornwood are fine men, and perhaps that was why Jon and Larence Snow were agreeable fellows. But Roose Bolton was not a fine man. Not a fine man at all.

Hopes dashed, he’d finished his ale with Old Lord Overton, stayed to play a song or three on his harp for Overton’s family, thanked Overton for the pleasure of his company, saddled Rhaegar, and returned home. He’d need to pack more things for a ride to the Rills with stops at Winterfell and Barrowton on either way.

It seemed so silly to leave the Redfort so soon – so wasteful. He’d caught up with Lord Horton and was planning to join his dearest friend Mychel on a tour of the major castles of the Vale. They’d stop at Runestone at least, and certainly the Gates of the Moon, and maybe he’d be able to convince Mychel that since he was a fourth son, he was free to do anything he wanted, so he should make an honest woman out of Mya and marry her. It would be like Duncan the Small and Jenny of Oldstones, if Duncan were a high lord lower than the crown prince, and Jenny was something nearer to a king’s bastard.

It wasn’t like Duncan and Jenny at all, really. Mychel and Mya had it far easier.

Plans ruined, he’d begged his leave of Lord Horton and Lady Redfort and the girls, bid goodbye to Jasper and his wife, left his regards for Creighton and Jon, and apologized profusely to Mychel. There’s always next time. He rode hard for Gulltown in the morning and three days later had boarded the next ship for White Harbor.

He didn’t stay long in White Harbor, just one night at an inn in the city, and didn’t enter New Castle either. Lady Wynafryd and Lady Wylla’s company he found perfectly pleasant, but Lord Too-Fat-to-Sit-a-Horse and his sons Ser No-Saddlebags-for-Me and Ser Slower-than-a-Trot he could barely tolerate without bursting into peals of laughter and breaking his placid Bolton mask.
On the one hand, it would be discourteous. On the other hand, his father would take a toe if Domeric so much as chuckled in front of more than two Northern lordlings who were not close and familiar relations.

It wouldn’t do at all to beg the hospitality of New Castle.

He rode straight for Moat Cailin and only stopped to sleep or piss. When he arrived, he had the whole castle to himself for three entire days. Beneath the broken towers and ruined walls, encouraged by the humming sounds of the green, green life of the Neck, he breathed in the humid, swampy air, lay on the ground, took out his travel harp, and sang to the stars, savoring the opportunity to pretend he was Rhaegar Targaryen at Summerhall before his father’s men or the Umbers and Karstarks or any other Northern army could descend on the Moat and spoil his quiet, dreamy peace.

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Soon the whole army arrived at the Moat. The peace and quiet broke when the first host (the Starks, Karstarks, and Umbers) came within ten leagues. Ten leagues are as close as any Bolton should be to any Umber, his father would say, Umbers are too loud. Even so, somehow, he wound up drinking in a drafty room off the hall next to Smalljon Umber, with Daryn Hornwood, the three Karstark brothers and a few sons of the hill tribes after the long commander’s meeting in the great hall. He’d drink alone, but he knows that this whole war is a chance to get to know the men he’d be dealing with for the rest of his life.

Moreover, he needed the drink, because today he had learned from Steelshanks Walton that the Bastard has been called to the Dreadfort and named castellan, and the thought turned his stomach. One only knows what the Bastard would do, what ideas he would get, once he’d been given the keys to the castle and found all its secret rooms. *Hunting horns and missing girls and bloody tree trunks and barking hounds*, he thinks. *It will get worse. And Reek will be there too.* His only memory of Reek from before he left for Barrowton was that Reek stank very very much and that half the Dreadfort was very very happy when Reek was sent away. As happy as one can be at the Dreadfort. Domeric drained another cup of ale and shook his head to push the disgusting thoughts away.

*Robb Stark should be here*, he thought instead, *he’s only a green lordling like us.* But Robb Stark was still in the great hall with his lady mother, discussing Lord Stark and the Stark girls’ captivity in King’s Landing. He wondered if Robb Stark would lead a rescue party to bring his sisters back from the South out of the clutches of the crown and the Kingsguard like Ned Stark did so long ago, and it isn’t until the Smalljon next to him shouted *Bolton! So you’ve eyes for a Stark bride, do you!* and heartily guffawed that he realized that he’d wondered aloud. A hill tribesman smirked at him and joined in the Smalljon’s laughter, intoning that Robb Stark would never let a Bolton join his rescue party, let alone have his beautiful sister – they all know which sister – and then the Karstark brothers and the hill tribe heirs struck up a loud debate on beautiful Northern ladies – beautiful women in general – and it was easy for him to quietly slip forgotten from the discussion. Daryn Hornwood quirked an eyebrow at him, also silent – Daryn was betrothed to Alys Karstark, and wisely said nothing, since in the room were three drunk Karstarks and only one drunk Hornwood, and anything Daryn said was like to earn him a blackened eye, a missing tooth, or a broken nose, and they hadn’t even left the North yet.

Thankfully the conversation was interrupted by a squire’s opening the door to summon them all back to the great hall for some important announcements from Robb Stark and Lady Catelyn. The Northern force would be split once they reached the Twins, with Robb Stark in command of the host in the west, Domeric’s father the host in the east. His father would take the Kingsroad down to
the Trident to cut Tywin Lannister off from the Kingslayer in the West. Robb Stark would take the horse west across the Ruby Ford and lift the siege of Riverrun.

A battle guard for Robb Stark was also named, twenty for now, with more to be named later, when the Northern army joins up with the rivermen. Robb Stark and Lady Catelyn called the names of most all the young lordlings that had been drinking in their tent – save for a few hill tribesmen and Harrion Karstark – and some older nobles, like Robin Flint and Ser No-Saddlebags. Lady Catelyn even called his name, and he dipped his head at the invitation.

Halfway sober, he thought on the honor House Stark had given him. He’ll be counted among Robb Stark’s close companions - any group that consists of both Robb Stark and Theon Greyjoy would eventually become thick as thieves, like Ned Stark and Howland Reed, Ethan Glover, Martyn Cassel, Theo Wull, and his uncles Lord Willam and Ser Mark. The pick of the North would come to see him as more than Roose Bolton’s son, they’d see him as Ser Domeric, gentle and kind and true, they’d see why all the Rills swear he’s Ser Mark come back to life with dark, dark hair and ghost-grey eyes.

He’d met Ser Mark only once in his life, and regrettably he couldn’t even remember it, since he’d still been on his mother’s teat at Aunt Barbrey’s wedding to Lord Willam. Everyone who’d he’d ever spoken to about Ser Mark only had good things to say. Mother had fondly told him that Ser Mark was a true knight, and when Mother had died and he’d been sent to Barrowton, Aunt Barbrey had recounted story after story of Ser Mark taking her and Mother on rides through the Rills as little girls, Ser Mark making her smile, Ser Mark holding her shoulders as she cried when her heart was broken. Grandfather and his other Ryswell uncles had always praised Ser Mark’s skills in the lists, his skill with the spear, and above all, his ability to get them to stop their squabbles. Even Lord Stark had humored him when Domeric had occasion to beg a story about Ser Mark from Robert’s Rebellion.

More than once Domeric had wished that Ser Mark had been his father. Ser Mark deserved to ride with Lord Stark; Domeric would prove he deserved to ride with Robb. He would earn the trust of the other Northern lordlings, he would be named their friend, their brother if he was lucky, and in twenty or thirty years when Roose was dead the Dreadfort would be a place where smallfolk and high lords alike stopped on their travels, where other houses sent their sons to foster and offered their daughters to marry. Hopefully their fate wouldn’t all be the same as that of Ned Stark and his companions, though. Hopefully they would cut down enough Lannisters to bring back both Ladies Stark and ride back North with their lives. And he wouldn’t even need to ride in the same army as Roose; the camps would be nowhere near each other. He might even freely laugh at something the Smalljon or Greyjoy said without his father catching word of it.

But it wasn’t to be. When the throng of lords and heirs dispersed into the castle, his father placed a hand on Domeric’s shoulder and lead him to where Lady Catelyn and Robb Stark were standing.

“My lady,” his father started softly, “Lord Robb. I thank you for the honor you have given my son. I fear that with myself in command you show House Bolton overmuch favor. Surely there are some other names that merit the position? You must allow me to beg that my son ride in my company.”

It was another moment that Domeric could not control. His father would brook no public disagreement or complaint from him; he must calmly nod his head in assent if he wished to see the dawn with both his feet intact. For all that Domeric was a hand and a half taller than Roose, the chilly squeeze his father gave his upper arm left him feeling very small. So he nodded at Lady Catelyn, and blinked his eyes.
He could tell that Lady Catelyn and his father were thinking the same thing. *My son will not die for yours.* But that was exactly what Lady Catelyn wanted him to do if need be. He could tell that she wanted to keep the leash onto the Boltons short and tightly held. Where Smalljon and the others had been rewarded for their families’ well-known devotion to the direwolf, Domeric would have been a hostage to ensure Roose’s loyalty in the field. They were not truly giving him a chance to prove his worth. It all went back to Roose.

Lady Catelyn gave both of them a tight smile. By the way her, blue eyes narrowed and flicked to Robb’s he could tell that she had lost this battle, had given into Roose without fighting. Whether they’d discussed this before, he didn’t know. “Of course, Lord Bolton. We will find someone else,” she said. Father and son both dipped their heads. Lady Catelyn and Robb Stark turned to leave, and Domeric watched their two copper heads recede out of the hall.

Now that he would be marching southeast with his father instead of southwest, opportunities to prove himself true and brave and trustworthy and un-Boltonlike to the North would be few and far between. He’d have to make them himself.

Later, he heard that Lady Catelyn offered his spot in the guard to Dacey Mormont.

Chapter End Notes


HBO really ripped us off by denying us our pink. All those great costumes for Dany, Cersei, and Sansa, but Roose and Ramsay's wardrobe got no love. Neither did Bronze Yohn, who didn't deserve to be 'Bronze' in the show.

The first part of this story will be mostly a DB character study, following Roose's army until the end of the Wot5K. Sansa will not appear until the beginning of the second part.
Domeric II

Chapter Summary

Domeric makes a friend. The Battle on the Green Fork.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For all that they could have be riding to their doom, Domeric enjoyed the march down the Kingsroad. He usually rode with his cousin Robert ‘Robbie’ Ryswell, son of Roger, who stuck close beside their uncle, Roose Ryswell. As they made their progress he caught up with Ronnel Stout on how his family in Barrowton was faring, and when they made camp he’d taken many suppers with Harrion Karstark at his cookfire. Harrion – or Harry, as he asked to be called – was itching for battle, had strong opinions on most everything, and was all Northman. Harry’s father Lord Rickard had long since trusted him with dispatching with any wildlings raiding Karhold lands, of which there had been an increasing amount in recent years; Harry was eager to bash southron skulls.

“You’re mighty southron-looking yourself, Bolton,” Harry had chuckled. “Can’t grow any whiskers, can ye?"

Domeric shaved every morning. “I have been told that I am comelier without a beard,” he’d retorted softly. “But it is true that many of my habits were acquired while I squired in the Vale.”

“Oh? Did the Leech Lord squire South as well?”

“No. My late lord grandfather saw to my father’s education, and nobody at the Redfort or Runestone I’m familiar with ever leeched themselves. I am not sure where he learned of the practice. I do not believe my father was ever south of the Neck until Robert’s Rebellion.”

“So the Leech Lord is not a knight.”

“No.”

“But you are, aye? A septon in a dress smeared oil on your face after you spent the night praying in the new gods’ house?”

“Aye, I am a knight. But in the Vale, there are still some that keep the old gods, and some castles have a proper heart tree. When I was knighted, I kept vigil in a godswood, and I cut my hand and gave my blood to the weirwood before swearing my vows.”

“The first knight of the Dreadfort too?”

“Aye, I suppose so.”

“But would a knight flay a man alive?”

“No, but I could flay a dead man and none would be the wiser.”
“Har! I shall call you Ser Flayer, Knight of the Dreadfort then.” Harry’s tone betrayed his japing intent, the Karstark’s long-borne scorn for southron knights and wariness of the Bolton name apparent. But Domeric paid no mind, for there was no harm in a moniker that was entirely true. Besides, he held his vows closer to his heart than he did his father’s heritage. He had much the same reaction when Harry found out he played the high harp and named his horse Rhaegar and said, *Har! You’ll be Domeric Targaryen to me, then.* He didn’t mind. He’d been an admiral of the Last Dragon since he’d learned about Robert’s Rebellion in his lessons with the old Barrowton maester as a boy. *A warrior prince who played the harp and loved his histories.* ‘Twas a fine thing to be.

Nonetheless, Domeric didn’t like others noting he was ‘more Redfort than Dreadfort’, as his father was wont to say. His being nearly too southron for the flayed man sigil was his least favorite topic of conversation, after anything to do with his father or their relationship in general. His fostering in the Redfort was the one of the few decisions of Roose’s that he agreed with, for all that Roose seemed to rue its consequences. So he changed the subject.

“Tell me about the Karhold.” Harry was more than happy to oblige. He described two keeps on a river atop two weathered rocky hills, connected by a wooden rope bridge; the outer walls ringed the hills, each keep had its own tall pointed towers and curtain walls. The floors and the beds and even a cloak or two were made of sealskin furs, for the Bay of Seals was just to the north, and seal hunting was good no matter the season. Some summer days one could ride east to the Grey Cliffs and dive into the sea without freezing.

Knives and swords and axes in the Karhold armory had handles of tusked seal ivory, and even whalebone; mounted on the wall in the Lord’s solar was an ice bear’s snarling head whose was is on the floor. The wooden furniture was carved with sunbursts and on the walls hung tapestries of Karlon Stark and his deeds.

But Domeric thought that the best part of the Karhold was that it was full of Karstarks. Besides Lord Rickard and Harry, there were Torr and Edd and Alys, Uncle Arnolf and his son, Cousin Cregan. Uncle Arnolf might not have been the most agreeable company, and Cregan might have been a boor, but Torr and Edd were apparently riotous fun, riding along the river, hunting, and fighting wildlings. Even their dear sister Alys joined them in their rides and hunts sometimes. Domeric envied Harry his large and mostly loving family.

“The Karhold sounds wonderful.”

“My friend, you will always be welcome there. But make sure to bring your harp along.” Harry Karstark was the first son of a Northern noble house to call him a friend. Domeric’s father was with the Dreadfort camp, so he smiled as brightly as he wanted and started plucking the opening chords to *The Bear and the Maiden Fair*. Everyone within earshot of Harry’s cookfire sang.

When they made camp with two days’ march remaining to Lord Harroway’s Town, his father called a meeting of the commanders at his tent to prepare for the coming battle. Domeric was not a commander, but he was always present at these discussions. Harry was a commander, though. Harry would be in charge of the Karstark spearmen on the right by the river. Straddling the Kingsroad in the center right would be Lord Medger Cerwyn and his men, and in the center left were the Freys, led by Ser Aenys. Robett Glover would hold the left. In the rear, his father commanded the Dreadfort reserve of foot, and Ronnel Stout the reserve heavy cavalry, barrowknights, and Rillmen. The column would reflect this formation, and in the morning, they would march for a day and a night in hope of ambushing Tywin Lannister’s camp near Lord Harroway’s Town at dawn.
His father pushed the eastern host hard south along the Green Fork. Domeric rode in the rear with the barrowknights and men from the Rills that had joined the Dreadfort’s levies. He was behind Ronnel Stout and between Roose and Robbie Ryswell and he marked the hours by the swish of Ronnel’s horse’s tail. Since most of the column consisted of foot, the horses only needed to walk. While riding didn’t tire him at all, the monotony of it all did, and soon he was exhausted. Aside from the sound of hoofbeats and footsteps, the army was silent. Many if not most were too drained to talk.

Then on the horizon in the predawn they could see the jagged silhouette of the Lannister camp and the smoking remains of the cookfires. It was time to form up. He could see his father giving the signal to the hornblowers. Having locked in place in the steady rear line, there was little for him to do at this point but sit and watch from atop Rhaegar’s back while they slowly advanced.

From the commotion on the horizon it was apparent that the Lannisters were awake and moving into formation. The first line of foot charged. Soon out of the dewy fog of the predawn light came a hail of arrows, and they landed against Harry’s shield wall.

Then the Lannister van along the river, all ahorse, charged Harry’s shield wall. Domeric could see the standard bearing three black dogs on a yellow field. A hulking figure on a falling horse smashed into the shield wall and rose to cut down many Karhold men. The Mountain, Domeric shuddered. Stay safe, my friend.

In the center and the left, Lord Cerwyn, the Freys, and the Glovers joined the charge to support Harry’s spending force. From beyond The Mountain, he heard the telltale whoops and calls of the mountain clans of the Vale. He almost did not believe it, but he saw it, and wondered if anyone besides himself in the Northern army had ever killed one of them before. How in the seven hells did they get here?

His musing was unhelpful. The Northern army would clearly be soundly defeated. They had only engaged the van led by Clegane and now it seemed like another company of fresh cavalry was preparing to charge. They bore the burning tree banner, orange on smoke. House Marbrand. Ser Addam is said to be a fine commander.

It would be a rout. It had already been a rout, no matter how many Vale mountain clansmen they had broken with their discipline. The Lannisters didn’t outnumber them by much, but the lion’s horse vastly exceeded the wolf’s, and that would seal the day.

Then his father signaled to the hornblowers and drummers to sound for the retreat into the hills. The Dreadfort foot began their northward march. The mounted barrowknights and Rillmen fell back a bit as well, waiting to swing around and defend the Karstsark, Cerwyn, Frey, and Glover foot from the rear.

My first battle, Domeric thought, and I didn’t even get to charge, let alone bloody my sword. He knew that in this moment his personal glory did not matter, for the entire strategy depended on distracting Tywin and sparing as much of Northern foot as possible. Once the confrontation had lasted long enough to be called a battle, there was no need to continue the ruse.

After another day’s march back up the Kingsroad, once it was clear that the Old Lion’s forces were not pursuing their column, they made camp. The men urge the rest. Not the lords and commanders though – his father ordered all of them and the officers to his commander’s pavilion to make an accounting of the highborn casualties. Ser Aenys Frey noted the death of Ser Pate of the Blue Fork, a Frey by marriage, fallen to Gregor Clegane. Ser Jared Frey, Ser Hosteen Frey, Ser Danwell Frey, and the bastard Ronel Rivers were also unaccounted for, either fallen or taken prisoner. Robett Glover recounted the death of Halys Hornwood, who took an arrow to the throat. Kyle Condon
supplied that Medger Cerwyn was missing, and nobody could find Ser Slower, Ser Donnel Locke, or Harry. *Harry. Damn.* After, the officers called roll. It was estimated that they’d lost about five thousand men. The loss of foot was not an unmitigable disaster, but so many highborns dead or taken was a heavy cost for a mere distraction.

On the morrow they would make for the causeway and hold the Moat. The march would be much less merry.

Chapter End Notes

Harry Karstark is one of those characters that we get like two glimpses of who ends up having more importance in absence than in presence. He’s also someone you can do literally anything with, as long as you keep in mind what actually happens in the story. Just like Domeric. I like to think they could have been friends, along with Daryn Hornwood (RIP).
Domeric III

Chapter Summary

After retreating back up to Moat Cailin, Roose confers with Domeric on the aftermath of the battle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They dropped the Frey host off at the Twins and made their way back to the Moat. The Dreadfort force took the Gatehouse Tower, since his father held the command. The Bolton men shared the tower with the Dustin and Ryswell companies since there was room. The Glovers and the Cerwyns occupied the Children’s Tower, and the Karstarks less their leader shared the Drunkard’s Tower with the smattering of men from other Northern houses.

He was just settling down into the room he’d been given when Elmar Frey, his father’s chinless squire, knocked on his door.

“Ser,” he said. “Ser, Lord Bolton requests that you attend him in his solar before the commander’s meeting in the great hall.”

“Thank you, Elmar. I know my way up.” His father’s chambers were at the top of the Drunkard’s tower, one flight up from his own. Elmar nodded, followed him up the stairs, and knocked on the door to the solar.

“Lord Bolton, Ser Domeric to see you.”

“Enter,” his father said.

“Father.” Roose was already looking straight at him. He met his father’s eyes, and Roose motioned for him to sit. “Elmar, a cup and some hippocras for my son.” He hated hippocras, but always drank as his father did whenever he was in private attendance with Roose. He preferred sweet Arbor golds or hearty Northern ales, but his father did not keep these at the Dreadfort or in his chambers while traveling.

“There was a bird from Riverrun. It brings much news. Robb Stark’s army met the Kingslayer at the Whispering Wood and captured him after the victory, but not before he cut down Daryn Hornwood and Tohrren and Eddard Karstark. The Lannisters were routed, their entire force slain or taken prisoner. Aside from the loss of young Hornwood and the Karstark boys, Northern casualties were insignificant. Robb Stark then lifted the siege of Riverrun. What’s more, King Robert has died and the boy Joffrey took Ned Stark’s head and slaughtered his household, so the lords in Riverrun named Robb Stark the King in the North and of the Trident. His Grace is planning a campaign in the Westerlands to strike the heart of Lannister support. Lord Tywin is retreating to Harrenhal, which our scouts already know,” here his father paused. “The rivermen mean to take their castles and lands back one by one. His Grace sent Theon Greyjoy to the Iron Islands seeking an alliance with the Iron Fleet. Lady Catelyn is riding south to treat with both Baratheon brothers. What’s more, Riverrun received a white raven from the Citadel.
Domeric was silent for a moment before starting. Where to begin? The beginning of the letter. He took a breath. “The Whispering Wood and Riverrun victories prove our feint to have been successful, but that splitting the host was costly. The identities of the highborn causalities will cause strife in the North for His Grace.

“The deaths of Lord Halys and Daryn Hornwood mean that the Hornwood succession is in question. There is Lord Hornwood’s bastard Larence Snow at Deepwood Motte, so the Glovers might press his claim. Since Lady Hornwood was a Manderly by birth, the White Harbor might take offense to this. Then there is Lord Hornwood’s sister, Lady Berena, who married Leobald Tallhart. She has two sons, either of which may succeed to the Hornwood, unless death should take Lord Helman and young Benfred. Then one might succeed the Hornwood, and the other might wed little Lady Eddara to join both Tallhart lines. The Karstarks and the Flints may also press claims, but both are weaker. To avoid insulting any, His Grace may let House Hornwood die out, and name a new House to the seat, or even distribute its lands between the Dreadfort and White Harbor, or even Ramsgate, but each of those solutions bring their own problems.

“Additionally, should Harrion Karstark be dead rather than a prisoner, the Karhold succession would also be unstable. Lord Karstark is not yet too old to wed again, but the easier solution would be to wed Lady Alya to Arnolf’s son Cregan, the next male in line of appropriate age. But from what Harrion has told me of his temper, Lord Rickard will be wroth at his sons’ deaths, and nobody in the main Karstark branch gets on well with either Arnolf or Cregan.”

“It is as you say. What of the campaign in the Westerlands?”

“Rash. Stupid, even. His Grace is being foolish. Autumn is here. The King in the North ought remember that winter is coming. He should be brokering a peace with the Iron Throne by trading the Kingslayer for the Princess Sansa. It only matters that her betrothal to Joffrey be broken.” By all estimations, the Princess Arya was dead. There had been no word of her since before Lord Stark had been taken captive. She had most likely been killed along with the rest of the Stark household, or had died in a gutter outside the Red Keep, her remains stewing in a bowl of brown. If she lived, she would be Elmar’s.

“If the North is to be an independent kingdom again, it matters not whether Cersei’s get are bastards. An independent North need not bother with Stannis or Renly’s claims, or this campaign to the west. It would be superfluous in spring, disastrous with winter approaching. All the North should commit as many men as possible to bringing in the last harvest, maybe the last two, or we will all starve before we see spring because we let our crops die in the fields.

“But the Princess will not be traded for the Kingslayer if they mean to succeed in this campaign. The Kingslayer is a battle commander and is worth more as a hostage in war than a girl of thirteen. The only worth the Western campaign has is vengeance for Lord Stark. That can wait till spring. If His Grace lets the Princess languish in King’s Landing until he can claim total victory, he may as well slit her throat himself. We cannot trust the Lannisters to preserve her honor, and no man would have her after. It only makes sense to leave her south if we use her marriage to Joffrey to broker a peace, but His Grace will not accept his sister bedding down with the man who took his father’s head.

“And since His Grace needed to take a Frey wife to make the Crossing at the Twins, the Princess and the little Prince Rickon must make Northern matches. The other lords would be slighted otherwise.” It was all he could do not to furrow his brow in front of his father. He had to keep his face. The Princess would be given to Smalljon Umber, or Harry Karstark if he still lived. Cley
Cerwyn perhaps, or his cousin Robbie Ryswell, but young Cley had been left at Castle Cerwyn and could claim no deeds of valor. Cousin Robbie hadn’t any either yet, but he would, and the match would do well to repair the relations between the Rills and Barrowton that had soured since the Starks spurned Aunt Barbrey and left Ser Mark and Lord Willam to bake in the Dornish sun. Domeric himself was out of the question since he was a Bolton, and Boltons did not get Stark brides. Not in eight thousand years.

“The only thing to do is to exchange the Kingslayer for the Princess, march everybody back up the Kingsroad, leave some men to close the Moat, and prepare for winter.”

“Very good. And Theon Greyjoy?”

“Another folly. Greyjoy is like as not to come back to His Grace empty handed having wasted his time as he is to turn his cloak and help Lord Balon strike back at the North for its part in putting down the rebellion. If the snows do not shut us out of our lands, the Ironborn will do it for us.” For all that he did not savor the smirking kraken’s company, who considered himself the comeliest lording north of the Neck – that was not true, that was himself, or Cousin Robbie or Uncle Roose, or Daryn Hornwood or Robb Stark or even Jon Snow - he did have a measure of sympathy for Greyjoy’s situation. Just as it was said that Domeric was more Redfort than Dreadfort, Greyjoy was nothing if not more a northern greenlander than an Ironborn. Balon Greyjoy would look down his hawkish nose at Theon when he returned, and Theon would either double down on the habits and loyalty he had picked up with the Starks, or bend over backwards to prove himself a true kraken. It all depended on Theon’s relationship with his father, whether he resented him or wanted to please him. Domeric understood.

“You are shrewd, my son. Come, let us dine with the lords and share this news.” His father rose and placed a hand on Domeric’s shoulder. It went unsaid that the lords would not be made privy to this discussion, only the letter.

Elmar held the door open for them and they walked downstairs to the hall. As they silently made their way through the castle he thought on the discussion with his father. Roose seemed pleased with him, as much as Roose Bolton could be pleased. He very rarely pleased his father – he very rarely wanted to – but there was no shame in it this time. He would be shamed by flaying a living man’s hand to spill his secrets – it was not knightly – but there was no shame in simply being smart about things and sharing his piece.

He was smart, even Roose said so, but Robb Stark did not appear to be, for all he had engineered a tactical success at the Whispering Wood. From his visits to Winterfell over the years he had taken Robb Stark to be kind, charming, and genial and only just growing into the seriousness that befitted a high lord’s firstborn son and heir. Now it seemed that His Grace the King in the North did not take a long-term view of things as a true king ought. Domeric would bet Rhaegar’s hide that Robb Stark would be the King Who Lost the North before the year was out. He had too many political problems brewing at home, he’d pulled out the only cork stopping the Ironborn from reaving Bear Island to the Arbor, he was waging war in the south when they should be pulling in the harvest, and he’d left the Princess a prisoner in the capital to be dishonored at the beastly Joffrey’s whims.

The thought made him frown. He could frown because he was walking behind his father, and Roose couldn’t see his face. If any maiden in Westeros deserved to be a princess it was the lovely Sansa Stark, and if any princess deserved to be rescued it was she. The sweet girl simply did not deserve King Robb’s abandonment to her betrothal with Joffrey Baratheon, for all that she would have made a wonderful Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. She was courteous and kind and was always a delight to talk to, with her bright eyes, soft smiles and demure laughter, clear as a bell. She’d always been pretty as a child, but without a doubt at thirteen years old she’d already been the
most beautiful girl north of Moat Cailin, and he’d hadn’t seen anyone better in the Vale. If the Queen was called the Light of the West, surely Lady Sansa was the Light of the North. No one who had ever seen her could ever forget her face.

Whenever he visited Winterfell they’d play the high harp together and sometimes she would accompany him by playing the bells instead. He’d help her with her poetry and sometimes set her poems to music. All songs start out as poems, he’d told her, and all poems can be made into songs. Like her father, she enjoyed hearing his stories of his time at the Redfort, and when she’d heard he’d been knighted she’d congratulated him by embroidering a handkerchief of pink silk with a flayed man holding a bloody sword atop a black horse with a red mane. It was rather morbid, but he kept the gift all the same. He’d shown it to Aunt Barbrey on his next stay in Barrow Hall, but she’d just scowled and asked him why he’d been accepting favors from Catelyn Tully’s little minnow. He didn’t care for the insult to the Lady Sansa, but in observance of his lady aunt’s feelings he’d curbed his tongue and simply said it would have been discourteous to reject any gift from Lord Stark’s daughter while a guest under Lord Stark’s roof.

Truly, Aunt Barbrey’s comment had cut him to the quick. He saw in the Lady Sansa something of a kindred spirit. For all that she might be deemed too Southron to be a Stark thanks to her Tully mother, the same could have been said of him and Lord Eddard too due to their fosterings. She and Lord Eddard both failed to openly show that wild wolf’s blood that made the Starks the Starks in times long past. Likewise, while he did sharpen all of his blades every evening, and was no slouch at the mechanics of flaying – he could skin a deer, after all – he didn’t have the heart for torture, and he could not countenance cruelty to the smallfolk or the thought of practicing the right of the first night. The only time he truly felt like he belonged in the North was when he went riding in the Rills with his Ryswell cousins, and he hardly saw them. Since his fostering had ended and he had been made a knight, most of his time had been spent at the Dreadfort training to be the next Lord Bolton. He had the ‘lord’ part well in hand, even Roose said so, but it was clear he’d never live up to the family name. He didn’t want to anyhow.

Chapter End Notes

A look at how Roose examines the product of his training. Also a peek at how not everybody might be happy with His Grace, Robb Stark, KingInDaNorf. Any 'Robb Hate' in future chapters is all in Domeric's head. Same with Cat, etc.

Also, Elmar Frey! Poor guy. Annara Farring's get probably won't have anyone to protect them when winter comes for the Freys in-series. It's not their fault, they're all basically kids.

This story will be updated on Fridays. At the time of this posting about 10 chapters are written.
Domeric IV

Chapter Summary

Roose sends Domeric on a bride hunt at the Twins.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They occupied the Moat for nearly four long moons. After the red comet disappeared and the subsequent chatter died down, it was all so boring. There was no library at Moat Cailin. There was little to do besides train with the men. Cousin Robbie had wanted to set up a space so the Rillmen and barrowknights and some men from White Harbor could practice at the lance, but there wasn’t enough heavy cavalry to merit the effort. Most of the horse the eastern host had was light cavalry rather than heavy. There weren’t even commanders’ meetings and the attendant conversations with his father, for they had no orders besides occupying the Moat from either His Grace or Riverrun. If not for Cousin Robbie he would have been driven out of his mind.

Even singing and playing his travel harp became gratingly tedious. If he wanted to practice scales and drills to keep his fingers nimble or simply play anything other than The Bear and the Maiden Fair or The Lusty Lad he’d needed to sneak away to a ruined part of the keep. Sometimes someone would ask for Iron Lances or Black Pines, which he enjoyed, but no one ever wanted to hear My Featherbed or Off to Gulltown, which were his favorites. He’d even sang Her Little Flower and Meggett Was a Merry Maid, a Merry Maid Was She, since they were in step with what the men liked, but even those fell out of favor in a matter of days, and it was back to The Bear and the Maiden Fair again. Still, he could tell that morale was suffering, that the men were as bored as he was while His Grace’s host was marching west, so he obliged them their favorite bawdy song.

Late in the fifth moon of the year there was a bird from Riverrun. Ser Edmure was commanding them to join up with Ser Aenys at the Twins and take Harrenhal from Lord Tywin. Finally, something to do.

Like before, the march to the Twins was short. The mood was much the same, though the men had been bloodied. Apprehensive to ride out after so many weeks idle, the men were eager for battle, more so now that His Grace and his army’s deeds in the west had earned him the moniker the ‘Young Wolf’. The Dumb Wolf, more like.

His father left him and Steelshanks Walton to see to the Dreadfort camp while he met with Ser Aenys and Lord Walder inside the castle. As he was settling into his own tent, he saw a short shadow on the entrance flaps.

“Ser, Lord Bolton requests your presence within the east castle.” It was Elmar.

Elmar led him into the seat of the Lord of the Crossing. Domeric hadn’t been inside the Twins before; he hadn’t even gotten to cross that famous bridge. He tried to ask Elmar about the history of the castles, which parts were built when, how the Freys had managed to keep everything so bloody symmetrical over six hundred years, but the boy had few answers with him, and those he had were short and vague. Perhaps the boy was daft. Perhaps he just didn’t care.
Eventually Elmar opened the double doors to the great hall. Inside were his father and Ser Aenys. Arrayed around them were some thirteen women and girls who looked to be between the ages of five-and-ten and thirty. Lord Walder’s high seat of black oak carved into the twin towers’ likeness was empty. Domeric felt his stomach turn, his heart filling with dread as he schooled his face to calm.

“My lord father has retired for the day,” Elmar whispered up to him. “But he has given my brother Aenys leave to conduct his business.” Ser Aenys was old enough to be Elmar’s grandfather.

Domeric gulped silently. “And what would that business be, Elmar?”

“That is for Ser Aenys and Lord Bolton to share, ser.”

Fuck! Was he to have a Frey bride like His Grace? They didn’t need to cross the damn bridge to get to bloody Harrenhal! Did his father mean to have dark-furred pale-eyed weasels for grandchildren? He could not imagine the next Lord of the Dreadfort without a chin. The cold stare of his sires required eyes, nose, and chin to have the same effect. Don’t let it be so, he implored to the old gods. He wondered if they could hear him so far from a weirwood.

“Father, Ser Aenys. How may I be of service?” his voice was soft but his voice echoed since the hall’s ceilings were high.

“Domeric. Thank you for joining us. Ser Aenys and I have been discussing the terms of a marriage pact. But day has grown long and our talks are not yet done. My son, I task you with speaking with each of these fine young ladies while Ser Aenys and I finalize our discussion.”

So it was true. Fuck! Did Roose truly hate him so, to torture him with an ugly wife to take to his bed and look upon for the rest of his days? He did not hate Roose, their differences aside. He respected his father, aye, the most intelligent man between Greywater Watch and the Wall. Sometimes Domeric thought that his father was the only lord in the North who bothered to string two thoughts together and consider the consequences of his actions. He and Roose never liked each other, aye, and his father seemed to scorn his habits and preferences – his passion for the high harp, songs, and poetry for one, and his commitment to knighthood and codes of chivalry for another – but he had always had the impression that Roose had some measure of respect for him, or at least his for skill at arms and as a horseman and his swift recall of history and the ease which he took to politics.

His days riding in the Rills had taught him that careful breeding was as important for men as it was for horseflesh. Grandfather Rodrik had always stressed the importance of jealously guarding the blood through deliberate matchmaking. It was the same with men as with horses and dogs. The wrong choice of sire or dam could spoil a line forever. Ryswell heirs sought brides who were tall, strong-boned, and fair of face, with brothers who were tall and broad, muscular and handsome, so Ryswell daughters would be tall and comely to attract powerful husbands, and Ryswell sons would be imposing to command respect. He was glad that for all he had Roose’s coloring, he had inherited the frame and features of his mother’s kin. Like skill in battle and a shrewd wit, comely faces and well-formed bodies were assets in the great game.

He was certain that bedding down with a Frey would taint Bolton blood for generations to come. Such a risk was not worth any amount of coin that would be spent in a few short years, or an alliance that would break when the winds of fortune turned, or a title to a patch of land that could be conquered away. He’d almost rather take the black, leave the Dreadfort to the Bastard, and never again look upon a woman’s face than willingly sow his seed in poison ground. Even marrying an Umber would be better.
“For myself or for you, Father?” He was not usually so bold with Roose, but he hoped beyond hope that his father meant to wed for the third time rather than saddling him with a weasel for the rest of his life. After his time in Barrowton as Aunt Barbrey’s page had ended, but before he had left for the Redfort, he had even asked his father if he would marry again so he could have a mother and siblings. Roose had stared at him and said, perhaps, but it came to naught.

“We shall see.”

Ser Aenys spoke up. “Allow me to present my stepmother, the Lady Joyeuse Frey, born of House Erenford,” he said, and motioned to a pale girl with wispy hair and a slightly swelling belly. Lady Frey could be Ser Aenys’ granddaughter too. “She will introduce you to my sisters, nieces, and cousins and serve as your chaperone today.” Domeric could feel thirteen sets of female eyes mooning at him or raking down his form. It was uncomfortable, but he supposed it wasn’t every day that high lords and their sons came to Lord Walder’s hall seeking a wife.

“I am enchanted, my lady.” He bent to kiss her knuckles and smiled with all his teeth. She squirmed and looked at the floor.

“One more thing, my son. We march on the Ruby Ford in two days’ time. The wedding will be tomorrow. Elmar will bring you to my tent this evening and we will have words.”

“As you say, Father.” Roose and Ser Aenys exited the hall, and left him to his task. He had no idea what his father liked, or if Roose did like anything particular in women, so he would have to base his assessments on what was practical and politically astute. That he could do.

He estimated that there were around three hours of sunlight left in the day. Three hours, twelve girls, fifteen minutes each.

Lady Frey began by introducing the three daughters of Merrett Frey, son of Lord Walder’s Crakehall wife. The three sisters’ mother was Mariya Darry, and all three had yellow hair and watery blue eyes. Crakehall men were built like the boars of their sigil, but often ran to fat, and Crakehall women were known throughout the Seven Kingdoms for their big breasts and wide hips and large rear ends. They also often ran to fat, and had a reputation for being wantons who often gave their husbands horns. His father would flay alive any wife who dared do such a thing. Domeric himself would be content to lock her in a tower and never speak to her again.

The eldest was Lady Amerei, recently widowed, whose late husband Ser Pate of the Blue Fork died at the Battle on the Green Fork not five moons ago. She touched his arm and palmed his chest in a way that was much too familiar to be proper and gave him eyes that would rival Baelish’s finest Gulltown whores. This one would cuckold him if she ever bore a babe, he sensed. He did would not have that and knew his father would not either.

Then there was Lady Walda, called “Fat Walda” to distinguish her from Fair Walda, White Walda, and Walda Rivers; she was four hands shorter than he but looked to weigh fifteen stone – two stones more. That wasn’t the worst of problems she could have, he supposed. The expected ten-year winter and associated severe rationing required at the Dreadfort would take care of that eventually. She might even save them some food if they put her on a reduction scheme. He could put her on a strict riding schedule to accelerate the process. What’s more, her girth made it rather likely that she was still a maid. The lady had an easy giggle, a quick wit, and told bawdy japes as well as any man-at-arms. She could bring mirth and laughter to the Dreadfort, and his father wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. He could laugh to please a lady wife or lady mother. Walda would be excellent company in a long winter holed up indoors most days but it was a shame she was so fat. She might have passed as pretty – never beautiful - in some lights, and only if she smiled, if she hadn’t been fat.
The last was Lady Marissa. She was neither as brazen as Amerei nor as much riotous fun as Walda. She was rather plain, less memorable than her sisters, and he supposed she would serve so long as she was truly a maiden and had been properly trained to run a keep.

Lady Sarra, Lady Serra, and Lady Cersei were the daughters of Raymund Frey, brother of Merrett, and Lady Beony Beesbury. While the Beesburies were a First Men house, they were Reachers, so none might take well to the North. Sarra and Serra were pimply, and all three were Crakehall Freys. They did not seem much better than their cousins.

It seemed that there was no end to the Crakehall Freys, for the dark-eyed, black-haired beauty Lady Alyx was a Crakehall Frey as well. Her father was Symond, brother of Merrett and Raymund, and her mother was Bethario of Braavos. The lady’s brother Alesander was a singer and she also played the high harp. For all that she had that wanton Crakehall blood, he might get on well with her. But her mother was from Essos and no half-foreigner would be the Lady of the Dreadfort. Southron ladies were looked down upon enough back up North. He couldn’t subject a girl to that.

Lady Roslin, Lord Walder’s daughter, was a proper little lady and more in line with his tastes, with a cute little gap-toothed grin and shy smiles. From her pallor and her dark eyes and her long brown hair, she might have passed for a northerner if her fine bones didn’t look so delicate as to break like a bird’s. Her mother’s name had also been Bethany, but Lady Bethany Frey had been a Rosby, and the Rosby family was known for easily taking ill. Lady Roslin would die in childbed or of a fever like his mother or be taken by the cold. That would not do for either his father or himself.

Lady Tyta, daughter of Lord Walder by Lady Alyssa Blackwood, had seen nine-and-twenty name days. She was too old.

Lady Tysane was the daughter of Lame Lothar Frey, Lord Walder’s steward and Lady Tyta’s eldest brother. Her mother was Lady Leonella Lefford of the Golden Tooth. The Leffords were sworn to the Lannisters, so such a match would not pass in the current political environment.

Lady Arwyn was Elmar’s oldest full-blooded sister. Their mother was Lady Annara Farring. Elmar was all right, for all that he was scared of leeches, so he supposed his sister must be too. She would serve if she could weather the cold and run a keep. He’d have to ask Elmar, for all the boy only had eleven namedays behind him.

By far the best was “Fair Walda”, daughter of Ser Walton, son of Ser Stevron. Walda was nearly of an age with Domeris and was a picture of beauty drawn by a man without a muse - what men imagined a beautiful woman to be when no particular woman haunted their dreams. She had a fine and shapely figure, sandy blonde hair and clear blue eyes with a straight nose and bow-shaped lips set in a symmetrical oval face. Very academically comely. She had the smug smile of a woman who knew she was beautiful and had an arrogant air about her, but then he was rather vain too. They all had their faults. What was more, her mother was Deana Hardyg, aunt of Harry Hardyg, heir presumptive to the Vale; her grandmother, Walton’s mother, was Marsella Waynwood, sister to Lady Anya Waynwood; and Stevron’s mother was Perra Royce, kin to Bronze Yohn and Nestor. Fair Walda’s elder brother Steffon was a knight in service to House Waynwood, and her younger brother Bryan was a squire with the Hunters at Longbow Hall. According to Walda, her father looked like a Waynwood like her brother Steff, while she and Bryan took after their Hardyg mother. Fair Walda would be a fine match no matter her Frey name or the look of her face. If his father made him marry a Frey, Fair Walda would be his choice.

At the end, his choice didn’t matter. When Elmar appeared and led him out of the castle to his father’s tent where the maester was leeching him, Roose immediately asked about “the blonde fat one”. Apparently Roose and Ser Aenys had finally agreed on the terms of the alliance, and those
included the bride’s weight in silver as a dowry. “His Grace’s war is like to keep our levies raised until the year is out. We will not have the men to pull in the harvest, as you predicted. We need the coin to import food from Essos and keep the smallfolk fed and quiet.”

He gave Roose his piece on Fat Walda – sharp, witty, likely to last the winter. Fertile by all indications. Darry mother, Crakehall grandmother. He didn’t mention Walda’s laughter. That would spoil it. “And who shall be getting married tomorrow, Father?”

Roose only stared at him. If he tried to read his father’s features, he’d say Roose’s look said, *boy, I know you’re not stupid*. But then he could never tell with Roose.

“Why, me, of course,” his father said. And that was that.

Chapter End Notes

Some comedy. I give you Rodrik Ryswell, the amateur eugenicist, and an overreacting Domeric. The Freys have a reputation that goes far and wide, as do the Crakehalls.

Pardon the language. From the mouth of Walder Frey himself, "all the Crakehall women are sluts" (AGOT, Catelyn IX). Catelyn in ASOS calls them robust and good for bearing children, but maybe she either chooses to ignore this other aspect of their reputation or was just shielded from it. A reputation for giving husbands horns would not bode well for the daughters of any house’s prospects.

Fat Walda also makes her first appearance here. I love Fat Walda. Even Roose Bolton likes Fat Walda. Every mention of Fat Walda in canon is pure joy.

I find Frey politics super interesting. If you haven’t seen it, go watch Preston Jacobs' "Frey Civil War" video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rdngFZrG4pQ
Domeric V

Chapter Summary

A wedding at the Twins.

There will be slut shaming and sexism in this chapter.

Chapter Notes

O you on the way of Love go by,
listen and see
if there is any grief, as grave as mine:
and I beg you only to suffer me to be heard,
and then reflect
whether I am not the tower and the key of every torment.
Amor, indeed not for my slight worth
but through his nobility
placed me in a life so sweet and gentle,
that often I would hear it said behind me:
'God, for what virtue
does this heart own so much delight?'
Now I have lost all my eloquence
which flowed so from love’s treasure:
and I am grown so poor
in a way that speech barely comes to me.
So that I desire to be like one
who to conceal his poverty through shame,
shows joy outwardly,
and within my heart am troubled and weep.

- Dante Alighieri, 'O you on the way of Love go by', La Vita Nuova

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was passing strange watching his father get married in a sept, by a septon, swearing his vows by the Seven gods Roose didn’t believe in. He wondered if those vows had any force, whether they would mean anything at all. It was an interesting theological question. Roose’s last two wives had been women of the North of ancient First Men stock who worshipped the old gods, his last two weddings in front of a heart tree. He could not say whether his father worshipped the old gods either – he never saw Roose give his blood to the weirwood, he never saw Roose kneel and pray – but he did know that Roose feared them. By Domeric’s lights the old gods were the only things that Roose feared. In the light of the Seven, House Bolton and the Red Kings of old would have been condemned long ago, having committed sins uncounted. But the old gods were permissive, their prohibitions few but strictly observed – severely enforced. An atrocity in the light of the Seven was merely more blood for the weirwood.
Ser Merrett ushered Lady Walda down the aisle between the altars of the Father and the Mother. Her maiden’s cloak bore the twin towers of Frey, with Crakehall brindled boars and Darry plowmen parading around underneath the river. The cloak could have passed for a tapestry depicting the life of a farm in the shadow of a keep. He didn’t have the vocabulary to describe how it had been made – some type of embroidery here, some patching together of furs and fabrics there – but truly, Lady Walda’s maiden’s cloak was a work of art. Ser Merrett swung the cloak off Lady Walda’s shoulders, and Roose unclasped his white-trimmed greatcloak of pink vair spotted with red, and placed the new Lady of the Dreadfort under his protection. Domeric had three namedays on his new stepmother.

They made a queer pair, the Lord and Lady Bolton. His father was not handsome, but he was not ugly either. His features were regular, his face plain. He would be very average looking, very nondescript, if not for his cold Bolton eyes and the striking Bolton pinks and reds. By contrast, Walda’s features stood out: her bright yellow hair, her jiggling girth, the little brown freckles along the bridge of her nose. He’d been wrong about the Freys; they weren’t all weasels. The Crakehall Freys were pigs. Walda especially looked a pig, wrapped in his father’s pink cloak; she certainly sounded like one, with her infectious, snorty giggles. He wondered what his new half-siblings would look like. He hoped that his own marriage – to whichever lucky lady – would be prosperous and long, bearing many beautiful babes with ghost-grey eyes and night dark hair. The line of the Red Kings would not fall to pigs. No matter how Walda’s get turned out, he was still the heir to the Dreadfort.

The Frey women hadn’t the time to organize a true wedding feast, so the food was normal supper fare. There were merely more courses, more ale, more wine. Domeric wanted to indulge himself in the wine, for someone had thought to seat him next to the Lady Amerei, who he’d recently learned from Elmar was called ‘Gatehouse Ami’, since she “raised her portcullis for every knight who happened by”. Domeric wondered if he had been saying such things when he was eleven. Just this evening Lady Amerei had shoved her round, freckly teats under his nose and palmed his breeches under the table. Disgusting. He hated when highborn women played the part of slatterns. Even whores were better, for at least one had to step up, jump even, to clear the bars set by coin! But this Gatehouse Ami’s behavior was nothing if not base. Frey blood was hardly better than baseborn blood for how rare and ancient it was. Proper ladies did not act thusly. They did not need bare breasts and brazen touches to have men at their beck and call. They could hide behind a screen and still cast their spells.

He had to get away from her or he would empty his stomach onto the high table and shame House Bolton before their goodfamily of Frey. Roose would think him a lush, and he would be missing the skin on several toes in the morning. “My lady,” he whispered in her ear. “My aunt. I am of the line of Rogar the Huntsman. You show me no confidence by serving up the boar before I have entered the woods. My pride has taken a grievous wound. I beg your leave, my lady, to give chase to hidden game, and do honor by my ancestors.” He hoped she took his meaning. She wouldn’t if she was slow. No matter. His best Roose face would send her running. It did.

Chastened – good – Gatehouse Ami nodded and grit her teeth. She stood up and went to peddle whatever river pox was waiting between her thighs to someone who wasn’t him. Good.

His belly settled and he was able to truly savor the food without imbibing too much more. How many times had the Freys filled his cup? He had been too busy trying to shoo away the slattern without offending their hosts to notice. This course was small quails stuffed with onions, prunes, and a soft white cheese.

“I hope you are enjoying our family’s hospitality, Ser Domeric,” came a fluttery voice. It was Fat Walda. His new stepmother had come to take her sister’s spot next to him.
“This fine feast is a welcome surprise in the middle of this war, my lady,” he said softly. “The wine and song will surely cheer the men before we march south tomorrow. If they can be roused from their tents,” he chuckled. Lady Walda laughed as well, and he couldn’t help but smile.

“My lady stepmother,” he began, “it gladdens my heart that you will be coming North with us when this war is done. We did not have much time to talk the evening past, but truly, I am grateful that you are my father’s choice. The Dreadfort is very quiet, you see, and it can be quite unnerving if you are alone. Your presence will be quite welcome – there will be smiles and laughter that the halls have not seen since my own lady mother died. The servants do not speak much, and the men live far from the family quarters. When it is just myself and my lord father, it is dreadfully quiet, unless I am playing my harp. Should I want cheer and conversation, I must ride out to Weeping Town or to another lord’s keep. My father is often about his business, and needs silence for his work. Our meetings or suppers together are quite serious, and my father rarely laughs or smiles. Perhaps your company will change him.

“It is quite lonely at the Dreadfort for one who relishes the company of others. A lonely castle overlooking the Lonely Hills.”

“Your words are kind, ser,” she said, smiling brightly. He could tell that she was unused to compliments. By the gods, the Dreadfort needed more smiles! He would compliment her every day if it would make her smile. His father never smiled, and never seemed to like when Domeric did. “Would you tell me more about my new home?”

“The Dreadfort is dark. There are few windows for a castle of its size. And those that we have are tall and narrow and let in little light for at least some part of the day. During the winter, when the sun only shines for a few short hours, some windows get no light at all. All the light then comes from the torches, and the torches are held on the wall by the sword hands of our ancient enemies. Just the bones, anything else would have rotted long ago.

“You’ll have your own suite of chambers, close to the nursery, close to my lord father’s, farther away from mine. The Lady’s chambers. My lady mother’s things are still there, I can help you clear them out. There’s a large portrait of her and my father atop their horses in her solar, you won’t want that there, I’ll take it to my own. And she left all of her jewelry to me for my own lady wife someday, but I’ll pick the ones I won’t part with, her Ryswell things, and we can go through and split the Bolton things between us two. The garnets, the rubies, the cinnabar and rose quartz. We even have some jewelry with pink sapphires! I don’t need it all, I’ll commission new jewelry for my own lady wife. And we’ll have to get you ladies’ maids, we’ll hire a whole team of them. We haven’t had any women servants at the Dreadfort in over ten years, since my mother died, excepting the cooks and washerwomen of course. All the servants, at your command. You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

Walda’s blue eyes were wide, bright, and watery; her smile was eager and big, and she was nodding vigorously. It was clear that she’d never had so much to herself among all those Freys. Well, until Domeric got married, Walda would be the only Lady Bolton. She wouldn’t have to share. The thought pleased her, he could tell. Domeric would try to please her and make her smile like that every day. All ladies should smile as much as possible, he thought. His own lady mother had smiled so rarely near the end. The thought hurt.

“You must miss your mother very much. What was she like?”

“Beautiful. Dreamy. A proper lady. She always loved songs and stories about knights and heroes, and she shared that love with me. Dark brown hair, tall. She looked rather like my Aunt Barbrey, you’ll meet her when we get back North. When I was very small, she was happier, but she kept
losing babies to crib death that she’d borne living, and pieces of her heart died with each of them. She died of a fever, when I was eight, and Father was fighting the Greyjoy rebellion. I got sick too, and when I woke up, I didn’t have a mother or a brother anymore. Roger, his name was. He lasted the longest. We thought he was going to live like me. Almost two namedays, he had. He was already toddling about on my heels and calling me ‘Dommie’. None of the others ever did that. And then he was dead, and my mother was dead, and I was alone with Maester Uthor for six long moons.” Gods, was he talking about Roger? He must have been further into his cups than he thought.

Walda took one of her pudgy hands and patted his own. “There, there,” she said. Could she tell he was sad? Roose wouldn’t like it, he’d want him to hold his face. “I will give you another brother by this time next year.” She squeezed his hand and changed the subject.

“Tell me, will I get to see the room where you keep the skins?” That was bold of her, but she was his lady stepmother, and was entitled to this question.

“Which one? We sort them by house.” Her eyes widened. “I jape. The Starks outlawed flaying many years ago. But the secrets of the Dreadfort are for only the Lord and his sons to know. Your sons will know, but not you. My mother didn’t. I am glad of it. My lady, if my father forbids you to go anywhere, I beg you to obey.” The last bit was serious.

She looked disappointed. “Will I be taught how to flay at least?” Walda was truly throwing herself into her new status as Lady Bolton.

“Can you skin a deer?” She shook her head. “Then we must start there, and the hunt before. We love our hunts, we Boltons. My father will take you hunting, and if he won’t, I will.” She smiled at that. She may be fat, but not so fat like Lord Too-Fat-to-Sit-a-Horse and his sons. She could come on hunts with them.

“Ser Domeric, I am so happy that it is your father I married today, not you, for all that you are so kind and charming and handsome. I know it was because I had the largest dowry as I am so fat. When you walked into the hall, we all thought it was you choosing a bride, and I knew I had no chance. Fair Walda you would choose, or maybe Alyx. But now I’m your stepmother and I will have the pleasure of your company anyhow!” She giggled, and he smiled.

“You are correct that I would have chosen Fair Walda, but not for the reason you think. I squired in the Vale, you see, so we have many mutual acquaintances. We would have had much in common. I even crossed lances with her brother Steffon at a squire’s tourney once. He was older, but I beat him at the tilt. He rang my head like a bell in the melee, though.

“I am glad that you are my stepmother, my lady.” He had no reason to lie.

The dancing was to start then, and his father came out to lead the first dance with Walda. Then Domeric danced with Walda, which was awkward because she was so much shorter than he, and Roose danced with Lady Mariya. Steelsanks danced with Walda next, and his father with Lady Bethario, and he with Lady Alyx. It was only Crakehall Freys in attendance, but there were still so many of them. Thankfully Gatehouse Ami was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t want to dance with her.

He left before too long, during Milady’s Supper. He didn’t know which song would hail the bedding, in which he was under no circumstances going to participate. The Queen Took Off Her Sandal, The King Took Off His Crown was the most popular, but others were common too. He’d seen Roose naked too many times during his leeching sessions, but he’d never seen his own mother’s bare form. Lady Walda deserved the same dignity.
He ran into Cousin Robbie stumbling around the corridors as he rounded his way out the castle. Robbie’s red doublet was wrinkled and it looked like the buttons weren’t done up correctly. His shirt was hanging out of his breeches on one side and his long brown hair was tangled like a bird’s nest at the back.

“Dom. Thank goodness! Are you leaving for camp, too?” He was lost, apparently. The Twins were big.

“Aye, Robbie, I am. I remember the way.” He frowned. “Where have you been? You missed the dancing. Bedding hasn’t happened yet.” He quirked an eyebrow. “A serving girl?”

“No. A Frey,” he said. “Knew more tricks than all the girls in Barrowton. Free, too,” he chuckled. “Blonde. Blue eyes. Like the bride, only thinner.”

“Best be on our way to the maester then, Robbie. Your cock will burn when you piss before we’re halfway to Harrenhal.”

“Truly?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Robbie.” He passed on Elmar’s words. Robbie blanched.

“I must thank you, Dommie,” Robbie said. “But you’re no fun anymore. Haven’t been since you came back for good. So serious.”

“I still like to laugh, Robbie. I still go drinking. I’m not my father.”

“Aye, but whenever you visit you always stop after the drinking. Chasing girls isn’t the same without you and that harp of yours. Or your poetry. Uncle Rick and Cousin Rod and I can’t catch the kinds of dams your harp would bring us, and you never even bedded them anyway - ”

“I can teach you the high harp, Robbie. It’s never too late to learn. Or I could let you memorize some of my poems.”

“That’s not the point, Dom. We miss you. What’s wrong, cos?”

“I’m a knight now. Nothing’s wrong. I just won’t help you sully petty lords’ and hill clan daughters anymore. I took vows.”

Robbie sighed. “When’s the last time you bed a girl, eh, Dom?”

“‘Twas in Gulltown not six moons ago.”

“Yes, but you have to spend coin for that, you don’t have to spend coin when you have your harp or read your poems, where’s the fun in it - ”

“I have plenty of coin.” Robbie wouldn’t understand. “Besides, I’m not paying for what I could get with just my harp. Baelish’s girls, they give you an experience.”

“And what experience would that be?” Robbie shook his head. “Look Dom. I know. Grandfather too. Not my father or our uncles or other cousins or the girls, they won’t help for all they would think they can. Just, just talk to us all right? You can talk to us. Don’t just shove it all away behind that scary Bolton face of yours. Don’t just disappear and brood and pluck at your harp and write your poems and play pretend that those Gulltown whores are your lady love - ”

Robbie knew. For true. How? He had only ever told Mychel…
Domeric stopped walking. “Speak not of it.” His voice was spider-soft and colder than ice.

Robbie started. “Come on now - ”

“Speak not of it, Robert Ryswell, or put up your steel.”

That shut Robbie up. Robbie put a hand on his shoulder. “As you say, cos.” They walked in silence for a long minute.

“Do you know the thing that ribs me most, Dom? In my heart? That pains me?”

“No, Robbie.”

“Grandfather told me that he’s starting to think I’m unfit for the Rillseat. That I’m unserious about life. Like Uncle Rick.” Robbie was a lusty lad who loved bawdy songs and filthy japes. He was like their Uncle Rick in that way.

“Is he wrong?”

Robbie paused. “Yes. My father trained me, Grandfather too. I know all of the sworn houses, the petty lords. By all accounts I’m respected enough. The smallfolk know my face, aye, they know they can talk to me. I do a good lord’s face, they say, and I’d take the courses that Father or Grandfather would take in most cases, and that my reasons are sound if not. But, I say, I’m not married yet, let me have my fun while I’m not tied down. Got no bastards to my knowledge, no one’s ever come forward with a little Snow for me. I’ll put away the boy’s games once I have a lady wife to tend. I’d be faithful to her and do my duty. My father and I have even worked through a long and short list of suitable choices. Uncle Rick is seven-and-twenty and has never shown interest in taking a wife.

“If Ser Mark had lived we would not have this problem.” Robbie said. “Grandfather liked him better than any of his own sons. ’Twould have settled all our squabbles. Ser Mark would have just needed to pick one of us to groom after that.”

“Succession by nomination is not without its complications, cos.”

“Aye, but it makes family matters so difficult sometimes. If we did things like the rest of Westeros it would be so easy. The Dothraki of the snow, them southrons call us Ryswells. Worse than the rest of the barbaric, wildling North! I digress. If the first son inherited things, the number of girls I’ve bedded wouldn’t threaten my position as heir. But, you know, tradition. The First Place to the Strong Horse, after all.” He wrinkled his nose.

“You’re a strong enough horse, Robbie. You and Uncle Roger.” He patted Robbie on the shoulder. “So who’s Grandfather’s favorite now then?”

Robbie snorted. “Grandfather’s new candidate for heir is Little Rick.”

“Little Rick? Little Rick is nine.” It didn’t make sense. There wasn’t anything seriously wrong with Robbie. “Why Little Rick?”

“Little Rick reminds Grandfather of you,” Robbie said. “Little Rick adores you. Wants to be you. Speaks with a soft voice. Begging Aunt Barbrey to take him on as her page. Puts on that scary face you wear when you think we all need to shut our mouths.” Robbie grinned. “His isn’t as good as yours, of course. Never will be. Doesn’t work without your eyes.

“It’s that cold Bolton blood you have. Makes you the strong horse, Dom. We all know you’re the
favorite. Grandfather wishes you could sit the Rillseat after him, but you’re not a Ryswell. I was born a Ryswell for true, but I ride not so well as you, my dear cousin of Bolton.

“You’re everyone’s favorite. Aunt Barbrey especially. So charming, you are. So kind. So loved. One conversation with you, everybody is your friend. She would have named you Lord of Barrowton when you became a man grown if Ned Stark wouldn’t have taken her head for trying to raise the Red Kings again.” Ned Stark wouldn’t have done that. Domeric’s father’s first wife had been a Dustin cousin, the daughter of the one with the longaxe, and Roose’s maternal grandmother had been from the Dustin main line. The Boltons had the best claim after Barbrey, but the Starks wanted the Stouts for Barrow Hall after Barbrey died. The Starks would never give the Boltons any more than they already had.

“The Red Kings never ruled Barrowton, Robbie. The Lonely Hills to the Shivering Sea, aye, and the Bite to the Bay of Seals, but nothing west of Winterfell.”

“Barrow King, then. Or King in the North.” Robbie’s smile was dark in the firelight.

“Careful, cos. Speak softly. That’s treason.”

“Wouldn’t be treason if you had what you wanted.”

“His Grace has two brothers.” He scowled. “And I told you not to speak of it, Robbie.”

Robbie ignored him. “The Ironborn will kill them. How long do you think until they storm the Rillseat and burn Barrowton to the ground? One moon? Two? Some King in the North we have. He never should have let Greyjoy go. The Umbers and the Karstarks, if the Starks said jump, they’d ask how high. They don’t know what it’s like in the west, to wonder if the Ironmen will sail in on the dawn tide and take everything you have. Maege Mormont, she knows, but for all she’d counsel the Young Wolf about the threat of the Ironborn, she wouldn’t go against him. Sycophants, the lot of them are. None of them stopped him, even though His Grace has wind for brains. It’s as you said. You should tell your father to turn us around and march us back up past the Moat to defend the North.

“You’d be a far sight better king than that sod of a Stark we’re saddled with.” Robbie spat. “You think ahead. You’re as smart as your father but you have a heart. People like you. You would never have trusted Greyjoy.”

“Robb Stark is the only man in Westeros who trusts Theon Greyjoy. I’m nothing special, Robbie.”

“How does one come to trust a Greyjoy anyway? How could one be so soft in the head? Did Cat Tully bang his head against the walls of Riverrun when he was born?”

“Softly, Robbie. Careful. That’s His Grace and his lady mother you’re talking about.”

“So you say.” Another long minute of silent walking.

“Robbie?”

“Dommie?”

“Do you know why I can’t have what I want?” Robbie had already spoken of it. He might as well kill his cousin’s curiosity now.

“Because your name is Bolton?”
“Aye, and what do we Boltons do to Starks?”

“You strip them of their skins and hang their hides around your shoulders.”

“And the Starks? What do they do to us Bolts?”

“They take your heads.” Robbie was wrong. Domeric shook his head.

“They sink their wolf teeth into us and rip us to pieces.” He shook his head and sighed. They were at the camp now. “The grumkins and snarks would come back south of the Wall if a Bolton ever took a Stark to wife, or the other way round. Or the Long Night would come again. Something awful at least, or someone would have done it. Eight thousand years is a long time. It will never be. It’s just not done.”

“That’s a load of shit from a horse’s arse and you know that, Dom. Superstition. You’re too smart for that.” Robbie elbowed him in the ribs. “No reason not to try, eh?”

Domeric gave a long sigh. “Let’s just get you to that maester.”
Domeric VI

Chapter Summary

News of Ramsay's actions back North arrives. Roose strikes a deal with Vargo Hoat to take Harrenhal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning his father received a bird forwarded from Riverrun regarding the Bastard. Roose shared it with him, of course. Apparently Ramsay had accosted the Lady Hornwood on her way back from the Harvest Feast at Winterfell – how could they feast on less than half a harvest, he thought – forcibly married her, raped her, and demanded she name him heir to the Hornwood. Then he locked her in a tower and let her starve. She ate her fingers and then she died. So his bastard brother became the Lord of the Hornwood. Then the Winterfell master-at-arms killed him, which was good. But now the Manderlys were occupying the Hornwood, as Lady Donella had been one of their own, and he just knew that in twenty years he’d still be bowing and scraping and paying reparations to White Harbor trying to make up for this. Perhaps he’d never be able to. But that didn’t matter. Lady Hornwood had been one of the few highborns in the North to treat him as just a boy, just another lordling close to her own son’s age, rather than Roose Bolton’s son. He’d pay the reparations to the Manderlys for her.

It was all so embarrassing. It was all so disgusting. It was all so shameful. The Hornwood succession was already a brewing political mess, and now House Bolton had gotten involved in so vile a manner that the North would speak of it for generations. My father a raper, the Bastard a raper, the line of Boltons full of rapers. How cruel the gods were, to set his soul among such company. Domeric Bolton hated rapers. How could one ever treat a lady, a woman, a girl that way? He’d asked Lord Horton why, one day, after attending an execution. Because their blood is up, boy, he’d said, and they don’t care if she says yes or no. She’s there, and her feelings are in the way of what he wants. Or because they like the sound of crying, screaming. Some are like that. He’d then asked if it was like the cries and screams of enemies, and Lord Horton had shaken his head. No, it’s the cries and pain for their own sake. The knowledge that you have the power to cause that in another soul. The cries and pain get their blood up. Or the thrill of the chase, the fear in their eyes. And when the blood is up the need is there.

Domeric could not empathize with this for all he understood the words. His blood would cool when faced with a woman’s tears, a woman’s fear, her rejection and her hatred. The promise in soft smiles and demure laughter on a pretty face, that’s what got his blood up. He supposed that he would never understand, since he had no stomach for torture. That’s what rapers were. Torturers.

His father though… what he did was in cold blood, just like he tortured in cold blood. His father had raped Ramsay’s mother because she hadn’t given him his barbaric rights. It probably hadn’t even been good. He did it to prove that he was Lord, and she was nothing. He did it to punish her because had transgressed. To make her obey. His father would not take joy from screams, from pain. He took joy in nothing.

Ramsay’s actions were atrocious. To think that he’d once thought to name that beast a brother.
Ramsay was ambitious. Ramsay saw an opportunity. Ramsay had his fun. Ramsay enjoyed it. Ramsay was the type to enjoy the screams and the cries and the fear. It was good that he was dead. He’d be looking over his shoulder for the rest of his days had the Bastard lived. He’d have to hire a food taster, a personal guard, seal all the windows, never ride out alone again … he’d become Mad Aerys within a year.

After Old Lord Overton had told him to turn around on his way to visit Ramsay, he’d paid a visit to his mother’s family at the Rillseat. He’d told Grandfather what had happened. Grandfather’s face had drained of color. I thought Roose had told you, Grandfather had said. Grandfather was well appointed of what happened near Domeric’s home. Grandfather had his spies. He never told me why, Domeric had replied. Dommie boy, Grandfather said next, if you ever have the itch for brotherhood and don’t care to board a ship, just come here. Robbie’s here, my Roose too. Don and Young Rod and Little Rick. Don’t go near that Bastard again. He wants you dead.

He wouldn’t. It wouldn’t be the same, though. Robbie and the rest hadn’t been raised by Roose Bolton. They didn’t have to deal with the whispers of every other highborn they met for the first time. Do you leech too? Do you have skins in your trunk? What’s it like to flay a man? They never feared for their toes, never feared being locked up in the Torturer’s Tower for being late to lessons. They didn’t grow up thinking that the drafts in the corridors were the wails of prisoners in pain, past and present, or breathing in stuffy air that tasted like a death rattle. They knew what it was like to have a father’s love, to be looked at as a person rather than a pet project.

Moments like this made Domeric wish he had been born a Ryswell. Made him resent having been born a Bolton.

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The men were hungry for blood when they reached the Ruby Ford. This is where the Last Dragon died, he thought. Died for his lady love. When they were a few days’ out from the Twins, a raven had come bearing news of His Grace’s great victory at Oxcross. Already the bards were singing of the Young Wolf – Wolf in the Night, it was called. The news and the song invigorated the men, it got their blood up for the coming battle. That was good.

Domeric’s blood had been boiling for a different reason. Every victory in the West would only provoke the Lannisters more. It would draw out the campaign. Tywin Lannister had even marched out of Harrenhal to defend his home, so their scouts had said. Uncle Roose was one of those scouts. There was no reason to doubt Uncle Roose, so Domeric’s father considered the intelligence confirmed.

They had orders to take Harrenhal, but Tywin was gone. Was their entire host to sit in another ruined castle for moons before hearing from the Young Wolf again? The castle was a strong point for a long campaign in the Riverlands, aye, but they were Northmen, not Rivermen. Already the Riverlords had split from the Northern army and were taking back their own castles themselves anyway. The only people who cared about whether the Trident was secure were Robb Stark, his Tully mother, and her family. Their friends of Frey didn’t care. The Twins would hold if the Trident burned. Again they’d be wasting their time. The Lannisters were not attacking the North. The Ironmen would be, if they were not already. The Northern army did not care to defend the lands they marched through, or its people. They were just more invaders to the smallfolk here. The Northmen should be going home.

Pointless, pointless, it was all pointless. Tywin was gone. There was no Lannister army defending the capital. They could march on King’s Landing. It was less than a moon’s march for an army with a supply train. But they could not save their Princess – they hadn’t the men, they hadn’t the
horse. Those were in the West. They couldn’t storm King’s Landing without a united host. Perhaps they couldn’t take the city even with the entire force that had gone south when Ned Stark had been arrested. Both armies, all of them – they were all wasting their coin, wasting their food, wasting their time, as they had been for six moons now. And it was their Princess who suffered. Every day her kingly brother wasted was another day their she-wolf lay chained in a cage. His Grace held the Kingslayer beneath Riverrun in a cell. He could make a trade. He could end the war. He could stop the waste, of coin and food and time and blood. He could send them back to defend their homes before the enemy reached them. He could take their Princess back to Winterfell where she belonged.

Instead, their boy king pranced the pick of the North up and down the Westerlands chasing fool’s gold and false glory while playing at vengeance.

He was wroth. Again, he was in the rear with the small company of horse. Again, he was doing nothing. He was with Robbie and Ronnel Stout. Uncle Roose was with the outriders. At dawn a guard had caught sight of an approaching party coming to their camp, so they formed up. It was a troupe of Essosi sellswords in service to Lord Tywin that called themselves the Brave Companions. The Bloody Mummers, everyone else calls them. Their leader was Vargo Hoat, of Qohor. He was called the Goat, as he wore a goat’s head helm, after the Black Goat of Qohor. Around his neck was something that looked like a maester’s chain from so far away, and his steed was a –

“Dom. Dom, look - ” Robbie started, ribbing him with his elbow. “Zorses, haven’t you always wanted to see one? Do you think if we kill him and the zorse is captured alive we could take it to Grandfather?”

“I know, Robbie, but be serious now. They may have a peace banner but they’re all from Essos, we don’t know if they’re going to honor it.” The Goat was treating with his father. “They don’t call them the Bloody Mummers for nothing.”

“They’re all so colorful,” Robbie said. “Are those bowmen all from the Summer Islands? Feather cloaks! How grand! And the Tyroshi - ”

“They cut off the hands and feet of their prisoners, Robbie.” Domeric frowned. “Even we Boltons treat highborn hostages well when we need them.”

“No harm in observation, Dom. The bit about Summer Islanders and Tyroshi could have been useful.”

“Shove off, Robbie. Look, parts of Glover’s van and the Freys are going with the Goat’s company. Father must have persuaded them to turn their cloaks.” He spat. “Sellswords.”

It appeared that Roose’s talk with the Goat was done, for they clasped arms and turned away from each other. His father returned to where the host was standing in formation and waved to signal a retreat to camp.

“Harrenhal will be ours tomorrow evening,” Roose had Steelshanks announce.

***

When they arrived at Harrenhal the first order of business was dispatching with the servants in the castle who had collaborated with the Lannisters during Tywin’s occupation.

There was a maester, an armorer, and a goodwife, and a steward, all shorter by a head, tarred and feathered and up on the castle walls for the crime of serving Lord Tywin as they had Lady Whent.
Then the girls – the poor serving girls – were denuded of their hair and their clothes and placed in stocks in a bear pit for the Northmen to take as they pleased, all for being too weak to defend themselves against the Lannister garrison and their lusts. It roiled his gut. It made him sick. He was a knight. He had sworn vows. This would not stand.

But he could not help them. His own father had ordered this.

What use was a knight who could not protect women and the weak? What use was a war to defend a kingdom when the defenders attacked the kingdom’s people? He could not stand down his father, the Mummers, and almost ten thousand men all by his lonesome. It was all so, so pointless, this war.

He wanted to take the keys to the stocks – surely whoever held them could not dare deny the heir to the Dreadfort - down into the bear pit and free all the girls. He knew exactly what he’d say.

*My ladies, he’d begin. I am sorry for the horrors you have all endured at the hands of my father’s army. On my honor as a knight, please accept my protection from my father’s men. If any of them harm you or seek to in the future, please let me know. Ask for Young Lord Bolton, or Ser Domeric.*

He’d walk into the barracks at dawn and stand staring in silence while the men began to notice his presence, while the chatter died down. When he’d had the attention of all he would look around the room and say in a spider-soft voice, *if I hear that any of you has harmed a woman, I will cut off your balls and make you watch as I flay them.* But he couldn’t do that. His father would hear. His father would override his words and then flay his toes while asking him why he sought to deny the men what they had earned. *Because I am a knight,* he would scream, tears mingling with sweat and streaming down his face. *Because it’s the right thing to do. Because the Bastard embarrassed us and we need to prove that we are better than him.* And then Roose would just look at him with the ghost-grey eyes they shared.

But he was a coward, to his shame, when it came to his father. He couldn’t face Roose. Not in this.

**Chapter End Notes**

Donella Hornwood is the first person to mention Domeric in the entire series. She refers to him as 'young Domeric' so I take that to mean they had met. The exclusion of Lady Donella and her fate in the show really changed show-Ramsay IMO. It took away his cunning/deliberate evil and amped up the 'uncontrollable mad dog' aspect to his character. But maybe some things are just Too Horrible For TV.

It occurs to me that Lady Hornwood's fate sort of echoes the structure of the girls Ramsay chases in his games. Lady Hornwood was hunted through the woods, too.

Domeric channels Jaime Lannister in this chapter. I imagine Jaime's 'so many vows' problem would be rather common in GRRM's world.
Domeric VII

Chapter Summary

Domeric interacts with a lost princess, a wronged walrus, and a friend in a haunted castle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His father had taken a new cupbearer named Nan, alias Weasel. She had dressed as a boy, but was actually a girl. Nonetheless, Roose had put her in a Dreadfort uniform and taken her on as a page. Apparently Elmar had proven himself to be too squeamish to be useful at his father’s leechings, while this Nan did not seem to fear anything. An investigation revealed that she had been one of the Harrenhal servants who had killed the Lannister guardsmen and helped to free the Northern hostages the night before the main host arrived.

During the first leeching, the second night they spent in the castle, he looked at the girl. There was something familiar about her that he couldn’t place. She had the look of the North about her, sounded like a northerner too. So he talked to her after they were dismissed.

“My lady,” he addressed her, “Nan. Where are you from? I believe I have seen you before.”

“I’m not a lady, my lord,” she bristled. “And I’m from Maidenpool. My lord.”

He shook his head. “You speak like a Northerner and this is a Northern army. Won’t be any fooling us.”

She flared her nostrils and exhaled from her nose. “Barrowton, my lord. My mother is a maid in service to Lady Dustin at Barrow Hall. My lord.” Then she looked down and he couldn’t see her face.

Her answer made him smile. “I know Barrowton well. When I was your age I was a page there, like you. Lady Dustin is my aunt. Which maid is your mother? Danna? Rosie? Serena?” Then he furrowed his brow. “What are you doing here, Nan? How did you get here? Lady Dustin did not march south with us. Your mother shouldn’t have been a camp follower in the train. Neither should you. We should get you home,” he said.

Nan just shook her head, looking away. She scrunched up her face and chewed her lip. “Came down with my father, I did, my lord. Not my mother. Just before the war. On my father’s business. To do some work as a favor to his friend. A stonemason he was, my father, and there ’ent much stonework in Barrowton. Then we got stuck, my lord. Because of the war.”

“Terrible. You should not be here. Does your father let live?” She shook her head again. “All the more reason for you to go home. I’ll write to my aunt. We’ll take you back, my lady, somehow.”

He furrowed his brow again. He looked at her face. He could not place it among all the faces of Barrowton that he knew.

“Why haven’t I seen you in Barrowton, Nan? I try to visit as often as I can.”
“I worked in the kitchens when I got old enough to work, my lord. My lord did not visit the kitchens often. And I beg pardon, my lord, if you please, but my lord only saw the pretty girls, not the little girls.”

He laughed. “You have me there, my lady. I won’t keep you when you’re on my father’s business. But I promise you, Nan, I will find a way to bring you home, if you would have my help.”

She scurried away and avoided him for the rest of his stay in the castle. It weighed on his heart. She was a child. He had wanted to help. It seemed as though he couldn’t help anyone.

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Lord Tywin had held the prisoners from the Battle on the Green Fork captive at Harrenhal. The Lannisters had treated them well – they had been given free run of the castle. Ser Slower – Ser Wylis, I must call him Ser Wylis, I must respect the Manderlys – did not look the worse for wear, for he had the liberty to visit the kitchens as he pleased (and visiting the kitchens pleased Ser Wylis very much). The first time he ran into Ser Wylis, Domeric begged a moment of his time.

“How well did the Lannisters keep you abreast of news outside?”

“We were told about the king’s campaigns. When the armies marched, victories and losses, the like. We heard about Oxcross.”

“They did not tell you of Stannis and Renly? Or comings and goings in the North?”

“No, ser. Why? Is there news for me?” Domeric nodded grimly. Roose was never going to take the initiative to tell Ser Wylis of this. He’d wait to be confronted and explain that the Bastard had been far away, that Roose had no knowledge or control over Ramsay’s actions, and that he had had little part in raising him elsewise. That he was a mad dog who had been put down anyway.

“Ser Wylis, I think it best we find somewhere to sit down.” They were near the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, so the search was concluded quickly. Then Domeric sucked in air and explained what the Bastard had done to Lady Donella.

“I know that there is nothing that could ever give your family satisfaction for what my father’s bastard did to your cousin. I met the good lady on a few occasions and was very distressed to hear the news. For many reasons.” Then he paused. “There is little likelihood that my father will ever make recompense on behalf of House Bolton. He will pin this on Ramsay and Ramsay alone.” He looked straight into Ser Wylis’ face.

“But Roose will not live forever, and when I am Lord of the Dreadfort and you are Lord of White Harbor, we will come to an understanding. Things can never be made right, but I promise you that House Bolton will be making gestures of goodwill to House Manderly for a very long time. I swear on my honor as a knight.”

Ser Wylis nodded stiffly, thanked him, and grasped his arm. “We are all grateful that you’re not your father, lad,” he said. Then he rose and retreated to the part of the hall where food was typically served.

Whenever he needed to swear on his honor, Domeric would swear on his honor as a knight. He could not very well claim his honor as a Bolton. His honor as a knight was the only honor that he had. And even that was frittering out, day by day, as they persisted in this hopeless war.

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Domeric took solace in the fact that Harry was alive, and hale, and well. He was easily as vigorous as he had been six moons ago.

“What did you do while you were here, Harry?” They were eating dinner in the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, as he always did when the Goat wasn’t there. Sometimes Harry joined him, Robbie, and Uncle Roose. Other times Harry would eat with the Karhold men, who were much relieved to find their commander alive. One of them had already told Harry about the fates of young Torrhen and Eddard.

“Walked the battlements, mostly. Climbed the towers that weren’t where the Old Lion was staying. Excellent view of the countryside here. Do ye know that if ye go all the way to the top of the Wailing Tower, ye can see the copse of weirwood trees on the Isle of Faces? A tiny tiny speck of white in the middle of a dot of green, in a blue-black patch near the horizon. Very queer looking eye, the God’s Eye is.”

Harry had also spent much of his time in Harrenhal’s enormous godswood. “Prayer does a man good in times like this,” he had remarked. “War. Loved ones lost. Idleness tempting. Idleness breeds broodiness, and broodiness sucks the life out of you. Drains yer strength. Ye might think that prayer is idle,” and here Harry stabbed a fork into a hunk of meat and pointed it at Domeric, “but it is anything but. Prayer is active. Prayer hones the mind. Even if ye don’t hear them, the old gods work on ye when ye pray and look into their faces. They turn ye into who ye need to be when their answer comes.”

After that, Domeric started visiting the godswood with Harry as part of his daily routine. He’d rise before dawn, shave, and see to his other grooming before making for the Hall of a Hundred Hearths, where he would meet Harry outside the double doors. Then they’d walk in silence to the godswood, passing over the stream and through near ten acres of oaks, pines, and sentinels before arriving at the gigantic heart tree at the center. Its sinister face snarled with hateful intent, and its sappy red eyes flashed malice and ill will. Pray, fool, it seemed to say to him. Pray and give me blood. Mayhaps one day I shall act on what I hear and grant your heart’s desire. He and Harry would kneel down, eyes level with the tree’s twisted mouth, and begin their communion with the old gods. Harry would simply hang his head, but Domeric would take out one of his daggers, slash his palm, and smear it into the weirwood’s cracked bark.

When it was time to go, he’d clean his hand in the stream, and they would go train or drill with the men in the Flowstone Yard for a few hours. Then it would be time for the midday meal, and then he’d either meet with the Dreadfort officers, wander about the castle, sup in the mess or with the lords in the Hunter’s Hall if there was a raven that required a commander’s meeting, and then go attend a leeching if there was a need. If there was no need, he would make for Harrenhal’s extensive library and keep up his correspondence with Aunt Barbrey and Lady Walda, tuck into a book or scribble out a poem or two. Child, none of my maids are married to stonemasons. None of their children are named Nan, a bird from his aunt said one day. The girl had lied to him. That was strange.

Often he found himself consumed by his writing, as if the castle itself seemed to hold the candlelight still and constant for hours and hours before sucking it all away with only a breath’s notice, leaving him to put away the books or the parchment and fumble back to the door in the near total dark. Then it was time for bed, and then he’d sleep and do it again.

Many times he’d shuffle about the castle and its grounds, avoiding all, taking in the environment, breathing in the history that hung thickly in the air like smoke or steam or whatever substance ghosts were made of – for there were many ghosts in Harrenhal. Once, he’d walked his horse out to where the tiltyards stood, mounted up with an old training lance, and pretended that he was riding
the joust in that ill-fated tourney from the year of his birth. He had been named champion, of course, and so he’d swung around before the crowd of shades and placed an invisible flower crown atop his missing lady love’s head.

Other times he would walk about the grounds and the ruined gardens, looking up at the castle’s five towers as he went. Widow’s Tower, Wailing Tower, Kingspyre Tower, Tower of Ghosts, Tower of Dread – and then he smirked.

*Every tower in the Dreadfort is a Tower of Dread*, he thought. *This place feels like home.* He rolled his shoulders. *It’s cursed.*

Houses Hoare, Qoherys, Harroway, Towers, Strong, Lothson, Whent… all gone now. People said that Lady Whent had only fled, but in all likelihood she and her guard had been slaughtered by that rampant wolf pack, or had been killed by outlaws, clothes stripped from their bodies, coin and food and horses and carts looted from their camp. Janos Slynt was the lord of the castle now, but he was freezing on the Wall, and any sons he may have had had not come to claim it. Even individuals who had held the castle for but a short time succumbed to the curse or fed its evil. Rhaena Targaryen, left to die, Mad Danelle and her bloody baths, the Witch Queen Alys Rivers and her vile magic – it made him wonder what foul fate would befall Lord Tywin, what would befall his father eventually. Already they had seen the remains of Tywin’s child-killer castellan Lorch ravaged in the bear pit. Perhaps this war would bring down all of the Lannisters, from the Old Lion and his children down to little Joy Hill. Perhaps it would bring down the Boltons – all of Roose, Ramsay and himself.

Then he felt cold. Not the comfortable, homey nip of a Northern summer, not the bone-chilling bite of a Northern winter, but a different sort, one that began in his head and dripped down to pierce his heart and radiated outward to his skin, like pain from a stab wound. *Pray, fool*, a voice in his heart said, and he shivered.

He felt a kind of dread, then, that he hadn’t felt since he was a boy, since before he’d left for Barrowton. The dread of his childhood, the dread of home – the dread of ghosts. Ghosts wailing in pain, ghosts staring in silence, ghosts breathing on your throat and touching you in your sleep. Truly, Harrenhal felt like home! It must have been the blood in the mortar. It must have been all the death. All the torture within the walls. All that pain those stones had seen.

Ghosts, ghosts, Harrenhal was filled with ghosts. It was just like the Dreadfort! But where the Dreadfort was like a sealed crypt, choking with stuffy air, with the walls trapping you inside, Harrenhal was like a looted tomb, cracked open by thieves and spewing dust and foulness that clung to all that followed. When you got out of the Dreadfort, you were *out of the Dreadfort*. The ghosts didn’t follow. Harrenhal, though – the ghosts in Harrenhal stuck to you like shadows. Somehow he felt he’d never leave Harrenhal behind.

He didn’t want to be alone.

Chapter End Notes

A bit of an uneventful chapter. The beginning is a shout out to the Tywin/Arya scene from the show. It always bothered me why Arya never revealed herself to any of the highborns walking around Harrenhal when Roose was there. She had a lot to choose from - Roose, Kyle Condon, Wylis Manderly, Harrion Karstark, Robett Glover,
Helman Tallhart, Ronnel Stout. She wanted to talk to Robett but she never did. Arya had been to White Harbor twice, and Ser Wylis would most likely have been there. She could have talked to him too.

It's understandable why she wouldn't talk to Roose, who is very creepy. Roose picked up on the my lord/m'lord distinction with Theon in ADWD, but he doesn't mention it to Arya in ACOK. Probably one of his games. Why nobody else in the castle picks up on a northern accent is beyond me, though. Maybe they just didn't have any reason to talk to her.

I find it interesting that she didn't think to speak to Kyle Condon at all, especially since he would have been an obvious highborn around Cerwyn men all the time, and Castle Cerwyn was only a half day's ride from Winterfell. In Bran II ACOK, Bran mentions that Cley Cerwyn was a "friend" to the Stark brothers, so presumably Arya would have known him well. She might have been able to persuade Kyle Condon about who she was if she gave enough details about Cley and his behavior. Who knows, maybe she just didn't recognize the Condon sigil. Should have payed more attention to lessons with Maester Luwin :/

The Barrowton excuse may have worked on Tywin, who'd likely never been there and wouldn't have cared, but it wouldn't have worked on Domeric Bolton. I'm extrapolating on her "not proactively asking for help" to "refusing help out of some twisted logic". Maybe that's wrong, IDK. Maybe she's just creeped out because he has a scary Bolton face.

Harrenhal is a creepy, spooky place. How does a person who grew up in the also creepy, spooky Dreadfort react to it? I imagine that people like Roose who feel like they belong there would do just fine. But if you don't feel totally at "home" at the Dreadfort you probably won't like Harrenhal too much. The dragonfire and huge ruin aspects probably don't help.

The description given for the Harrenhal's godswood and in particular its heart tree are interesting. They were obviously there pre-conquest, pre-castle, pre-Andal invasion. A huge tree in a huge forest will be super old. The rafters and beams are said to be made of weirwoods three THOUSAND years old. Why did Harren the Black choose the shores of the God's Eye to plant his mega-seat? Was it because the Isle of Faces was just next door? Why would he do that if he was a Drowned God worshiping Ironborn? Regardless, something spooky and old gods related is going on in that castle, which was basically a ginormous blood magic engine made more potent by whatever dragonfire does.

I am releasing chapter 8 today. I wrote a lot and fixed a chapter that wasn't working. Updates will continue to be on Fridays.
Domeric VIII

Chapter Summary

The northern army at Harrenhal receives a string of Very Bad News.

Chapter Notes

Are you him that so often spoke
of our lady, talking to us alone?
You well resemble him in voice,
but the face seems to us another man's.
And why do you weep so bitterly,
who from yourself stir pity in others?
Did you see her weeping, that you cannot
hide your sorrowing mind within?
Let us weep and go by sadly
(who tries to comfort us commits a sin),
for in her weeping we have heard her speak.
She has a face so filled by pity,
that he who wished to gaze on her weeping,
would fall dead before her.

- Dante Alighieri, 'Are you him that so often spoke', La Vita Nuova

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Ironmen had come. As the weeks wore on, more and more birds trickled in, a string of bad news, one after another. *Dark wings, dark words indeed.*

First came Moat Cailin. They learned about this in a bird from the Twins not a moon after they arrived at Harrenhal. Helman Tallhart cursed and avoided Lord Bolton’s eyes.

“We never should have left.” Tallhart said it, but everyone was thinking it, and what was more, everyone agreed. The commanders and lords were meeting in the Hunter’s Hall poring over maps. Victarion Greyjoy had taken his longships east up Saltspear and the Fever River to take the castle from the north. Helman Tallhart’s garrison, which had been left behind at the Twins and the Moat when they first left for the Battle on the Green Fork, had come to meet the main host on the way to Harrenhal.

*None of us should be at Harrenhal*, Domeric thought then, as he had many times in the days they’d been there. There was nothing to do here. None of the Northmen cared about the Riverlands or the Riverlords and their castles. They all cared about the Moat, though. They should have all stayed at the Moat. They should have stayed in the North. They should have taken the Princess back as soon as Ned Stark died and gone back home…

When the meeting was over the lords shuffled out the door. Tallhart looked the worst – Torrhen’s
Square was not very far from the Moat, and many of his men were here – while Robett Glover and Kyle Condon looked shaken. Robbie caught his eyes, and then Domeric looked at Ronnel Stout, and then at Uncle Roose. The Rillseat and Barrowton were both in the vicinity of Saltspear. He felt nervous.

Robbie gave voice to one his thoughts. “His fucking Grace has truly done it,” he said though gritted teeth, both fists clenching. “Theon fucking Greyjoy. What a fucking idiot. Which one of my sisters do you think will be carried off on those fucking squiddy ships, to be raped day in and day out and never to be seen again? Branna? Beth? And what about Aunt Barbrey, all alone? His fucking Grace. His fucking Grace. On your knees for his fucking Grace, the King in the North…” No one else saw but Robbie’s eyes were starting to shine and he was blinking quite rapidly.

Bile rose in his throat. Would Aunt Barbrey become a salt wife? She was getting on in years, yes, with some wrinkles and grey hairs, but she had always been beautiful, and she had never borne a child. She kept up her riding and had not run to fat like some women her age. What if a grizzled old sailor thought her young and tight enough and stole her away to his ship after burning down Barrow Hall? The thought made him angry.

“I’m sure they’ll all be fine, Robbie,” he whispered, but he wasn’t sure at all. They were here. They couldn’t do anything. They were rotting in the open grave that was bloody Harrenhal, and all that mattered to them was under assault if it wasn’t gone already.

Then Uncle Roose clapped a hand on both of their shoulders and squeezed. “Lads,” he said, “it’ll be all right. No harm will come to the Rills while Father and Roger and Rick are there. Your sisters are safe, Robbie. Father sent less than three hundred horse here, remember? That’s counting you and me, Robbie. The rest of them, and the best, are at home. No one’s being carried away.” For all that it always grated when Uncle Roose called him ‘lad’ – they were nearly of an age, after all, Roose was hardly two-and-twenty – he was glad for his uncle’s comfort.

“Barb sent less than three hundred south as well. No one’s burning down Barrow Hall. Close your mouth, Dom, I know you were thinking it. Right, Stout?” Apparently Ronnel Stout was behind them too.

“Aye, lads,” he said. “Lady Dustin and Barrowton are well protected. It’s just me and the boys here. Only as much as the Stark levies required. We’ve enough men back home to keep the Ironmen away. No need for such treasonous talk, young Robert.”

The Rills and Barrowton were lucky. Torrhen’s Square and Deepwood Motte were not. The next bird that came announced how Deepwood Motte had fallen to Asha Greyjoy – what the fuck did the Ironmen teach their women anyway – and now Lady Sybelle and little Gawen and Erena Glover were in the kraken’s clutches. Oh, and Larence Snow. What was more, Theon fucking Greyjoy had raided the Stony Shore himself, had Benfred Tallhart drowned of all things, and had gone on to have some of his men strike Torrhen’s Square in a feint.

“‘Our garrisons from Winterfell and Castle Cerwyn rode out to defend Torrhen’s Square, leaving an opening for Greyjoy to take Winterfell with only a handful of men,’” Lord Bolton read aloud and looked up at them all in the Hunter’s Hall. “It appears as though our little princes are now captive, along with the whole of the Stark household.” So his father had read in a bird forwarded from Ser Rodrik. The whole hall was silent.

Everyone knew who was to blame here but nobody said it. No one could do anything. Lord Helman’s face was ashen. It seemed like he’d fall apart once Domeric’s father dismissed the meeting. Robett Glover was shaking in place and doing his best to breathe evenly. His face was slowly purpling. Ser Kyle Condon handed Glover a goblet of wine which he summarily dropped.
“Perhaps his Grace should be making provisions to secure the safety of his other heir,” Domeric tried with a whisper. Everybody looked at him and nobody said anything. It was a bad time, the wrong moment.

Roose turned to stare at him, a lip curling. They had discussed this before. “A mission such as that would require orders directly from his Grace. To risk bodily harm to the Princess without his express permission would be nearing treason. The Lannisters will not harm her. She is a valuable highborn hostage.

“You may all go.”

Lord Bolton had spoken. All they could do was pray.

So pray they did. Most all men who were not part of the White Harbor contingent came to the godswood at least sometimes during their occupation of the castle, but only now were they coming together, at the same time, every day. It was no matter fitting them all, for the Harrenhal godswood was twenty leagues in size. Uncle Roose, Robbie, Ronnel Stout, and the Dustin and Ryswell men were the first to join Domeric and Harry after the Moat had fallen. Then the Karstark men, to join their lord. After news of Winterfell, Torrhen’s Square, and Deepwood Motte came, Robett Glover and Helman Tallhart started coming with their men, and Kyle Condon and the Cerwyns too. Even some Dreadfort men like Steelshanks came since Domeric was there.

They became a communal ritual, their mass meetings in the godswood. They bound the Northmen together and reminded them what, in the end, they were fighting for, even if they could do no fighting now. They kept them all sane amidst the painful, maddening idleness. Each day the lords would kneel in front, closest to the snarling heart tree, where all the men could see them. Each day they would read out their public intentions, namely those pertaining to other people and places known to all – that is, highborns and their castles. In the meantime they would pass bowls around for the men to collect their blood into. By the end they were passing around hundreds of bowls.

Harry would typically lead these meetings since he had the loudest voice among all of the lords.

“For Lady Sybelle and the Glover children and their safety,” Harry would boom, and they would all repeat.

“For the liberation of Deepwood Motte. For the liberation of Winterfell. For Prince Brandon and Prince Rickon and their safety. For Princess Sansa, her safety, and her honor. For Princess Arya, her safety, and her honor. For King Robb, his victory, and his wise counsel. For Lord Bolton and his wise counsel. For a bountiful harvest. For strength to last the winter. For the safety of our women, our children, and our homes. For the dead.”

Then they would all cut their palms and give their blood to the weirwood’s roots. It was all very somber. It was all very moving. There in the Harrenhal godswood, they were one North, united behind one cause. They were one army against one enemy – an enemy they could do nothing against. Then they would break apart, and the day would begin.

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The worst bird came forwarded from the Twins, written by Domeric’s uncle-by-marriage, Little Walder Frey, Lady Walda’s full-blooded brother, and his cousin, Big Walder Frey, of the Blackwood line. They were both wards at Winterfell, but the raven bore the pink seal of the Dreadfort.

Theon Greyjoy had burned Winterfell to the ground. He killed the little princes and burned them
too, mounting their charred corpses on the castle walls. Greyjoy had many of the Winterfell retainers put to the sword, including their maester. The Northmen who had been left behind had assembled to liberate the castle from the Ironmen, but had taken many casualties. Cley Cerwyn was dead, as were Leobald Tallhart and Rodrik Cassel. At the last moment the Bolton garrison led by Ramsay Snow had come to relieve the spent Northerners. Ramsay had all the ironmen flayed and killed, took Greyjoy prisoner, and was holding the Frey boys and Winterfell’s remaining people in safety at the Dreadfort.

*My brother the hero,* Domeric mused bitterly. *Ramsay the raper, the savior of Winterfell. Who would have thought? Here I am, the knight, and I have done nothing while so much evil has happened.*

“It would seem your brother is not dead, my son,” Roose said softly. “That is good news.”

“So it is, Father,” said Domeric. They had discussed this already. It was bad news for him. He had thought himself safe from the Bastard. The Manderlys would not like it either.

“It’s the only good news,” said Kyle Condon, who was shaking his head. Ser Wylis and Domeric exchanged a look. “Cley… Cley… A boy. House Cerwyn, down to Jonelle and a few cousins… Gods only know if Jonelle can yet bear babes… Does she know?”

“Lady Jonelle was left at the Twins with Lady Walda,” said Roose. “She would have heard this news before we did.”

Helman Tallhart had his face in his hands. “Leobald… First Benfred, now Leobald. I thought they would both be safe up there. Damn the Ironmen! Damn them! Gods be good, let Eddara and Berena and the boys be safe.”

Domeric looked at Robbie, whose mouth was pressed into a thin line. Uncle Roose’s jaw was set tightly. None of the Ryswells liked the Starks, especially not Catelyn Tully’s get, but they would not sink so low as to celebrate the deaths of two little boys. Still, their faces betrayed the looks of those whose dark predictions had come true. Ronnel Stout’s face was similar. Robett Glover still looked angry, as he had looked at every meeting since word of Deepwood Motte had arrived. *I told you so,* any one of them could have said to the Young Wolf, couched in the proper courtesies, of course. *I told you so,* they would have said, but none of their company had even seen His Grace since the turn of the year. That honor went to the Greatjon and Rickard Karstark, whose lands were on the Narrow Sea, not the Sunset Sea. They could probably care less about the Ironborn so long as they hadn’t breached Winterfell’s walls. Better for them, even, with the other Northern lords spending their power while the eastern shores remained safe. Galbart Glover or Maege Mormont might have said something, but who knew whether they would have been heard over the chorus of voices shouting *AYE!* in their boy king’s ear.

Truly this was a crisis for the North. The little princes dead, Winterfell taken, houses Cerwyn and Hornwood in ruin, all with winter upon them with no way back home. They couldn’t very well ferry their way across the Bite with Lady Lysa — another Tully, who would have guessed, the only one worth anything is the Blackfish - refusing all ravens from the North and the Rivermen.

Surely this was the time to say something, to receive the input of all. Domeric coughed. No one looked up. Then he coughed again, and a few eyes were on him, so he started speaking.

“If I may, my lords,” he began, “it would seem as though securing the Princess’ person is a matter of utmost political importance now. She is His Grace’s heir. Should His Grace fall in the West while Princess Sansa remains a captive of the Crown, we will have a Lannister King in the North. We might not even have a kingdom of the North anymore. Surely Lord Tywin will want to bring
the North back into the Seven Kingdoms if he wins this war. If Joffrey puts a Lannister in the
Princess’ belly, eight thousand years of Stark rule will be over and done with when this generation
dies.

“We shouldn’t wait for His Grace’s instructions. He’s too far, we’ll never reach him in the field in
time. We wouldn’t know which castle to send a bird to, or how long it would take a rider to get to
his camp. At this moment, every day matters. We should send a party down to King’s Landing
before Stannis -”

“Stannis is more likely to make peace with His Grace. His Grace has no quarrel with Stannis. The
Princess will be safe should Stannis take the city.” It was Ser Aenys Frey. Domeric turned on Ser
Aenys and tried his best to look like his father, cool and dispassionate and above all, correct. He
would not be interrupted again.

“We have no leverage over Stannis,” Domeric said. “And Stannis does have a quarrel with His
Grace. Stannis styles himself the rightful King of the Seven Kingdoms. He will not make peace
with His Grace so long as His Grace remains King in the North and of the Trident. Stannis will
want His Grace to give up his crown, which, by all accounts, he will never do. What’s more, the
lords who named him such will not let him. No. It’s better for the Princess to remain the
Lannisters’ hostage rather than Stannis’. She is highborn. They will treat her the same.”

As long as Joffrey is not dishonoring her. Stannis would never do that. But that was only a suspicion that he
could not voice if he was to keep sounding credible. “If the Lannisters keep King’s Landing, we
still have the Kingslayer to trade. If Stannis takes the city, which our intelligence says he is like to,
we will have nothing to trade her for, except His Grace’s crown.

“We must send a party before Stannis arrives and the capital descends into chaos. We have plenty
of Lannister armor here from when Lorch held the castle. We don’t have enough men to storm
King’s Landing, but we don’t need them. We only need ten good men, maybe fewer. We would
need stealth and speed. It’s less than a week’s hard ride to the capital from Harrenhal with a party
that small; we could disguise ourselves as Lannister soldiers and sneak into the Red Keep. There
are maps here, of the city, in the library, I’ve seen them. Books with descriptions of the Red Keep,
as good as we can get without blueprints. It’s possible. We could break the Princess out, we could
bring her here, or to Riverrun, before she’s trapped.” He took a breath and was about to speak.

Ser Kyle Condon stared at him agape. “What makes you think the King would trade the Kingslayer
for her if the Lannisters beat Stannis, after all these moons? Or that the Lannisters would make the
trade? His Grace’s campaign in the West has gone on for far too long. He has taken too many
castles, done too much damage. Who’s to say the Lannisters won’t make His Grace give up his
crown like Stannis would?"

Personally, Domeric was of the opinion that Robb Stark didn’t deserve his crown, not after all this,
but he wasn’t about to say so. Condon’s question, though, he could answer. He did pay attention in
these meetings, after all. “His Grace has taken many hostages in the West. He has more than just
the Kingslayer, he has more Lannisters. Ser Kevan’s children. There are other highborns too. We
could trade them all for just the Princess. The situation has changed now that Prince Bran and
Prince Rickon are dead. She’s one mortal wound away from becoming the Queen in the North.
She’s worth all of them combined. We need her. We must have her back.

“There’s loot too. Gold. Jewels. Precious things. His Grace’s host, they can’t have sent it back
North, they can’t have spent it all. They have it in their baggage trains. We could give it all back
just for the Princess. Gods be good, the Greatjon sacked Castamere! It’s full of silver and gold,

enough for generations! Surely the lions would give us back our Princess to regain Castamere.
“We have enough hostages to trade. We have enough loot to afford a ransom. If we can’t rescue her before Stannis and the Lannisters do battle, we’ll have to pray that the Lannisters win just so a trade is still possible. Before the Princess is trapped and we truly cannot do anything for her anymore should our King fall.”

Domeric looked around the room. His father’s gaze was inscrutable. Roose seemed like he was waiting for someone else to talk before he adjourned the meeting. Robbie stared at him, his face knowing. The Freys looked annoyed, the rest either puzzled or like they were thinking over his words. Ronnel Stout gazed thoughtfully at him, raised an eyebrow, and opened his mouth.

“Lad, I’ve known you more than ten years, that’s the most words I’ve heard you string in a row since I’ve laid eyes on you.” That comment was not helpful. At that moment, Domeric couldn’t care less if Ronnel Stout started to suspect anything. He didn’t care if the whole North did. They had to get their Princess back, or it would be too late. Their princes were dead. They couldn’t go home. The Moat was closed. The host was split. They couldn’t storm King’s Landing, no matter who held it. They had to do something. He didn’t care how many words he’d have to string together to get them to do something.

Domeric’s father leveled a cool stare at Stout. “My son can speak at length when the occasion arises.” Then Roose looked around the hall. “I would hear any additional objections to Domeric’s words before we consider sending any ravens to Riverrun or to the West.” Domeric had reason to hope at his father’s remark. On the one hand, the birds meant a delay and a chance that his plans could be rejected. On the other, they hadn’t been dismissed outright. His father was plainly deliberating. There was a chance that they could move on this.

“My lords of Bolton.” It was Harry. Harry was looking at Domeric and speaking slowly, clearly chewing on his words. “I do not think the other lords marching with His Grace would take kindly to this. They have fought and bled for the loot they have taken. Their men too. It would betray the men to give up that loot. They earned it. And anyone who knows the Greatjon well will know that he will be loath to give up Castamere. And the hostages… Pardon, my lords, but I know my father. My brothers are dead. The Kingslayer killed them. My father wants Lannister blood. He wants the Kingslayer dead, and if not him, any Lannister hostages they have, any Lannisters they can kill in the field. He will not accept a trade. Not for the Kingslayer, not for any Lannister. He will oppose it every time the issue is raised. He will howl for their execution. That is his way.

“Condon is correct,” continued Harry. “The western campaign has gone on too long. Not just for the Lannisters, but for our brothers out there. They are too invested. They have spilled too much sweat, too much blood. They will not stop until they have total victory in the field. They will not see it all undone. They will not give up all their gains. They will not give up the Kingslayer and give him the chance to take his revenge. Not for a girl of four-and-ten who is no use in battle.” Domeric schooled his face. His throat was tightening. He knew Harry had the right of it – at least the part about what the Karstarks and the Umbers with the Young Wolf would think, but they were all wrong. The Young Wolf and his coterie of yes-men were all wrong, about the campaign in the Westerlands, about the Kingslayer, about the Princess. She is worth more than a field commander. She is worth more than Castamere, more than all the loot, more than all the hostages together. She is not worthless like they are saying. Not when her own father would have saved her. Not when her husband would be king.

 Couldn’t they all see? Why couldn’t they get their priorities straight? Why did Ned Stark die with Joffrey’s claim on his lips when all knew he supported Stannis in his heart? Why else than to save his daughters? Why insult Ned Stark’s memory by taking vengeance in Ned Stark’s name and dooming sweet Sansa, who Ned Stark loved so dearly? Was it all so pointless then?
Domeric wanted to say more but Roose’s face stopped him. His case had been made. There were no more pieces to be said. Only pleas and begging.

“Thank you, Lord Harrion.” His father’s voice was soft. “Does anyone have anything else to say?” No one answered. Nobody was looking at Domeric anymore. They were all looking to Roose.

“We are done here then.” They all left the room.

Chapter End Notes

It must have really sucked to be Helman Tallhart in canon. To be at the Twins, the closest possible southern castle to Moat Cailin, and then to be summoned away just before the Ironmen attack your home and kill your son and younger brother. Then Roose sent him on a suicide mission and he died. A lot of the tertiary characters have awful lots of it.

It also must have sucked to be Robett Glover too. To be a staunch Stark supporter only for the Stark leader to predictably but unintentionally get your home destroyed and your entire family seized. His kids are age three and one. So little :( I am puzzled by the fact that he was so anti-Bolton and complicit with the Manderlys in the Davos-Rickon plot in ADWD. From an emotional standpoint it seems like he ought to have backed whoever held Theon Greyjoy and could trade for his family back. But then it also says something about him that he is so loyal to the Starks that he conspires for them despite all that. Especially since Glovers don't seem to have died in the original RW according to the wiki.

Also, what happened to the Westerlands loot? Did Robb, the Greatjon, & co march to Riverrun and the Twins with it? Obviously they couldn't take Castamere with them (why they took it in the first place is beyond me, it doesn't seem like such a feat, especially since it was still /underwater/). Whoever gets their hands on that loot, whether it's just on the goldroad or outside the Twins or in the Riverrun vault, would be filthy stinking rich.
Domeric IX

Chapter Summary

Domeric spends time with his Ryswell and Bolton family members and gets an idea.

Chapter Notes

Any dialogue you recognize is from ACOK, Arya X.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lord Bolton eventually sent a raven to Ser Edmure at Riverrun asking for his input on both a trade and a possible rescue operation to King’s Landing. As Harry predicted, exchanging the Kingslayer and any combination of hostages for the Princess was summarily rejected. Apparently, standing orders were to keep the Kingslayer clamped in irons with no questions asked until His Grace returned from the West. Ser Edmure deferred to His Grace on the question of a possible rescue operation. They’d needed to send a raven to the Crag, which was where His Grace happened to be at the time, but apparently His Grace had taken a wound and was in no fit state to make any sort of decision.

And so the waiting continued. Stannis’ confrontation with the Lannisters came and went, and with it their opportunity to rescue the Princess. The good news was that the Lannisters defeated Stannis and still held King’s Landing. The bad news was that they had achieved this victory with the help of House Tyrell. Thanks to Ser Edmure’s play at glory at Stone Mill, Lord Tywin’s force was able to turn south and meet up with the Tyrells to save the city. With the might of the Reach behind them, the Lannisters had enough hope of beating King Robb in the field to deny a trade of the Kingslayer for the Princess.

The Crown’s supply situation was no longer as dire – they needn’t rely on just the West and the Crownlands to feed them when the Tyrell stores were full. While it was a good thing that the Princess was no longer betrothed to Joffrey Baratheon, his betrothal to Margaery Tyrell was undoubtedly worse in the short run. The Lannisters could keep Princess Sansa captive in the capital while the Old Lion, the Fat Flower and Randyll Tarly swung around from the southwest to crush the Northern host. They could then proceed to retake the Riverlands and smash the rest of those loyal to His Grace’s cause, free the Kingslayer, take more highborn hostages from among the Northmen and Riverlords, and dangle them all in front of His Grace and his lady mother to dictate surrender terms before even needing to consider trading the Princess.

They shouldn’t have waited. They shouldn’t have bothered asking Ser Edmure or His Grace. They knew the answer before they even asked. Her family had abandoned her. They all had, now.

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Ser Helman and his men had been getting restless, so they were ordered to take Castle Darry back from the Mountain’s men. Lord Robett and the Glovers had been sent to Maidenpool to sack the city. Ser Helman and Lord Robett were the only ones who got to do anything. The sight of their
departure one morning left the remaining men itching for something to do.

Domeric stabbed his fork into a bowl of soup during the midday meal. *I have to get out of here.* Robbie ribbed him with his elbow.

“You’re doing it again. Stop.”

“Doing what?”

“Brooding. All melancholy like.”

“I’m not brooding, I’m thinking. You should try it some time.”

“Thinking so hard you’re trying to eat soup with a fork?”

“It’s those mushrooms, Robert. Very hard to catch with a spoon.”

“Nonsense. You can catch mushrooms with a spoon… Anyhow you’ve been strange lately. Pray tell why?”

“Strange?”

“Yes. Ever that last meeting about the Stark boys. The one where you talked. You rarely talk at meetings, you. Since then you’ve been lingering in the godsdow in the mornings, spending half the night in the library while somehow having the energy to be a demon in the yard. Tell me, have you been sleeping? Or have you thought your way into sleep that gives twice the rest an hour?”

“There’s nothing to do here. Might as well do the things that there are to do, well, better. Better praying, better training, better reading and writing.” Here he took a swig of his ale and grinned darkly. “Better training means better sleep. You should know that.”

“That I do.” Robbie made a point of swirling around his spoon and then pointed it at Domeric’s face. Apparently he had decided that men at war did not require table manners. “Say, why don’t we go for a walk? Just you and me, cos. You could point out to me where all of those historical things happened. You know, point at a spot and say, *that is where Prince Aemond first spotted Alys Rivers. That is where Mad Danelle kept her bats.* You’re good at that sort of thing. Besides, been a while since we had a chat, for all that we see each other every day now.”

“No, thank you, Robbie. I’d rather not.” Domeric wasn’t going to let Robbie of all people see how much this castle unnerved him. Robbie would never let him live it down. He’d be the butt of all the japes whenever he visited the Rillseat, and then his father would hear of it, and if there was anything Roose Bolton would not abide, it was japes at the expense of House Bolton. *The flayed man is to be feared.* Not merely respected. Not loved. Never laughed at.

“Just a chat in the godsdow then. Or wherever you like to go.” Robbie was the one who was acting strange. For all that Domeric often told his cousin to sober up, to be more serious, Robbie was never one for deep conversations. Robbie was who you went to for fun and games, not anything you truly cared about. Oh, he’d listen all right, but then he’d tell some jape and start laughing again. He wasn’t Mychel Redfort.

“And what would you like to chat about, Robbie?”

“Nothing in particular. Do I need a reason to want to spend time with my dear cousin of Bolton? Haven’t had as many opportunities as I’d like since you packed off to the Vale. We used to be close, before.”
It wasn’t like Robbie to be like this. Domeric had the sinking suspicion that he was reporting back to Grandfather. Why Grandfather would pick Robbie of all people as an informant, and to inform on Domeric of all people, was outside the realm of logic. Robbie would make a terrible spy. Domeric would answer Grandfather’s questions if asked.

“I suppose not. I will go, if it pleases you.” So when they were both done with their soup they traipsed off to the godswood, and they talked about nothing in particular along the way.

When they arrived at a clearing by the stream, far away from the heart tree, Robbie’s feet shuffled on the ground. He cleared his throat. “So. Look. About the Princess - ”

“I told you that I would not speak of it.” Domeric glared but Robbie met him with a hard, brown stare of his own.

“I will speak of it,” Robbie said, “because you need to hear it. We both know that nothing can be done about her situation. All I’m telling you to do is to stop worrying. His Grace has lost the war already. He’ll die, and we’ll get her back as our Lady of Winterfell, loyal to the Crown, or he’ll live and be forced into the Crown’s terms. Even if those terms involve her remaining in the South, she won’t be in danger. She’s a lady. Nobody harms ladies. It’s like you said. But she won’t be a Princess anymore, or Queen in the North. And she won’t need rescuing. For her it will be almost the same as if this whole war never happened. Cat Tully wanted to send her South anyway, everyone knew it, even though Starks don’t belong in the South. So… so… if you really did give up, earlier, before even trying, like I think you did, it will all be the same. You and Lord Bolton can go back to putting offers together for Lord Royce’s daughter or that Hunter girl. Nothing’s changed. Don’t be stupid, all right? The next battle your father throws – don’t look at me like that, we both know your father has been throwing these, they’re all pointless anyway – don’t go running off to play the hero or do something else stupid like that. You’re too smart to be stupid.”

Robbie was gripping Domeric’s shoulders then. Domeric just continued glaring at him coldly. “I’m not stupid. I don’t need you to remind me and you know it too. I’m coming back North with you, don’t worry.” Domeric shrugged one of Robbie’s hands off. “So who is putting you up to this? You’re not one to lecture. Was it Grandfather? Aunt Barbrey?” It couldn’t have been Roose. Roose would just order Domeric himself.

Robbie scowled at Domeric and then sighed. His grip on Domeric’s shoulder slackened. “You really think I need orders to watch out for you?” Robbie shook his head and his face was forlorn.

“We’re done here, Robert. Let’s go.”

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The next morning Elmar accosted Domeric on his way out of the godswood.

“Ser, there will be a leeching in an hour. Lord Bolton requests your presence. Best not head to the yard this morning, ser, or you’ll be late.” Elmar looked out of breath.

“Thank you, Elmar. Come join me to break your fast? It looks like you could use a meal.”

Elmar shook his head. “Thank you, ser, but I can’t. I’m off to the yard to see to his lordship’s armor. I left some rust spots on it last time and his lordship was displeased. I’d best be more careful this time around.”

“All right then, Elmar. Off with you. Don’t forget those tricks I showed you, with the sand.” He ruffled Elmar’s hair. “Come find me if you don’t remember.”
Elmar grinned and nodded in his chinless way. He was growing on Domeric. “Thank you, ser!”
Then the boy ran off.

Domeric ambled over to the Hall of a Hundred Hearths where breakfast was being served. He received a thick cut of boar, a loaf of dark bread, and a slice of hard cheese on his trencher. Most of the other lords were already in the yard, but Uncle Roose was still at one of the tables. His face was slightly flushed and his hair was pulled back in a messy ponytail. Uncle Roose often led scouting missions around the castle. It appeared that he had only recently returned from his latest excursion.

“G’morning,” Uncle Roose said, and Domeric nodded, tucking into his food. The two ate in silence for a few moments. Domeric liked that about Uncle Roose. He didn’t speak unless something needed to be said. Granted, as the leader of the outriders, he often had things to say, but he rarely bothered with pleasantries.

“Any news?”

“Little and less. Much is the same. Villages and fields burning or losing folk to that damned wolf pack. Food situation here likely worse than back up North. The Rills and Barrowlands will be the only places with anything to eat between here and the Wall three years from now.” As if for emphasis Uncle Roose took another hearty bite of ham.

“Aye,” said Domeric, as he broke off a piece of bread. Even at Harrenhal the quartermasters were saying their supplies wouldn’t last the year with the amount of men they had. The food situation would be bad everywhere north of the Crownlands excepting the Vale. It would be particularly terrible in the North and the Riverlands, save for those lands whose lords had the coin to import food. Thanks to Lady Walda, House Bolton had that coin.

“Shall we be off to the yard?”

Domeric shook his head. “I am required at my lord father’s leeching session.”

Uncle Roose smirked at him. “Wouldn’t want my goodbrother to miss you, then.”

They both finished their meals and bid each other goodbye. Then Domeric made his way to the Kingspyre Tower and started up the stairs. He knocked on the door after reaching his father’s chambers. Nan – if that was truly her name – opened the door. His father lay naked on the bed. The man who was not a maester – Qyburn, of the Mummers – was placing the translucent leeches onto the inner sides of his father’s arms and legs, one by one.

Domeric was surprised at how small his father looked there in the bed. He supposed it was because the chamber was crowded, and many in attendance were tall or large. There were a few Freys in attendance – Aenys, Jared, Hosteen, Danwell, Ronel Rivers, and Harys Haigh – and most were of Crakehall stock. The Crakehalls made most other men look scrawny, and Domeric could be called broad himself. For all of the times he had attended leechings before, this time felt queer, for never had Roose looked quite so pale, quite so thin. When Domeric had been a boy, Roose had loomed tall and strong over the entire Dreadfort; nobody could defeat his father. Looking down onto the pallid body on the bed, it struck Domeric that most of the men in the yard could dispatch with Roose Bolton with a mailed fist to the neck. When had been the last battle that Roose had fought himself? When had his father last trained in the yard? Domeric couldn’t remember. Certainly not from this campaign. Perhaps it had been at the Dreadfort…

Domeric focused on the fattening leeches’ slow flush to pink. The Freys were all griping about how the Young Wolf had lost the war, how Stannis’ defeat at the Blackwater and the loss of Winterfell had doomed them all, how their army should flee Harrenhal before Lord Tywin could
come starve them out. Nothing said was new; his father had heard it all before, from Domeric’s mouth, and others’ too. Half the army could tell that Robb Stark, the King Who Lost the North, was done. Everybody knew about the food situation, knew how the Lannister-Tyrell alliance doomed them all to bend the knee or die before seeing home. Those who didn’t admit it were in denial. The cause was lost.

The leeching was complete. The Freys, Uncle Roose, and Robbie were dismissed. His father bid Steelshanks, Qyburn, and Domeric stay while Nan the liar removed the leeches.

“There is a letter from your lady wife,” Qyburn said.

“You may read it,” Domeric’s father said.

“‘I pray for you morn, noon, and night, my sweet lord, and count the days until you share my bed again. Return to me soon, and I will give you many trueborn sons to fill the Dreadfort’s halls and gladden dear Domeric’s lonely heart.’” While Father never answered Lady Walda’s letters, which arrived daily and were always the same, Domeric kept a lively correspondence with his stepmother. He told her of his travels and his hobbies and their lands and she would tell him of her family and provide choice gossip from around the realm that they were likely not to hear during war. It made Domeric smile to know that she remembered him in her notes to his father. It would be like having a true family at the Dreadfort again.

“I will send a letter of my own,” his father said to Qyburn.

“To the Lady Walda?”

“To Ser Helman Tallhart.” A rider from Ser Helman had come not two days past to announce the Castle Darry’s fall to the Tallhart forces. “Tell him to put the captives to the sword and the castle to the torch, by command of the king. Then he is to join forces with Robett Glover and strike east toward Duskendale. Those are rich lands, and hardly touched by the fighting. It is time they had a taste. Glover has lost a castle, and Tallhart a son. Let them take their vengeance on Duskendale.”

“I shall prepare the message for your seal, my lord.” Qyburn left to see to his task.

His father’s order was strange. Duskendale was to the southeast, deep into in the Crownlands. While the Riverlands’ only true borders were the Neck, the Mountains of the Moon, and the foothills at the base of the Westerlands, Duskendale was without a doubt in Lannister control, as was everything east of the Kingsroad once south of the God’s Eye. To get to Duskendale an army would need to cut its way through fields and farms between Antlers and Sow’s Horn. So far away from the Riverlands, and only a minor port so close to King’s Landing, Duskendale wasn’t strategically valuable to His Grace at all, especially since Robett Glover had already gone and sacked Maidenpool. The North didn’t have a fleet; they couldn’t very well blockade the Crownlands ports or use them for resupplying. Besieging Duskendale was tantamount to throwing Tallhart and Glover the lion’s den expecting them to be eaten.

This could only mean one thing. His father had a brain, after all. Roose Bolton was turning his cloak and purposefully throwing good Northmen away.

“I will hunt today,” his father announced. “Domeric, Walton. You will both join me.”

“Of course, Father,” Domeric said as Steelshanks nodded in assent. “Boars or stags or foxes?”

“It is wolves I mean to hunt. I can scarcely sleep at night for the howling.” Roose said as he dressed for the day. “See to your own preparations and come join me at the stables.”
“So I shall, Father.” Domeric left and returned to his chambers.

As he dressed, Domeric mused on this latest development in the war. His father’s disregard for the Tallhart and Glover men disgusted him. Surely there was a way to change factions without sacrificing so many lives. Such changes were common in war; the Dance of the Dragons saw no less than eight houses flip when the tides turned. The best way would be for his father to persuade Glover and Tallhart to flip along with him. Tallhart might be possible given the situation with the Ironborn at Torrhen’s Square. Robett Glover would be more difficult, as he was only heir to Deepwood Motte; his brother Galbart was lord. But it was Robett’s wife and children that the Greyjoys had captive – it was Robett over whom House Bolton had leverage. The Bastard held Theon Greyjoy, after all. If the Bastard was smart about hostage treatment – and after the affair with Lady Hornwood, that was a more than fair question – they might be able to trade Greyjoy for the Glovers, and possibly Larence Snow. Lord Balon’s son was worth much.

Bringing over the Tallharts, Glovers, mayhaps the Hornwoods and even the Cerwyns to the Lannister camp could buy them the use of the Lannister ships and possibly the use of the Redwyne fleet to rid the krakens from their shores. Where the Boltons went, so would Barrowton and the Ryswells; if Roose just tried to turn what he could of the army they had, they could deliver seven houses to the Crown – nearly half the North. House Manderly and House Karstark were lost causes, but with Tallhart, Glover, Hornwood, and Cerwyn they had a chance. With the Crown on their side, they might secure food from the Reach to replace the harvests they left to rot. If only his father’s first impulse was to help his rivals to their feet rather than holding them down from an arm’s length away, they might truly salvage a peace and a sure footing for winter out of this bloody mess their king had made. Perhaps the Crown would even give House Bolton the Lady Sansa once the Young Wolf and his rebels were defeated by good, loyal Northerners…

It was a good solution.

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Domeric met his father and Steelshanks at the stables. Robbie and Uncle Roose and a few other Dreadfort men were in their hunting party. They all mounted up and started southeast for the wood on the God’s Eye.

“Father, a word, if I may?” He rode up next to Roose. Perhaps it wasn’t too late. Perhaps he could still change things.

“My son. You may.” They were nearing the woods.

“Have the ravens to Glover and Tallhart already gone out?”

“I saw them fly. Why do you ask, my son?”

“Forgive me father, but I do not think the move is wise.”

“Oh? You would have me rescind the orders?”

“Aye. There are better uses for Robett Glover and Helman Tallhart. You could… include them in what you are planning. Tell them that the Lannister and Redwyne fleets could free their castles. The whole western shore of Westeros hates the Ironborn, the Rock and Highgarden will want to see them put down too. Have Ramsay trade Theon Greyjoy for any highborns. Tallhart and Robett Glover could be convinced in this way. The Hornwoods too, since the Glovers have Larence Snow. Kyle Condon is also reasonable, and he controls the Cerwyn men. We could take four houses over with us, Father. Anyone who was touched by the Ironborn. We’d have most of the western half of
the North and a good bit of the east.”

Roose drew to a halt. Rhaegar kicked the ground. The rest of the party was far behind, and they stood beneath the dappled light of the forest canopy. Roose’s face was crossed with shadows. “And how do you know what I am planning, my son?”

Domeric’s mouth tightened. “I do not claim to know, Father. I only ask that you include others in your plans.”

“The orders have been given.”

He had to try harder. “Father, you are making a mistake. We could unite half the North behind us, we will never hold them this way – ”

“You speak out of turn.” Roose wheeled his chest around to stare Domeric in the face. He did not look so small in his riding leathers and atop a horse. “The decision has been made. Talk no more of this. Come, let us be on our way.”

“Yes, Father. My apologies.” It was done then. His father would turn Houses Bolton, Dustin, and Ryswell on the Young Wolf and damn all the rest. Better for House Bolton when all the others emerged from winter starving, weak and broken. Better for House Bolton if the rest of the North was doomed.

This was disgusting. His gut roiled and bile rose in his throat. He could not abide by this. He’d have to join the Duskendale campaign and warn Robett and Ser Helman. Would they believe him? It would not be likely. For all that the other Northern lords distrusted Roose, it was usually due to his bearing and their suspicion that he kept the old Bolton ways. His father had never given any true, credible cause to doubt his loyalty to his liege lord. There would be no proof, no past actions to point to, only a spooking suspicion. And Glover and Tallhart were baying for blood.

But Duskendale made no sense. Duskendale was worthless. They’d have to see. But what if they didn’t? He’d be marching off to Duskendale and his death with the rest of them. His whole time here in the South would prove pointless. He wouldn’t have done anything to defend the North, to serve their king, to save their Princess.

The Princess. Duskendale was two days’ hard ride away from King’s Landing. He could join the march to Duskendale, show himself briefly during the battle, and then steal off to the capital. He’d made as much plans for such an operation as could be made. He’d be alone, but he could do it. Then he started to breathe in hope that warmed his blood from his lungs to his fingertips. He wouldn’t need to fight for his father. He wouldn’t need to fight for his king. He would fight for his Princess. His presence here would have a purpose.

He only participated half-heartedly in the hunt, spearing only one wolf that looked more like a fox. It must have been the product of a true wolf and a coydog. He was usually more enthusiastic about these things, but his mind was somewhere more important.

“The fur can be dyed to Bolton red,” he commented to his father. “The pelt is enough for a few collars or muffs. Or I could add it my pink wool cloak, or to the sable.”

“All fine choices,” Roose replied. He had nine wolves to himself. “I mean to make the rest into a blanket.”

“I apologize again for my outburst earlier, Father. It was wrong of me.” Roose regarded him coolly. “I would ask to participate in the campaign to Duskendale.”
Roose only stared. “Why?”

“This war has given me no opportunity, Father. I do not know when I shall next have the chance to test my abilities. I seek no glory, only knowledge, Father. You yourself were proven at Stoney Sept and at the Trident. I only wish to deserve the same respect you are afforded.”

“I see.” They were approaching the castle again, and his father deliberated for many long moments. “I will allow it. Ser Kyle and Lord Harrion will also be joining Tallhart and Glover. Join the Cerwyn party and stay near Ser Kyle. I mean for you to return, my son.”

“Of course, Father.” He dismounted. “I mean to do you proud.”

Chapter End Notes

We will be leaving Harrenhal next time. You could call it Domeric's own private defiance at Duskendale! Sorry, I love puns.

This chapter and the next one can be considered the end of the canon timeline.
Domeric X

Chapter Summary

Domeric leaves Harrenhal. The Battle of Duskendale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

That evening the Freys were in an uproar. All underneath the Wailing Tower one could hear the shouting. A bird had arrived from Ser Ryman Frey announcing that Robb Stark had broken his betrothal pact by marrying Lady Jeyne Westerling at the Crag. The Westerlings, an old First Men house quickly fading into obscurity, were sworn to the Lannisters. Of course, Domeric thought. After so many mistakes, what is one more? He would have laughed darkly if it wasn’t so discourteous, but the Freys were his stepfamily now, and propriety required he be offended on their behalf. The Young Wolf was truly finished now. His brothers were dead. The North was lost. The Lannisters and the Tyrells were allied against him. He had no way to retrieve his sister. His highest commander was about to destroy a large part of his army. Now he’d lost the largest fighting force in the Riverlands and drawn their ire too.

It would have been tragic if it wasn’t such a farce. At this point Domeric no longer cared. He was a king’s man no longer! So he continued on his way to prepare for his departure.

The first stop he made was the treasury. Domeric made away with one hundred gold dragons’ worth of coin into a large purse. It was too easy. He felt no remorse for stealing from Lady Whent; if she was not dead, the Princess was her kinswoman; if she was, Harrenhal belonged to the Tully family. Surely neither Ser Edmure nor Lady Catelyn would object to this use of their gold and silver.

The next stop he made was the kitchens to ask for bread, meat, and cheese. He also refilled his wineskins. No servants dared voice questions. He packed several days’ worth into a saddlebag. On the march the army would take forage from the fields, but he would take what little the smallfolk had for winter for his own purposes.

Then there was the library. He stole a map of King’s Landing from the time of Jaehaerys II. It was old, but it was the most recent map that Harrenhal had, so it would have to do. He’d wanted to take along a history book with a chapter that described the layout of the Red Keep, but it was too large, and with too many excess pages to be useful. Instead he settled for copying down notes of the description into the moleskine where he collected his poetry. He didn’t have the heart to tear out the pages of a text some poor maester had spent so long transcribing.

Finally he went to the armory. At this time of evening there was nobody there. Piled in a corner were a few kits of Lannister armor taken off the dead from Amory Lorch’s garrison. He picked one that fit well enough and packed that into his saddlebag as well. This presented a problem. He’d be riding out in his own armor, but would need to carry the Lannister armor as well. He supposed he would have a draft horse travelling with him with his tent and other supplies, but it would be cumbersome to take along to the capital and would likely slow him down. No matter. He’d figure it out on the road.
It was time to sleep then. He was so giddy that it did not come easily. Nonetheless, a full night of rest was necessary, so he slid on a dressing gown and asked a guard to send him Qyburn.

“A sleeping draught,” he requested when the erstwhile maester arrived.

“Nerves, my lord?” Qyburn said.

“No. Anticipation,” he smiled, and from Qyburn’s reaction it was terrible. “My preparations have left me restless.”

“At once, my lord.”

“I must wake at dawn, Qyburn. Not too much. You have my thanks.” Qyburn would tell his father about this most like but that didn’t matter. The next time Domeric saw his father would be moons from now. Domeric would have rescued the Princess and his father would be a traitor. There would be a reckoning.

Once Qyburn returned with the draught, Domeric downed it whole and lay back into his furs. He closed his eyes. When they opened again it was dawn.

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“Lord Robett. Lord Helman.” Domeric did not leave the commanders’ tent along with Ser Kyle and Harry. He really shouldn’t have had any business being there, what with having no men in the company, but he was still Lord Bolton’s son. To exclude him could have been construed as an insult.

“Lord Domeric,” Tallhart answered. “What business have you?”

Domeric eyed both Glover and Tallhart flatly and explained how Duskendale was worthless. “Choose a better objective.”

“They are the king’s orders.” Tallhart was scowling.

“After the king sent Greyjoy away, you would trust the king’s orders?” Domeric eyed Robett Glover, who was pressing his lips into a flat line.

“The king has shown no small measure of tactical acumen. He has won many victories in the West.”

“The king is not here. Duskendale has no value. We only make enemies by scouring the land here. At least the Lannisters are hated enough that raiding the West helps Stannis and endears us to Dorne.”

“You are green, Lord Domeric, with a green boy’s heart. This is no different than what we did at Maidenpool or Darry.” What they had done at Maidenpool and Darry was despicable. The rivermen were already starving. The winter would only freeze their burned homes and desecrated corpses.

“His Grace is also green.” Domeric looked to Tallhart to Glover and then settled his gaze in the middle distance between their heads. “And Maidenpool and Darry were closer to Harrenhal than to the Tyrell-Lannister army. The Crown will hear of this when riders from Antlers or Sow’s Horn sight our column and will catch us before we reach the sea. We will not be able to escape.”

“Then we must pray we are simply failing to see what His Grace sees.” This was hopeless. Others
take them, he was done.

“Very well. I beg your leave, my lords.” He was done with the army. He was done with this war.

The host burned and raped and looted its way down to Duskendale. At night when they made camp they would dine on livestock from the fields they’d passed, on bread made from flour stolen at swordpoint. The men would take the girls they had dragged away from the local farms and villages into their tents and pass them around until they were too sore to move, too tired to scream. Helpless cries could be heard from all directions throughout the night, no matter where you slept. It was awful. In the morning, if there was a wind from the north, the scent of ash, charred meat, and burning flesh would hang in the air and spoil the dewy autumn freshness. Before they broke camp, they would break their fast on stolen eggs—the fowl from the coops were taken and cooked for the lords—and cut oats from silos that they had torn down or burned the day before. When they resumed marching, all the smiles were grimaces, all the laughter harsh.

Domeric started writing an alternate version of *Wolf in the Night* in a minor key. It told of how the great pack a hundred strong went off to attack a village while the pups were left to drown in the den during a flood. He’d left his harp at Harrenhal but his fingers remembered where they would need to go. The chorus was all about howling—of the pack on the hunt, of the suffering maidens, of the bereft parents and shivering orphans and the pups that died in the water. The wolf in the cage, the pup that was lost. He couldn’t sing it aloud, of course, not here, where morale would suffer, but if this war ever ended he’d stop by all the taverns from the base of the Lonely Hills to the mouth of the Weeping Water to Saltspear and make sure every singer north of the Neck knew the words. Maybe it would reach the Riverlands too.

As his father had bade him, he rode in the Cerwyn party. Ser Kyle’s countenance was grim. Domeric had wanted to ask why they were burning the smallfolk’s homes, why it was necessary to let the men rape the farm girls, but he held his tongue and thought better of it. The license to destroy southern lands and lives was more than half the reason any of them were there. Duskendale was no true objective. If Domeric questioned any of it—if he was noticed refusing to participate—they his very presence here would be protested. His father would hear of his behavior when the remaining men returned without him, and when they met again Roose would know of Domeric’s disobedience. What’s more, Roose would know that Domeric had lied to his face; it would not do to have left ostensibly to prove himself and have word spread of his distaste and reluctance. No, it was better to play along and simply disappear in the chaos of battle.

After what seemed like eons after they had left Harrenhal, the host made camp outside a village not three leagues from Duskendale. The Cerwyn host was near the rear of the column, furthest from the town. After setting up his tent, Domeric tied Rhaegar to a tree near a burned-out house just out of sight to the east of the column. In the floor of the ruined hovel, he dug a hole in which he stuffed all his supplies that would not be useful during the battle—the Lannister armor, the map, the coin, his other sets of clothes, and all but one meal. He put the dirt back in the hole and spread it flat as the rest of the floor. He dragged the broken bed over where the hole had been. Satisfied, he went back to the tree, marked it with his knife, and rode back to camp to take what sleep he could.

The next morning the host pushed its wide trail of smoke and charred fields southeast towards the sea. As they approached high noon the silhouette of the port could be seen on the horizon, the drum towers of the Dun Fort and the seven spires of the Duskendale sept looming over the rest of the short buildings, sunlight glinting on Blackwater Bay behind it all. The ground sloped downward towards the water and when the wind came off the sea, the scent of salt and shit and birds mingled with that of burning crops.

As the day wore on, they in the rear heard shouts ringing from at the front, the distant clang of
steel on steel. Glover’s van must have encountered the Duskendale garrison.

Suddenly a Karstark rider came crashing near.

“Ser Kyle,” he started. “Ser Domeric. We’ve been ambushed. Tarly, Leygood, and Ambrose were waiting for us in the wood between the fields and the city. Came up on either flank and cut us off from Lord Robett and Lord Helman. Word is Tallhart’s dead. Lord Robett sounded the horn for retreat but last we saw Tarly and Leygood were blocking him from the north. If he’s a way out it’s west towards the Kingsroad.”

“How many?” Ser Kyle said. The Karstark man grimaced.

“We don’t know. We… we sent out riders but none have returned.”

“And Lord Harrion?” Domeric didn’t bother hiding his worry over his friend.

“Fallen or taken. He was pushing us back but Ambrose caught us. Our men’re taking as many as they are but discipline is broken. The last orders we have were to find you lot.”

“Understood. Thank you,” said Ser Kyle. Ser Kyle turned to Domeric. “Take the other mounted men and have them circle the foot. Ride to the rear and help lead the retreat. I’ll send a Cerwyn banner bearer with you. The men will rally to you. You’re visible.” Ser Kyle sounded the horn for retreat.

“Aye, ser.” Domeric flipped down the visor of his helm.

Ser Kyle did likewise and drew his sword. “THE KING IN THE NORTH!” he shouted.

The men in their company drew their swords roared in reply. “THE KING IN THE NORTH!”

They began to fall back.

Not an hour later Domeric heard a rumble. He turned to the Cerwyn man bearing the black battle-axe on silver. “Do you hear that?”

“It’s just the Karstark men coming to join us.”

“No, it’s not coming from behind.” Domeric strained his ears and motioned for a halt. “It’s coming from the northwest,” he said lowly. “Send word to Ser Kyle. Tell him someone’s here - ”

But it was too late. They didn’t see them because they were marching up the slope, and the enemy host was behind the horizon. He looked at the banners. Green apples on gold, red apples on gold. The Fossoways.

Domeric shouted through his visor. “Form up! Hold the line!” Hopefully Ser Kyle and the rest would catch them soon.

The enemy charged. “Fossoway! Fossoway!” Came the shouts. “King Joffrey!”

“Hold the line! Push forward if you can!” The Cerwyn men were forming up behind him. He lifted his shield and raised his sword. Where was Ser Kyle? Where were the Karstarks?

It didn’t matter where they were because they weren’t fast enough. The Fossoways were on them.

“FOSSOWAY! KING JOFFREY!”

“THE KING IN THE NORTH!” Domeric hoped his voice was loud enough. His father always
turned to Walton whenever shouting was required. He had Rhaegar rear up kicking and brain a Fossoway man with a heavy hoof. It was a good thing Rhaegar had mail of his own else he might have been easily pierced. Around him, the Cerwyn foot were clashing with the Fossoway men. Whenever a red apple or green came too close, he would slam the point of his shield into their shoulder, or do his best to take a limb or head.

At first it didn’t happen often, but as the day wore on, they lost their fear. Fossoway had put the veterans in the back. The green boys, though – they took one look at Domeric and his armor, at his pink shield, stayed their arms and stared.

His father’s voice whispered in his ear. *At the sight of the flayed man, they flee.* He cut those down easily. It grew more difficult once he got to the seasoned men, though, but when Rhaegar kicked them into their fellows, or when Domeric painted their joints red they were dispatched soon enough. *Green apple, red apple. Green apple, red apple.*

Then the sea of apples split. A knight on a tall white courser came forward to engage him. The knight’s armor was gilt plate. His helm sported a tuft of bright green feathers, and across his breastplate stretched a great green apple made up of a thousand glittering emeralds. Branches and leaves of enamel twisted their way around the apple and up and down his arms and legs.

It must have been a commander trying to lure him out before he could take any more men. How many Fossoways had he killed? He did not know. He didn’t care. He had to fight. He had to win, not the battle, but his own life. He had to rescue his Princess. Being lured away suited him.

Domeric spurred Rhaegar onward before the Fossoway knight could press him back. The white courser reared, but Domeric raised his sword and shield and by some blessing of the old gods slashed its right leg before the hoof could do too much damage. The golden apple knight turned his horse and ran it out of the fray before Domeric could wound it anymore.

“*Come at me, barbarian,*” came the knight’s voice. The knight’s sword came next, and Domeric’s rose to meet it. Again and again their swords met. He was getting tired.

The white courser reared once more. This time, Domeric’s shield was broken, but his sword cut the horse’s right foreleg to the bone. He urged Rhaegar back. A pink stain darkened to red and spread up the creature’s leg, and muscle and tendon and artery and vein came out flapping like broken harpstrings.

The white courser fell, crushing the golden knight beneath it. For good measure, Domeric walked over to where the knight lay dying, knocked his sword away, took off the golden helm, and slit the knight’s throat. Domeric sighed, sheathed his own sword, unstrapped the broken shield, dismounted, and took off his helm. His face was hot and sweat-slick hair clung to his forehead and neck. He took his waterskin out of its saddlebag, took a long swig, and looked around to get his bearings.

The Fossoway knight had led him far back up the slope, within shouting distance east of where their camp had been. Two fields over and he would be at the little hovel where he had hidden his things. *A true blessing*, he thought. He must sacrifice something truly worthy the next time he saw a weirwood. Rhaegar had done enough that day, so instead of mounting up he walked the horse to the hovel and let him eat and water at his leisure.

Once inside, he dragged the bed away from the hole and started digging. Out of the hole came the Lannister armor, the map, the coin, one set of clothes, and the food. He stripped off his own armor and into the hole it went. He considered placing Rhaegar’s mail into the hole as well, but thought better of it. He wouldn’t need it where he was going, and he could sell it for more coin. He refilled
the hole and dragged the bed back in place. Too tired to eat, he took another swig of water. As he drifted off to sleep, he thought of all the people he might have seen for the last time. Elmar, who most likely would not be marching North with them once the Ironborn were done with. Lord Helman, likely dead. Harry, who he had not spent as much time with as he’d have liked, either dead or again a prisoner. Ser Kyle and Lord Robett, on the run for their lives.

His rest that night was hard and dreamless. When he woke in the morning he broke his fast on bread and water. Then he packed up his supplies, saddled Rhaegar, and made towards the sea for Duskendale.

The path the battlefield cut through the farms and fields was muddy and littered with dead men and a stray horse. It was a blessing that what streams there were were run clear instead of red. When the wind blew away the fresh scent of dew, he was assaulted with the smell of smoke from the north or the stench of dirty brine from the sea. When the town was on the horizon to the southeast, he encountered another fallen knight. Three black thunderbolts danced on his orange surcoat. A Leygood man. Underneath the surcoat, however, the knight’s mail was plain and dark. It would be useful, so Domeric stripped it off the dead man and threw it into a saddlebag. In the first copse of trees with sufficient cover, he slipped out of his lion’s skin and donned the dark plate. The Lannister armor he would put on closer to capital. Here it was better to be anyone.

He encountered a living man less than a league to the town. Domeric put on his best Valeman’s lilt and asked the man – a farmer, it looked like, off to see whether his land had survived the battle – after news of the town.

“An’ who be askin? Seems to me you’se a man o’ war, ser.” The farmer was scowling at him suspiciously.

“Ser Donner Stone. ‘M a hedge knight out o’ Gulltown.” Creighton Redfort had the most rhythmic, singsong lilt he’d ever heard. He’d need to sound like Creighton now, if Creighton had been lowborn. “Fought with Stannis, I did, and then after ‘e lost, tried me luck with the wolves. Now they‘se lost too, not sure what I’ll do. Back to Gulltown, most like.”

“Well, Ser Stone, best o’ luck to you then. Town’s not far, the Reachers caught the wolves ‘fore they could do what they did at Maidenpool. Word is the Mountain’s men’re hunting ‘em down now. We’ve no love for the Mountain here,” the farmer spat, “but better him than the wolves. Hope the Mountain catches the pack o’them ‘fore they get back te Harrenhal. ‘S good you’ve left ‘em.”

Domeric thanked the farmer and proceeded into Duskendale. In the market square, a peddler had set up a stand trading armor picked off the dead. Domeric took out the black ringmail that would be Rhaegar’s no longer.

“Two gold dragons,” said the peddler. He asked no questions. The deal was done. Between the square and the water was a tall inn bearing a sign with seven crossing swords. Domeric took Rhaegar to the stables and had a boy see to the horse’s needs after taking his saddlebags in his arms. He went inside.

“One night. How much?”

“Depends. Alone?”

“Aye, a room with a locking door. And a bath, and supper, and breakfast.” The innkeep eyed him sullenly.
“Ten coppers.” He paid.

“Follow me.” The innkeep led him to the third floor and handed him a key. “This door.” Domeric entered and deposited all his things but a small purse of coin between the door and the bed. “Your bath will be ready in an hour.”

An hour was enough for him. He left the inn and started back for the market. Duskendale’s market square was lined with shops and stands bearing goods from the South and across the Narrow Sea. One such shop was selling ladies’ things, highborn women’s castoffs that merchant daughters snapped up. On a stand hung all sorts of bonnets and caps. In a case were rows and rows of gloves. Cloaks and mantles were hung on several racks, and there were racks of satchels and purses and gowns as well. Behind the counter were shelves of what looked to be bottles of perfumes and paints that ladies used on their faces.

“Looking for something, m’dear?” A squat woman who looked to be around his father’s age addressed him from behind the counter. He approached.

“Aye, milady.” His eyes flicked to the shelf behind her head which was marked out for hair dyes. Briefly he considered buying a brown or a black to match his own but then he realized he had no idea how to use it. The Princess probably wouldn’t either. It wasn’t as if they’d have any servants with them. Then he thought of her bright hair, how its deep reds and bright auburns would flicker and dance like flames and the notion of changing it died in his mind. He couldn’t dye the Princess’s hair. “A bonnet. A riding gown and a traveling cloak. A pair of gloves.” He almost said riding boots, but this was not a cobbler’s shop, and the Crown would have seen to it that the Princess had fitting boots.

“How tall is yer lady, dear?” The shopkeep gave him a small smile. Internally kicking himself, he realized that it had been over a year since he had seen the Princess, and that he had no idea how tall she was now. He thought back to the last time he had seen Lady Catelyn.

“How tall is yer lady, dear?” The shopkeep gave him a small smile. Internally kicking himself, he realized that it had been over a year since he had seen the Princess, and that he had no idea how tall she was now. He thought back to the last time he had seen Lady Catelyn.

“About this high,” he motioned to the level of his nose. It was better to err on the side of too tall rather than too short.

The shopkeep gave him a reproachful look and a small tsk. “Menfolk shouldn’t be buying ladies’ dresses without knowing their ladies’ measurements. I suppose ye’ll be showing me how large her waist is with yer hands next.” She scoffed. “Don’t bother, dear. This one here, the slate wool, should be the right length. The bodice ties along both sides so it should fit most.” It looked more like a surcoat with long slashed sleeves, but he had no choice but to trust the lady.

“What for the cloak, dear?”

“Grey wool,” he said instantly. Grey was nondescript and well suited for traveling. The shopkeep took a cloak that most closely matched the description off of the rack.

They didn’t have much in the way of gloves. Only flimsy things of silk. He was looking for leathers so he passed those over. Next he moved on to the bonnets and caps. Many were things that were held to the head by fabric ties and looked to fly away easily.

“Erm, do you have anything for a lady who might like to hawk?” What he meant was a lady who might need to ride away very fast but he wasn’t about to say that.

“The cauls and snoods and hairnets, dear. The pins will keep them secure.” She motioned to a table covered with the things. Right. Hopefully the Princess could pin a hairnet in place herself.
“Which of these covers all the hair?” He felt terribly stupid. The shopkeep was almost amused as she plucked several headpieces off the table. Two looked to be hard things that hugged the skull closely, almost like a second skin. Most were hairnets of metallic mesh or woven wools, some jeweled, some without. They didn’t truly cover all of the hair; it was clear from the spaces between the lines of mesh or spun wool. A few looked to be linen sacks, almost hoods. They would serve but they looked rather flimsy. Finally his eyes were drawn to a solid piece of black velvet. Twisted chains of silver rings crisscrossed over the velvet, and tiny white pearls adorned each crossing.

It was much finer than he had been expecting, but it was still the best. He separated it from the rest.

“How much for the lot?” The shopkeep narrowed her eyes at him, as if she didn’t expect him to be able to afford it all. The headpiece alone was probably worth a dragon or five. Too much for the hedge knight or sellsword he was pretending to be.

“Five hundred stags.” Not too much for Domeric Bolton, who was in no mood to haggle. He handed over the requisite coin and made off with his purchases back over the cobblestone streets to the Seven Swords.

He beat his bath up the stairs by fifteen paces.

“Shall ye be coming down for supper, m’lord, or shall we send it up?” said the serving man.

“Have it sent up, please,” he said after a few moments of deliberation. He had the information from the farmer and all the extra supplies he needed. There was no need to dine in the common room.

After his bath and having chewed through his dinner, Domeric lay back into the featherbed and drifted off to an easy sleep with a smile on his face. In two days’ time, he’d be in King’s Landing.

Chapter End Notes

I have no skill at writing battles and for that I apologize. I tried my best to look at a map and the AWOIAF entry for the Battle of Duskendale, but as the event happened offscreen, how the fighting happened occurred is unclear. According to AWOIAF, Tarly traps Glover against the sea in the fields and the farms outside Duskendale, Tallhart dies, and Harry Karstark is taken. Whether that is north or south of the town is not said. My interpretation of what happened is that the Northern forces was marching in units that were separately ambushed by Reacher armies.

I wish some fan had put together a Westerosi price index, making up prices makes me feel incredibly stupid.

Thank you to everyone who has been supporting this story.

EDIT 12/5/2019 Thank you to nitpicker who linked the AWOIAF currency page. Prices have been updated to reflect canon. Hyperinflation has not happened in this AU.
Domeric XI

Chapter Summary

Domeric arrives in King’s Landing and catches a glimpse of his princess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The ride down the Rosby Road to the capital was uneventful. On the first day he saw no one, but as he approached King’s Landing travelers increased in quantity. Word must have spread that it was safe to approach Duskendale again.

Once he was in sight of the city walls, he broke off the Rosby Road and headed towards a copse of trees with enough cover. Then he changed back into the Lannister armor and went over his story. He’d have to keep up the Valeman’s voice because he had no idea how a Westerman really sounded like.

The gold cloaks accosted him when he came through the Iron Gate. There weren’t that many sentinels on the walls, perhaps one for every five posts, he could see, and many were slouching and looking down rather than standing at attention. Could King’s Landing truly be this ill defended?

“What ho, soldier? All alone, are ye?”

“Aye! Was with Clegane’s men, but took a knock to the head when we caught the wolves and when I came to they were gone. ‘S closer to here than to Harrenhal so I’ve come here seeking to switch companies.”

“On to the Red Keep with you then!” The Red Keep was on the coast at the mouth of Blackwater Rush. From the maps he’d stolen, there was no route straight along the wall on the coast, so he did his best to keep the wall to his left as he made his way through the city. When he finally reached the Red Keep he realized that there was no castle gate on its coastal wall, so he had to go around the base of Aegon’s High Hill until he spotted one of the great bronze gatehouses he had read about. He hailed a Lannister guardsman speaking to a gold cloak manning the gate and begged entrance to the castle, selling the same story.

The guardsman summoned another more senior red cloak who then helped him see Rhaegar to the stables and escorted Domeric through the Red Keep. He struggled to remember the descriptions in the old book, but many of the waypoints were old Targaryen statues and tapestries, and apparently King Robert had done away with all of those. Now the Red Keep was decked out in Lannister crimsons and Baratheon golds. He had no idea where he was being led. Up and up a set of spiral stairs the red cloak bid him, until they reached a set of double doors at the top of the tower guarded by two more red cloaks.

“My lord, Lester and a soldier from the army to see you.”

“You may enter.” The red cloak closest to the door turned the knob and swung the door outward. “Why have you brought me a common soldier, Lester?” The door opened to a chamber with
Myrish rugs on the floor. Many tapestries hung on the walls, and near the back of the room was a golden-tinted round window. There was a large oaken desk behind which sat a bald man with thick blonde sideburns. He was wearing a rich red velvet doublet chased with thread-of-gold. The famous pin of the Hand of the King glinted on his breast.

Domeric’s heart stopped beating. He swallowed. *They’ve brought me to Tywin Lannister. I’ll die here…*

The guard named Lester spared his fate. “Says he was at Duskendale with Ser Clegane, my lord. Seeking new orders. Seeing as the rest of the army's good and blooded we thought to bring this one to you for the red cloaks. Better use of him.”

Tywin Lannister motioned for Domeric to sit in the leather-backed chairs in front of his desk. “Why did you desert my army, soldier?” The Old Lion’s eyes were green and flecked with gold. His stare was hard and piercing.

Domeric swallowed again, loudly this time. *Face like Father, voice like Creighton.* “Pardon, m’lord, but I didn’t desert. Was separated from the company, I was. When we met the wolves west of Duskendale. A Glover man knocked me in the head with the flat of his blade. Left for dead, I was. In the mud. When I came to, I didn’t know where Ser Clegane and the company went, only that the orders were to make for Harrenhal. I-I wasn’t sure if I could catch them without being caught, so I came back here. I’d serve with the castle garrison, if you’d have me. M’lord.”

Lord Tywin’s gaze did not soften. “You do not speak like a Westerman. How did you come to serve with Ser Gregor?” Domeric was very glad he’d practiced his story then.

“Me mam’s from Gulltown, m’lord. Youngest daughter of a merchant. Met me da in Lannisport. When Mad Aerys was king. Me da was a sailor from outside Banefort. Wasn’t around much. Learned to talk from me mam, I did. We came to fight with Lord Quenton’s men. Me an’ me brother. Mychel. The wolves killed him on the Green Fork. Then me company got sent to Harrenhal, and you know what happened after we left Harrenhal, m’lord. I went with your host, I did, didn’t stay behind with Ser Lorch. When I heard that Ser Gregor was taking men to fight the wolves, I switched with one of his. For me brother. M’lord.”

“I see.” Lord Tywin continued to stare at him harshly, studying him closely. He reminded Domeric of his own father. “You seem young and eager to serve. How many name days have you seen?”

“Twenty, m’lord.” Domeric would be twenty on his next name day.

“Twenty. No longer green, it appears.” Lord Tywin scowled. “And you wish to join the castle garrison. Why?”

Domeric cast his eyes downward. “The castle garrison gets regular meals, m’lord.” On Tywin’s desk was a rolled-up scroll sealed with a familiar shade of pink wax. Having seen too much, he looked up to face Lord Tywin again. “And the Riverlands have all but ran out of forage. I can fight, m’lord, but I do like to eat.”

“Very well then.” Tywin Lannister met Domeric’s eyes. “What is your name, soldier?”

“Jasper, m’lord,” ghost-grey met pale green. “Me mam named me.”

“I shall allow you to join the red cloaks, then, Jasper. Seven only know we need your sort more than the sellswords and other filth my children have seen fit to take into our service as of late. Lester,” he turned to the guardsman still in the room. “Please take young Jasper here to Ser
Osfryd.” Lord Tywin waved a hand in dismissal.

Domeric rose and let out a breath. “Thank you, m’lord. I’ll do me best here in the castle, m’lord.” Then Lester ushered Domeric out of Lord Tywin’s chamber, down the spiral staircase, and across the castle. They stopped back at the stables and Lester allowed Domeric to fetch some of his things.

“Off to the barracks next lad. Then Ser Osfryd will show you ‘round the castle. You won’t need to remember everything, o’course, but you’ll get to know it once you’ve been given enough assignments.”

Domeric couldn’t believe how much his luck had turned. A quarter of an hour ago he’d been sure he’d be the Old Lion’s next meal. Now he was to be given a personal tour of the Red Keep and an in-depth explanation of the red cloaks’ rounds and schedule by one Ser Osfryd Kettleblack, the new captain of the Lannister guards.

“I knew Lord Tywin’d be grateful for ye here. Red cloaks ‘ent been the same since the Blackwater. Nothing like at the Rock. Back west ye’d be just another new recruit but here, pick any ten guards and ye’re worth more ‘en nine of ‘em.” Lester had given this remark on their way to see Ser Osfryd. It had only reinforced what he had heard during his encounter with Tywin Lannister. A shoddy castle garrison would only make his job easier.

Lester found Ser Osfryd at what must have been the officer’s quarters in the barracks. Domeric was shown an empty bunk with storage for his things and given a red cloak’s uniform. The dark-haired, hook-nosed Ser Osfryd directed him to the guards’ baths and bid him return once he was clean and changed. He was done quickly enough.

The tour started with a cursory walk around the curtain walls and the outer gatehouses, barbicans and cornerforts. “We won’t bother with those,” said Ser Osfryd. “Those’s for the City Watch, the gold cloaks.” Next were the various stables and kennels. “That’s where yer horse’ll be.” Ser Osfryd motioned to a stable with Lannister banners flying. “It’s for the King’s men. There’re stables for Queen’s men and visiting nobles too.” Domeric memorized the location. He’d need to know where Rhaegar was. “There’s the White Sword Tower, for the Kingsguard. Traitor’s Walk and the Dungeon Tower. Maegor’s Holdfast, with the royal apartments. The Tower of the Hand. The Kitchen Keep.”

Now they were walking up a dizzying set of stairs. “These are the serpentine steps.” They reached the top. “There’s the godwood. The Maidenvault, the royal sept over there. Now we come to the Great Hall.” Ser Osfryd motioned to a grand pair of doors. “Court is in session now. We won’t go in. You’ll only ever go inside if you’re guarding a member of the royal family, or the Lady Sansa.” Domeric’s ears piqued at the mention of the Princess’ name.

The grand doors to the Great Hall opened. A line of well-fed, gossiping nobles filed out, guards of various houses among them. Domeric recognized many Reacher sigils. He frowned when he saw the green apple of the Fossoways of New Barrel, and then frowned again when he processed what all the Reacher ladies were wearing. *Gods be good,* he thought, as he looked over their gowns with their backless bodices, barely-there cap sleeves, and airy skirts. The deep necklines alone would have been daring in the Vale, and provocative up North, but the whole ensemble together was simply scandalous. *These are Reacher women? Truly from the Reach, the heart of chivalry in Westeros? Reacher lords let highborn ladies dress like whores to court? Their daughters, sisters and wives? To stand before their King?* The south was hot, but not too hot. They were not in Dorne. If he could survive in his armor, surely the ladies could cover their backs and arms…

“Go ahead, take your look,” said Kettleblack with a cruel grimace. “Not a sight you’ll be seeing on
campaign. Life’s better here in the castle, lad.” More ladies filed out of the Great Hall, these in more sensible gowns with trailing sleeves and covered backs. Domeric saw Westerlands sigils on their guards. “Food for the belly, food for the eyes.”

Then he saw her. She was taller than he remembered, and was dressed in a gown of sky-blue silk that, thankfully, was styled in the fashion of the Westerwomen. But his thanks ended there. He had to physically close his mouth with his hand. The gown’s hem was frayed and dirty and hung a hand’s height off the floor. He could see his Princess’ ankles; her stockings had holes and tears that promised to be extensive as they stretched up her legs. The neckline had been modest once, but that had been long ago, for the tops of her breasts were squished together and threatened to burst out of the straining bodice. The fabric of the gown visibly tightened over her hips and as she turned, he could see that it hugged rather than hid the curve of her bottom. But that wasn’t the worst part of it.

The worst part was the quick glimpse that he’d gotten of her face. The last time he had seen her she had been merely beautiful. Now her face was so haunting that she could inspire men to throw away their souls. Her bow lips, pink and perfect, were set in an expressionless line. Her gaze was straight, boring into the middle distance, but her ice blue eyes were sad and empty and cold. *What have they done?* He thought as she swept away. *How could they have hurt her?* His eyes lingered on the shining auburn of her hair. *At least they didn’t do anything to her hair.* His heart was hammering in his chest and he felt heat rush into his blood and creep into his face. He was so angry. *Sansa Stark should not be treated like this…*

“You like the wolf bitch, do you?” Ser Osfryd’s voice bade him back to earth. The hook-nosed man smirked. “You wouldn’t be the first. Bright red hair. Pretty face. Tall. Nice teats. I’m sure once King Joffrey’s done with it and fucked her right proper he’ll let us all have our turn. Said so himself, His Grace did.” The courtiers were gone, so Ser Osfryd was free to snigger harshly. His laugh was an ugly sound. “Tell you what, lad. Since Lord Tywin sent you yourself, you must be good. I’ll assign you to guarding the Stark girl. Mayhaps one of these days you’ll get a taste.”

Domeric managed out a croak in acknowledgement. He was too wroth to be pleased with his incredibly good luck. They were making things so easy for him. But that didn’t matter. The captain of the household guard was japing about common guardsmen *taking a turn* with the Princess of Winterfell… the Crown was dressing her in rags like a pauper… For all that Ser Osfryd had implied that she still had her maidenhead the Lannisters were still allowing grievous insults against her honor, against the whole North’s.

He had to get her out. He had to get her out as soon as possible.

***

Ser Osfryd gave him the evening off. “Go explore the castle, get to know it, and report to me in the morning.”

They had returned to the barracks. Domeric could see that only one of every four beds were being used. What men flitted in and out of the room seemed barely men at all, reeking of the streets or speaking squeakily like lads of less than three-and-ten. When Domeric went to the mess to eat his dinner, there looked to be a smattering of more seasoned guards, but they were few, and old besides.

*These guards really are terrible.* Father would never have allowed the Dreadfort garrison to sink to such a state. Lord Tywin must truly have been desperate to clean up the mess the Queen and the Imp had made. Domeric would have been empathetic as a lord to a lord if the weakness hadn’t been making his life so much easier.
So after he supped in the mess hall – by the gods the castle ate well – he took his plain armor, his coin, and the things he had purchased for the Princess and stashed them in the bole of a tree in the godswood. Afterwards he did a lap around the upper level of the castle, and then the lower, making mental notes as he went, and then he returned to the barracks and drifted off to sleep.

True to his word, after dawn broke the next morning, Ser Osfryd assigned him to guard the Lady Sansa when Domeric reported for duty after breaking his fast. Ser Osfryd paired Domeric with a guard who had been a sellsword before. When it was time for the morning shift to start, the former sellsword led them off to the Lady’s chambers.

“Ye’ve taken to the guard’s walk right quick,” said the sellsword. “Done this before, ’ave ye, lad?”

“Nae. Grew up around a castle, I did, an’ watched the guards walk. I remember easy.” It wasn’t a lie.

They were in Maegor’s Holdfast now, walking up the winding stairs to the highest room in the tallest tower. *It’s like a song, he thought almost giddily. I’m off to save a princess in a tower like Serwyn of the Mirror Shield. Only I’ll be slaying lions and trimming roses instead of giants.*

They reached the top of the tower where two more red cloaks were waiting to be relieved. “Her movements last night?” said the onetime sellsword.

“Like the night before. Supped with the Tyrells. Spent a few hours in the godswood. Back here near the hour of the wolf.”

Domeric’s partner nodded at this. “Good day to ye, then.” The two red cloaks stalked off back to the barracks and left Domeric and his partner to stand outside Sansa Stark’s door. Domeric contemplated slitting the sellsword’s throat and breaking the door down but quickly dismissed the idea. That would get him caught immediately, would get him killed, and he’d never get her out. No. He was so close. He could not waste the opportunity. So he waited.

*What should I say to her? Will she know me?* Inwardly he shook his head even as he stood still as a statue outside her door. She was only a few feet away… He could do this. He could think of what to say her later, when it was needed. All he needed to do now was not get caught.

Then the door swung open. “She is going to Princess Myrcella’s gardens to meet Lady Margaery,” a foreign, female voice addressed him. It was a dark-haired handmaiden. Domeric nodded. Then she appeared in a swish of purple skirts – *too small again* – and he followed at ten paces, his eyes sweeping from one wall of the corridor to the next, side to side, back to her in the middle. His partner walked in front of the lady to clear the way. *This is it. This is real,* he thought, his heart galloping away, as they descended the stairs, flight after flight after flight. *I will save the Princess.*

Chapter End Notes

A funny thing is, between the Battle of the Blackwater and Sansa's marriage to Tyrion would have been the ideal moment to rescue her. Ser Osfryd (one of the Kettleblacks banging Cersei) was the head of the Lannister household guard and he doesn't even know how to read. Tywin had sent his own red cloaks off to chase Tyrion's Vale mountain clansmen away from the city, so that's a bunch of competent men just gallivanting off to the Vale.
Tywin brought ~20K men with him to the Blackwater, and the Mountain brought an unknown amount of men with him to Duskendale, but those soldiers wouldn't be red cloaks. They'd be the Westerland levies, veterans from the Green Fork and Stone Mill, and it's not clear where they're hanging out. Anyhow, if they're camped outside the city rather than housed in the castle, it's probably to the west by the King's Gate or the Lion Gate, since the Lannister-Tyrell relief force floated up Blackwater Rush to get there (not the Iron Gate to the northeast).

What was more, there were only ~4400 gold cloaks left after the Blackwater, and Tywin was kneecapping deserters who came back. According to AWOIAF, only about a third to a quarter of these were competent soldiers, the rest were "poorly trained, and many were drunks, brutes, or cravens who joined for the promise of bread".

A small deviation from canon in this chapter is that Shae is already Sansa's handmaiden.

Poor Sansa. As of ASOS, Sansa II all of her clothes are too short, too tight, and men leer at her :( That's not something that HBO really showed, Sophie Turner seemed to always be dressed impeccably.

Next chapter is Sansa Stark Rescue Mission proper.

Thank you all for reading and supporting this story. All feedback is appreciated.
Domeric XII

Chapter Summary

Domeric spirits Sansa out of the Red Keep.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Princess Sansa joined a whole bouquet of roses in Princess Myrcella’s gardens. The ladies sat in a circle on stone benches in a small cobblestone square with a fountain shooting streams of water over the back of a prancing stag. The prettiest one who was the most finely dressed – for all that she could be called dressed in those flimsy scraps of green and gold – was obviously Margaery Tyrell. From what he could pick up of the conversation there was also a Megga, an Alla, and an Elinor, and the one playing the high harp – oh, how he missed his high harp – was Leonette. That must have been Lady Leonette Fossoway, who was married to the Fat Flower’s second son, Ser Garlan. There was also a Merry, a Janna – the Fat Flower’s sister, and an Alysanne. All throughout the morning they grazed on cheeses and grapes and pastries. Princess Sansa liked the lemon cakes especially. After seeing her so sad yesterday it made him glad that she was smiling with the rest.

Watching the ladies giggle merrily brought him back to the Redfort. He was five-and-ten again, sparring in the yard with Mychel or Jon or Waymar Royce and straining not to be distracted by the Redfort sisters Cassie and Jessie and Jeyne shouting at them from above, waving their bright red handkerchiefs in the air. Sometimes Ysilla Royce would join them, or Gillyanne Hunter or Brenda Belmore. They were good girls, Cassandra and Jessamyn and Jeyne. Cassie’s singing was as musical as her laughter and Jessamyn was almost a better poet than he was and Jeyne was the best dancer in the entire castle. And they were all expert seamstresses. The last name day he’d spent at the Redfort before he left the three of them had presented him with a fine pink doublet embroidered with a pattern of alternating tiny flayed men and blood drops all in red. The cuffs and the collar and the hem at the bottom were all lined in another sort of blood red fabric cut into a thousand tiny Dreadfort silhouettes.

You know, you could change your name to Domeric Dreadfort and you wouldn’t need to be a Bolton anymore, Cassie had whispered into his ear during the feast that night. Then whenever someone said your name too fast it would sound like you were our brother for true. He’d laughed so hard he’d slammed his fist on the table and toppled his goblet of wine all over her gown. In return she’d slapped him fondly on the arm. Why not? He’d replied. The Baneforts are named after their castle too. The Rykkers should’ve changed their name to Dunfort when old King Scab did away with the Darklys. What a wasted opportunity! Cassie had laughed then as well, and her hand had shaken so much she’d spilled her own wine. Then Jessie and Jeyne had taken her on each of their arms and dragged her away to change into something clean before the dancing started.

He wondered how the three of them had been faring since he’d last seen them near on a year ago. Hopefully their lives were happy and normal and above all, safe. Perhaps Jessie and Alec Hunter would be married by now. Perhaps they’d have a babe on the way. For all that the Starks and Tullys were suffering for Lady Lysa’s silence, the Vale was untouched by war. Life would be peaceful there. They’d be pulling in the harvest and picking giant pumpkins and dancing in the leaves, all red and orange and bronze and gold. At least that’s what Ser Jasper had said that autumn
in the Vale was like. He was the only one of the Redfort brothers old enough to have truly remembered the last autumn.

Then Margaery Tyrell stood up, and the rest of the ladies did too. He had to pay close attention again. Lady Margaery went over to Princess Sansa, clasped her hands, and kissed her on each cheek. The Princess smiled demurely and looked down, murmuring something inaudible. Then the Reacher ladies and their Tyrell guards gaggled away back towards the Maidenvault.

The Princess turned towards Domeric and his sellsword partner after they were safely alone. “I wish to walk throughout the gardens for a few minutes, if it please you, sers,” she said softly, so polite, so perfect.

_The time to act is now._ “Aye, my lady,” he said. He dropped the Valeman’s lilt and slipped into his own comfortable Northern brogue again. The Princess frowned and did a double take as if puzzled, but then gave him a small smile and turned to walk away.

Domeric placed his hand on his hip and drew his knife. Silent as an owl and as quick as an eagle, he turned to the other red cloak and dragged the blade across a gap between the lion’s head helm and the gorget, drawing a curtain of red. There were no screams.

The sellsword was dead before Domeric caught the heavy corpse in his arms. He shoved the body under a rosebush with as little noise as possible.

The Princess was rounding a corner now, into a tunnel made up of tall, viny hedges with a trellis overhead. _Perfect._ Stalking forward silently he caught up to her. Once they were midway through the tunnel, he grabbed her by the arm, clapped a gauntleted hand over her mouth, and dragged her back into the hedge.

She struggled a bit, and then stopped. He took a leg and braced it over hers, trapping her against him while the hand that wasn’t over her mouth fished for that precious thing beneath his breastplate. Having found the square of pink silk, he pressed it into one of her soft, small hands, took off his helmet, unhooked his leg from his and gripped her shoulder to spin her around, keeping her from screaming the entire time.

“Princess,” he whispered. “Lady Sansa. Do you know me?”

Her blue, blue eyes were as big as dinner plates as they flicked between his face and the favor she had given him three years before. Her gaze found the little flayed man atop the black stallion, lingered on it, and then raked upward to meet his own. She nodded.

He let his hand fall away from her mouth and gripped her other shoulder.

“You’re Domeric Bolton,” she breathed, and she looked like she didn’t believe it, like she was about to cry. “You kept this?”

“Over my heart and every day, my Princess.” It was true. He’d never parted with it.

“Someone came for me.” Her voice and lower lip trembled like drops of water on a leaf in the wind.

“I came for you,” he said softly. “I want to take you away from here. Back to your family at Riverrun. Will you go with me?”

She stared into his face for a long moment, her eyes searching for something. Her lips pursed and then parted and then quirked into the beginnings of a smile before settling in a neutral expression.
Then she nodded.

“Do you have any clothes well suited for travelling?” She nodded again.

“Good. We’ll go back to your chambers. Change into those clothes, and pack anything else suitable. Heavy cloaks, the like. The jewels you want to keep. Coin if you have it, and any jewels you can sell, but nothing recognizable. Pack lightly though, one bag at most. Wear boots and riding gloves. Take any blades you can. I have food.” She indicated her understanding with yet another nod and stepped out of the bush. He picked up the helmet, pulled it over his head, and followed her back to Maegor’s Holdfast.

When they reached the top of her tower he stood outside her door and waited for her to emerge. Finally the door opened, and he saw that her hair was done in a single simple plait down her back. She was wearing a dark brown dress with pearls on the front, and her cloak was pale grey. Then he went inside, went to the wardrobe, took a gown and tore a long section of it, walked to the first large window he could see, and smashed the precious glass from Myr. Then he placed the torn piece of gown on the remains of a windowpane, walked back to the hall, and shut the door. By the time the Lannisters realized she was gone and finished searching the spikes of the dry moat below for the Princess’ remains they would be far, far away.

“To the godswood, Princess,” he said into her ear. She knew the way.

They reached the tree where he had stashed his things. He pulled out the spare armor, the coin, and the items he had bought for her.

“Can you put this on by yourself?” He showed her the hairnet and the pins that came with it. “It would be better to cover your hair. It’s very recognizable.”

She nodded in understanding and began rolling her plait into a knot, taking one pin into her hand and another in her mouth. He would have liked to watch her work but he had to change into the plain plate and cloak himself. When he was done he stuffed the guardsman’s uniform into the bole of the oak and turned back to the Princess.

The hairnet was on properly and she had pulled up her grey hood. That was good. She could be any maiden now.

“We’re off to the stables next. I have a horse. I’ll have to find a wagon or something like for your direwolf, I don’t know how we’ll get it out of the city - ”

Then her face fell suddenly and he just couldn’t keep talking. Her eyes were swimming – they were so sad – and she turned her face away.

“I don’t have a direwolf,” she whispered. “Not anymore. They killed her.” She looked back toward him. “I am ready to leave now.”

No! He’d nearly made her cry… he couldn’t have that. He didn’t know what to do with the fact that they’d killed her direwolf. One the one hand the absence of a hulking beast the size of a horse made things easier for him. On the other, everyone knew that King Robb’s direwolf rode beside him in battle and defended him with more competence and ferocity than his whole battle guard combined. He’d expected that the Princess would have at least had her great lupine protector with her here. But he supposed that nothing in this great stinking pit of a city had been as he had expected. He’d expected she’d be treated well. He’d expected competent guards. He’d expected to struggle to get her out. He didn’t expect to find her dressed like a beggar and gossiped about like some sort of royal mistress.
“I am sorry, my Princess,” he said. He didn’t know what else to say, so he changed the subject to
the task at hand. “Please keep your eyes down.”

He led her by the arm to the stables and had no trouble retrieving his horse. His saddle would not
be practical and he cursed inwardly for not having exchanged it for one made for riding double
back in Duskendale.

“You’ll ride in front, my Princess. I hope that is all right with you.”

It was still daylight and the guard had not yet changed. That was good. They will think she is still in
the garden. No one will come looking for her. Petitioners were still moving in and out of the Red
Keep. Like the red cloaks, the gold cloaks seemed to be made up of the dregs of the men left in the
city – sellswords and drunks and boys so young their voices hadn’t broken. The Tyrell guards
seemed to be the best fighting force in King’s Landing, but the Tyrell guards were not responsible
for securing anything but the Reacher nobles, so Domeric and the Princess were ignored or
overlooked all the way out the castle gates. Domeric had one hand on the pommel of his sword the
whole time, ready to draw, but it was not needed.

The Princess was silent the whole way through the city. Perhaps the humid, fetid air bade her to
breathe out of her mouth like he was doing. Perhaps she wanted to ignore the shouts of merchants
and the mass of stinking smallfolk lumbering about. Domeric felt uneasy. The whole affair had
gone too smoothly for his comfort. Duskendale to King’s Landing in three days, one night in the
castle, and out the gates by the early afternoon? What had he done to deserve the gods’ favor? His
luck was bound to run out soon.

The heroes always had to struggle to rescue the princess in the songs.

Chapter End Notes

The handkerchief first made an appearance in chapter 3.

Yes, he is making things up as he goes along.

Thank you to everyone who has been reading this story.
Domeric XIII

Chapter Summary

Domeric struggles with what to say and engages in self-reflection.

Chapter Notes

All I encounter in my mind dies,
when I come to gaze on you, sweet joy:
and when I am near you, I feel Love
who says: 'Run, if you care about dying'.
The face shows the colour of the heart,
that, fainting, leans for support:
and in the vast intoxicating tremor
the stones beneath me cry: Death, death.
They commit a sin who see me then,
if they do not comfort my bewildered soul,
if only by showing that they care for me,
through pity, which your mocking killed,
that is descried in the dying vision
of eyes that have wished for death.

- Dante Alighieri, 'All I encounter in my mind dies', La Vita Nuova

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His luck would not in fact run out that day. They left King’s Landing through the Iron Gate unharassed, among a group of farmers returning to their fields with their empty wagons and carts now the market time was done. Already the air was better as soon as they stepped into the countryside. Without the cobblestones and winding streets in the way they could afford to go a little faster, so he tangled the reins in his right hand and circled his left arm around her waist to secure her against his upper body.

“You shall be safe soon, my Princess.”

“Thank you, ser,” she said shakily. He could hear that she was not one for talking at this moment. That was fine with him. They were going at a moderate trot. They would ride together for the first day to get as far away from the city as possible, and then the rest of the way he’d get down and walk. Domeric didn’t want to risk overburdening Rhaegar when he didn’t have a proper pack horse with him. Already he had pushed the poor courser too hard for his liking on the way from Duskendale, and he’d only had a day of rest since then. Under no circumstances would he let Rhaegar come up lame. They’d only ride double again if it was clear that they were being pursued. It would take perhaps a sennight to get to Duskendale at this rate, maybe less if they had to ride hard for portions of the way.
She did not speak a word for the rest of the sun’s descent into the west, only clutching his left arm to remain steady.

As the day looked to end, Domeric turned Rhaegar off the road to find a place to bed down for the night.

“We’ll make camp here,” he said. They had reached a safe-looking copse of trees between a village and a farm about two days’ walk to Rosby castle. Domeric dismounted, took off the dark helm, and turned to face her. Her eyes were glassy as if she were in some sort of daze. He motioned for her to grip his shoulders and placed his hands around her waist.

She looked down at him and spoke with a faraway voice, as if she thought she was inside a dream. “We’re not in King’s Landing anymore.”

“No, we are outside the city.” He helped her off of Rhaegar’s back. Now she was looking up at him, studying his face as if his skin was glittering or changing color.

Perhaps his skin was indeed glittering, or a different color. Green, maybe, or red, perhaps, or both, like the Bloodstone Emperor. Aye. The Bloodstone Emperor. A usurper. A torturer, a dark sorcerer, a necromancer. He could have been a Bolton! He lay with a beast of a woman and then the Long Night came. That would be right. It was a dream, and he was dreaming he was the Bloodstone Emperor going to claim his red-haired bride. Qyburn had given him dreamwine, and he was still in his bed at Harrenhal, and Duskendale hadn’t happened yet, and Harry and Lord Robett and Ser Kyle were safe and Ser Helman was still alive and tomorrow when he rode out he would tell them that his father hadn’t had orders from the King at all and nobody would go off to Duskendale and they wouldn’t burn everything and they wouldn’t rape the farm girls, they would ride to Riverrun instead, and he’d talk to Ser Edmure and Lady Catelyn and then he’d go off to save the Princess, but he wouldn’t do it by himself, there would be ten men with him, and he’d just be giving orders, and they would have to kill people, and when they got her out he wouldn’t have to think of anything to say to her, because His Grace would have given him a message to let her read, and gods be good, he wouldn’t have to be all alone with Sansa Stark for however long it was going to take to get her clear across the countryside…

It had to have been a dream. Aye. This couldn’t have been real. Aye. It had been too easy. No one had tried to kill him. No one had even tried to stop them. How long had they been riding? He didn’t know. The sun had set, aye, but he didn’t know how much time had passed. Mayhaps he had just blinked and the sky had turned purple when he had stopped his horse, but now he was touching her, and next he’d kiss her, and then he’d lay with her, and then she’d turn into a wolf like some sort of skinchanger, and then she’d start ripping his head off…

Her voice snapped him back. Not a dream. It was real. It was real and he would have to say something to her...

“You’re taking me back to Robb? To my mother? Truly?” At the mention of her mother her voice started wavering. How long had he been standing numbly like that? She still hadn’t taken her hands off of his shoulders even though his own had fallen away from her waist.

“I will get you there. Truly.” That was his voice, but he didn’t feel his mouth move. He didn’t feel like he was in his body, but he was still looking at her, still watching her, and she was still touching him…

Then her tears that were threatening to come arrived for true. She started sobbing and pressed her face into his gorget. Oh. Now he was back in his body. Now he could feel himself again. Gingerly he drew his arms around her and placed one gauntleted hand on her back.
“Thank you,” he heard her say between shuddery, sniffly breaths. “I’d thought I’d never see them again. Or the North, or a northman.”

“You will, my Princess. Your family and the North.” Was that the right thing to say? He hoped drawing her closer and rubbing circles onto her back would help her stop crying. He hadn’t expected her to cry…

When her tears were done, he squeezed her shoulder and led her to sit on a tree stump. He pulled out the favor again, patted her cheeks dry and did his best to hold her blue gaze. It’s real, she’s real, I must be good to her. I must say all my courtesies. She is my liege lord’s sister. She is my Princess.

“The Lannisters mistreated you, my Princess. That will stop. From this moment onward you will be afforded all due respect as befits a lady of your station.” He exhaled in the steadiest way he could manage. “Please excuse me while I make camp.”

Then he tied Rhaegar to a tree and then made to start a fire. That was easy. He could do that. Task-oriented thought was safer, more comfortable. He exhaled again. Easy. Another exhale. Just like before a tilt. Breathe in focus, breathe out fear.

They had no need to cook this evening but the nights grew cool so close to the ocean. He’d learned his lesson on the trip south. He found the pack with the food and gave her some salted meat, a roll of bread, and a piece of cheese. He took out his only bedroll and lay it out on the flattest patch next to a tree, and then he retrieved the bag with his clothes and positioned it on the ground at safe distance from the foot of the bedroll. Thankfully he had a spare saddle blanket large enough to curl up in.

“The bedroll’s yours,” he said.

The heat had not yet left the humid Crownlands air. He was still flushed and sweating from spending the whole day in full plate, and riding double was uncomfortable no matter whether you sat in front or behind. Besides, the armor was made for a man slightly shorter, slightly thicker, and the kit did not fit him properly. It pinched at some junctures and his shoulders were achy and screaming. He turned away from the Princess and began stripping off the stolen plate.

He had no idea what to say to her. Words usually came easy to him but his mind was utterly failing him now. This was the part that he had been waiting for. This was the part that he had been dreading. What if she asked him why he had broken with her brother’s army to come and find her? He felt as if he might die if he had to tell her the truth but he couldn’t very well lie and say that King Robb had sent him on a special secret mission. When they eventually reached His Grace, he would be exposed immediately. He might very well be punished for not retreating to Harrenhal with the rest of Condon’s men.

His face was burning and his neck was sweating. By the gods, the south was warm. An evening breeze kissed his skin and gave him some relief, but the tense and brutal awkwardness did not abate. He knew he should have thought of something to say while he was watching her in the garden, or standing guard outside her door. The singers never sang about what the knight said to the lady the moment she was rescued. They just sang about how he rescued her. Knights didn’t need reasons to rescue ladies.

That’s only in the songs, a voice in his head said, and it sounded like his own. In life, knights don’t go on quests to rescue ladies for love. They do it because they’re told to. They do it for coin. Did you think you could be a knight from the songs?
Aye. What had he been thinking?

You weren’t thinking. You were stupid. That was Robbie’s voice. Didn’t I say, don’t be stupid? You’re too smart to be stupid. Why did you do this?

Why indeed? That was Father…

When the ravens had flown out announcing that Lord Stark had gone south to serve as Hand, and that Lady Sansa had been betrothed to the Crown Prince, he’d had the fleeting idea to steal away down the Kingsroad and beg King Robert to legitimize Ramsay. He would have needed to pretend to like Ramsay, to respect and love him and deem him worthy to rule the Dreadfort, but it would have been worth it. Why? King Robert would have boomed, perched on high from that great barbed chair. Why beg for the rights of your father’s bastard? So that I may swear my sword to the future queen, Domeric would have said. So that I may someday take the White and guard her always. And then everybody in court before the Iron Throne would have laughed, and word would have reached Father, who would have set Ramsay on him for shaming House Bolton. And then he’d be locked beneath the Dreadfort, and then the torture would begin…

So he’d thought better of that notion. Besides, he had only been recently knighted and there were many finer swordsmen, knights with countless deeds of true valor to their names. Domeric would not have deserved such an honor. Instead, he’d contented himself with composing music for his harp and writing his poetry. Perhaps he’d even gather his work into a collection and secretly have the maesters spread it around. Then all the ladies would smile, all the ladies would sigh, all because of him. He’d have his own lady wife then, of course, his own children, and he would be Lord of the Dreadfort and could change things for the better. But it would be all duty, and they’d respect each other without loving each other, they might even be friends, and that would be fine, because that was the best many highborn marriages could aspire to. No one but those who had known him as a young man in the Rills or in the Vale would ever need know the poems were his, and only Mychel Redfort would ever know that they were about the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. They’d all be dedicated to the Queen of Love and Beauty and every woman would believe it was herself. The Lord of the Dreadfort was not supposed to write poetry about secret loves that would never spark. No Bolton of the Dreadfort was ever supposed to love a Stark…

He was not prepared for this. I hardly know her, he panicked inwardly. I can’t say all that, she’ll think me a fool, or worse. I haven’t seen her in nearly two years, and I can count on two hands the number of times I’ve been to Winterfell and spoken to her. It was ridiculous, if you thought about it. People would be right to laugh at him. Father would be right to torture him. By the gods, why did I do this? I deserted the army and I don’t even know what to say to her. She didn’t need me, they didn’t dishonor her, they don’t do that to highborn hostages, they only talked about it and dressed her up wrong. They wouldn’t actually do it. Robbie was right. I am too smart for this stupidity. I am such a fool…

“Ser Domeric?” The Princess’ voice drew him away from his thoughts. He noticed that she was finished eating, and he was done taking off the armor. It was sitting neatly in a pile next to the tree. Now he was just in his linens and hose. He turned back to look at her. She was sitting prettily on the tree stump, staring at him with starry blue eyes. Her knees were together and pointed towards him and it looked like she didn’t quite know what to do with her hands. Somehow even with her hair covered and her tear-tracked, snow-white face dirty with the dust from the road she seemed to shine.

“Aye, my Princess?”

“How did you know that they mistreated me?” Ser Osfryd’s voice rang in Domeric’s ears as he
picted how he first saw her coming out of the Red Keep’s Great Hall. *You like the wolf bitch, do you? I’m sure once King Joffrey’s fucked her right proper he’ll let us all have our turn. Said so himself.* He clenched his jaw.

Any lady about whom common guards talked like that was being mistreated. Any lady forced to bandy about in clothes so tight they’d belong in a whores’ mummer’s show was being mistreated. It wasn’t mortal jeopardy, but ladies deserved better than that. It was clear for anyone to see. Domeric frowned.

“When I hid as a red cloak the other guards spoke of you with gross disrespect. And your gown was too small. Everyone knows that highborn hostages should be kept with honor. That means providing appropriate clothes.”

“Oh,” she said, her eyes downcast. “That’s not what I meant.”

That wasn’t what she meant? He struggled to think of things that might be worse. Were they starving her? Torturing her? They weren’t keeping her in the Black Cells… He’d heard rumors that Joffrey was petty and cruel, but surely it couldn’t have been so bad. Surely he would have been disinherited by King Robert or deposed like Mad Aerys already if he treated noble prisoners as poorly as Ramsay did. Surely she hadn’t been dishonored as he had feared…

He stepped closer and tried to examine her more thoroughly without imposing upon her personal space. She had all of her fingers; her hands were perfect. If her feet had been maimed, they would be covered all the time and he wouldn’t have noticed. That was the idea behind taking toes. Other people wouldn’t see or suspect anything. He struggled to remember how she walked in the castle. Nothing seemed to be amiss with her gait. Perhaps any wound had healed already? He wasn’t about to take off her boots to find out.

“What did you mean?” He tried to sound as gentle as possible, to keep the dread out of his voice.

She breathed in deeply, picked up a twig, and started drawing shapeless figures in the dirt. “Joff was terrible. After he took my father’s head he made me go up on the walls and look at it. And my septa and our steward and the rest.” Domeric remembered walking beneath the poor servants’ tarred heads at Harrenhal. That would have been very painful indeed. He had suffered to look at the innocent Harrenhal servants. As much as it might have been satisfying to see the heads of one’s enemies on spikes, he couldn’t imagine what it would have felt like to see that of someone he loved. He couldn’t bring himself to picture it done to Grandfather or Lord Horton or Maester Uthor.

“After the Blackwater and the Lannisters betrothed King Joffrey to Margaery, he said I was nothing and that could have me anyway. He… He left me with my honor,” she continued slowly, “but Joff would bring me before the court and make me naked and stuck a crossbow in my face. That started before the Blackwater though.”

*What?* The last whole thing in him broke at that moment. The entire world was red. Sansa Stark, their beautiful princess, the jewel of the North, made naked before the court? Joffrey Baratheon had told sweet Sansa Stark that he would rape her, kill her? To her face and in front of gods only knew how many others? He’d never wanted to flay a living person so much in his entire life. Perhaps this was how his ancestors got their start. *I shall skin the beast alive and drape his hide on my Princess’ back. The bastard’s screams will make the sweetest song.*

“Then he would have the knights of the Kingsguard beat me with their gauntlets or the flats of their swords. Some of the wounds are only just healed but most are scars now.” *What?* They beat her? Knights of the White Cloak, striking a highborn lady with steel? Some knights betrayed their vows, yes, it was no secret what Ser Lyn Corbray was like. But the Kingsguard? The order of the highest
honor?

He could not believe what she was saying, but he would not dare disbelieve her. What motive had she for telling him anything but the truth? How could anyone make something so awful like that up? *I will flay their hands and present my Princess with seven sets of gloves.*

“He would do this whenever Robb would win a battle in the West, or whenever something displeased him. He did it for fun.” Now he was truly fuming. They said that Bolton blood ran cold, but his was boiling hot. The campaign in the Westerlands had been folly from the start. Now he knew the true extent of it. Domeric had thought His Grace the fool, but now he simply hated their boy King Who Lost the North, who played at glory while his innocent sister took his wounds, when the lions drew her blood instead of his. *I will tell all the Northern lords of this,* he thought, *and they will know their king for a fool. Were it not treason, I would challenge His Grace to single combat for the Princess’ honor.* It was His Grace that threatened her honor, aye, not just the Lannisters. Domeric would give Robb Stark back those wounds, strike for strike.

“I hate them all. Joffrey, the Queen, the Lannisters. I hate them.” How could she keep a straight face while saying all this? *Was that a smile??*  

“They will never hurt you again, my Princess. They shall all die by my blade, if the gods are just, if they are not already dead when we march south again come spring.” Now he was promising her another southern campaign. He’d scoffed at His Grace’s campaign in the West. He’d scoffed at himself for coming here. What a fool he had been. What a fool he was. He was right to desert and take the Princess away, and His Grace was even right in wanting to scorch the lions’ den, even if it had been a bit too soon. *I would have skinned lion pelts right along with him if he had had the sense to wait till spring.* The King’s actions were foolish, for they starved the North and hurt the Princess, but it was the Lannisters who struck the blows. Oh, how they all deserved to burn. Oh, how he desperately wanted to flay Joffrey and the Kingsguard and leave them to bleed out and die…

His mind was going places it had no business going. Such thoughts were not knightly. He scrounged about for his wineskin and took a long drink.

“I am going to eat as well, my Princess,” he said to her, but also to himself. He did not feel like eating but he had to, needed to. It was already dark. He’d need to sup before he slept, so he returned to the pack with the food and helped himself to a roll and some cheese and salted meat. There were no other stumps so he sat against the tree by the bedrolls.

“You don’t need to call me Princess, ser,” she said. She gave him a soft smile that lived only a moment. Domeric was very glad that she changed the subject. “I’m just Lady Sansa or Sansa.”

He shook his head. “You’re the King’s sister. You’re a princess. Our Princess, the North’s. Princess of Winterfell. That’s how we thought of you anyway. We, the army I mean. At least the army my father commanded. We didn’t hear much from the army with your brother.

“We prayed for you, you know. For your safety. For your honor. Especially after the Ironborn killed the little princes, and when Stannis was planning to attack King’s Landing. Every day at Harrenhal, in the morning. Thousands of men kneeling in the godswood, cutting our hands and giving our blood to the heart tree. We prayed for other things of course, for the safety of our homes, for the defeat of the ironmen. But I wanted you to know. Even when our commanders wouldn’t do anything, we didn’t forget you. We cared.” That was easy to talk about. Facts were easy. The truth was not…

Her bright blue eyes were wide and she was silent for a long moment. Then her mouth tugged
upward.

“The gods must have been with you then, ser.” She watched him as he ate. He looked into the fire. They didn’t need it. Even in only his linens he could feel that it was a warm and balmy night.

Somehow one of the smallest meals in his life took the longest amount of time. Every time he looked up, he could see her starry, dreamlike gaze glinting in the flames. The sweet, serene expression on her white face was at odds with her earlier tears. For all that he was glad to have made her happy – even if he did not know how – it was somehow more difficult to find something to say now than when she was sad.

He finished eating.

“I will sleep now,” she said politely. She rose, so he stood as well. He was next to the bedrolls so she approached.

She quirked up her lips and looked up to him. Her smile was kind but her mouth was cruel. “Thank you again for taking me away from the city, ser. Good night.” Then she pressed a hand on his chest, kissed him softly, and gracefully sank down to wrap herself in the bedroll.

His heart stopped beating. It galloped away. No! She couldn’t! With the press of her lips to his it was done. Her teeth were digging into him, cutting down through his flesh to his very bones. She was cracking his ribs open, breaking the cage that held his heart in safekeeping. Every bit and piece of him she had torn asunder, only to come together again and reform anew in different places. She held him in her maw. He would fall to bloody pieces if she let him go, spit him out.

He stepped away from the tree and made for the stump. He sat, picked up the twig, and poked at the fire.

He would have been lying if he told himself that he had not hoped for this on some level. Ladies rewarded knights who rescued them with kisses, after all. But he was not prepared. Not at all. He hoped that it would stop with just the one. He’d have the one treasured memory, that one fine day, and he’d be able to hide it away and keep it separate from everything so he could get on with the rest of his life. Any more, though, and he would be ruined – the life of a normal highborn closed off to him forever. He wouldn’t be able to just return her to His Grace and walk away like he had planned. He couldn’t marry her after all, she was a Stark and he was a Bolton. Any more of her damnable kisses and he’d need to start making plans to spirit her away across the Narrow Sea, because he could not bear to ask His Grace for her and be told no, and they would say no, they should say no, because his name was Bolton. But he’d sooner run his sword through His Grace’s heart than hear that he couldn’t have the Princess who he loved and who was coming to him willingly. But that would be stupid. If he killed His Grace some fucking Umber would take his head, and he’d never be Lord of the Dreadfort, never even be able to rise in some sellsword company in Essos, never be able to ever give the Princess a lick of what she deserved. Perhaps he could choose go off and take the black like his friend Waymar did, but Waymar was dead, lost beyond the Wall, wildlings sucking the marrow out of his bones somewhere off in the Frostfangs. No. Terrible things would happen if Domeric allowed anything more.

It was all too much to process.

Domeric kept poking at the flames. He kept staring at the fire. Eventually he unsheathed his sword and began to sharpen it, and then he worked on his knife.

When his eyes were so tired they were falling closed he made for where he had lain his sleeping place. He wrapped himself in his cloak, and then again in the saddle blanket. He placed his sword
on the ground and lay it down by his head. The bag of clothes made a decent pillow.

He hoped beyond hope that he’d get to kiss her again.

He was doomed before slumber took him.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last Domeric chapter for a while. We will move onto Sansa's perspective next.

You may be curious as to why Sansa has said very little. It will become clear. She will also speak more.

As a point of divergence, we are somewhere between Sansa II and Sansa III, ASOS. I think it would be worth it to give those chapters a re-read.

Up until this chapter we have blown through Clash and Storm. Chapters will cover shorter periods of time moving forward.

Again, thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting.
Sansa woke to the sounds of seabirds chirping and the early dawn light stroking her face. She felt warm and cozy all wrapped up in what seemed to be an overlarge, padded blanket. It must have been Margaery’s, or Megga’s or Elinor’s. The mattress was somewhat firmer than she would have liked but she had rested well enough. Maybe it was some new fashion in the Reach to sleep on something hard to improve one’s constitution.

Then Sansa opened her eyes. She wasn’t it her own chamber in Maegor’s, and neither was she in one of the Tyrell cousins’ beds in the Maidenvault. She was outside, and she was lying on the ground in a bedroll beneath a tree.

Oh.

So it hadn’t been a dream.

At dinner Megga had told the story of how Elinor’s betrothed, Alyn Ambrose, had worn her favor all through the Battle of the Blackwater. Elinor’s favor had bolstered Alyn’s courage and gallantry so much that he’d shouted her name as a battle cry, killed two men and faced it all without fear. Megga had voiced her dream for a champion wearing her favor to kill a hundred men. *Silly Megga. Dreams don’t come true,* she had thought, then.

Sansa had listened to the romantic tale with pity and envy. The way Megga told it, Alyn and Elinor had a love out of the songs. Sansa wished she could still believe that there was life and a love like that waiting for her, but she knew it could not be. Joffrey had been her golden prince. He kissed her and he gave her jewels and called her his beloved, but he had Lady killed and her father killed and everyone else from the North killed too. Then he’d had her beaten, stuck a crossbow in her face, and had her stripped naked and then beaten again.

Lord Baelish was right. Life was not like the songs. And the Hound was right too. There were no true knights. There were only monsters, and the monsters always won. Megga and Elinor were wrong. She prayed that they would not have to learn one day.

So when Ser Domeric Bolton had pulled her into the bush and told her he’d take her away barely a moment after the Tyrells had left the garden, she knew it had to be a dream.

Only in her dreams could she conjure up a gallant knight from the North who had come to take her away from King’s Landing back to Robb and Mother. It was too good to be true. That day couldn’t have really come to pass.

When she was small, Father had once told her that dreams were made of things you saw and felt and did while awake. Everything in the dream was familiar to her in some way. It had all felt so
real. The Tyrells wanted to take her away from King’s Landing, and so did Ser Dontos, and so did the Hound. But the Tyrells would have taken her to Highgarden to marry Lord Willas for her claim to Winterfell, likely to never see Mother or Robb again. Ser Dontos was a drunk and a fool and it was never the right time for the escape he kept promising her. Then there was the Hound, who admittedly had killed for her and would have been a fierce protector, but he was rude and his words were hateful. He was dangerous and made her feel afraid.

Ser Domeric was better than all of them. In the dream he hadn’t looked that much different than the last time she’d seen him, about two years’ past, but for the fact that he was dressed as a red cloak and then in armor that could have belonged to any knight. After you started talking to him and noticed that his eyes were kind, their ghostly paleness was not so unsettling anymore. In fact, he was quite comely, with a sharp jaw and a straight nose, a fine mouth and hair that was black and thick and shiny. His face was free of disfiguring, ugly burns like the Hound’s. He was tall and broad and whole, with a knight’s hard form and fine muscles borne of training and battles, unlike the crippled Lord Willas and the fat Ser Dontos.

Ser Dontos. Her silly Florian, who she had come to believe would never take her away - he had given her a hairnet, and so Ser Domeric had too. Ser Dontos' hairnet had been silver and purple, but Ser Domeric was black and silver and pearl. Black for mourning, for Father and Bran and Rickon, and silver and pearl because she was a Stark. It was perfect.

Her sleep was usually full of nightmares, but she had been happy with the Tyrells for company, so it wasn’t surprising that she had a good dream this night. All the Tyrell ladies loved songs, and Lady Leonette even played the high harp with her, so the dreamweaving part of her had reached back into her memories and pulled out a knight who loved songs and played the high harp.

Megga had been talking about Alyn Ambrose wearing Elinor’s favor, and so her mind had recalled the pretty pink handkerchief she’d given to Ser Domeric when he’d earned his spurs. I know you shall prove a true knight, ser, she had said when she had given it to him. There were so few knights in the North. She’d wanted them all to wear her favor, because knights deserved ladies’ favors and she was a lady and had stupidly fallen madly in love with each and every young knight who rode through Winterfell’s gates. You’ll be the greatest black knight there ever was! Sansa had told Ser Waymar, when she’d presented him with his favor on his way to the Wall, but that one hadn’t been as pretty or as memorable. It had been black linen with the runes and studs of his house stitched in white in one corner, the Castle Black sigil of the Night’s Watch in the opposite. Ser Domeric’s had been much finer work.

Besides, it was silly to fall in love with a brother in black. Their vows were for life. They couldn’t leave the Wall to come to your rescue and bring you back to your family. They couldn’t get married, so Robb couldn’t reward her savior with her hand. Thus, the dreamweaver in her heart had chosen Ser Domeric over Ser Waymar to come and find her.

What was more, Ser Waymar was a Valeman and had sounded like it. Ser Domeric was of the North. In her dream every word out of his mouth sounded like home. She hadn’t heard a Northern brogue since Father died...

If Ser Domeric had actually come to rescue her, it would have been so perfect. He would take her to Robb and Robb would be so grateful and pledge him her troth right then and there. Then when the war was over Ser Domeric would take her back to the Dreadfort and she would be his lady and would never need to go south of the Neck again. She could visit Mother and Robb often, as the Dreadfort was the closest great seat to Winterfell bar Castle Cerwyn. And with a gallant husband like Ser Domeric, none of the scary tales about things beneath the Dreadfort would matter. Better yet, everyone else would believe those tales, and they’d be too frightened by the flayed man
banner to ever dare hurting her. He would protect her from all of them. Ser Domeric and the Dreadfort would have been so much safer than Lord Willas and Highgarden with the puppies and the barge. The whole realm feared the flayed man of Bolton. No one would ever fear a flower, only the men behind it.

Then there was the kiss she gave him. It was only fitting that a lady reward her knightly savior with a kiss. And Megga and Alla had been talking about kissing games and asking her about Joffrey’s kisses. Joffrey’s kisses had been rotten and wormy, while Ser Dontos’ had been wet and slobbery. The Hound’s was hard and cruel and frightening. When Ser Domeric had kissed her back in the dream it was sweet. Now she understood what the singers meant by sweet kisses. They weren’t sweet like fruits or pastries but in the way of voices and smiles and people. He had clutched her to his chest and smiled into her mouth. Her neck had heated and the bats in her tummy had fluttered and danced and soon her whole body had been pressed flush against his. The kiss in the dream was better than the ones she shared with Ser Loras in her waking imagination.

The only part of the dream that was bad was when she talked about how Lady was dead and how Joffrey had hurt her. It had seemed so real. But she had told Lady Olenna about how Joffrey had her beaten and that was when the Tyrells offered to take her away. And what Ser Domeric had said afterward had been so like what the Hound had told her the night of the Blackwater. No one will ever hurt you again or I’ll kill them. They will never hurt you again, my princess. They shall all die by my blade, if the gods are just. So she could have dreamed that part of it up too.

But even though she could have dreamed it all up, she hadn’t. She was truly awake and she was truly outside and she truly had been taken out of King’s Landing by Ser Domeric Bolton. And she had truly kissed him...

Sansa froze in the bedroll. She studied the camp around her. All the bags were neatly piled next to the horse, as was his armor. His sword was gone, as was he, but the horse was still there so he couldn’t have been far.

She had to apologize. It had been so improper of her. It was good that she had time to think of what to say. Sansa hoped he would understand that she had just been a hostage so long that she’d believed that they’d all forgotten about her, so he must have been a dream. Hopefully the journey back to Robb would not be too awkward.

It was the ghost of the silly girl inside her that had thought that since he had her favor, he had come to her rescue because he loved her. No, that was stupid. He was a knight in Robb’s army, and he had brought the favor along to war because she had been held hostage and if she was not ransomed, she would need to be rescued. The favor was something useful that she would recognize as proof that he was truly who he said he was and not one of Joffrey’s men playing at some cruel jape. He was not in love with her. Robb sent him because he was a fast rider that could kill people, with enough stealth and cunning to break her out of the Red Keep.

Robb might still grant him with her hand, though. It would be a fair reward for such a perilous undertaking. Why else would a knight agree to go on such a dangerous mission, but for the honor of marrying a princess? Ser Domeric would be a king’s goodbrother then. He would have prestige and influence and power.

That would not be so bad, Sansa thought. Even if he didn’t come because he loved her, he was still a comely knight who could protect her from harm, and a Northern high lord’s son and heir to boot. She could still live at the Dreadfort, she could still see her family every so often, and she’d need never go South again. His music and poetry would still be pretty even if she didn’t believe in them anymore. He could give her a very good life. Better than Joffrey would, certainly. Better, even,
than a life of luxury in faraway Highgarden. She could never see Mother in Highgarden.

She might even one day come to love Domeric Bolton like Mother had come to love Father. He was easy enough to get along with and she was already so, so grateful that he had taken her away from the city. But first she’d have to apologize to him for her behavior else the whole journey to Riverrun would be off to a terribly awkward start.

Sansa sat up and got out of the bedroll. There wasn’t an obvious way to fold it so she did her best to roll it up as neatly as she could. She noticed that the jeweled hairnet Ser Domeric had given her was crooked so she took it off and stuffed it into a pocket in her cloak. She could put it back on later. She really shouldn’t have slept in it. The pins were very uncomfortable. Her plait was coming undone too, so she undid it all the way and combed her fingers through her hair.

The brown dress was wrinkled. It was the only one that fit. She’d been in the process of sewing more, and then there was the gown the Queen had commissioned for her, but those would never be finished. She hadn’t bothered bringing any of the other traveling or riding dresses. They were too small to be worn. She stood up, shook out the dress, and straightened her skirt.

Sansa heard him before she saw him.

Ser Domeric was coming out of the east where the sun was still low in the sky. He was whistling a familiar tune, and as he drew closer it was clear that the tune was *Six Maids in a Pool*, about Florian and Jonquil.

He saw her and stopped whistling, and waved his hand in greeting.

“Good morning, my princess,” he said when he had reached the camp. He was holding his helm upside down as if it were a bowl. “I hope you slept well. I brought some eggs to break our fast on, if that pleases you.”

“Thank you, ser,” she said. “And I did sleep well.” He was still calling her princess. She supposed that he was right, that since Robb was King in the North that made her a princess. She did not feel like a princess, though. Nobody treated her like a princess. Before the Tyrells had arrived, she was a hostage, and now she was just another lady.

Ser Domeric moved towards the remains of the fire and stoked it back to life. Then he produced a few sticks and stuck them into the ground around the fire. He balanced the helm on the sticks and it made a sloshing sound. He left the water to boil while he held the eggs in a small sling of fabric and moved away from the fire.

Now was the time to apologize. “Ser?” He looked up, and it looked like he was trying to stop a smile at his lips, but it had already claimed his eyes.

“Aye, my princess?”

Sansa took a breath and fell into a deep curtsey. She looked straight at him. “Good ser,” she started. “I must thank you again for traveling so far to take me back to my king. From the depths of my heart I am so grateful. I know your journey must have been perilous indeed, and you have been very brave. But I must apologize for… my lapse in propriety yesterday. I confess that so long had I thought myself abandoned and had given up hope of rescue that I believed myself in a dream. Please forgive me, ser.”

He blinked and then pointed his eyes away. “There’s nothing to forgive, my princess, and you ought not curtsey for me,” he said quietly to the boiling water. Then he plopped four eggs into his
helm, moved to one of his saddlebags, and produced a spoon and a small bowl. “‘Twas like out of
the songs. No harm in just one kiss of thanks. I know ‘twas not meant as an invitation to take any
liberties with you.”

Ser Domeric turned to face her again. His face was nearly as pink as a Bolton banner. Then he
turned his attention to the eggs, which were done boiling, spooned them into the bowl, and
retrieved some bread and a waterskin. He handed it all to her and motioned for her to sit on the
stump.

He coughed into his fist. Sansa remembered that Ser Domeric was a generally quiet person. He
didn’t often start conversations but once you did talk to him, he always had something intelligent to
say.

“I must apologize myself for our poor accommodations, my princess. We’ll have to share the spoon
and the bowl. I came alone and couldn’t bring my draft horse so I don’t have my tent either. We’ll
have to camp like this again tonight, but tomorrow we should reach Rosby castle, and there should
be an inn in the town outside. You will have a bath and a featherbed. I’ll be able to get extra
supplies too. You’ll have to cover your hair before we get there, though.” His eyes were lingering
over her hair. Maybe she should have left the hairnet on, even though it had been uncomfortable
when she woke up. She didn’t want to make any trouble for him.

Sansa nodded and started on an egg. Rosby castle, he had said. From what she remembered, Rosby
was to the northeast of the capital, by Blackwater Bay. It was on the Rosby Road, not the
Kingsroad, and they had taken the Kingsroad to get to King’s Landing. Sansa had asked Father
whether they would be stopping at Riverrun to visit Grandfather Hoster and Uncle Edmure on the
way south, but he said no, Riverrun was west of the Kingsroad, and it would take too long to get
there. She finished the other egg, took a piece of bread, and handed the bowl and the spoon back to
Ser Domeric. Then she frowned.

“We’re on the Rosby Road? Why aren’t we taking the Kingsroad? Aren’t you taking me to
Riverrun?” Why are we going the wrong way? A note of panic crept into her voice.

Ser Domeric’s brow furrowed and he pressed his lips together. Then he put down the bowl full of
food and the spoon, knelt, and took one of her hands.

“Princess,” he said – she would need to ask him to stop calling her that again – “I would not subject
you to the horrors of the Kingsroad. The Riverlands are full of armies and outlaws and they’re all
rapers. There’s even a pack of wolves a hundred strong preying on villages and travelers. It would
be too dangerous for me to take you through there by myself. I would not be able to leave you
alone, and we would both need to work at making camp and keeping watch. We may both die
there. Others take me before I lead you to your doom.” He ran a finger across her palm and looked
into her face. His pale grey eyes were very soft.

“You have ladies’ hands. Ladies’ hands are not meant for such roughness and hardship. I would
spare you as much hardship as was within my power. The Rosby Road is much safer since it’s
indisputably within King Joffrey’s control. And around King’s Landing near the coast the farms
and fields still have forage. Further north and west the fighting has destroyed all of the food
supply. But I will keep us on the road for as short a time as possible. Once we get to the port at
Duskendale in around a sennight we’ll take the first ship to Gulltown we can find.”

Sansa nodded in understanding. Ser Domeric was still holding her hand. His touch was very warm
and he still had not taken his own eggs yet. She was going to tell him he was free to eat but he kept
talking.
“From Gulltown we’ll take the road to Runestone, House Royce’s seat. Bronze Yohn always spoke very highly of your father, and Ser Waymar was my friend. Before he disappeared beyond the Wall, he wrote me and told me that he and his father had stopped by Winterfell on their way North. We will both be welcome at Runestone with the Royces. Do you remember them?”

Sansa nodded. She wouldn’t have forgotten Ser Waymar. It made her sad that he was gone. She had loved him, but she hadn’t even known him really, but her heart still twinged at the fact that he was dead like Uncle Benjen. She hoped Jon was all right. Once you disappeared beyond the Wall you didn’t come back.

“I am sorry about your friend. Ser Waymar was very gallant. I would never forget the Royces. Lord Yohn and Ser Andar and Ser Robar all rode in the Hand’s Tourney for my father in King’s Landing last year. And when I heard that Ser Loras had slain Ser Robar, I was very sorry as well.”

Ser Domeric’s eyes went wide at that, and then he blinked. “Oh,” he said softly. He looked like he had been slapped. “Robar too?”

Sansa squeezed his hand and put the other on his shoulder. “I’m sorry.” She knew what it was like to lose people. She’d thought he’d known about Robar… She hadn’t meant to shock him.

“Ser Loras killed him at Storm’s End.” Sansa had been in love with Ser Loras too, but Ser Loras was a Kingsguard, and even if he returned her love one day, they could never share it. It would only end in tragedy, Lady Olenna was right. Besides, Ser Loras had forgotten that he’d given her a rose, and once she mentioned Ser Robar his courtesies had cooled. She didn’t want Ser Domeric’s warmth to go away. If they had to go the whole way back to Robb with Ser Domeric treating her coldly like Ser Loras had, she thought she might cry.

“Many people have been killed.” Ser Domeric’s quiet voice was distant and his eyes were far away. Oh no…

Sansa pulled her hands away and changed the subject before she could make things even worse. “From Runestone we’ll go on to Riverrun?”

Ser Domeric nodded. He smiled at her wistfully, and sadness lingered on his face. “Aye, my princess. If His Grace and your mother are still there. They might try to take back the North by marching east through the Vale and sailing across the Bite to White Harbor. In that case we’ll just stay in the Vale and wait for them to meet us. But if His Grace stays in the South, from Runestone we’ll ride to the Redfort, where I was fostered, and then to the Bloody Gate. Lord Royce and Lord Redfort will both want to help, I know them. They could lend us men to serve as your escort down the High Road and then the River Road. An honor guard of a hundred knights and men-at-arms, maybe more if we are lucky. Stark banners would be dangerous, but Royce and Redfort banners could protect you. They’re neutral. Your aunt the Lady Arryn won’t join the war, most like, but if we go to Lord Royce and Lord Redfort directly she shouldn’t stop them. Not for merely ensuring a lady’s safety during her travels. Worst case, it will be a safe place to wait out the fighting.”

That made sense to her. Ser Domeric might have been the only one Robb could have trusted to succeed at this task. If Aunt Lysa wouldn’t call her banners for Stark and Tully, the next best he could do would be to send one of his knights with friends in the Vale to treat with her lords directly.

“Robb chose well when he sent you for me, ser. I am glad that you are here.” She smiled at him. “Please, ser, you ought to eat too.”

Ser Domeric nodded, and then he frowned, but he picked up the bowl. He cracked open each egg before neatly consuming them, and then he tore the loaf of bread apart and ate it piece by piece.
The frown hadn’t left his face when he had finished eating and put the bowl and spoon away. *Have I truly ruined things already?*

Ser Domeric stared at the fire again. He began to stamp it out and kick dirt over the evidence of their camp. Then he put away the bedroll and began to strap the saddlebags to his horse. They were going to leave for the day’s journey soon.

He started putting his armor on. Sansa watched as she had the evening before. The kit was plain dark plate, without sigil or adornment, like the Hound’s. He could have been any knight or man-at-arms. She supposed that since for this mission secrecy was important, the plainness was necessary, but still she wondered what his own armor looked like. All the noble knights had personalized armor in the capital, elaborate or not. She wanted to ask him but he didn’t seem to be in the mood for talk. Perhaps later if things got better.

Sansa studied him as he strapped the vambraces onto his arms. He was broader and more heavily muscled than the lithe Ser Loras, taller than Joffrey but shorter than the Hound. Yesterday his arms had felt strong around her, his legs and chest hard. He did look like he could be a knight out of the songs…

“King Robb didn’t send me, princess.” Ser Domeric’s voice was only just loud enough to hear. “I came of my own accord.” His back had been toward her but now he turned to face her. He wore a dark look and his pale features were slowly coloring. His helm was still on the ground.

Sansa furrowed her brow. Her heart sped up and her tummy fluttered and she couldn’t say whether it was from fear or hope. “Why?”

Ser Domeric pressed his mouth into a thin line and then inhaled. He ran a hand over his face, and then Sansa could read nothing in his expression.

“We should be on our way, princess.” He walked to her and offered her an arm to take. She stood and he led her to his horse. He put his hands on her waist and she put her hands on his shoulders and he lifted her off the ground. He had placed her sidesaddle though his own saddle was not made for it. Then he untied his horse from the tree.

“Ser?” He hadn’t answered her question.

Then Ser Domeric moved to speak again. He took another deep breath.

“Because you weren’t wrong,” he said. “They all abandoned you. Your brother, my father, both armies. Ser Edmure too. I told them all you were important, but they wouldn’t listen. They all refused. Nobody listened. Nobody was coming.” Ser Domeric sounded like he was in pain. He turned to look straight at her, and his ghost-grey eyes were glassy.

“Because whenever the army wasn’t doing nothing, we were doing terrible things, and I couldn’t take it anymore, so I abandoned them. Because I wanted to do something good, and you deserved to be saved. Because I wanted you safe, and I wanted to save you.”

Then he gently took one of her hands, slowly placed it over his heart, closed his eyes, and sighed.

Oh! Oh. *Oh*…

Chapter End Notes
I hope I did Sansa's voice justice. I love her <3

When rereading her ASOS chapters I was surprised of how similar they were to the Sansa chapters in AGOT when she was still spending time with Jeyne Poole, and how different they were from the dark tones of Clash. It's almost like Sansa is regressing a bit, but then you realize that in the company of other friendly girls her age in the Tyrell cousins, her behavior/outlook is healthy and normal. At 12-14 it is normal for a highborn girl to be riding, hawking, enjoying songs during leisure time, and chattering about kissing boys. So in ASOS, Sansa gets to be normal for a few weeks. The war stole normalcy from Sansa Stark, and then after it returned, it was ripped away from her again.

But in ASOS she's still observant and her thoughts demonstrate her emotional intelligence, as do her endeavors to try to suss out what people want from her in her lunch with Lady Olenna and the gown fitting session. She's still somewhat naive and often gets things wrong (see her choice to tell Dontos about the Tyrell marriage plot, her guess that the gown came from Lady Olenna), but she's really trying to see things. She's not the savviest, but she's trying. I did my best to pick her character up from where she would have been in canon.

So, in this chapter, she tries to figure out what is going on, based on how she has come to understand the world after her time in Kings' Landing. And her expectations are subverted. So it is awkward.

Also. With Domeric's plan I wanted to avoid the 'journey up the Kingsroad' plot, which shows up in a lot of SanSan/Blackwater AU fics. (FWIW I am pretty positive towards SanSan in general). It's more realistic for the Hound to be able to make that journey with Sansa, because the Hound is Top Dog when it comes to Westerosi warriors. I don't think Domeric would believe himself up to going it alone through the heart of the Riverlands. He believes himself to be a good enough sword to be respectable but not a winner in a tourney, nothing special. Also he has inherited or assimilated Roose's caution. He has more to lose personally than the Hound did if this mission goes wrong.

It is intentional that the dialogue is awkward, over-courtly cheeseballs on both their ends. They are both trying very hard. This is not a situation which has a ready social script.
Sansa II

Chapter Summary

Sansa learns more about the war.

Chapter Notes

When you get to the last few paragraphs, remember, you were 14 and had cringe thoughts too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa didn’t know what to say. What does it mean? She hoped that it meant he loved her, for she so, so wanted to be loved. She wanted to ask, she wanted to speak, but it seemed to her that Ser Domeric wouldn’t know what to say either, for he just led his horse away from the tree, picked up the helm, and they started to walk. Sansa didn’t know whether to be disappointed that he wasn’t going to ride behind her again, or be relieved that she would be spared the terrible awkwardness. It shouldn’t be awkward to find out you were loved…

She had ridden astride yesterday, but she had still needed to cling tightly on his arm to keep steady then, as they had been going so fast. His tall red courser’s gait was very different than that of the palfreys and geldings she was used to riding. Ser Domeric’s saddle was made for a man riding to war. It was uncomfortable, and even at the slow pace Sansa felt unsteady. Whenever she tried to shift positions, she either felt precariously off balance or like the saddle’s contours were poking her hips and bottom. Ser Domeric noticed.

“I apologize for your discomfort, my princess,” said Ser Domeric. “Would you prefer to ride astride?”

I would prefer to walk, she thought, but she bit her tongue. Somehow, she sensed that if she voiced this out loud Ser Domeric would have a hard time choosing between granting her wish and denying it. In the legends, knights never let ladies walk if they had a horse.

“I would, ser,” Sansa said, making the choice for him. She didn’t want her poor rescuer to be any more uncomfortable than he already was. He halted, and so did his horse. He put his hands on her waist again and steadied her while she swung her leg into position. “Thank you.” It really did feel much better to ride this way.

In her mind she kept running over his words. They all abandoned you. I told them all you were important, but they wouldn’t listen. Shock washed through Sansa like a bucket of cold water had been poured over her head. In an instant, the earlier awkwardness seemed like it would have been better.

“Truly, ser, Mother and Robb and my uncles abandoned me?” Sansa could scarcely believe it. For so long, for as long as she could remember, Robb had been her hero. All that time she had spent praying for Robb, believing in him, all those beatings she took whenever Joffrey got angry at his
progress, and Robb had abandoned her? She could feel again Ser Boros’ gauntleted fist to her stomach, how it had taken her breath away, how her hair had gotten stuck in between the finger joints when he had grabbed it, how the flat of his sword had hurt her thighs so much she thought her legs would break, and how when she stood it felt like she had been stabbed. *It will be over soon,* she had thought, then, but if Ser Domeric was right, if it had been left up to Robb, it wouldn’t have. She had gotten up and walked with what felt like knives in her thighs too proud to break before them, and had exalted at the thought of Robb killing all the Lannisters. *Did I bear all that for nothing?* She could almost taste the blood in her mouth.

She could see his lower face muscles twitch as she looked down at him. “Your brother and your uncles, yes. I do not know about your mother. All of our army’s communication with Riverrun was conducted through Ser Edmure. We did not write your mother. Ladies do not typically involve themselves in war councils, and an operation to retrieve you would have been a military matter. Many lords believed that your mother would only approve the maneuver without thinking through the consequences, so nobody asked her.” His words were clipped and bitter. He tried, Sansa thought. *He knew mother would want me too.*

“Why didn’t they want to come for me, ser?”

“His Grace wanted to scourge the Westerlands and beat the Lannisters in the field prior to marching on King’s Landing to force a surrender from Lord Tywin and the Crown. That is why the Kingslayer was not traded for you upon capture. He is a rallying point for the Westermen, and a skilled battle commander. But after considering all that happened, the best time to make a trade would have been immediately after Oxcross.” *After Oxcross, after the crossbow in my face.* “They didn’t, though, and so after the Blackwater, the Crown became too strong to defeat in the field for a trade on terms favorable to us to be worth it to them.” Ser Domeric paused. “It was also thought that a rescue operation would have proven too dangerous to your person.”

“But you came for me and I have not been hurt.”

“Aye, my princess. We have not encountered danger yet.”

Sansa thought on that for more moments. Ser Domeric said he’d abandoned the war because nobody else wanted to come for her, and he had wanted to. He loved her. That must have been it – he said that he wore her favor every day and then brought her hand to his heart. It was like out of the songs – it was like a dream come true. Could it be so?

“Is there a reward you would have of my mother and Robb for delivering me back to them?” If he was in love with her like a knight out of the songs, then the obvious reward for coming to her rescue was her hand. But he sounded so sad. Maybe because she had apologized for kissing him, he thought that she didn’t like it, or him. Sansa wished that there was some way that she could convince him that she was all right with the prospect of marrying him, that despite her earlier apology for propriety’s sake, she did not in fact regret the kiss, that she had quite liked it. Maybe if she convinced him, his mood would improve?

But her question only deepened his melancholy. *Something is not right here,* Sansa thought. He turned his face away from her as he walked, but his horse kept on following the road. “I sought no reward, princess,” he said. “I only wanted to see you safe.” He took a breath, but his voice was still stiff. “I wish your brother had sent me. That he had cared. I came up with a plan and it was rejected. So when I saw the chance, I left the army and came here by myself. But I won’t be rewarded. I deserted the army. The usual punishment for deserters is death or the Wall. But when I was in the Red Keep, I heard they were having their deserters’ kneecaps broken, that’s rather lenient. Mayhaps if he is merciful, His Grace will spare my life. That could be my reward. My head
securely on my shoulders, and my titles too. I suppose your brother will decide what happens to me when we get to him.”

Sansa pictured Robb making Ser Domeric kneel down over a block and taking his head with a greatsword, only to hold it up in front of her and make her look at it like Joffrey did. Her throat felt tight. Alone of all people, he had come for her. Not Robb, not Mother, not her Tully uncles or Aunt Lysa. No…

“Robb wouldn’t punish you,” she said almost desperately. *It doesn’t make sense.* “Robb’s a good king. And you’re good too… You did a good thing in coming for me. Surely he would see that. You’re the heir to the Dreadfort. He can’t just kill you or send you to the Wall. Lord Bolton wouldn’t stand by it. You don’t deserve to be punished for this…”

Ser Domeric chuckled. “It’s possible, princess. Deserters have no honor. When your liege lord calls the banners, you answer to make good on the oaths you’ve sworn. When you desert an army, you break those oaths. And the gods curse oathbreakers.” He shrugged. “At Duskendale during the battle I was leading the retreat. A few hundred men I had behind me. I let a Reacher knight draw me away from them, and when I killed the knight, I came for you. Maybe those men are dead because I left. I don’t know. I didn’t care. I should have cared. Commanders don’t just let men die on whims. Commanders serve the men serving them, as they serve their superiors.” His voice didn’t sound stiff anymore. There was something raw and genuine in it that made Sansa uneasy but she couldn’t place it.

Then he turned back to look at her. “I don’t regret it though,” he said softly. *He’s lying, Sansa thought.* *It’s on his face and in his voice. He’s not trying to hide it, he’s trying to convince himself.*

“Someone had to save you. You were suffering there. It’ll be worth it when you’re safe.” He sighed and straightened his shoulders. *That’s not a lie, she thought. He believes that.* “It won’t be so bad at the Wall. My father has a new wife. Walda’s firstborn can have the Dreadfort.” Even a baby would have been able to see through that last part.

He’s guilty, Sansa realized. *He came to save me because he cared when nobody else did, but he couldn’t do it without leaving his men and risking his honor as a knight. He cares about them too, but he cared about me more.* Her heart went out to him. He was a good man in a bad place. It was wrong to desert the army, yes, but it was also wrong for Robb to have abandoned her in the capital at Joffrey’s mercy. He shouldn’t have had to make such a choice. Ser Domeric shouldn’t have had to risk his honor, and she knew he had honor, he was a knight sworn to protect ladies, and now he was protecting her. He shouldn’t have had to shirk his duty to come for her. Didn’t Robb have a duty to her too? As her brother, shouldn’t Robb have been protecting her? What about Robb’s honor, if Robb abandoned her?

“Robb… he’ll listen to me. I’ll ask him to spare you… He wouldn’t refuse me…” Sansa’s voice trailed off. *I pleaded with Father to spare Lady, and Father couldn’t listen. He slit her throat with Ice anyway, and Lady didn’t do anything wrong.* If Father could kill Lady for nothing, Robb could kill Ser Domeric for doing a bad thing even though he had done something good.

“Robb should have listened to your plan,” Sansa said. “He should have given the order for you to save me. Then you wouldn’t be a deserter, and no one would question your honor.” *Or his.*

“Aye, my princess,” he said. “If your brother had been a good king, he would have sent me to you. Maybe then he would have rewarded me.” He chuckled darkly. “Better yet, he would have traded the Kingslayer for you ten moons ago. Then this war would have been over and we would all be back home in the North already. We’d have a full harvest and the Ironmen wouldn’t have dared invade. Your brothers would be alive too.”
“You do not think Robb is a good king.” It wasn’t a question. The iron taste of disappointment crept into Sansa’s mouth. Joffrey was a bad king, and the whole realm hated Joffrey. Sansa had seen it during the bread riots. But Sansa had only ever heard horrible things about Robb from the Lannisters. She had assumed that Robb was good, that his Northmen must have loved him. But here was Ser Domeric, who had been with Robb’s army the whole time, and the way he told it…

the Ironmen… Bran and Rickon… oh… no…

“No, I do not, my princess. I am sorry.” Ser Domeric was staring at the road as he led his horse. “His Grace is beloved, but he makes a poor king. Outside the field, all of his choices have led to ruin. He abandoned the autumn harvest to start a campaign on the heels of winter. He sent Theon Greyjoy away and all but invited the Ironborn to sack the North. He broke his betrothal pact with the Freys by marrying Jeyne Westerling. He doomed many people he left up North.” He turned to look at her again. The tightness in his face was lessening. It looked like he was having an easier time talking about Robb than about anything else this morning.

“A bad king can be loved, and a good king can be hated. It’s best to try to be a good king first. Then you will be respected. The feelings of the smallfolk, the love or hate or fear, that’s all less important than respect.” The vague echo of the Queen’s drunken ranting bounced off the back of Sansa’s mind. She hadn’t asked for a lecture but the talk seemed to be helping him. She could have cut in to defend her brother, but her brother wasn’t here, and Ser Domeric was, and Sansa had the sinking sense that everything would be safer if Ser Domeric felt at ease.

“And loyalty,” he continued, “what use is a king who leads his leal men to die for naught, who starves his leal smallfolk? The bond between liege and vassal binds two ways. A good king asks his sworn men no service that would do them dishonor. He dispenses justice according to the laws of the land. He defends his vassals and his smallfolk when they or their lands are attacked. When his people are starving, he feeds them, even if he has to starve himself. A place at his hearth, meat and mead at his table. Do these things, and you are a good king. Love and fear arise from how you achieve these ends. A good king in these respects must do much to earn his people’s hatred. Do much, and do it publicly. Burn nobles like Aerys did, for example. Commit crimes against the gods. Breach the rights of the nobility, or try to take them away.

“Whether he leads his army from the front or from the back does not matter. Leaders at the front are the stuff of songs, aye, they buy love for the future. How loved a king is early in his reign is owed to his forebears. Your brother is loved because your father was a good ruler, as were Lord Rickard and those before him.” Sansa nodded at him and smiled. At least he sounded like he had put more thought into this than the Queen.

They proceeded in silence for many minutes. Ser Domeric was no longer as tense or as sad, and she supposed that was good, but as Sansa sat astride his horse her heart sank and sank and sank. Questions were formed in her mind and fell down into her belly like counterweights. Was Robb truly a bad king? Was it his fault Bran and Rickon were dead? And Ser Domeric…Would Robb truly kill him for deserting? Or send him to freeze on the Wall with common criminals? It didn’t make sense, but the thought was terrible. All these new thoughts were terrible! She had thought things were going to get better… She knew it had been too good to be true! A gallant knight who loved her had raced across the kingdom wearing her favor to free her from the Lannisters and return her to her family, but instead of rewarding him with her hand in marriage, Robb might end his life instead. Ser Domeric was good. He didn’t deserve it. He was a hero! He was her chance at love… It wasn’t fair. The Hound was right. Nothing was fair.

“Isn’t there anything you could do so that Robb wouldn’t punish you?” Her eyes were watering. She hoped she could stop her tears, hold her voice steady. She didn’t want to make things more awful than they already were.
Ser Domeric turned towards her again, and he must have seen the tears threatening to fall, because he pulled out the pink handkerchief and handed it to her again. She dabbed at her eyes and held it in her hand. The silk was very soft.

“Perhaps if I convinced Lords Royce and Redfort not just to send not just an escort but both their armies to fight for your brother. Better if Waynwood, Hunter, Templeton and Belmore could come too, I have friends in those houses. Combined they control nearly half the knights of the Vale, twenty thousand men. Then your brother might have a chance at winning the war. If I could do that, I’d truly deserve both a pardon and a reward.” What he left unsaid was that Robb cared about winning the war more than he cared about her.

“But that won’t happen, princess. Your aunt the Lady Arryn has forbidden it. The lords of the Vale won’t disobey their liege lady. ‘Twould go against their honor.”

*I’ll do anything*. Sansa decided. *I’ll do anything and say anything I can so Aunt Lysa and the Vale lords will help Robb win. I’ll make them see*.

She didn’t know any of them besides Lord Royce, but Lord Royce was Father’s friend, and Ser Domeric said that he wanted to help. Queen Cersei had said tears were a woman’s weapon. Maybe if she got down on her hands and knees and begged and cried prettily enough the lords of the Vale would be so moved they would want to help too. But maybe that wouldn’t work, either. She’d begged Joffrey for mercy for Father and it hadn’t worked.

“Do you truly think Robb is going to lose, ser?”

Ser Domeric sighed. “Aye, princess. He lost when the Ironmen took Winterfell and killed your brothers, when Stannis lost and the Tyrells joined the Lannisters. The last straw was when His Grace reneged on his pact with the Freys and married Jeyne Westerling. Foolish, that was. The Frey alliance gave him near on two thousand swords and passage across the Green Fork. Not worth much, most would say, but not nothing, like the Westerlings. The Westerlings are barely noble anymore, and they’re sworn to the Lannisters. And her mother is a Spicer, they were common Essosi merchants not two generations ago. At least the Freys have been around for eight hundred years. ‘Twas dishonorable for His Grace to break his betrothal to the Frey girl, all for nothing but to spare an enemy’s daughter the shame of a broken maidenhead. When we at Harrenhal heard of it we were all confused. So stupid, that was. Now the Freys have turned their cloaks on him.” Then Ser Domeric frowned. “Your brother should have talked to them before crossing the bridge. The Frey girls. Gotten to know them, who their families were. I talked to them all, before my father’s wedding. My father married a Frey. Some of them were quite lovely or well connected. If he had married Ser Walton’s daughter, Walda, he might have gotten Frey swords and Vale swords and prevented all this mess.”

The words spilled from his lips like wine from a smashed decanter. He was speaking naturally, easily. She knew he was telling the truth. There was a lot to take in. Sansa hadn’t known that Robb had a betrothal, let alone broken one, and that Robb was married now. She hadn’t known many things about the war, except for the battles that Robb had won. The Queen hardly kept her well-informed. The Queen had made Sansa believe Robb was winning! Ser Domeric knew a lot about the war, though. Oh, what was Robb doing? Why had he abandoned his own sister, only to dishonor himself for some common girl from the Westerlands? Mother and Father had taught them all about the importance of betrothal pacts. They were oaths. Robb was an oathbreaker now. Even his bannermen were abandoning him…

“‘Twas why I chose to come here. The war is lost. The whole thing’s pointless. It’s not worth it. At Duskendale, three thousand good Northmen were sent off to die for no good reason. I tried to tell Glover and Tallhart, but they didn’t listen to me, and now they’re probably dead. I didn’t want to fight in the war anymore. By the end the army was just abusing the smallfolk as badly as the
Lannisters had, if not worse. So now I’ve left, because if there was anyone worth fighting for, it was you.”

That was a different story than what he had said earlier. Or was it? He’d said that he’d come because no one else was coming for her. But he’d also said that the army was doing terrible things, and so he abandoned them. That must have been it. Whatever terrible things the army had done must have been the last straw, yet still he cared for all of the men he’d left behind. He is good, Sansa thought again. He cares about everyone. He is good and he is brave.

The sun was high in the sky. Ser Domeric had led them off of the road slightly, on the side where the ocean was, near a copse of trees. Most like they were going to stop for a rest and a meal. He met her eyes then, and Sansa felt her face warm and her heart beat faster. He looked nervous, ashamed, even, but why should be he ashamed for helping her? Did love make men nervous like it made maidens? She looked into his face and only saw questions.

“You truly relieve that my brother would punish you for leaving to bring me back?” It didn’t make sense to her. It couldn’t possibly be true. Not Robb. Not the brother she had known. But the brother she had known was just a boy, not a king. Sansa never met Robb the king.

Joffrey seemed different too, she thought. Joffrey was kind and gallant, and you only stopped loving him once he killed Father. And he only killed Father when he became king. No. She could not. She should not think that Robb was like Joffrey. No. She would not. Robb had never hurt her. Robb would never do that.

Ser Domeric only sighed. “It sets a poor precedent not to, my princess. If deserters are rewarded, every craven would do it. Think of the smallfolk. Farmers who’ve only held hoes, not spears. That’s what an army is. And if they got wind of me getting rewarded, your brother’s army would scatter at the first chance. That’s why deserters get beheaded or sent to the Wall. So the army will stay together. I won’t be rewarded, princess. The best I’ll make off with is a pardon for myself.”

Yes. She remembered. She learned the law at lessons too.

“You knew this and you came for me anyway?” Sansa stared at the pink favor in her hands. He loves me, he loves me, I know it. He didn’t say he loves me, but he wore my favor and risked his own honor for my sake. Why else would he have done those things? He is good and brave and he is intelligent and he loves me. He knew he would be punished and he came for me anyway. He deserves more than just a pardon from punishment. He’s a hero. He deserves a hero’s reward.

Ser Domeric blinked at this. His pale eyes narrowed. “No,” he said, so softly, so slowly. Then he flushed pink. “To be honest I only realized what I had done this past evening. I didn’t think of that before. I should have, but I didn’t. I just wanted to get out, and when I was out, I was happy.” He moved to help her off of his horse. “I think I might have come even if I had known. I… I hated it there. At Harrenhal. And I hated what your brother was doing. What my father was doing.” For a moment he looked like he was someplace else. “Bringing you back was the only thing worth doing, once your father was dead.”

Sansa gripped his shoulders as he lifted her onto the ground. Once she was standing steady, she looked up into his face, but she did not move her hands. There it was again. The guilt, the shame, the nervousness. He has nothing to be guilty for. He has nothing to be ashamed of. I do not want him to be nervous around me. She lifted the pretty square of silk to look at it again, and then gave him a hopeful smile. “You truly wore this every day? Over your heart?”

“Aye,” he said. She could barely hear him, but she could sense the tightness in his voice. The muscles around his mouth were twitching, but his eyes shone like moons, and she hoped that what she saw there was hope, too.
He really is comely, she thought. Not shining and golden like Joff or beautiful like Ser Loras, but comely all the same. He is good and he is brave and he is intelligent, and he is comely.

“Then you are my knight, and I am your lady.”

“I am your knight, and you are my lady. My princess.”

“Like in the songs?”

“Aye, like in the songs.”

Perhaps her life could be a song after all. The King and the Queen were the monsters, and they had trapped her in a tower, and she was a princess from a rival kingdom. She had suffered, yes, but the princess always suffered a long time before her knight rescued her. The knight and his lady always needed to pass all of the tests together before them on their adventures before they were wed, that’s why the songs were so long, why the legends kept you breathless before the end. At every turn there would be villains and battles and all sorts of obstacles in their way. She already knew some of them. They’d need to convince the Vale lords to help Robb win the war. They’d need to defeat the Lannisters and the Freys too. They’d need to convince Robb that no matter what he had done, the knight of the Dreadfort deserved the Princess of Winterfell. The monsters didn’t have to win. The heroes could, if they tried.

Sansa was tired of sadness, of nightmares and shattered dreams. There was a good life in front of her and maybe if she did all the right things and said the right words to win over the right people and the gods smiled and heard her prayers, she would have it. She would have the Dreadfort, she would have Robb and Mother near, and with the flayed man around her shoulders no one would ever dare hurt her again. She would have to be brave to get there, but she was a Stark. She could be brave.

I will love him, Sansa decided. I will love him because he is good and he cared and he didn’t forget me. Because he loves me, and he came for me. Because I want to hope that things will be good again.

The autumn day was bright, the sky clear and blue and cloudless. To the west, golden fields bursting with wheat and corn and barley trembled and shone with every breath of the salty sea wind. The seabirds were calling to each other and a sweet southerner breeze tickled her face, pleasant and cool. All her nerves were humming along with the air, warm and ripe with life before the harvest and winter and cold, cold frost would claim it all. The sunshine was gleaming on her knight’s dark plate, and when she placed a hand on his breastplate, it was warm. The sad, sad look on Ser Domeric’s face had long fled, and in its place was a tiny, tiny smile, and his eyes were smiling too. It’s perfect, Sansa thought. This moment is perfect.

“I would thank you,” Sansa said. “My knight from the songs.”

Then she tipped up her face, closed her eyes, and pressed her lips to his cheek.

Chapter End Notes

The goal of this chapter was to show Sansa’s reaction to Robb abandoning her and to showcase her emotional intelligence.
If you are puzzled about the things that Domeric is saying... just think about what he is not saying, and then it will make more sense. But it isn't supposed to really make sense, because he is still an unwilling passenger on the strugglebus.

I debated cutting the last biggish paragraph but decided to keep it despite its floridity. Sansa's chapters are very vivid and atmospheric, especially the Tourney of the Hand chapter. She is the kind of person who thinks in purple prose, like in a romance novel.

I hope the character development makes sense. I truly think that if a knight in shining armor showed up for Sansa at this point in her life she would both retain the strength and observational skills she developed while also regaining some of her idealism and hope for the future. Everybody deserves some hope in this universe (except for Ramsay, Ramsay doesn't need hope).

Not much time has actually passed, but highly emotional moments seem to stretch on forever. It will stay this way for the next few Sansa chapters. The plot will slow down a bit for the sake of character development. And I hoped you enjoyed Dany mooning over Daario.
Sansa III

Chapter Summary

Sansa gets an impromptu lecture on history and philosophy. And fluff moments.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“My Princess was insincere in her apology to me.”

That was what Ser Domeric said to her when the kiss was done. He wasted no time in turning away to retrieve their bag of food, but not before he had given her the most inscrutable of expressions. No, not inscrutable. The muscles in his jaw were tensing and relaxing.

His smile was gone. He had been smiling before. Sansa had been hoping for him to smile more brightly and profess his love for her with words. Then she would have told him that she loved him too, and they would have gone on to talk about how to best get the lords of the Vale to declare for Robb. Sh Now she didn’t know what to do. I’ve ruined it, she thought, and for a moment she heard Queen Cersei laughing at her. Would the Queen have ruined this?

“Does my princess have no care for propriety?” His words were very deliberate, his tone very even, and it did not sound like he was japing. One of his eyebrows inched upward, and suddenly Sansa was aware that the light of the southron sun had heated the steel of his breastplate to a near painful degree. She jerked her hand away and covered her mouth. Love is poison, Queen Cersei had said, and Sansa didn’t want her to be right.

Sansa shook her head violently and started stammering. I thought… I thought… I didn’t think… “N-no, I do, what I meant was, I thought… I wanted… to thank you… like in the songs…”

While Ser Domeric was rummaging in his saddlebags Sansa heard him exhale sharply, and then inhale, and then do it again nine more times. He’s still nervous, she realized, but she was nervous too, and the knowledge did not kill the frenetic trembling in her blood. He handed her the bowl with the bread and the cheese and the salted meat and she saw it shaking. There was nothing to sit on here, so he spread his spare saddle blanket on the ground. Sansa kept standing. Her legs were lead.

“My princess has already thanked me. Perhaps she has forgotten?”

His blank face and deadpan tone only made the jittery feeling worse. The bats in her tummy would not stop flapping about. Ser Domeric thought her improper, and Mother and her septa had said that that was a perilous thing for a man to think of a maiden. Now it was all ruined. He might still take her to Robb, but now he wouldn’t want to marry her, wouldn’t want to help Robb win the war, and Robb would sell her off to someone who only wanted her claim to Winterfell, and then Robb would lose and die and she’d be all alone. It would be all ruined, and nobody would ever love her…

“I-I’m sorry, ser,” Sansa stuttered. She wanted to cover her face with her hands. She could hear
Lady Olenna telling her that she was a pomegranate as if the old woman were standing right next to her.

Then Ser Domeric’s face fell, and he looked as though he were ashamed. “It is I who should be sorry, princess,” he said. “I should not have teased you so. ‘Twas unkind of me.” He motioned towards the blanket. “Please, princess, sit and eat. We should not tarry long here, only enough for my horse to rest.”

Oh. Robb and Jon and Arya had teased her, a hundred years ago in Winterfell, but she had always been able to tell with them, to understand. Jeyne Poole and Beth Cassel never teased her, they only teased Arya, but the Tyrell cousins did once or twice, and she had been able to tell with them too. Joffrey never teased her. He made his meanings clear.

Sansa sat down and did her best to hide her face in the bread while still eating as delicately as possible.

It was terribly awkward again. It wasn’t awkward before, when they were talking about the war, but talking about the war made Ser Domeric unhappy, and it would make her unhappy too.

In the end, when she’d finished with the bread and the cheese and the meat, Sansa apologized profusely for a second time and warbled about how she didn’t mean to be improper, how she thought it was proper and right and good because that’s what the songs were like, and how everything in the capital had just been so awful that she wanted to believe things were going to get better because he came to save her and it must have meant that he was a true knight and they had all said that true knights didn’t exist, and that she was silly and stupid for believing it all, and that she was sorry. The dream had been a better excuse.

“I’m sorry,” she finished. Sansa wanted to fade into the dust and blow away with the wind.

“Do not apologize to me, my princess. There is no need.” Now he was frowning again. Oh no oh no oh...

Sansa dragged her gaze away from the ground. Ser Domeric was studying her with something that looked like concern. He did not seem nervous anymore.

“Things will get better for you, my princess. I promise. When we get to Runestone you will want for nothing. No one will hurt you there. Lady Ysilla and Ser Andar’s wife will treat you kindly. I hope they will prove friends to you.”

Sansa handed the bowl with the food back to him.

“I have a full wineskin if you would like wine, my princess.”

“I would like wine, thank you, ser.” If she was drinking wine, she would not be talking. While Ser Domeric put down the bowl of food and retrieved the wineskin, Sansa pulled the snood out of the pocket in her cloak and began to pin it in place.

Ser Domeric turned to give her the wineskin. “You covered your hair,” he said wistfully. “Better that way, I suppose. Safer.” Then he took off his gauntlets, picked up the bowl and began to eat himself.

Sansa took a sip if the wine. Only a few moments afterwards did she begin to feel more at ease.
The wine was sweet. The wine was strong. She handed it back to him and he drank as well. Then he took another deep breath.

“I do not believe you are stupid, you know,” he said as he broke off a crust of bread. “Not for believing in the songs, or wanting life to be like them. Songs are beautiful. No. Stupid is something else.” He ate the bread. “I believe that life ought to be beautiful like the songs, and I have been told that I am passably intelligent. Do you think me stupid too, my lady?”

He did not sound like he had been insulted. Instead he sounded patient, and his eyes were kind. Sansa felt relieved. Perhaps things were not ruined after all.

“No, ser. I could never. You are very intelligent.”

“You flatter me by saying so, and for calling me a true knight, my lady,” Ser Domeric stared at her then, and his mouth twitched up in what might have been a smile. “That is the highest praise. A compliment I do not deserve. After what I did with my father’s army nobody would name me a true knight.” Then the might-be smile was gone, and Ser Domeric looked sad again and drank. “A true knight is all I ever wanted to be.”

“You are a true knight, ser,” said Sansa. “A true knight would have come for me, and you did.”

“Aye, that is why I did it. To be knightly again.”

He was so different than everyone in the capital. Ser Domeric was of the North, and yet he was a knight, not only in name like so many knights in King’s Landing, but in his heart as well, she could tell. The Hound had told her that a knight’s vows meant nothing, and yet Ser Domeric seemed to treasure his. He did not call her stupid, like Joffrey and Queen Cersei and the Hound even Lady Olenna. She wondered if he would think her stupid if he found out more about how she had trusted Joffrey and the Queen, had failed Father.

As he moved on to eat the cheese and salted beef, Sansa thought on what he’d said. Life ought to be beautiful like the songs. Not that life was like them. She wanted so much to have that good, safe life in the North with Ser Domeric at the Dreadfort with Mother and Robb close by. She could see Winterfell whenever she wanted, whenever she was not in her confinement. They’d play the harp and sing together and host Northern tourneys on the banks of the Weeping Water and he would always be her champion, wearing her favors over his heart and around his lance. He’d always win, and she would always be his Queen of Love and Beauty. They would make beautiful children, Northern children named Brandon and Rickon and Eddard, and they would love each other so, so much. Oh, why had she ever loved Joffrey? Why had she ever loved Ser Waymar and Ser Loras? Her life would be perfect with Ser Domeric. It had seemed so close, so possible only a few short minutes ago. She had been so ready for hope, so ready to be brave. She did not want to believe it impossible again.

“Ser?”

“Aye, my princess?”

“Is life like the songs?” Please say anything other than no.

Then he was staring at her once more, and it seemed as if the pale greyness of his eyes truly did come from ghosts.

“I knew you were not stupid, my princess. That is an intelligent question.” He began moving the
fingers on one hand, as if he were playing a harp that was not there. Then he took another drink. “Songs are just stories, or expressions of feeling. Hopes and wishes, or taunts. As to the former, some people’s lives are so eventful, their deeds so great, that songs are written about them. Their lives are like songs in that the songs were made like their lives. These people become heroes and villains of memory. For the rest of us, if we imitate them, in our words and in our deeds, then our lives can become like their songs, should circumstance permit and the gods allow.” He spoke slowly, as if he was thinking, and stared into the distance. He took another drink of wine.

“The Day they Hanged Black Robin, for example. That is a song about something that happened to someone that lived. There’s a marker by the tree where they hanged Black Robin in Lord Harroway’s Town. I don’t remember the day it was, but it happened during the Dance. It’s a beautiful song, but it’s sad. A life can be painful, miserable, and still be like the songs. There are other songs like this, about things that really happened. The Rains of Castamere, about Tywin Lannister, and Wolf in the Night, about your brother. That one’s new. You might not have heard it.” She hadn’t. “Six Maids in a Pool, about Florian and Jonquil too. They were real. Jonquil’s pool is real, it’s in Maidenpool. They lived, though the song might have exaggerated some things about their life.

“Then there are songs that are taunts, rallying cries. They remind you of what may come to pass should you threaten a certain people. Black Pines and Wolves and the Hills are like this. Steel Rain, too. A people need live up to these taunts, these threats, if they are to keep their reputation. These songs inspire men at war, help them remember to share in their fathers’ valor. A soldier’s life should be like these songs. It’s his duty to be like them.

“Then there are love songs, which express feelings. It is easy for something in our lives to be like love songs, because many people fall in love. Many people share those feelings. We relate to the words.” Then he looked at her. “No Featherbed for Me. That’s about how a man wants to love his lady, and how the lady wants to be loved, and how those loves are different. My Lady Wife, about coming to find comfort and joy and passion in the duty to one woman alone.” His stare had softened, and the ghostliness in it left. Then he smiled at her, and it wasn’t so small. He loves me, she thought, and she smiled back. And I love him.

“Let Me Drink Your Beauty is an easy one to understand. As are Two Hearts that Beat as One, and Seasons of My Love. ‘I loved a maid as white as winter, with moonglow in her hair.’

“Do you take my meaning, my princess?”

“Life can be like the songs, if you make it so, if you try. Many people’s lives can be like love songs.” Sansa hoped that she was correct. Then he nodded at her, and she felt the gladdest she had since Father died.

“Do you think your life is like the songs, ser?”

Ser Domeric paused to think again and took another drink. “I suppose it is. When I was a boy, my mother told me the story of Serwyn of the Mirror Shield. A knight from the Reach, aye, but a knight of the First Men, who kept the old gods, from before the Andals came. The Targaryens tried to say he was in Aegon the First’s Kingsguard, but everyone knows he lived in the Age of Heroes. I used to pretend I was him when I was a boy, playing at swords. I thought of him when I was in the Red Keep. He saved a princess, too. So I suppose my life is like his song in a small way, but only because I wanted it that way, and chose to be like him.”

“Then we can make our lives like the songs.” And I can make the life I want.

“Aye, we can. If the gods will it.”
Sansa could not remember smiling so much since she had left the walls of Winterfell, and perhaps she had not smiled as much back then either. Somehow the walk to Rosby on the dusty road in her dirty, smelly clothes with only Ser Domeric and his horse for company was so much more delightful, made her so much *giddier* than any day spent in a pretty gown with Jeyne or Beth or the Tyrells did. In the capital, before everything awful happened, she’d thought she was happy; after, she’d felt she’d only known happiness in Winterfell with her family. Now she knew that she had been wrong on both accounts. Here on the Rosby Road, dressed in rough brown wool, the bats in her tummy turned to bubbles in her heart. She was floating.

Ser Domeric was wonderful. After they’d finished their lunch and watered his horse, they’d continued walking north. He was so easy to talk to now that all of the awkwardness was gone. Almost everything he said made her giggle. It was very easy to trust him, to tell him things and ask him questions and then hang onto every word when he answered. He’d come for her. He’d fought for her brother. He was a Northman. She could trust a Northman.

Sansa refrained from asking about Lord Bolton, since his mention seemed to make Ser Domeric frown, but she asked about his mother’s family, and he could talk for ages about them, the Ryswells and Lady Dustin. “The only thing my dear cousins of Ryswell like better than arguing,” he’d said, “is settling their argument with a horserace. Or a fistfight. They’re almost like Umbers, only shorter, quieter, and better looking. And with better horses. Of course.” “My aunt keeps Barrowton as clean as White Harbor. I think Barrowton is better, you can get goods from all of Westeros there, and still it’s small enough to know all the faces. And the wood is homier than the marble.” His eyes had gone wide when Sansa had said that she’d never been to Barrowton or the Rills. “You will like it there, I know it,” he’d said. “You must see them when we go back North.” Sansa hoped that he would take her himself.

After they made camp for the evening, they started playing a game. Ser Domeric would whistle the first few notes of a song, and Sansa would have to tell him which one it was. If she got it correct, she would whistle first few notes of the next song, and he would need to name it, but if she got it wrong, he would keep whistling until she got it right, and if he got to the end without her naming the song, nothing happened. They would just laugh together, and then he’d sing the whole thing, so she’d know it the next time. It was good to be able to enjoy the things she liked again.

“Ser Domeric?” she said after the game was done. “Do you have a favorite song?” She’d told him her favorite song was *Six Maids in a Pool* when they were playing their game.

“Aye, I do. It’s *Off to Gulltown*. Because when I go to Gulltown, I’m always happy. It either means I am going to the Vale, or going back North to visit my mother’s family after seeing my father.” Then he paused. “And I suppose we are going off to Gulltown now.” He paused again and smiled at her, stretching his legs.

“I don’t know *Off to Gulltown.*”

“No? I’ll sing it for you, then. *Off to Gulltown to see the fair maid, heigh-ho, heigh-ho. I'll steal a sweet kiss with the point of my blade, heigh-ho, heigh-ho. I'll make her my love and we'll rest in the shade, heigh-ho, heigh-ho...*”

Sansa furrowed her brow. “I don’t think I like that song very much, ser.”

“Oh? Why not, my princess?”

She looked into the fire and told him about the Battle of the Blackwater and how the Hound had
come to her room that night. It was hard to talk about, but she got it all out. All of it. The Queen and Ser Ilyn Payne, sending for a maester for Lancel who she should have let die, the green fire, the smell of smoke and the sound of screams and suffering. He was a patient listener. He understood. He’d been in battles too.

Ser Domeric’s gaze grew dark when she finished speaking about the Hound. “He will never hurt you again. I promise you.” He poked the fire with a stick. “I will never sing that song again, if you like, but if you do not mind the tune, I can always change the words.”

She liked it when he said that. *I can always change the words.* It made her feel hopeful.

“It would be good, ser, if you changed the words,” she said. “The tune is pretty.” She bit into her bread.

“How about this? *Off to Gulltown with the sweetest of maids, heigh-ho, heigh-ho. She’ll give me a kiss and I’ll swear her my blade, heigh-ho, heigh-ho...*”

Sansa clapped for him in approval. “Did you bring your harp with you, ser?” Ser Domeric was the best harpist she’d ever met, better than herself and Lady Leonette, and even better than Hamish the Harper and all the singers in King’s Landing, whose music was their trade. It would be good to hear him play.

“No, my princess, I am sorry, but it had to be left at Harrenhal.” Sansa had quickly learned not to mention Harrenhal or what Ser Domeric did afterward. Every time Ser Domeric spoke of it, his eyes would go flat and Sansa thought that he was going away inside like she had so often in King’s Landing. So she tried her best to avoid mentioning it, and every time he had to bring it up, she would change the subject.

“That’s all right.” She watched him take a sip of wine. “Tell me, ser, does your horse have a name?” Ser Domeric loved his horses. At the Dreadfort was working on a project to introduce the hardy, winter-ready traits of the mountain clans’ garrons into the fast Ryswell coursers, but it was probably too soon to know the outcome yet. Sansa wished now that she had spent more time learning about horses with Arya so she could ask him better questions. It hurt to think about Arya, likely dead. *I miss you, sister. I hope that wherever you are, you are smiling too.*

“His name is Rhaegar,” he began, “for the Dragon Prince. My grandfather Rodrik gave him to me when I became a man grown and I returned from the Vale. A fine red stallion for the son of the Red Kings, he said.” He seemed apprehensive about this, for his smile turned into a frown.

“Oh? Why Rhaegar Targaryen?” It was a strange name for a horse. Rhaegar Targaryen had started the Rebellion by kidnapping Aunt Lyanna. Then he raped her and left her to die in Dorne when he left to fight the Battle of the Trident. She didn’t know any more about him. Father didn’t like to talk about the Rebellion. All she knew about the last Targaryens came from lessons with Master Luwin. So she let Ser Domeric explain. She liked to hear him talk. She liked his voice.

“Please forgive me if that offends you, my princess. I know the pain he caused your family might still be fresh.” It was too distant to be painful to her. “My lady mother and Aunt Barbrey were well acquainted with your Aunt Lyanna. Raced her at horses in the Rills when she came to visit your uncle Brandon in Barrowton. She shamed them both to my grandfather, she did, beating the Ryswell sisters every time. She — she would never have let herself been captured, abducted. Rhaegar would never have caught her; she would have outrun him on her horse, had he given chase.” That sounded right. Father never spoke of her, but the older members of Winterfell’s household had said that Arya was like Aunt Lyanna, and that sounded like something Arya would do if she ever discovered a man she liked. *Oh, Arya...*
“No one could ever force her into anything, so they say. I do not believe that King Robert’s tale was true – that he stole her, raped her, locked her in a tower held her against her will. When your lord father found her, she was in the Tower of Joy. So said my Aunt Barbrey. We had kin with your father, so he had to tell my family. What kind of name is ‘Tower of Joy’ if not one for a den of love? By my lights, my Princess, Rhaegar was good and decent, who would have made a just king. Certainly better than Mad Aerys and even King Robert, who drank and whored and beat Queen Cersei into the Kingslayer’s arms.”

Sansa remembered King Robert’s drunken shouting at the Queen during the feast at the Hand’s tourney so long ago. It was easy to believe that someone like Arya would want to run away from marrying someone like him. And she knew what they said about Ser Jaime and the Queen and Joffrey and his siblings. The Queen cared for Ser Jaime so, and always resented King Robert. Were the rumors really true? Brotherfucker. Brotherfucker. Brotherfucker, the crowd had chanted, but it didn’t matter to her. No matter who Joff’s true father was, the Kingslayer or King Robert, they were both awful, not as awful as Joff, but awful in their own ways. And Sansa did not know what to think about Ser Domeric was saying about Prince Rhaegar. For all that she hadn’t been born yet, he had only been a babe during the Rebellion too. And Ser Domeric liked love songs. Maybe he liked to think of the Rebellion as a sad love song, just not the one King Robert had the bards sing.

“Your Aunt Lyanna was his lady love and he her silver prince. She went with him because she wanted to and loved him in return. The whole affair was quite unfortunate. If not for the Faith of the Seven’s business with Maegor the Cruel, we might have had a beloved Northern queen today. Aegon the Conqueror had two wives, after all. Something must have happened that she could not send word to Lord Rickard or Brandon or your father. Elsewise there may not have been a war. Aerys’ death was necessary, aye, but not Rhaegar’s. Rhaegar had the makings of a great man, a great man with a great love. A love that burned so hot that half the realm was put to fire. The whole Rebellion was a waste of life, just like this war has been.” Then he sighed. “Would it were that we could all have loves so great.”

Ser Domeric sounded very far away at this last part. Was it the thought of the war that haunted him so? That must be it. She didn’t want him to think that she didn’t love him. We will have a great love, Sansa thought. I know we will.

“I hope that does not offend you, my princess.”

“It doesn’t,” she said, but she was not done thinking. “Thank you for the story.” He still looked distant. Sansa did not feel like talking either.

If Aunt Lyanna had truly broken her betrothal to run off with Prince Rhaegar, her love had started a war and had gotten her, Uncle Brandon, and herself killed. Sansa hoped that it would be different with Robb. He broke a betrothal too, and broken betrothals begat rebellions and betrayals. We will help Robb win, and then betraying the Freys won’t matter. We’ll get the Vale to help and the rest of Robb’s kingdom won’t be put to fire. Just Winterfell. The Freys alone couldn’t beat the North, the Riverlands, and the knights of the Vale.

Sansa wondered what Jeyne Westerling looked like. She was from the Westerlands, and when Sansa imagined the Westerlands, all she could think of was gold. Gold like the Gold Road and the Golden Tooth. Gold like the golden lions of Lannister. But there was silver in the Westerlands too. Silver like Silverhill, and the silver beneath Castamere. What does Jeyne Westerling look like? She thought. Is she gold or is she silver? There was only one woman that Sansa would ever see when she thought of a golden queen. She tried to imagine Robb and a silver queen, but all she saw in her mind’s eye was a Targaryen, and the Westerlings were much lower than Targaryens. There was a Targaryen queen named Jeyne Westerling too. She was Maegor the Cruel’s wife. She didn’t like
that thought. Robb could never be Maegor the Cruel. *That Jeyne Westerling had brown hair.* Robb’s queen must be have had brown hair.

Margaery would be a queen with brown hair, too. But Jeyne Westerling was from the Westerlands and wouldn’t look like Margaery, who was all Reacher, born and bred. She would look like a Westerwoman. It was in her name. Jeyne Westerling. *She must have been so beautiful for Robb to have broken his oath to the Freys. So beautiful that his heart would have broken to leave her.* When Sansa tried to picture a beautiful woman, all she could see was Mother, and Margaery, and the Queen. It was queer to think of Robb marrying a woman who looked like Mother, and she already knew Jeyne Westerling wouldn’t look like Margaery. No, she must have looked something like the Queen, because the Queen was from the West, and all of the Queen’s ladies had something of the West about them, something in the shape of their faces, the shape of their eyes. And no matter how evil she was, the Queen was undeniably the most beautiful woman Sansa had ever seen. That was something right about her, even though everything else about her was wrong. Queens ought to be beautiful. Robb’s queen, Jeyne, must certainly be beautiful too. That was what her imagination settled on when she pictured Jeyne Westerling. She looked like Cersei Lannister, only with brown hair, and she was so, so beautiful.

“Ser?”

“Aye, my princess?”

“Is Jeyne Westerling Robb’s lady love?”

Ser Domeric grew quiet and started thinking, then. “Might be,” he said, “or it might be that he thought that marrying her was only the right thing to do after ruining her. For her honor, and for his. Or,” and here he frowned, “it could have been a plot by the Lannisters. The Westerlings are sworn to them after all. Get Jeyne into bed with your brother, get his crown, turn the Freys, and then have him stabbed in the night or poisoned at a meal. Then the Lannisters win the war. Or she could be reporting everything she sees and hears back to Lord Tywin, and the Lannisters win the war then too. Whatever the reason, His Grace was a fool to marry her, pardon me, princess. And he was a fool not to come for you.”

There was silence for a long moment. *I hope Robb loves her,* Sansa thought with acid in her mouth. *I hope Jeyne Westerling loves him too. I hope she is worth it to him.* She closed her eyes, and in her mind, she saw her brother Robb, arm in arm with a younger version of Cersei Lannister, with brown hair.

Chapter End Notes

The ice had to break eventually. Everyone is glad that it's no longer awkward. Especially Domeric who hadn't spoken to a lady since his dad got married, which was like... 6 months ago or thereabouts. Servants don't really count. And before Harrenhal, the last time was probably at Moat Cailin with Catelyn, which was a further 5-6 months before that. He is rusty.

Sansa isn't as awkward on her end because she has been dealing with Joffrey and Dontos and the other noblemen in the court. But she can still get super embarrassed. Wouldn't you be embarrassed too? Boltons can't really tell joke jokes, the most they can manage is deadpan that makes you think you're the joke instead of the actual joke
Poor Jeyne :( Getting badmouthed by someone who never even met her. Jeyne, it wasn't your fault. But I imagine these sorts of thoughts were going around the minds of everyone who wasn't at the Crag, and even probably people at the Crag. I'm looking at you, Smalljon and Olyvar. Or even Black Walder. Never thought I'd say this but things might have turned out better in this AU if Robb had let Black Walder rub off on him. Or Theon. But then Robb wouldn't be Robb.

I don't think it is unrealistic for Sansa at this point to look at a handsome knight and decide she was in love with him immediately. A bit over a year ago at the Hand's Tourney she and Jeyne Poole were literally pointing at knights and deciding which ones they were "in love with", like high school girls sitting in a circle at a sleepover ranking boys in the yearbook. She fell in love with Loras in like a day, and Loras Tyrell never did anything for her. And then in Sansa II ASOS she says Willas' name into her pillow over and over again. But she really wasn't in love with Loras or Willas, was she? She was in love with the picture of life they could give her. She didn't know them at all.
The next day was much like the last. They broke camp and walked northeast along the Rosby Road. As the day wore on, Sansa could make out Rosby castle and the underlying town on the horizon.

“Would you tell me more about Runestone, ser?”

“What would you like to know about it, princess?”

Sansa pursed her lips and looked down on Ser Domeric from atop his horse. She wanted to know everything. “I would like to know whatever you think is important.”

“What is important? Well, it’s an ancient castle on a cliff overlooking the sea, less than a day’s ride north from Gulltown. On the other side of the water is Old Anchor. Between Gulltown and Runestone are Fotheringhay village, and then large fields of lavender. We’ll go through them, they smell wonderful, and they’re very pretty. I think you’ll enjoy them.

“Runestone is strong. Siege equipment built into the curtain walls. One of the oldest great castles in the Vale, along with the Redfort. Both castles have a proper godswood with a real heart tree, a real weirwood, instead of something like an oak like the one in the Red Keep. But Runestone’s godswood has the Runestone. As wide as a man is tall, and tall as a tree, carved with the runes of the First Men. Covered in those swirls they made. You need to read the Old Tongue to understand the parts that haven’t been weathered away. From what we can see it tells the story of how the First Men came to Westeros. Their war with the Children. The pact. The Long Night. Parts of the story are missing or chipped off, but it’s clear that the First King of the First Men landed at Runestone before he and his people spread across the continent.

“There are runes carved into the stones of the curtain walls and all the important towers and keeps to stave off evil and keep the men brave. Runes carved above the frames to every important door. The Great Hall, the nursery and the like. There are a few keeps, and a few courtyards. A sept, barracks, granaries, kitchens, a maester’s tower, a library, all the things you’d expect a castle to have. Kennels and stables. A forge and an armory. A tiltyard, a yard for training. At least one of everything. Bronze statues everywhere. Lots of bronze decorations. They like their bronze, those Royces. They were the Bronze Kings, after all.

“I am sure Lord Royce will see to it that you receive a proper tour, princess, and that you are told all you wish to know.” He took a breath. “My princess, may I ask you a question now?”

“Yes, ser, you may.”

“What do you know of the situation in the capital? Between the Lannisters and Tyrells? If Lord
Royce is to be of much help to you it would be wise to share with him all you know from your time at court."

"The situation?" Sansa frowned. "Lady Margaery is to marry King Joffrey and the Tyrells have allied with the Lannisters. With food and swords from the Reach, the Crown is very strong. King’s Landing would be rioting again if the Tyrells took their bread away."

“Aye, my princess, but is there more that you know? Do the lion and the rose work in concert or are they strangling each other? Will they fall apart with a breath of the wind? Who has more influence, Lord Tywin or the Queen of Thorns?"

Sansa did not know how to answer any of his questions. “I… I… do not know… The Queen kept me locked in my tower most days, unless I was summoned to court or to the king. When the Tyrells came, I was invited to spend time with Lady Margaery and her companions. I never saw the Queen or her ladies there. I do not think the Queen likes the Tyrells, but the Queen likes no one. Lady Olenna and Lady Margaery asked me about how Joff was, and I told them the truth, and they’re not going to call off the wedding even knowing what he is like. I am grateful to them. They were very kind to me.” Then she blushed. “They were going to take me to Highgarden. To marry Lord Willas. For my claim to Winterfell.” Sansa hoped Ser Domeric wouldn’t be jealous.

“Then, my princess, it is a good thing that I came when I did. I would not have been able to find you in Highgarden. A match with the Tyrells is hardly better than a match with the Lannisters. Allied to the Crown, the Reach wins the North nothing. And you cannot be wed without your brother’s consent.” Ser Domeric paused but gave no indication that he was bothered at the idea of Sansa marrying Willas. For some reason that disappointed her. Then Ser Domeric frowned. “You said that the Queen was cold to you but the Tyrells were kind? Did you see anything more that would suggest… strife or discord between them and the Lannisters?"

“I could not say, ser,” she said.

“Truly? No hints, no gestures? Not even while you were riding with them outside the city? Where spies couldn’t hear?” Sansa just looked at him blankly. “You did not see it in how the court arranged itself after the Reachmen arrived?"

“I… I… no…” Ser Domeric thinks I am stupid now, Sansa thought, her face flaming. And it was going so well too.

“Princess, did Lord Stark and Lady Stark teach you to ask these sorts of questions before you left for the capital? What to look for, who to trust? How to read the political situation under the mummer’s farce?” Sansa shook her head. “They did not prepare you. I would have thought… and your mother seems so good at it too. And you were to be the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms…” Ser Domeric was trailing off but then he looked up at her. “It does not matter. I will speak with Lord Royce. He will see that your education is completed and that you receive one as proper to the heiress to a king.”

“Thank you, ser,” Sansa said, for she did not know what else to say. Warmth was still blooming on her cheeks.

“It’s not your fault, princess,” Ser Domeric said. “Your father should never have taken you to court without preparing you.” Then he was silent for a beat. “But considering how your father was arrested after less than a year in King’s Landing and how His Grace has been stumbling from one blunder to the next, perhaps he could have done with further education himself. No offense to Lord Stark, of course.”
“Of course, ser,” Sansa said. She wasn’t offended. She was relieved that he thought it wasn’t her fault. Then the relief vanished. *It was my fault Father only lasted a year...*

Another few beats passed. “When we get to Rosby we cannot be ourselves. I am Ser Donner Stone, a hedge knight from Gulltown. Who would you like to be, princess?”

It took her a few moments to think. She first thought to be Jeyne, but she missed Jeyne Poole too much, and she didn’t want to be Jeyne like Jeyne Westerling. So she chose Beth, like Beth Cassel. “Beth,” said Sansa. “Just Beth.”

“Beth. A good name. My mother’s name,” Ser Domeric gave her a winning smile. “Who are you, Beth?” Ser Domeric had put on a funny air then. He wasn’t speaking like a Northman anymore.

“I… I… am a seamstress’ apprentice. From the capital. My mistress worked for the Queen, but she fell out of favor, and had to turn her apprentices out.” Sansa didn’t have to change her voice.

“Aye, I was in the capital for the Blackwater. And I stayed afterwards, and met you there. Wouldn’t leave without you. We were married in that sept near the River Row. Now I’m bringing you back, and we’re making a life together. I’ll find work with Lord Grafton, or the Arryns, or Lord Royce, and there’s plenty of work for seamstresses in the Vale. We’re looking for a ship in Duskendale to take us home. We’ll be Donner and Beth until we dock at Gulltown.”

It was a sweet story. It would be nice to act like she was Domeric’s wife.

“I’ll stop calling you ‘princess’, obviously. Sometimes you’ll be ‘my lady’, and sometimes you’ll be ‘Beth’, or ‘wife’. You can keep calling me ‘ser’ if you like, but I’m your husband, you’ll have to call me Donner sometimes. Or Don, if you want to seem more familiar.” He was giving her a cheeky grin.

Sansa wanted to tell him to stop calling her ‘princess’ altogether and just call her ‘Sansa’ for later, but he seemed like he was really enjoying their little mummer’s game. Ser Donner Stone had made more expressive faces in two minutes than Ser Domeric Bolton had in two days. He laughed louder, too.

“Donner?”

“Aye?”

“Why didn’t we sail from the capital?” Sansa wondered why she hadn’t thought of this question sooner. They might have been halfway to Gulltown already if they’d already boarded a ship.

“There were no ships docking at Gulltown for a few weeks, since King’s Landing is still recovering from the Blackwater. And I wanted to get out of the capital as soon as we could. It stinks. Nose couldn’t take a day more. Better to wait in Duskendale, where the air is fresher.”

They play-acted as Donner and Beth all the way to the heart of the village at the feet of Rosby’s walls. In the beginning she asked him where his accent was from, but he simply said, “Accent? My lady, I have no accent. It’s you folk from King’s Landing with the odd manner of speech. From Gulltown to the Bloody Gate, everyone talks this way. You sound stranger than a sisterman, wife.”

Sansa laughed.

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Rosby village was much smaller than Winter Town, and Rosby castle was much smaller than
It was even smaller than Darry, and Darry was one of the smallest castles that Sansa had seen before. It looked like there was only one tall main keep flanked by two taller towers with gently sloping roofs. If there were other buildings, Sansa could not see them beyond Rosby’s curtain walls. They came upon the windmill and a farm with a barn first, and Sansa could hear the clucking of the hens, the honking of geese, the bleating of goats and the snorting of pigs. The animals were all much louder than the cattle and the horses that had dotted the outlying wheat fields as they had walked by. The farm stank, but animal stink was healthier, heartier than the suffocating miasma of King’s Landing. After the farm was the village proper, and there were a score of daub-and-wattle huts and buildings with thatched roofs where the smallfolk lived and worked. By the signs on the huts, Sansa could see that there was a butcher, a brewer, a seamstress, a smith, and carpenter, at least. There was a small market square by the village green, and horses grazed around the well. On the other side of the green there was a small sept and a small tavern with a small stable attached. Everything about Rosby was small, it seemed.

Many smallfolk were out and about relaxing with tankards of ale in their hands in the purple light of dusk now that the day’s work was done. Ser Domeric walked them to the stables and a stableboy came to meet them. He helped Sansa dismount, but when she was steady on the ground, instead of releasing her waist, he leaned in and casually pecked the corner of her mouth. She could feel the fleeting swipe of his tongue on her skin even after he had let her go and turned away to unstrap their saddlebags, and the cool sensation of the air over the damp spot by her dimple left her nerves thrumming all the way down to her toes.

“Beth, love, please take a bag as well.” He was motioning to the bag with her clothes with his foot. Ser Domeric had the bag with his clothes and had stuffed his bedroll into the bag carrying his other things.

Sansa colored, nodded, and picked up her bag. Ser Domeric led her into the tavern.

“A room, a bath, and dinner,” he said to the tavern keep. “We’ll buy food for the road as well.”

“Twenty coppers for the room, bath, and dinner. We’ll decide on the food later.” Ser Domeric paid and they followed the tavern keep up the stairs. There was only one floor above the main hall and the kitchen, and that floor only had three rooms. It was a miracle that one was open.

“Bath’ll be ready in half an hour. We’ll ‘ave it brought up ‘ere. Supper’s on whenever ye want it. Here’s the key.” The tavern keep left and closed the door.

“You’ll bathe first,” Ser Domeric said while he was laying their bags on a chair in the corner. “I’ll be downstairs trying to get some news. I won’t start eating until you come down, and then I’ll bathe while you’re asleep. I don’t need hot water.” He rummaged in one of the bags and produced a neatly folded gown and a grey cloak. “I bought this for you, and I noticed that you didn’t bring any more clothes than the ones on your back. I’m not sure whether it will fit, but it’s something clean.”

It was a kind gesture. “Thank you, ser,” she said. “It was very thoughtful of you.”

“You are most welcome,” he said, and gave her another winning grin. He took off the armor and left to go downstairs. Sansa barred the door after the swish of his cloak.

A knock on the door heralded the arrival of her bath. Sansa lifted the bar and allowed the serving boys to haul the steaming tub inside.

“We will keep the tub until the morrow,” she told them. They both nodded and scurried back out. Sansa barred the door again, shook her hair out of the hairnet, and began stripping down to her
small clothes. Even under her shift she could tell that a layer of grime had formed on her skin. It would be good to be clean again.

With the bath came lye soap and a pumice stone for scrubbing. Sansa dunked her head under the water and began to lather herself, leaving white suddy trails up and down first her legs, then her arms, then her back and swirling in her hair. She scrubbed her limbs until they were red and raw and the clear water turned grey. *I was so dirty*, she thought. She hadn’t gone so long without a bath since Father died, when she had refused to eat or get out of bed. But she pushed the thought away as she dunked her head again. It was too sad. She was happy here.

*I wonder if the Tyrells will miss me.* Margaery had been planning to take them all hawking today, with her cousins and Merry Crane and Aly Bulwer, two days since Sansa had left the Red Keep. Megga and Alla and Elinor and had been looking forward to it. Elinor liked to hawk like Margaery, but Megga and Alla didn’t really care for it. They liked to hang back and giggle atop their horses while chirping on about Elinor and Alyn Ambrose and whether Horas or Hobber Redwyne would kiss them.

Sansa had thought them silly just two days ago but now she wasn’t so sure. *It's not silly to want kisses, Sansa thought. It's not silly to want to be loved. Love is not poison. The Queen is wrong. She only thinks that way because King Robert was cruel to her and the person who cares for her most is her brother. When someone kind and good loves you it is different.* She dunked her head underwater again and blew bubbles in the soap on her way back up. Suddy foam clung to her face and she swatted it away, her hand lingering on the spot on her dimple where Ser Domeric had kissed her. The thought left her tingling again. *Maybe he will give me another kiss later.*

Chapter End Notes

Happy Thanksgiving to everyone in the US! Hope you had a great day with family and friends :)

I apologize if this chapter feels filler-y. A lot of it was devoted to worldbuilding.

The description of Runestone and to an extent Rosby heavily referenced what the awesome people working on Westeroscraft built. For those of you who don't have Minecraft (it's ok I don't either) her is a link to a walkthrough of Runestone and the surrounding countryside. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epOqitYU49U

It's a cool fandom we have beyond the fanfiction corner. My only criticism of Westeroscraft is that the scale sometimes feels a bit off, but who am I to complain, I can't really play minecraft that well. Besides, the world they built is so intricate and detailed and shows us so many places GRRM's work will never take us to.

For example... take a look at the Redfort and the surrounding area. Wouldn't you rather live there than the Dreadfort? It's like Neuschwanstein... only red :) https://imgur.com/a/Xs3OdYG

One of the goals of this chapter was to give Sansa a chance to be a 14 year old girl. She deserves it. The other goal was to show that Domeric kind of enjoys LARPing more than he enjoys being himself.

Thank you to everyone who has been reading, commenting, and leaving kudos. I am
glad that I have been able to create something that others have enjoyed.
Sansa smiled to herself in the Myrish glass and picked up her hairbrush. Fifty strokes later, and with a neat plait down her back, she pulled on the dark grey gown Ser Domeric had purchased for her. It didn’t quite fit – the waist was a bit loose and an inch or two of heel showed over the hem – but it was nearly the right length and it wouldn’t fall off. Besides, it was more comfortable too loose than too small.

She rolled her plait into a ball and fixed the pearled hairnet in place. *I look like I am in mourning,* she thought. She wanted to leave her hair free and put on the prettiest jewels she had in her bag, but those were Sansa Stark’s jewels, and here she was just Beth the seamstress’ apprentice. Beth didn’t have jewels. The hairnet was probably the nicest thing Beth owned. Who was Beth mourning? Sansa Stark could be said to be mourning Bran and Rickon and Arya and Father, but it didn’t feel right. She was too happy to be mourning.

Sansa grabbed her skirts and made for the common room downstairs.

Ser Domeric was sitting at one of the long tables. He had saved her a place beside him by placing his cloak next to him on the bench. He had a wine cup in front of him and was looking at nowhere in particular. When he saw her, his face lit up like steel under the sun. He rose to help her sit, and then caught a serving maid’s attention. “Wine for my lady,” he said, and the maid scurried away into the kitchens.

Ser Domeric slung his arm around Sansa’s shoulder as if he had done it a hundred times before. He gave her another breezy smile and when he did, she could see that his lips were stained with the deep purple tones of strongwine.

“I trust that all was to your liking, my lady?”

Sansa could only smile and nod. Sitting next to Ser Domeric with his arm around her shoulder left her full to bursting with a sort of nervous energy she’d never felt before. She started to wring her hands together on the table, but Ser Domeric quickly brought his other hand over hers to still them.

“I think I shall purchase a horse for you on the morrow,” he said. “Lord Gyles does not ride often, and he has instructed his stablemaster to put some of his older stock up for sale. Would you like that?”

“I would like that, ser,” Sansa said. Ser Domeric gave her hands a squeeze. She wanted to say something, but there were many people in the tavern, and she did not know what sorts of conversations were appropriate for a traveling hedge knight and his wife. “How many days until Duskendale if we both ride?”
“One, maybe two,” he said, “three if we go very slowly.”

Then Sansa’s wine and the food came, and she was relieved from further conversation. The maid refilled Ser Domeric’s cup and left. Somehow on the way down the stairs in the Rosby tavern she had been stripped of all her social graces. Hopefully Ser Domeric would think that it was the wine coloring her cheeks and not embarrassment.

The meal was dry pork, a bowl of celery and carrots in bone broth, and a loaf of rosemary bread. It was good to be eating something hot again. Ser Domeric removed his hands and they both tucked into their food. He looked hungrier than she felt.

While they were eating a party of Rosby men came through the door. Sansa could recognize their surcoats, the three red chevronels on ermine. She could feel Ser Domeric tense up next to her, though he did not change his position or reach for his sword. She could see his eyes flick towards the tavern’s entrance and the corners of his mouth twitch downward the slightest amount. Sansa’s heart caught in her throat. Lord Gyles is always at court, she thought. He could have sent his men here to look for me.

She tensed as well, and watched them out of the side of her eye.

The dozen Rosby men sat down at one of the other trestle tables and paid them no heed. Sansa continued eating, but Ser Domeric didn’t. He held his spoon in a death grip over the dregs of the bone broth, and his sidelong glance remained fixed on the Rosby men. It doesn’t look like they’re looking for me. It looks like they’re just resting and eating like us.

“Pate!” It was the tavern keep’s voice. “A song!”

There was a man called Pate with the Rosby men. From across the room Sansa saw that he had overlarge eyes, hip-length honey-colored hair and a too-wide mouth. He pulled off a brown cloak to reveal a black and white tunic, red breeches, and knee-high red leather boots.

“You’ll be eating free if you give us a song!” Gormon the tavern keep shouted at Pate. That got Pate to smiling.

“Well, keep it hot for me then!” Pate stood up, rummaged around at a bag near his feet, and went to sit on a stool near the fire. He was carrying a small woodharp.

Pate strummed a few scales and opened his mouth. “Ooooooooooooooh, when Willum’s wife was wet, it was raining o’er the marches, and all the lovely maidens they were dancing in the hills, oh the thunder did it crackle, the rain did splash the pebbles, and Willum’s wife went out there in a lovely shift of silk…”

Ser Domeric clutched at his spoon tightly and frowned quite openly during Pate’s song. Sansa saw him close his eyes and grit his teeth and scrunch up his nose as if he smelled something quite awful, and then he downed the entire cup of wine and rubbed his temples. She wanted to touch his arm, to see if he was all right, but then he started making that queer motion with his fingers from the day before. When the song was over, he rose, stalked towards Pate and stood in front of the fire.

“May I see your harp, friend?” Ser Domeric motioned to Pate’s harp and Sansa covered her mouth with her hands. She couldn’t breathe. She couldn’t believe it. Not moments ago Ser Domeric had seemed so wary of the Rosby men and now he was risking a confrontation with one of them. Should she go upstairs? Should she hide? Everyone was looking at them.
Pate’s overlarge eyes widened with obvious apprehension. He gave Ser Domeric the harp and scooted back on the stool with an audible screech. Ser Domeric plucked each and every harpstring in short order, frowned, and then he turned the instrument on its side and turned a few of the tuning pins ever so slightly, plucking the associated strings as he went. Then he slurried all the notes together and gave the harp back to Pate.

“Have a care for your craft, Pate. Give it another go.”

Pate scowled. “And who are you, ser, to tell me how to treat my harp?”

Ser Domeric shrugged. “Just another lover of music.”

Pate’s companions were sniggering, and so was the tavern keep. Sansa wanted to go upstairs. She had the distinct memory of absently wandering into the courtyard during a feast at Winterfell. Her father’s men had been drinking and laughing then, too, and then a serving maid had come over, and then they jeered at the maid, and then she left, and then there was a fight. It seemed like a bad idea to fight in the small tavern. They were closer quarters than an open courtyard, and everything was made of wood. The ceiling was low, and if Sansa stood on any of the tables, she could knock down the candles in the chandelier.

Then came the jeers. “Pate! Give it another go!” “Paaate!! Show ‘im there’s no prettier plucker than you!” “Come on, Pate!”

Pate groaned. “Let me eat, you pisspots! We’ve been riding all day!” Then he turned to Ser Domeric. “You. Why don’t you have a go? Think you’re better than Lord Rosby’s personal singer, do you?”

Ser Domeric smirked at Pate and turned to the tavern keep. “I want the deal you gave him. One song, one meal, no cost. Wine included.”

The Rosby men and the tavern keep laughed again. “And if we tell you to stop?”

Ser Domeric only grinned like a knave. “You won’t.”

Sansa could do nothing but watch. He’s soused, she thought, a hand over her mouth. Ser Domeric took Pate’s woodharp once again, and plucked the opening notes to When Willum’s Wife Was Wet.

When the song was done the whole room was silent.

“He’s better than ye’re, Pate,” observed the tavern keep. “No bones about it.”

“Aye,” agreed one of the Rosby men. “Should be ‘im going to sing for Lord Gyles’ niece at her wedding.”

Pate was seething into his soup. “Just let me eat, you fools! He’s a full belly, and what, half a flagon of wine? Gormon, you’ll have another song, get me half a flagon too.”

And so Pate was fed and drank his fill. He drew his black sleeve across his face, slammed down his wine, flung himself away from the table, and snatched the harp back from Ser Domeric.

It was The Bear and the Maiden Fair. Ser Domeric rolled his eyes, and when Pate passed him back the harp, he smiled like a cat about to pounce. All the tension in the room was gone, as if the first words had conjured some ancient spirit of heady joy and sated bellies. Ser Domeric began to play, and every time the chorus came round, he improvised with cheeky little flourishes and trills, none two the same but still resolving to the right chords. The way he sang and plucked and looked round
the room made it seem like he was telling a story, or trying at a one-man mummer’s troupe. He even sang in different voices for the bear and the maid, and it all managed to be on key. When he got to the line about the bear smelling the maiden’s honey, and then the line about licking it, Ser Domeric met Sansa’s eyes for the briefest of moments, and despite the crush of bodies and the roaring fire her spine was sent to shivering. The men in the tavern clapped in time with the music and shouted along with the chorus. Butterbumps’ rendition of the song way back in Margaery’s apartment all those weeks ago could not compare.

When he was done the room thundered with applause. Even Pate. Sansa could feel all of her muscles relax and let go of the breath she did not realize she was holding. Gormon the tavern keep handed Ser Domeric another goblet of wine, and then he gave Pate one too.


Pate looked stunned. All of the animosity was gone from his voice, or maybe it was only the hunger. “What’s your name, singer? You must be known. A traveling bard doesn’t eat half so well as one a lord retains. There’ll be work for you in the capital. See Lord Gyles and tell him that Pate the Pretty Plucker speaks for you. He’ll find someone to take you on.”

But Ser Domeric just shook his head and gave another winning grin. “My lady love and I just left the capital. Won’t be returning anytime soon. Off to Gulltown, we are. Work for us there aplenty.”

“You’re both singers?”

“No. A hedge knight and a seamstress. But we both can sing.” Then he turned to Sansa and beckoned for her to come over. “My lady has the sweetest voice.” She rose from her bench and meekly made her way to him. They had made a scene, Sansa thought, but it was too late to unmake it, and she was having so much fun besides. Everyone is looking at us, she thought, and everyone loves us. The thought made her gleeful.

Ser Domeric motioned for her to sit on the remaining stool by the fire looked around the room. “What shall we sing next, my lady?”

The men in the tavern answered before she could. “Megga’s song!” “Let Me Drink Your Beauty!” “The Maids that Bloom in Spring!” “Florian and Jonquil!”

“Florian and Jonquil,” Sansa said, looking at the space between two Rosby men’s heads. You look like a pomegranate! She wished the Queen of Thorns in her ear would stop.

“Florian and Jonquil it is then.” Ser Domeric turned to look at Pate. “Pate, would you like to be the bard? I shall be Florian, and my lady shall be Jonquil.”

Pate grinned and downed his wine. “Gladly, friend.” He cleared his throat. “Six maids in a pool…”

The ever-increasing amount of people in the tavern kept on asking for more songs. After Six Maids in a Pool, Ser Domeric led the whole tavern in a round of The Lusty Lad, and then Pate sang The Name Day Boy. After a bit of prodding Ser Domeric persuaded Sansa to sing Two Hearts that Beat as One all by herself, and then he sang Oh, Lay My Sweet Lass Down in the Grass, which bridged into My Lady Wife, and everyone cheered. Gormon assured Ser Domeric that he would not have to pay for anything for their journey tomorrow, and gave him back his twenty coppers.

Then Pate sang Jenny’s song while Ser Domeric accompanied him on the harp and the laughing spirit left the room to usher in one of his more somber cousins. By the time Pate got to the last
'never wanted to leave', all the serving maids were crying, as were some of the goodwives that had wandered into the tavern earlier in the night.

“I think that will be all for today, Gormon,” Pate said. “We’ve to get up early on the morrow if we’re to make it in time for the wedding.” The crowd groaned.

“You said you’re going to the wedding of Lord Rosby’s niece?” Ser Domeric said softly, while he looked at Pate, and it seemed that his pale eyes were once again sharp and lucid for all that the drink had left high color on his cheeks. “In the Riverlands?”

“Aye. Pretty girl, she is. Her brother was a ward here until a year before the war. Olly. Likeable lad, very popular. Should’ve been a knight by the time he left, but can’t very well squire for sickly old Lord Gyles. We all think Lord Gyles wants him for his heir. He’d be a good lord, all right. She came to visit him once. The sister to be married. Don’t remember the lady’s name, but I suppose her father’ll remind me once I get there. She’s marrying some riverlord.”

“Good for her,” Ser Domeric said with a small smile. It was a Ser Domeric smile, not a Ser Donner smile, tight and just turned up at the corners. He studied Pate intently. “I’ll sing one last song, if it pleases you, Pate. One I adapted from Rymund the Rhymer’s work. Share it, will you? Get to know it. The people of the Riverlands will understand. And the bride’s father is sure to… appreciate it.”

“I’ll oblige you that,” said Pate. “To whom shall I attribute this riff on Rymund?”

“Ser Donner from Gulltown. Just a hedge knight.” Ser Domeric shrugged his shoulders and Pate passed him back the harp.

Ser Domeric began with slurring out a series of chromatic scales that gave Sansa the distinct impression that he was pulling back a curtain before a mummer’s show. “At night the wolves went out to prowl…"

That’s the song about Robb, Sansa thought. No, not just Robb, all of us. And a song about us could only be a sad song. The tones were all deep and the chords were all dark. The first verse described how the head of the pack wandered down with his pups to the lion’s den only to die trying to get them out. Father and Arya and me. Then the chorus came, and after a line about howling, Ser Domeric gave an actual howl. The next verse told of the new pack leader wandering from the wolf’s den to hunt the lions in the rocks. Another chorus, and more howls. He wandered through the mountains and killed half the pride, but not before he destroyed many villages in his anger. He ate little children and made maidens cry and still he could not find the lost pup. Arya. More howls. He was wandering away from the lion’s den and the pup in the den was kept in the cage, and she howled in sadness too, because the lions were hurting her, and Ser Domeric met her gaze. That’s me, Sansa thought, tears pricking at her eyes. But then the wolf’s den was left abandoned, and the pups at home drowned. Bran and Rickon, Sansa thought, and now the tears were openly streaming down her face. Every note rang in her bones and every word touched her heart. Somehow Ser Domeric had taken all of the sorrow she had felt about her family and committed it to music. He wrote this for me and he knows my pain. He thought of me, he knows me, he loves me, I know it.

Then with one last chorus of howls the song was done. Sansa was not the only one crying. It didn’t matter to the people of Rosby that the Starks were traitors. Her family’s story was sad and they were all sad for them. They cared. Sansa wanted to hug each and every one of them.

Through her tears Sansa could see Pate looking at Ser Domeric with open reverence. “Are you sure you don’t want to be a singer, Donner? You could come with us and a riverlord could take you on. Your lady too, she’s good enough. Steadier pay, steadier work than for a hedge knight.”
“I’m sure,” said Ser Domeric. “I promised my wife Gulltown, so to Gulltown we will go.” Then he gave Pate back the harp and rose, slinging an arm around Sansa’s waist. She was still sniffling a bit. His song was so beautiful. She clung to his arm. Thank you, she wanted to say, but she hoped he could feel the words through her hand. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

“If it pleases you,” Pate sighed. Then he clasped Ser Domeric’s free arm. “‘Twas good to meet you, Ser Donner from Gulltown. And you, my lady.”

“And you, Pate. Safe travels.” Sansa nodded her head at Pate too.

“Aye. Good night and travel well.”

Chapter End Notes


Traveling singers and troubadors were essentially the medieval versions of rockstars, right?

When writing this chapter, I thought of this passage from AFFC, Sansa I:

"Once, when she was just a little girl, a wandering singer had stayed with them at Winterfell for half a year. An old man he was, with white hair and windburnt cheeks, but he sang of knights and quests and ladies fair, and Sansa had cried bitter tears when he left them, and begged her father not to let him go. “The man has played us every song he knows thrice over,” Lord Eddard told her gently. “I cannot keep him here against his will. You need not weep, though. I promise you, other singers will come.”

They hadn’t, though, not for a year or more. Sansa had prayed to the Seven in their sept and old gods of the heart tree, asking them to bring the old man back, or better still to send another singer, young and handsome. But the gods never answered, and the halls of Winterfell stayed silent."

NED... The Dreadfort is right next door.

In this chapter Sansa gets to be a boyband groupie. She doesn't scream, but she gets a front row seat when the Beatles play. Or the Backstreet Boys. Or Justin Bieber. And then he calls her on stage and sings a duet with her!!! And then he sings a song that is about her and that hits her right in the feels... it's every boyband groupie's dream.

That's it. That's the thesis of this chapter. Sansa deserves it. I love her.
Sansa VI

Chapter Summary

Sansa and Domeric reach Duskendale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

True to his word, Ser Domeric bought Sansa a grey palfrey and a saddle and more rope the morning they left Rosby. With the saddlebags split between two horses they could go faster, at a brisk trot.

“We should get to Duskendale in two days, my princess,” he’d told her when they were clear of the village. “This horse looks a bit better than I had expected, we can push her a bit faster than I had thought to.”

“Sansa,” she broke in. “I insist you call me Sansa, ser.”

“If you insist, my - ” he stopped himself. “Sansa. Then I would ask you to call me Domeric. Or Dom, that’s what my family calls me. Not my father, the rest of my family. And my friends.” She couldn’t see his face but she hoped he was smiling. “I’ll have a hard time with that. You are my princess, Sansa.”

“Domeric,” she said, “I shall call you that.” Domeric. Sansa liked the way his name felt, how her tongue grazed the roof of her mouth and her lips parted and closed and parted again when she spoke it. She ignored the last part. She could be his princess if he wanted. She was just glad the formality was gone.

It was good to be on the road, under the shining sun and clear sky, breathing in the clean coastal air again. Being outside and riding his horse seemed to greatly improve Domeric’s mood from the night before.

It had all started out so well when they left the Rosby tavern’s common room and went up the stairs. Domeric had followed her up, just two paces behind, and as they ascended the air around her seemed to crackle. With every step her heart seemed to double its pace, and when they reached the door she waited for a few moments for him to open it for her before realizing that she had kept it in her skirts the whole time. Embarrassed, she had fumbled with the key, and it took her a few tries to get it into the lock and turn it correctly. Then she turned the knob and Domeric held it open for her while she went inside, and then he barred the door behind him.

Sansa had gone to the Myrish glass to free her hair. It is not supposed to hurt. Shae would do this right. She removed the pearled net and the pins, one by one, and when the last pin came out, she caught Domeric’s eyes in her reflection. Sansa smiled, and he smiled too. As she untied the thong around the end of her plait and unwound the sections from each other, her hands shook, and it felt like she had ten thumbs. She ran her fingers over her scalp and through her hair, and trying her best to only break his gaze for the shortest moment, and turned around to face him. Her chest and tummy were full to bursting with bubbles and bats, rising and popping and fluttering against her ribs in a pitter-patter that sounded in her ears and set her veins to tremors.
She was done with her hair, so she rose and went to him. “Thank you, ser,” she said. “For the song... It was so lovely. You played so well.” She wanted to tell him how much his song had moved her, how powerful his voice was, but doubtless he had already heard all of those things. She wanted to speak of Bran and Rickon and Arya how much it meant to her that there was someone who knew just how much she grieved for them, but the words would not come, they all died on her tongue. She felt so graceless. All she could say was ‘lovely’ and ‘well’. So she looked up at him and hoped he could see it all on her face.

“It was my pleasure, princess,” he said, and he was speaking softly again, like Domeric Bolton and not like the cheeky and confident Donner the hedge knight. His smile was tiny, just tugging up at the corners of his mouth, and his lips were parted the smallest amount. His pale eyes twinkled like glassy baubles, and overall his expression was very strange. He will kiss me now, she thought. I know he will. She did not think it possible but heart sped up even more, and the bubbles in her chest started floating and popping but more kept forming to take their place.

It wasn’t ladylike at all, but Sansa took another step closer to him, because she wanted to get closer, and she lay a hand on his arm, because she wanted to touch him. Domeric was tall, but Sansa was tall too. The top of her head was at the level of his eyes, and he wouldn’t need to bend down at all. She only had to tip her face up and stand on her toes a bit and they could be kissing. So she leaned forward off her heels, smiled up at him, and lowered her eyelids.

But he didn’t move to kiss her. Instead she felt a finger under her chin and a breath on her cheek, and when she opened her eyes, she saw that Domeric wasn’t smiling anymore, but he wasn’t frowning, either. His eyes shone like moonstones, and they shifted from her eyes to somewhere by her ear, in and out of focus, and then he held her gaze. His mouth turned downward, and a furrow appeared in his brow. Then he picked a section of hair near the front, close to her face, and he wound it through two fingers and twirled it around his palm. Sansa’s hair was long, so even when he had wound it around several times, there was still slack, and it did not hurt.

“Have a care for your honor, my lady,” Domeric said, running his knuckles against her cheekbone. “Your honor, and mine.” His touch left a trail of gooseprickles on her skin. Sansa felt her hair bounce against her face and fall away from his hand, and then the air moved. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them, the stiff strain in his voice was obvious, just like the melancholy in his pale face. “Have a care.” Then he drew her into his arms and hugged her tightly, buried his nose in her hair and gave an audible sigh. His chest was hard and warm, and Sansa could feel his heart beating quickly too. After a time that felt too short, he unwound himself from her and spun her around. As she turned, her hip brushed the pommel of his sword and he gently pushed her away from him.

“We’ll have an early day tomorrow, princess,” he said. “You should rest now. I will look away so you may prepare for sleep.”

Too confused to be disappointed, Sansa nodded meekly. She went to stand between the bed and the shuttered window and removed her boots and her gown. The shift was still clean; she could sleep in that. Then she placed her boots at the foot of the bed – Domeric had placed his bedroll on the floor – and hung her gown in the wardrobe and crawled under the furs until only her eyes and nose were out.

“Good night, ser,” she said.

“Good night, princess,” he replied. Then he drew the grate around the hearth so the light in the room was nearly gone.

But Sansa did not sleep. She couldn’t. Not with her heart still pounding loudly in her ears like a
drum in the deep. *What did I do wrong?* She wanted to ask, but Domeric didn’t sound like he wanted to be talking anymore. So she feigned sleep as best she could and watched through half-closed eyes. A stripe of moonlight eked its way across the floor like milk spilled on stone, and in it she could see Domeric standing by the fire, eyes cast low. He went to sit in one of the chairs by the window and put his head in his hands for a moment, muttering something under his breath. Then he rose, rid himself of his swordbelt and his boots and tunic and breeches and made for the bath.

*This is wrong,* Sansa thought. *I should not be watching now.* She screwed her eyes shut and pulled the furs over her head, but she could not help but hear.

He entered the water with a perfunctory plunk. Then he cursed at the cold and she could hear him scrubbing himself down for a while. He cursed again. Then there was another plunk of him dunking under, and then a splash when he rose.

“Others take me,” he said. Then she heard what must have been him toweling off, and then the pads of footsteps, and the shuffle of him entering the bedroll, and then silence.

She shouldn’t have listened. She still had no answers. So Sansa slept.

***

The difference in Domeric’s bearing as they trotted towards Duskendale was like summer and winter. There was no sign of sadness in him when he was play-acting Ser Donner Stone when they broke their fast, when he bought her palfrey, or all along the road.

It was another fine autumn day. They passed golden fields of wheat and corn and millet and barley, and beds of carrots and potatoes and all sorts of crops. They passed pastures and pens filled with livestock, copses of trees topped with brittle browns and blushing reds and happy yellows and flaming oranges, all waiting for the winter winds to strip them bare. Then the fields turned to limestone hills, and that was how they knew they were getting close. Ser Domeric kept looking over his shoulder, as if he expected Lannister soldiers to come crashing down the Rosby road to seize them both, but they never saw a single red cloak. Every few minutes they passed fellow travelers along the road, farmers with their carts or journeymen looking for work, but mostly they were left alone. Sansa let Domeric do the talking if talk was demanded.

“*To find news,*” he said, but there was little and less to be had.

There were so many questions she wanted to ask him, *What did I do wrong* the foremost among them. But it was never the right time. It never seemed to fit in any of the conversations they had while riding or while eating lunch or even when they had made camp for the evening. They were all too happy. Sansa didn’t want to ruin Domeric’s good humor by raising a subject that would make him upset. *Later,* she kept saying to herself. *Later. Don’t spoil this."

They reached Duskendale by midmorning on the next day, or rather, they reached the Dun Fort. The Dun Fort was on the southern edge of the harbor’s inner point, the curtain walls and drum towers and inner keeps obscuring the port town beyond.

“That’s a weirwood,” Sansa said. She could see the five-fingered red leaves just poking out from behind the pale, shimmery walls.

“Aye, the Dun Fort is ancient. It was the seat of the Kings of Duskendale from the days of the Hundred Kingdoms. The Darklys. They were of First Men stock, and the old gods ruled here before the Andals came. The weirwood here is probably one of the oldest south of Harrenhal. Before King’s Landing was built, Duskendale was the most important port between Maidenpool
and Storm’s End, and much blood was spilled over its control. The Darklys were sworn to the
Ironborn, the river kings, the storm kings, and the kings in the Narrow Sea, all at different times.”

Sansa liked that about Domeric. He seemed to know everything that there was to know about
everything. At Winterfell she had been the best at histories and letters, well, after Jon, but around
Domeric she felt like she hadn’t known anything at all. He knew not just what happened, but
always had a story, a why, for every event in the past that he mentioned. He knew more stories
about King’s Landing and the Red Keep than she had, and she had lived there for over a year.

They rode around the Dun Fort and soon came to one of Duskendale’s gates. A guard stopped them
on their way in, and waved them through once Domeric explained their story.

“We’ll stop at the Seven Swords in town. That’s the big inn on the main square. We’ll get a room
there, for as many nights as we need before the next ship to Gulltown comes.” Then Domeric
furrowed his brow. “You should stay in the inn this afternoon. I have to ride to the battlefield and
retrieve something I left there.” Then he turned to face her. “We could get you something to work
on for a few hours. Some parchment or a moleskine and a quill, or some fabric and thread. Would
you like that?”

Sansa looked up at him on his tall red courser. She wouldn’t like that. She wanted to go wherever
he was going. “I… I would feel safer at your side, ser,” she said.

But he shook his head. “You would be far safer inside, my lady. There may be looters and thieves
about, to take what they can off the fallen. And I would not have you see where your father’s men
lay dead.”

They rode on through the cobblestone streets of the town and Sansa mulled on his words. She
remembered Domeric’s sad song about Robb’s war, how he had said that what the army had done
in the Riverlands was terrible, how Robb had led the Northmen south for nothing, and was silent
all the way up to their suite in the Seven Swords. They were fighting for us, she thought. And now
they are dead. She bit her lip. I have seen dead men. I am here now. I will remember them.

“Domeric?” she said, while they were unpacking their things. When she said his name all the
features of his face brightened.

“My lady?”

“I would see it. The battlefield. I would see the men who died for Robb and send them off to the
gods. I would pray for their souls.”

His smile withered away. Domeric studied her, his face inscrutable. “My princess, it will be
dangerous.” His tone was even. His voice was soft.

She did not flinch away from his gaze. He looks like Roose Bolton, she realized. She dismissed the
thought. “I have been in danger. I will be safe with you.”

Then his jaw twitched, and he let out a breath. “As my lady commands.”

Domeric’s shoulders tensed as he led their horses through the square in front of the inn. He
breathed in with a sharp noise and stopped abruptly in front of a peddler hawking armor picked off
the dead from the battle, who had many pieces to sell. Thieves and looters, Sansa thought. Perhaps
not so many anymore.

“That sword. And the pine tree rondels. I will buy them.”
“You again? One dragon.” Domeric narrowed his eyes at the peddler and made the exchange.

Sansa was silent again until they existed the town and they mounted up. “Did the peddler know you?”

“Aye. I sold Rhaegar’s mail to him.”

“Why did you buy the sword and rondels?”

Domeric did not turn to look at her. “They belonged to Ser Helman. I knew them on sight. They belong to Eddara Tallhart now. Or her mother. I will bring them home.” His voice was very tight. “I had hoped he had lived but the rumors of his death have proven true.”

Sansa rode up next to him and laid a hand on his arm. “We will remember him.” Sansa had known Helman Tallhart. He was always a gracious host whenever the Starks visited Torrhen’s Square.

“Aye,” he said. There was no mistaking it. He was sad.

They rode by the sea north of the town. On the beach there was a large cairn of rocks, more than three times the size of the sept at Winterfell. In front of the cairn there was a driftwood plank staked into the gravel. Carved in rough lettering were the words HERE LIE THE WOLVES.

“This is where we will pray,” she said. Domeric helped her dismount, and when she knelt, he followed. Sansa touched the rocks of the cairn.

“I am Sansa Stark of Winterfell,” she said. “You came away from your homes to fight for the name of Stark, and you died for it. On behalf of my house I thank you for your valor. Of you all I only knew Ser Helman Tallhart, Master of Torrhen’s Square, a kind man, and brave, but none of your deaths shall be forgotten. May the gods care for your souls as we all smile on your memories. House Stark will remember.”

“The North remembers,” Domeric added softly. “I am sorry,” he said to the cairn, bowing his head. After that they knelt in silence for a few more moments, and when Sansa stood, Domeric helped her onto her horse. He wore a look of plain dismay on his face, the corners of his mouth turned sharply down, deep furrows on his brow. He was thinking of the dead he had left again, she knew. It wouldn’t do well to disturb him.

He led the way to wherever he was going, and neither said a word for near on an hour.

They were riding up a slope, through what looked like it had once been farmland. Now the ground underfoot was a muddy mess and it did not seem fit for growing anything. Every so often they passed burned-out hovels, or mills that had been torn apart. When the wind came off the hills Sansa could smell the ghosts of smoke. They must have burned it, Sansa thought. She remembered how bountiful the lands south of Duskendale had looked. It will be a long time before these fields return to how they were. They are ruined. How awful.

“They deserved better,” Domeric said abruptly, as they neared a burned-out hovel that looked much the same as the rest. “Ser Helman and the rest. They shouldn’t have been sent to fight here. And they should be buried at home. In a lichyard by a godswood, or in a crypt where weirwood roots can reach them. A marker with each of their names. Not thrown together under a pile of rocks on some southron beach.” His voice sounded bitter.

He stopped and dismounted and tied his red courser to a tree with a gash in its bark, and took a spade out of a saddlebag. Then he helped Sansa off her palfrey and tied it to the tree too. His eyes were far away. Even with his hands around her waist it did not feel like he was totally present.
Finally, he went into the hovel and shoved a broken bed against one of the crumbling walls and started to dig.

As the piles of loose dirt came up he spoke again. “My uncles. Lord Willam and Ser Mark. They died in the south, after the last war. In Dorne. They went with your father to find the Lady Lyanna and bring her back. Then they died, just like her. They were left in cairns like that. In Dorne. Your father told my aunt Barbrey. That’s where they are. Under cairns in southern sand. We always wanted their bones back.” More piles of dirt came up to reveal something black in the hole, and the bitterness in Domeric’s voice only deepened.

“But we can’t bring them back. Not any of them. I don’t know which one Ser Helman is. Lady Tallhart and Lady Eddara will only ever have his sword and those two rondels. Just like my aunt only ever got Lord Willam’s horse. And we got nothing back of Ser Mark.”

Sansa wondered if there was anything she could say and laid a hand on his shoulder. “They died heroes’ deaths, ser,” she said, “and they will receive heroes’ honors.” She did not know if she was speaking of his uncles or Ser Helman. She did not know what honors those would be. She’d speak to Mother and Robb and they’d come up with something. But she had to say something, for him.

Domeric looked back at her, and his face was tight with something that looked like gratitude or shame. “Heroes,” he said, his tone wistful. Then his eyes softened and once again he looked sad. “Thank you, princess. Sansa.”

He was done digging now. Domeric began to take the black things out of the hole, and it was clear that they were a kit of armor. There was also a bundle of fine clothing in Bolton colors. He set aside the clothing, and one by one, he deliberately laid the pieces of armor on the bed in the shape of a man, fitting them together so as to make sure all the parts were there. The kit looked to be his size. It was clear it was his.

He needed something to distract him, so Sansa changed the subject. “Your armor is quite striking, ser. You must appear so fearsome when you face your foes. And the work is very impressive.”

Nothing she had said had been a lie. Domeric’s armor was black plate from tip to toe, engraved with blood red enamel. Having been buried, it was dusty now, but she knew that when he cleaned it properly it would all shine. The sabatons and greaves and gauntlets and vambraces bore carvings made to resemble the bones of the feet and fingers and shins and forearms, and the couters and rerebraces and poleyns and cuisses were likewise carved to look like skinless muscle. The pauldrons and the tassets were skinless muscle too, and the rondels were all embellished with little flayed men or grinning skulls. The gorget was plain, but the helm sported a tail of blood red horsehair, and on the shoulders were two horses’ heads with flashing red rubies for eyes. They were both chomping at the bit, their teeth clamping down on his heavy pink greatcloak which lay unfurled beneath it all. But by far the most beautiful piece was his black breastplate, undeniably a work of art. Here the engravings depicted skin being peeled away from the chest to reveal a broken cage of ribs, at whose center was a heart. It’s bleeding, Sansa realized. It’s bleeding rubies. She wanted to giggle but she stayed silent.

He is the flayed man. The one being tortured. It was something only a Bolton would wear. All his enemies would fear him, Sansa thought. They would quake just to look at it. She smiled. No one would ever hurt a lady whose lord looked like that. No one would ever hurt Lady Bolton.

Domeric straightened at her words. “I designed it myself, my lady,” he said. Did he? How morbid. How wonderful! She could see his chest puffing up a bit. That was wonderful too. “I am glad you think well of it.”
“It is a beautiful kit, ser. You have a talent.”

“The smith had a talent. I just told him what I wanted.”

Domeric was much more affable on the ride back to town. There saw hardly anyone on the trail, so they could speak freely, speak as themselves. She asked him a few more questions about his armor, because many men liked talking about their armor, and he was no different. He was very enthusiastic about the subject, she found.

Lord Bolton had commissioned it from a master smith in White Harbor when Domeric had sent a raven home with the news that he’d been knighted and would be returning to the Dreadfort soon. He hadn’t brought the whole thing with him; there were a few extra pieces made special for the joust which had been left at Harrenhal. When the war had broken out, he’d been in the Vale, and he’d been planning to attend a tourney at Wickenden to celebrate the wedding of Lord Waxley’s only daughter, but he’d needed to go to Moat Cailin instead.

“Have you ever ridden in a tourney, ser?”

“Only squire’s tourneys. Never as a knight.”

“But you’d been a knight for two years, before the war. You could have ridden then.”

“Aye, but I had duties at the Dreadfort. The only tourneys in the North are at White Harbor, and Lord Manderly’s next major nameday isn’t for years and years. Might be he’ll host one when Lady Wynafryd is wed. If he can afford it after the war.”

“You could have ridden at the Hand’s Tourney for my father.”

“I thought about it.”

“Why didn’t you come?”

They were only a few minutes away from the town walls now. Domeric stopped his horse.

“Because if I had won there would have been a scandal.”

“A scandal?”

“Aye. The worst kind. Can’t very well crown another man’s betrothed, much less the Crown Prince’s.” He was smirking at her.

Sansa’s eyes widened at that, and there were bubbles in her heart again. That was me! He’s loved me since before the Hand’s tourney! For more than a year...

She opened her mouth wide to say something but he had started off on the trail back to Duskendale again. When she sped after him, she could hear him chuckling.

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter I wanted to display Sansa’s emotional intelligence, deepen her connection to the North, further acquaint Sansa with the effects of war, and showcase some GRRM-esque clothing porn (Dom's war bling).
The Boltons have some really cool war bling. It's kind of the team "look".

Roose (Reek II ADWD): Back where the press was thickest at the center of the column rode a man armored in dark grey plate over a quilted tunic of blood-red leather. His rondels were wrought in the shape of human heads, with open mouths that shrieked in agony. From his shoulders streamed a pink woolen cloak embroidered with droplets of blood. Long streamers of red silk fluttered from the top of his closed helm. https://www.deviantart.com/fernoll/art/Roose-Bolton-732464851

Ramsay (Theon VI ACOK): At their head was a knight in dark armor. His rounded helm gleamed a sullen red, and a pale pink cloak streamed from his shoulders...The torchlight glittered off the chipped enamel of his visor. His helm and gorget were wrought in the shape of a man’s face and shoulders, skinless and bloody, mouth open in a silent howl of anguish. https://www.deviantart.com/aldok/art/Ramsay-in-Winterfell-554680757

On the back end I have reached 100K words. I am shooting for 350-450K total. Thank you to everyone who has been reading, leaving kudos, and commenting.
 Sansa VII

Chapter Summary

Sansa finds something more in common with Domeric beyond songs and music. Domeric speaks more frankly about the political situation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun was low when they got back to the inn. While Sansa bathed, she watched it sink out of the purple sky into the grey-green sea, a great orange disc disappearing under the horizon. They had one of the best rooms in the Seven Swords, on the topmost floor and with a splendid view of Blackwater Bay.

“My lady?” Sansa could see Domeric’s silhouette behind the screen separating the tub from the rest of the room. She hadn’t heard him come upstairs. He had been in the common room listening for news.

“Ser?”

He was silent for a moment and then spoke slowly. “There is a beach under the cliffs where the tides don’t reach all the way. Between the harbor and the Dun Fort. The lights from the town and the castle and the lighthouse reflect off the water and keep it bright enough to see. We could eat there, instead of the common room. Or up here. Whatever you would like, my lady.”

Eating outside meant that they wouldn’t have to play-act as a sellsword and a seamstress anymore. She wouldn’t have to wear the hairnet, she could just be Sansa, and Domeric didn’t have to put on any funny airs. And maybe he will give me a kiss…

“I would like that, ser. Thank you.”

Even behind the screen could see him brighten at her response. “Excellent,” he said. “We’ll go after I’ve had my bath.”

The beach between the town and the Dun Fort was covered in fine sand, mottled black and white. It was much nicer than the beach north of the town where the Stark army had been laid to rest. To the east was the sea, a rippled black mirror that shone jade green under the glow of the lighthouse. To the south, on the limestone cliffs above the sea, sat the Dun Fort, watching the town and the port and the harbor from above. The Dun Fort’s outer curtain walls stretched around far, far behind them, splitting off to the west to wrap around Duskendale and shield city and castle alike. As Domeric dismounted and helped her off his horse, Sansa felt a twinge if sadness that the short, slow ride was over. She’d ridden behind him, the satchel with their food and wineskin strapped to her back, her arms winding around him to clasp together at his front. Sansa had relished the feeling of pressing so tightly against him, for he hadn’t worn any armor, and she had felt the hard muscles of his sides and back through his tunic.

The only other time she’d ever touched a man so closely was when the Hound had saved her during the bread riot, but it hadn’t been half so pleasant. Here on the beach at Duskendale there
weren’t any angry, shouting smallfolk, no flying rotten fruits or grabbing hands. It was just Sansa and Domeric, and it was quiet. It was safe.

Domeric dismounted and helped her off his horse. *Rhaegar,* she thought giddily. *How funny.* *We’re dragonriders.* She reveled in the feeling of his hands on her waist and her hands on his shoulders. For those brief moments they were closer than if they were dancing. Dancing was better on the whole, though. Dancing lasted longer. Oh, how wonderful it would be, to dance with him! Perhaps they would, once they got to Runestone.

He took the satchel from her and spread the saddle blanket on the ground, far up from the reach of the sea, with cliffs and rocks and caves at their back. A short and skinny tree was growing in the sand, and that was where he tied his horse. Their red dragon. Rhaegar. He bade her sit, and so she sat, and he did too.

Domeric opened the satchel and produced a wineskin and bundles of food wrapped in linen napkins. He unwrapped the bundles, shook out the napkins, and handed one to her. She spread it over her lap as he began to unpack the food.

“They’re pies,” he said. “Beef and fish and apple and berry. I – I know you like lemon but they didn’t have any – ”

“They’re perfect,” Sansa said. “Thank you, ser.”

He cut the meat pie and fish pie in half with his knife, and handed her one of each. *His hands are beautiful,* she thought. *His fingers are so long.* Graceful. In the moonlight they were white, snow white, like ice spiders. Sansa broke off a piece of the beef pie and put the rest in her lap. They ate in silence, staring at the moon on the sea.

“Have you ever been to the sea before?” he said, after a while. “On the waves, or on a ship?”

Sansa shook her head. “No,” she said. “I have been to White Harbor, but never on a ship on the waves. I have seen Blackwater Bay. The Tyrells took me sailing on a river barge on Blackwater Rush, and I went on a riverboat with Robb and Uncle Edmure when I was at Riverrun a few years ago.”

“Riverrun,” he repeated. “Sansa?” He was staring at her. “Will you be happy? When we reach your family?”

His question came when she was still chewing. He looked embarrassed at this, but she nodded in acknowledgement. The chewing gave her time to think. Was she happy? She hadn’t really thought about her family since he sang their song at Rosby, except for the brief moments they’d spent praying by the cairn on the beach.

“I will be glad to see my mother again,” she said slowly after swallowing, “but I do not know how I am going to speak to Robb. It seems as if he will be so different now. As if I will be meeting a stranger. Or as if I had lost all three of my brothers at Winterfell instead of just two, and my sister. As if someone else will stand there in my brother’s body. My king, but not my brother. I fear I will not know him.”

Sansa’s throat was dry. She turned to look for a flask of water, a wineskin, but she couldn’t find one. As if he knew her thoughts Domeric produced his wineskin from his hip and handed to her. Their fingers brushed on the neck. Sansa took a sip.

“Robb… he was my hero. When we played monsters and maidens with Arya and Jon, Robb would
always be my champion. Arya would be Jon’s squire. When Old Nan would tell us frightening stories, it was Robb who would hold me if I would start to cry. Robb was always there. I don’t remember a time without him. I don’t remember a time without Arya either, but I would always quarrel with Arya. I rarely quarreled with Robb. Robb I knew best. He was there the longest. Bran and Rickon, I love them, but I remember when they were babies, when they were born. I got to know Bran some, but we were always doing different things when he became old enough to truly talk, and Rickon… he never got the chance to get that far.” When she finished, she didn’t feel like speaking anymore.

Domeric was still staring at her. “I lost young brothers too, you know,“ he said after a few long moments. She hadn’t known. She shook her head. She’d only ever heard that Lord Bolton had one trueborn son. “They were all babies, when they died. I never got to know them, either. Not even the last. Roger. He died during the Greyjoy Rebellion. My mother died then too. A fever took them both.” He looked at the moon.

“My mother… her name was Beth. Bethany Ryswell Bolton. She named Roger after her brother. Roger Ryswell. My uncle. He had a daughter a few moons before. Another Bethany Ryswell. Another Beth. Roger Bolton and Beth Ryswell. Because Beth Bolton and Roger Ryswell loved each other very much. They were each other’s favorite siblings. Mother told me so. Uncle Roger too. Now… there’s just Roger Ryswell and little Beth, and Beth Bolton and little Roger are both gone.

“I know well my cousin Beth. She’s around your age. But my brother Roger, I never… I never got to know him. He was talking, walking when he died. Always chasing after me through the halls of the Dreadfort. He wanted to play with me. I never wanted to play with him. He could talk, but he didn’t have anything to talk about. He could walk, but he couldn’t run fast enough for me. Or ride a pony. All I ever wanted to do was ride my pony.” Domeric took a long breath in and let a long breath out.

“If I had known – if I had known what was going to happen – I would have just played with him. I wish…” His voice, as always quiet, had trailed off into silence. Sansa took his hand in both of hers and looked into his eyes. They shone brighter and paler than the moon. The muscles in his jaw were twitching.

“You wish that you had spent more time with him,” she said. “You wish you could have just been there for him like he wanted you to. That you could have accepted him as he was. That you had been a better brother.” His eyes widened and he nodded. “I wish… I wish I had been a better sister. That I had held Rickon more, and told him that I loved him every chance that I could. I wish that I had spent more time with Bran, and that I hadn’t fought with Arya. I wish I had realized how important they were to me.” Sansa released his hands and ate the last piece of berry pie to swallow the pain in her throat and quell the quaking in her voice.

There was more silence after that.

“Ser,” she said, “you did not finish your pie.”

“I have not,” he said, picking up the last bite. “Would you like it? Better for you than for the birds.” Sansa nodded. “Here, then.”

Domeric picked up the last piece of berry pie and Sansa put out the palm of her hand. But his hand bypassed hers, and paused about the height of her shoulder. Their eyes locked, then, and he pressed his mouth into a line, and his gaze darted to her mouth for a moment. A crease appeared between his brows as if in question.
Sansa’s eyes widened. She smiled at him and then opened her mouth, sticking her tongue out just a little.

His lips quirked upward and his hand began to move again. *Too slow,* Sansa thought, *he’s moving too slow.* Her heart began to beat like the wings of a bat. Eventually his fingers met her mouth. They brushed her bottom lip and against her tongue before releasing the piece of pie and pulling away. As she swallowed the flaky crust she watched him suck the berry juices off his fingers.

*His mouth is very pretty,* she thought, *and when he opens it, his pretty voice sings pretty songs.*

Dome ric tilted his head and stretched his neck. The joints between his bones cracked and he sighed. Then he extended his legs forward, one after the other, pointed and rolled both ankles, one after the other. Then he turned his face towards her once more.

“Did you enjoy your supper, my lady?” Sansa nodded wordlessly.

“Shall we be leaving, then?” She shook her head. *Not yet…*

“There is business you have here?” She only stared at him, pursing her lips. “My lady awaits some sign from the Moonmaid or the Stallion?” The stars were very pretty, but Sansa did not search for their signs tonight. She shook her head once more.

“My lady would like a kiss.” He had been teasing her again. Her face must have been so red…

“Am I right?” Sansa nodded like a little lamb.

Dome ric took her hand and then brought it to his lips, kissing her just below the knuckle of her middle finger. Then he met her eyes.

“My lady was expecting something else.” Another nod. Her voice had left her. Maybe it had flown away with the seabirds, or she had swallowed it with the pie…

He shifted closer to her on the blanket and braced his hand on the ground. Then his other hand tipped up her chin and his face came very close, so close she could feel his warm breath on her skin. The bat in her heart was very loud in flight. Dome ric held her gaze for another moment and then closed his eyes, brow furrowing. When they opened, he exhaled in a cool puff, released her chin, and leaned upward to kiss her forehead. Then he touched the tips of their noses together and pulled back.

“That was not what my lady wanted either.”

No, it wasn’t. Sansa bit her lip in disappointment. *Again,* she thought, staring at the sand. *Did I do something wrong again?*

Dome ric sighed again, but then he slung his arm around her shoulder and drew her next to him. Sansa was very confused. With his other hand he tipped up her chin once more. “I could not kiss my lady love,” he said, “elsewise I would not bring her back. I would take her away with me, but my lady love wants to see her mother.” He closed his eyes again. “And ‘twould be dishonorable to kiss the bride of another man.”

Sansa blinked. *What?* She found her voice again. “Robb has… promised me?” She was so confused. “To whom?”

“None yet. But he will. And not to me.”
Sansa felt a snake of dread slither around her throat. It started to squeeze. “You are promised then.”

“No.”

“Then… why… Robb…” *I am a Stark and I am brave.* “You saved me. Robb *must* give me to you. It’s… how it works… You’re a hero… who saved a princess…”

“No,” he said. “And I haven’t saved you yet. We’re not at Runestone yet.”

“But once we get there – Robb *must* –”

“Kings do what they will,” he said, gently again. “And he will not give you to me.”

Oh, how she felt so *naked*. Worse than naked! She felt like she didn’t have any skin at all, like he had peeled it all away to reveal the workings of her flesh, her wildly beating heart. There was no point in keeping any secrets from him now.

“But – but –” Sansa bit her tongue and steeled herself. “You’re a hero. My hero. It’s what I want. I want to be your reward. Because you were the one who took me away when no one else did.” She inhaled sharply. “You called me your lady love. Do you not love me? I thought – I thought – you came – for my hand…”

Domeric clenched his jaw, and opened his mouth, and closed it again. Then he spoke and tightened his arm around her shoulders. “I would like that, my lady, my love, I swear it,” he said. “but it cannot be. I dare not ask.”

“You dare not even ask? Not even just to try?”

“I dare not, for I would be wroth enough to draw blood when His Grace denies me, and he would. And it would not end well.” He rubbed his temple. “What is my name, Sansa Stark?”

“Domeric Bolton.”

“And you know your histories? Of my family and yours?”

Of course she did. She wasn’t stupid.

“The Boltons bent the knee to the Starks during the Andal invasion. The last Red King was Rogar the Huntsman, who swore himself to Theon Stark, the Hungry Wolf. The King of Winter. Ever since Karlon Stark defeated Donner Bolton a thousand years ago, the Dreadfort has been steadfastly loyal to Winterfell and never rebelled again.” *I am not stupid. I am not stupid,* she reminded herself, over and over and over, but she wasn’t sure she believed it.

Domeric gave her a wan smile and touched her hand. “Aye, my lady. Your maester taught you well. But that is not what I meant. The Boltons have never been steadfastly loyal. Less than a hundred years ago, during Dagon Greyjoy’s Rebellion, my thrice-great grandfather Bartimus was planning to take Winterfell. I know, I read his journal, my father showed it to me one day. Bartimus Bolton would have succeeded if Lonnel Snow and his crannogmen had not swept in to defeat the Ironmen and the ruling Lady Lorra Stark from the succession crisis threatening her son, Lord Donnor Stark. Lady Lorra was the mother to Lord William, Lord Rickard’s grandfather. But you know that.”

Sansa did know. She’d seen William and Donnor and his father Beron and even Jonnel in the crypts, and Maester Luwin had gone over this story. “Because of Lonnel Snow, Bartimus never got
the chance to act on his plans.” Domeric laced his fingers through hers, and they were very warm.

Oh, he was being so confusing! He was holding her so gently, but his words were ruining everything. She could have dissolved into his touch like sugar in tea if not for the cold shock of the tales he told. He was pulling her closer and pushing her away, all at the same time, and she did not like it.

“So you see, my lady, we Boltons have bent the knee, but we have never been loyal. And for that reason we are not trusted. You might have thought that when the Boltons were finally subdued that the King in the North would have taken a bride, to bind the two together, like they did with the daughters of the Barrow Kings, the Warg Kings, the Marsh Kings? But it did not happen, and we are not trusted like the Reeds and the Dustins. Why? I do not know. Perhaps my blood is tainted, or cursed.”

His hands were so gentle, but his words were so harsh. Not just harsh, stupid! What did that matter? That was all hundreds, thousands of years ago. She didn’t care about a thousand years ago, of the Red Kings of old. She cared about now. She cared about him.

“My father… Nobody trusts my father. Not truly. They need him for his cunning and his skills, but nobody wants him around. He unsettles people, and I unsettle people because I am his son. They suspect he keeps the old ways, the Bolton ways, and they think it of me too, unless they come to know me better.”

“I do not care,” Sansa protested. “You are not your father. You’re not the rest of your family either. There’s nothing wrong with you, or your blood. I know you have no part in whatever they did… They can’t hold that against you. I trust you. You saved me. You are good… You are different. Kind and brave. A true knight. And you sing, and you play music, and you care about everyone, and you are… you…”

*Even if you were like the rest of them, I would not care.*

“Even if your brother saw all that, or your mother did, my lady, it would make no difference. They could not give your hand to me. Not when they need it to make a peace.” He inhaled shakily. “Your brother cannot win this war. He must bend the knee, for the good of the North. The Riverlands. His kingdom. There must be a peace with the Lannisters and the Crown if any of us are to survive the winter.”

Domeric tightened his hug around her, and squeezed the fingers twined through hers. “I do not like it either. They will send you to Highgarden and Willas Tyrell, or perhaps to Lancel Lannister at the Rock. I do not want that.”

“Ser Lancel is injured,” Sansa said. “He may not yet live.” She hadn’t wanted him to die, but she didn’t want to marry him…

“Highgarden then.” Domeric inhaled again. “Think of it this way, princess. We could be like… like Queen Naerys and Aemon the Dragonknight. I wouldn’t have to marry, I could be your shield instead, or go to the Wall, Walda’s son could have the Dreadfort – ”

*No, Sansa thought. No, no, no. He cannot say this. I will not believe it. I will not give up.*

“But we’re going to the Vale… They will help. Aunt Lysa will help. All of her lords will help. I’ll make them see. We will. We’ll help Robb win. He wouldn’t need to surrender, and then he… he couldn’t deny you… us.”
“Sansa,” he started gently. “My love. How do you think the Vale would be raised? They would expect a marriage alliance. His Grace is already married, your brothers are dead, and your sister is missing. The only one left would be you. You couldn’t marry your cousin Robert, he is too young, but you could marry his heir. Harrold Hardyng. Harry. He is only a squire yet, but comelier than me. Or Lady Waynwood’s grandson Roland. A gallant knight, and a good and friendly man. He would take good care of you.” Then he paused. “Harry and Roland are both near mine own age, but it could also be Lord Corbray. Lord Lyonel. He is of high standing in the Vale and is in need of a wife.”

Domeric sounded somewhat upset, but only somewhat. His jaw was clenching. That is his tell, Sansa thought. He clenches his jaw when he is unhappy. He sighed and tried to hug her closer. She could feel the heat coming off of him. I am unhappy too. How can he tell me he loves me and say such awful things too? Why couldn’t we just enjoy being together? Why did he have to ruin it?

“Your brother could not give you to me, Sansa. He needs you to do your duty, and your duty lies elsewhere.” He breathed in deep and hugged her closer. “What if we didn’t go back, aye? We could go across the Narrow Sea. To Lys, or, or to Lorath, or to Tyrosh, and your brother and alliances wouldn’t matter, it could just be you and me –”

Sansa jerked back. She didn’t want to go to Lys, or to Lorath, or to Tyrosh. She didn’t want to do her duty, or at least what he said her duty was. Everything he said made sense. Too much sense. She didn’t want him to be right, but how could he not be right? She could find no flaw in anything he said. She turned her face away. The tears were coming now in ugly, sniffly sobs that she could not swallow.

I don’t want that, Sansa thought. I don’t want to go to Lys or to Lorath or to Tyrosh. I don’t want Willas Tyrell or Lancel Lannister. I don’t want Harry Hardyng or Roland Waynwood or Lyonel Corbray. I want Domic Bolton. I want his kisses and his singing I want to be his lady wife and have his babies. We will call them Eddard and Brandon and Rickon and they will have dark hair and pretty eyes like moons and we will wrap them in pink blankets. We will have tourneys on the Weeping Water and have feasts and music and dancing in the hall. I don’t want to go to the Rock or Highgarden or the Vale. I want to stay in the North and live at the Dreadfort and be its lady. I want to be Lady Bolton and wear the flayed man on my back. I love Domic and I do not care if he flays his foes and hangs their skins on his walls. I want him to be my lord husband, and no one else.

“Do you mean that, Sansa?”

Sansa had thought aloud. She brought her hands over her face in shame. Domic unwrapped himself from around her and slid his long fingers underneath her palms. He gently pried them forward until she could no longer hide. He did let go of one of her hands, and brought his face close enough so that their noses were mere inches apart.

“Do you mean that?” Sansa nodded.

“You love me and you want to be my lady wife?” Sansa nodded again.

“And you do not care about the flayed man banner. About the flaying.” She shook her head.

“You want me and no one else.” Another nod.

Her eyes were wet and wide, but his were kind. He released her other hand and began to trace the tear tracks on her face with the pads of his thumbs. When he opened his mouth, she could barely hear him. His voice was like the breath of a ghost, his breath, the ghost’s touch.
“Aye, then. It cannot be helped.” Another breath, another ghost. His voice came louder now. “Please do not cry.”

It started so suddenly that she did not feel it at first. His face was already so close. The brush and slide of his mouth was so soft, so light at first that she thought it was the ghostly breath again. But it was his hands that let her know that it was real, that it was him, and then the press of his lips grew harder. One hand found the base of her neck, the other, her waist, and they were warm, and they were pulling her into him. Her mouth was already open, so his tongue did not beg entrance, he just touched it to hers, just the tip, and then he slid it back along the inside of her teeth, across her lower lip, and then down along her tongue again, and then she wanted to touch him, but his grip was too tight, and all she could do with her hands was limply brace herself against the ground, and then... and then... and then...

Could ice melt upward? Could sparks fly down? They must have been able to, though all wisdom said elsewise. She was melting, but she was melting up, up from the source, to the source, through the source, the source of the heat, the touch of his tongue against hers. She was melting up, and she was flowing up. Flowing into him. And the sparks were flying down too. Sparks were flying down, down to somewhere in her tummy, down from the source of the heat. His mouth. She was melting upward, and sparks were flying down. But ice melted down, and sparks flew up. The world must have been upside down. She was disoriented, dizzy, and the only things telling her which way was up and which way was down were his mouth and his hands, but his hands kept moving...

When they broke apart Domeric let out a shaky breath.

“No Brandons.”

“Ser?” Sansa could hardly believe she could speak at all. There was a whole colony of bats in her heart now, each one beating their wings as fast as they could go.


Sansa’s heart skipped a beat. “Then – you mean – Robb and Mother – we can try – ”

“Aye,” he said, “we can try.”

Sansa could have squealed, but squeals were ugly sounds. Instead she wiggled out of his grasp and wound her arms around his neck for another kiss. We can try, Sansa thought as she smiled into his mouth. And we’ll succeed.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Sansa finally got her kiss. It's been a few weeks for us, but for her it's been something like 4 days. Which felt like a long time. Dom's really been yanking her chain, hasn't he? Not very nice of him. But he had his reasons. Are those reasons good? Sansa disagrees.

Next week we switch POVs again.
Thank you to everyone who has been reading, commenting, leaving kudos. I appreciate it.
Robert Ryswell relished riding through the reaches of the Riverlands, for it reminded him of the Rills, only warmer. The mighty Trident rushed wider, roared louder than the slow and swampy Fever River, but the songs of her daughters and granddaughters warbled in his ears like the babbling brooks back home. He hadn’t been south of the Neck since those sixteen moons he’d spent a squire at Seagard several years’ past, and he hadn’t returned since. ‘Twas a shame, really – his father had met Lord Jason during the Greyjoy Rebellion, and they’d both agreed that every lord on the Sunset Sea needed a strong fleet and sound sailors to stop those fucking squids from ever reaving again.

He hadn’t been knighted – aye, he’d left Seagard before he’d become a man grown – but it hadn’t been a waste. Lord Jason thought well of him. When he’d been called to the lord’s solar on that last day, Lord Jason had walked him to the tower window and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Lad,” he’d said, “I’ll be sad to see you go. You’ve been a good squire. None’s ever cleaned the eagle’s wings on my helm so well. You’re a decent sword, and a fine lance too. Are you truly sure you don’t want to be a knight?”

“Aye, my lord,” Robert had replied. “I am sure. Thank you for taking me on. It has been an honor to serve you.”

Robert had been sure. Still was. At five-and-ten he’d knelt in the Seagard godswood praying over his future, and the gods had given him his answer. The next step on for a squire was knighthood, and knighthood meant a knight’s vows. Lord Jason had said he could say his vows in front of the heart tree if he wanted, and Robert had been grateful for the consideration. Stuffy old Septon Berrigan had needled Lord Jason about how a knight’s vows simply needed to be sworn in a sept in the Seven’s light, but the proud old eagle had brushed him off in respect of Robert’s faith. Looking into the face of the Seagard heart tree, Robert knew he wouldn’t dare take those vows.

A knight’s vows were too hard to keep. There were too many. Be brave? Aye, he could do that. His mother was a Stout of Goldgrass, and all Stouts of Goldgrass were brave of soul and stout of heart. Defend the weak and protect all women? Aye, he could do that too. Obey his liege lord? In most cases yes, but what if your liege lord was stupid, craven, or treacherous? Others take a stupid liege lord, and a craven or treacherous one too. And to be just, and champion the innocent? How was he to know what was just? Who was he to decide who was innocent? He was only a man who knew
the law. He was not a god. And he would not – would *dare not* – give his blood to the heart tree and look into the face of the old gods and swear a vow he did not know he would be able to keep.

So he’d said as much to Lord Jason, and Lord Jason had accepted his answer. “I’d be hard pressed to find another lad who took oaths so seriously. Or the gods. That is very honorable of you, young Robert,” he had said. “But it means that your time as my squire must end. There are many young men who would be my squire, and who I would dub fine knights.”

Robert had understood. He and Lord Jason understood each other. How could they not, after having spent so much time together? Lord Jason had taken him out sailing on Ironman’s Bay, patrolling the coast around the Cape of Eagles and as far north as the Flint Cliffs. He’d gotten his sea legs and learned how to stave off greensickness. He’d learned how to tie half a hundred sorts of knots and how to fight when the deck was slipping under your feet. He’d learned how to scrub a deck and read the stars and winds. Sailing was almost as good as riding a horse. Almost. A ship wasn’t alive. A ship couldn’t be your friend.

Aye, his time at Seagard had been worth it. More than worth it. Lord Jason had sent him off with detailed plans for galleass and galleys, as well as shipwright and a young captain he could not afford to pay. House Ryswell would have a fleet. The North would have a western port city to rival White Harbor. If Robert couldn’t be the next Lord of the Rills, he could be the Lord Admiral of the Ryswell Fleet, and that would be grand too. They’d build up Gravelton at mouth of the Greatrill and see trade from the Arbor and Dorne and Lannisport. They could sell prized ironwood logs and the finest pelts in all the known world, and northern icewines. The North would be rich! House Ryswell would be rich! Eventually. They’d never be known as the Dothraki of the snow again. Not with a fleet. Not with a port. Everyone knew that the Dothraki hated the ocean. But first they would need to build the fleet, and build the port, and get the Starks to pay for it.

When he’d arrived home, Grandfather Rodrik and Father had looked over the papers Lord Jason had sent with him, had a discussion with the shipwright and the young captain, and drawn up the plans to hire excess men from White Harbor and request a loan from Lord Stark. So they’d sent the letter, and it had taken them months to get a reply. Thank you for writing, Lord Ryswell, I am reviewing your proposal, was all it had said. It hadn’t even been in Lord Stark’s hand – Father knew what that looked like – it had been penned by the Winterfell maester. But this was Lord Stark they were writing to, so they had to grit their teeth and wait a few more weeks before following up again. Thank you Lord Ryswell, I must consult with my steward. Thank you Lord Ryswell, we are auditing the treasury. Thank you Lord Ryswell, I am conferring with Lord Manderly. Delay, delay, delay, and bugger Lord Too-Fat! Bugger Lord Stark and his steward too.

Grandfather had thought that Lord Stark was just stealing their plans so that he could give his youngest or his bastard a seat on Sea Dragon Point, but it turned out that Lord Stark had just been overwhelmed. Eventually they’d come away with a loan that wouldn’t cover even a quarter of the fleet they’d wanted to build, so they’d had to use their own coin to start the work. Slow going, that was. So they’d started work on the galleys *Ryder’s Ghost* and *Lady Robyn* along with a few longships to round out the dozen or so they’d already had. The galleass *Proud Stallion* and *Sentinel Seventy-Nine* and the rest were going to have to wait. When Lord Stark had been named Lord Hand, Father had thought that they could have angled for a city charter for Gravelton and more coin for the fleet, but no, Thank you, Lord Ryswell, I tell you this in confidence, but the Crown cannot afford such an expenditure. And then Lord Stark had been relieved of his head. Bugger the Crown.

No thanks to Lord Stark, Father had been able to stave off the Ironmen from harrying the Ryswell coast or rowing up Greatrill and the Blazewater River, leaving Uncle Rick to take much of the horse and to defend the banks of the Blazewater. Thus, the Dustin men could fortify Barrowton
and patrol the Barrowlands without worrying about the west. Beth had sent him a bird telling how Don and Young Rod had come back with a string of Goodbrother skulls and the heads of a Drumm, an Orkwood, and a Codd, and after that he’d known things would be fine. It was a fucking shame about Saltspear, Deepwood, and Torrhen’s Square, but they only had so many men and so many ships, no thanks to Lord Stark. No thanks to His Grace or the Manderlys either. It was all thanks to Lord Jason.

“Try to shake off the wenching before you get home,” Lord Jason had told him when he’d been sent off. “I’ve let you spend too much time with Patrek, and your father won’t thank me for it.”

“Aye, my lord,” was all he’d said. “I will try.” Fuck, he’d hadn’t really tried, had he? Pat had taken him out and whetted his taste for women and it had never gone away, and now Grandfather Rodrik thought he was unserious. If some lass presents me with a Snow to keep fed and sheltered and says it’s yours, I’ll know in my heart you’re unfit to rule. You know well to guard the blood, I’ve told you enough times. Aye, that had hurt. But he’d never regret those nights carousing out with Pat. Those were fond memories. Pat was his friend, and he’d even liked Ser Edmure enough, when he came to visit. It was good to know that there was at least one Tully that wasn’t either a loon or a grasping, slippery watersnake.

He’d been happy to go back North and see his sisters, but he’d missed Lord Jason and Patrek and all the Seagard household. Lord Jason had taken him all over the western part of the Riverlands. They’d gone up to the Twins and down to Hag’s Mire, past Oldstones and Fairmarket, all the way down to Riverrun. He hadn’t been any further south than Riverrun, or further east than the Red Fork. Not until now, at least. Now, as a rider out scouting in this stupid war, he’d been as far as High Heart and within sight of Acorn Hall. From Harrenhal he scouted halfway to Stony Sept in the southwest and halfway to Sow’s Horn in the southeast.

He could just picture what it was like in springtime. Herons would swoop down, bursting forth from the morning mist, spearing trouts as they leaped into the air, only to stand up, tall and proud, on their long and spindly bird legs and raise their beaks to the dawning sun before they flew away again. In the summer the girls – highborn and low, from the great castles to the petty holdfasts to the villages and the farms – would run into the streams in just their shifts, hiking their hems up about their knees, and they’d wade in the water up to their waists to escape the heat. Then in the afternoon, the air would simmer and buzz, a deep booming thunderclap would herald the coming of the evening rains, and the girls would run across the fields and through the forests with wet white fabric clinging to their skin. How beautiful! How glorious! How blessed were the Riverlords for their rich bounty! It was no wonder that Fair Maids of Summer had been written here!

But now it was autumn, and it was all burning. The Riverlands weren’t beautiful anymore.

Fuck this stupid war. Fuck the Lannisters, and the Ironmen too. For fuck’s sake, why did Cat Tully have to go off, capture the Imp, take him to the Eyrie, only for Lysa to let him go? By the gods, Ser Edmure’s older sisters were both crazy! And now the kingdom of their birth was burning.

Smoke tickled Robert’s nose as his horse leaped over a fallen log just east of the God’s Eye, and he sneezed. Eurgh. The column from Duskendale was near. They were due back any day. Any day now, and Dom would come back. Dom, and Harrion Karstark. There was news for those two.

On the one hand, Robert wanted to be the one to sight the column, to welcome Dom back from the march and tell him about the bird he’d received that day they’d gone on the wolf hunt. On the other hand, if he was the one to meet the column, he’d also need to tell Harrion that he was now Lord Karstark, and that was news that he did not want to break.

By the gods, did the King Who Lost the North want to lose not just castles, but his bannermen too?
What was he thinking, executing Rickard Karstark? For fuck’s sake, the Karstarks were one of the most loyal houses to the Starks, possibly the most loyal. Well, now they wouldn’t be. Not anymore. His Grace could have held Lord Rickard hostage, or at least sent him to the Wall. First the Freys, now the Karstarks. How did His Grace hope to win back the North? Fuck, they were all going to hang once the inevitable came and they lost to the Lannisters.

No, Robert didn’t want to be the one to sight the column. Robert did not want to have that conversation with Harrion Karstark. He could tell Dom about the bird he’d had from Father when they were all back at Harrenhal.

Robert had discussed it with Roose while Dom and Lord Bolton went off ahead. That skeevy bastard Qyburn had let him know about the raven. Oh, Aunt Barabrey would get a kick out of that one. Was there anyone who ever hated maesters more? Anyhow. A betrothal! He’d been betrothed! In the middle of a war! How grand! Father and Grandfather must have been optimistic about his prospects, not just of survival, but for sitting the Rillseat too. And it was a good marriage. Sara Glenmore was to be his wife; she was the second daughter of Loren Glenmore, the petty lord of Rillwater Crossing, and Rybeca Ryswell, Ser Mark’s sister. They must have thought so highly of him to give him the closest thing Ser Mark had to a daughter. Everyone had loved Ser Mark. Ser Mark was supposed to be the next Lord of the Rills by now. And they were giving Robert his niece! Surely that meant that Robert was in Grandfather’s good graces again! Roose had agreed.

Dom had been off with Lord Bolton for the entire hunt, and then had rushed off to gods only knew where once they had returned to the castle. Robert had looked all over Harrenhal for him and hadn’t run into him once. That was to be expected, Harrenhal was too damn big. Robert had finally located him in his chambers that evening, but the Dreadfort guard had let him know that Dom had taken a sleeping draught for the night, and Robert had walked away relieved. Finally, Dom had done something sensible. Dom needed his sleep. They all could see it.

Harrenhal had been eating him, Robert could tell. Eating him, or sucking his spirit out like the bats that lived in the towers. This must have been what Father saw whenever he’d visited Aunt Beth at the Dreadfort. The Dreadfort had eaten her, leeched out her life essence. Dark circles under her eyes, like she never slept, and her mouth always pointing downward. Her voice always softer and softer. Everyone who lived at the Dreadfort had a soft voice. It made Father sad to speak of Aunt Beth, Grandfather too. Dom had much of Aunt Beth in him, everyone said. And now Harrenhal was eating him, like the Dreadfort had eaten Aunt Beth. It made Robert sad.

Dom had needed some good news, especially after his plan to rescue the princess got rejected. Fuck, he’d been so depressed after that. It was good that Dom had left Harrenhal. Dom had needed to get out and taste some battle glory. That is, if Dom hadn’t gone and done something stupid. It would be just like him to want to run off and play the hero like a knight out of the songs. To charge out from the front when Lord Bolton would have him overseeing the battle from the rear. But it would be even more like him to just clench his jaw and walk himself back after he cooled off and brooded for a bit. He would just need someone to remind him to cool off.

When Robert had realized that Dom had left for Duskendale, he’d been worried and talked to Roose about it. Roose had shrugged his shoulders. Everything would be fine.

“You know what Lord Bolton’s like. He wouldn’t let anything happen to Dom. Dom’s with the Cerwyn men. So the Cerwyn men will be in the rear, Glover and Tallhart will do the fighting and take all the losses, and Dom will come back with Condon leading the retreat.”

Roose was right about Lord Bolton. Dom would be fine. But with Dom gone there was no point in staying in the castle, so Robert had joined Roose and the outriders so he wouldn’t be bored.
Aye, he’d have to talk to Dom as soon as he got back. Dom needed a pick-me-up. Robert still hadn’t written Lady Sara yet, for fear of messing up and writing something stupid. But Dom was a wizard with the written word. Dom could help him write a proper love letter. Dom would want to help make it perfect. Dom loved helping.

And Lady Sara deserved a proper love letter. Hair like honey and eyes the color of stone, with pretty lips and a prettier laugh. How she had laughed at his japes the last time he’d stopped by Rillwater! He hadn’t taken her maidenhead but it had been a near thing. They’d been kissing by the stables and he’d stuck the point of his dagger into the knot of her bodice and she’d known what he’d wanted. She’d shown him her pretty teats and let him cop a feel. And now when they got back home, he’d be married right away, and he’d be staring at her pretty face and pretty lips and pretty teats every night for the rest of his life.

The column was close, so he’d get to talk to Dom about it, but he’d have to speak to Karstark too. Fuck. He’d have to think of something to say. Something tactful.

Robert’s horse jumped over a thin rivulet. There. On the horizon. He could see it. The column. He approached until he was within shouting distance and then hailed them with a wave.

“What ho!”

The head of the column was a haggard knight with a stained silver surcoat. Two red tridents crossed around a red eagle’s head stretched over his chest. The knight’s eyes were sunken and his scraggly beard had seen better days. By the gods, was that Condon? He looked like he’d been dragged through the Seven Hells and climbed out by a weirwood root. Behind him he saw tattered banners drooping, their bearers clearly exhausted. The black battle-axe on silver, the white sunburst on black, the brown bull moose on orange. No Glovers or Tallharts. Fuck.

“Ser Kyle?”

“Roose Ryswell?”

“No, I am Robert. Report?”

Condon took a breath. “Defeat. A thousand dead, at least. Some six hundred wounded who could still march. We never reached the walls of Duskendale.”

“Understood. Notable casualties?”


Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! Dom, dead or taken? This wasn’t supposed to happen. He was supposed to come back… Lord Bolton wouldn’t put Dom in a place where he couldn’t at least keep himself safe. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! There was a lump in Robert’s throat, and it was growing. The pain was tight.

“Robert?” Yes. Condon. The report. He was a soldier, he had a duty. Pain was for later. Robert focused his gaze on Condon’s, and in those slate eyes he saw fear. “Am I going to be flayed?”

What? Erm. Maybe? How the fuck was he supposed to know what Lord Bolton was going to do? But that wasn’t what Condon needed to hear. Robert chuckled nervously.

“Of course not. Lord Bolton can’t flay you. His Grace would take his head. You’re in command of
the Cerwyn men. The North needs you. Besides, flaying is illegal.”

Condon narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. Skeptical, he was. Robert continued. “I’ll ride back to the castle. Send back horses and wagons and carts. Food and more maesters. It’ll take me a day and a half to get there. Depending on how fast you’re marching, the horses should meet you three or four days after that. Lord Bolton will expect a full report when you arrive. Aye?”

“Aye.”

Robert was going to take his leave, but there was one more thing. He couldn’t forget. “Who commands the Karstark men here?”

“Karl Greycliff.”

“Send him forward.”

Karl Greycliff was a grizzled man past thirty, a petty lord with a bushy brown beard and cool grey-blue eyes. When Robert finished explaining about the Lannister boys and Lord Rickard and His Grace, black rage twisted Karl’s dirty face. “Thank ye for the report, young Robert.” Then Karl left to inform his men, and stewed.

After that, Robert took his leave and rode like the wind. As he flew back to Harrenhal, arse up and body bent close over his red courser’s back, more than once he felt warm tears mingling with the cool sweat on his face.

Dom. Dom. Dom. How? Robert couldn’t believe it. Dom was supposed to come back. When the war was over, they were supposed sail down the Blazewater together and go ice fishing on Saltspear. Dom was supposed to see Robert’s wedding and spout sweet words to Lady Sara while Don and Young Rod made bawdy japes and ripped off her clothes. They were supposed to go off and ride in tourneys and show those pretty southron dandies that Northmen could be fine lances too. Dom was a prisoner. Aye. A prisoner. Was he injured? Robert hoped not. But at least if he were the Lannister maesters would treat him well. Dom was too valuable to let die. Lord Bolton would strongarm Ser Edmure into making whatever trade was needed to get Dom back. And if the Lannisters refused a trade and asked for a ransom instead, well, Lord Bolton was rich now, and Aunt Barbrey would drain the Barrowton coffers to get him back too. Aye, Dom was a prisoner, but they would get him back.

Robert refused to imagine the alternative. He didn’t want to imagine a world with a hole in it, a hole shaped like Domeric Bolton. Then he’d be left with only Roose and Don and Young Rod, and things wouldn’t be the same. Roose was fine, but with Don and Young Rod it was always a contest. There was always the sinking feeling that sweet friendship would sour into bitter rivalry. With Dom nothing was a competition. They all could just appreciate him. His quiet presence and his soft words. His efforts to stop the petty bickering. His poetry. His music. It didn’t matter that he was a better horseman than the rest of them, and his name wasn’t even Ryswell. Fuck. Robert’s face was wet again.

He reached the little holdfast where the scouts were supposed to camp and regroup later that evening. The twilight sky was pink, and the setting sun was red. Pink and red, like the flayed man banner. It must have been a sign. Aye, the gods were telling him that Dom was all right.

Roose and the other outriders were already there. Robert must have been the last.

“I found them,” Robert told Roose.
“Good,” said Roose. “How’s Dom?”

Robert relayed what Condon had said. Roose blanched.

“Fuck this shit war.” Roose was taking it hard too. “You sleep now,” said Roose. “Here’s your food. We won’t make you take watch tonight. At first light go back to the castle and tell Lord Bolton, and make sure the lads from Duskendale get their horses.”

“Aye.”

Sleep didn’t come easy that night. He lay in his bedroll and stared up at the little holdfast’s stone ceiling. *Dom, are you out there? Are you in a cell, or chained up on the back of a wagon? Are they feeding you salted meat, or just hard bread and gruel? Or did they lock you in the Dun Fort, with a featherbed and hot clam stew and wine?*

He’d have to write letters when he got back to Harrenhal. One to Barrowton, to Aunt Barbrey and Branna. Maybe Grandfather Harwood would be at Barrow Hall when they opened it. He hoped Grandfather Harwood would be there. Branna would need someone to hug. Aunt Barbrey would just crumple up the parchment, stomp off alone, and rage. Another to the Rillseat, to Grandfather Rodrik and Father and Mother and Uncle Rick and Beth. They’d be in Grandfather Rodrik’s solar when the letter was opened, sitting on couches by the hearth. Grandfather would open it first, read it, and then hand the scroll to Father and go and stand by the window. It would fall to Father to read his letter out loud, and then all would be silent. And then Uncle Rick would start shouting at Father, and Mother and Beth would leave.

And another to Rillwater, to Sara Glenmore. Fuck. He’d forgotten about her. Now his letter would be stupid, because Dom wouldn’t be there to help.

He was so tired when he entered Harrenhal through the postern gate the next day. The first person he saw was Ronnel Stout, milling about in russet and gold, his favorite uncle in the world. Roose didn’t count. Roose was more like an older brother than an uncle. Uncle Rick was a right prick, Lord Willam was dead, and no one would call Lord Bolton their favorite anything. Thank goodness for Ronnel. He didn’t even make Robert call him uncle. Just Ronnel.

“You found them, lad?”

“Aye, I did.”

“Not good news, I take it.”

“No.”

“Who came back?”

“Just Ser Kyle. Over a thousand lost. Six hundred or more wounded.”

“I’ll take it they need a welcome party?”

“That they do.”

“Right then. I’ll see to it. You talk to Lord Bolton.”

“Aye.” Ronnel then started off shouting at the men to ready the wagons and horses.

Robert gave his horse to a stableboy and made his way to the Kingspyre Tower. The dread grew as
he ascended the spiral stairs. *Remember, son,* Father had said, before he’d ridden for Moat Cailin, *no man of House Ryswell has anything to fear of Roose Bolton. He needs our reputation more than we need his. He might not want you to think it, but he is just a man. And you’re a bigger man, and a better one.*

That wasn’t what Dom would have said. Dom was afraid of his father, and thought that everyone else should be too. When they were boys Dom had been convinced that Lord Bolton would flay his toes if he did anything wrong. Robert had chuckled nervously and said, *But flaying’s illegal. He can’t do that. Grandfather wouldn’t let him.* Dom had just whispered, *Yes he would,* and hadn’t said anything to anyone for the rest of the day. That night Robert had asked Father if Lord Bolton would really have done that to Dom. *I don’t think so,* Father had said, *but he wants Domeric to think so. He wants Domeric to be afraid so he will be under his control. But Domeric is his heir, and I don’t know a man who would truly risk his heir by his own hand unless he had committed a crime.* If even Father thought that Lord Bolton wouldn’t do it, then he wouldn’t. No man alive hated Roose Bolton more than Roger Ryswell.

Robert was nearing the top of the stairs. There were two Dreadfort men outside the door. Robert started squaring his shoulders. He thought of his mother, bidding him goodbye in the courtyard before he rode to war. *Remember, Robbie, you have the blood of the Stouts of Goldgrass,* she had said, with her hands on his cheeks. *And all Stouts of Goldgrass are brave of soul and stout of heart.*

“What business have you?” said one of the guards.

“We found the survivors from Duskendale.” Robert’s voice did not shake. *I have nothing to fear from the man behind that door. I have come to give a report.*

Then the guard slammed the butt of his spear and banged on the door. “Lord Bolton, Robert Ryswell to see you.”

“Enter,” came a voice, muffled and soft. The door opened.

All the curtains were drawn and the room was very dark. It was midday, and the tower had many windows, but it seemed that Roose Bolton did not care for light that did not come from little flames struggling for life. Lord Bolton was sitting behind a desk with a bowl of grapes in front of him, and beside it lay a pile of peels.

“How may I be of service to you, young Robert?”

Robert straightened his back and gave the news of Duskendale. Lord Bolton watched him coolly. *Those eyes do not scare me. Those are Dom’s eyes, and that is Dom’s father.* There was a sheen of sweat building on the back of Robert’s neck.

“You worry for my son.”

“I do.” There was no use lying to Lord Bolton. He looked like he could see through anything. He wouldn’t need his flaying knife to figure out the truth.

Lord Bolton picked up said flaying knife with one hand, a grape with the other, and skinned it with one stroke without looking away from Robert’s face. Then he dropped the peel unceremoniously onto the pile. *That doesn’t scare me, Dom can do that too.*

Lord Bolton skewered the grape with his knife and ate it off the curved tip without making a sound. “Do not fret for Domeric, nephew. I have it on good word from Lord Tywin that he will be returned to us.”
A wave of relief crashed over Robert’s heart. “Thank goodness. I am grateful that you have shared as much with me, Lord Bolton.” Then Robert paused. How could Lord Bolton have had word from Lord Tywin so quickly? I just learned the news yesterday and they took no birds to Duskendale. He shook the thought away. Lord Tywin just sent the raven to Harrenhal the moment he knew they captured Dom. “Who is Lord Tywin asking to trade? Or are you paying a ransom?” The relief was ebbing away. Dom’s eyes are not scary. Ghost grey is just a color.

“It is none of your concern.” It really wasn’t. Robert wasn’t a commander. It was just courtesy that he was invited to the meetings at all. “The war should be ending soon, young Robert. We will have Domeric with us again. At the end of the year, or shortly after.”

Robert hoped that was true. That meant a peace was coming. They couldn’t win. They would be making concessions. Brides would be sold off, reparations paid. Fuck, he hoped Beth and Branna wouldn’t be included. He hoped they’d stay North. But there was no use worrying. He’d find out later. It was only a few more weeks now. The peace. He wanted to get Dom back. He wanted to go home. He wanted everything to just stop burning, and he missed his sisters.

“I am glad of that, Lord Bolton. Thank you for sharing.”

Robert took his leave, and rushed down the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we couldn't just leave Roose Bolton alone, could we? There's a whole ensemble cast Domeric left behind at Harrenhal!

I made Robert the grandson of Harwood Stout, because one time we saw Roger Ryswell and Harwood Stout laughing together. You don't need to be in-laws to laugh together but it seemed like a logical move. I also debated whether to just make stuff up about Roose Ryswell to fill the role of this character, but then I realized that family squabbles are always more fun when the factions are diverse and numerous. And I think it's easier to have a "friend" type relationship with someone who's a cousin than an uncle of a similar age. There's generational baggage that comes with that.

There may or may not be an uneven bromance going on here. In the canon universe where Domeric was poisoned by his enemies, Robbie ugly cried and didn't care who was looking.

My headcanon is that one of the Ryswells (most likely Rickard but it could have been Rodrik in a less composed moment) made up the moniker "Lord Too-Fat-to-Sit-a-Horse." It started as their inside joke, and then Brandon Stark heard it, perhaps at some tavern in Barrowton, and then it was only a matter of time until the whole North was fat shaming Lord Wyman. But the Ryswells high key throw shade on anyone who can't ride.

A Roose Bolton flex is peeling grapes.

Please raise your hand if you would object to this story's rating being kicked up to an E. It might not necessarily. I am going to write what I am going to write. But honestly I have no idea where the line between M and E is.
ETA: Merry Christmas everyone. Hope you all get to enjoy time with your friends, families, and loved ones this holiday season.
Domeric XIV

Chapter Summary

Domeric whiles away the last few days in Duskendale living in his own head. A very interior chapter. A sappy maudlin one.

When you get past the middle, just remember, I love Myranda Royce, but she isn't for everyone.

Additional warning for some pretty extreme misogyny from the ghost Waymar Royce.

Chapter Notes

My eyes saw how much pity
was apparent in your face,
when you gazed at the attitude and form
that I often appear in through grief.
Then I understood that you would know
the nature of my hidden life,
so that I felt fear in my heart
of showing my misery in my eyes.
And taking myself away from you,
I felt that the tears rose from my heart,
which were summoned by your look.
Then I said to my sad spirit:
'It must be that Love lives within this lady
who makes me go weeping so.'

- Dante Alighieri, 'My eyes saw how much pity', La Vita Nuova

He shouldn’t have kissed her.

He shouldn’t have kissed her that night on the beach, or when they got back to the inn, or the next day, or the day after that, or the day after that, or the day after that. He’d kissed her half a hundred times, but they all felt like mistakes.

“And when the savage giant lay dead on the ground, Serwyn sheathed his sword, and rushed up the stairs to the highest room in the tallest tower of the giant’s castle. There, chained against the wall, knelt Daeryssa, the princess of his dreams. He lay his Mirror Shield on the ground, looked into Daerysssa’s face, and kissed her. And since his kiss was true love’s kiss, the giant’s curse was broken, and the magic chains that bound her shattered into a thousand shards, and the dark tower was filled with light, gleaming off the Mirror Shield. And then, hand in hand, they descended from the tower, and went off to hunt the dragon that held the Reach in torment. Only then, when the dragon was dead, would old King Gardener let Serwyn marry his lady love.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes
That was where Mother had stopped reading that night, the night he had asked her about kissing.
“Kisses are only for your family, my Dommie lad, my love, unless they’re kisses to a lady’s hand.
Kisses on the face are for the little brothers and sisters I will give you, and for me. For your
children, and your lady love, your wife.”

“But you are Father’s lady wife, and Father never kisses you.”

Mother had looked so sad then, sitting by his bed with their special book in her lap. “No,” she had
said, “but that is because I am only your father’s lady wife, and not his lady love.” Domeric had
nodded his head. He didn’t think that Father loved him either. “But sweetling, when you marry
your lady wife, you should try to love her. Your wife should be your lady love. And I know you
will succeed, because my darling Dommie lad succeeds at everything he tries. Good night, my
little knight. I love you.” Then Mother had kissed his forehead, pressed her nose to his, retired to
her chambers, and left him in the dark.

Domeric’s first kiss had been at the Eyrie, in a storeroom. Lord Horton had had some business with
Lord Nestor in his capacity as High Steward of the Vale, and Domeric had been left with the other
squires to do as he pleased. That was where he had met Waymar’s cousin, Myranda. At nearly
four-and-ten Domeric couldn’t tear his eyes away from her breasts, and whenever she, smiling, met
his gaze, he would flush pink as a Bolton banner. She had noticed him staring and had led him to
the siloes, and pulled him into the grain.

Later that week Domeric had gone picking flowers for Randa in Lady Lysa’s garden. He found the
best flowers for her at the feet of Alyssa Arryn’s statue. They were orchids, and they were the best
because they were pink of petal and red at the center. The next time he saw her, he was going to
give them to her, and if she said she loved him too he was going to write to his father and then
Randa would be the next Lady of the Dreadfort. But the next time he’d seen her, she’d been
pressing Lyle Lynderly against the wall, biting his neck and palming his breeches while Lyle
fondled her ample chest. Domeric had crumpled the orchids in his hand and turned away.

Still later that week Randa had sought him out again, and tried for another kiss. He’d refused, and
then she’d asked him why. After he’d explained, she’d giggled and tossed her curly brown hair.

“What Domeric. Whoever told you that was stupid. You don’t have to save your kisses for your
wife. You don’t even have to save them for your lady love. Kissing can just be for fun. See?” Then
Randa had grabbed his collar and stuck her tongue down his throat again, but he’d jerked away,
wiped his sleeve over his mouth, and spat.

She looked shocked for a moment. And then she laughed.

Never before had Domeric heard a crueler sound than Myranda Royce’s laughter, except for his
father’s silence.

There’d been other kisses with other girls, but Randa had been the first. And the worst.

Domeric had talked to Waymar about it when he and Lord Horton had returned from the Eyrie.
How could his cousin be such a bitch? “Don’t worry, Dom. You don’t have to listen to a fat
slattern like Randa. Girls like her, they look at you and they decide you’re handsome, and because
they’re pretty they know you’re looking too. A woman’s looks, that’s her weapon. Her kisses, her
tears, her cunt. They look at you and think, aye, it would be fun to play him for a fool. It makes
them feel powerful, to know they can disarm men who could cut them down in a moment. And if
they don’t want to make you into a fool, they want to marry you, and then they always want
something. If you’re an heir, they want to be lady of your castle. If you’re not, either you’re
nothing, or they’re some merchant’s daughter who wants her children to be noble. They don’t want
you for you. You’re just a tool to them. A stepping stone. If they praise anything that you do that you weren’t born with, it’s so they can brag to the other ladies while they’re sewing, and act all high and mighty while claiming your accomplishments, when they did nothing at all.”

Then Waymar had held up his sword hand. “This right here, this is my lady love. I don’t need to defend her. She’s the one who defends me. She feeds me when I’m hungry and sates my need when my blood is up. If I must cry, she dries my tears. Me, when I’m knighted, I’m off to the Wall. I’ll rise high on my own valor and no woman will ever be able to drape herself in my glory. No snake will ever tempt me to stain my honor, or steer me away from my goals. I’ll miss Ysilla and Ryella, but I won’t have to deal with those snakes with pretty faces ever again.”

Domeric hadn’t wanted Waymar to be right. He’d wanted a lady wife that he could kiss and hold and call his lady love. Who would love him in return and who wouldn’t hate him for making her a Bolton. He wanted to be a kind lord husband almost as much as he wanted to be a true knight. He had objected, said that his mother and his Ryswell cousins and Ysilla and the Redfort girls weren’t like that, but Waymar had just scoffed.

“It doesn’t count if they’re your mother or your kin. Jeyne’s just a little girl, and Cassie and Jessie are like sisters. Don’t mess around with that lady love nonsense, Dom. If you need to get your wick wet just pay a whore and be done with it. You’re an heir, you’ll need a wife, but you should just put a few sons in her and ignore her.”

Domeric had talked to Mychel and then decided that he was going to ignore Waymar instead. Not about the whores, but about the rest. Perhaps he shouldn’t have, even though Waymar had been wrong. Sansa wasn’t a snake. Sansa was different. Sansa was special. Sansa was perfect. But she would never be his, would never be his lady wife, and that was why kissing her and loving her and letting her hope had been a mistake. Mychel’s encouragement aside, messing around with all that lady love nonsense hurt. He was playing with fire, and instead of running he was basking in the warmth. He had been too cold to notice himself burning.

The morning after they got to Duskendale, the first thing they did was take a trip to the docks to inquire after passage to Gulltown. There was going to be a ship leaving in three days, a Tyroshi merchant’s cog with room below for his horse. No amount of coin could buy them a cabin, for the trade envoys from Pentos and Myr had purchased all of them. Domeric didn’t like it, but it would have to do. They needed to get out of the Crownlands and into the Vale as soon as possible.

After the docks, they’d gone back to the Seven Swords and fetched the jewelry she had brought to sell. They went back to that ladies’ shop he had visited on the way south. The shopkeep’s eyes had gone wide when they’d entered together, and she’d had to cover her mouth when Sansa had brought out the jewels. Domeric’s chest had swelled with pride just standing next to her. The shopkeep had given Domeric ten dragons’ worth of coin and offered Sansa the pick of the whole store, and she had been brimming with delight, so of course he had been delighted too. Domeric had had to whisper and remind her that she could only have dark colors, blacks and navies and greens and violets, and no jewels. While Sansa was fitting a gown with one of the shop assistants, the shopkeep had looked him in the eye.

“You are the luckiest young man in Westeros,” she said. Domeric smiled and thanked her.

*But I’m not lucky, he thought. I have the worst luck in the world. It’s wonderful now, but it will end when we get to His Grace, or even when we get to Runestone, and then it will be worse than it ever was before.*

It scared him sometimes. It scared him to look her in the eye. Sometimes he thought his heart would give out, or his lungs would explode, all under the power of her gaze.
He felt like such a simpering fool. She could never know the half of it.

He had not realized just how lonely a person he had been until he had come to spend so much time with her. He supposed he had not noticed. Loneliness was normal. He was used to it, to knowing that whatever time he would enjoy with the Redforts or with Aunt Barbrey in Barrowton or the rest of his family at the Rillseat, he’d have to go back to the Dreadfort eventually, and be alone again. He always had one foot out the door, as if letting himself get in too deep would just make his inevitable departure all the more painful. But he could afford that with the Redforts and his Ryswell family. He could always go back and see them again. The Redfort and the Rillseat and even Barrow Hall were not his home. It was at the Dreadfort where he belonged, at that dark and lonely castle at the base of the Lonely Hills, on the banks of the Weeping Water. Dread and loneliness, that was his lot. Never weeping. Boltons made other men weep.

Sansa though, his princess - every moment he spent with her was a moment closer to their parting, to when he would have to give her back to her kingly brother, likely never to see her again. He couldn’t waste any of it. He had to relish all of it. He couldn’t ruin it. He couldn’t tell her about his father, not now. Then the spell would break. There was so much more to her than he’d seen during those few times he’d spoken to her at the Great Hall in Winterfell, or under the watchful eye of her septa. More than he could ever express in his poems. She was so much more than just the perfect lady with a perfect form and a perfect face. She was perfect for him, and she loved him. She loved him for him, unlike what Waymar said, or at least she said so. She liked to listen to him talk, because she said she liked to listen to him talk, because she said he was intelligent. By the gods, he had not talked so much to anyone as he did to her, ever. Not even to Mychel or to Robbie. Certainly not to his father or anyone else. Conversation was easy. He did not need to think of what to say to make her smile, and she would never think him silly, or stupid.

The things he’d dreamt of, what he wanted for his future when his father was gone, a castle full of light and laughter, the singers in the hall, the tourneys on the Weeping Water, she wanted those as well. The things that hurt him in his youth – she understood them. She saw. It was as if she had been there the whole time, listening inside his head while she had been living in his heart. The loss and regret when his younger siblings left the world. The desperation to flee south to chase his dreams, and, once faced with the disappointing reality of how the south saw the North, the heartsick yearning to go home. The feeling of being trapped in a castle full of fear, surrounded with countless scared servants. Of needing to wear a mask, all the damn time. Her mask was different, hers had a smile, but still – she knew. Sansa Stark had been lonely too.

Somehow she seemed to sense each and every one of his moods, to say exactly the right thing that would draw him back to earth whenever his thoughts would wander off and trap him where he didn’t want to be. She would look up at him and smile sweetly, or touch his arm and start humming a tune, and he could just forget for a little while. He didn’t have to think about how it was his fault that Ser Helman and so many good Northmen were gone and Harry and Robett were captives, how his father had betrayed their king and how all of his options looked to end with his head on a spike, or a noose around his neck. He could just let Sansa and her starry blue stare soothe him like a cold compress, the feeling of her arm in his anchoring him to the ground. He knew that when she was gone he would always feel alone, like something important had been lost, no matter how many of his friends or family surrounded him.

He could not imagine ever pledging himself to another woman. Not anymore. He hadn’t lied to her. He’d rip up the offers he’d been working on for Ysilla and Gillyanne Hunter and quietly let down Jeyne Redfort and her little girl’s dreams. When his father was finally gone, he’d take Walda’s eldest as his heir and never marry. His father’s children by Walda would be young enough to be Domeric’s own. The Dreadfort wouldn’t be as lonely as it had been before. Walda would make a fine companion in his dotage, and he’d be the best elder brother there ever was. He
wouldn’t care if the rest of the North thought him a sword swallower like Lord Galbart. Better than having to take a wife who wasn’t Sansa Stark.

*Aunt Barbrey can help me,* he thought. *She will show me how to cope.* Aye, Aunt Barbrey could. When she first out that he loved Catelyn Tully’s daughter she would be wroth, but Domeric was sure she cared for him enough to put that aside eventually. *She will understand once I talk to her.* *She loved Brandon and Brandon loved her but Lord Stark kept them apart. They couldn’t be together. Then Brandon died, and she was coming to love Willam, and Willam loved her, but then Willam died too.* Aunt Barbrey hadn’t taken on another husband, after Willam. She’d been alone for eighteen years. Aye, when the pain and loneliness became too much, he could go to Aunt Barbrey. She would understand. *Aunt Barbrey will always love me.* And then after Aunt Barbrey was gone, there was always Walda. Or the Wall.

They boarded the *Mistmarcher* three days after arriving in Duskendale, seven days after he had taken her from King’s Landing. By the gods, had it truly only been seven days? He felt like he’d never spent a day without her by his side. Harrenhal and the Twins and Moat Cailin, they were all a thousand years ago, and the rest of his life from before the war was the distant past, shrouded in murky gloom. She was enchanting him, as if magic had truly returned to the world, the sweet singing of the Children of the Forest buzzing in his ears. He half expected to look down into the water and see mermaids lounging on the beach beneath the limestone cliffs, squishers clawing at the hull, and leviathans spouting water from their snouts off on the horizon. Or, he might look into the sky, shielding his eyes, only for the sun to be blocked out by Daenerys Targaryen flying out of the east on the back of her dragon, come to bring the realm to its knees and forge a peace once more.

There wasn’t room enough for the horse he’d bought at Rosby, so they sold it in town, but it couldn’t buy them better accommodations, for the ship was near full to bursting. Domeric had tried to haggle with the captain for a cabin or at least one proper bed, but Domeric had been too distracted by the captain’s three-pointed hat and ludicrous purple beard to properly articulate the limited Tyroshi he had. He turned to Sansa for help, but apparently, she only had High Valyrian. He wished Robbie were with them. Robbie was the one who was good with languages, with sailors and their ships. Aye, Robbie could have gotten her a bed. Domeric had chosen to study music and history instead. It was hard to try to talk about coin when all the foreign words you knew were for musical notation or snippets of love poems.

“Fret not, Ser Knight, I speak the Common Tongue.” So they spoke the Common Tongue. And then the captain showed him and Sansa and his horse to the quartermaster who brought them down below.

They weren’t given a bunk, or a pallet, or a cot, or a separate room. They weren’t even given a curtain or a screen. No, it was one hammock, tied to the ceiling by two hooks, with rings in the floor and rings in the wall to tie their things, among many hammocks and rings in the common hold for common travelers. His horse would have a better place.

It would not serve. Sansa deserved better. She was a princess, though he could not say as much. She deserved whatever she wanted. Already he’d let her free her hair and dress in the new gowns he’d bought her. All the Tyroshi had colorful hair, and most of the passengers were wearing fine clothes. She would fit right in.

He tried to protest to the Tyroshi quartermaster, but the green-whiskered man just shook his head and laughed. “This is your place.” He was angry. He felt helpless. He was supposed to protect her and see to her needs.
Domeric gulped. It was going to be a long journey to Gulltown.

Chapter End Notes

I liked this chapter a lot more the first few weeks it spent sitting on my computer. I debated cutting it but I decided that it was important to show the extent of how much of a sap Domeric is. And I didn't want to cut the moment with Bethany, which probably happened shortly before she died.

Domeric's moment with Myranda was nobody's fault. Some people just aren't compatible.

Who hurt you, Waymar Royce? Who hurt you?
The Mistmarcher sails to Gulltown.

Warning for several types of squick and imaginary dubcon. And also a description of flaying.

Chapter Notes

Love and the gentle heart are one thing,
as the wise man puts in his verse,
and each without the other would be dust,
as a rational soul would be without its reason.
Nature, when she is loving, takes
Amor for her lord, and the heart for his home,
in which sleeping he reposes
sometimes a short, sometimes a longer day.
Beauty may appear, in a wise lady,
so pleasant to the eyes, that in the heart,
is born the desire for pleasant things:
which stays so long a time in that place:
that it makes the spirit of Love wake,
And likewise in a lady works a worthy man.

- Dante Alighieri, 'Love and the gentle heart', La Vita Nuova

The first three nights on the Mistmarcher, Sansa was greensick.

Her face was pale and sweating, her eyes bloodshot and red. After he held her steady over the bucket as she heaved, she tried to cover her face. “I’m sorry, ser,” she said. “I couldn’t help – I never – ”

“Don’t be sorry, my lady,” he said. “Not your fault. I was greensick my first time on a ship. You’ll get your sea legs soon enough.” He pried her hands from her face and wiped her tears away with the pads of his thumbs. He pressed the tip of his nose to hers and moved to kiss her, but she pulled away.

“You can’t!” She protested. “I look ugly now, and the taste – ”

“I don’t care,” he countered. “You could never be ugly.” Then he pulled her back and buried his nose in his hair, and slanted her face up to his mouth.

The loss of fluid and food tired her out quickly. She curled up in the hammock, all balled up like a
newborn babe. Then he began to push the hammock back and forth like a pendulum, and then she fell asleep. He crawled in beside her and faced away.

***

The fourth night, there was a storm. A true autumn maelstrom. Nasty and wild, as they approached Claw Isle. When the rain and the rocking started, she was balled up in the hammock.

“Ser?” She was afraid.

“Aye?”

“Would you hold me?”

He took a breath and pitied her quivering form. I cannot deny those eyes. “Aye. If you’d like.”

The Mistmarcher pitched and rolled, and he could have sworn that the waves had held them upside down for one terrifying moment. The hammocks in the hold swung back and forth, hither and yon, and it was a very good thing that everybody’s belongings were tied down fast. Gods, he hoped Rhaegar was all right. His big red beast of a friend hated closedness, hated the damp and the dark. What about us? Domeric thought, heart in his throat. We’re not all right. The ship could wreck, and no one would ever know we were here. No one would ever find our bones. He pictured himself sinking in the green sea, the black abyss dragging him downward. Above him was Sansa, her red hair swaying like seaweed, glowing in the surface light. She was floating near the surface, arms flailing, reaching, but then she stopped, and she was sinking towards him too.

Would the Drowned God take us? He wondered. Or would the old gods of the forest find us in the water? He didn’t want to find out. He didn’t want to die here, on the Mistmarcher surrounded by loud Tyroshi sailors and fat merchants from Pentos and Myr. He wanted to be buried under the earth, where the weirwood roots could reach his bones. In the crypts under the Dreadfort, next to Roger and his other siblings and his father too in time. At least if I die, I will die holding her.

“It will be all right,” he murmured, after the thunder cracked and her eyes went wide, the rain pelting the hull like a volley of arrows on a shield wall. He kissed her brow and nuzzled her nose, but he did not know if he was telling the truth. So he held her, and felt her heart flutter against his, and then he fell asleep.

***

On the fifth day, the storm died down, and on the fifth night, the sea was calm and the southern winds were fair. He held her again, and he did not want to stop. Was there ever a feeling more wonderful? More sublime?

There was the slide of her stockinged calves against the hose of his shins. The dip of her waist and the flare of her hips under the wool of her shift, in then out then in again. Her face against his neck, her breasts against his chest, the ridges of her spine. The way she would squeeze his hand and stroke his cheek and smile with the most honest affection. The warmth, radiating outward from her touch to him, only to reflect back to her and grow in the infinitesimal space between them both. The warmth, the love, its own independent light.

He had never felt so close to another person, so cared for, since the death of his mother.

“I love you,” he said. He touched the tip of his nose to hers, and kissed her on the forehead.

“And I love you,” she said back. She bunched her fingers in his shirt, and her hands told him, I am
yours and you are mine.

He never wanted it to end.

***

On the sixth night, he started to hurt. By the gods, he wished it would stop. The tightness in his throat, the throbbing in his chest, the stabs of knowledge that the wonderful feeling was going to go away. The wholeness, the warmth. She was going to go away. He would have to give her back. He felt like he was Royce Redarm, only instead of ripping out the guts of his enemies, he’d plunged his hand into the open wound in his own breast and then pulled out his beating, bleeding heart.

He loved the sweet pink that would bloom on her cheeks whenever she would bat her eyes in expectation of a kiss; he loved the raw, chapped red of her lips when his kiss was done. He loved her gentle sighs, the way the pink would spread across her face, her ears, down her neck and her collarbone past the collar of her gown, the bloody red of her hair flowing out from her head. Pink and red – that is what she looked like when he kissed her. Pink and red, like the flayed man banner. She would be draped in his colors even when she was wearing nothing at all…

The gods had made her for him, but they were cruel. He must needs return her to His Grace, but His Grace would give her away to another man, another man whose colors and cloak were not pink and red.

That was when the other pain started.

He thought of the flowers at Alyssa Arryn’s feet, the best flowers in the world. Orchids, pink of petal and red at the center. By now the Eyrie was cold; by now the flowers would be frozen. Winter is coming. He imagined bending down and plucking one of the frozen orchids, bringing it to his nose and watching the thin sheen of ice melt away under his hot breath. The pink petals glistened with drops of dew. He lowered the flower to his lips and licked at the red center, searching for its sweet nectar with his tongue.

But he would never taste it. Aye, that was why it hurt. He would never taste it, and so there was soreness, aching, straining. Pain with no chance of relief. Torture.

He bit the inside of his cheek and clenched his jaw.

It was the second worst pain he’d ever experienced in his life. Before, that title had gone to the blow he’d taken to the head when he and Mychel had been practicing the art of wrestling in full plate in the Redfort yard. His ears had rung like the bells in the Motherhouse of Maris and he couldn’t read or step into the sun for the entire week. Mychel had retreated to the sept and had only stopped praying and fasting when Maester Jeron had confirmed beyond doubt that he would make a full recovery.

It wasn’t the worst pain in his life though. That was when he had returned to the Dreadfort, and his father had led him down below.

“You are a man now,” his father had said, Maester Uthor in tow. “A man of House Bolton. And a knight as well, it seems.” They stopped at a room with nothing but a single torch, a table, and a chair with leather straps. After the door had been barred behind them, his father had bid him remove his shirt and sit, and Maester Uthor strapped him to the chair.

“I will show you today what it means to be a man of House Bolton.” His father had drawn his flaying knife then. It was shiny and sharp and very clean. “This is what we do.” His father had
made a small incision, not more than three inches long, on his upper arm. “Keep still,” he’d said. “I expect you not to cry out.”

Then his father had pulled the skin up and peeled, just an inch or two. “You must remember who you are.” He had to clench his jaw and bite the inside of his cheek till it bled, and his arms had chafed against the leather straps, but he had not screamed, and he had not cried. He had hardly moved his face. Then his father had watched Maester Uthor stitch him up and apply that special secret cream which would spare his skin from any scars.

“I am pleased with you, my son.”

That pain was worse. But this was still very bad. Sublime torture. It was everything he could not to reposition her with his hands and begin to rut against her with his cock, to start grinding bone on bone. He’d never wished for a septa to come and scold him so much in his life.

Septa Frenelica at the Redfort is the least comely woman I’ve ever seen. She is tall and thin but her back is stooped with a hump. Her warty nose is wide and hooked like a vulture’s beak, and her veiny fingers are bony and clawed like a vulture’s talons. Her wrinkled face looks as if she is always smelling carrion and rotting meat. There is nothing to hide beneath her septa’s robes.

He is dressed in shining silver plate, the rainbow sword etched proudly on his breast. He is a Warrior’s Son. Following the scent of incense smoke and the trancelike tinkle of bells, he makes his way to the sept to pray, to kneel before the Warrior. He pushes open the door and sees her kneeling before the Maiden’s altar, lighting the Maiden’s candle and chanting the Maiden’s hymn. Her septa’s veil is just a bit too far back on her head, her red hairline just peeking out, and her septa’s robes are not shapeless enough. He tugs on her sleeve.

“Septa,” he whispers, his voice bouncing between the seven walls. “I must make my confession. Would you know my sins?”

No, no, no, no, no, no! He was a knight. He could not indulge in such ignoble thoughts. Not about his Princess, the sister of his king, the future bride of some other man. To do so was shameful. The risk was too great. Especially with her right there.

This is why they don’t send knights to rescue maidens, he thought. Because once they’re rescued, they’re never maidens anymore. Aye, they shouldn’t send knights. They should send warrior women, like Jonquil Darke, the Serpent in Scarlet, Good Queen Alysanne’s sworn shield. Or the Mormonts. The Princess’ maidenhead would not be in danger if His Grace had sent one of the Mormont sisters to rescue her instead.

Maege Mormont is short and stocky, with a thick waist and calloused hands. Her hair is stringy and gray, and her tongue is as rough as her face. Maege Mormont might have a title, but she is no proper lady. Beneath her leathers and mail are sagging teats and the muscles of a man.

He is standing on the deck of a longship, one knee hiked up, foot pressed against the rail. The white skeleton hand gleams in the sunlight, on a great billowing sail of red. He is a Drumm of Old Wyk. His dark hair is streaming behind him in the sea wind, and his white linen shirt is sticking to his sweaty chest. The Drowned God roars in his ears, and the salt spray tickles his tongue. There it is, a white-on-green gem in the brilliant blue – his prize. Bear Island.

She is waiting for him on the beach, in a short tunic and leathers and mail. She raises her mace, he draws his axe, and they begin to dance. It is not long before they are both breathing hard, faces flushed and sweating. He knocks the mace away and pins her to the ground. You cannot defeat me, woman. Submit.
“Yield!” she says, “I yield. Come into my castle, captain.”

No. He had to stop. It wasn’t right. She didn’t belong to him. So he continued to hurt. He could bear it. He had borne worse.

***

By the seventh night, he couldn’t bear it. Not anymore. It was too much. The love. The need. The pain. She couldn’t go away. She had to be his. How could he ever give her back? Law and honor required that he return her to the man who owned her, his liege lord, their king. She belonged to her brother, but Robb Stark didn’t value her, didn’t treasure her, didn’t love her like Domeric did. Robb Stark saw her as a thing. By the gods, Robb Stark let the Kingsguard knights beat her with their gauntlets on and strike her with the flats of their swords. Robb Stark let King Joffrey stick a crossbow in her face. It took no stretch of the imagination that Robb Stark would sell her like a horse for some alliance, and she would be lost to him forever.

He was angry.

By all the ancient laws of the First Men, she is yours, a voice in his head said. You stole her. She struggled. She submitted. She went with you. She is yours and no one can take her away. It was a pleasing thought, but it wasn’t true, and he tried to banish it from his mind. He wasn’t some wildling from beyond the Wall, or a Moon Brother or Painted Dog from the mountain peaks. He was a knight. A nobleman. Civilized, restrained. A man of honor. You’re more like them than you think, the voice said. There’s not a drop of Andal blood in your veins. You are a son of the First Men, thorough and pure. Your gods are not the gods of knighthood and chivalry, of crystal lights and incense smoke and oils. Your gods are the gods of the blood and the wild. Of the forest. Of the trees. She’s yours. Come before the trees and your union will be blessed.

He hummed low in his chest, and then hot blood rushed into his loins. He could see it. Himself, a wildling, night-dark hair tangled and tumbling down his back, bloody acorn paste smeared like paint under his eyes and on his lips. Around his neck are tied the finger bones of his enemies. He collects them. They’re his trophies. There is a string of red fox pelts around his shoulders over a cloak of faded red wool, bound together by a braid of human skin. His armor is not plate and mail, and it does not shine; it is boiled leather and bronze scales, and it is carved with ancient runes. He’s sitting atop his horse – his tall red courser – and he’s riding bareback. On his back are a quiver and a bow, and on his hip are a knife and a hunting horn.

He sees her there, by the running water, near the forest’s edge. He stops his horse and stares. Her hair is red – she’s kissed by fire – and it’s his lucky day. She’s a peasant girl, dressed in a brown roughspun gown that’s too tight, too short, and an apron as white as snow. She’s washing linens in the stream, and she is singing a song. She hears the horse whinny and looks up. He meets her gaze, and her blue eyes shine like the stars above. She smiles. He smiles too, and his white teeth are stained red from the bloody paste. She drops the white linen in the red clay dirt and then she stands and flees. She runs, runs, runs for the forest. For the trees. And she begins to laugh.

He watches her run. He gives her a head start. The chase isn’t fun if it’s too easy. He blows the horn. I’m coming.

It’s not long before he reaches her. He’s on a horse, after all. They’re in a clearing, in a weirwood grove, and all the gods are watching. All the trees have wicked smiles. He hears the horse whinnying and looks up. He meets her gaze, and her blue eyes shine like the stars above. She smiles. He smiles too, and his white teeth are stained red from the bloody paste. She drops the white linen in the red clay dirt and then she stands and flees. She runs, runs, runs for the forest. For the trees. And she begins to laugh.

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It’s not long before he reaches her. He’s on a horse, after all. They’re in a clearing, in a weirwood grove, and all the gods are watching. All the trees have wicked smiles. He leaps off his horse and grabs her by the arm. He yanks her to his chest, and she yanks back, but then she leans in, and she keeps laughing. He whips off his cloak and drapes it around her, and then he claims her mouth. He lays her down on her back and kneels, one hand twined with hers, the other reaching for his knife. With one swift stroke he rips her dress and her apron apart in twain. Her red hair is fanned out above
her head, like weirwood leaves, and her lips are red, like a weirwood’s mouth. Her face is white, and her skin is white, like weirwood bark. Her breasts are white, and their tips are red, and down below is more red hair, a second set of wet red lips. Another weirwood face. She belongs to his gods. She belongs to him. You are mine.

His breeches are tight so he breaks their chains of string. He is free. Farewell bronze scales. Goodbye boiled leather. He has to feel her everywhere. He kisses her lips and then she sighs his name. His gods are speaking to him. He offers himself up to them. He gives his gift to the weirwood’s mouth, and his gods kiss him with their blessing. When the sacrifice is over, he withdraws. He can smell it. The salt and the iron, the seed and the blood. The sweat. He wipes it on his hand, and he gives it to the tree.

Domeric opened his eyes and froze. No, he thought, hands of shame choking him. I couldn’t, I didn’t mean to, I’m sorry. He turned in the hammock and brought his hand to the damp front of his breeches, and the tips of his fingers came away shining in the dark. He sniffed them. Iron. Oh. So it hadn’t been him. Or it might have, he’d felt it. It didn’t matter. He would need to change anyway, and he was still sorry.

His eyes adjusted. Gently he shook Sansa awake. She would want to wake up, to change as well. When she rose and felt and saw she flushed purple. She brought her hands over her face and started to whimper.

“I’m so sorry, ser,” she said. “I’m so sorry, it’s all my fault, it’s vile – ”

“But she only shook her head wildly and covered her face again. He tied the corners of his blanket on the hammock hooks to allow her some privacy from the rest of the passengers. She fumbled around for a clean shift and rags and disappeared behind the blanket. After he was clean as well, he told her he was going above deck.

“I cannot sleep,” he said. She merely nodded, and he fled up the stairs.

The night was cold, and the wind was colder. Good. He could think.

He needed her. She had to stay with him. Please don’t go. I don’t want to be alone again. But she had to go, didn’t she? She was more than just the best girl in the world, with the sweetest smiles and the loveliest laughter. She was a princess. She was a pawn, a piece in the game of thrones. She would be sold like a horse, just like Mother. It had always been her fate.

I hold the piece, he thought. When he’d ridden out to find her, he’d never sought such power in his hands. He’d only wanted her free…

He clutched at the windworn rail of the deck so hard that the splinters nearly pierced his palms. I can’t just give her away. She said she wants to be my lady wife and bear my children and live in my castle. She said she loves me. I have to try. I can’t give up. I have to think of a way…

He considered for a moment the path she wanted them to pursue. Raise the Vale for the King in the North and crush the Lannisters. He’d told her that in order for that to happen, she’d likely need to be married to seal the pact. That was true. There could be no other way to raise the Vale. Harry Hardyng or Roland Waynwood or Lyonel Corbray. Harry was an arse, but Domeric had tolerated him before. Now he wanted nothing more to take his fist and punch in Harry’s smirking face, break
his perfect nose and smash his pearly white teeth. Roland Waynwood was gallant and affable, but he looked like the sketch of Brandon Stark Aunt Barbrey kept in her jewel chest. _No Stark would ever give her to me_. He imagined stringing Roland up on one of those Tyroshi contraptions so oft described in the history books, turning the gear that pulled the chain as Roland choked, choked, choked. Lord Lyonel? _He would be easy. I have coin and Ser Lyn wants coin. Mychel could arrange a meeting. We could help each other. No one would need to know._

Stop. Stop. He needed to stop. _Harry and Roland and Lord Lyonel have done me no wrong_. Bile rose in his throat. _I am disgusting. A beast in human skin._ Besides, even if they raised the Vale, there was still no way they could prevail. All the swords in the Vale numbered less than fifty thousand. The Reach had seventy thousand, the West had at least twenty thousand, and the Crownlands still more. _There is no way we can win. Stannis is our enemy and Dorne has shut its doors._ It would not matter if the Vale marched and His Grace sold her to Harry or Roland or Lord Lyonel. The Crown would crush them, her husband would hang, they _all_ would hang, and she’d be given to someone else.

And if the Crown did not crush them, and if Lady Lysa finally defended her blood, the Kingdom of the North prevailed and Sansa did not need to be sold, His Grace would never choose to reward her to the likes of Domeric Bolton. No, it would be to Smalljon Umber or to Harry Karstark. Good and leal men. _Harry is my friend, but he would not be anymore_. Domeric was tall and strong, but not as tall or strong as those two. He could never win.

But perhaps Sansa was right. Perhaps her brother would be so grateful to him for bringing her back that his Princess would be his reward. _Unlikely_, he thought. _She is a Stark and I am a Bolton. His Grace would never do so. And if he did, he would be a fool._ She needed to be available for the Vale alliance. She would have to be sold to someone, elsewise the North would lose, and they would all hang.

_I don’t have to hang_, he thought. _I can die in battle, with her favor on my breast and her name on my lips, and the rubies of my armor flying before the sun. I’ll take a wound to the chest and die of a bleeding heart, just like Rhaegar Targaryen._ And then if she still lived, she would have to marry someone else… Someone like Willas Tyrell, or Lancel Lannister. He might as well have just left her in King’s Landing and never gone to Duskendale.

No. No. No. He could not let that happen. They had to be the winning side, and he had to keep her. It had to be forever.

Domeric looked into the sea. The water was a twisted black mirror, his reflection shifting with the waves. When he looked down he saw his father, and he heard his father’s voice. _I am pleased with you, my son. You must remember who you are._ You have to remember your name.

_What’s my name?_ he asked himself. _Domeric Bolton, Father said. A fine Bolton name, as old as the Red Kings and all our traditions. I named you. I am pleased with you, my son. You have done me proud._

And he had, hadn’t he? He would never be called ‘more Redfort than Dreadfort’ if he made the choice his Father would choose.

_Winterfell, Winterfell, he had a claim on Winterfell! He held the key to the North in his hands. He could achieve the dreams of his fathers, rise higher than any Bolton had since the Age of Heroes. She told me I’m her hero. She wants me to take her home._

_It would not only be for our House. I would see you happy, my boy._
The Dreadfort, the Dreadfort, he’d have to take her to the Dreadfort. They couldn’t stop in Gulltown. Not if he was going to take her home. Lord Royce and Lord Horton could never know what he had done. The Mistralker would stop in White Harbor. Aye, it would only be another week. They could sail over the Bite and dock in White Harbor and ride hard for Bolton lands.

*That won’t work,* he thought. *I’d never make it past White Harbor. She would want to stay the night at New Castle and call on the Manderlys, but Lord Wyman is not Ser Wylys. He’d have me knifed in my sleep. And if we didn’t stay in the city, we’d have to pass through the Hornwood, and the Manderlys hold the Hornwood.*

Ramsay, Ramsay, Ramsay, *why?* Why couldn’t Ramsay have been born noble and true, sound of mind and sharp of wit? How could anyone be so stupid as to rape a lady of a noble house? Damn that business with Lady Donella and her fingers. *The Manderlys would kill us all.* And if somehow Domeric evaded them, when he finally carried Sansa through the Dreadfort’s gates, it would be Ramsay there to welcome them both, acting as lord in Father’s stead.

*He will not come within ten leagues of her. He will not come within ten leagues of me.*

There had been a babe, pushed into the world hardly a year after Domeric’s own birth. Bertram, the crypt said. Around Ramsay’s age. Domeric didn’t remember him. He died in the cradle while Aunt Barbrey came to visit. *Why couldn’t Bertram have lived instead of Ramsay? Or Roger? Roger would be near Sansa’s age now, or thereabouts. Or any of the others. A true brother of mine would never have been as stupid as Ramsay. He would have never risked the wrath of the Hornwood, or the merman’s vengeance. He would have saved Winterfell from burning and nobody would hate us. We would have safe passage through the North and then when we rode through the gates, my brother would call for a feast, take us to the godswood and see us wed before the tree, and I could love her in my own bed.*

But it was no use wishing for Roger or any long dead brother of his blood. There was only Ramsay. He couldn’t take her home.

*I could take her to Barrowton. Aunt Barbrey would shelter me. Or to Grandfather’s hall. Grandfather always wanted a Stark marriage for his blood.* But that wouldn’t work either. The Ironmen controlled the Moat and Torrhen’s Square. He wouldn’t risk traveling through territory crawling with squids.

*I could stop at Gulltown and find a raven and write Aunt Barbrey for help and then make for White Harbor. She could send me swords to escort us back.* But Aunt Barbrey needed those swords, because the North was crawling with squids. He couldn’t ask her to let them go. It was the same with Grandfather.

*I could go back below deck and have her right now, and then when we get to Runestome, I could tell Lord Royce what I had done. He would think poorly of it but he would march us before the tree himself to make things right. Then I could write to Father and to His Grace and tell the whole truth. His Grace could not blame me for a mistake he made himself. Father would take care of the rest, and I wouldn’t care. I hate Robb Stark. I would dance on his corpse.*

But he had to care. After the rest was taken care of, she would hate him forever, if she found out. And if she never found out, she might always suspect. And if she did not suspect, he would have to live with the knowledge that it was because of him that her last brother was dead. He would have to live with a secret, a lie. Sansa loved Robb Stark. Domeric would not be the one who took him away from her. Not when he himself knew the raging emptiness that always followed whenever he descended to the crypts and ran his fingers over Roger’s name. No. He would not be the cause of her pain. He could not risk having her find out from someone else, but if he told her, she would
hate him then too. The spell would break, and in its place a curse would fall. It all would end.

Lord Horton would know. He wouldn’t suspect. He’d know. He knows me and he knows Father. He would tell Lord Royce. Domeric knew exactly what Lord Horton would say.

I thought you had honor, boy. It was on my honor that I knighted you. It seems that I was wrong. You are no true knight.

Everything I have ever worked towards and tried to make of myself would be gone...

He never wanted to be like the rest of them, anyway. Father and all the Boltons before. Cold-blooded torturers and men without honor. Indifferent to the wails of women and the bleating of the weak. I am better, he’d told himself. I will be better. And he had made himself better. At least, the world had thought him so.

She named me a true knight, but I am no better after all. He clenched his jaw and gripped the rail. A bite pierced the soft inside of his cheek, and a sharp thing pierced his palm and stuck. It was a splinter of wood. With his other hand he pulled the splinter out. There was blood in his mouth.

There is blood on my hands...

No. No. No. He could not let that happen. She named me a true knight. She called me her hero. She would not love me if I were not those things. Better she be given to someone else than start hating him. I have to be better than them. Not just for my honor, but also for her.

What could he do? I could tell His Grace of Father’s treason when I return her to him. I would keep my head and my seat and perhaps even her. And then what? Robbie and Uncle Roose and Ronnel Stout and the rest were all at Harrenhal. They would stand with the Dreadfort men unless they got further direction from Barrowton or the Rillseat.

Could I truly stand across the lines from them? What if something happened? How could I return to Aunt Barbrey, or to Grandfather’s hall? Kinslayer, they would call him. They would be right. He could never go back. He would be never be welcome in the homes that he wished he could call home again. They would hate me. And I would hate me too.

Domeric pictured all those times he and Robbie and Uncle Roose and Ronnel Stout had practiced the tilts with tourney lances, smashing shield after shield after shield. In his mind the lances’ blunted tips sharpened in the gleaming sun, and then Domeric was piercing Ronnel Stout’s gorget, and Ronnel fell, the chevrony russet and gold of his surcoat staining red. Then Uncle Roose was riding up to him, and then Domeric lanced him through a chink in his armor at the armpit, blood spurting out of the wound. Finally came Robbie, charging at him with thundering speed, and then the point of Domeric’s lance went through his heart, his cousin’s red courser dragging the corpse on the ground by a foot stuck in the stirrup.

“My champion!” Sansa called, and when she kissed him, there was blood on his tongue.

No. No. No. He could not let that happen.

I could write to Grandfather and Aunt Barbrey, and then the barrowknights and Rillmen could leave Harrenhal. They could take the Manderly men with them. It would be the whole North against my father.

And then what? He would return the Lord of the Dreadfort and have to explain to Steelshanks Walton’s daughters why their father was dead. He would have to tell Ben Bones that his boys Barn and Byrd had been killed in fighting he’d caused.
Old Lord Overton’s son is with Father too. He saved me from my folly. He told me about Ramsay. I owe him my life. How could I repay him like this? And my smallfolk, my smallfolk, I have to think of my smallfolk. I would hardly have any left if it came to that. A true knight’s duty is not just to his liege lord and to his king. He has to protect his smallfolk too…

Dommie was back a thousand years ago at Moat Cailin, after the Battle of the Green Fork, before they learned His Grace had been crowned. He had asked Father about why there hadn’t been any opportunity for him to prove his valor in the charge.

“You complain for yourself,” Father had said. “You think not of our men. You think only of glory. Do you think our men want glory?”

“Some do,” Dommie had said. “Most only want to go home.”

“Home to what?”

“Their farms. Their wives and children.”

“Their wives and children.” Father had stopped peeling his grapes then. “I will tell you of something that you did not see. It happened at the Dreadfort the last day the banners were to leave. You were in the Vale. That day, a young tanner and a farmer’s daughter came to me for permission to be wed. There were many such couples those weeks. The men wanted someone to fight for, to return to. I granted them all permission, of course. I care not for the marriages of the smallfolk so long as they come to seek my consent and pay the fee in accordance with our laws and go before the gods in accordance with theirs, and the groom can support any children. No power blocs can form between a tanner and a farmer’s daughter. They are no threat to me.

“The farmer’s wife was there. When the petitions were nearly done she begged me leave to speak. She said, My lord, I am the mother of this bride, but I have been a war wife too. When last you marched my husband and I stood here in your hall seeking your consent to wed. After you granted your leave, my husband followed you, and when the war was done, you returned him to me. I am a merchant’s daughter. My father left his daughters in Karstark lands, Umber and Manderly too. My sisters were all widowed then, but you brought my husband home. Lord Bolton, I beg, do the same for my daughter. Bring my goodson home to her.”

Then Father looked Dommie straight in the eye. “You would have made not only that girl, but countless other girls I saw wed less than two moons’ past, widows for your glory. You have no duty to glory. You have a duty to them. I have a duty to them. My smallfolk. They feed us, we protect them. It is our smallfolk who keep House Bolton at the Dreadfort, not the Starks of Winterfell. I have no duty to the smallfolk of Karstark, or Umber, or Manderly, or of Cerwyn, or Hornwood, or of the mountain clans. I have a duty to mine.” Father had paused and showed his teeth. "A peaceful land,"

"A quiet people."

“Do you see now, my son?”

“Yes, Father.” There was no arguing there.

How could he tell that woman that her young daughter was a widow? How could he face that girl? How could he tell them why?

Because I wanted to marry my lady love, that was why. Because I am a highborn and I thought my love meant more to me than yours did to you, was worth more than the lives of thousands of others.
How could he say that?

He couldn’t, that’s how. Even if the North turned on the Dreadfort, the Dreadfort stood with the Crown, and there would be more war. He could not see good Northmen killing other Northmen, or dying in the south. He could not see more farms burn or more crops rotting in the fields. He could not see thousands bleed and starve to death to soothe the yearnings of his heart. Or the aching in his loins. He could not be Rhaegar Targaryen. But he wouldn’t have to.

_We would all hang anyway, even if the Vale were raised. There has to be a peace. There can be no more fighting. We cannot let more smallfolk die. And when we have a peace, she will be sold away. And I cannot offer my hand for peace because I know what Father would do. When His Grace died, everyone would know. And she would blame me._

A light on the coast flashed in the distance. Hope. Yes. There could be another answer.

_I could be a hostage. When I return her, I could tell him of Father’s treason and beg His Grace to bend the knee in exchange for peace in the North. I would not have her but I could see her. She could visit me in my cell. It would not be the worst. There would be no more fighting. I could save my honor. She could still see me as good._

It was a good plan. House Bolton wouldn’t move against the Starks so long as His Grace held the heir to the Dreadfort. Neither would House Dustin or House Ryswell. His father wouldn’t do that.

_Yes he would._

_He has Walda. He has Ramsay. I’m expendable._

_Yes he would._

Domeric touched that spot on his arm and looked into the black mirror again. The rippling water had shattered his reflection into a thousand shards, and then a patch of seafoam floated over it, as if he had been trapped under a snowbank. _She has ripped me apart,_ he thought. _She sank her fangs into me and ripped me apart._

He ran a hand over his face to make sure it was still in one piece. When he got to his jaw, seven days’ worth of scratchy whiskers greeted him.

_How ugly I am,_ he thought. _What is inside shows plain on my face._

He heaved over the side of the deck. A small hand grasped his arm by his elbow. He flinched and whirled around.

“Domeric?” It was Sansa. He only stared. It hurt to look at her. “You have been up here a long while.”

“My lady.” His mouth tasted of bile. “I have been thinking.”

Her eyes were searching him. She wanted to know what he was thinking. “About the war.”

She nodded and pressed herself against him, winding her arms around his neck. He felt the tension leave his shoulders and sighed. Then she started kissing his jaw, up to the corners of his mouth. He stiffened and pulled back. “My lady, there is bile – ”

She just pressed closer again. “I don’t care.” Then she kissed him, and when it was done, she took him by the hand, and started to sing softly. It was the Mother’s hymn.
Sansa led him down to the common hold. She got into their hammock and pulled him down beside
her. She wound her arms around his neck again and he buried his nose in her hair.

“Gentle Mother, font of mercy…”

Mercy, he thought. *Gods have mercy on me.*

Chapter End Notes

This was another largely interior Domeric chapter, because Domeric is a very interior
person.

You know someone loves you if they are willing to make out with you when your
mouth tastes like vomit.

Domeric isn't so different from Roose and Ramsay is he? A good day for a Bolton is
going out for a hunt and having sex beneath a tree. (But only if you catch the fox and
your courser doesn't come up lame.)

There are a lot of holes in Domeric's logic in this chapter, which I am aware of, but
he's not exactly thinking clearly. He really needed that hug.

I hope everyone had a Merry Christmas. See you all in 2020.

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