The Conquest
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Summary

An AU of grand scale inspired by a prompt by Oblongata.

Three hundred years after Aegon the Conqueror built a new empire on the ashes of the Valyrian Freehold the known world is a place of war. The Targaryen Empire is pressed by enemies, the Seven Kingdoms war amongst themselves and forces contrive to pull them all apart.

Amidst all this are a prince and princess who fear themselves ruined by the horrors they’ve endured. Together they might be the hope their people are looking for. More importantly, they might be the dream both abandoned long ago.

Notes

This work was inspired by and most of the characters come from George RR Martin's A Song of Fire and Ice book series. I gain nothing from this. Nothing I say.

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See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

When the Doom came to Valyria many believed the reign of the dragonlords was at an end.

Yet not all the dragons perished in the destruction of the freehold. A hundred years after the Doom a new dynasty did rise.

Aegon the Conqueror, First of His Name, Highest King, returned to the land of his forebears and built an empire out of the ashes of the Valyrian Freehold.

With the might of their dragons the Targaryens conquered much of the freehold’s former territories, establishing the Targaryen Empire which soon became the most powerful and wealthiest realm in the known world. At the height of its power the empire stretched from the headwaters from the Rhoyne to the Shivering Sea, from the hills of Andalos to the grasslands of the Dothraki Sea. Their might enough to cause the most fearsome of rulers tremble.

Yet three hundred years later those glorious days are long passed. The dragons are gone and the empire’s enemies grower bolder. With the fate of his dynasty in the balance, Rhaegar Targaryen, First of his Name, High King of the Empire, must name an heir.

To the Seven Kingdoms, which continue to war as they have for since the coming of the Andals, the politics of the empire matter little. Two heirs vie for control over the Vale, the Dornish stand isolated and outnumbered by their enemies and the Reach wallows in the grandiose ways of the Gardeners. For the first time in its history the Kingdom of the North rules over parts of the riverlands. That expansion stands in the way of King Tywin Lannister’s goal of creating a grand kingdom of the south, one with a Lannister king.

All this means a time of upheaval on both sides of the Narrow Sea. A time where a war weary prince and a beleaguered princess hold little hope for the future.

And little knowledge of each other…

THE FOREST OF QOHOR

Fires burnt here and there, the feast of flames continuing long after the battle was done.

The dense forest of pines and spruce, once a sea of deep brown bark and thick green canopies, had been devastated by the fighting. Swathes of this hinterland had seen their ancient trees felled for use by the defenders. Many of the trees that still stood were now blackened, bare husks of their former selves. Burnt by the hundreds of flaming arrows and burning pitch fired to and fro. Others suffered from the boulders flung by catapults, branches and greenery cleaved away or trunks torn to shreds. Some leaned against their brethren like wounded warriors, not yet ready to join their comrades already littering the ground.

The number of fallen trees could not compare to the hundreds of very real corpses spread out across this immense battlefield. Men and horses sprawled amongst the tree stumps, others crushed beneath the branches of trees collapsed during the fighting. Not all were fresh, for the fighting here had lasted more than a week, and in some places the freshly killed now piled high atop the rotting dead.
The dead buried by the dead, Jon thought grimly, amidst all this madness that makes a sense of sorts.

The dark rider took in all this with a grimace, for he had an excellent view of the lands around from this ruined fort. Built upon a small hill in the midst of the forest, the timber fort held a commanding position overlooking one of the main trails through forest. Hence why the Dothraki had fought so hard to take it.

And killed so many in doing so.

The timber palisades and ramparts of the fort were thick with the dead. A glance to the sharpened stakes surrounding its edges showed dead Dothraki and horses impaled upon them. There were more about the breech the horselords had forced in the palisades when they’d torn them down with rope and the strength of their mounts. This fort was but one of many hastily built to throw back Khal Drogo’s advance through the forest to Qohor.

The Qohorik who manned this fort knew what would happen if the Dothraki reached their city and had died to the man to prevent such a thing. Arrow riddled bodies were common, a few had arakhs buried so deeply their wielders had abandoned the weapons in their victims. A last stand had been made towards the center of the fort, the Qohorik dead laying atop one another at the base of one their shrines. A goat sacrifice still rested on the altar, rotting and riving with maggots. Offered perhaps in hope of salvation from their gods.

For some help to arrive before the Dothraki broke though. For Jon do to as he promised.

It was a sad thing to watch his men riding through the gates to join him here, for the men of Qohor had likely hoped for such a sight only yesterday.

“Poor bastards.” Ser Brynden Tully spoke in his smoky voice, the elder Westerosi warrior shaking his head as he dismounted. “One more day. If those palisades had only held out one more day. Reminds me of the Sack of Harrenhal.”

“These are foul times indeed to think such horrors so common.” Thoros of Myr added, the warrior priest urging his steed around another dead mount. “May the Lord of Light greet these men with the favor they deserve.”

“They deserved more than that.” He said quietly, his men ignorant to his words.

Jon turned away from bloody mess around him to take in the sight of his men. He didn’t care for how Thoros’s bright red cloak suited the bloodletting that had been done here. The red priest stood out among those riders entering the fort, for most were garbed in a much darker way. The Blackfish lived up his moniker, his cloak and boots as black as the dark chainmail all in this company wore. Jon wore such mail himself, though beneath a heavy chest plate engraved with the images of dragons and wolves.

This was how the Dark Order had dressed since its founding two hundred years ago. For while the Targaryen Empire brought light to all it ruled the Dark Order ensured its enemies could find no shelter in the shadows. Other imperial legions sworn to the High King were usually ten thousand strong, a mix of cavalry and infantry. The Dark Order was far smaller, numbering only a few thousand, yet what it lacked in numbers it made up for in other ways. Unlike some other legions, those within the order did not need to be born of the empire and thus many foreigners, chiefly Westerosi, came to find their way to serving the High King. The order was entirely mounted, its reach and speed far greater than other legions, able to meet foes far and wide in defense of the empire.
Such was how Jon had even come to be in the midst of yet another slaughter.

He’d been in Braavos, negotiating with the Sealord alongside his great uncle, Prince Aemon, only a month ago. A welcome respite from the near constant warfare Jon had seen in the last five years. He could no longer count on his hands how many campaigns they’d waged across the realm and it exhausted him as much as the empire itself. It was a fine thing to come to the Free City of Braavos to use words rather than swords.

That all ended when word arrived from Qohor of impending doom. A Dothraki khalasar, forty-thousand strong and led by the dread Khal Drogo, was heading their way.

The High King commanded the Dark Order to aid the far flung city and Jon, as its Lord-Commander, had heeded the call of the empire once more.

*What is one more campaign to me? Another pile of dead at my feet? More blood on my blade?*

In the three weeks since they’d joined Qohor’s defenses he’d seen the most brutal warfare of his twenty years in this world. Thousands had died in the Forest of Qohor, the imperial armies doing their best to bleed the Dothraki rather than meet Drogo in outright battle. The outcome was far from certain when, only yesterday, the Dothraki had suddenly left the field.

Allowing Jon the chance to finally answer the calls for aid he’d received while battling the Dothraki elsewhere. So he could see the terrible cost his strategy had wrought upon the Qohorik. As he walked about the bodies, young and old alike, he cursed himself for sending these men here in the first place.

“This wasn’t your fault Jonarys.” Thoros came to his side, speaking his given name as the red priest often did during darker moments. “You are much like the High King, your shoulders slump with the great burdens you place upon them.”

“Aye my lord.” The Blackfish stepped over a Dothraki body, spitting upon it. “Qohor would be a burning ruin right now if it wasn’t for your plan. These men came here to save their home, they knew the risks and died for a good cause.”

“It’s a wonder more aren’t dead.” He shook his head, moving back towards the breech and gazing out at the Dothraki dead at the base of the hill. “Half the forts were overwhelmed, we were being pushed back on every approach, Drogo was winning. So why do we stand here victorious?”

“ Might be we bled him more dearly than he expected.” Pello the Greenbeard said, the Tyroshi warrior pulling at his dyed whiskers. "Or he caught wind of the reinforcements coming from Norvos…”

“Or our prayers were merely answered.” Thoros added and the older knight laughed.

“Considering how many gods we all pray to it’s about time one listened.”

“We’ll know more soon enough.” Jon pointed down to the forest trail, at a small number of black riders approaching along it. “Gendry’s patrol returns. Let’s learn what Khal Drogo is up to.”

He hoped his friend would bring word the horselords were heading back to the plains of the Dothraki Sea. That this most recent invasion of the empire’s frontier was already at an end. Before all this he was meant to report back to his father’s council and share what progress had been made with the Braavosi. His mother more than any had urged him to make a swift return, for their adversaries at court had been emboldened of late.
Lyanna Stark was many things but fearful was not one of them. Jon was her only child and best defense against those in the empire who disdained the High King’s spirited second wife.

Especially when she champions unpopular causes, he thought, only my mother would attack a blight on the empire’s honor even Jaehaerys the Good could not overcome.

While his father’s empire was truly the finest realm in the known world, filled with great works of beauty and splendor, it was built on the back of slaves. When Aegon the Conqueror returned to Essos with the might of his dragons he rebuilt the former Valyrian Freehold for better and worse. Within the Targaryen Empire toiled thousands upon thousands of slaves from all corners of the world. Slavers travelled far and wide to fill the empire's hunger for servants, even raiding the lands of the Seven Kingdoms.

Jon's mother had been taken in such a way. She’d been travelling aboard a ship bound for the Kingdom of the Storm to marry its king when the slavers attacked. Her brother, Prince Brandon, heir to the King of Winter, fell in defense of his sister. Princess Lyanna was so vengeful in her grief that when the slaver captain came to her she bit his ear clean off. The slight was not forgiven, his mother made a slave rather than being ransomed as was customary.

Mother spoke little of her time in captivity, save with pride at how she and her fellow slaves bided their time to stage a revolt aboard the ship. The bloody rising of the slaves against their masters was successful yet served to cripple the vessel, leaving it at the mercy of the seas or whoever else stumbled upon it.

Father said a strange wind blew that day and still believed it was the gods themselves guiding his imperial dromond to the drifting ship. By law any escaped slave found on the seas was subject to the will of whomever discovered them. Yet when father’s men boarded the vessel they found the surviving prisoners armed and defiant, his mother at the fore.

“She was a vision, a dark beauty with a fierceness I’d never thought to find in one so lovely.” Father had told him. “From the moment she threatened my life she became a part of it. I cannot say who captured who that day, for I have been under your mother’s power ever since.”

Although father decreed that all the slaves could remain free and arrangements would be made for their safe journey home, Jon's mother had declined to leave him. Spurning the betrothal arranged by the Starks and her home itself, Lyanna Stark would become his father’s wife only a month later. His second wife that is, for Prince Rhaegar was already wed to Princess Elia Martell of Dorne at High King Aerys’s behest. The Targaryens had long taken multiple wives and were free to choose their brides, unless the groom happened to be an heir.

His father had been pronounced heir only half a year earlier and his marriage to Lyanna caused upheaval at the imperial court. Even now, more than twenty years later, Jon still felt the effects of his parents’ defiance.

As child he was infamous. The product of a union between a Targaryen prince and a Westerosi slave. The second born son of a king who only gained the throne following the murder of his father. Many even whispered Jonarys had been born the same day Aerys was brought low though his mother swore it was a lie. Wherever he went that reputation preceded him. Some nobility turned up their noses at Lyanna Stark’s son while slaves bowed, out of respect for his mother’s status among the downtrodden.

One of those who held his mother in such esteem met Jon at the foot of the hill, where the majority of his men and horse awaited. The scouts were led by a large, well-muscled man with coal black hair and bright blue eyes.
“My lord.” Gendry hailed him, climbing down from his horse, pressing a fist to his chest. His dear friend only ever acted so formal when they were in front of the men, for the two were as close as brothers. They’d surely been raised as such.

“Sergeant.” He nodded. “What did you learn?”

“We followed their trail to the edges of the forest.” Gendry replied, looking about as many others hung on his words. “They are not regrouping like we feared, the khalasar has left the frontier. Heading back east into the Dothraki Sea.”

“Khal Drogo defeated!” The Blackfish shouted to a raucous cheer from the men. “The order prevails! The order prevails!”

“The order prevails!” The men chanted boisterously. “The order prevails!”

“Glory to the empire!” The Summer Islander Black Balaq roared and his words too were echoed.

Yet he could not join in the cheering, for they had not truly defeated Khal Drogo. Something about their sudden departure filled him with unease. Nor did he much feel like cheering while those he’d sent to his death rotted nearby.

Gendry put a hand to his arm then, his eyes scanning the fort before offering him a sympathetic look.

“Jon, brother, let me see to the burying of the dead. We shall honor them like the good men of the empire they are. Let it trouble you no more.”

“That’s just the problem my brother.” He answered. “That they were good men. We bury far too many good men these days.”

“It’s getting so only the vile and corrupt stand to inherit my father’s realm.”

“We must have peace… a lasting peace.”

“If only for the sake of good men.”

WINTERFELL

Every eye in the castle watched the party enter. The guardsmen and servants lined the battlements and yards did so. As did loyal retainers and the royal family itself, all staring silently as their king was returned to them.

The wagon rolled through the gates, pulled by a team of horses and flanked by an escort of mounted warriors.

All held spears with the banners flying limply, the grey direwolf of House Stark on a snow white backing. The men holding the banners were grim faced and somber, even by northern standards. From where Sansa stood with mother and the others, the line of riders seemed endless. The wagon was halfway across the courtyard and still the men came on.

Sansa spotted many she recognized among their number. Helman Tallhart, Ronnel Stout, Halys Hornwood, Galbart Glover, Medger Cerwyn and his son Cley.

Yet she saw few of the men who had left with her father months ago.
No Martyn Cassel. No William Dustin. No Mark Ryswell.

It was only when the wagon drew close did she get a glimpse of her father. Or what they carried him within, a coffin of the darkest oak.

For Eddard Stark was dead.


Cersei swore I’d never be safe from her wrath, she thought bitterly, Joffrey told me there was no end to the pain he would cause me.

Father tried to protect me from all that... so they killed him... oh father...

“Father!” Rickon sobbed, her eight year old brother making to run to the wagon before mother took hold of him.

“Hush sweetling.” Mother whispered, pressing Rickon’s weeping face into her middle, embracing him as tightly as Sansa wished to be held herself. “We must be strong now… strong for your father. Strong for Robb.”

Rickon continued to weep, his bushy red hair shaking back and forth as he tried to deny what they all had known for weeks now. Arya bore it far better, her little sister’s face as cold as a block of ice, her grey eyes as hard as men twice her ten and five years. Bran was trying to act the same, yet even the lanky young man he’d become struggled to hold his chin high, a single tear rolling down his cheek. No matter how strong they tried to act Sansa saw the pair holding each other’s hands.

No one held Robb’s hand, nor could any if they wanted to. Her brother’s powerful hands were clenched into fists at his side. With his strong jaw set and his auburn hair and beard cut as it was, save for the Tully coloring, Robb was every bit father’s son. Draped in the furs and wools of the north the softest thing about her older brother were his eyes. For nothing could hide the anguish in them when father’s wagon came to a halt before them.

Father’s bones were just steps away and it was a struggle to hold her place.

Once she might have bawled like Rickon did, perhaps even faint. Yet that time was long gone. She’d been through enough torture and pain to learn how to control her emotions. Or at least how to hide them.

Your father’s dead, you must show grief, she thought, but some of these visitors could be traitors.

Show no feeling and they won’t know how to hurt you. Show nothing at all.

Her clothing showed little of anything. Sansa held a wolf skin cloak tight around herself, hiding her figure from the lecherous eyes of men. Beneath it was a simple grey gown that hid every bit of skin it could save her face. If there was one truth Sansa had learned it was that her body brought out the beast in men. At times she wished her breasts would shrink away or hips would grow thin or too wide, or that she was a haggard crone of eighty rather than a maiden of ten and eight.

Those selfish thoughts fell away as two men broke off from the escort, both dismounting in front of them. One was a weasel faced young man wearing a tunic with a quartered coat of arms bearing twin blue towers on grey and three red chevronels. The other man was a far more familiar and welcome sight.

Jory Cassel, her family’s trusted shield, held something in his hands hidden by a pelt of wolf’s
fur. He carried it straight towards mother and Robb, dropping to a knee at their feet, showing no concern for the mud he sank into.

“Queen Catelyn.” Jory rasped. “I served your husband. I fought for your husband. I failed your husband.”

“You did no such thing Jory.” Mother shook her head, gently moving Rickon towards Sansa so she could take her little brother in hand. She pulled Rickon to her side, drying his eyes with her sleeve while Jory held up the fur-covered object.

“I couldn’t save my king, but I wouldn’t let those scum claim his body. Or his crown.”

A ripple of whispers and quiet words went through those watching as mother reached out to pull aside the furs. Beneath them was a thick circlet of hammered bronze, dented and scratched here and there. The runes of the First Men were etched along its length and rising from its sides were nine black iron spikes wrought in the shape of swords.

This was the crown the Kings of Winter had been wearing for time untold. The crown her father had worn since she could remember. The crown he’d died for.

Sansa remembered how mother would lift it from his brow to rub her fingers over his worried head. Whether touching her father or handling his crown, mother had always done so with gentleness and care. She did the same now, her hands trembling only the smallest bit to take the crown in hand and hold it before her. Mother’s own crown was a slimmer band of bronze lacking any decoration save a wolf’s head of the blackest iron.

“My husband is dead.” Mother spoke loud enough for all to hear. “The King in the North is dead but his line survives.”

“The pack lives on!” The Greatjon bellowed, his face red with anger. “The Starks endure!”

“The Starks endure!” An echoing cry came from the crowd, Arya and Bran joining it. Sansa merely clutched Rickon all the tighter.

How much more can we endure? How much more suffering can my family take?

Can I bear anymore?

“King Eddard left an heir.” Mother spoke as she turned to face Robb, crown in hand. “Winterfell is yours, my son. The Kingdom of the North is yours, its troubles are yours. Winter is coming Robb, if you have the strength to face the cold winds and the winter snows, speak so now.”

“On my vow I do.” Robb answered, voice gruff and loud despite his low tones.

“If you mean to honor the legacy of the Stark kings come before you, your father’s legacy, speak so now.”

“On my honor I will.”

“If you are worthy of the weight of this crown, bend to accept it.”

Robb did not hesitate, kneeling in front of mother and bending his head forward. With a summer chill in the air Robb’s breathing came up as clouds of white mist. When mother lowered the crown through those clouds they became steam in Sansa’s eyes, the bronze a fiery brand.
The sounds of a terrible sizzling and her own screams filled her ears as a pain from years ago came back all at once. A horrible pain and shame, a cruel laugh haunting her memory.

Her grip on Rickon tightened so that he hissed in pain, pulling her back from the past to witness Robb being crowned here in the present. The crown sat well upon her brother’s brow, his auburn hair like a field of fire the bronze was being reforged within.

“The crown is yours.” Mother stepped back. “Rise and let all see you carry its weight. Rise and begin the reign of Robb Stark, King in the North.”

When Robb stood, back straight and chin raised high, the Greatjon pushed his way to stand before him. The gigantic Umber lord pulled free a monstrous greatsword, holding it upwards and kneeling down.

“The King in the North!” The Greatjon roared, causing Rickon to jump in her arms. “The King in the North!”

“The King in the North!” Jory echoed and a hundred others did the same, all drawing swords and kneeling too.

“The King in the North!”

Hundreds now shouted and knelt, Ser Rodrik Cassel joined the lords Hornwood, Karstark and Cerwyn in offering up their blades. Every rider of the escort and guardsmen in the castle did the same. Even young Bran drew his blade, which had never seen battle, and held it up to Robb after while his place in the mud.

“The King in the North!” Arya and Rickon took up the call but Sansa could not find the voice to do so.

For she had been paying attention to her mother’s words. The crown gave Robb more than just a kingdom, it gave him its enemies as well.


*Joffrey and Cersei are bad enough. Tywin Lannister is a man all Seven Kingdoms fear.*

*My father could not stand against all of that, how can Robb?*

When the cheering died away and everyone was on their feet again the man who’d rode in with Jory pulled something from his saddle. A large sheathed blade Sansa recognized as her father’s Valyrian steel greatsword, Ice. Carrying the sword forward with a lowered head and hesitant steps, the mysterious southron man was introduced by Jory.

“My king, here stands Olyvar Frey, son of Lord Walder Frey. He and his brother Ser Perwyn were among your father’s party when we were ambushed. Without their efforts I would not be standing here today, King Eddard’s bones and sword lost. The brothers Frey defended us in our efforts to rescue all, Ser Perwyn falling in service to his king.”

Robb crossed the rest of the distance between the Frey and himself, grasping Ice but not moving to take it from the man’s hands. Instead he bid Olyvar to meet his gaze, which Sansa found full of sympathy.

“Your brother’s name shall be known to all northmen.” Robb said. “His sacrifice does honor by House Frey. That you stood for my father when I could not means I owe you a great debt Olyvar. I
shall bestow upon you a knighthood. If there is any more I can do for you, good man, speak to it and surely I will see it done.”

“I ask for nothing your grace.” Olyvar spoke quickly, clearly unready for Robb’s gratitude. “My brother died as a subject of the Starks. I only ask to honor his death and my fealty by serving as your man, however you’d have me.”

“Then my man you shall be.” Robb nodded, looking down to Ice and tightening his hold upon it. “But I shall offer you a vow as well, Olyvar Frey. The same I swore my mother, my brothers and sisters and I swear now to my father.”

With that Robb took the sword handle and while Olyvar held the sheath he pulled the greatsword free. The dark and smoky color of the steel made Robb’s hair and eyes look all the brighter.

“On the blade of my ancestors I so swear to have vengeance on those who have wronged us.” Robb spoke through gritted teeth. “Justice for all those killed by Lannister treachery. I shall not rest until Ice is red with the blood of lions.”

He looked to Sansa then. “And stags.”

Robb meant well but her face burned. That her family all looked to her then was bad enough. When countless others did the same she lowered her eyes and released Rickon to pull her cloak all the tighter. Trying in vain to hide her shame.

It was horrid to feel thankful when Robb commanded father’s journey continue on to the crypts, for it stole the attention from her. This was a far less public honor, for while her family led the procession to the crypts only the highborn and dearest servants of House Starks were permitted to follow.

This was not how Sansa wished to welcome father home. He was meant to ride back through the gates and find her there, thankful and happy. She was to embrace him and feel safe in those strong arms once more.

*Nothing good ever comes of us going south,* she thought, *I told father that… I told him not to go…*

Once Sansa had felt much differently. Years ago, when she was young and naïve, her mind filled with songs of southron knights and romantic songs. It was her dream to one day be a queen of a kingdom in warm, flower-filled lands. A dream she thought had come true when the Durrandons came to visit. Her father and the Robert Durrandon were old friends, having fought side by side to drive the krakens from the riverlands. Ever since the North had ruled a swath of the riverlands, joining the kingdoms of the Storm and the Reach in dominion over parts of those rich lands.

While mother described the south as a place of great beauty King Robert was not much to look at. Fat and sweaty as he had been Sansa was unimpressed by the southron king, yet his heir had been the very image of a prince. Joffrey Durrandon took after his Lannister mother in all ways, golden hair, bright green eyes and a handsome face. To hear of her betrothal to Prince Joffrey was a sweet thing, that she would be going south with the Durrandons the answer to all her prayers.

Yet the gods were cruel.

Things had gone well at first, her prince acting kind to her while a tad harsh towards smallfolk and his own siblings. Those were the first signs of the monster Joffrey truly was yet Sansa was blind to it. That all changed when King Robert died in a hunting accident and Joffrey took the crown himself. War had been brewing, the Durrandons and Starks set to ally against the Kingdom of the
Reach and take full control of the riverlands. Sansa knew Queen Cersei preferred Robert ally with the Lannisters instead and disdained how much land he meant to share with the Starks.

Joffrey went back on all Robert's pledges, demanding nearly all the land they were set to win and parts of the riverlands already held by the North. Still not content, Joffrey commanded the Starks to fight for him, to help crush his uncles Stannis and Renly, who had raised up claims to his throne.

Father’s stern refusal of Joffrey’s demands led to her first ever beating. Joffrey had his sworn swords take out his wrath on her body.

It was merely the beginning of her torment. Every loss or setback Joffrey suffered in his mad rule was visited upon her through beatings and worse. The small retinue mother had sent with Sansa to Storm’s End were murdered before her eyes. Joffrey had forced her to stare up at Septa Mordane’s head on a spike twice. Once when it had only just started to rot and the crows had been at it. The second after a storm had stripped half the greenish flesh from one side.

Nothing was too sadistic for Joffrey. She was beaten until her body was a tapestry of bruises. Stripped naked to the jeers of men. Taunted with lies about her family being murdered.

The war went so badly for Joffrey she feared he would kill her before any rescue would come. For two years that hell dragged on and her hope struggled to survive. It was at her worst that a hero saved her, the most unlikely of men. Now, years later, Sansa believed Sandor Clegane had been a hero all along. The Hound might have served Joffrey, his life one of violence and cruelty, yet he never struck her.

In the end, it was he who showed her mercy. Sandor Clegane who showed more nobility than any of the knights who witnessed her torment.

Sandor who rescued her. Sandor who cared for her. Sandor who showed her there were still good men in the world.

And how unforgiving the world is towards them.

There was no denying that as she watched father’s remains sealed within his tomb. While scores of torches had been brought down with them into Winterfell’s crypts somehow the darkness persisted. It hid along the edges of the granite pillars holding the earth above their heads, behind the nearest statues carved into the likenesses of dead Starks. The shadows loomed behind her grandfather Rickard and uncle Brandon, father’s statue now joining them in this damp, chilly place.

Words were said, rites observed, yet all Sansa could think of was once it was all over the darkness would be back. They would leave and father would stay, buried here in this cold, dark place.

Such was why, when everyone else made to leave, she stayed put. Mother was too bereaved to remain any longer, Arya and Bran each holding one of her hands when they left. Jory enfolded a weeping Rickon into his arms, leading her little brother away. One by one the Starks and their allies made to leave the crypts until only the king’s two eldest children remained.

“It doesn’t look like him.” Robb spoke hoarsely. “The statue… that’s not father. Not the one I knew.”

He was right. While the stone mason had certainly done a good job in capturing a strong, stern looking king, one with direwolves curled at his feet and a bronze sword laid across his lap, Sansa could never name it her father. His stone grey eyes too unfeeling for the king who had shed a tear to be reunited with her. His face too hard for the father who kissed a daughter’s head when it was full
of worries. His skin too cold for the man who embraced her before leaving Winterfell for his trip south.

“It’s just a statue.” She replied, wiping away a tear. “Just some stone thing father rests beneath. It can never be what he was to us… what I remember him as…”

Robb grunted and made to run his hand along the bronze blade on the statue’s lap. She watched as his shoulders slumped, his head shaking as he did so.

“This is my fault.” Robb choked out. “It should have been me to go. Me who died, not him.”

“The Boltons needed to be dealt with.” She reminded him. “Their rebellion had to be put down and father trusted no one more than you…”

“No, no you don’t understand… father didn’t just go south to treat with the river lords. He went there for me.” Robb turned to face her then, anguish etched across his face. “Father was going to treat with the Gardeners. Trying to secure a peace between us, an alliance of both of our kingdoms. It was a secret, at least it was meant to be…”

“That doesn’t make sense.” She said. “Father held nothing but disdain for King Mace. Ever since the war when he let Tywin Lannister march through their lands to ambush our army…”

“That’s true.” Robb nodded. “But he hated Tywin and Joffrey more, we both did, for what they did to you. We both wanted justice for you and everything points to the Lannisters and Durrandons preparing for war again…”

He made fists at his sides and cursed beneath his breath.

“It was my idea, the alliance with the Gardeners. Princess Margaery was unpromised and I suggested to father that I marry her. It was me who pushed him into seeking allies in those soft flowery bastards…”

It wasn’t that much of a surprise to hear this. All knew father’s southron bannermen stood between Tywin Lannister and his goal of uniting the Rock and Storm kingdoms. Pinkmaiden, Raventree Hall, Seagard, the Twins, all begged for men the Starks just didn’t have. Even her uncle Edmure, Lord of the River Marches, warned that if the Lannisters marched Riverrun could fall.

Which was believable since her father was killed while travelling through their own southern holdings. Such was the power and reach of the Lannisters.

Yet Robb’s admission spoke to something more sinister.

“The Gardeners betrayed him.” Her hand went to her mouth. “That’s what you’re saying isn’t it? They told the Lannisters father would be coming.”

“They swear they didn’t.” Robb spoke through gritted teeth. “As Maester Luwin tells it the raven proclaiming father’s death barely arrived before one came from Willas Garderner. The Greenhand prince swearing up and down they were outraged by all this.”

“Not so outraged they called off Margaery’s betrothal to Joffrey.” She felt a cold creep up in her, for that arrangement had followed father’s murder as well.

“The bastards.” Robb trembled with rage. “Prince Willas pledges peace between our families now but what’s that mean to me? Two kingdoms set against us instead of three? Is that the great feat I sent father to his death for?”
“Robb you couldn’t have known-”

“I should have!” He yelled, his cry echoing throughout the crypts like the ghosts of old agreed. “I have to know these things! I’m the king now, I have to protect all of you! The kingdom itself! The prince who got his father killed!”

“They killed him Robb, not you.” She tried to take hold of him but he backed away, half hidden in shadows now. “You heard the lords out there, all the people, they believe in you.”

“Belief doesn’t mean victory Sansa. Else I would’ve broken through the gates of Storm’s End myself and saved you before Joffrey…” Robb’s face lowered and the darkness hid his expression, just as she tried to block out what he spoke of. “It makes me furious to think that monster is set to marry and lords turn up their noses at you…”

*Let them,* she thought, *better still have them ignore me altogether.*

*All men can smile but they can be monsters all the same… I cannot bear to be given to another…*

“There must be war.” Robb’s voice came from the darkness. “Against Tywin and Joffrey both. Our bannermen north and south scream for it. With the Boltons rebelling and the Arryns fighting amongst themselves father felt a war coming, that’s why he listened to me. Mother says I should make peace, offer our enemies all our lands south of Riverrun but I can’t do that. We’d look weak. Those families we’d be giving away have fought hard beside us, against the Durrandons and Lannisters both… I can’t betray good men.

“Good men are betrayed every day.” She looked to father’s statue. “They die long before their time… and I don’t want you to be among them Robb. The last time father and you fought against the Lannisters you had the Arryns to help. Stannis and Renly to distract Joffrey’s armies….”

“And now that’s all gone. Gods Sansa, you do take after mother.” Robb sighed, leaving the shadows to behold father’s statue at her side. “She said the same thing so let me tell you what I told her. Surrender is not an option. Neither is defeat. We win or we die.”

“We can’t win. Not alone.” She pleaded. “Two years Robb. Two years I spent alone with those people. Surrounded. Outnumbered. I escaped because of a good man. A friend. I’d be dead and buried if not for him… and we all will be if you try and stand alone…”

Robb suddenly took hold of her arms and jerked her about to face him. “You will never be alone again Sansa. Never again. I won’t let you or any of the others die because of me. I’m not being proud, I know if I try and fight the bastards alone we’re doomed. That’s why I’ve asked for help.”

“From who?” Sansa asked as she remembered being held by Sandor once in such a way. Though she’d felt smaller in his arms, for he had towered over her while Robb and she could look eye to eye. “The Martells?”

He shook his head. “They’re in a bad way too. No, it’s the Starks in danger so it’s a Stark I reached out to.”

“What can Uncle Benjen do?”

Their beloved uncle was in White Harbor with his wife Wynafryd Manderly and their children. While always welcome guests here at Winterfell Sansa saw little Benjen could offer, for his command of the Stark fleet amounted to only two score galleys.

“Not our uncle.” Robb corrected. “Our aunt.”
“Aunt Lyanna?!”

It was Sansa’s turn for her words to echo through the corridor, as if the name Lyanna was a shock to the spirits as well. Many here in the North spoke her name in hushed tones but to Sansa her aunt had always been a magical figure. Saved from slavers to wed the most powerful and famed prince in the known world, it was safe to say Sansa had aspired to living a story as romantic as her aunt’s. She’d even played at being Lyanna as a child.

Yet none of them had ever met the High Queen of the Targaryen Empire. Truly all they had knew of her were stories told by father and Uncle Benjen.

When Sansa left the crypts alongside Robb she had more than stories to go by, and more than fears to haunt her.

Robb had to host a morose feast in the Great Hall for their visiting lords but didn’t force Sansa to attend. She was thankful for that, the dampness of the crypts had found its way within her gown so now the garment felt wet and heavy against her skin.

The mood of the castle was more somber than usual. Every servant or guard she passed on the stairs of the Great Keep looked glum or offered words of condolences. When she opened the door to her chambers a welcome sight greeted her, the first one in hours. Upon her bed, filling the entire breadth of it, was a large grey direwolf.

“Lady.” She smiled, for no matter her mood, the wolf could always make her smile. “Oh you lot chose a horrible day to stray from our sides.”

The wolf cocked her head, those golden eyes locked on Sansa as she came to sit upon the bed and wrap her arms around Lady’s neck. The beast responded by sniffing and licking at her face, whining some as her desperate hold dragged on. Sansa couldn’t help it, for the direwolf never failed to give her strength. All her siblings had been wroth to find their wolves disappeared a few days past. It wasn’t unusual for the five to leave the castle, they often did so whenever the sixth of their number appeared outside Winterfell’s walls.

The Ghost the smallfolk called it. The albino direwolf that never fit in at Winterfell like the others had. The runt who went unclaimed by any of the Stark children and had run out the gates as soon as it was old enough to. Father predicted it would die without its pack yet sightings persisted and every few moons the white wolf would appear. Each time the silent spectre somehow bid his brothers and sisters to join him for a run about their lands which lasted for days.

Such was what happened only days earlier yet Sansa was happy enough to find Lady returned to her.

“I always feel safer with you here.” She kissed Lady’s snout as she rose from the bed. “If only you’d come to me before I’d gone south. You would’ve smelt the rot on Cersei and Joffrey from the start.”

Lady whined at that, almost in sympathy, yet she could not blame the wolf. The pups had been found after her return to Winterfell so there was nothing Lady could have done to protect her. Not like she did now, for the wolf was one of two people Sansa could ever undress in front of.

With her gown covering so much of her skin its dampness made it to uncomfortable to bear. Once Septa Mordane or others would’ve helped her undress but that was a time long gone. Only mother had ever viewed what Sansa now displayed to Lady as she stripped.

Sansa’s body was slender but her hips were wider and rear full enough that men turned their heads to
She knew better though and the light of her chambers left no mistake of the painful truth. The scars were few and small but there nonetheless. Three thin lash marks upon her back, a handful of pale marks where blades had cut upon her chest and stomach.

“Nothing that mars your beauty.” Mother had said of those marks. “Nothing a good man won’t be able to ignore.”

Yet even mother had struggled to speak kindly of the worst of her scars. The one burned into the back of her right shoulder. The dark image of a stag, etched deep into her flesh by Joffrey with a red-hot brand. Three men had held her down for Joffrey to scar her in such a way, the vile creature laughing through her screams and the sound of her searing flesh. A fourth man had been among their number but his protests had earned him a rebuke and dismissal from the cruel occasion.

She’d been lost to a world of pain and burning for days afterwards, for her golden tormentor had forbidden the maester from dosing Sansa with milk of the poppy. That time had been a haze of agony, cruel green eyes and sickening laughter.

Yet when she regained her senses she found herself free of all that torment.

For her protector, the only man in Joffrey’s service never to strike Sansa and the only one to oppose his branding of her, had somehow spirited her away from the castle.

“Quiet now little bird.” The Hound had warned when she awoke upon a small rowboat to find the scarred warrior rowing them along the shoreline. “You save your strength. We’ve a long way to get you away from the flames.”

Sandor hadn’t lied. Their escape from Storm’s End began a months long flight through the south. Always heading north in hopes of somehow finding the northern army. She’d been fearful in Sandor’s clutches, for he was often gruff and harsh with her in speech. Yet when it came to cleaning her wound or carrying her through rough terrain, his tenderness betrayed Sandor’s true self.

“You’re a hero.” She’d said one night, Sandor nearly choking on a squirrel he cooked for them. “You’re my hero… a true knight…”

“I’m a man cooking a squirrel.” He’d grumbled back. “A hero would’ve kept you from being burned.”

“But you saved me.” Sansa had answered back and the man grimaced again.

“For gold. Your family will pay me most like.” Sandor lied, for he often demanded payment of another kind from her. “Sing for me, little bird. Sing me a song that makes me forget how ugly I am.”

Sansa liked to think she’d never sung more beautifully. For she spent weeks singing her dear protector to sleep each night. Willing that her lyrics would somehow reach the kind man who cared for her so dearly. That he could accept them where he rejected her words.

Or her body.

They had found an inn near the Blackwater during a stormy night. After two months together it was the first time the Hound had not pretended Sansa was his daughter when they took the last room. Their clothes had been soaked through. The fire small, its meager flames offering little warmth. Both
had stripped themselves down yet only Sansa lay upon the bed. The Hound resting his naked body on the floor, claiming with enough wine he’d survive the night.

She offered him blankets and he rejected them. She offered him the bed itself and he rejected it. She became so desperate to save him from a chill he’d awoken to find her laying beside him on the floor. A blanket thrown over top of them both, their naked bodies pressed together.

Sandor had been so lost to the drink it felt like an eternity to her before he finally opened his eyes. For she’d been alive with a feeling deep within her, one that kept her hips pressed against his side and her heart pounding in her chest.

“She offered him blankets and he rejected them. She offered him the bed itself and he rejected it. She became so desperate to save him from a chill he’d awoken to find her laying beside him on the floor. A blanket thrown over top of them both, their naked bodies pressed together.

“Little bird… what the fuck are you doing?” Sandor had asked in a raspy tone, yet as soon as his eyes found hers she’d done what she’d wanted to do for weeks.

She kissed him. His unshaven cheeks were rough and his breath stunk of wine but Sansa kissed Sandor with all the love she could bring to bear. While lightning crashed without and thunder boomed above the man who could’ve broken her in two accepted her kiss. Again and again Sansa had kissed him, her lips and cheeks raw and her skin on fire, yet the most Sandor did was steady her shoulders as she did so.

Until her leg rose up and brushed against his manhood. A hard, thick thing which sent a shiver through her body. As soon as she’d done that Sandor came alive, nearly throwing her aside like he did the blanket. He lifted her up in his powerful arms and laid her down in the bed, leaving her naked body open for his eyes to take in. When lightning flashed without she was given the same opportunity.

Sandor’s massive body had bulged with muscle and his chest was thick with dark, coarse hair. His manhood had the same thick thatch of hair about it though her eyes were locked on the size of the staff which stabbed out at her. Once Joffrey had a team of stable boys enter her chambers at night, naked and stiff in such a way. Her screams of terror to find them standing over her had amused him and thankfully he’d derived as much delight from denying them her body as tormenting her with the threat.

Something Sandor had tried to deny himself as well.

“I can’t.” Sandor had rasped as he looked down at her. “I’m a monster but not this kind of monster….”

“You’re no monster.” She’d answered, reaching for him, tears in her eyes at how much she wished to be with him. “Please Sandor… love me… love me like I love you…”

The man who denied his true self did not deny her then. It had hurt, she knew it would, yet it was a hurt she was willing to take for him. Sandor was soft and gentle with her, refusing to move without Sansa urging him to. The pain never truly went away but it dulled, which made seeing and feeling Sandor’s great pleasure all the better for her.

When he reached his release Sansa nearly wept to see the look of unfiltered happiness on her love’s face. Never had his scarred eye opened in such a way that she saw joy in it and Sansa had kissed him hard to ensure that moment lasted as long as it could.

Yet their time together was not to last much longer. Not a day after Sansa and Sandor made love, her head full of names for their future children, Joffrey’s men had come upon them.

That was when the Hound appeared again. He was one against six and Sansa could do nothing but
scream in terror as he met their challenge. Sandor Clegane was a hero, she’d known that for some time before watching him overcome such numbers. Yet even a hero could not survive the wounds he took. She was no healer and he said it wouldn’t matter, he was doomed. All that mattered to him was getting her as far as he could. Sandor held on for three days after the fight, each day more agonizing than the next.

Until the morning they awoke and neither Sansa nor Sandor could lift him onto his horse.

“This is it then.” Sandor had winced as he collapsed against the base of an oak tree. “Time for the little bird to fly free.”

“I can’t.” Sansa wept, burying her face in his neck and making to lift him again. “Please I need you… you saved me… we’re in love and are going to be married…”

“Never.” He’d pushed her away. “I’d never wish that on you… if I was all you make me to be you’d not have that mark on your back… I’d have given you that mercy…”

With that he’d kissed her, a soft, tender kiss. One that ended with him pressing a dagger into her hands.

“And now I beg you for a mercy little bird. A song and some mercy. A good end to a bad life.”

She’d argued of course. She’d wept and screamed but it was all for naught. Sansa was not strong enough to lift him. Nor was she strong enough to deny him.

It was a cruel thing. Hundreds of times before Sansa had imagined killing Joffrey. In the end though she killed the man who saved her from that monster. To spare the man she loved any more pain she found the strength to press a blade into his heart.

A day later Lord William Dustin, who knew Sansa from birth, found her filthy and weeping next to a recently dug grave.

Such was how Sansa came to be returned to her family. It was also why she remained unmarried to this day.

For while none knew she gave up her virtue to a good man, all knew an evil man had branded her as his own.

And as Sansa gazed at her naked body in the looking glass of her chamber she felt content to accept such.

\textit{Joffrey may have branded me but I gave myself to Sandor.}

\textit{A good man… of a kind I’ll never see again…}

With a hand to her heart Sansa willed it the beating thing to turn cold. For it could never beat as powerfully for a man as the one she had already lost.

For Sandor Clegane had been a man like no other.

\begin{center}
\textbf{THE HEARTLANDS}
\end{center}

The Targaryen palace of Summerhall was a beacon of beauty and power unlike any other.
That was truly saying something, for these lands were already splendid in their own right. The Heartlands were called such for good reason, for they lay between three of the empire’s greatest cities. Lys, Myr and Tyrosh, the three daughters of Old Valyria, all sitting along the edges of this fertile region. Once, in the anarchy following the Doom, those cities had fought bitterly for control of the lands separating them. That time had long passed though, in the peace to come during the Targaryen reign the so-called Disputed Lands proved to be the richest and most fruitful of the imperial domains.

Such was why the Heartlands were chosen to build the new home of House Targaryen in Essos, Summerhall. While the High Kings ruled the empire from its capital in Volantis it was at Summerhall they raised their families. The magnificent palace had been built using dragon flame and white stone quarried from far away lands. Three tall towers rose high into the skyline, the Towers of Visenya and Rhaenys being shorter, the tallest being the Aegonspire. Dotted with wide windows and balconies, each was topped with massive stone dragons. Their wings spread apart while their mouths snarled into the sky, beacon fires burning bright within those massive jaws.

Below the towers were a number of pale keeps and spires of various purposes, many with terraced gardens and reflecting pools jutting out from their sides. To Jon it was a mark of vanity to have private pools and gardens in such a place. For Summerhall sat along the shoreline of a wide, tranquil lake. Surrounding it were green fields and lush orchards that stretched so far that Jon had been riding through them for the better part of an hour before finally reaching his family’s home.

A month after leaving Qohor he was finally able to heed his parents’ summons. He rode with only a score of his most loyal retainers, for no army was allowed within five leagues of Summerhall without the High King’s invitation. His friends rode the closest, Gendry and Greenbeard to his right, the Blackfish and Thoros to his left. They made quite the impression on the field tenders they passed, many rising up from their work to stare. When some recognized Jon they smiled widely and cheered.

“The Free Queen!” They shouted. “The Free Queen!”

He raised his hand up and wondered how many of these folk were free due to his mother. For mother had long ago convinced father to free all the slaves tending these fields. In truth his father no longer owed any slaves himself, unlike other members of House Targaryen.

As his horse clattered upon the smooth Valyrian road leading to the palace gates he wondered which of his family might be gathered within. There were some Jon hoped to find there, others he wished far away.

When they passed through the gates and into the wide, cobbled courtyard of Summerhall its splendor took him aback. After years of harsh living the many golden statues and tall fruit trees made him feel like he was unworthy of such a place. That was until he noticed the beauty who was waiting to welcome him.

Queen Lyanna wore a blue gown of silk bound together by a pair of bronze rings, her skirts trailing far behind her. She treated her hair much the same, for it fell well below her shoulders in a cascade of dark brown, the color of the rich earth of these lands. Some said mother’s grey eyes were cold but Jon had only ever found warmth in them.

It felt good to see little had changed.

“My boys!” Mother cried out happily, arms open wide at the sight of Jon and Gendry. “I shall have Rhaegar strip you both of all your glories for staying away for so long.”

“It was not by choice your grace.” Gendry sounded abashed. “I swear it.”
“The Dothraki don’t bend to the will of mothers.” Jon added, quickly dismounting so Gendry could do the same, an act of courtesy he had told the sergeant to forego.

When their feet hit the ground the queen gathered both into a warm embrace, as she had done since they were young boys. Gendry’s cheeks turned red, for his friend was as embarrassed by mother’s display as Jon was. Mother knew this yet hugged them all the tighter.

Gendry had come to them when he and Jon were just about eight years of age. Mother had been leading him through a slave market at Volantis, showing him the crippling suffering of the poor souls, when they’d come upon a young boy being beaten mercilessly by a slave master. Mother had watched it with a mix of disgust and rage, for even queens had no right to interfere in such matters. Yet when the boy began pleading for mercy in the Common Tongue of the Westerosi she’d been driven to act.

Sending the slaver off with sheer ferocity mother had tended to Gendry herself. She’d paled to take note of his appearance, proclaiming she’d known a king once of such features. Gendry’s story came out soon after, for he was the bastard born son of the Storm King himself, Robert Durrandon. He’d lived a life of relative peace as a blacksmith’s apprentice until he drew the ire of the Storm Queen, Cersei Lannister. One night her agents came and took Gendry away from the blacksmith he apprenticed for, putting him on a ship to be sold into slavery.

In exchange for his cheap price the Storm Queen had attached only one condition to Gendry’s sale.

“Please m’lady.” Gendry had wept from the pain of his beating. “I’ve done nothing to no one save be an apprentice… they won’t let me be one here… they say I’m pretty enough for the pleasure houses… I don’t know what those are…”

“Hush child.” Mother had gathered Gendry up into her arms, earning the protests of the slaver. “I have never let gold pass between myself and the vile flesh traders. Yet I shall do so now, if only to pay a debt I owe to Robert Durrandon. No matter if he never knows it.”

Such was how Gendry came to join their family, for mother refused to simply have him sent away. She’d bought his freedom and felt responsible for him, thus Gendry had been raised side by side with Jon, becoming the brother he always wanted.

Even though he already had a brother by blood. A fact which bid him to interrupt his mother’s gushing kisses upon Gendry’s and his face.

“Mother, please, we’re warriors not children.” He broke away, his face growing stern. “Who else is here? I heard tell the Golden Legion was camped south of the lake.”

Mother’s good cheer fell away and the face she wore for dire matters took its place.

“They’re all here. Every dragon there is to speak of, for either good or ill.” She sighed, waving forward some servants to see to their horses. “Come, your father has called together the Council of Heralds to hear your reports of the frontier. Your men should come as well, Viserys and Aegon have brought theirs.”

“As you will it.” He nodded to the Blackfish and the others. “Prepare yourselves for a stare off with the Golden Legion.”

“Splendid.” The Blackfish grinned. “Been a boring ride.”

As his mother led them along the marble walkways and silk curtained halls of the palace he noticed something different in her. He’d missed it in the joy of the reunion yet now there was no missing the
dark circles beneath her eyes. When she caught him looking, her smile appeared forced.

“Mother? What has happened?” He asked and immediately saw her forming excuses. “Don’t hide things from me. We’ve been apart too long for that.”

“I wanted to wait.” Her words barely above a whisper, her hands wringing in worry. “Word came from across the Narrow Sea. The Winter King is dead… my brother Ned has been killed.”

“Eddard Stark?” He felt his mouth go dry for he knew the name well.

*My Uncle Eddard, mother’s favorite brother, he recalled,* whenever she spoke of the North’s strength, of northern honor, *it was his name she invoked.*

“Eddard Stark was a good man.” The Blackfish spoke gravely. “I only met him twice but there were few men better your grace.”

“I’m so sorry mother.” He stopped their steps, taking hold of the queen and kissing her brow with care. “You called him a great man and I always thought to meet him… I hoped to at least…”

“He would’ve loved you Jon.” She said, cradling his face, blinking away tears. “I blame myself for not visiting years ago, I only hope his children can forgive the lateness of my arrival.”

“Arrival?” He pulled away in surprise. “What are you-”

“Nevermind.” Mother interrupted, clearly done with the topic and urging him along once more. “It is something we shall discuss later, it is unwise to keep the Council of Heralds waiting.”

He wished to comfort his mother but there was no arguing against her reasoning. The Council of Heralds had been a power unto itself since the end of the Dance of Dragons. Appointed by the High King for life, and composed of the most powerful and wise men of the empire, it was the council and only the council that could name the heir to the Targaryen crown. No title existed in the empire save one bestowed by the High King himself, even that of princes and princesses. The king could propose any Targaryen he wished as heir but unless they gained the approval of the Council of Heralds, the king’s favor meant little.

In his father’s reign the council had only grown more powerful, for it was they who had ushered in Rhaegar Targaryen’s reign in the first place. When his heir married a freed slave High King Aerys had declared Prince Rhaegar’s life forfeit, promising to kill not only his son but his wives and all their children. In this Aerys ran afoul of the council, for it was in Rhaegar they put their faith in. That council had seen the prince as the most capable to right all the wrongs Aerys’s madness had wrought in the empire.

The die was cast after Aerys had Rylar Rogarre, a member of the council, burned alive for speaking in Rhaegar’s defense. During their next meeting, with Aerys feeling imperious, the council members drew their blades and cut the king down. It spoke to Aerys’s unpopularity that none of his sworn shields raised a blade to avenge him.

When they arrived at the council chambers it was the white-cloaked warriors of the Highguard who permitted them entry. His men were forced to join the press of other armed men gathered in the corridor, a score of Highguard warriors keeping watch over the different factions. He and mother were only allowed one companion each and so it was that Gendry and Ser Brynden who joined them in stepping through the doors.

The room was wide and circular, with open windows and tall pillars around the edges. At its center stood a table carved in the shape of the Valyrian Freehold, a table the royal family joined its
councillors in standing around. Chief among them was the tall, black garbed High King. A golden crown sat upon his father’s heard, a long mane of silver-blonde hair flowing beneath it. His dark indigo eyes flashed to spot their arrival.

“Jonarys.” His father smiled to see him, a rare thing. “Thank the god Balerion you are well my son, I feared so to send you against Khal Drogo.”

“I serve you and the empire, no matter the foe.” He answered, which earned a scoffing laugh from another at the table.

His uncle Viserys looked much like the king, save being shorter and slighter of form. Where Rhaegar exuded power and authority, Viserys oozed vanity and disdain. It said something about his uncle’s character that Viserys commanded no legion of his own. He’d been forced to raise his own company from the slaving elements of the empire, the Brave Companions they were called. Though Jon found little bravery in hunting down escaped slaves or raiding other lands to enslave others.

If any here captured the strength of the High King it was Aegon, Jon’s brother. Powerful in bearing and displaying most of the Targaryen features, Aegon set himself apart from their father by keeping his own pale hair cut close to his head. His brother was clad in black and gold silks and offered a curt nod in Jon's direction. Beside Aegon stood his wife, and their sister, Rhaenys. Black haired and olive-skinned, the princess took after Queen Elia in looks yet differed from her mother in other ways. Her gown was bright red, an amber pendant shaped into that of a flame hanging about her neck. Rhaenys’s conversion to the red faith of R’hllor had driven a rift between Aegon and his wife, so that even now there was notable gap between them.

None caught the eye more than the young woman now striding Jon's way. His father’s sister was of an age with him and their relationship had never been one of aunt and nephew. While he took notice of the Daenerys's bright smile his eyes drifted to take in the rest of her beauty as well. She wore a revealing purple gown, her lovely hair unbraided and bouncing along with her bust as she came to embrace him. Far shorter than Jon, he was able to rest his chin upon her head as he held her tight.

“It’s been far too long.” Daenerys whispered. “I missed you Jon.”

“I missed you too Dany.” He kept himself from kissing her head, for they were already acting shamefully enough in front of the others. “I think you’ve shrunk.”

She slapped him across the face, light enough to spare him harm but loud enough to draw a snort of laughter from his friends. With a hand to his cheek he gaped as Daenerys returned to her place at father’s side, shooting him a look over her shoulder full of mischief.

Compared to Daenerys the councilmen were drab, uninteresting figures yet Jon took note of them nonetheless. There were the usual noblemen representing the great cities of the empire including Illyrio Mopatis of Pentos and Lysardo Rogarre of Lys. The great fleet admiral Sallador Saan shared a whispered word with Varys, the eunuch seneschal, all while his ancient great uncle Aemon moved his sightless eyes all about the room.

“Jon, your arrival is fortuitous.” Aemon nodded shakily. “The Sealord of Braavos sails to Volantis, to conclude the peace we worked so hard to reach.”

“And gave too much away for.” Viserys spoke haughtily. “Aegon the Conqueror wished to rebuild the Freehold, not let parts of it slip his grasp.”

“Braavos was never under the sway of Old Valyria.” Aemon noted. “Founded by the enslaved in defiance of our ancestors, they take pride in their independence.”
“A slave is forever a slave in my eyes.” Viserys looked to mother as he said such. It was a foolish thing to do with Jon so near and he was already advancing on the bastard when his father acted first.

“Watch your tongue younger brother, else I will have it out.” The king snapped, bidding Jon to halt his advance with a raised hand. “We are here to discuss Aegon and Jon’s victories, not bicker like children.”

“Truly uncle, I’d thought you’d be in better spirits.” Aegon let his shoulder knock Viserys some as he walked to shake Jon’s hand, doing his best to crush it in his grasp. “The toad had his men follow my march, picking the flesh from my conquests like the vultures they are. Good to see you Jon, I take it you’ve heard of my exploits?”

He had. During the long journey back from Qohor all he heard about was Aegon and the Golden Legion's victories. While the Dark Order defended the empire’s northern borders Aegon had expanding their borders to the south. The Ghiscari cities of Slaver’s Bay were the empire's chief rivals to the south and had been slowly encroaching on their territory for years. When Aegon learned Meereen was going to war against Yunkai, for some foolish reason, he took advantage of it. Marching his Golden Legion up the Demon Road, Aegon brought the truculent rulers of Mantarys to heel before seizing the port of Tolos and ruined city of Bhorash as well. Not content with merely gaining new territory, Aegon went on to crush Meereen’s defenses and sack the city and its great pyramids.

“One of our greatest rivals brought low.” Aegon smiled while some of the councilmen clapped. “Hundreds of wagons of wealth to add to our coffers, thousands taken prisoner and the pyramids of the Great Masters themselves set to flame!”

“A worthy offering to R'hllor.” Rhaenys clutched at her necklace and prayed as mother scowled. “And to the slave markets.”

“No need for harsh tones Lyanna.” Aegon reached out to take up a cup of wine. “Your son held strong against the Dothraki, acting honorably. Yet it should fall to the first son to achieve glory. Two victories are better than one.”

“Or none.” He said solemnly, garnering the attention of all. “Father, I fear I know why Qohor was spared Khal Drogo’s wrath. It was not the Dark Order that drove him away, but the prospect of far richer spoils elsewhere.”

He shot a glance towards Aegon. “Far to the south.”

“What are you talking about?” His brother crossed his arms. “Make sense Jon.”

“Word travels fast on the Dothraki Sea, from khalasar to khalasar. The Ghiscari have been weakened, their cities and the lands of the Lhazarene open to attack. Every walled stronghold between Meereen and the Sea of Sighs left broken, the empire vulnerable to attack.”

“How dare you?!” Aegon yelled, throwing aside his wine and putting a hand to his blade. “Behind that mask of carved ice you call a face hides a jealous sot! Leave the warring to me and go back to treating with slaves, that’s where you belong!”

Jon's hand went to the pommel of his sword as well and he tensed, not because of Aegon’s threat but what his words implied.

“Why do I belong with slaves?” He asked, stepping forward. “Insult me all you want but any slight towards my mother will be met, brother.”
“Jon!” Mother tried to take hold of him as Dany put herself between the brothers.

“Aegon say you meant no such thing!”

“Let him come!” Aegon waved Jon on. “Let’s settle who’s to be heir here and now-“

“Enough!” Father’s voice boomed like an iron ram against a gate. “Lower your hands from those blades! You are sons of the dragon! Blood of the Conqueror himself! Act it!”

Despite father’s orders Aegon and Jon squared off still, his brother’s purple eyes doing their best to beat down his own. Yet he could feel father’s gaze upon him as well, his mother and Dany’s too. So Jon did as he was told, pulling his hand away from his sword and placing it upon his heart, a salute to his king.

Aegon required a touch more to do the same, namely the touch of Daenerys’s hand upon his arm. His resolve weakened as the pair looked to each other, the princess whispering a command of her own that forced Aegon to abandon his threat. He soon turned to salute their father as well while Rhaenys watched all this with fury.

“Forgive me father.” Aegon mumbled. "I was only defending my victory against slander.”

“There was more wisdom in Jon’s observations than slander.” Father shot a glance to Varys, who nodded. “Though less candor than I would’ve preferred.”

“The Lord-Commander is quite right.” Varys slipped between the other councillors in his soft slippers and billowing silks. “The little birds fly far and wide, even in the cities of the Ghiscari and the settlements of the grasslands. Several khalasars now move upon Lhazar, Khal Drogo’s among them. With Meereen sacked, its rival Astapor now dominates Slaver’s Bay. Together with Yunkai and New Ghis, they are moving to restore their ruined sister.”

“So? What of it?” Aegon asked, though sounding a little less confident. “The horselords will fight amongst themselves and then against the Ghiscari.”

“Perhaps.” Varys said with little conviction. “Though my little birds in Astapor say the Great Masters there will wait out the Dothraki infighting and then try and buy the winner over for an attack elsewhere.”

Aegon took a step back in shock and, while Jon had been proven right, he felt a knife twist in his gut. He disdained the empire’s treatment of slaves yet it was ten times better than how Ghiscari and Dothraki treated theirs. The thought of their foulness breaking over the frontier made him sick.

*It will take a lot of blood to throw them back*, he lamented, *more blood, rivers of it.*

*Rising up over my head, drowning me in it once more.*

“Then it shall be war.” Jon admitted before gesturing to Aegon. “With the strength of the Dark Order and Golden Legion together we might be able to-”

“No.” Father cut him off before addressing the others. “Leave us. Everyone but my sons and wife, leave us.”

Rhaenys and Viserys both protested but his father sent them on anyways, Jon silently letting the Blackfish and Gendry know to watch over Daenerys. He didn’t care for the evil eye Viserys gave Dany after she kissed Rhaegar farewell and took Aemon’s hand to escort the blind prince out. Jon wasn’t alone in watching Dany leave, for Aegon’s eyes followed her as well.
Until the doors closed and father took Aegon and Jon into his confidence as he had since they were but boys. Father cupped an ear each on both of them, drawing them close.

“There, now you must act as one to hear me.” His eyes moved between them. “When you two let your passions get the better of you like that you play right into the hands of those who wish to set brother against brother. The many factions of the empire are as dangerous to its survival as its enemies. Rise above the politics, stay united and trust when I make my recommendation for heir it will be in the best interest of both of you.”

He wanted to point out it wasn’t the crown he challenged Aegon over but he kept his tongue. Father’s will was so powerful and after the years of bloodshed it felt good to be held by him once again. Even if it was only to be lectured.

“Jon was right.” Aegon spoke begrudgingly. “If we join our strength we can bloody this new Ghiscari alliance before they grow too powerful.”

“No, no I will not risk a war that could leave us open to the Dothraki. I will call up the legions of the Rhoyne and levees of these lands to demonstrate our strength. I’ll have Sallador’s fleet harass New Ghis, in hopes of forcing them into accepting a separate peace with us.”

Mother went to run a hand through father’s hair then.

“All of which will drain the empire’s strength even more.” She said. “At a time when your father wishes to make many changes that will require a power we do not yet hold. Lands we are yet to control.”

Expansion? Mother has never supported the expansionists.

She abhors their undying hunger for new territory and slaves...

Father took mother in hand then and led them all towards a large map hanging upon the wall. A map of the known world, from Ulthos and Sothoryos to the Summer Islands and Westeros. It was the Seven Kingdoms father directed their attention to, specifically the lands nearest the farthest outpost of the Targaryen Empire. Their ancestor’s birthplace, the former seat of Aegon the Conqueror himself. Dragonstone.

“Westeros has lost a great man in Eddard Stark.” Father kissed mother’s hand. “His murder at the hands of the Lannisters caught the Kingdom of the North off guard. King Tywin’s ambitions would not be held back by a banner of truce.”

It was well known that Tywin Lannister, King of the Rock, was bent on controlling southern Westeros. His grandson Joffrey Durrandon, the Storm King, ruled lands from the Dornish Marches to the Bay of Crabs and the great castle Harrenhal itself.

Aegon tapped his chin in thought as he took in the map.

“King Tywin is making his play for a grand kingdom in Westeros.” He pointed disdainfully towards Highgarden. “I see little to stop him from doing so. The hatred between Gardeners and the Martells rules out any alliance there.”

Mother nodded. “And the battles between the Gardeners and Starks for the river lands has led to bad blood there as well. With chaos in the Vale and the Iron Islands only interested in reaving, the Starks and Martells are quite friendless. Even if they united, they would be too weak to stand against the Lannisters.”
It made sense yet Jon disliked the conclusion he was led to by reflecting why all this mattered to his father.

“You wish to support the Lannisters?” He tasted something foul in his mouth. “Father, I can understand them being a powerful ally in the days to come and their gold could pay to shore up our armies but I have to protest—”

“I’m glad you do, my son.” Father smiled to his mother. “Tywin Lannister is no friend to us. I wish to create a new ally all my own. Our words are fire and blood. Your blood is of the dragon my sons, but it is also of the Martell sun and Stark direwolf. I intend for you both to do honor by your blood and bring fire to their enemies.”

He and Aegon were incredulous at this and thus began hours of discussion between father and them both. Where plans were made and revealed all at once. It was long into night before he was finally free to seek his chambers here at Summerhall.

They were far larger than he was used to anymore. The floors were marble with a bath carved into the floor and behind some thin curtains lay an open balcony overlooking the lake beyond. Years of sleeping in the cramped quarters of forts and pavilions ruined him for such luxuries. Especially the large raised canopy bed he was meant to sleep in.

The bed where two naked young women lay waiting for him, both posed lewdly, running their hands about their bodies in seductive ways.

“We’re for you, son of the High King.” One said, cupping a supple breast up at him.

The other dipped her fingers into her sex. “A gift, from your loving uncle.”

Viserys… of course… if only I could beat that piece of shit bloody…

It wasn’t a stretch to see why his uncle had sent these two to him. For both had dark brown hair and pale skin, their eyes different shades of grey. Features as familiar to him as their accents.

“You’re Westerosi? From the North?” He asked, ignoring their nakedness to find their garments piled at the foot of the bed.

The two women shared an uneasy glance before the taller one nodded.

“Yes m’lord.”

“Then by the Old Gods, accept my apologies for this dishonor.” He offered the thin slips back to both women, who merely stared in confusion. “I do not bed women held in bondage. I was raised better, so please, dress and leave.”

As they did so he got a better look at their bodies. The scars and bruises were faint but there they were, evidence of the treatment he was returning them too. Before they could scurry from the room he asked them to stop.

“I want you to seek out the chambers of Sergeant Gendry in the lower levels.”

“Beggin’ your pardons m’lord but we was only supposed to lay with you.” The older one answered again. “Then we was to go back to master Prince Viserys.”

“He’s no prince.” He snapped and felt bad when they recoiled. “Apologies, but please, forget returning to Viserys. If you wish to return to the North go to Gendry’s chambers, tell him who sent
you and say the name, Lyanna. Do this and I swear, as the son of a Stark, you shall be free again.”

The younger one met his gaze then, a look of unbridled hope flashing in her eyes. He repeated himself once more and got both to agree to do as he said. Gendry would know what to do, in their early days as simple cavalymen in the order they’d helped many slaves this way. People they hid instead of handing over to the upper ranks to enslave or sell for profit. Long after the dreams of glory and service to the empire were tainted by the blood and rank smell of rotting corpses Jon still took pride in helping those people.

The candles and torches blown out he stripped away all of his clothing, the heat of these lands bidding him to climb into the bed naked. The breeze coming in through the balcony felt good on his bare skin and he hoped somewhere in the castle, those two slaves bedded down with hope in their hearts.

His father’s plans should have kept him awake but after all his travels Jon found himself drifting off.

He was half asleep when she arrived.

Whatever entrance she stole through was a mystery to him. His battlefield instincts were still sharp though, for Daenerys’s footfalls were barely audible on the marble floors. He rose up on his elbows to see her beautiful form pushing aside the canopy of his bed. A moment later, it was her robe falling aside, Dany not speaking a word as she displayed her pale naked body to him.

Her breasts were full and high, the silver blonde hair about her sex as inviting as he remembered. He was already hard by the time she crawled up the bed to lay a kiss upon his lips. Gentle yet hungry all at once, her teeth nibbling at his lower lip.

“I said I missed you.” She sighed, letting her tongue tease his. “I meant to say I missed this too.”

He said nothing as they kissed again and again, her lips sweet and hair like silk in his hands. When she broke free it was only to kiss down his face and neck before moving lower. Dany pulled the sheets away as she traced a wet line down his chest and then his stomach. When she wrapped her hand around his cock he moaned a curse, for he knew what coming. Dany looked him right it the eye as she took the head of his cock in her mouth, moaning herself to wrap her lips around it.

When they had all been young children here, running and playing in the pools and gardens. Dany and Rhaenys used to take turns kissing Aegon and Jon both in those days. When they grew older things changed, Rhaenys became distant after the death of her mother and Dany and Aegon's kissing grew less playful. At one time he was sure it be those two to wed, for it was no secret at ten and three Aegon took Dany’s maidenhead. Yet time weakened their love, the pair having a falling out, Dany hurt by Aegon enjoying the pleasures of some of Viserys's bed slaves.

They quarrelled and soon after Aegon left on a tour of the Three Daughters. That had been a sad time for Dany and Jon had done what he could to see her through it. His efforts brought them closer and closer, until their time together became the high points of his day. One thing led to another between them, friendship giving way to love. Long before he killed for the first time Jon believed he’d become a man the day Daenerys made love to him beneath a lemon tree.

Later Jon would see there was more lust than love between them but he'd been too young to tell the difference at the time. Of course, he'd asked Dany to marry him yet, with his leaving to join the Dark Order and the war on the horizon, she refused him.
“If only so you return to me some day to ask again.” She’d wept to say at the time.

After a couple years, even though the feelings had faded, he had returned to ask again. He did not begrudge Dany’s refusal, for she clearly cared for him enough to welcome him back to her bed. To cradle him as he wept to experience something so beautiful after all the horrors he’d been through.

He’d surely seen worse since but there would be no tears this night.

“Fuck.” He groaned when Dany looked him right in the eye before sinking back down onto his cock.

His body wanted to arch and buck up into the touch of her lips and tongue but he fought against that. It was far better to watch Dany suck and kiss at his cock. With her hand stroking and pumping it, her mouth working the top, the sensation became too much. It had been too long and she was far too beautiful.

“No.” He warned her before grunting and filling his hands with the sheets. His climax was so powerful she barely pulled away in time to escape the mess.

When it was done Jon fell back on the bed, lost in the ecstasy of the moment while Dany set to cleaning him with the sheets. She would have him clean for what came next, for they were practiced at this by now. His cock remained hard, as it often would be after the first release. She moved to straddle him when Jon wrapped his arms around her and flipped Dany onto her back.

“Jon, you don’t have to.” She said halfheartedly as he pushed her legs apart. “I thought you’d be too tired to- oh yes…”

Her words faded away as he lowered his mouth upon her sex. He’d always enjoyed doing this, tasting her. His lips and tongue making her all the wetter while her thighs trembled. She sighed and moaned herself when he found her bud. It did not bother him that she bucked and ground herself against his mouth, nor when her hands took hold of his hair to urge him on.

His jaw was sore by the time she reached her release but his manhood remained stiff. Her cheeks flush and body weak, Dany accepted him with a gasp, the wet lips of her sex parting before his cock which was so wrapped in a warm embrace he’d needed so. He tried to be gentle but Dany’s hands clawing at his back and desperate kisses bid him to drive into her harder and harder. As hot as this night was his body was burning, sweat dripping down his face and mingling with hers as his mouth wrapped around her nipples.

The poles of the bed were quaking terribly when he came again, driving deep within his first love to spend his seed. He stayed like that, his face buried in the crook of Dany’s neck, his manhood still inside her while she stroked his back and breathed heavily. It was only when the heat of their two bodies became too much that he rolled off of her.

Cool air moved over his sweat soaked and heaving body, his eyes focused on the dark canopy above. Nothing was spoken between them, the only sound their breathing while he stared off at nothing. Dany’s eyes had found something of interest though, for her fingers began tracing the scars upon his body.

A long pale mark courtesy of a Dothraki arakh across his side. A bit of puckered flesh near his left shoulder where a Braavosi water dancer had skewered him. An uglier scar along his thigh, where a Ghiscari had lashed him with a steel-tipped whip.

“So many hurts in so little time.” Dany sighed, kissing her finger tips before pressing them against a
scar. “My poor Jon…”

“You do not have to look.” He grumbled, refusing to meet her gaze. Truly he could not bear to look at her again, lest his youthful feelings get the better of him once more.

"Don’t grow cold to me again." Dany said, rising up on an elbow to look down at him, a finger drawing lines on his sweaty chest. "Is it that northern honor Lyanna made you aspire towards that troubles you? Jon, I thought we understood each other…"

"You understand me better than most." He cupped her cheek in his hand. "I was just thinking on how that could be yet I'm still at a loss for how you remain unwed."

She smiled at the question, turning her eyes to the open window. "Freedom Jon, so many are denied it in the empire so I will cherish mine. I wish no shackles on me, whether real or the ones a husband burdens a wife with. Do you hate me for saying so?"

"Never.” He answered truthfully, feeling safe to speak freely with her. To reveal truths he kept hidden from everyone else. “We are not meant to be, I saw the truth of that some time ago. I love you Dany, I always will, but I can live without you. Try and imagine my mother and father saying the same."

"I cannot, theirs is a love for the ages." Dany sighed, running a hand down the line of his jaw. "Perhaps one day I shall feel such a thing... that I shall be worthy of it if I do. Lest I regret losing out on such a soul like yours.”

She kissed his brow then, a long lingering kiss that was filled with more care than anything else. When she pulled away her eyes were sad.

“I pray you find the love you seek Jon. You deserve it more than any of us."

“Because I don’t bed slaves?” He asked.

“No, because you believe in love. You have none of the ambition of Aegon or Viserys, not even Rhaenys. Aegon thirsts for battle but every time you return from it I see how the fighting burdens you, how the light in your eyes dim a little more. You take so little joy out of life…”

He turned away from her, rising to sit at the edge of the bed and facing the window. In this moment he didn’t like how close they were. To hear truths about himself that he was not willing to accept. Dany’s hand touched his shoulder, soft and reassuring.

“Jon, you were born of a great love and have one of the truest hearts I’ve ever known. Likely one of the truest the empire has ever seen. I fear what will happen to that heart if you cannot find another that beats as powerfully. Please, ask Rhaegar to let the Dark Order stand down for leave. Give yourself time to seek a bride… a love… or at least a reprieve from the fighting-”

“You’re a dreamer Dany.” He said, looking through the curtains to the starry sky beyond. “I envy you, your dreams, your hopes. Mine gave way to nightmares long ago... that's my life now. Battle after battle. Riding, killing, death, there’s not going to be any peace for me. Not now at any rate. Father’s sending me across the Narrow Sea. Apparently I’ve seen enough war on this side of the world, I’m meant to broaden my horizons by waging it in Westeros.”

“Oh Jonarys…”

Her hand pulled away and he didn’t blame her. If he could escape the darkness that found him even in this palace of beauty he would surely try. Not if it meant breaking his vow to the Dark Order or
his father though, if he could not have peace Jon could still cling to his honor.

It was his honor that mother put so much faith in. While she hadn’t been home to Winterfell since she first left, mother was intent on returning there soon. To save her family, to have Jon help save their family.

_We fight to save the Kingdom of the North. A war to preserve the Targaryen Empire itself._

_More blood. More death. A duty he could not balk at._

When he felt the bed dip he turned to see Dany climbing off it, making to don her robe once more. The arch of her back and the teasing way her hair moved against the top of her arse reminded him there were better things he could be doing now than worry.

"You're going?" He asked and she held the robe before her, looking at him with sympathy.

"I thought perhaps we were done." She spoke with concern yet that look fell away when he stood to face her, his manhood hard once again.

"It's been nearly a year Dany. I'm far from done."

“And it be nice to have a proper farewell between us.”

“Perhaps something I can dream on later.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Nothing is the same and few things are what they seem when the dragons come calling on the land of wolves.

THE DARK ORDER

The Dark Order was founded two hundred years ago by Daemon Targaryen, the Rogue Prince.

In an otherwise tranquil period, the city of Mantarys raised a dread army, one that raided by night and stole away hundreds before dawn. The poor souls taken in such attacks were sacrificed for blood rites too unspeakable to mention. So ill-omened was Mantarys that High King Viserys balked to send armies or dragons against it.

Until one man spoke up. Prince Daemon, the king’s willful younger brother. Having been denied leadership of an imperial legion, Daemon began building an army all his own. So popular was this rogue prince among the empire’s most hardened warriors, he gathered a force of a few thousand with ease. Inspired by a trip to the Wall in faraway Westeros, the prince drew from all ranks of nobility and freedmen, no matter their breeding or background, uniting men in common cause.

Most in the imperial court believed that Daemon’s campaign against Mantarys was cursed from the moment he left Volantis. Half a year later, The Rogue Prince returned victorious, flying upon his dragon Caraxes and leading his army home. Behind them Mantarys and its blood worshippers laidsmashed, each league of the army’s return marked by the impaled head of a foe.

In reward for their great victory, the High King bestowed upon Daemon’s men titles and rank, the beginning of the Dark Order. From that time onward, its members could claim spoils and honors like any legion. Yet unlike other imperial armies the order was granted the power to name its own commander, a measure done by popular vote.

The order would go on to play a key role during the Dance of Dragons, helping raise Aegon the Third to the throne. Over the years, famed warriors have risen through the Dark Order’s ranks, including many with Targaryen blood. Aemon the Dragonknight, Daemon Blackfyre, Brynden the Bloodraven.

Men both great and terrible.

Great and terrible… there are no better words to describe the Dark Order.
Jon leaned against the dromond’s railing and closed his eyes. The oars tilling the sea below sent a salty mist up at him.

Not far from shore, the *Jaehaerys* was moving at a brisk pace, the triple-decked warship pulling around a massive grey-green stone jutting out of the water. Rising fifty feet into the air, its crown hosted a ringfort jammed with scorpions, spitfires, and scores of crossbowmen. The giant stone dominated the approach to White Harbor, the northern port where much of their fleet was already docked.

Built facing east along the mouth of a large river, this city would serve as their gateway to the Kingdom of the North.

A hand touched Jon’s shoulder then, his mother coming to join him along the rail. The High Queen wore a gown of the darkest grey, a garment far less eye-catching than the crown upon her brow. A product of the finest smiths of Qohor, Queen Lyanna’s crown was a circlet of blue gold, wrought in the shape of roses. Jon was never one for jewelry or decoration but it always made him happy to see his mother looking so elegant.

Her expression confused him though. Her eyes glistened with sadness while a small smile pulled at her lips.

"I'm home." Mother spoke softly, her eyes moving over the city and the waterfront before she pointed to the stone ahead. "Seal Rock. Gods Jon, that ugly thing was the last thing I ever saw of the North. Brandon teased me when I wept to lose sight of it. He said he never knew me to love seals so much... he always made me laugh..."

"The seals appear to have left with you." He put a hand overtop his mother's, squeezing hers lightly. "This rock is now home to scorpions, far deadlier beasts."

Mother flinched some at his words. "The peace my brothers and I grew up with died with Brandon. The North has seen war after war ever since, costing it dearly. My father, poor Ned... I meant to see him one more time. In my mind, I pictured it all the same. My brothers, my home... it was foolish of me. Twenty years of bloodletting and war, this city has changed with it."

"It has grown stronger." A gruff voice spoke up from behind them. "As you did after many hardships my queen. The Starks endure."

The voice belonged to one of the white-clad warriors keeping a respectful distance from them. Ethan Glover was mother's oldest friend and the only Northman among the elite Highguard of the royal family.

A thick, strongly built man, Ethan looked a powerful warrior in the white enamel and mail of the imperial guard. In one hand he held the dark ironoak shaft of a poleaxe, in the other a gleaming snow-white helm. His hair and beard were thick and russet-colored, bound in a braid behind his head, with a bronze ring below his chin. None of that compared to Ethan's most fearsome feature, the demon's mask brand burned into his right cheek. The mark of a disobedient slave and a dangerous man. A mark Ethan wore with pride.

The Glover man had served as Brandon Stark's squire and part of mother’s escort to the Storm King. After the slavers attacked their vessel, Ethan was captured and chained to oars, no amount of whipping could bend his will. When it came time to throw off their shackles, Ethan fought side by
side with his princess. He'd never left her side since, following Jon's mother on her path to becoming High Queen, eventually taking the vows of the Highguard. Ethan swearing his life to her safety.

"Your uncle's last words to me, 'Protect Lyanna.'" Ethan had told Jon once as a boy. "He trusted me. She freed me. I will do honor by them both, for the rest of my days."

As a boy, Jon saw Ethan as the paragon of all that mother told him of northmen. Strong and fierce, proud and honorable, the Glover man was known far and wide as the High Queen's mailed fist.

Though to mother Ethan would always be a dear friend and treated him as such.

"Thank you Ethan." Mother's smile had a bit of mischief to it. "Now don't try and pretend that seeing our homeland again doesn't touch you as well. None will think poorly of you for shedding a tear."

"I am not one for weeping."

"Perhaps not today, but I remember a young boy freshly arrived at Winterfell, looking quite misty-eyed to bid his mother farewell."

"I was a child then!" Ethan protested. "That is- I did not weep... I only showed sympathy for my mother's plight..."

Jon held back a laugh but Ethan's Highguard comrade failed in that, Tumco Lho breaking into a coughing chuckle that was quickly silenced by a glare from the older warrior.

Tall and dark-skinned, Tum was yet another who owed his freedom to Lyanna Stark. Born in the Basilisk Isles and trained up as a gladiator for the slave pits of Meereen, Tum had led a slave uprising that drew the eye of the empire. Thousands of slaves escaped Meereen, only to be hunted by the Ghiscari legions, pressing them on a death march toward the Gulf of Grief. That was where the royal fleet met them. Mother had convinced the High King to save the rebels, to inspire the rest of the Ghiscari's slaves, in the hopes that it would cause future uprisings for their enemies.

Tum, an able warrior with both sword and battle-axe, had begged for the chance to repay that debt by serving the FreeQueen. In less than a year the warrior proved himself worthy to join the Highguard, becoming one of mother's principle protectors ever since.

Father would've sent a third of his guard with her, had she allowed it. Instead she'd scolded the High King on the kind of message that would send to the Starks of Winterfell, her family.

*My family too, for what little that means, Jon thought, the Starks I know are the ones from mother's tales, and most of them are dead.*

*There's no guarantee this King Robb will welcome us once he hears our offer.*

Jon kept those worries to himself, for he'd already spoken on them at length with both his parents before setting sail for Westeros. Instead he held his mother's hand as she pointed out sights in the white-walled city as it grew closer with every moment.

A large castle sat upon the hill within the walls, the New Castle, seat of House Manderly. The Wolf's Den was an ancient looking fortress overlooking one end of the long harbor, a strange pall seeming to hang over the ruin. Truly it was the harbor that drew Jon's attention, for it was packed with vessels flying the black and red banners of the Targaryen Empire. More than fifty ships had ferried the Dark Order from Myr to White Harbor. Most were cogs and carracks, dropping anchor in the city's large outer harbor. The twenty or so dromonds and war galleys that served as escort were filling quays
within the inner harbor, sheltered by the city walls.

"Lord Manderly honors us by letting our warships dock there." Mother said as they watched horses and black-garbed men streaming off of ships and onto the docks. "The inner harbor is usually reserved for Manderly ships, the northern fleet."

"They have not strayed far." He pointed out the twenty or so northern galleys guarding the entrance to the White Knife and the harbor itself. "A sign of caution... or a trap waiting to be sprung."

Mother slapped his arm then. "Jon, these are bannermen to House Stark. Acting wary means they are serving my family well. The same family, I remind you, that invited us here in the first place."

"But they’ve never once sent an envoy to us. You call them family mother but I have never seen the Starks once treat you as kin. Who is to say your brother's children are cut from the same cloth as the man you remember?"

She looked surprised and hurt by his words, gazing at Jon as if trying to put a name to his face.

"My father and brother were put in a difficult position after I decided to stay with Rhaegar. By breaking my betrothal to Robert... it was a stain on House Stark’s honor. I knew what it would mean and I stand by my choice, yet I never expected my family to understand. They were well within their rights to shun me... but after Ned ascended the throne of Winterfell he wrote to me. Benjen too. Our letters were few but in their words I found my brothers again. I cannot see Ned's children plotting against us. Nor could I imagine you speaking of them so harshly. To have you acting so... so..."

"Protective?"

"Cold." Mother sighed. "Oh Jon... when this is all done I hope you try and propose to Daenerys again. She would be a fine match and you clearly love one another. It is time you took a wife and cease this endless warring. With her as a mother I would have such handsome grandchildren..."

He ignored her words, for their ship had moved deeper into the inner harbor, passing the Jaehaerys' sister ship, the Alysanne, already at anchor. The Blackfish and Thoros were overseeing the unloading of the dromond, both men giving a wave to see Jon's ship moving into the quay next to them. When he turned to seek Gendry down in the hold, the queen made to bar his path.

"Son, do not think I've missed the change in you. Even as a little boy you were solemn but there was a happiness behind your frowns... a warmth. If I'd known what the Dark Order would do to my darling boy, I would have made Rhaegar find some other duty for you. Aegon's already wed well, if not happily. You can surely do better on both counts. Daenerys would be perfect for you."

"For a woman so concerned with freeing people from bondage, you're far too content in dictating the course of my life. I'm not a child, nor a slave to your wills mother-"

She cut him off by grabbing hold of his tunic and pulling him close, her eyes wide with anger.

"Never speak to me of being a slave. Ever. Whatever else you think you've seen of this world, the life of a slave is something you are blessedly ignorant of. You know nothing Jon."

A flush of shame crept up in his cheeks, for while he was a man grown it was still a terrible thing to realize that he'd hurt his mother then. She spoke truly, in his righteousness he acted like a spoiled prince. For all his troubles, he'd never shared half the hardship of these three people next to him.

"I apologize your grace." He straightened and put a first to his heart. "Forgive me my foolishness. I command men in battle better than I do mine own tongue. If you'd excuse me, I would see to our
Thankfully mother gave Jon leave then. He had little desire to stay behind and reflect on why he had become so frustrated. It wasn't really mother's insistence on grooming him for the imperial throne, which he had never coveted. Nor her attempts to wed him to Dany, who had given Jon a tender kiss and a tearful embrace when they'd parted at Summerhall. Rather, it was how mother and Dany agreed on how to 'save' him which bothered Jon, that somehow if he married it would lift Jon from the darkness he now drowned in.

_They act as if I want to be this way_, he thought, _this is what I had to become to lead._

_To fight. To survive._

_They believe a wife could save me from that while ignoring the more likely outcome... that I'd drag the poor woman down with me._

His mind turned to the two slave women that Gendry had spirited away from Summerhall. The women currently sharing a cabin below deck. Viserys had raised hell when he discovered his bedselves missing, accusing Jon and Lyanna both in their flight. Thankfully, Jon's fool of an uncle spoke in such an impolite manner that Rhaegar became offended on their behalf, ordering his brother away from Summerhall.

While Jon wished Viserys nothing but long and hard travels, he hoped the freed women's journey was at an end. Bess and Elly were both grateful to be returning to the North as free women, yet fearful of what their future held. Elly worried him most. Only ten and five, she had tried on no less than three occasions to share his bed during the journey. She had no family to speak of in the North and wept to offer herself as his own bedwarmer.

"My lord's bed would be kinder than the streets." Elly had sniffed as he rejected her advances. "Or the brothels most like... Bess thinks we might find work there. I don't want to be with so many men but Bess says it's better than starving…"

_It's not enough to merely strike their chains, he thought, freedom will not put a roof over Elly's head or food in Bess's belly._

_Viserys was a monster but he kept them alive. I must do better._

_That's what this quest is all about in the end, helping these women and their like is part of my parents' dream._

Thus, as the Jaehaerys was tied off to the quay and ramps were lowered down to the docks, Jon reminded himself of the promise he made to Bess and Elly. They would be under his care until shelter and work was found for them both. He prayed to do right by the pair and the untold numbers back in the Empire who depended on the success of this journey.

After a company of men and royal servants moved to line the edges of the dock, Jon and Gendry descended the ramp, both wearing mail with swords strapped to their waists at the ready. At the far end of the dock, near a large carriage, he spotted a sizeable welcoming party of northmen, including a number of spearmen.

"If things go poorly do not worry on me." He said to Gendry, his eyes not wavering from the northmen. "You get the queen back to the ship. My mother must be seen safely away."

"Ethan and Tum will do well by her. I'd be at your side Jon, like always."
"Not this time. You'll protect her with your life sergeant, that's an order."

He did not need to look to Gendry to know his friend understood. With a nod to some of the servants the pronouncement of the queen's arrival commenced. Banners bearing the red dragon of the Targaryen Empire were lifted high while trumpets blew a series of high notes. Soon after, with a Highguard to either side, mother descended down the plank and onto the dock. The welcoming party was not quite what Jon had expected. Ethan had set a high standard for northmen it seemed, for the two men standing at the fore of the White Harbor group were two of the fattest that Jon had ever seen.

Before he could reflect on this further their royal herald began to crow.

"Harken! Before you comes her imperial highness Lyanna Stark, High Queen of the Targaryen Empire! The Majesty of Summerhall! Queen of the Freehold, from the hills of Andalos to the river Rhoyne."

"Queen my arse!" A voice called from within the Manderly party. "That's the woman who used to beat me with sticks!"

A wiry, dark-haired northman pushed his way by the Manderly guardsmen, sending Jon's hand to his sword. Gendry and Tum did much the same but Ethan, to his shock, waved off their efforts. That's when mother let out a joyful laugh, grabbing at her skirts and running to embrace the stranger.

"Ben! My little wolf!" Mother laughed as they wrapped their arms around each other, her face pressed tightly against the man's closely trimmed beard. "Still yapping and causing trouble I see."

"Like you're one to talk." The man pulled away, waving an arm to demonstrate how packed the harbor was with men of the Dark Order moving about. "Look at all this! I just had these docks fit enough for a queen and you show up and ruin them!"

Mother started laughing again and Jon began to piece together the stranger's identity. Their features were very similar and few besides his father could make the queen laugh so warmly. When the pair moved apart, Jon saw that the man's tunic displayed three grey wolves chasing each other's tails on a field of white. Mother waved Jon forward then.

"Benjen Stark, let me present my son, Jonarys." Mother pushed both men together. "Jon, this is my little brother, your Uncle Benjen."

"You remind me of Ned." Benjen Stark's smile was tainted by the sadness in his voice. "Though if you bothered to smile, I'd wager there's some Brandon in there as well."

"My mother told me much of you Prince Benjen." He shook his uncle's hand firmly. "Though I was kept in the dark about her beating you with sticks."

"A true demon she was." Benjen shook his head solemnly. "I think there was a log or two involved-"

"Oh nonsense!" Mother cuffed Benjen's arm as he grinned playfully. That was when one of the fat men behind them began to cough impatiently.

The pair looked so much alike that Jon was not surprised to learn they were brothers, though he was a bit taken aback to learn they were knights. Sers Wyllis and Wendel Manderly were Lord Wyman's sons, both men well past their prime, with thick grey mustaches that fell below their chins. That, combined with their girth, reminded Jon very much of walruses he once saw in Ibben.
Whatever their appearance, the Manderlys were nothing but amiable and respectful as they welcomed the Targaryens to their city.

"Queen Lyanna, Prince Jonarys, we are honored to have you here." Ser Wyllis dabbed at his brow, which was sweaty despite the cool northern air. "To have Targaryens within our walls, surely this will be a tale for generations to come! Our father would be here himself but, regretfully, the trek from the New Castle to the docks is a tad trying for him."

"He has put on a bit of weight of late." Wendel added with a lumbering bow. "We however are fit enough to greet imperial royalty and its escort. Warriors to warriors."

Jon shared a look with Gendry who appeared just as incredulous at those words. Somehow both maintained their discipline in that moment. Mother waved away the Manderly brothers' apologies, offering her hand for both men to kiss.

"A fine feast has been planned for you." Wyllis continued. "With only the freshest catches and game from our own forests-"

"Grandpa move! I want to see the dragons!" A young voice brought their attention to a small boy hidden behind Ser Wyllis's girth. The child, who could not be more than four, was struggling against the efforts of a comely young woman keeping him pressed to her skirts.

"My apologies!" The woman sighed, throwing back her long brown braid and taking a firmer grip on the boy. "I swear, my son learned his manners from his father."

"I'll accept blame on that account." Benjen nodded with a wink to the boy. "Let him come Winnie. Here lad, meet your aunt and cousin."

"This is your boy?" Mother's eyes widened as she bent down to meet the coming of the dark-haired child. "Little Wyllard? Why in my mind he was but a babe in a cradle."

"I'm not little anymore." The boy stated proudly before pointing to a green-haired lady near his mother who held a bundle in her arms. "Lya's the babe now. She's the littlest."

Mother gasped and Benjen shrugged. "She was born two moons back. It was Wynafryd's idea to name her Lyarra, after mother."

Such was how Jon came to be introduced to his uncle's family. His wife, Princess Wynafryd, was Ser Wyllis's eldest daughter and blushed when mother came to place a kiss on her cheeks. When the babe began to fuss, no amount of kind-hearted protests from Wynafryd could stop mother from taking the bundle into her arms. As tiny Lyarra was fawned over, Wyllis made to introduce the pretty girl who'd been holding her, his second daughter Wylla.

"Your grace." Wylla curtsied well but her eyes moved over his men with a fierce curiosity. "I welcome you to White Harbor... your men as well. Is this truly the infamous Dark Order?"

"It is, but do not let the tales fool you. As grim as our name may be, my men will conduct themselves with discipline and respect within your walls."

"Well that would be a waste." Wylla winked mischievously. "We've gone to such trouble to stock the city with food and drink, it would be shameful for your men to miss out on the festivities. Grandfather wants you to find as much wine as welcome here, women as well-"

"Wylla! This is a prince!" Wyllis sputtered some, coming to put an arm around his daughter. "Forgive my daughter's impetuousness, my father spoils her. She speaks wilfully but to hear her sing,
oh it is like the sirens themselves calling. A score of lords have asked for her hand after such a performance. Between us though, rumors fly that King Robb might seek her for himself. My Wylla is surely worthy of a royal match… which reminds me, I've heard you've yet to wed yourself-"

"Father!" Wylla hissed as her cheeks burned. Before Jon could answer, the Blackfish and Asher Forrester, a newly made sergeant and a northman himself, arrived and rescued them both from the awkwardness.

"Forgive the intrusion." The old knight bowed before addressing Jon. "Thoros and Balaq have the men and the horses in the outer harbor formed into companies and I've done the same for this stretch. I'd wager the order will be ready to move out within the hour, but we've still got supply ships waiting for berths."

"Sounds like a problem for our Grand Admiral." Wylla smirked at Benjen, who was speaking with Ethan while Wyllard hid behind his legs, staring up at the scarred warrior.

"Grand Admiral?" Jon asked and his uncle nodded.

"Aye, an honor I did not ask for yet it was bestowed upon me nonetheless by my goodfather. Lord Wyman said there's no better choice to lead the Stark fleet than a Stark… no matter this Stark's thoughts on the matter."

"Husband, you perform your duty well." Wynafryd put in. "It was my husband who commanded the blockade of the Weeping Water during the Bolton uprising-"

"Thank you Winnie, but I doubt my war lord nephew will be impressed by my tale of sitting on a bit of wood for a siege." Benjen came to sort things out with him. "Once some of your ships are unloaded they can lay anchor up the White Knife, where the currents are calmer. How many more are you expecting?"

"This appears to be all of them." Jon answered, the Blackfish grunting in agreement. "I'd have the cogs put up the river-"

"Pardon me, you say this is all?" Wendel interrupted, joining Wyllis and Benjen in staring at him. "But I count no more than four thousand men here."

"That sounds right, with sailors added in that is." Jon nodded, an answer which plainly displeased their hosts. "We were more but recent battles drained us and we've not had time-"

"Benjen." Mother handed Lyarra back to Wynafryd and made to take command of the situation. “Brother, I'd appreciate it if you accommodated the Lord-Commander's needs. Whatever else we need to discuss can surely be done when we meet Lord Manderly in his hall. I for one am eager to thank our gracious host."

No argument arose and whatever misgivings the Manderly brothers had disappeared at the spectre of having the High Queen journey through their city. They tried to usher mother into joining the ladies and children in their grand carriage, which had carved mermen decorating the sides, but she politely declined. Many looked askance when the High Queen mounted her own horse instead but Benjen only laughed.

Most of the order was going to bed down in emptied lodgings near the far end of the city, while Jon and a small company of his men would join the queen in the New Castle. Until then, he would ride at the head of the order with his captains, his proper place as commander. When he made to mount his horse, he felt a tug at his cloak, young Wyllard having taken hold of it.
"Can I ride with you?" Wyllard asked, his little chin stuck high in the air. "Please? I won't fall I promise."

"I... uh..." He looked to the boy's mother and found Wynafryd and Wylla both smiling, much like his mother and uncle.

"It's fine by me!" Benjen shouted. "He sits a horse well if you keep a hand on him! Your mother did the same for me once!"

"Go on Jon." Mother grinned ear to ear. "It's good practice for when you have a son of your own."

He wanted to argue against it, to remind them that a march of the Dark Order was no place for a child. His protests fell away as Wyllard began to jump up and down eagerly. His excitement caused Jon to remember the little boy he'd once been. Begging for his father or Ethan or even mother to lift him up onto their horses for a ride.

"Come along then coz." He took hold of Wyllard and lifted his small body up and into his saddle. When he climbed up behind the boy, he put a hand to Wyllard's hip and took the reins in the other. Soon he was leading his horse away from the dock and onto the cobbled roadway leading into the city. The wagons and horses of the Manderlys and the royal parties were at the fore while a long dark mass of riders snaked down the edges of the harbor.

Gendry and Asher both chuckled to see the young boy sharing Jon's horse and a ripple of laughter began moving down the ranks. Brynden winked at Wyllard while Black Balaq and Greenbeard appeared bored at the spectacle.

"Now Wyllard, we are to lead these men through the city." Jon said, pointing at the lines of riders. "They must be given commands, orders that must come from their commander. So you will have to say what I tell you to."

"I get to tell them what to do?" Wyllard's mouth dropped and Jon could not help but grin.

"It's a high honor so you must treat it as such." He continued. "Now look to Ser Brynden, and, as loudly as you can, repeat after me. Order attention!"

"Order attention!" Wyllard shouted and the Blackfish repeated the call, which echoed among sergeants down the line.

An audible clanking and tremor of movement followed his men snapping to attention. The only sounds to be heard after were the cries of seagulls and the crashing of waves. When Jon and Wyllard commanded the men to ready themselves thousands donned their helms and hefted up spears and banners. Wyllard stared in silence at the army of men whose faces were now hidden behind dark steel. Jon donned his helm as well, the world growing dark save for a narrow slit.

"Now we wait." Jon's voice boomed in his helm in a way that made Wyllard jump. They did not have to wait long, for Ser Wyllis broke free of his wonder soon after and waved the Manderly party forward.

"Order, march!" Jon spun his horse about as Wyllard repeated the command.

The clattering of thousands of hooves upon the cobblestone streets drowned out the noise of the carriage wheels and the sea itself. White Harbor's streets were wide and open, its city watch having cleared people out of their path. As the Dark Order winded its way through the city, onlookers packed along the street sides, hanging out windows or the tops of roofs to watch their passing. Some
appeared fearful, others pointing in wonder at Black Balaq’s exotic features, while a few were cheering to see young Wyllard at the head of the army.

The boy giggled and waved to his people, beaming to be a part of this grand parade. Jon felt surprised at how much fun he was having as well, the child's joy warming his heart some.

Until Wyllard turned to look up at him with his wide, earnest eyes.

"One day I'll be just like you!" The boy spoke sincerely. "I'll be in the Dark Order! I'll fight! Just like you!"

In that moment Jon remembered feeling so eager to join the order's march. It felt like an eternity ago. A time before he’d ever shed blood or taken a life. Before he’d watched a friend die or seen a child's corpse rotting in the hot sun. Before he’d ever won a victory, only to see the families of the men he'd defeated whipped and enslaved in his family's name.

Through his helm's slit Jon saw all of Wyllard's youthful joy plain upon his face. Everything else was darkness.

It scared Jon how much he preferred that to the boy's hope. The nothingness to those dreams.

They only served to remind him of a time when he'd shared such foolish hopes.

When he knew nothing.

WINTERFELL

“Arya wait!”

Sansa’s command was hushed yet firm, her steps hurried as she chased her sister across the courtyard. It was already filled with people rushing about, so Arya’s flight towards the Great Keep didn’t draw much attention. Sadly the sight of Sansa and her friends chasing after Arya caught many an eye.

They were all dressed in their fine gowns, the other ladies doing their best to show off their best features. Jeyne Poole, already very pretty to begin with, had her hair braided so all could see her lovely face and lively brown eyes more clearly. Talia Forrester moved gracefully in a gown as dark a green as the needles of an ironwood tree. Beth Cassel’s curly, auburn locks made up for her plainer face and her dress hugged her wide, attractive hips in an eye-catching way.

Arya and Sansa were dressed very much alike, both wearing dark grey gowns with white stitching at the collars and sleeves. There were differences though. Arya’s thick, dark hair flowed freely while Sansa’s was bound up high in a conservative manner. Arya’s embroidery was done in the pattern of running wolves while Sansa’s were roses. The neckline of Arya’s dress was cut lower at the front, her bust being smaller than Sansa’s yet still shapely enough to display. Her sister protested against it all but she was a maiden flowered now and mother insisted Arya dress like a lady on this day.

Yet there was nothing ladylike in how her sister acted now. She was forced to watch as Arya’s skirts were dragged through the mud of the yard, dirtying a gown that Sansa had personally dressed her in. All five of the young ladies had spent much of the morning readying themselves in her chambers. Their normal dressing maids were all called away as part of the frenzied efforts to ready Winterfell for the arrival of its guests.
Mother worries our family will look poorly to the Targaryens, Sansa thought, yet they are the ones who have shone poor manners.

They weren’t ’t expected for another week. This Dark Order must move like the wind.

Arya was only moments away from reaching the hall and Sansa had no doubt if she did that Mother’s fears of being shamed would come true.

“Arya please!” She begged. “It is not worth it! Just stop!”

Arya did stop, but not because of her pleas. Nor was it the guards standing at the hall’s wide oak and iron doors who barred her entry. Instead it was Lady who blocked the way, the grey direwolf’s massive body moving back and forth as Arya tried to dart around.

“Lady move!” Arya demanded, stamping her foot. “You should be helping me!”

“She’s helping all of us!” Sansa snapped, grabbing Arya by her shoulders and spinning her about. Angry grey eyes stared back at her and it hurt to think of father then. “I asked you to stop. I asked you not to make a scene! What would you have done in there? In front the entire northern court?”

“Exactly what that shit deserves!” Arya crossed her arms and looked to the other girls. “Tell me you don’t think Robb should know!”

Talia made a sympathetic sound. “It was a ghastly thing for him to say about you Sansa. My brothers would want to know if someone said such a thing about me-”

“Now’s not the time.” Jeyne said, hushing Beth before she could speak. “There are so many lords and heirs in the hall! Father says we’ll never have a better chance of finding husbands. If Arya pitches a fit she’ll spoil everything-”

“Then you should have held your tongue.” Sansa shot Jeyne a baleful look, for it had been her clumsy attempts at gossip that sent Arya charging down here in the first place.

Arya was not the only one angry. The entire Kingdom of the North was clamoring for a new war in the south. Robb was willing to give them that war, hence why his most powerful bannermen had been gathering at Winterfell for weeks. While certainly busy with preparations for war, mother had found time for Robb to see to other arrangements as well. She apparently agreed with Vayon Poole that now was a fine time for matches and betrothals to be made.

Sansa wondered how many knew of Robb’s offer to the Karstarks. Lord Rickard’s eldest son Harrion was already wed, yet his second son Eddard remained unpromised. Robb had fought beside Eddard Karstark at the Siege of the Dreadfort and liked him well enough to offer Sansa as a bride. It came as no surprise to learn that the match was not to be, and in truth she felt relieved to hear so, yet Sansa sensed that mother had held back some details on the matter.

Details that Jeyne learned during a visit to the godswood, hiding behind a pine as the Karstark brothers spoke in confidence. Apparently Lord Karstark had been amenable to wedding his son to Sansa, but only if Eddard was named the new Lord of the Dreadfort as well. Robb grew wroth at the demand, arguing that a marriage to Sansa should be honor enough and seeking the Bolton holdings as a dowry was an insult.

Robb was ignorant to a worse insult though. The one Jeyne overheard Eddard Karstark giving voice to in the godswood.

“Why shouldn’t I get the Dreadfort?” Jeyne had heard Eddard say. “If the Starks want me to take
that ruin of a lady, the least the king could offer is a ruined castle as well. At least the Dreadfort has fewer scars and can be rebuilt with time. We stormed the Dreadfort in the hundreds but, the way I hear it, even that castle had less men through its gates than Sansa Stark.”

Her friend blushed to repeat the insult to Sansa at the time, for it embarrassed them both. She wasn’t ignorant of what people thought of her. Joffrey had spread tales far and wide of his branding her and lies about giving Sansa over to his castle guard. Robb harshly punished anyone who repeated such falsehoods here in the North yet they persisted still, Joffrey’s cruelty tainting her body and reputation both.

Sansa was prepared to ignore the Karstark insult, treating Eddard and his entire family with courtesy despite the disdain she caught in his eye. He likely still whispered slights about her, though thankfully the lordling was being smart enough to refrain when Robb was near. Sadly, Jeyne had not been as careful when whispering the tale to Beth during their dressing. Arya’s ears were as sharp as a direwolf’s and her anger just as fierce.

Yet as Sansa held her, Arya’s eyes betrayed something far worse.

“Let me tell Robb.” Arya urged her. “He shouldn’t have tried to give you away to that arse to begin with. When he finds out what Eddard said, Robb will beat him bloody. If father was here-”

“Father’s gone Arya. He’s dead.” Sansa retorted, tightening her grip on Arya’s shoulders. “That’s why you must leave this be. If you tell Robb he would surely do as you say and it could force a rift between us and the Karstarks. We need them now. Robb needs their men and horses to avenge father. To keep us all safe. Please Arya, words are wind. You can’t let our family suffer for me.”

*That’s what is important, not some lordling speaking truths I’d rather keep hidden.*

*I am scarred. I am ruined. I’m not worth Robb risking his campaign.*

*I wasn’t worth Sandor’s life.*

“That’s not right.” Arya said softly, her anger falling away. “He should apologize. You’re a pain sometimes, but you’re not ruined… you’ll always be prettier than me at least…”

She smiled. “That has not been true for some time. You have a woman’s form now Arya, and a graceful manner. Enough to make any man swoon, or at least ignore the mud on your skirts.”

Arya looked down to the dirtied dress yet seemed more annoyed by how much of her bosom was displayed. It was distraction enough for Sansa to extract a promise from Arya not to confront the Karstarks. Her sister mumbled a vow before making to fidget with her neckline. A part of her saw this and felt jealous. Sansa envisioned herself wearing a gown which showed more skin than her neck and wrists. In that moment she wished to dress like a maiden again, seeking her true love once more.

Until she caught how the guards at the doorway were looking at her.

Alebelly and Fat Tom meant nothing by it truly but the way their eyes moved swiftly over her body set her skin to crawling.

“Princess, your mother was asking after you.” Alebelly said while Fat Tom mimed a swoon at the sight of the young ladies, setting Beth to giggling.

“Has everyone been summoned to the throne room?”
“No, not yet.” Alebelly looked morosely to the door. “The lords and ladies are being served mulled wine… piping hot and sweet smelling… I bet’s grand tasting…”

She felt relieved to hear so and promised to have some wine sent out to the men. Grabbing hold of Arya’s hand, Sansa hurried the others within. The Great Hall, large as it was, looked near to bursting from the great numbers within. The lords and ladies of the North and their retainers mingled and moved about the trestle tables, their chatter filling the hall with an air of excitement. Nearly every noble family was represented. Sansa spotted the Hornwoods, Lockes, Glovers, and Flints to name a few.

There was no sign of Robb or mother but she spotted Bran and Rickon near Smalljon Umber. Her brothers both wore white doublets emblazoned with the grey direwolf of the Starks, looking quite handsome as the Smalljon regaled them with some tale.

Cley Cerwyn shared a laugh with Eddara Tallhart, the newlyweds amused by the Umber’s passionate re-enactment of a battle. Rickard Karstark and Galbart Glover appeared quite put out by the Greatjon’s loud declarations of promising to lead the van into battle. Talia waved to her brother Rodrik and his wife, Elaenor Glenmore, while her twin Ethan blushed to behold his sister’s friends.

At the sight of Beth, Ser Rodrik Cassel smiled widely, putting a hand on Ethan’s shoulder and waving his daughter onward.

That would be a good match, she thought, Ethan is quite kind and well-read, and Beth would make a fine goodsister to Talia.

While thinking of betrothals Sansa caught sight of the Karstark brothers, all three sharing steaming tankards of mulled wine. While Harrion spoke softly with his Bracken wife, the younger two both turned to admire the group that Sansa led. Eddard’s smile quickly turned to a smirk at the sight of her, a whisper to Torrhen causing him to chuckle. She kept her chin raised high as she passed by them, doing her best to ignore it.

Eddard’s reaction was an easy thing to miss if one wasn’t looking for it. Unfortunately for him, Arya had been watching for just this very thing. A shout and the sound of a splash erupted from behind her.

“Ah! Fuck!”

Eddard’s cry of pain bid half the hall to look his way, finding the Karstark brother covered in the hot wine he’d been drinking only moments before. While he hissed in pain, Arya stood before him, nudging at the empty tankard with her feet. Sansa put the pieces together and groaned at Arya’s wilfulness once more.

“How clumsy of me!” Arya raised a hand to her mouth, either feigning innocence or hiding a smile at how Eddard struggled to keep his soaked clothing from touching his skin. “I fear your clothing must be ruined.”

“Gods! Watch where you’re going!” Eddard snapped, his face red with wine and anger. “Are you blind girl?”

“Princess.” Sansa interceded then, putting an arm around Arya and meeting Eddard’s fierce gaze. “Arya is your princess Eddard Karstark, and you would do well to address her appropriately. A proper washing can fix those stains but it will do little to mend poor manners. Surely my lord will beg forgiveness for being so discourteous to his king’s sister?”
Her words flowed like venom but were spoken as sweetly as cider. Still, Eddard bristled and might have worsened things had his father not stepped in.

“Of course he will.” Lord Karstark turned a stern eye to his son. “The hall is full, mistakes are made. Apologize.”

Eddard swallowed, his jaw clenched. “I apologize for my discourtesy, princess.”

“And I’m sorry for your clothes.” Arya curtsied in the same false way she would whenever mother forced her to apologize to someone. “Oh, and the wasted wine.”

“We’ll see to the washing.” Sansa added, leading Arya away before she suddenly found a tad more courage, looking over her shoulder to the burned and embarrassed lordling. “Perhaps you should see a healer my lord. We would not want you burdened with any scars.”

“Oh now that’s pushing it.” Arya whispered, barely holding back a giggle.

Sansa had to admit that it felt good to see Eddard embarrassed in such a way and felt relieved to think that Arya’s anger was now sated, all without destroying the bonds between Robb and the Karstarks. It was the best of both worlds really.

Soon two other worlds would now meet, as a herald called out to the hall.

The Targaryens had been sighted from the castle walls, meaning soon enough House Stark would be welcoming their distant kin home. Sansa joined her siblings and the rest of the northern court in departing the hall for the throne room of the Great Keep.

It was mostly empty when they arrived and far too grim for Sansa’s liking. The long room was drab and grey, the only color coming from the scores of vassal banners hanging upon the walls. At the far end of the room, at the top of several raised stone steps, Robb sat the weirwood throne of House Stark. The throne was quite magnificent, tall and white, its armrests carved into the shape of direwolves. Beneath his crown, Robb’s brow was furrowed in thought as he watched his family and bannermen enter. Grey Wind was doing much the same from his place at Robb’s feet, the wolf’s massive form barely fitting on the wide step.

Mother stood beside the throne, dressed in a black gown befitting her mourning of father. Sansa and Arya were never meant to attend the hall in the first place, so mother eyed them curiously as the Stark children took their places nearest the throne.

“Sansa?” Mother asked curiously. “Bran and Rickon were to lead the procession from the Great Hall, did something happen?”

Arya happened.

She nearly said such but held her tongue as the dampened form of Eddard Karstark made to stand with his family to the side of the room.

“Nothing happened.” She lied. “I just wanted to give the lords in the hall a chance to see the others. The light is so much better there and my friends all look like visions today.”

“No more than you.” Mother smiled to stroke her cheek, her attention moving to Sansa’s hair. “Your hair is so lovely Sansa, I wish you would let it down, your father always said… well nevermind. What matters is that you are here and what you’ve done with Arya.”

Mother’s turned to Arya then, her sister misunderstanding the sudden attention and beginning to
shake her head vigorously.

“I didn’t mean to! I swear-”

Arya’s words fell away when Sansa put a finger to her lips outside mother’s vision. Mother paid it little mind as she inspected Arya’s hair and dress before waving Bran and Rickon on as well. She nodded in approval at Bran before using her sleeve to clean the back of Rickon’s ear as he fought her.

“What do emperors care about dirty ears?” Rickon asked.

“High King.” Sansa corrected. “The Targaryens have a High King, not an emperor. Truly Rickon, you must pay more attention to Maester Luwin’s lessons. Little slip ups like that can make you look unlearned and men who do not read cannot lead the maester- do not stick your tongue out at me!”

Sansa made to snatch the little boy’s tongue out of his mouth when he ducked behind Arya. Mother put a stop to Rickon’s flight soon after before the sounds of horns began coming from outside the keep.

“It is time.” Robb declared from atop his throne. “The dragons are here, gods help us.”

Once Robb might not have sounded so displeased to welcome guests to their home. Yet he had gambled much on seeking an alliance with the Targaryen Empire, many here in the North distrusting the dragons and their strange ways. Some even thought Robb weak for seeking help at all. She feared his gamble had not been worth it. They had heard troubling rumors that instead of a grand army arriving at White Harbor, the Targaryens had only brought a few thousand mounted warriors.

An insult perhaps, she thought, but why would Aunt Lyanna come all this way just to insult us?

Why would she bring her son as well?

These questions still tugged at her mind when the doors to the throne room swung open and members of Robb’s personal guard led a large party within. Morgan Liddle, Lucas Blackwood, and Olyvar Frey were all armed and dressed in fine tunics yet they could not hold a candle to the splendor and fearsomeness that followed behind them.

At the head of the strangers, walking beside Uncle Benjen, strode a slim, dark-haired woman wearing a crown of blue gold. Her gown was silver save for the wonderful blue patterns that twisted across the bodice and down her arms like vines. Flanking her were two helmed warriors in the finest suits of armor that Sansa had ever seen. Both men wore white enamel with cloaks as pure as snow and so she named them as Highguard, the sworn shields of the imperial family. The larger of the two carried a poleaxe yet it was the second man that drew the eye, his skin appearing to be a strange, foreign color.

Rickon gasped at the sight and Sansa shushed him, never once taking her eyes off the growing number of strangers. In contrast to the white clad warriors were a score of men armored in steel and mail as black as night. Only half wore helms as they followed the procession and those who didn’t shocked her for reasons as different as the men themselves.

One large man had dyed his hair and beard green, another had skin far darker than the Highguard who’d surprised Rickon and wore a cloak of bright feathers of many colors. A grizzled, older man with grey hair walked beside a tall, muscular warrior with a comely face who reminded Sansa of someone. The next face was one she could name easily, for Asher Forrester was Talia’s older brother, second born son to their family and exiled from Ironrath years ago. Ethan and Talia’s faces
lit up at the sight of Asher while Rodrik’s turned to stone, as if his brother had no place being here.

Which could not be said of the leader of this company, who looked as much a northman as any. His hair was a familiar shade of dark brown, his beard full yet neatly trimmed. He was tall in stature, lithe of body, yet strong looking all the same. The black armor he wore was so well polished it caught the light like the obsidian dagger that Maester Luwin kept in his study.

He could have been called handsome if Sansa did not find his expression so solemn. His grey eyes were much like Arya and father’s yet lacked any familiar warmth. Instead they seemed cold as she watched him look over the faces of the room, perhaps with a hint of distrust. It was then that she noticed the blade at this man’s hip, one with a masterful handle of artistry, yet a weapon all the same.

Robb should have had them all disarmed, she worried, this hall might be filled with Stark men but they could react too slowly.

What if we’re in danger? What if we’ve invited monsters into our home again?

She looked to Robb and found his eyes moving from the Targaryens to Grey Wind at his feet, the direwolf unmoving as it watched all this as well. When Uncle Benjen and the regal woman arrived before the throne, her uncle shot a smile the children’s way.

“King Robb!” Benjen bowed to her brother. “Your grace, my dear nephew, allow me the honor of presenting your aunt, Lyanna Stark, High Queen of the Targaryen Empire! The Majesty of Summerhall! Queen of the Freehold-”

“He does like to talk, doesn’t he?” The Queen interrupted, taking her skirts in hand and curtsying to Robb. “As wife to the High King, I offer you greetings and friendship from the Targaryen Empire your grace. As your father’s sister though, I offer my nephew the love of an aunt.”

“I must play two roles then.” Robb answered, rising from his throne and descending down to stand in front of their aunt. Lyanna was tall enough to meet his gaze and her eyes widened some when Robb bowed. “As King of the North I welcome you to Winterfell your grace, its comforts are yours. May it be as warm as your words. And as your nephew, I welcome you home Aunt Lyanna.”

The Queen smiled at that, offering her hand which Robb took and kissed lightly. He then raised it high for all to see, turning Lyanna so the entire court could bask in this moment.

“We Starks are united once more!” He spoke loudly. “The Starks endure! The North Remembers!”

“The North Remembers!” The court echoed, the Greatjon’s bellow was nearly matched by the largest Highguard warrior, who pounded his poleaxe down to make his point all the clearer.

As soon as the cheer died away, the grey-haired warrior from the dark number broke free from the others and made to come right at them. Sansa drew back in fear yet was shocked when mother laughed and made to meet the man, the two enveloping each other in a warm embrace.

“Oh uncle.” Mother clutched him all the tighter. “Uncle Brynden, words cannot express how good it is to see you… it has been too long, far too long…”

“I missed you too Cat.” The older man’s lined face wrinkled in a smile as they pulled apart. “Forgive me. I mean I missed you, your grace. Having travelled half the world, let me tell you, you are still the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.”

“You should have come here after your falling out with father. Ned would have welcomed you, if only for me.” Mother’s voice trembled towards the end, the man clutching her hands.
“I am sorry for your loss. Ned was a good man.”

“A great man.” Benjen added, to a grumble of approval from others. “We’re going to make the Lannisters pay for my brother’s death. I’ll fight to the death to see that happen.”

“But will the dragons?” The Greatjon asked, stepping out from among the crowd to stand at its fore. “We could’ve marched more than moon ago yet we stayed here. Our king was promised an army and you bring what? A few pretty horses?”

“Jon Umber.” Lyanna shook her head to walk towards the man, reaching up to tug his beard with a grin. “Just because you’re louder than most doesn’t make you more loyal to the Starks than me. Handsome devil that you are.”

Sansa had never seen the Greatjon blush before and before he could reply, the Queen held out her hand to the leader of the dark warriors. He locked eyes with Robb as he came on, Lyanna laying a hand upon his shoulder.

“King Robb, meet the man who will help you and the North drive Tywin Lannister scurrying back to Casterly Rock. My son, Jonarys Targaryen, Lord-Commander of the Dark Order.”

“Which I can assure you…” The dark prince glanced to the Greatjon. “Are more than a few pretty horses.”

“Far less than a legion though!” Galbart Glover added before Robb held up a hand, as if to restrain his bannermen. Sansa knew it to be a mummery though. Robb wanted the Targaryens held to task for their poor showing of support, yet could not sully their visit by doing so himself.

“Forgive my vassal’s vigour.” Robb offered his hand which the prince shook firmly. “When your father agreed to waging war alongside us against the Lannisters, we expected a famed Targaryen legion to arrive at Winterfell. Three thousand is far less than ten Prince Jonarys.”

“Jon.”

“Pardon?”

“You may call me Jon.” The prince answered stiffly. “My father has not bestowed the title of prince upon my brother or myself. I have been named Lord-Commander of the Dark Order, so if you wish, you may title me as a lord.”

Sansa shot a look to Rickon, inclining her head so he could catch the importance of studies.

“May I now?” Robb’s jaw clenched some, clearly displeased to be corrected in front of the entire court. He swallowed down any anger he had then to lead both the queen and her son to their family.

One by one they were presented to the royal pair, Lyanna acting with far more warmth than the prince. The queen embraced mother like a sister, offering whispered words that Sansa assumed to be condolences. Their aunt then gave each of the children a kiss upon their cheeks, Sansa earning two for some reason.

“Dear Sansa, it is good to meet you.” The woman spoke quietly to her, holding her fingertips gently. “Even across the Narrow Sea I’ve heard of your trials. I admire your strength and envy your beauty.”

“I must say the same of you.” She felt her cheeks growing red to think that her shame had reached as far as the Targaryen Empire. “When I was a little girl, I used to dream of this day. I would beg father to let me visit the empire, to meet my aunt, the High Queen.”
“You would’ve been a feature at court to be sure.” Lyanna smiled as Jon finished kissing Arya’s hand and Sansa offered hers next.

His grasp was firm, his skin rough, likely weathered from the grip of a sword or the reins of a horse. When she raised her eyes to meet his, she expected to find them roaming over her body like all men did. Instead Jon gazed right back into her eyes, and it was then that she thought herself wrong earlier. His grey eyes weren’t truly cold, only sad.

The saddest eyes she’d ever seen.

“Princess Sansa.” He said in a formal tone. “It is a pleasure.”

“My prin- er lord.” She caught herself. “I hope your stay will be pleasant. I fear Winterfell might be a bit too drab for someone who was raised in a palace the likes of Summerhall. The Heartlands are even more agreeable than the banks of the Rhoyne, or so I’ve heard.”

Jon raised an eyebrow at that. “Your castle is impressive princess, as is your knowledge of the empire. Most Westerosi assume that the royal family lives in the capital. Just as many in the empire think of the North as a frozen wasteland, filled with savages.”

“Oh.” Sansa wondered if the last part was a slight. “And what do you think my lord?”

“I never thought such foolishness to be true but I admit to underestimating your lands.” His face warmed some then. “Summer snows might bother my men but I find them refreshing. The North has a harsh beauty, difficult to see at times, but it is there if you look… I believe its people are much the same.”

She felt flattered by this handsome prince, a sweet thing to think on until a darker thought sprang to mind. Years ago, another prince had stood before her in this very hall, comely and full of flattery, blinding her to the evil within him. Joffrey had ruined her as much with his with his false smiles as he did with his burning brand.

You’re letting your silly dreams blind you again. Every word could be a lie.

He leads an army… an army of warriors have come to your castle… men who could hurt you… take all you hold dear.

Sansa drew back from Jon then, too upset to act more gracefully. He looked at her strangely but did not linger, his eyes following Robb as he climbed back up the steps to sit upon his throne. Robb bid the Targaryens to stand before him again, adjusting his crown as he stared down at them.

“Now that we Starks are all reacquainted, I hope you understand that I must show respect to my loyal bannerman, lords who hunger for justice almost as deeply as I do. They came when I called on them, bringing every man they could. You might have noticed them, twenty-five thousand hardened warriors, waiting outside the castle. Waiting for my aunt to bring her husband’s promised strength. Was I wrong to ask them such? Combined, the Lannisters and the Durrandons can field four times our numbers. Your contribution does not change that figure-”

“Wars are not won by numbers on a parchment.” Jon broke in, earning a harsh look from his mother. “I apologize your grace for being abrupt, but the Dark Order can match and defeat any mounted force the Sunset Kingdoms can offer.”

Robb did not look convinced. “I have more heavy horse gathered here at Winterfell than your entire order. With that alone we could overwhelm you and I have even more horse in my holdings in the
“I wouldn’t bother to send for them, your defeat would be certain either way and it be a waste for them to journey so far for such.”

“Watch your tongue!” The Greatjon bellowed as the tall, muscular Dark Order man moved to stand between the lord and the prince.

“I mean no disrespect to your warriors.” Jon ignored the Greatjon, still gazing up at Robb. “So I ask that you show respect to mine. I would never drag them so far for a hopeless cause. The Dark Order stands against foes that others wouldn’t dare. We will fight with you against your enemies. Take my word when I say that we are more than what we seem.”

Uncle Benjen stepped forward then. “It’s true Robb, I’ve never seen a force that moves like theirs. Such order and speed, and then there’s the ships they brought. War ships, docked and ready for battle at White Harbor as we speak. Our fleet size has been doubled with them, the Durrandons will never match us!”

“This war will not be won at sea.” Robb pointed out, many lords voicing agreement, only to be silenced by a look from the High Queen.

“My son speaks the truth! As does King Robb!” Lyanna spoke loudly. “The Dark Order will prove to be a powerful ally in the days to come, yet even with its might and that of our fleet, defeat would be likely! That’s why we’ve arranged for the Golden Legion to join our fight!”

“The Golden Legion?” Robb leaned forward in his chair as Sansa’s mind whirled with tales of the most storied army in the empire. “They come to the North? When? How much longer must we-”

“They have already arrived in Westeros, but they are not coming north.” The dark prince answered. “My brother led his army to Dorne. There he shall join his strength with that of House Martell and together they will lead thirty thousand out of the Dornish passes. Marching to war against the Kingdom of the Storm.”

The importance of his words caused the entire room to quiet, Sansa holding her breath at the thought of the Golden Legion marching against Joffrey. Robb’s face was carefully placid, but Sansa knew he was hiding his excitement.

“I see, an attack from the south. The Durrandons will be too busy fighting off the Dornish to aid the Lannisters in their war with us… their forces cut in half. Our strength nearly equal.” Robb’s smile was a grand thing to see after weeks of him worrying. He rose from his throne and opened his arms wide. “That will teach me to doubt my aunt and cousin! This alliance could help us win back lands lost to us! Perhaps even take new territory from our foes!”

“Yes… land.” Lyanna’s tone changed, her face becoming somewhat stern. “I’m glad you brought that topic up dear nephew, for we must secure your agreement on the matter of the Durrandon lands before sending word to Aegon-”

“What’s this about land?” The Greatjon asked. “The Dornish want land from us?”

“Not from you Lord Umber.” Prince Jon answered. “The Martells seek some new lands this is true but it is not them we speak of. No, it is the empire that seeks territory. My father wishes to expand our holdings here in Westeros, beyond Dragonstone. We desire the lands nearest to the island, those currently held by King Joffrey. From the Bay of Crabs as far inland as-”

“I don’t understand.” Sansa spoke up, surprising herself as much as the court then. This turn had
been too shocking for her to stay silent though. “We thought you were coming to help us fight our enemies. To get justice for my father.”

“If your brother agrees, we shall.” Lyanna gave her a sympathetic look. “Trust me my dear, I want to avenge Ned, the brother I loved so much. Yet my wants must come second to the empire’s needs.”

“You did not come for honor then.” She looked up the queen in a new light. “You came as a Targaryen, not a Stark.”

“We came to stay.” Jon met her eyes then, the sadness still there but something akin to regret as well. “You will have your justice princess… but we will need something in return.”

*You were right*, she thought, *you were right not to trust him.*

*Kind words hiding their true wants. A good cause to cloak their desires.*

*They did not come to help.*

*They came to take.*

**JON**

He liked this castle.

Jon couldn’t quite put his finger on why but as he walked the outer wall of Winterfell there was no denying it. As a king’s son he had stayed in finer places, like the spacious manses of Valyrian nobility or the grand palaces scattered across the Heartlands and along the Rhoyn. Places of untold wealth with warm air and blue skies. Far different than the grey sky above his head now and the cool winds bracing him.

He liked the briskness of the cold and the fresh scent of pines and hearth fires that lingered in the air.

Some of his companions were not so easily won over. Behind him Gendry stood shivering in a heavy cloak while Asher shook his head.

“Gods, big as you are Gendry your shaking is going to tear this wall apart.”

Gendry was embarrassed. “I should’ve worn that heavy wool too, it kept me warm on the ride. This castle spoiled me is all. The walls block the wind and that keep is as warm as Summerhall.”

“Tempting to stay out of the cold isn’t it?” Asher’s face grew grim. “My father used to say that’s why only the strong survive in our land. Sooner or later, you’ve got to face the cold.”

“Winter is coming.” Jon said, turning his gaze beyond the castle and to where the Dark Order camped outside the South Gate.

Their tents and horses lines were raised in an orderly fashion, their camp ringed with stakes and ditches. Mother was displeased he ordered such but it was an act of discipline on the order’s part and he wouldn’t have his men growing lax now. Even from this height he caught sight of hundreds at practice. Black Balaq led his longbowmen in loosing at makeshift targets while Lem and Thoros guided others in drills with the sword and spear.

*They will be ready, I have faith in that*, he thought, *I just wish I had as faith in our allies.*
“Three days.” He said aloud. “Three days King Robb has had to support our strategy and three days he’s gone without speaking of it.”

“It’s a lot to take in.” Gendry wiped at his wet nose. “I grew up in the Kingdom of the Storm and heard all the tales. Of how large it was in the good times or how it shrunk in the dark years. No one ever cut it into shreds before…”

“A big move.” Asher nodded. “There’s been Seven Kingdoms for a long time, longer than there’s been an empire that’s for sure. Now we show up saying all that’s going to change.”

Jon shook his head. “It was folly telling the Starks as we did. My mother and I wanted to lay out our plans before we ever left Summerhall but Varys convinced my father otherwise. He told the king we risked enemy agents learning of our plans before we were ready. With the murder of Eddard Stark and the rebellion of the Boltons, Varys argued that some of the northmen could not be trusted.”

“Some can’t.” Asher spat over the wall, crossing his arms. “My brother Rodrik and I visited Winterfell often so trust me when I say Robb Stark is one of the good ones. He’s got the look of his mother but it’s his father’s code he follows. King Eddard stuck to his word, even when no one else kept theirs.”

“Sounds like you Jon.” Gendry added. “Give the Starks time, they’ll hear the queen out and see you for the man you are.”

I hope they don’t. Gendry’s fought beside me and seen the same horrors but he’s never had to take responsibility for them.

He can wipe the blood from his hammer but my hands will never be clean.

“Prince Jon!”

A youthful voice interrupted his brooding, drawing their attention to some nearby stairs. The three youngest Starks were coming his way, a trio of direwolves among their number. Two were grey and the third was black, Summer, Nymeria and Shaggydog. Each as different as their masters.

“Prince Jon!” Bran called out happily as the lanky young man beat his siblings out in their race to him. “Good day to you!”

“It’s Lord Jon, remember?” Arya cuffed her brother, the young princess reminding Jon of mother then.

Rickon cuffed Bran again. “Don’t you listen to Maester Luwin?”

“It’s alright.” Jon saved Bran from the other two. “People call me much worse and I survive. How can I help the noble princes and princess of the North?”

The three all looked to one another, having a silent argument before Arya rolled her eyes and pointed to Jon’s hip.

“The boys wanted to see your sword but they’re too cowardly to ask. Of all of us, how am I the one wearing the dress here?”

Gendry’s jaw dropped at the girl’s audacity while Asher’s laughter drowned out the protests out her brothers.

“Arya Stark, you have not changed.” Asher grinned and Arya beamed at him before giving Gendry
a look that bid him to close his mouth. Jon swore she looked him up and down then.

“We’re not cowards!” Bran spoke up. “We just didn’t want to be rude is all.”

“It is no trouble.” He gave the youths a grin. “It’s only fair I think, you walk around with your direwolves for all to see, living weapons as much as the dragons ever were.”

The Starks all watched eagerly as he reached down to draw free the sword his father had gifted him before leaving for the North. The handle was a collection of silver barbs winding upwards into two arcs. The pommel was made in the same fashion, but encrusted with bright red rubies. When he pulled it free the Valyrian steel longsword gleamed even in the weak light of the cloud-covered day. Its blade was long and sharp to the touch, slimmer than the average longsword and lighter too.

“This is Dark Sister.” He named the blade, holding it before his cousins, who gazed at it in awe. “It has been wielded by Targaryens for time untold. High Queen Visenya wielded it during the founding of the empire.”

“It’s a girl’s sword?” Rickon made a face and Arya shot him a filthy look as Gendry came to Dark Sister’s defense.

“A sword is no less deadly because it was wielded by a woman. I’ve seen many blades my prince but few as fine as this one.”

Jon stepped back and slashed through the air in a swift arc that sang in the wind, causing the boys to jump and Arya to smile widely.

“Stronger than any normal steel yet half as heavy. Prince Daemon, the founder of the Dark Order, he wielded this blade. As did Aemon the Dragonknight and Brynden the Bloodraven.”

“And now you do.” Bran spoke respectfully. “Maybe one day people will talk about the same. Jonarys the Terrible!”

“Terrible is right.” Asher spoke with mock severity. “Not don’t be telling anyone that Jon was showing Dark Sister off. Our Lord Commander has a reputation to uphold. Many say he never bares his blade lest blood need be shed—”

“They don’t need to hear that.” Jon spoke far more sharply than he meant to but would spare these children any tales of his butchery. All grew quiet and he knew the mood had been spoiled. He was sheathing Dark Sister once more when he caught sight of another grey direwolf walking the battlements in their direction.

When they’d first been brought before Robb Stark his eyes had immediately moved to the direwolf at his feet. Jon held a deep respect and appreciation for horses but he had never lost his breathe at the sight of one like he did with Grey Wind. To him the wolf was the second most beautiful thing in the room.

He was not so free to stare at the loveliest.

The very same princess who now followed behind her wolf. Her thick auburn hair was drawn back in a long braid, her cheeks a touch bit red from the wind’s chill. She wore a gown of the lightest blue, though he saw little of it beneath the white fur cloak she had pulled tightly around her. Beneath it he knew there was a graceful and womanly body but it wasn’t that which drew the eye first. Truly it was the bright blue of her eyes that pulled him in.

And the fear in those eyes that bid him lower his gaze.
"My lord." Sansa spoke evenly, her eyes locked on where his hand still rested on his sword hilt. "Is something amiss?

"No, no not at all." He lifted his hand free and bowed quickly to her. "Forgive me I was just showing your siblings my blade-"

"He usually doesn’t!" Rickon smiled widely. "He only shows people he’s about to kill!"

"That’s not true I-"

"Rickon, come here please." Sansa’s face grew cold, her hand outstretched towards the boy. "Arya, Bran, you too. Forgive us my lord, but Ser Rodrik awaits my brothers for their sword practice and Arya is needed for… well Arya is needed elsewhere."

"Oh Jon do come!" Bran’s face betrayed none of the unease the princess clearly felt. "Please, I want to show you how well I can fight. Maybe you can change mother’s mind and let Robb take me south."

"Bran, do not put him in such an awkward position." Sansa chided her brother. "Robb decides who marches with him and I’m sure the lord has better things to do-

"I will be happy to watch my cousins spar." He said, making to join the younger Starks as they moved towards the stairs. "Though your sister is right, it is not my place to tell your family where to send any of their people. Whether it be an army or a prince. If your brother wishes you here there’s no shame in it. I was older than you before I ever marched to war. Sometimes I wish I had been older still."

He caught the surprise on Sansa’s face at his words, she was likely not used to hearing men sound so foolish. Bran acted downtrodden for a time but Rickon’s excitement brought the older boy around soon enough. They chatted with him excitedly, bragging about their victories over other boys while Arya insisted she beat both her brothers with branches any chance she got.

During their descent Sansa remained rather quiet, to his dismay. In the throne room he’d had a taste of her charm and a glimpse of some bravery as well, few woman ever dared challenge his mother when she took on her mantle as High Queen.

_Sansa only said what all were thinking, what you were ashamed of yourself._

_We should have come as friends, as family, not as conquerors._

_I cannot blame her for thinking poorly of us. Nor King Robb for distrusting me._

When they arrived in the training yard the king was already there, speaking with several others, including Rodrik Cassel, the master-at-arms. Robb was grinning as words passed between him and his men, that was until he saw who his siblings led into the yard.

"Lord Jon." Robb inclined his head curtly. "I heard you were inspecting your men from the walls."

"He’s come to watch us spar!" Rickon exclaimed before Bran and he rushed off to don their leathers. Arya made to stand with him but Sansa urged her away so both girls stood beside their brother.

"You need not stay." Robb gestured to the yard’s arched exit. "I imagine a commander of the Dark Order has many duties to see to."

"The boys were set on me watching. If it makes them happy it is worth my time. Sometimes it is
good to remind ourselves why we fight.”

“Well said, although if I remember correctly you fight for land.” Robb countered, ignoring Sansa’s quiet admonishment and pressing on. “Or has something changed in the last few days that makes you value my family as much as I do?”

Jon met Robb’s eyes then, a stare not borne of anger, more of a challenge. After growing up with Viserys and Aegon he knew well when someone was attempting to draw his temper out.

“If I am unwelcome your grace I will leave, I can tend to my own men’s training.”

“Surely you are welcome.” Sansa broke in, her voice soft yet firm as she took hold of Robb’s arm, a gesture he ignored.

“Yes, do stay. Perhaps later I can visit your camp and witness this training. It would be a sight to see what sort of practice can make you claim such a meagre force to be unbeatable.”

Jon seized on that. “If his grace would like a demonstration I can arrange one right now. Choose your finest guard and I shall produce a challenger.”

He spoke not in anger, for an idea came to his mind as he spotted a number of Dark Order men leading horses through the castle grounds. Robb nodded, smiling at the opportunity to show him up, calling forth a guardsman named he named as Hal Mollen. A muscular man with a thick brown beard, he took up the challenge with a smile. Jon then hailed his passing men, one in particular out of the lot and who had once called Westeros home himself.

A thick necked men-at-arms who stood a head higher than Jon and was quite confused at the whole situation.

“Grenn.” Jon gestured towards the Starks. “King Robb would have you spar with one of his men. Do us proud. No blood though.”

Grenn looked to his challenger then. “I’ll do my best m’lord.”

With that the black-clad man drew his sword and went forth to meet his opponent. A small crowd formed around the pair, Bran and Rickon pushing around Ser Rodrik to have the finest view.

“Live steel?” Sansa sounded incredulous. “Robb surely blunted blades are needed.”

“Warriors do not clash with blunted swords.” Robb answered and Jon nodded, feeling only a twinge of shame for risking Grenn so.

Asher held up a gold coin to Gendry. “I wager he takes it to-”

“Put that away.” He ordered, not taking his eyes off Robb. “This is not about wagering or winning. This is a point that needs to be proven.”

Robb let Arya start the bout by giving a shout and Hal struck first. The blow was swift and well-aimed, Grenn’s defense slower but able, knocking Hal’s blade back. Two more strikes from the northerman drove Grenn back a couple paces but the third he stepped aside and let Hal overstep. A kick to the guardsman’s hip sent him stumbling. Then Grenn was on the attack. Powerful blows that were careful and well-placed, his steps pushing Hal where he wanted him. Grenn acquitted himself ably, a fine fighter, but it the Stark guardsman who won the day. Both men were sweating when Hal finally knocked Grenn’s sword free and Jon’s man yielded.
There was so shame in the loss and Robb did well by Grenn, complimenting him on his swordsmanship before offering Jon his hand.

“A fine display.” Robb said, gripping his hand like a vice. “He pressed Hal for sure and he’s been training at Winterfell since he was a lad. Sadly this only proves my point, as fine as Hal and your men fought the Lannisters have better warriors, thousands of them. Three thousand Grenns will not turn the tide.”

“Grenn joined our ranks only half a year ago.” He said in a straightforward manner. “He was a slave once, a simple laborer who had never wielded a blade before. A farmer’s son before that. Look at what we’ve done with him in such a short time. He’s among our rawest recruits whereas most of my men are seasoned veterans. Trust me when I say in Essos only the Unsullied are as well trained, that’s the kind of army I offer you.”

Robb looked at Grenn then, hand going to his beard with an expression that bordered on disbelief. He didn’t blame him, before Jon learned the rigidness of life in the Dark Order such a transformation would seem doubtful.

There was nothing but doubt on Sansa’s face as she watched her brother treat with Jon. He saw that she wrung her delicate hands slightly and found himself remembering how soft they’d felt in his grasp during their first meeting. It bothered him for some reason to see them moving so nervously, yet it clearly disturbed Robb more when he caught Jon looking to his sister.

“Your army may be all you say but I’m not yet sure if you’ve presumed too much on my family.” Robb moved to block his view of Sansa. “I trust men who’ve fought by my side and few others.”

Asher stepped forward at that. “You trust my brother don’t you? Well you crossed swords with him in this yard countless times, stubborn rivals if I remember correctly. Now you trust him with your life, things change your grace.”

“If any was an expert on how things can change it be you Asher.” Robb eyed the sergeant with distrust before he took to nodding. “A fine point though. Bran! Come here at once, Rickon, fetch me a sword!”

All were confused as Robb backed away and removed his cloak, handing it off to Arya before lifting his crown off his head for Bran to hold. Jon began to suspect where this was going when Rickon appeared with a longsword for Robb.

“I’ve caught a glimpse of what abilities your men can boast.” The young king lifted his sword in a challenge. “Let’s test your mettle, Lord Jon. Let me see if you are the type of man I can fight beside. If I can trust you to have my back.”

Gendry gave a small shake of his head and Jon had no illusions that his mother would do any differently. Beating Robb might embarrass the king and destroy this alliance before it was ever sealed. Losing to him could do the same.

Yet when he caught the princess’s eyes on him he felt the urge to do as Robb asked. To show the Starks the type of man he was. To prove to them he was someone they could trust.

“Asher, lend me your sword.” Jon removed his own cloak then and unstrapped his sword belt to hand off to Gendry. While Asher offered him his blade Robb raised an eyebrow.

“Is the famed Dark Sister too good for the likes of me? Or do you worry once I knock the blade from your hand I might claim it as my own?”
The taunt earned laughter from many of the watchers while Sansa’s eyes widened at the sight of Jon pulling lifting up Asher’s blade. She was clearly fearful for her brother and he wished he could explain that he chose the simple longsword over Dark Sister to spare her such worries.

For he had no urge to kill Robb Stark.

Even if he was really starting to dislike the bastard.

SANSA

“To King Robb!”

The dark prince’s toast rose above the din of the Great Hall as hundreds raised their voices and goblets to shout her brother’s name. From her place at the high table Sansa had a good view of the entire hall, its tables filled with guests straining to get a glimpse of the spectacle near her.

Lord Jon, who had been seated beside Robb at the center of the royal table, was now standing tall and holding a tankard of ale high in the air. Not to be outdone, Robb rose and raised his tankard into the air as well.

“To my cousin Jon!” Robb shouted as he laughed. “Now to find out who has the greater thirst for victory!”

More laughter followed that, her great uncle Brynden and Gendry calling out Jon’s name from the table filled with Dark Order men. Arya acted little better, competing with Bran and Rickon for who could pound upon the table louder. Even mother and Aunt Lyanna looked to be trying to outdo each other in showing disapproval at their sons’ behavior.

If only they’d been in the yard earlier all this foolishness might have been averted.

What was Robb thinking challenging the dark prince in the first place? Why did you hold out hope the Jon would refuse?

He’s not so different from any other man…

Robb and Jon were certainly acting like men now, the most boorish kind. She wished she could sit with Jeyne or Talia for she had little interest in watching a king and prince see who could drink ale the fastest.

“Get on with it!” The Greatjon laughed. “I want to see which beast has the greater thirst! A wolf or a dragon!”

After that Robb clanked his tankard against Jon’s and both young men lifted their drinks to their lips. As they gulped down their ale the hall rang with cheers for both men, she even spotted Dark Order men placing wagers with northern lords.

It wouldn’t be the first time today one of her brother’s contests with the prince led to bets being made.

Robb and Jon’s bout in the yard was a fine display of swordsmanship, far better than Hal’s duel with the order man beforehand. Her brother fought well, driving Jon all apart the yard. In the end though the speed and grace of the prince had led to his sword being laid near to Robb’s neck. It felt like the whole yard, including herself, had held their breath in that moment. Had Jon wished it, the North
could have lost its king then and there.

When Jon lifted his sword away and bowed to Robb it had felt good to breathe again. Robb showed grace in his defeat, shaking the prince’s hand and complimenting his abilities. How that led to the two deciding to test their riding skills she wasn’t sure.

Bran and Rickon’s lessons were forgotten as half the castle gathered to watch Jon and Robb ride at rings. That contest had ended in a tie, not once or twice, but three times. When they decided to move outside Winterfell for a race around the castle’s walls onlookers had packed all the gates, joining with the camps without in cheering the riders on. Mother and Aunt Lyanna had appeared around then, both pleasantly surprised at the time to see Rob and Jon laughing as they raced by.

Rob had won the race yet the contests had only just begun. A test of archery had come next, which both did quite poorly at. Then a foolish game the Wulls suggested which had Robb and Jon running with logs and seeing how far they could throw them. There appeared no end to the cousins’ rivalry but it was clear the ice-cold regard the two leaders held for each was being melted by these contests.

Sansa’s fears lessening with them. Over the last few days she’d watched the Jon and Lyanna intently, wary for any sign of cruelty or betrayal. Her eyes weren’t closed like they had been with Joffrey but they caught no glimpse of a monster in Jon. Instead she saw a man who treated people well, whether they be kin or strangers, lowborn or highborn. He rarely smiled but caused others to do so often, her siblings especially.

*It had been kind of him to show them Dark Sister,* she thought, *I knew he meant them no harm.*

*Yet I still quivered and shook like a scared child… I cannot live my life fearing every strange man with a sword.*

*Robb will likely marry me to one some day.*

That thought made it hard to laugh with the others when ale spilled down the sides of Robb’s mouth as Jon gulped at his tankard desperately. The prince’s efforts were to no avail, Robb tipping his tankard fully over before pulling it away with an ale stained smile.

“A winner!” Uncle Benjen laughed heartily, pointing at Jon who made to lower his ale. “No you don’t! Finish what you start!”

“I think an end is what’s called for.” Mother declared loud enough for Jon and Robb to turn her way. “Or are we to endure a juggling contest next?”

“Sorry moth-” Robb burped loudly, sending Arya and Rickon into a torrent of giggles. “I am doubly sorry mother. We are tied though! We can’t let it end at a tie!”

Aunt Lyanna clearly disagreed. “Oh I think that’s a marvellous place to end your contests and begin our merriment nephew. I remember how the bards disliked the northern cold and how I longed for music in my youth so I had a minstrel brought with us from Summerhall.”

“A wonderful idea your grace, I’m sure Sansa would agree.” Mother nodded and Sansa clapped her hands together at the thought.

“A minstrel would be grand! Does he play southron ballads or the eastern tunes? I’ve never heard Jenai of The Sorrows sung by a bard of the empire before.”

“Then we must change that.” Her aunt raised a cup of wine to her. “If only to see my sweet niece smile. Robb, may I have the minstrel sent for?”
Robb appeared put out, surprising her by looking to Jon as if to hear his thoughts on the matter. Jon did not seem enthused either and she feared him to speak against it until his gaze fell to her and something changed.

“Some music could be welcome.” He said to Robb with a hand to his chest. “If only to comfort me after my embarrassing performance.”

“Ha!” Robb patted the prince’s shoulder before turning to face the tables. “It appears I’ve been neglecting my fairest guests! Well good women, Queen Lyanna has arranged for some fine entertainment for us this evening, so let us raise a toast to her!”

After the goblets were raised the queen called to the Highguard standing to the far end of the table. Ethan Glover wore no helm now and the red gnarled flesh about his demon brand was there for all to see. It saddened Sansa to think of Sandor then. Of how sweet it would have been to have him here, sitting beside her as a minstrel played for them. When Ethan left to collect the musician it drove the hard truth home.

*That man will return but Sandor is gone forever. Resting in that pitiful grave I dug.*

I hope flowers have grown near it… some roses perhaps… his life was so ugly may his rest have some beauty to it.

Her sadness was helped some by how Talia and Beth clapped and beamed when the minstrel arrived. He was an older man with a distinguished air about him, holding his chin high and cradling his harp as if it was a child. Lyanna must have planned this beforehand for without a word from her or request from the audience he struck up a northern tune.

Many still made noise throughout the hall, drinking and eating to their heart’s content but nothing could drown out the minstrel’s heavenly voice or the harp’s soothing playing.

She sipped her wine and closed her eyes, letting the singer’s lyrics take her far away. To when she had been a young girl, dreaming of the world songs painted for her, of gallant knights and lands of forever summer. Of a time before she was touched by the darkness, before it scarred her so.

*A better time… a better me…*

After first song ended Robb rose to lead Lyanna down for a dance. Jon did the same for mother and Benjen offered Sansa his arm. Her uncle was a decent dancer, the music slow enough that they fell into an easy rhythm. Robb and Lyanna were all smiles, her brother acting so dashing half the young women present appeared jealous. Her mother and Jon made a handsome couple as well, the older woman’s natural grace brought out by the prince’s swift steps.

Robb was her next partner, then Bran, and she’d thought to drag Rickon out after since the boy was too shy when it came to dancing. Mother had other plans however, leading Jon over to her with a pleased look in her eye.

“Sansa, do our guest the honor of a dance.” Mother took hold of her hand. “Someone taught him well and considering today’s events I think it only right to have his skill tested by the best dancer Winterfell has to offer.”

Sansa and Jon both sought a way out of it.

“Mother… I thought to take a rest…”
“It’s no bother I could take some wine—”

“Nonsense.” Mother declared, pressing Sansa’s hand into Jon’s. “Exhaustion, sore feet, thirst, I’ve always felt a good dancing partner can make that all feel distant concerns. Have fun, be young, and treat her kindly my lord.”

“Of course.” Jon nodded curtly, his fingers wrapping around hers in the same tender way he had when they’d first met. “If the princess allows?”

“I do.” Her voice was barely above a whisper, out of embarrassment and anxiousness. This would be the first time someone other than her loved ones held her so close since Sandor.

When his hand went to her hip, pressing firm against her body, her heart began to beat faster. It only grew worse as they drew together, their chests so close Sansa feared he’d feel her heart pounding like a drum. She prayed her hands would not grow clammy and was nearly caught unprepared as the next tune started up and Jon led her on. He clearly knew the steps to this dance, guiding her hips about and his feet staying clear of hers. Still, something felt amiss. Jon’s movements lacked all the finesse he’d shown with mother and his other partners. With them his face was at ease yet when she glanced to him now Sansa found his jaw set and eyes distant.

*His other partners weren’t scarred and tainted… Lyanna heard of my shame across the Narrow Sea.*

*Of course Jon did as well.*

“I apologize my lord.” Her words brought Jon’s eyes down to hers. “My mother should not have put you in such an awkward position… truly if you wish to see to your thirst with some wine feel free to do—”

“Awkward for me?” He sounded confused. “Sansa, I only said that because I did not wish to force you into a dance. There’s a hall full of proper northmen to choose from and I’d not stand in the way of you finding a better partner. Your mother was only doing me a kindness.”

“A kindness?”

Jon’s face reddened some. “I might have remarked on your dancing. It is- I mean you move- well you catch the eye. There are balls thrown during the Lyseni love goddess festival, events filled with the empire’s finest dancers, and if you were there trained performers might stand back and take notice of you.”

It was her turn to blush as Jon raised her hand high and spun Sansa about. When she returned completely into his hold she could not help but smile.

“You’re too kind Jon. Far too kind, it’s you leading us now. As well as you do I wonder how you keep so well practiced? I did not see any women among the Dark Order so I must ask, is sergeant Gendry a nimble partner? Asher perhaps? He’s doing quite well himself.”

Jon blinked at her jesting while a hint of grin pulled at his lips. His gaze followed hers to where Asher was dancing with Talia, her friend’s face full of joy to be in her older brother’s arms.

“That’s something.” Jon remarked. “Mother insisted I learn dancing as a child but I never pegged Asher for it as well. The most dancing we do in the Dark Order is with blades in our hands. Sometimes I think of myself as a dancer when I face a swifter foe than usual. My blade becomes my partner and I must find a way to lead it into doing away with—”
He tensed then, his grip on her hands growing lax and eyes widening. She’d been listening so intently that Sansa feared to have step on his feet.

“Forgive me.” Jon closed his eyes. “I’ve been on the march too long, my mind goes to dark places. I speak of foul things in sweet times... this is why all are wrong to call me a prince. Surely a true prince would know better.”

“Most are ignorant of the worst in this world.” She said, tightening her grip on Jon’s hand and shoulder, bidding him to stay with her. “You were telling me a story Jon, it did not scare me to hear it. Here in the North hardly a tale is told without blood or death being mentioned. Even the love stories.”

“I’m afraid I’m short on love stories.” He spoke softly, his fingers once more entwining with hers. “Too many years among harsh men… now that I’m among fairer company it be nice to hear a sweet tale or two. Would you know any Sansa?”

“I did once.” Their next step had their chests brush up against one another, his eyes not moving from hers. “Stories I’ve not told for some time… but I’d be willing to revisit. If only to repay you for this minstrel, and a splendid dance my prince- oh I’m sorry-”

“Pay it no mind, for this dance I can be a prince. If only to be worthy of a princess.”

She knew better than this. Jon’s words were too kind, his smile too comely and touch far too welcome on her body. Yet Sansa could not deny how all that made her feel or that she wished this dance to continue on and on. So when the minstrel finished the song she felt like beating the musician with his own harp, no matter how well he played. Jon acted disappointed as well and she had hope he’d ask for a second dance when the Greatjon came to tower over them.

“Jon Targaryen!” The lord spoke in a tone full of either threat or enthusiasm, she truly couldn’t tell with him. “I thanked Lyanna for the frilly minstrel but he interrupted my king when he was on the cusp of victory!”

“Those silly contests again.” Sansa sighed. “They’re at an end, aren’t they?”

“There’s one more!” The Greatjon laughed, pointing to where his son and several others were moving people away from the dancing space. To her shock she saw Robb unbuttoning his doublet as Cley Cerwyn poured ale into his mouth.

“I saw all that fancy footwork Jon!” Robb called out. “Let’s see if you’ve got the strength to match that speed!”

“No.” Sansa shook her head. “No Robb we’re having such a proper evening-”

“And this is a proper wrestling match!” Rickon interrupted from where he now stood upon a table, earning cheers for his boldness. “Just like when King Rodrik Stark won Bear Island from the Iron Islands king! Wolves fight! Starks wrestle!”

“Well said lad!” The Greatjon laughed before facing the Dark Order table. “I’ve got three barrels of ale on my king!”

“A fool’s bet Umber!” Uncle Brynden shouted back, Thoros the Red Priest leaping up from his seat. “Oh I’ve got a thirst! Show the wolves what for Lord-Commander! R’hlloir will watch over you!”

Jon stood silently taking this all in, a bemused expression on his face. When he glanced her way she
willed him to see it all a folly. How a true prince would prefer a dance with a princess over some silly wrestling match. That for a little while longer Sansa could pretend she was not a scarred, ruined thing and be the girl she’d once been.

Instead Jon grew somber and he nodded towards Robb.

“I’m willing enough to serve you one last defeat Stark.”

“Then come at me coz!” Robb laughed, pulling free his shirt and displaying his broad, muscular chest. Jeyne and Beth’s tittering at the sight might have amused her once but Sansa was too upset.

Jon didn’t even notice when she left his side to go and join mother and her aunt in scowling at the whole affair. Men were forming a circle, taking wagers and shouting encouragements while Sansa felt as discouraged as could be.

*Which is silly, Jon owes you nothing, it’s not his duty to make you forget all your suffering.*

*He speaks of harsh times but he comes from a land of untold splendor, where princesses are beautiful and free of scars…*

“How about a wager dragon?” Robb asked, cracking his neck as Jon entered the circle of men, undoing his shirt clasps. “If I win, the best horse in your company is mine! A fine steed to mount for my battles to come! Go ahead and ask anything of me in case you win for I doubt I’ll have to pay up!”

“We have nothing he’ll want.” She sighed to mother, who raised an eyebrow at that.

“The prince wanted something earlier. That was clear to all Sansa.”

“Mother!” She hissed quietly. “Please, don’t-

Her words caught in her throat when Jon lifted his shirt free. His body was as lean and muscular as she thought it might be, the smoothness of his skin sending a warmth spreading through her chest. That was until she saw the marks on his body. The scars across his chest. Another at his shoulder. A couple at his back.

Robb had the odd mark here and there but those were nothing compared to Jon’s. His words of war and suffering struck a different chord with Sansa as he glanced her way for the briefest of moments.

“I’ll take your wager wolf.” He said, cracking his knuckles as the two men began to circle one another. “But I ask for something far better than any horse.”

“Name it.” Robb bared his teeth and readied his arms.

“After this fight, the minstrel plays again.” Jon said, his feet moving surely over the ground. “He plays again and he plays a song of Princess Sansa’s choosing. He keeps playing until she’s had enough.”

“A song she loves and wishes to dance to.”

“For I’d have a dance with a princess.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Despite the mistrust and fear, an alliance is forged.

Through kindness and courage.

The wolf and dragon are bound together.

The Fall of the Hoares

The end of House Hoare and the rule of the ironborn in the riverlands is owed to two men who never lived to see the fruits of their labor. Rickard Stark, King of the North, and Steffon Durrandon, the Storm King, were united in their hatred of ironborn. The North had been raided relentlessly during the reign of King Harwyle Hoare while the Blackwater and Trident were used to ravage the Durrandon holdings as well.

A pact was formed between the Starks and the Durrandons to drive the reavers out of the riverlands for good. The Tullys, and other river lords chafing under iron rule, joined with them. Prince Robert, the Durrandon heir, was betrothed to Lyanna Stark while her brother Brandon was promised to Catelyn Tully.

Neither marriage was meant to be for the gods mock the plans of men.

King Steffon died during a voyage to Dragonstone in an effort to win Targaryen support for the war. Slavers killed Brandon Stark and abducted his sister, her story continuing on elsewhere. At the time many blamed the ironborn for the lost Stark vessel and Robert turned his rage towards the Hoares.

King Harwyle was an ineffectual leader, unpopular even with his own people. With the Durrandons, Starks and Tullys united against them the Hoares lost several battles, eventually being forced back to Harrenhal. From there Harwyle sent word to his most powerful bannerman, Balon Greyjoy, to rally more men from the Iron Islands to break the siege.

Those reinforcements never arrived. Following Robert’s betrothal to Cersei Lannister the Kingdom of the Rock raised a fleet and threatened the Iron Islands themselves. Some say Lord Balon refused to abandon the islands to the lions while others claim he preferred a larger crowd for a kingsmoot he believed soon in coming. The Hoares and Harrenhal held out for months before mines dug beneath the massive walls allowed Robert and Eddard Stark to invade the castle. The fighting was fierce and every living member of House Hoare died in that battle. Among the fallen was the King in the North, leaving his son Eddard to lift his blade and avenge Rickard’s end.

Thus Robert and Eddard finished the work their fathers began. The krakens were driven back into the sea. The riverlands divided between the wolf and stag. It was said the two kings
remained good friends for years after.

Until the lions tore that peace asunder.

JON

The weirwood rose tall and proud before him. Today the northern sky was a dark grey which made the heart tree’s red leaves stand out all the more. The canopy was the color of blood, the tree bark as white as bone.

This tree even had a face, one with deep, dark red eyes that seemed to follow him. Jon was a stranger to this castle yet the heart tree gazed at him as it knew him. It was an odd how that didn’t bother him. In truth, it felt natural. Like everything about this godwood. He felt at peace in this dark, wooded part of Winterfell. The air had a damp chill to it and was filled with the smell of pines. This was the North.

A land Jon was drawn to even in his dreams of late. When he’d stepped into the godswod moments ago his senses had came alive with the memory of last night. When Jon had been running through a forest, far darker and larger than this one.

Something driving him onward. A hunt. He was hunting. Following a trail and scents left behind by prey.

*Enemies, threats,* he remembered, *beasts that meant great harm.*

It had all felt so real that when Jon awoke he’d expected to feel the earth beneath his feet, his hands pressing down on pine needles and roots.

Now he ran his hand down the weirwood’s bark, finding it to be as smooth as it appeared.

*The Dark Order has no finer longbows than those made of this wood. As elegant as it is strong.*

*Just like a certain daughter of the North... a true beauty...*

“You look a true Northman.”

His uncle’s words caused Jon to turn away from the tree then, for he had been ignoring Benjen.

“Feel free to offer a prayer Jon.” Benjen inclined his head towards the weirwood. “Starks have been praying to this heart tree since Bran the Builder raised Winterfell. That’s what the stories say at least. You have as much right to that weirwood as the rest of us.”

“I have less.” He replied. “My mother told me of the old ways but we Targaryens are raised to follow the gods of Valyria. Queen Elia chose the sect of Balerion for Aegon and Rhaenys, mother chose Vhagar for me.”

“Can’t I say I’ve heard much about it.”

“Rituals. Candles. Offerings. Statues of naked people. All normal by Valyrian standards.” He backed away from the tree and gestured to his dark clothing. “Never had much time for it after I joined the order. I was taught to put my faith in the man next to me and to earn his in return. That seemed more important than dragging a sheep before some altar.”
“No sheep for us, less ceremony too.” Benjen kicked at some fallen leaves and grinned. “More foliage though.”

“Fair trade.” Jon shared a smile with his uncle. He liked the man and begrudged only having met Benjen so late in life. It made him wonder if he would have got along with mother’s older brothers as well.

Many say I remind them of Eddard Stark. It would have been nice to know him I think.

He sounds a good and honorable king. A man like me could have learned from him.

As he thought on that he heard voices coming through the godswood. Benjen had brought him here on Robb’s command and he recognized the king’s voice easily enough. Robb appeared soon after, with no other than Jon’s mother on his arm. Ethan and Tumco followed closely behind while the Blackfish caused Queen Catelyn to laugh happily. It cheered him to note how similar it was to Sansa’s laughter. Jon heard that sweet sound more and more often of late. Her smiles as well.

Jon did not dare delude himself to think they were for him alone. Sansa was never truly alone with him. Most of the time they spent together was among other Starks. Like when he gave the Starks a tour of the Dark Order’s encampment or joined them for a ride about their lands. Somehow the princess and him always found reason to grow near. To have moments where they spoke only to each other. When Sansa’s smiles and laughter even brought good cheer to him.

He remembered how much his body and jaw had ached after the wrestling match with Robb. A hard won victory on his part yet all his hurts had been worth it to bring Sansa blushing and smiling out for one more dance. The pain only came after her hands left him and those blue eyes looked elsewhere.

Stop it. Your mind is off thinking on that foolishness when it should be on the task at hand.

For all you know the Starks are ready to give their answer. The fate of kingdoms could be at stake.

An empire itself.

If that was the case he took heart, for when mother left Robb’s side she did so with a wide smile.

“Jon.” Mother kissed his cheek before doing the same to Benjen. “Benjy, I hope we did not keep you waiting.”

“Oh it was a real trial.” Benjen winked at Jon but something about his words caused Robb’s good spirits to die away.

“Interesting you should mention trials uncle.” Robb said as he shook Jon’s hand firmly. “We had a raven from Hornwood. Another village was attacked and some outlaws hung. They spoke of Ramsay Snow swearing vengeance upon me.”

Benjen spat. “More Bolton leftovers? Their lord and heir are dead, the Dreadfort taken. They couldn’t beat the Stark so they take it out on the smallfolk? Defenseless innocents?”

“Trying to live up to Roose’s legacy no doubt.” Catelyn added with a shake of her head. “Let us hope that is the last of them.”

“I’m doubtful of that.” Robb said. “I’ve decreed that any seeking shelter shall be permitted entry into their lord’s castle. Winterfell included. It is for us to protect their homes and if we cannot, we must share ours.”
Hearing that impressed Jon. To him it was a kind and noble decree, a rare thing indeed. Most rulers were unconcerned with the suffering of their people. If it spared a lord some hardship, he'd allow his subjects to endure horror after horror. That Robb clearly felt a deeper responsibility to his people was just another reason Jon had come to like the king.

“Is there anything the order can do?” Jon asked then. “You’ve welcomed us to these lands, we won’t begrudge helping to defend them.”

Robb grasped his shoulder. “Thank you Jon, but I believe you and I have greater trials ahead than just facing bandits. More powerful foes as well. To the south.”

The two regarded each other a moment more before Robb let a small grin slip free and Jon could not help but join him.

“The alliance?” He looked about at the others, finding them to be just as pleased. “You’re accepting it then?”

“I am.” Robb nodded. “The Kingdom of the North and the Targaryen Empire shall march as one. Together we’ll preserve my realm and create a new kingdom altogether.”

“Splendid news.” Mother beamed, cupping Robb’s hand in hers. “Absolutely splendid. Today starts a new day between the direwolf and dragon. A new era for the Seven Kingdoms and the empire itself.”

“It surely will.” Queen Catelyn interrupted. “As long as some conditions of ours are met.”

“Conditions?” Mother appeared shocked as she looked between Robb and Catelyn. “You spoke of no conditions earlier.”

“Nor did you until the royal party arrived at Winterfell.” The queen replied. “Lyanna, you made it quite clear the empire is not willing to help us out of the goodness of your husband’s heart. Just as you have demands, so do we. Fair is it not?”

The High Queen did not take that well. Mother enjoyed being back at Winterfell but even her patience was wearing thin at how long Robb and his bannermen considered their offer. Aegon had found far more success to the south, the Martells already committed to joining the war. His messages to the North made it clear Aegon viewed their slow progress as a hindrance to the High King’s plans.

His mother had been enraged to read such words and Jon caught a hint that anger in her eyes now. So before she could speak to it he took Queen Catelyn’s hand in his and kissed it respectfully.

“I understand fully your grace. The king is well within his rights here. What must we do to join in common cause?”

“Well said coz, well said.” Robb nudged him. “I’m eager to get south, my father must be avenged and our lands defended. My uncle Edmure warns of Lannisters probing into the riverlands and the Durrandons doing the same. Together we might throw them back but I need more than your word on all that’s been promised. We want a guarantee. We want something that binds us together…”

“We want a marriage.” Catelyn added, her eyes locked on Jon in a hopeful way. “A marriage between you and my daughter. We want you to marry Sansa, Jon.”

Jon was speechless. This wasn’t the first time he’d been offered a match before some great campaign. He’d rejected all the others out of hand. His duty to the order came before gaining some well-bred woman he hardly knew. Yet something about this offer gave him pause.
Mostly because he didn’t feel worthy of it.

“Out of the question.” Mother stepped between Jon and the others. She kept her voice low yet she gripped her skirts tightly, a sign of her anger. “Jon cannot be part of this bargain. It was never an option.”

“It must be.” Catelyn answered, not shrinking at all. “If you wish our support for your future conquests you must take my daughter as a bride. If you are to win new lands with Stark men, you must wed a Stark woman.”

“But I cannot.” He protested weakly. “I am… I am honored, truly, yet I’m already sworn to the order. I have only served six years. Men of the Dark Order serve for seven years before we can be free to leave… or take a wife…”

Rather than being offended Catelyn smiled then, waving the Blackfish forward.

“I hate to correct you on your own company’s rules but I’ve spoken at length with my uncle about this. Apparently there’s a precedent for men of your position.”

“There is.” The Blackfish ran a hand through his grey hair, mindful of the hard look he was earning from Jon’s mother. “Ah, sorry. Didn’t see much harm in sharing some order history with Cat…”

Before the old knight even need speak to it Jon knew exactly what he was going to say. He could’ve smacked himself for forgetting it in the first place. When Daemon Targaryen founded the Dark Order he’d been a widower. Yet only five years into his lordship over the order Daemon took a Velaryon wife. He declared that since he served as Lord Commander, and carried the weight of command, that such a reward was due to him. No other Lord Commander had ever done the same and that was partly why Jon let it pass from his memory. More than that he’d long ago accepted his future was in the order. That he was good for little more than war and killing.

The Starks felt differently, Robb and Catelyn both challenging him to say the Daemon precedent couldn’t be applied to him.

“It could be.” He answered. “Though it would mean I give up command of the Dark Order once my service is up… that’s when Daemon left-”

“The order is not what matters here.” Mother declared, pointing to Jon and the white dragon insignia on his sword sheath. “There is more at stake than merely building a new kingdom in Westeros. There’s an entire empire to think about. Jon could be the next High King and he must wed carefully. His choice of bride could affect the council’s decision.”

Catelyn seized on that. “Then a Stark bride should not hinder Jon in the least. Afterall, Prince Rhaegar wed a Stark and he was still chosen as heir.”

Before mother could respond Benjen weighed in as well.

“Come on Lya. It’s a fine match. Jon’s a good man. Sansa’s a true lady. Wed them and North and East are bound together. You more than anyone know how important marriages like this can be…”

“I will not give away Jon like father did with me!” The High Queen rounded on her brother. “And you’re wrong Benjen! Sansa does not have the kind of reputation many would welcome in a new queen…”

Mother caught herself then, sharing a look with Ethan whose expression darkened. His was more sorrowful though, unlike the anger that spread across Robb’s face.
“What do you say of my sister?” He made the mistake of speaking harshly and stepping forward at the same time. Ethan moved swiftly to bar Robb’s approach, holding his hand up to slow the heir.

“Easy your grace.” Ethan warned before mother nudged him aside, looking stricken.

“I apologize. From the depths of my heart I do. Sansa is a sweet girl and I more than any have no place deriding her reputation… yet as a mother… as a High Queen… you must know that the tales regarding her stay in the south have reached the empire. Tales that put her in a dark light. Of scars and worse…”

Jon knew full well what tales were whispered about his mother’s time as a slave. They enraged him and father both. Yet he couldn’t reconcile that with what he was hearing about Sansa.

“What happened to Sansa in the south?” He asked, drawing all eyes to him. “I heard she was held captive by the Durrandons during the last war but little more. They wouldn’t have dared mistreat her though. Not the daughter of a king. Not one as kind as…”

None answered, all trading unsure glances or avoiding each other’s eyes entirely.

“She was a hostage.” He pressed, feeling a foul suspicion growing within him. “Betrothed to King Joffrey…”

“We don’t speak of that monster.” Catelyn nearly whispered, a touch of grief to her voice. “Lest to wish for his death… for all he did to my daughter. For the scars he left her.”

“He hurt her?” Jon’s fists clenched. His muscles tensing. “Joffrey scarred her? He had her in his care and he did that? By what right does he live? I thought your seven forbid such things!”

He rarely ever felt such anger. It couldn’t be helped. Not when he pictured the princess who smiled and laughed for him being hurt by some shadowy figure. He remembered the fear he’d seen on Sansa’s face every time he reached for a blade. His mind went to dark places wondering what had instilled such terror in her. His rage was so that the others eyed him warily, all save for Robb. The king went so far as to put his hands on Jon’s arms, gripping them tightly.

“One day Joffrey will rot in the seven hells for all he has done.” Robb looked into his eyes. “I owe my sister that. That and more. I think you’re the man to help me do right by her. To give her justice. To give her the life she deserves.”

If all this is true I’m not… she deserves better…

Sansa’s already had to abide one monster.

“Ask something else.” Mother sighed. “Anything. I admire Sansa… I understand her trials but if I’m to see my son as High King one day I cannot agree to matching him to Sansa.”

“Just Sansa?” Robb released Jon to face Queen Catelyn. “If it cannot be her we’d be willing to accept Jon wedding Arya instead.”

“Arya?” The High Queen blinked some and put a hand to her chin. “Perhaps, she might be more acceptable to us-”

“Us?” Jon snapped. “What is this we, mother? Did we not speak of this back at White Harbor? I am not a child and you’ve no right to speak on any of this. Nor to speak ill of Sansa!”

“Jon!” Mother flushed in embarrassment. “I’m safeguarding your birthright.”
“And I’m fighting your war.” He gestured to Dark Sister. “Another bloody war for the empire. It’s fine to send me off to kill and conquer but it’s too much to let me choose my own wife? How many more must I cut down in my family’s name before I earn that right? How much blood must I spill? Or shall I die first?”

Few things rattled his mother. Very few. Yet now she acted as if she’d been struck. Her eyes glistened and a hand went to her middle. A wind blew over them all and the shaking of the leaves above was the only thing to be heard. He could not say he regretted his words. Father always said he was as stubborn as his mother.

So he scorned her then to address the Starks.

“I am as free to make this decision as my father was. It is I who command the empire’s forces in the North. It is I you shall deal with.”

Queen Catelyn did not hesitate to come forward and take his arm.

“Might I ask to speak alone with you Jon? I fear this was not handled as it should have been.”

He accepted the woman’s offer, wishing to be anywhere but near his own mother. Half due to his anger at her, half because of how horrible it felt to see her pained by his outburst. Robb and Benjen made no argument, his uncle speaking softly with his distraught sister while Catelyn led Jon deeper into the godswood.

“My daughter was beaten.” The Queen spoke softly, gazing up at his face as he tensed at the words. “Sansa was branded and scarred. She was threatened with horrors far worse. Does that make her unworthy in your eyes?”

“No.” He struggled to keep the bile down. “Yet I think the match is a poor one. Your daughter has been through so much. She deserves better than me.”

He meant those words to comfort the woman but it appeared he failed. Her expression saddened some and she looked away from him. All that made it a surprise when Catelyn placed a hand over his and patted it gently.

“I wish Ned could have met you. He and I were never meant to marry. I was for Brandon but he died so my father made me wed Eddard instead. At first I found him cold and harsh… that he was displeased by me. It took Ned far too long to open up to me… to confess he thought himself unworthy of me.”

She stopped him, running a hand through her hair in a sad, longing manner.

“I don’t think I ever convinced Ned differently. He made me so happy… we loved each other so. We loved our children just as much. And we failed Sansa. We gave her over to Joffrey and all that befell her is because of that. Do you think I would let her go through that again?”


“I’ve noticed that. Do not take this the wrong way but since your arrival I have made it my duty to learn about you Jon. My Uncle Brynden hates most people and distrusts nearly all the rest. A true Blackfish. Yet he claims you to be one of the finest men he’s ever met. That he would be willing to die for you.”

“The Blackfish said that?” His eyes widened. “Well I’m his commander… it’s his duty-”
“What duty did you owe those slave women?” She asked with a raised eyebrow. “Benjen told me about the two northern women you freed from bondage. You had the Manderlys give them shelter and work. As I hear it you made it clear their treatment was of great concern of yours. Were they your mistresses?”

“They were not.” Jon shifted his stance awkwardly, the woman’s gaze as unwavering as Ethan’s. “I would not bed a woman who had no freedom in the matter. My father’s empire enslaves countless innocents… I freed two. It is no great feat.”

“Benjen thought differently.” The Queen replied. “My husband would say you acted honorably. All I’ve heard marks you a decent man. One who cares for others more than himself. I could rest peacefully knowing Sansa was wed to such a man.”

Everything she was say was wrong and he shook his head at all of it. He also tried to push away the thought of Sansa caring for him. Of how it would feel to return from some campaign and find her waiting. To have a woman so sweet to hold. To hear her laughter. To earn her smiles.

*When I joined the order I was full of dreams… now I battle endlessly for an empire I can barely stomach…*

*What would it feel like to have something worth fighting for again?*

His silence did not sit well with the queen, who lifted her chin in a regal manner.

“A marriage is what the King in the North demands for this alliance to bear fruit. To fight as one the Starks and Targaryens must become one. If you cannot accept Sansa then we offer Arya instead. One or the other Jonarys. Stand with us or ride away. That is the choice before you.”

Queen Catelyn made to take her leave then, striding away from him with her skirts and hair catching some in the breeze. Her auburn hair was as lovely as Sansa’s and he couldn’t deny the resemblance then. Or the truth of how he was always saddened to see the princess walk away.

“Your grace, you are wrong.” He called out, Catelyn Stark stopping to face him. “I have no true choice in this. My father’s will must be done. So I will do what I must. But as I said before, I shall never force any woman to abide me.”

“So the choice is not before me.”

“It is before Sansa.”

**SANSA**

“I don’t know which I’d prefer.”

Beth giggled at Jeyne’s musings while Talia and Arya both made faces. Likely because both their Robb and Asher were among the men Jeyne was speaking about. They were all out on a midday ride through the Wolf’s Wood, Sansa and her ladies, Robb with his men.

And Jon with his.

He rode side by side with Robb as their horses ambled through the trees around the shrubs ahead. Asher was laughing with Olyvar while Lucas Blackwood and Robin Flint pressed Gendry on the quality of the Dark Order’s chainmail. Once the parties would not have mixed as they did now. That
was before Robb warmed to the dark prince. Now they spoke together with ease, passing jests and tales like old friends.

They’ve grown so close in such a short time, she thought, Robb won’t let nervousness and fear keep cripple him.

I can barely speak to Jon without my demons returning… how am I to marry him?

“Sansa.” Jeyne whispered conspiratorially, smirking and hiding her mouth behind her hand. “Well? Who do you is more comely?”

“I think it’s Asher.” Beth giggled again. “Ethan looks a lot like him.”

“I look like Ethan too, we’re twins remember?” Talia said with a sharp tone, causing Arya to laugh. “King Robb is far more handsome anyways.”

“What of Gendry?” Jeyne asked. “He’s as tall as the prince and built larger than Robb himself. Oh and his eyes…”

Jeyne made a mummery of swooning then which did not appeal to Arya one bit, her sister’s face scrunching up in anger.

“You sound like Alebelly when he’s had too many.” Arya quipped. “What’s it matter what Gendry looks like anyways? You said he’s not the marrying sort.”

“Well he’s not Arya. As far as I’ve heard he’s a baseborn bastard, with no true name either. We can still find Gendry comely though. What do you think Sansa?”

“I cannot say.” Sansa said, the gossip about suitors worsening her anxiety. “I’m betrothed Jeyne. My eyes are only for the man I am to wed. It would not be proper for me to do otherwise.”

“There’s no harm in just looking.” Jeyne added. “Men do worse than that even after they marry.”

I know the worst men can do… I’ve endured much of it… it mars my body still.

And after Jon gets a look at me his eyes will surely more elsewhere… the marriage will be a disaster…

That’s exactly what Sansa had said when mother came to her with the news of the betrothal. She’d been looking forward to joining Arya and Bran when they sought out Jon that day. Without her family or others about she could not bring herself to seek out the prince’s company. He likely only tolerated her presence out of courtesy to them and she felt ashamed to prey on his kindness in such a way. Yet it felt good to be around Jon. To speak with him. To earn a rare smile from the somber prince. Sansa’s mind had to fight hard to keep her heart from betraying her. To believe she’d finally found a brave prince.

Which was precisely why Sansa wept to learn she was to marry him.

“Mother not him!” Sansa had cried as mother held her tight, drenched the queen’s shoulder with her tears. “A second son of some minor lord, a knight perhaps… they might accept a wife like me. Not a prince. Not someone like Jon. He’ll scorn me… he’ll hate me…”

“He’ll do nothing of the sort.” Mother had cupped her cheeks and wiped away the tears. “Do you know what he said to me? After we asked this of Jon he said you deserved better. He thinks the world of you Sansa. That’s been plain since your dance in the hall. Trust me.”
“He’s being courteous.” She argued. “Or lying… mother what if he’s like Joffrey? I thought he was golden and perfect and he ruined me… what would a Targaryen prince want with such a woman?”

“Nothing could ruin you. Nothing my sweet girl. Robb needed a way to bind the Targaryens to us and I saw a way to make you happy. I’m sorry Sansa I thought you would want this. I thought… well it is a good thing Jonarys said he would only accept the betrothal if you agreed.”

That had surprised her to hear. It sounded like something a noble hero would do in one of the songs she loved so. Begging a lady’s favor rather than taking it. Then she remembered the songs were all lies. The brand on her back was proof of that.

“Oh mother. It was Jon’s way of finding a way out of this without offending us.” She spoke fearfully. “He’d not want to upset Robb… he’ll save his anger for me… just like Joffrey…”

“I don’t think so Sansa. I truly don’t but I hear you. Do not worry on this a moment more. Robb offered Arya as a bride too. We can seal the alliance by wedding and Jon to your sister.”

“Arya?”

Learning this both angered and terrified her. Arya had grown into a lovely young woman and Sansa was often jealous of the bravery her sister had in droves. That jealousy rose up again to imagine Arya with Jon. To picture Arya enjoying the life she wanted to have but Joffrey’s cruelty had denied her. The thought of Joffrey mingled with Jon once more, and she worried that perhaps Jon could be some sort of a lie. Jon did not seem evil yet the thought of risking Arya to such a man made her stomach clench.

Her little sister was ignorant to all the cruelty of the world. Yet Arya did her best to shield Sansa from little she knew of it. She had gone after the Karstark for Sansa without a second thought. Sansa was the eldest. She was the burden on the Stark’s honor. It wasn’t in her to risk Arya because of that.

So Sansa told her mother what she wanted to hear. That she changed her mind. That if someone had to marry Jon it would be her.

Robb was all smiles when he announced the betrothal in the Great Hall. Hundreds cheered and congratulated both Sansa and Jon. Yet when she’d looked to the prince he refused to meet her gaze, an unmistakable look of shame on his face.

_We’re not even wed and already I disappointed him…_

“Sansa?” Arya asked, appearing worried herself. “Are you alright?”

Her sister’s eyes were locked on how tightly Sansa gripped her reins, her knuckles white. She feared perhaps the other ladies had seen but Jeyne and Talia were now teasing Beth about the flower Ethan had presented to her the night before.

“I’m fine.” She lied, forcing a smile that Arya didn’t accept for a moment.

“Don’t lie to me. Every time someone talks about you and Jon getting married you look… scared. You want to marry him don’t you? I mean he’s much better than that arse Eddard Karstark-”

“A princess should not use such language.” She chided Arya, trying to hide her fear behind that. “And it is quite normal to be nervous about a wedding. Remember how Uncle Benjen looked before marrying Wynafryd?”

Arya laughed. “He was so pale he looked like the skinniest snowman ever. Jon did get sort of pale
when I told him he better treat you right.”

“You did what?” She asked and Arya smiled.

“After the announcement. Nymeria and I cornered him near the First Keep. I told him if he doesn’t treat you right, even if I like him fine and all, that I’ll have Nymeria eat him whole.”

“Oh Arya! How could you threaten a Targaryen prince?”

“I didn’t threaten him!” Arya argued, growing angry. “I warned him. I was just trying to help. Jon wasn’t even mad. He told me he did the same thing once to his uncle Viserys, apparently he’s a real shit. Jon doesn’t like him near as much as his aunt Daenerys and that’s who…”

As Arya went on and on about Jon’s life it only served to upset Sansa more.

Arya knows more about my future husband than I do... she had the sense to learn about him rather than act a fool...

There had been so many chances for Sansa to act the girl she’d once been with the prince. He was polite to invite her along with the others on their tours of his encampment. She could’ve asked about his life, learned of his interests. Truly she knew more of the Dark Order than Jon. He seemed more at ease showing her the drills his men ran through. When the order rode in formations they moved as gracefully as Lady did. With unspoken signals they changed direction, split apart or came together. No man ever rode alone, always with a partner at his side.

“Our strength is our loyalty.” Jon had told her. “Our dedication to one another. Without someone at your side, you leave yourself open to attack. Without unity, there is no order. Only chaos and the darkness. It is a horrible thing to be alone then.”

He’d turned his grey eyes to her then, likely to make sure she understood and she had. Sansa had told him that was a wonderful way of looking at the world, smiling like a fool the whole time. Jon had merely nodded, staring at her for a while as if he expected more. She’d lost her nerve and stayed silent. Losing yet another chance to inquire into the mysterious prince.

Sansa was cursing herself for that when the direwolves rejoined their party. Grey Wind led his sisters through the trees, making straight towards Robb while Lady and Nymeria sought them out. Lady always made her feel braver and when their trail brought them to a part of the forest sparser in tree cover Sansa would need that courage. That was when Robb and Jon decided to rein up and wait for the ladies to catch up to them.

“Arya!” Robb waved their little sister onward. “Care for a race? You and I, Grey Wind and Nymeria, first one to the end of the trail wins little sister.”

“Ha! Not much of a race!” Arya laughed before kicking at her horse, stealing a head start from Robb that he roared at her for. It was not lost on Sansa how Robb winked back at her as they disappeared into the distance.

Leaving Jon with her.

“Who will win?” He asked, watching her siblings ride deeper into the forest. “From what I’ve seen of both they are spectacular riders. Better than me.”

“Arya most likely.” She answered before venturing to be a tad bolder. “And you likely sell yourself short my lord. I’ve seen your men ahorse and have never seen finer riders.”
“My men shame me. Your brother bested me in a race the night of our challenges.”

“Oh of course… I forgot.” Sansa had seen that race and felt a fool now. “You were victorious in your wrestling match though. I was thankful for that.”

“As was I.” Jon glanced to her. “The dance was… pleasant. I spared your feet a trampling and that is always a good thing.”

“Always my lord. We did well together.”

She smiled at him, trying to show Jon how sincerely her words were meant. For half a moment Jon looked ready to do the same but his mouth formed into a firm line.

“Since you speak of performing well, I must ask something of you Sansa. It’s about us possibly marrying... see I’ve been speaking with your septon.”

“Oh.” Sansa tried not to be bothered by Jon’s uncertainty whether they would wed or not. “I… I did not know you followed the seven?”

“I don’t. At least not yet.” Jon looked away from her then. “I was raised in the sect of Vhagar but that will not do for what is to come. It is important I adhere to the rules of the seven from now on. The followers of the Valyrian ways are less stringent when it comes to marriage rites. Apparently the Faith is the not the same… there are expectations of the bride.”

“There are.” Sansa felt her heart begin to pound. She knew full well what followers of the seven would think of her and her past. “I will try to live up to them. I was raised in the seven as well as the old ways. I can do all that is needed...”

“That’s not true.” Jon said, lowering his voice so that others would hear. “There’s much you cannot do. It shames me to speak on it.”

It shamed Sansa too. She knew she could be no proper wife. She was tainted and ruined. In the south girls like her would be given away to the silent sisters. It tore her apart to realize this was how Jon meant to escape their betrothal. By shaming her into changing her mind.

*How can I stand before a sept and pledge to do my duty to him? I’ve nothing left to offer.*

*He’ll wed Arya instead or call the wedding off altogether. All will know how I failed.*

*Father will go without justice and the fault will be mine...*

“Sansa?” Jon’s eyes narrowed on her. His expression darkening.

The panic welled up in her, causing Sansa to tug at her dress and hair some. Her hands were moving on their own, her actions frantic. She felt everyone’s eyes on her. Their judgement. Jon’s judgement. Her chest became tight. The air was being sucked away by everyone so close to her. The trees were closing in.

“Sansa? Sansa what is it?”

“I can’t…” She rasped, grabbing her reins and looking about for an escape. “Let me… I need to go…”

Then she was kicking at her mount, the poor horse whinnying in displeasure. Still, it jerked forward, galloping away from the others and wending its way through the trees. She kicked and snapped the
reins. Seeking air. Seeking any escape from the tight hold of panic on her body. The cries from the others were lost in the wind in her ears, the world becoming a blur of trees and shrubs.

She didn’t know how long she rode. In woods this thick she could have only crossed a short area but that wasn’t her concern. She just needed air and when it finally started to return to her Sansa eased up on her horse. It slowed to a stop in a small clearing, snorting as she clutched at her chest and gasped in deep, desperate breaths.

*I’m such a fool… this was how it was always going to be. This is what I’m doomed to be.*

**Joffrey did what he did to make me his forever… Sandor died to free me but I’ll never really escape.**

A snap of a branch caused both Sansa and her horse to start. Robb had made it clear they weren’t supposed to ride off alone, not with outlaws prowling the North. Yet it was no broken man coming out of the woods, only Lady following after her. Sansa could practically feel the concern coming off the wolf and climbed down from the saddle to meet her. She took only a few steps before dropping to her knees and wrapping her arms around the wolf’s neck. Lady whined and sniffed deeply of her, accepting the embrace and growing still.

“Lady… Lady… don’t you ever leave me.” She pressed her face into the wolf’s fur. “I can stand never knowing love but not being alone… I can’t be left alone again… not like after Sandor…”

Lady listened to Sansa spill her fears out for some time, being there like she had been ever since they first found each other. No matter what the realm thought of Sansa this wolf would accept her. It was a small comfort to think on, for no prince ever would. Then Lady scolded her as well, pulling away from Sansa violently. The wolf acted so suddenly she was nearly thrown off balance. She caught herself with one hand to Lady’s back as the beast gazed at the arrival of a horse and rider ambling into the clearing.

The prince she’d run from.

“Sansa? Are you alright?” Jon asked, wide-eyed and fearful as he leapt down from his horse and walked towards her.

“I’m fine.” She struggled to her feet, smoothing her skirts and hiding her face from his gaze. “I just needed to get away for a moment. To compose myself…”

“That’s my fault.” Jon grabbed hold of her horse’s reins and led it back her way. “I am poor with my words… I meant to ease your burdens, not add to them. Weddings are complicated affairs and there’s only so much I can leave to you. The bride has her duties but there are tasks for the groom as well. I should have sought the septon’s guidance on those rites…”

“I’m sorry?” She looked at Jon’s eyes and found them as sad as ever. Not full of judgement or disgust like she feared. “You were asking me about wedding rites?”

“Yes… I was a poor student during our lessons at Summerhall. I never cared much for the ones on the Andal faith and I didn’t want to embarrass you during the wedding…”

*He didn’t want to embarrass me… he wasn’t calling off the wedding… he was asking for help…*

She was grappling with this when Jon stood before her, head lowered. He did not raise it even as he handed the reins to Sansa’s mount back to her.

“I would not have you suffer my idiocy… my bungling. Not during a wedding. You deserve a fine occasion. It’s important that my family be seen as respecting the Faith of the Seven in the south but if
you wish to be wed before the heart tree I will find a way to make it so. If you want to change your mind.”

“That’s not why I rode off.” Sansa reached for her reins, her hand slipping over top of his. A tremble running through her, so powerful she swore his hand did the same. “A wedding before the seven is fine by me Jon. Teaching you about it even better. I should not have ridden off, I’m just a silly girl who misunderstands things.”

“Silly?” Jon’s grey eyes looked up with a deep earnestness. “Princess, if I thought you silly I’d never try and explain the Dark Order to you. Few have grasped the truth of our ways as quickly as you. I felt my words clumsy in comparison to yours… I had not looked at the order in that light in a long while. In a hopeful manner.”

Sansa was struck by his words and the smile that pulled at Jon’s face. Here, in this clearing, they were alone. She should have been terrified. Fearful of the sword strapped to his side and the weapon he hid within his garments. Yet nothing about how he gazed at her or spoke so kindly troubled her. Joffrey’s trickery had been born of boasts and sly charm. If Jon was a liar he was a brilliant one.

He could’ve tried to take advantage of her not yet instead he helped her up into her saddle. His hand lingering on hers. Hers on his. She wanted to believe more than anything he was what she hoped. Yet Lady’s growl gave her pause.

The direwolf had backed away from them both, now lowering her head and snarling towards Jon. That was when Jon pulled away from her, his head snapping about, much like Lady’s was doing. His hand falling to his sword.

“Jon…” She grew fearful, her hopes betrayed. “Jon what did I do?”

“Sansa, ride off.” Jon said before pulling free Dark Sister. “Now.”

Rather than pointing the blade at her the prince pointed it to the edge of the clearing. There she saw a number of ragged looking men appearing. More were emerging from the woods all around them with each passing moment. Their clothing was filthy, their beards long and faces dirty, all armed. Swords, spears, mauls, one with a bow. There were eight in all, each one pointing a weapon at Jon and her. A tall one was so bold as to grab at Jon’s horse and yank it far from the prince’s reach.

“That’s her.” An older man growled to an uglier one. “That’s the Stark daughter. The older one. I seen her from the trees. Knew it was her that rode off.”

“Perfect.” The ugly one replied, hefting up a cruel looking sword and throwing back his cloak made of some strange hide. He had a broad nose, long dark hair and wormy looking lips. His eyes as pale as milk.

It was him Jon pointed Dark Sister at.

“This is the Princess Sansa Stark. She is under my protection and that of her brother Robb, the King in the North!”

“He’s no king of mine.” The ugly one laughed. “Nor my father’s. We’ll see how high and mighty the Starks are when we leave this one’s skin drying out in the sun.”

“Hold.” Jon commanded as Lady snarled and snapped. “If you wish a hostage I am Jon Targaryen, son of the High King. Take me and let the princess ride free from here. If you make to bar her path, you will die. That I promise.”
All the outlaws began laughing then, mocking Jon and making lewd gestures to her. Sansa held her reins tightly and tensed when the ugly man swung his blade through the air in threat.

“Brave man. I’ve flayed a few of the brave ones before. They always end up screaming. I make them scream my name. Ramsay. She’ll scream it too when I’m done with her.”

“Ramsay Snow?” She put a hand to her mouth. The name was whispered and cursed at Winterfell, for his crimes in the North were legend. “The Bastard of Bolton.”

“Bolton?” Jon’s tone changed, his eyes darting to their left were only two barred their path. When he spoke again it was only to her, a whisper. “Sansa, when I move you ride. You ride.”

“Jon, no.”

She looked about for Robb, for Grey Wind. For anyone. Yet she saw no men save only those who meant her harm.

“Please Sansa, stay.” Ramsay smiled cruelly. “I’ll teach you to style me proper. After everything is said and every hole used—”

“Sansa ride!” Jon roared, rushing at the two men between her and the woods.

One held a spear, the other a maul. Before she snapped her reins the man wielding the maul had fallen, Dark Sister swinging blood through the air as Jon defended against a spear thrust. The others charged forward and Lady leapt up to attack a swordsman, allowing Sansa’s horse to run off. An arrow flew by her as Jon held back the spearman, the prince meeting her gaze as she rode by.

His sad eyes now full of fear as well.

Terror coursed through her. Much of it was for herself and what these men would do to her if she stayed. There was more than enough fear left for Jon and Lady as she watched the five Bolton men close in on them both. A spearman jabbed at Lady, driving her back while the other four attacked Jon. He met the cuts of blades and other swipes with a grace akin to the finest of dancers. Yet he had far too many partners.

Far too many.

Just like it had been for Sandor. When he rode to protect her from Joffrey’s men and paid for it with his life. When she had let him die for her. His love for her had earned him a poorly dug grave and nothing more. Now she left Jon to much the same.

Not again… not again… I won’t bury another…

I won’t let him die.

She pulled at the reins, jerking her horse about as Jon shouted in pain. The archer had loosed again and an arrow was buried in his side. He struck out and threw away more strikes from his foes but Ramsay was moving about. Trying to get at his back.

“No.” She rasped, finally getting the horse to face the fray. Kicking at its side with all her might. “Please. Please!”

The horse charged forward. Sansa’s heart beating just as powerfully as its hooves. Jon had been driven to a knee, still laying about with Dark Sister and holding his attackers at bay. All save Ramsay. The Bastard drew up behind Jon. Raising his sword high.
Only to curse at the sight of Sansa charging towards him.

At the last moment he cut at her horse but it was too late. Her mount screamed, Sansa screamed, but so did Ramsay. The horse rode right over the Bastard, the man falling beneath its hooves before the poor animal stumbled from its own wounds. Sansa was flying then. Thrown from her saddle and moving through the air like a bird.

_A little bird._

Then she hit the ground. The impact drove the air from her lungs. It set her side to screaming and her mind to reeling. She rolled across the earth, which was damp and hard. The pain racking her body nearly bid her to slip into a creeping blackness yet she held on. Sansa fought against it. Jon’s voice guiding her way.

“Sansa!” She heard him shout. “Sansa!”

The world was hazy but things came together. Her horse on the ground, Ramsay crushed beneath it. The fiend rasping and grunting as he died. Lady was killing another of his men, her jaws wrenching free an arm. Then there was Jon. Still alive, still fighting.

He was fighting three now. His face was red. Everything about him was red. She remembered the Dark Order and how they rode. Jon moved liked them. His skill and speed defying sense. Still his enemy came. Still he shouted for her.

She thought it was her mind failing her when a large white blur burst from the trees into the fight. A Bolton man screamed as the white beast pulled him down. The wolf’s massive jaws tore through his flesh, crushed the bones in his arm. Lady’s albino brother would be this man’s death.

That still left two for Jon to face. Two men fighting hard to kill him.

She needed to go to him so Sansa set to crawling on her hands and knees. Anther body hit the ground soon after, the dark prince having gutted him. The last Bolton fiend was pressing him, fighting like a savage. He was hale and strong while Jon was hurt and slowing. An arrow jutted out of his side. Other hurts bled on his face and body.

“Jon!” She choked out, crawling his way. “Not you!”

He didn’t hear her, for that was when his foe pinned Jon’s sword to the ground. Jon didn’t fight for his blade then, instead grabbing at the arrow in his side. With a shout he wrenched the arrow free, his blood spraying across the ground. He then drove the bloody arrow tip right up and into his foe’s neck.

The man was still gurgling when the white wolf took out his legs and made to tear him to shreds. Lady was standing over Sansa now, whining and licking at her face.

Yet still she crawled to Jon, who was staggering her way.

“Sansa…” He rasped, blood steaming down his face and from his mouth. “Sansa… speak to me… please be alright…”

“Jon.” She reached up to him.

Jon was covered in gore. His blade slick with blood. His face and black garb stained with red.

She remembered how Joffrey had draped himself in gold and satin. Nothing was too extravagant to
prove himself royalty.

Yet as Jon came to her, filthy and weakened, she found a man far more worthy of the title of prince.

Sansa saw her prince.

JON

_I look horrible... Vhagar see me through this..._

Jon scowled down at the finery he was wearing. He’d been struggling here in his pavilion with his clothing for far too long. The doublet was as black as ebony, its buttons and fastenings made of silver. The shirt beneath a dark grey with white frill about the sleeves and collar. They felt itchy against his wrists and worse around his neck. The collar was too tight and Jon grunted as he pulled at.

The sound was born from annoyance and pain, his hurts from the ambush not fully healed yet. Beyond the cuts and bruises it was the arrow wound that pained him the most. His side was stitched and bandaged, courtesy of the order’s chief healer and Maester Luwin. Both men had chided Jon for tearing the arrow free in the manner he had. He’d taken that in stride yet shouted in pain when boiling wine was poured into the gash.

That agony and the hurts he bore now were all worth it. Sansa had been spared whatever suffering the Boltons had planned for her. When Ramsay Snow threatened Sansa it hadn’t mattered how outnumbered he was. Nor that he’d lost his horse or lacked any armor. Sansa would get away, even if it meant his life.

So he had become death. Men of the Dark Order were taught to fight as if the odds would always be against them, for they nearly always were. He had lacked armor but that made him light, agile, Dark Sister alive in his hands. The Valyrian steel cut through flesh but it was Jon doing the killing. He hadn’t thought twice about tearing the arrow out to finish the last kill. That was how badly he wanted the bastard dead. Had Jon not felt so weak he might have smiled to see the light fade from the man’s eyes.

Sansa’s eyes had been far brighter. Those blue eyes were as lovely as could be. Which made it all the worse to see himself reflected in them. A bloody, gore covered monster.

He’d feared such a moment since Robb declared Sansa had accepted the betrothal. That one day she might see what he truly was. Jon just hadn’t expected it to come so soon.

_That seems to be the way of things here in the Sunset Kingdoms. Nothing has gone as I planned._

_Father chose the wrong man to carve out our place here... the Starks were wrong to give Sansa to me..._

The Starks credited Jon with saving Sansa’s life but that was a lie. Sansa had saved his in truth. Her riding back for him was one of the bravest acts he’d ever witnessed and had almost cost Sansa her life. There was not a doubt in his mind they both would have died there if not for the arrival of their true savior.

When Jon turned to look at his bedding he found a large white beast with bright red eyes staring back at him.
“Well then, how do I look?” He asked, holding out his arms and displaying himself to the direwolf. “You insisted on staying to watch me dress. Let’s hear your thoughts.”

The direwolf cocked its head in silent response, as silent as ever. This was the sixth direwolf born of the same litter as the others. The one without a Stark.

“The runt.” Robb had told him. “An albino mute and a standoffish one at that. It causes no harm since he is rarely seen. A ghost really.”

Ghost. That’s what Jon had taken to calling the direwolf that had saved them. The wolf refused to leave his side after the ambush. Ghost was present while the healers tended to him, something Sansa had tried to do as well until Jon sent her away. She’d taken a hard fall and he commanded the maester to see to her care. Truly he couldn’t bare her to see any more blood that day.

He wanted better for her.

Jon was still fussing over his clothes when Gendry and Asher entered his tent. Both stopped midstride and gaped at him.

“Fuck me.” Asher smiled, looking Jon up and down. “Look at all that lace.”

Gendry laughed. “I’m offended brother, is the dark mail no longer good enough for you?”

“Shut it.” He growled. “This is how Westerosi highborn dress for such occasions. I wanted to wear my armor but my bride told me that is not proper. I need to learn the ways of these people. It’s their customs I should be respecting.”

“Well, with all due respect commander.” Asher smirked. “I’ve never seen you looking prettier.”

While Gendry and Asher shared a laugh Jon scowled again. Neither of the two men wore armor either but were still dressed in the tunics of the Dark Order. He was about to ask them on the state of the others when Gendry opened up the flap and waved someone within. The High Queen walked inside then, carrying a dark cloak in her hands. Mother wore a black and crimson gown, which dragged behind her as she walked. Her dark hair was bound in a large braid that hung over her shoulder, bound in a silver ribbon, yet he saw no crown upon her head.

Mother caught him looking and touched at her hair.

“I saw no need for my crown this evening.” She smiled some. “Tonight I wish only to be a daughter of House Stark, not a High Queen. A proud mother more than anything else.”

“Then look to Gendry.” Jon fidgeted with his collar again. “Blasted thing…”

“Here.” Mother handed the cloak off to Gendry, then moving to sort out Jon’s garb. “I wish there’d been enough time to do this right. The Winterfell seamstress did well but I thought you looked quite handsome at court-”

“We’re not at court.” He replied. “The styles favored at Summerhall aren’t known here. I won’t look more an outsider than I already am.”

Mother laughed. “Gods, where does all that stubbornness come from I wonder?”

Despite his hurts and the comfortableness of his clothing, mother’s words lifted his spirits some. There had been tenseness between them since the godswood yet if mother still held any opposition to his marrying Sansa she held her tongue. She’d actually done the princess a kindness the day of the
ambush, for it had been mother to embrace Sansa and lead her away from his tent.

“I had thought to find you at the castle.” He said. “Is something amiss?”

“Nothing Jon. Not if you’re happy.” Mother stroked his cheek before inclining her head back at Asher and Gendry. “I only assumed with your men busy readying for the march south you’d be in need of someone to attend you.”

“We’re better at fighting than finery.” Gendry nodded. “Even if there wasn’t a war on, Jon would be poorly served by us in this.”

Somehow the talk of the coming war made him feel less nervous. Only days after the ambush ravens had arrived from Riverrun. Word had reached the Tullys that the Lannisters were amassing an army at Casterly Rock and the Durrandons were readying their forces north of the Blackwater. The enemies of the Starks had decided the time was right to act. Robb and Jon had been of the same mind on how to respond.

The army of the North would march south and the Dark Order would ride at their side. If good fortune was with them Robb hoped to arrive in the riverlands in time to join their strength with that of his southron vassals. Things were now moving at a rapid pace, his time here at Winterfell coming to an end.

His imminent departure meant it was time for Jon to prove his dedication to the alliance. His marriage to Sansa was no longer some misguided idea. The Starks wanted Jon and Sansa to wed before he left for the south. Thus the last few days had been spent not only preparing for war, but for a wedding. Only one of which caused his palms to sweat.

He was rubbing his hands against the sides of his breeches when Mother released his collar, beaming to stand back and gesture to him.

“There! There’s my handsome prince!” She put a hand to her chest then. “Mine for only a short time longer, my boy. I’ve dreaded this day as much as I longed to see it come. To see you married. To lose you to another.”

“Speaking of.” Asher broke in. “Sansa Stark is waiting. The Starks wanted us to be at the castle before sunset. We should be going.”

“No quite yet.”

Mother took the cloak back from Gendry. Unfurling it so all could see it was an entirely new garment. Most of it was made from black suede the order used for the cloaks of its outriders. Jon had worn such a cloak during many a harsh campaign yet never seen one this handsome. White fur draped about the shoulders and around the neck, more of it lining the edges. It was a fine contrast to the dark cloak and complimented the white three-headed dragon sewn across the back, his personal sigil. When the High Queen held the cloak out for him to touch he marveled at soft it felt within, discovering only then it was lined with black silk on the inside. That earned a questioning look to his mother which she shrugged at.

“I gave my silk gown over to maker.” Mother said. “Strong, warm, and gentle, I figured Sansa’s cloak should match the man I’ve giving over to her.”

“Thank you mother.” He bent down to kiss her brow. “I love you.”

“I love you too son.” She leaned into his shoulder, taking a firm hold of his arm. “Now go and fetch
Before they departed Jon entrusted Gendry to carry Dark Sister on his behalf. He felt naked without a sword on his hip but he terrified Sansa enough already. Gendry accepted the sword with grace, declaring himself to be honored.

Jon felt much the same when they left his tent to find a collection of mounted men and waiting to escort him to the castle. Ethan and Tum stood out in the white cloaks of the Highguard and Jon counted Balaq, Greenbeard, Thoros, and the Blackfish among the order men. Beyond the riders stood the rest of the Dark Order. His men stood at attention in two long lines, guiding the way from his tent to the gates of Winterfell. It touched him to see such a thing. This wedding was not popular among the men, apparently most wanted or believed Jon should continue on as their leader. He’d made it clear though this marriage benefited the empire more than his continued leadership of the order ever could.

Some of those arrayed before him likely disagreed with that yet they honored him all the same. Brynden rode forward, leading Jon’s horse to him with a weathered smile. Greenbeard held the black standard of the Dark Order, Thoros the red dragon banner of the Targaryen Empire. It fell to Asher to carry Jon’s own banner and it was then a light snow began to fall.

“A summer snow.” His mother’s words came out as a white mist. “During a wedding no less.”

“A bad omen?” He asked and Asher chuckled.

“A good one. A couple who marries in the snow can withstand anything, even winter.”

They were off after that, Ghost leading the party on their slow ride up to the gates. He tried to focus on the size and grace of the direwolf to settle his nerves. Jon had ridden into battle countless times and faced foes terrible enough to haunt his dreams, yet he’d never felt as scared as he did right now.

_It's not my life I’m set to ruin here... I can lead men, I can wage war, I can kill._

_What’s all that to caring for a wife? How can I be what Sansa needs? I don't even know what I need._

The sun was setting when they were welcomed within the castle by a troupe of Stark guardsmen. After dismounting Ser Rodrik led them on to the yard outside the Great Hall, which had been completely transformed.

Winterfell’s sept was too small for a wedding of this size so Robb arranged for it to take place in the shadow of the septry. A wide awning now stood outside the sept’s entrance, its beams adorned with bands of heather, thistle, and countless wildflowers. Septon Chayle stood below it, between the statues of the Mother and Father which both had bouquets of blue winter roses at their feet.

The decorations did not lack for admirers as the Stark bannermen packed the yard. A diverse collection of northern nobility stood to either side of the path Jon and his mother were walking along. Many he knew only by their family names, the Hornwoods, Cerwyns, Glovers, Flints, and so on. Yet here and there he found some he did to recognize. Maege Mormont and her daughters smiling as they passed, Rodrik Forrester and his wife did much the same but Jon found it quite unsettling when The Greatjon offered a wide grin of his own. That rarely happened without a bout of loud laughter to follow yet this time the Umber lord remained silent.

All were silent actually, the only talk to be heard were the greetings passing between Jon’s men and the northerners as they took their place among the audience. The Starks stood to one side of the
newly built altar. Queen Catelyn looking regal in a gown of blue. Her long hair moved slightly in the breeze and he noticed, just like mother, Catelyn had no crown upon her brow either. Uncle Benjen stood to her side, dressed as finely as the young Stark boys near them. Bran and Rickon smiled widely at the sight of Jon, though Rickon made a face when he pointed at the lace at Jon’s sleeves. Arya smirked at that as well, the lithe young woman wore a grey gown which none could call drab. Not on a girl with as much bearing as Arya, who was so bold as to wink at him.

*A wink today, a threat before that, I should fear this girl as much as I like her.*

*The Starks surely do raise women of note.*

His mother did not go to stand with her kin, instead moving to stand to Jon’s side of the altar. Ethan joined her there, Gendry and the Blackfish as well. Rickon giggled when Ghost pushed his way between Gendry and Ethan. Allowing the direwolf to act as part of his wedding party was likely not proper but it felt right somehow.

Anything that gave him strength was welcome right now. With the others standing apart from him Jon now waited with the septon at the altar. Everyone was looking his way and he instinctively reached for the assurance of a sword at his side. There was none there of course and he cursed himself for forgetting that. Then he began to worry on what else he might forget. Sansa had tried to do as he’d asked her, teaching him the rites of this marriage, yet between his healing and preparing for war their time together had been short. The Blackfish had done his best but practicing for the ceremony with the old knight acting as Jon’s bride was unpleasant for both of them.

*It’ll be far more unpleasant if you bungle this. Remember everything Brynden told you.*

*Prayers first. The septon will lead you through. Then they tie your hands… wait…*

His worry was so great that he nearly missed the arrival of the bride herself.

Excited chatter rippled through the guests and drew his eyes back the way he’d come. The last light of day was leaving them and lanterns were now raised by guardsmen to ward off the night. Through the shadows and falling snow came the bride. Robb held her arm, Lady followed at her side but Jon barely noticed any of that.

His eyes were locked on Sansa. His bride. The most beautiful woman he’d seen in all his years.

They’d drawn her hair up into a style like a braided crown, a tight bun of auburn grandeur. That left Sansa’s face free to be admired, his eyes drawn to her high cheeks, rose colored from the cold and standing out against pale, pristine skin. Her eyes were lowered and Jon’s gaze did much the same, taking in loveliness of Sansa’s bridal gown. She wore a grey cloak on her shoulders and beneath it her gown was as white as polished ivory. Gold trim hemmed her neckline, offering only the briefest hint to the top of her bust. Around her waist hung a belt with white satin and golden embroidery.

He was still in awe of all this when Sansa raised her gaze so their eyes met. Hers were wide and bright, like winter roses in a field of snow.

Snow drifted down upon her as Robb brought her onward out of the night. It felt wrong that Sansa would be surrounded by shadows. Her radiance belonged somewhere far brighter, like a field of flowers on a summer’s day. Surely not here amidst the snows.

Someplace better than at his side. Surely all had to see that.

There was no end to people admiring Sansa’s beauty. Jeyne Poole clutched at her chest while Beth Cassel stared in awe. The Greatjon’s eyes were practically bulging out if his head and Thoros made a
silent signal to the red god. He caught Harrion Karstark grinning to whisper something into his
brother Eddard’s ear, nudging the man and causing his face to grow red with anger.

Jon didn’t care for that yet if any others noticed they ignored it. Robb was too focused on delivering
Sansa to her place at the altar. With a kiss to Sansa’s cheek and a nod to Jon, the King in the North
made to join the other Starks. Sansa then faced the septon so Jon did the same, finding it strange to
have to look upon an old man with a beauty like Sansa so near.

Septon Chayle cleared his throat. “Here, before the Mother and the Father, under the eyes of the
seven and you good people, a union is to be forged. Who is this man?”

“He is Jonarys Targaryen.” Mother answered, her voice loud yet gentle. “Son to High King
Rhaegar, Lord Commander of the Dark Order, a dragon of the empire… and my son.”

“And who is this woman?”

“She is Sansa Stark.” Robb declared, chin held high. “Daughter to King Eddard and Queen Catelyn.
A princess of the North. A wolf of Winterfell. My sister… whom I love so.”

*Then take her away from here,* Jon willed, *give her to a good man, a kind man.*

Robb did no such thing as Septon Chayle led those of faith in a prayer. Few besides Sansa and the
rest of the queen’s children were able to join. The northmen held to their Old Gods firmly yet it was
not the North the High King was intent on claiming. His father had commanded Jon to do all he
could to win the favor of those who followed the Andal beliefs. If the faithful of the south saw the
Targaryens respecting their gods father hoped they’d accept imperial rule all the easier.

Jon had agreed at the time but he hadn’t expected to be married in such a fashion. He was quiet
during the prayers, ignorant to them truly, and thus stood like a statue as Sansa spoke for both of
them. A stolen glance showed Sansa looking to the sky above, her words coming out as mist
between her pink lips, melting the snow that fell. Some was collecting about her shoulders and Jon
had to stop himself from brushing it away.

He had no right to touch her yet. Not that it would matter when he did. Whatever vows Sansa swore
here this night Jon swore his own. None of which could let him harm the princess to his side. She’d
been through too much already.

“Jonarys-”

“Jon.” He corrected the septon without thinking, his mind elsewhere as he gazed upon his bride.
Sansa caught his gaze and blushed while Arya and Bran’s snickers caused Jon to redden as well.

The septon was less amused. “Jon then, you and Sansa must now be bound together. As you will be
in life.”

“Oh.”

Jon thought to apologize when he felt a warm touch against his fingers. Sansa’s hand brushed against
his, her own fingers wrapping around his. He realized then she was leading them into the next part of
the rites. She gently bid Jon to face her, taking both his hands in hers and he feared his were shaking
like a green boy’s before battle. Their eyes met again and the uncertainty he saw in Sansa’s made
him ashamed, for she likely feared he would bungle this. He offered the smallest of nods and a
squeeze of Sansa’s hands, in hopes of reassuring her.

For half a moment he thought Sansa would smile but the septon ruined it all by tying a ribbon about
their hands. Jon didn’t like that. It felt wrong to see Sansa bound in any way. His objection was forgotten as the septon began to speak the vows.

“Before the eyes of the seven, I hereby seal these two souls. Binding them together, for eternity. Look upon one another and say these words. Father.”

“Father.” His voice mingled with Sansa’s as they began to recite the vows of the seven. Their vows to each other.

“Mother… Smith… Warrior…” They spoke as one. “Maiden… Crone… Stranger.”

He knew the next part well, the vows which filled him with a desperate hope. A terrible fear.

“I am hers, she is mine.” Jon declared, shocked at how good it felt to say. Snow was melting upon Sansa’s red cheeks when she replied.

“I am his. He is mine.”

His heart beat faster to hear Sansa say so. To feel her touch. To watch how she bit at her lips as the septon declared them wed. Jon numbly watched as the man untied them yet made no move to take his hands away from hers. The septon was saying something but the pounding of his heart was too loud. A horror crept up in him when Jon realized another rite was expected and he had no idea what it was.

Sansa rescued him then, just like she had in the Wolfswood. Her eyes moved to his cloak and then to her own as she turned away from him. Robb stepped forward to take hold of the direwolf cloak Sansa wore, unfastening it and lifting away. Jon’s mother came beside him, pushing the bridal cloak into his hands before wiping tears away from her eyes. He wanted to comfort her but he was no longer a child and his duties were now to his wife.

“With this cloak I do seal my vow.” He laid the cloak around Sansa’s shoulders, fastening it as tenderly as his hands could. “I take you under my protection Sansa Stark. From this day until our last day.”

Sansa did not have to speak a word in response yet when she turned her hands sought his arm. Her body trembling, from the cold he hoped.

With the rites done the couple faced their families and guests, who erupted in applause and cheers. Robb was in a duel with the Greatjon for who could shout the loudest. Much like Jon’s mother, Queen Catelyn was weeping openly, gazing at Sansa with pride. Jon did a double take at Arya, for her eyes appeared misty as well. Yet when the princess caught him looking she rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

Lady took to howling then, a sound matched by her siblings gathered at the far end of the yard. Their howls echoed off the castle walls as Robb announced a feast in the Great Hall in honor of Jon and Sansa.

“Good food and better wine! Full bellies and hazy minds!” Robb shouted to the joy of all. “Let us celebrate this marriage like it deserves! May it grant my sister and cousin a happy marriage! And us good fortune in the war to come! To victory!”

“To victory!” The northmen echoed the call and Sansa’s hold on his arm tensed.

In the joy of the last few moments Jon had forgotten what the future had in store. He’d let himself get caught up in wedding the North’s greatest beauty. Sansa was his wife but war was his calling. Soon
it would beckoning him again, tearing him away from Sansa’s grasp. She looked up to him fearfully
and he wondered if she was recalling what he’d done in the Wolfswood. If Sansa too had become so
lost in the ceremony that she had forgotten the kind of man she married.

One far too good at killing. A man ignorant of how to make her happy.

And Jon wanted to do that more than anything.

To make Sansa happy.

SANSA

“If it please you my lord.”

Sansa looked to Jon to seek his permission. He was seated to her side here at the high table and
appeared surprised by the question. As was Robb, who stood with his arm offered for a dance. The
celebration underway was loud, Aunt Lyanna’s minstrel playing a lively tune. Sansa looked forward
to a dance with her brother yet knew the proper thing to do was ask the prince his mind.

*No, not just the prince… my husband now…*

*I am a woman wed. I am his and he is mine.*

“Of course Sansa.” Jon answered, rising to help her stand. “Whatever will make you happy.”

“No worries on that!” Robb chuckled. “I know my little sister, I’ll have her spun about so many
times she’ll be smiling half of the night. The rest of the night falls to you Jon.”

“Robb!” She gasped, the sound of it lost over Robb’s laughter as he took hold of her hand and led
her from the dais.

King or not she meant to scold Robb for his vulgar humor but her attempts were drowned out by the
voices of others. Guests called out praise for her gown and congratulations for her marriage. Sansa
still couldn’t quite believe it. This morning she had woken up Sansa Stark, the stain on the honor of
Winterfell. Now she was a part of the Targaryen imperial family. Four months ago she had never
given one thought to her distant cousin. Now Jon was her husband.

*If someone had told me of all this I would’ve named them a liar. That such tales belonged in songs
and the songs are lies.*

Yet as Robb began to spin her about in a dance her eyes went to high table. Where her husband sat,
as real as could be. Jon sipped of wine and watched their dancing with a far off expression. That
inspired her to put an extra bounce to her steps and to twirl her skirts about a tad more than usual. If
she was to be wed to a fine man she’d look worthy of one.

“Are you trying to outdo me?” Robb asked, eyebrow raised as he did his best to keep up. “Marriage
agrees with you Sansa. I doubt the realm has seen a more beautiful bride.”

“Thank you Robb.” She said before pinching at his arm, causing him to flinch. “And that is for
jesting of what is to come. You call me beautiful but that is because I wear a gown my friends
worked hard upon. There was nothing they could do for my scars though. Jon will surely turn away
from me when he sees them.”
Robb shook his head. “That man who stood tall against eight foes for you Sansa. He did not abandon you then, I can’t see him turning his back on you for some scars. Did you not see him nearly faint at the sight of you?”

“He did not.”

Robb’s words did cause her to remember how dashing Jon had looked waiting for her at the altar. His garb could not have been finer, the way the snow caught in his long dark hair gave the prince a cold elegance that made her chest flutter.

Her mind always went back to how he fought for her. How he had suffered such great hurts yet made to protect her nonetheless. Sansa had let herself believe Jon might truly care for her then. Yet after the fight he’d sent her away, refusing to have her around while he lay wounded. She’d thought for certain Jon blamed her for his hurts, a belief the High Queen dissuaded her of.

“Child, dear niece. Hush.” Aunt Lyanna had cradled Sansa against her as Jon’s cries of pain followed them on their journey back to the castle. “Jon holds no ill will against you, it is in his blood to act recklessly for the ones he cares for.”

“He does not care for me. Only the alliance… if I died under his care it would destroy all the arrangements—”

“Nonsense.” Lyanna had gripped her chin and forced their eyes to meet. “I spoke against your betrothal for the foulest of reasons. I must beg forgiveness for that and owe you a great debt. You must know Jon would not hear me and not for loyalty to any alliance. It was me speaking against you that stoked his ire.”

Sansa hadn’t believed her and Lyanna knew it without her speaking a word. The queen would not leave it be, drawing her close enough so the maester could not hear.

“You and I, we’ve known suffering.” Lyanna’s grey eyes darkened at some distant memory. “They branded you. Beat you. Well they whipped me. Did worse. They tried to ruin us. Rhaegar never accepted my views on that. He believed in who I was long before I could. There are good men in this world Sansa Stark. My son is one of them. Give him leave to show you that.”

Once Cersei Lannister proclaimed the same of Joffrey. The wicked woman knew of Joffrey’s cruel treatment of her and berated Sansa for earning his tortures. Always looking down at her when the tears would come. Lyanna was different. She met Sansa’s gaze, held her close and spoke of pain few could ever know. There was no falsehood in the High Queen. No judgement. Only understanding.

During the wedding, when Jon’s hands had trembled in hers Sansa feared he would pull away from her. Denouncing the whole wedding and her as a bride. When her chest had grown tight and the panic threatened to return, it was Lyanna’s words that echoed through her head. Of Jon being a good man. Instead of turning from her Jon had offered a nod. He gripped Sansa’s hands tighter and did not let go again until it was time to put his cloak around her shoulders. That cloak had been softer within than she expected, warmer as well. Strong enough to hold back the cold and make her feel safe. It fit well.

Jon’s touch had felt the same. While Robb was a fine partner Sansa wished it was her husband dancing with her now. He had left his seat at the table and was now speaking with a number of northmen. Rodrik Forrester shook his hand while Halys Hornwood waited his turn to do the same. What gave Sansa pause was the drunken form of Eddard Karstark, who said something that gave his brother Harrion and Jon a reason to look displeased. Harrion added something with a nod to Jon before forcefully pushing his brother back towards their table.
“What’s all this?” Robb asked and she thought for sure he’d seen this display as well.

Instead she found her brother staring at another couple making to dance. Namely Arya and Gendry, the poor sergeant being dragged across the floor to the hoots of his comrades. Arya had to put Gendry’s hands on her hips and press them till they stayed. The sergeant’s cheeks burned as laughter rang throughout the hall.

“Well, there’s a man I need to bloody.” Robb sighed and she smacked his arm.

“You’ll do no such thing. Leave them be. How often is it that Arya invites a man to dance? It’s a rare thing during a rare occasion.”

“Perhaps just a bruising then?” Her brother inquired, earning another smack. “Ow! Fine, fine. The wife of my ally is a demanding sort. I’ll have to accept being the kind of king to stand to the side and glower at his sisters’ suitors then. Or to suffer watching them dance with their husbands.”

Robb grinned and stepped away from her, for Jon now joined them with a bow.

“You grace, I would beg a dance with the princess.” Jon asked politely and Robb touched Sansa’s arm lovingly.

“You two have a whole lifetime of dances laying ahead and look how impatient he is to start. Well I’ll not stand in the way of that. Treat her kindly Jon.” Robb made to leave them but before he could Jon leaned in to whisper something to him. Whatever it was made Robb stiffen and eyes narrow. “I was clear on that matter. All were told. It’s not something to worry on Jon, please, enjoy the evening.”

Robb departed but his stern words aroused her curiosity.

“Was that about the alliance?” She asked and Jon frowned, clearly displeased to answer.

“No, not at all. A drunk man asked me how long until our bedding took place. A Karstark, saying something about proving your beauty to all. I did not know what a bedding was and did not take his meaning.”

Sansa’s blood ran cold. A bedding was her worst nightmare. Strange men grabbing and pawing at her, baring her flesh and scars to all, it would be like Storm’s End all over again. Mother had refused to hear of one and Robb had sworn no bedding would occur. She did not have to guess at which Karstark thought to suggest such a thing to Jon. A petty vengeance on Eddard’s behalf, for what Arya did to him or because of the mocking he received during the ceremony. Talia had overheard Harrion calling Eddard a fool for missing out on a bride like Sansa.

A vengeful fool. A drunken vengeful fool. He wishes a bedding to display my ruin to all.

To embarrass me… to embarrass Jon…

She was wringing her hands nervously at the thought when Jon took one in his, concern etched across his face.

“This bedding, it displeases you?”

“It’s a custom.” She hesitated to say. “One I asked Robb to forgo… it involves-”

“That’s all I need to hear. If you do not wish it, then it will not be done. I only worried I’d shown myself ignorant of another of your customs. I must make amends for my bungling at the wedding, I
pray this helps.”

The prince then gave a silent signal and the minstrel took up a new song all at once. It took only a moment for Sansa to recognize it and she smiled.

“Jenai of the Sorrows.” She said. “You asked for this?”

“No, you did. This was the song you chose after my match with Robb. I worried it was a poor choice for a wedding-”

“No it’s perfect.” She spoke truly, heartened Jon had deigned to remember such a thing. A small grin appeared on his face. A handsome one. Then she welcomed his hand upon her waist. For it fit well. Their dance began as such, the slower tune lending to a more leisurely form of dancing.

“This minstrel plays wonderfully.” Sansa sighed. “People call this a sad song yet there’s a great romance to it. Jenai and her Prince of Dragonflies… a prince who gave away an empire for love. For a woman with flowers in her hair.”

“Truthfully I used to mock it.” Jon admitted. “Aegon and I both, when we were boys. We’d laugh about an heir doing something like that for a woman.”

“It’s important for Targaryens to choose the right wife.” She said, feeling her spirits drop for she was surely the wrong type. Yet Jon shook his head, his dark hair falling some over his eye.

“To me it’s better to make the right choices. What’s best for the empire is not always what’s right. It’s taken me a long time to learn that… and I’m finally on the cusp of righting many wrongs. On making the right choices. I hope so at least.”

His solemnness was returning so she reached up to brush the hair from Jon’s face, letting her fingers trace along his skin. The feeling it gave was a warm one, a welcome one.

“I pray I am a right choice.” The words came out as if another spoke them. “I’ll do all I can to be one. The empire’s ways are different but-”

A bellow from the Greatjon cut off the rest of her words, the Umber lord stood near the Dark Order’s table and was urging them all to drink.

“Empty those cups!” The Greatjon lifted a tankard high. “Order men! Northmen! All of you! We drink as one before we fight as one! Let’s liven up those Dark Order cloaks with some lion’s pelts!”

The men of the hall shouted in agreement, drowning out the music and bringing the war back to Sansa’s mind. When it was mentioned at the wedding it felt horrible to think she was being wed only to bid farewell to her husband. The south was a place of great terror and hurt for Sansa but a part of her was jealous of Queen Lyanna. Her aunt would be joining the march south. Riding with Robb and Jon. Watching over them. Caring for them.

“To the Starks!” Uncle Brynden shouted, lifting his cup high and hundreds of men did the same.

“To the Targaryens!” Uncle Benjen added.

Men were shouting and drinking, boasting and spilling, it was all becoming very raucous and Sansa feared for her dress. She sought a less crowded spot for Jon to lead her when she spotted him. Eddard Karstark was swaying her way, his goblet spilling over as he stumbled through other guests. To others it looked like he was merely joining in the toasts. Yet Sansa saw something in his eyes. Drunk as he was, the man was intent on something. They had a cruel look to them, much like
Joffrey’s before some horrid act.

When someone called for a toast to Robb she watched in horror as Eddard lifted his cup. She thought of her dress then, the gown she looked so pretty in. The one that hid her ruin. Eddard nudged Rodrik Forrester for an excuse to let the dark wine spill downwards. Sure to ruin her dress.

It never had the chance. While she watched all of this numbly Jon spun her about, the wine splashing down upon him instead. His face and much of his chest were drenched in it, many in the hall growing silent or gasping like Sansa did. The Dark Order men rose swiftly from their seats, their eyes all on Eddard, who stood gaping at the prince.

“My apologies.” Eddard grumbled and bowed poorly. “I’ve been told I’m the clumsy sort. My father tells me I must apologize for that.”

“No, not for that.” Jon’s tone was cold, his stance a threatening one as he gently urged Sansa back. “You must apologize to the princess. My wife.”

“What for?” Eddard challenged. “It was an accident and her gown is fine. Not a mark on that dress.”

“Apologize for what you meant to do. Else I will hold you to account. My blade came with me to this castle and if you press me, it will leave bloodied.”

“Jon I don’t—” She wanted to stop this before it went too far but Arya came to hold her back, her face full of silent fury.

Jon’s expression betrayed nothing. Wine ran down his face in dark red lines akin to blood. It dripped onto the floor yet the prince’s gaze never left Eddard. The other Karstarks were near but their eyes were on the middle son as well, awaiting his response. Robb was not so patient when he arrived.

“Why must Sansa be apologized to?” Robb inquired, rounding on Eddard. “If offense was given to my sister on her wedding I will see to it that you—”

“Eddard will apologize.” She interceded, drawing all eyes to her save for Jon and Eddard, who still glared at each other. “He will do so and I will accept for he has had too much wine. Too much drink in celebration of my wedding. He will give an apology and I will wish him well the rest of the evening. We can part ways honorably for mistakes are made, are they not Eddard?”

Eddard’s eyes faltered and moved to her then. He was drunk but he was also backed into a corner. One she was desperately trying to see him out of. Jon need not have this man’s blood on his hands and she saw not point in Robb losing the Karstarks over such foolishness. More than that, she wished to tend to Jon, who had moved far too quickly for a man with his wounds.

With a deep swallow, Eddard bowed his head to her.

“My apologies. I am drunk and that made me... well my fight is in the south, not here. I apologize Princess Sansa. On my honor as a northman, I apologize.”

“I accept.” She said before reaching to Jon, who remained tense. “Jon… husband. This is at an end. It would make me happy to put this behind us.”

“It would?” Jon looked to her and she nodded.

He considered that a moment before she felt the tenseness leave his body and he turned his back to Eddard. No words passed between the two men, Eddard returning to his kin and Jon seeking out a cloth for his face. The mood had darkened some in the hall but she cared less for that than the state of
the prince. His clothing was soaked with wine and he would surely need to leave to change. When Sansa said so Robb began to laugh.

“Get that minstrel back to playing!” He commanded, waving his arm about to address all. “We need a lively tune! The bride and groom are about to retire to their marriage bed!”

She made to argue but the guests were already clapping and hooting at the idea. The Greatjon shouted something about Jon not being the first man to seek his wife covered in wine. Asher and Uncle Brynden took to patting Jon on the back while Jeyne and Beth ran forth to grab Sansa. There was to be no bedding but before Sansa could catch a breath her ladies were leading her from the hall while men flocked about Jon, shouting bawdy jests. The minstrel began to play *Oh, Lay My Sweet Lass Down In the Grass* and the last sight she caught of Jon was Aunt Lyanna speaking into his ear.

Robb had arranged chambers for the couple’s use in the Great Keep and that was where Sansa’s ladies led her. Jeyne and Beth were all giggles while Talia sang a sweet song to guide their way. Arya fumed about Eddard but Sansa had bigger worries. This was the part of the night she dreaded.

*Jon was kind to me with this gown on but when he learns the truth of me that’ll change.*

*I’m a scarred, branded girl with no maiden’s gift to offer him.*

*His kindness will turn to disdain… his tenderness lost…*

The chamber itself was warm, the bed covered in soft furs. Jeyne admired the flower petals tossed all over the room while Arya mocked them. Beyond that there was a dressing table for her with a washbasin that a servant filled with steaming water. While the girls helped Sansa out of her gown and let down her hair all she could do was stare at the bed.

They were meant to make love there but all she felt was fear.

Everything was moving too quickly, her gown taken away. Her small clothes replaced with a shift far too thin and bearing so much skin she clutched at herself. Her arms and legs were nearly bare, her breasts straining at the top of garment and her back no longer hidden. Arya drew Sansa’s hair down so that it hid the brand, the sisters embracing afterwards. She tried to draw as much strength from Arya as she could but there was little time for it. Gendry’s voice boomed through the door, announcing that was Jon ascending the keep and would there shortly.

And so they left her. Leaving Sansa alone, barely clothed, and doing her best to breathe normally.

*Any moment he’s going to walk in and see me here. We’ll be alone and everything will change.*

*Just like it did with Joffrey. Jon will come in and blame me for the wine. He’ll blame me for what I am.*

*He’ll hurt me for it…*

The sounds of footfalls in the corridor spurred an urge for her to hide. Sansa looked about the room, panic setting it and only growing worse as she found no place to shelter her. Until she saw her bridal cloak. The black and white cloak Jon had put about her shoulders.

She had felt safe in it and that was what she needed now. So, just as the chamber door began to open, Sansa threw the cloak around herself, hiding her body beneath it. She turned from the door and still did not face it when it shut.

“How?” Jon’s voice was hoarse. “Sansa I… I must say… the room is very welcoming.”
“It is my lord.” She spoke to the bed for she had not yet the courage to face him. The cloak could not cover her whole body and much of her front was exposed.

“How are you cold?” He asked, still not having moved from the doorway. “Do you wish me to call for more wood for the hearth? These aren’t your chambers and if you’re not comfortable…”

“Thank you but it’s alright. I’m not cold.”

“But you’re wearing the cloak still. And you’re shivering…”

“I don’t mean to… I apologize Jon.”

She bit her lip then and finally turned to face him. Jon stood in the doorway, his clothes stained and expression somber. The cloak hid most of her from his sight but when his eyes roamed up her bare legs and tops of her breasts the prince swallowed.

“I didn’t think… with the cloak on I thought you hadn’t…” Jon rubbed his face and looked away. “You look a vision Sansa. There was no need to go to such trouble on my account.”

“It was my duty. I am your wife.”

“Yes… yet you shiver.” Jon sighed. “You tremble without feeling cold. I can see the reason in your eyes, for it is familiar to me. So Sansa, speak truthfully now. Are you frightened of me?”

“I’m scared.” She admitted, shaking her head and pulling tight on the cloak. “I’m just scared… forgive me. Forgive me for acting a child my prince.”

“Lord.” He corrected her. “Just a lord, you’re the only royalty- oh no!”

The sob had escaped her before she could stop it. That small misstep caused the walls to break and her fears to spill out. Already she was a disappointment and he had not seen the worst of her. Jon was coming towards her, hand outstretched as if to help but she jerked back.

Jon stopped in his place. “Sansa… Sansa it is alright. I’m sorry for all this. They forced you didn’t they? To marry me? I know you think me a monster but I’m not the kind to-”

“You’re not the monster. I am.” She wept, watching Jon’s confusion grow. “Please my prince… my lord… Jon! Jon don’t hate me for what I am. I’ll do all I can for you. Whatever duties you ask just don’t hate me. Don’t hurt me.”

“No one will hurt you.” Jon raised up his hands. “None. Certainly not me. Sansa when they told me you were… mistreated, the only hatred I felt was for the monsters who could do such a thing. I wanted better for you. Better than me. I’m a monster and you saw that in the Wolfswood. Know I’ll never be one to you. For you I’ll be more. I swear it.”

*Why does he call himself a monster? How can I deserve better than him?*

“I’ll bed on the floor.” Jon continued. “For tonight. For every night until you give me leave. If that day never comes then so be it. I swore to spare you from monsters and I’ll swear another vow now… ugh.”

Jon had been making to kneel when he grunted and grasped at his hurt side. The events of the hall came back to her and suddenly Sansa was beside him. The cloak was forgotten, falling away as she took hold of Jon’s arm and helped steady him.
“Has your wound worsened?” She looked to his side and grew worried for it was stained dark, like the rest of his clothes. There was no way to tell if it was blood or wine she was looking at.

“It is no bother.” Jon lied horribly, his eyes wide at the sight of Sansa in her shift. “Sansa… your cloak…”

“You clothes.” She corrected, wiping away her tears and pulling at his doublet. “Jon take them off we must see if you are hurt. I’ve seen wounds fester before and if we aren’t careful—”

“As my wife commands.” Jon backed away to begin fumbling at the fastenings of his doublet. It did not take long for her to realize his skill with a blade did not extend to dressing.

“Here, let me help.”

Sansa’s fingers began moving through the loops and ties with ease, ignoring Jon’s protests. The memory of Sandor drove her on, her fear of Jon a distant thing compared to her fear for him. When the doublet was off the stained undershirt came next and Jon’s upper half was laid bare. Wine glistened over his lean form, darker where his muscle cared lines across his chest. His scars remained, the ones she’d stared at during the wrestling match. Yet it was bruises and cuts from the ambush that stood out to her. No more so than the dark red bandage at his side. Sansa watched with worry as Jon undid it and then exhaled in relief to find the wound there still stitched and not bleeding.

“You’ll need a new bandage.” She said but Jon was already tearing a strip from a clear part of his undershirt. Sansa could not help but frown at that. “We could’ve sent for one, there was no need to completely destroy your clothes.”

“Force of habit.” Jon shrugged. “When the order rides we use what we can. Fear not Sansa, your gown is safe from me.”

“Why thank you, Jon. Please don’t think to put that bandage on without washing first. There’s a basin right here.”

She took his hand and led him to the table. She took a cloth in hand and soaked it in the warm water. Yet when she made to press it against Jon’s chest he stopped her, holding her wrist in a shy manner.

“I can do this myself Sansa. You need not—”

“Did you not become a mess protecting me?” She asked, cocking her head and putting a hand to her hip. “You drove me off after the ambush, do not think to try the same here. Let me do my duty. Let me tend my husband.”

Jon relented, dropped his arms to his sides as Sansa began to move the cloth up and down his body. Moments before she had been weeping but Jon had done nothing to warrant it. Even now, as she soaked his chest in warm water he stood as still as a statue. His eyes trying to stay elsewhere but drifting down to her body now and then.

“I did not drive you off.” He spoke defensively. “I thought only to spare you the sight of any more blood. You already saw me at my worst that day.”

“Your worst?” The heat of the water felt right considering how her body was warming from touching his. “Jon you acted a gallant prince and I’ll hear no argument different. It upset me you would not let me stay at your side… I’ve seen my fair share of blood…”

“I know.” Jon rasped, his jaw clenching with each touch of the cloth. “Forgive me. I am trying to
treat you as you deserve and I’m making a mess of it.”

“Well messes are easy to clean.” She turned to wring out the cloth and was rewarded with a small laugh from her husband. Yet it died away all of a sudden and to her horror she realized her hair had fallen away from her shoulder. The brand was there for Jon to see and he stared at it now.

His face twisted in anger.

“I’m sorry.” Sansa dropped the cloth and covered the brand with her hand. “I’m sorry! I was going to wear a veil or keep my hair hiding it… please don’t look…”

She was backing away when Jon took hold of her arm. Then, slowly, carefully, he laid a hand over the one she used to hide the brand. When he began to pull it away Sansa whimpered in fear and shame. Jon’s grey eyes were as sad as ever as he peered down at the ugly stag.

“It’s too horrible…” Sansa felt the tears coming again. “It’s too ugly…”

“Nothing about you could be ugly.” Jon’s fingers tightened around hers. “What they did, it made them ugly Sansa. Not you. Now that I see this… it is only a reminder of my duty to you. My father sent me to fight for the empire. Robb and I shall shed blood for an alliance. But now I will fight for you. For my wife. I’ll make myself worthy of you.”

It was all lies. It had to be. Yet everything she’d seen of Jon made him a terrible liar. Others would recoil in disgust at the sight of her brand yet he looked at it with a deep sadness. Like mother would look after she visited the crypts. Sansa wasn’t prepared for this. Nor when one of Jon’s fingers left her hand and moved across her scarred flesh. She shivered at how gently it was done and how good his touch felt.

Yet Jon took that tremble the wrong way. His finger pulled away and he might have done the same had she not held firm

“Forgive me.” Jon beseeched her. “I swore not to touch you. I had no right Sansa, no right and I beg you-”

“I welcome it.” Sansa said, wishing to feel his touch again. “Please don’t scorn me now… not after saying such kind things.”

“I’d not scorn you. It’s not about that… I just won’t take liberties with you. Not when you’ve been forced into wedding me-”

“And I won’t force you to hold me… but if you did, I would welcome it. I would.”

Jon seemed torn then, his eyes searching hers for something Sansa hoped she could give. She took a small step forward, bringing them a bit closer, hoping Jon could accept that. He did more than accept it, his strong arms moving around her and pulling her body against his. Her brow rested against his cheek. Her breasts against his bare chest. Her hands at his shoulders. His hands pressing against her back. She could feel his heart beating and wondered if he could feel hers.

They stayed like that for some time. She couldn’t say how long. His embrace was much like the bridal cloak. It was strong yet soft. They fit well.

When Jon’s lips moved to kiss her brow a sigh escaped her.

“Was that alright?” He asked when she made to gaze up at her.
“It could have been better.” She teased with a smile. “In the songs a bride is kissed—”

Jon kissed her lips then. His beard rubbing against her face as his lips slide over hers. They were warm and full, the feel of them sending a shudder through her. It felt so good to be kissed again her breathing was heavy when he pulled away.

“I hope that was better.” Jon smiled down at her and she basked in that.

“It was… might we keep trying though?”

She was rewarded with another smile and then another kiss. This one she met halfway. It was all very innocent at first. Lips pressing to lips, hands staying put and yet gripping tighter and tighter. Yet soon the hands began to roam, hers to Jon’s face and strong shoulders. His up and down her back, sliding to her arse and causing her to laugh. That might have broken the kiss had her body not pressed hard against his.

Somewhere the fear still lingered. Rattling its cage and wishing to be free again. To grab hold of her mind and tell her things were as they had been. Yet Jon’s touch proved that all to be a terrible lie. One she no longer wished to cling to. She moaned and he grunted. Her leg rose up against his and his hand cupped her breast. That part wasn’t gentle but she had no need for it to be. The way his thumb rubbed across her nipple bringing forth another moan.

In her mind it was Jon that led them to the bed but she suspected that tale might not hold the full truth. Where Sansa should be wringing her hands a wicked woman had taken her place and unhooked Jon’s breeches. A wanton one who let the straps of her shift be slipped off, so that the garment crumpled on the floor.

It was only when Sansa found herself laying back upon the bed, naked and stretched out on the furs for Jon to gaze upon, that the frightened girl returned. Her hands moved to cover her smaller scars but the sight of Jon half bent over and struggling with his breeches caused her to laugh.

“I must work on my dismount.” He rasped when he finally freed himself.

When he turned his eyes went wide at the sight of her nakedness. Her nipples were hard and while she kept her legs together his gaze fell to the auburn thatch of hair bout her sex. Sansa only caught this in flashes for she was taking in the sight of him a well. His cock was large and thick, not so big as to worry her though. She felt its hardness touch her leg as Jon climbed up the bed. If he cared for her scars he did not show it, too intent on kissing her again.

“Jon…” She sighed, her hips pressing up at him and his hand moving down her body. “Jon… Jon… I’m no maiden…”

“Oh… me neither…” Jon did not even slow his kisses along her neck. That he brushed off her admission so easily made Sansa tear up.

“Thank you.” She grabbed at his face, forcing him to look at her. “Thank you for being a good man.”

“I will be one.” He said, his no longer as sad as they’d been. “I meant all I said… I’ll be worthy of you Sansa. I will be. Worthy of being yours.”

She did not weep. She did not fear. When her legs spread and Jon moved between them it was what she wanted. Her words that bid him to push within and her voice that whispered.

“I am yours.”
And he is mine.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Two souls, trying to do the best they can.
A war rages and defeats are many.
As worthy as the blade, wits are needed for victory.

The Clash of Stags

Robert Durrandon’s death in a hunting accident put the Kingdom of the Storm in the hands of his son, Prince Joffrey. Now a king, and more a lion than a stag, Joffrey set about ridding Storm’s End of those who disdained the influence of the Lannisters.

Ser Barristan Selmy was one such man. Barristan the Bold served as King Steffon’s champion first, then as Robert’s. Yet when Joffrey ascended the throne he wanted a younger man for a champion and took that honor from the seasoned knight. The king went further still after Barristan protested Joffrey’s rash decisions and crueler actions. The noble knight was stripped of his holdings and banished from the kingdom, some say Queen Cersei even tried to have him killed.

Such actions inspired many Stormlords to turn from King Joffrey and call for Robert’s brothers to take up the crown. Renly was the most popular choice, beloved by highborn and lowborn alike. The charming prince raised an army at Fawnton, gathering support from the Reach as well. Yet some believed this to be an error, for Stannis was the elder brother and had better claim. Away at Harrenhal, Stannis was detached from events at court and had few allies. A stern man, little loved by any, he marched south with a force far smaller than that of Renly’s.

Together the two brothers outmatched their nephew’s strength at Storm’s End. Renly had three times the men and Stannis had Barristan the Bold acting his champion. With most of his supporters and the Lannister armies away battling the Starks, Joffrey’s days as ruler of Storm’s End appeared near to an end. Until the Durrandon brothers did the unthinkable.

Instead of uniting to retake their family’s home from the Lannister queen and her cubs, Stannis and Renly made war upon each other. Within sight of Storm’s End, where the three brothers had grown up together, Stannis and Renly went to battle over Robert’s crown. Stannis saw the kingdom as his by rights, Renly argued since they were both taking it from Joffrey rights went out with the privy pot. Neither was willing to give up their claim so both vowed to fight.

Stannis had fewer men but Renly less experience. The younger prince attacked at dawn, his men charging with the sunlight in their eyes. Follies like that turned the battle from a rout into a viscous, brutal bloodbath. Thousands who disdained Joffrey’s reign died fighting one
another. The Durrandon brothers among them.

Mortally wounded but with Barristan the Bold at his side, Stannis cut his way to his brother. All knew Stannis a hard man but none ever believed him a kinslayer. Yet that’s what he became, with the sunlight at his back many claimed Stannis more a shadow than a man when he slew Renly.

With the rebel cause already reeling a force loyal to Joffrey fell upon the survivors. Many rebel lords were captured and made to bend the knee. Others lost their heads and lands, sating Joffrey’s cruelty. The fate of Barristan Selmy was a mystery afterwards, for he was not among the prisoners nor the dead. None having seen him since.

So it was, in trying to bring Joffrey low, Stannis and Renly secured their nephew’s continued reign.

A more shameful folly is not easily named.

JON

The causeway could barely be called a road.

In the empire, most roads were paved stone and level, the ancient Valyrian ones so broad that entire caravans could pass one another with ease. What lay ahead of Jon was little more than a ruddy path in the mud. Running along a raised embankment, it was narrow and winding. The cold, barren shore of the Bite lay to the east, the vast, murky bogs of the Neck stretched out to the west.

Robb and Jon took all this in with grim silence outside the gates of Moat Cailin, their only company the two direwolves at their sides.

Jon was thankful his father had not tasked him with invading the North, for Moat Cailin was a formidable fortress. Various types of moss crept up the great basalt curtain walls of the Moat, which were nearly as tall as Winterfell's. A great timber keep lay within and a number of smaller buildings, less important structures compared to the three stone towers that loomed over the fortress and the road itself. Each was pockmarked with arrow slits, allowing archers to rain hell freely on any foolish enough to attempt an attack up the causeway.

“Not much to look at.” Robb grunted then, glaring ahead. “Our road to glory.”

“I’ve seen worse.”

The king made a non-committal sound to that, his mind clearly elsewhere. Robb, like Jon, wanted to be elsewhere. Yet here they both stood, staring at the route they would soon take south. That’s where Robb wanted to be, throwing back the invaders marching through his lands and avenging his father.

A noble goal for the son of a king, Jon reflected, my father sent me here for a good cause as well.

And all I want to do is return north… back to Winterfell.

To my wife.

It was a foolish thing to think on. Sansa and Jon had had only one night together before the northern army marched south. His wife was little more than a stranger to him. Yet it hurt to leave Sansa all the
same. To bid her farewell with a stone face while his princess’s eyes glistened with sadness and fear. He remembered how she woke that morning, with a look of shy contentment to be wrapped in his arms, their naked bodies pressed together. Holding Sansa had filled him with deep sense of calm. Leaving her had torn that all to shreds.

“You will be safe here.” Jon had tried to comfort her when it came time to leave, the couple holding hands. “This is your family’s home. Nothing will harm you here. They’ll protect you.”

“And who will protect you?” Sansa asked, her grip tightening. “You and Robb. None of you understand what the Lannisters are capable of. I know how Cersei and Joffrey think and if they find out that we’ve married… Jon, they’ll hurt you because of it… you’ve no idea what they can do…”

“And they’ve no idea what I can do. They’ll learn soon enough. I’ll make it back, I promise.”

That was how Jon left Sansa, frightened and upset. All he could offer her was a chaste kiss to her cheek and empty words on his eventual return. Not that he could predict when that would be. Nor truly guarantee it. Despite every part of his being wishing it to be so.

“We’ll get through.” He proclaimed to both Robb and himself. “I’m not simply speaking of this causeway or the Neck. Nor Riverrun or Storm’s End. I mean all of this. The battles ahead, the war itself. We’ll get through this Robb.”

“I thought I was the cheery one.” Robb adjusted his crown. “Well, the only way we’re getting through this is if we get into the fight. We’ve spent two days here simply waiting for Lyanna. Those are days we could’ve been marching. Time we might not get back.”

While part of Jon wanted to point out how long it had taken Robb to accept the alliance in the first place, he held his tongue. He agreed that his mother was in the wrong here. When the northern army left Winterfell the High Queen had stayed behind, in hopes of making final arrangements with Aegon and their other allies to the south. Gendry and a small party were to escort her south and rejoin the army before it reached Moat Cailin. That had been two days ago.

It was only this morning that some of the Blackfish’s outriders reported spotting mother’s party half a day off.

“There’s no excuse.” Jon admitted, petting Ghost’s head. “They were only a few score riders. At the pace this army moves, they had more than enough time to catch up. I apologize, cousin.”

Robb sighed. “We’re brothers now Jon, no need for that. As annoyed I am, I take heart in knowing that Lyanna’s almost here and no harm has befallen her. I’d rather your mother be late than anything else.”

It would be a lie to say that Jon hadn’t been worried sick this whole time. The idea of hundreds of Ramsay Snows ambushing his mother’s party would not leave his head. All nonsense of course.

*She had thirty of my best men. Gendry would die before he let anything happen to her.*

*He guards my mother… the Starks protect Sansa… duties that should fall to me.*

“King Robb!” A voice hailed from back towards the gates. “Your grace, there you are!”

Lord Ellard Bowden appeared beneath the portculis, leaning upon a crutch as he limped towards them. An older man, Ellard had a wooden peg where his left leg should be, having lost the limb to a lizard lion ages ago. The beast’s hide now adorned the wall of the lord’s hall. His missing leg did not deter Lord Ellard as he hobbled onward. With his dark hair and long features Jon might have
confused Ellard for a Stark, were it not for the man’s eyes. They were an usually deep shade of green, of a color that Jon had never seen before in all his travels.

“A mark of the crannogs.” Ellard had jested when they first met. “Stay near to the Neck long enough and the bogs work their way into your blood.”

Moat Cailin was indeed a mixing of the North and the Neck. A good number of the Bowden household was made up of crannogmen and Lady Bowden herself was a cousin of Howland Reed. There was even a hut within the fortress where an old crannogwoman kept strange potions and poultices. Ellard claimed her healing skills helped cure the worst of their snakebites and thus she was treated with as much respect as the Bowden maester.

So far they’d avoided any losses due to snakes, the army camping north of the fortress while Robb and most of his bannerman bedded within the castle. The lord had given over the Gatehouse Tower in its entirety to Robb, the Stark direwolf banner flying high above it while just below was the banner of House Bowden. A longbow crossed by three white arrows upon a grey field, a nod of respect that the Bowdens had for archery.

A look to the battlements showed scores of archers patrolling the walls. Since their arrival, endless bouts of archery competitions had raged between the bowmen of the Moat and the Dark Order. Black Balaq, never one for easy praise, spoke of how impressed he was by the quality of the Bowden archers. Karl Bowden, Ellard’s youngest son, a lad of fifteen, had taken Balaq to eight rounds of target practice before the Summer Islander took the win. Balaq had shaken Karl’s hand, a rare mark of respect.

It was that same slim, young man that helped Lord Ellard as he bowed in respect to his king.

“Your grace, I was hoping to find you.” Ellard spoke in a weathered voice. “We’ve spoken on this before but forgive an old man his stubbornness. I must insist you take a company of my bowmen with you.”

Robb wouldn’t hear of it. “My lord, I’ve already accepted your sons and nearly all your spearmen into my ranks. Should things go wrong in the south I need your archers here.”

“I could hold this fortress with half the men I have now.” Ellard pressed and Karl nodded, looking to Jon with his own set of eerie green eyes.

“Twice as many as Brandon the Bowman had when he held the Moat. Captain Balaq says the Dark Order is always outnumbered. Well, so are the Bowdens, yet we fight all the same.”

“My boy’s right.” Ellard agreed.

The lord then began retelling them the tale of his house’s founding. Three hundred years ago an army of the Vale had thought to invade the North while King Torrhen Stark had been busy defending his coasts. All that stood in the way of those twenty thousand Vale men was Moat Cailin and the king’s bastard brother, Brandon Snow. It was Brandon who held back the invaders, with only a hundred bowmen at his command. Brandon himself who slew three members of House Arryn, the uncle and cousins of Queen Sharra Arryn. When the third Arryn had fallen, the Vale army had retreated. In reward for his bravery, Torrhen named Brandon the new Lord of Moat Cailin, giving his brother leave to found House Bowden.

“Never kneel.” Ellard said at the end of the tale. “Those are my house’s words and our vow. We’ll never kneel to any threat that the Starks might face. Leave me with one bow and a quiver of arrows and I’ll hold off the lions myself!”
“I’ve no doubt you would.” Robb patted the lord’s shoulder while shooting a tired look Jon’s way. “Yet my decision stands. The army marches on the morrow and this fortress will be well defended when it does. The North and my family’s safety at Winterfell must be assured. I’ll have at least one part of my realm spared this war.”

As they spoke the war was already well underway. When Robb’s twenty-five thousand men had arrived at Moat Cailin they were greeted with foul tidings from the south.

The Lannisters had launched their attack on the riverlands and by all accounts it was a disaster to the Stark cause. An army under Jaime Lannister had broken through the riverlords at the Golden Tooth while King Tywin marched a larger force up from the south. Riverrun and most of the riverlands were now threatened and the word was that King Joffrey had departed from Storm’s End to join the Lannisters with an army of his own. The only good news to be had was that the Dornish raiding of the southern Stormlands had made the Stormlords cautious. Most of them remained behind while Joffrey made to grow his army further north, drawing soldiers from the riverlords that owed him allegiance.

Then Joffrey will have as many men as we have here. King Tywin moves with an unblooded army and Edmure Tully wrote of fifteen thousand with Prince Jaime.

Robb was still debating with Lord Ellard regarding the size of the Bowden contribution when Grenn and Ser Olyvar rode through the gates.

“A party nears!” Olyvar called as they jerked their horses about. “Galloping hard from the north!”

“Is it my mother?” He asked and Grenn nodded.

“The Blackfish says so! He rode out to meet them but, my lord, something troubled him! The High Queen’s escort, it’s a hundred strong! Mostly Stark men!”

“A hundred?” Jon repeated, sharing a concerned look with Robb. “My mother had Ethan and Tum watching over her plus Gendry and thirty mounted veterans, more than enough to see her here. Why would Bran send more?”

Robb frowned. “I’ve no idea. I gave Rodrik Cassel strict commands not to weaken the castle garrison. Seventy riders is nearly every horse left in Winterfell.”

“Ser Rodrik’s a good man.” Lord Ellard added, stroking his beard. “A loyal man. He’s not the type to disobey without cause.”

“Then let us learn this cause.” Robb declared and soon they were entering the fortress once more.

Within the walls the three towers of Moat Cailin stood tall and straight, overlooking all as they crossed to the northern entrance. Karl was helping his father limp along while Ghost and Grey Wind ran ahead. That was not a strange sight but Jon did take note of how excited they seemed. They were still marching across the damp, muddy ground when he heard the howls. He had grown so accustomed to hearing such sounds at Winterfell that he could tell right away that it was two different wolves making the sounds.

“What is this?” Robb demanded, quickening his pace as Grey Wind howled back. “What the bloody hell are they doing here?”

Jon had no way of knowing for sure but something made him suspect who ‘they’ were long before the gates began to rise ahead of them. He was not at all surprised when two new direwolves darted beneath them. The black one ran straight for Ghost, Shaggydog tackling his brother and playfully
nipping at him. The grey one moved Jon’s way and he prayed for it to be Summer. Or Nymeria.

Yet when he saw her pretty golden eyes his worst fears came true.

“Lady… no.” He reached out to put his hands to the direwolf’s head, petting her as she licked at him. “You’re not supposed to be here… you should be with Sansa-”

“Hey Robb!” Rickon’s shout echoed through the courtyard. The youngest Stark was bouncing in his saddle as he rode into the fortress, laughing to wave at his brother and then at Jon. “I told them I’d beat them inside! There was a race and I beat them all!”

Neither man could give voice to their thoughts as more followed Rickon through the gates. Mother was a close second, the High Queen smiling widely as she galloped up beside Rickon. Ethan was among the next few to come through, then Tumco and Gendry. When Gendry spotted him the sergeant’s face twisted into an apologetic expression. One Jon understood all too well when a party of ladies rode in, guarded by Ser Rodrik and a number of Stark men. Jeyne and Talia were there, and between them came an auburn haired rider in a familiar black cloak.

“What a beauty.” Karl spoke admiringly. “Who is she?”

“My wife.” Jon said, running a hand down his face in disbelief at the sight of Sansa.

“What’s the meaning of this?!” Robb roared, marching through the press of riders and making Rickon reconsider climbing down from his horse. The boy gave a cry when Robb yanked him to his side, taking a firm grip on the Rickon’s collar. “Ser Rodrik! Why is my brother here? My sister and her ladies? Why are any of you here?”

The old knight’s face reddened in embarrassment or shame but before he could speak, mother intercepted the king.

“Dear nephew, I fear there were many developments since we last saw each other.” The High Queen held her hand out to Robb so he could help her dismount. “The King in the North shall have all the answers he seeks, after we are free from our saddles. It was a long and grueling ride for us. Wasn’t it Sansa?”

“Yes.” Sansa answered, her gaze darting between the king and queen. “We drove our horses to a lather Robb just to get here as quickly as we did. My ladies are exhausted, as is Rickon as I imagine.”

“I’m no lady!” Rickon struggled fruitlessly against Robb’s hold. “I can keep riding! All the way to Casterly Rock! Right Robb?”

“Shut it.” Robb spoke with barely restrained anger, turning his gaze to mother’s outstretched hand. The king certainly showed grace then as he, despite his fury, made to help the High Queen down. “I welcome you to Moat Cailin aunt, let us find someplace where you can explain your- where we can talk.”

“As his grace commands.” Mother smiled.

While Robb did Jon’s mother a courtesy, Jon moved to show his wife the same. A flush of color appeared on Sansa’s cheeks as he took hold of her hips to guide her descent to the ground. He couldn’t deny feeling warmer to touch her once more. Nothing compared to his anger though, which he did his best to hide from Sansa when she finally stood before him.

“It is good to see you well my lord.” Sansa spoke quietly, her eyes avoiding his gaze but looking about his mouth instead. “The travels were kind to you?”
“Better than to you I fear.” He said, noting how exhausted Sansa appeared, her pale skin standing out against the bridal cloak she wore so well. “Why have you come all this way Sansa? Why?”

Before she could speak to it, Lord Ellard loudly announced that the hall of his timber keep would be opened to the new arrivals. While the lord led the Stark riders and Sansa’s ladies to the keep, the royal party would gather elsewhere, in the smaller guesting hall of the Gatehouse Tower. Its long table could only seat ten or so but none made to sit as hot, mulled wine and stew was brought for the weary. The Highguard and Ser Rodrik stood silent and grim as Mother gathered Sansa and Rickon to her near the hearth so they could warm themselves. Jon joined with Robb at staring at the High Queen incredulously. She was pushing a bowl of steaming stew into Rickon’s hands when Robb’s patience came to an end.

“Alliance be damned, aunt or no.” Robb crossed his arms. “You’ll explain why you’ve dragged Sansa and Rickon halfway across the North. Right now Lyanna.”

“I apologize Robb. Sending a raven would have been kind but your mother and I feared anyone learning that your siblings were traveling south. There are still Boltons bandits about—”

“Yet you risked them anyways.” Jon stepped forward, leaning on the table and glaring at his mother. “How could you be so reckless with their lives?”

“Jon, please.” Sansa spoke up, her hands wrapped around a cup of mulled wine. “Do not blame your mother, this was all because of me.”

“You?” He blinked in confusion while the queen put a hand on Sansa’s arm.

“After the army departed Sansa and I got to speaking. Of her times as a hostage to the Durrandons. Of all that she experienced in the south.”

“All of which is precisely why she should be at Winterfell right now.” Robb grumbled, until a sharp look from the High Queen silenced him.

“I do not speak of the cruelty that Sansa endured, but all that she learned of our enemies. Knowledge as valuable as three legions and- well tell them my dear.”

“Joffrey is not well loved.” Sansa said to a mocking response from Robb. “No brother, I don’t just mean by his enemies. By his bannermen as well. Queen Cersei was always going on and on about which lords couldn’t be trusted. A list that grew longer with each slight that Joffrey gave, every cruelty he wrought on his people. I saw the proof of that in the eyes of the lords who visited Storm’s End. They couldn’t hide it as well as I did. They hated Joffrey.”

“Think on that.” Mother challenged them. “Men of note who might be willing to abandon the Durrandon cause.”

“Like who?” Robb inquired and Sansa was quick to answer.

“The Darklys of Duskendale.”

“Aunt Lysa!?” The king let out a deep breath of exasperation. “That bloody woman hasn’t answered one of our ravens in years! She wouldn’t even bestir her lord husband to rescue you Sansa!”

Jon pieced it together quickly then. He knew a fair amount about the Darklys, for the empire traded often with Duskendale. Lord Royner Darklyn was Joffrey’s vassal but was married to the daughter of one of his king’s greatest rivals. Lysa Tully, Queen Catelyn’s sister and Sansa’s aunt. Jon didn’t remember hearing Lysa’s name spoken once during his time at Winterfell, likely because she was
guilty of exactly what Robb accused. Abandoning her family, leaving Sansa to monsters.

Sansa looked anything but scared now. “You don’t have to remind me of how little Aunt Lysa helped me Robb. I was there when she came to Storm’s End. When she turned a blind eye to Joffrey having Meryn Trant strike me…”

She paused then for Jon’s fists had curled upon the table. The name Meryn Trant was now etched into his memory as Sansa pushed on through hers.

“Aunt Lysa won’t help us. She’s content to avoid angering Joffrey. Her husband is a different sort though. That was our mistake, beseeching Lysa for aid rather than Lord Royner. He despises Joffrey for the taxes he levies on Duskendale’s trade. He even spoke out when I was beaten. Joffrey would have surely killed him then and there... if not for Ser Dontos the Daunting. He championed his lord-”

“Alright, alright.” Robb held up his hand, clearly deep in thought. “The Darklyn’s are the Durrandon’s strongest bannermen north of the Blackwater… we could try and offer Lord Royner-”

“Not you Robb, us.” Mother looked to Jon. “I wrote Dragonstone before we left Winterfell. The empire’s trade is important to Duskendale and I’ve seen to it that arrangements were made… all thanks to Sansa.”

Sansa seemed embarrassed by the praise but Jon couldn’t understand why. His wife had seized an opportunity in the south that none of them had considered. He had thought Sansa clever before this, yet clearly he’d underestimated just how sharp her mind was.

Which made sense. He barely knew his wife.

“None of that explains why Sansa is here.” Jon said. “A raven would have sufficed.”

Sansa’s face fell as Mother bristled. “This is not the only insight Sansa had to offer on the inner workings of the Durrandons and the Lannisters. It is clear she could be a great asset to us, hence why I asked her to join my party for this campaign.”

“You’re serious?” Robb faced Ser Rodrik then. “My mother agreed to this? Letting Sansa ride off to war!”?

“It wasn’t mother’s decision!” Sansa argued. “I’m a woman grown, bedded and wedded. Lyanna was willing to take me so I came. Mother and Bran disliked the idea but I do not need their leave.”

“Nor mine it appears.”

Jon spoke the words without thinking, his anger at his mother and wife’s rash actions boiling over. Sansa drew back at that, wringing her hands while mother appeared disappointed. The last thing he wanted to do was speak harshly to Sansa, so he kept his mouth shut, fearful of what else might escape. An awkward silence fell across the room, the only sound being Rickon’s loud slurps of his stew.

“Um… so.” Robb scratched his head and gestured to his little brother. “Why’s Rickon here then? Did he figure on some way to win the Vale over to us?”

“Rickon is to be Jon’s squire.” Mother said before raising a hand to cut off his words. “Yes, yes, only an order man could serve in such a role. So until you are free of your vows, Rickon will act as my cupbearer.”

“Oh, right.” Rickon put down his bowl and snatched up an empty cup, offering it to mother. “Do
“By the gods.” Robb grabbed his face. “Fine, Rickon I can understand. Sansa, truly, I’m not sure what to think of bringing you… that’s a decision I’ll leave to your husband.”

All looked to Jon, who chewed on that thought. “I would like a word with Sansa. Alone.”

Mother nodded. “Naturally. After she travelled all this way to see you, it would be discourteous of us to deny you two a moment. You do remember all our lessons on courtesy, don’t you Jon?”

Jon’s glare spoke volumes, letting his mother know just how welcome her interference was right now. She took it in stride, making mention to Robb of how rooms would need to be readied for herself and Sansa. When Robb told her space was scarce, that Jon and the others had been bedding down with the army after the last free tower had been given over to the Greatjon, mother laughed.

“Let me deal with Jon Umber. There’ll be ample room for myself and Sansa’s ladies when we’re done. A proper chamber set aside for Jon and Sansa. We can’t have a princess bedding down in a tent.”

The High Queen sounded confident in all she said, not once considering that perhaps the Greatjon would not succumb to her charms. Nor that Sansa might be unwelcome to Jon bedding with her this night. He thought differently as Robb and mother led the others from the hall, leaving the couple alone.

Him standing to one end of the table. Her to the other. Neither meeting each other’s eyes.

“You’re angry.” Sansa spoke softly, pulling at her braid.

“I’m furious.”

“Don’t be, not with your mother at least. She didn’t speak the whole truth… of whose idea all this was. It was I who approached her, to collect on a debt and to show how I could help you.”

“You help me by staying at Winterfell.” He kept his tone firm even though her words softened his fury some. “When this is all at an end, I would find you there-”

“My father promised the same. When he went south I begged him to stay. Now he’s gone and mother cries at night. She hides it but we all know. I don’t want to weep for you Jon.” Sansa touched her chest then, near to her heart. “I want to be a proper wife. Your people are very different than mine Jon. Their ways are a mystery to me. Lyanna was a Stark who learned to act as the wife of a Targaryen and she rides with my brother’s army. She told me your aunt Daenerys travels wherever she wills. I believed it was my right to do the same. You never forbade me-”

“I was clear on wanting you to stay under your family’s care. Must I order you about? By Vhagar Sansa, you know don’t belong here.”

“I belong here more than you.” She shot back, defiance flashing in her eyes. “These lands are strange to you, the people a mystery. Much like the empire would be to me. Yes, you have Robb and the others to guide you but haven’t I proven my worth? That all the pain I went through was worth it?”

By the end, Sansa’s voice had risen until he had trouble telling who was being lectured. What was he to say to that? He was her husband but these were her lands. They were married but she was right. He wanted to keep her safe yet she’d already been hurt.

“Please don’t send me back.” Sansa begged, rounding the table and coming to take his hands and
lowering her head. “Lyanna has promised that the Highguard will protect me. That I shall be as well-guarded as her. I’ll make no more trouble… I’ll be as obedient as you wish, just please my lord, please don’t send me away…”

Jon had heard pleas before. Hundreds, perhaps thousands. From defeated foes to dying friends, an endless stream of sorrow and pain. Long ago he had steeled himself against such things. Yet when Sansa raised her head, eyes full of uncertainty, her hands on his, it shook him. It felt like he was back before the sept again, swearing himself to her.

“I’m not your lord.” He cupped her chin. “I am yours and you are mine.”

No effort was needed to lift her mouth up to his, for Sansa complied with ease. The kiss hugged the line between propriety and hunger. It felt too good to last only a moment, for he had thought on their wedding night often. Jon felt an urge to take hold of her body and press it against his but he fought it. There was no ignoring the matter at hand. So, reluctantly, he pulled back to find Sansa’s expression far more hopeful.

“I do not want an obedient wife.” He said, running a thumb over her chin. “You’ve met my mother. She’s willful, perhaps even wild at times. Do you think any son of hers could not respect strength when he sees it? No. What made my blood rise, what worries me now, is how wrong I was. This whole march I thought you were safe and secure… and it turns out I knew nothing.”

“I was in no more danger than any of the others.” Sansa insisted. “Less than Gendry or Ethan… both said they would die before any threat touched me. The High King let your mother go to war… let me act as strong as Lyanna does. She’s been teaching me what’s expected of a Targaryen princess. Like how to speak High Valyrian.”

“Truly?” He held back the urge to smile as Sansa nodded and made to prove it.

“Kostilus ynot ren-ren um...renignon.” She beamed to speak in a strained yet earnest Valyrian accent. Yet the meaning of the words confused him and she saw that on his face. “What? I said ‘please, let me come’ did I not?”

“Oh, let me come.” Jon grinned. “Close Sansa. It is kostilus ynot mazigon.”

“What did I say?”

“Please let me touch.”

“Oh.” Sansa acted embarrassed but he refused to allow it.

“Do not feel badly, your accent was good. It is my mother who is a poor teacher, she has no patience. I was the one who taught Gendry High Valyrian. I will teach you too, if it please you.”

“That sounds marvellous. Truly! Perhaps during our ride south we could practice? I do so wish to be able to speak to your father in his own tongue. I’d want to make you proud if we were to visit Summerhall… oh, sorry. I should not have presumed…”

“I would be happy to take you to Summerhall, it’s quite lovely. All Targaryen brides have been presented there since Jaehaerys’s reign. Hence that lyric from Jenai of the Sorrows—”

“No, not about Summerhall.” Sansa looked at him intently. “About me going south. You’ve yet to give me your leave.”

She was right. He hadn’t. Yet already Jon was looking forward to hours of riding with Sansa.
Teaching her his language. Speaking of his home. Perhaps of the home they might build together. A chance to get to know the woman his life was now bound to.

*Send her back to Winterfell and you’ll forever wonder if she’ll run off again.*

*If this was any other woman, with all she knows, you would not think twice about bringing her.*

Jon was still struggling with that when a knock came at the door. Young Karl Bowden came to announce that the Greatjon had volunteered to turn over his chambers to the newlyweds. A bit of news that caused both him and Sansa to flush.

“They are yours Sansa.” Jon said once Karl left. “You’ve had a long ride and I can bed down in my pavilion like I always do. I’ve much to think on.”

Sansa frowned some. “If you so wish it but, husband, the Greatjon was kind enough to gift his rooms to the both of us. He might take it as some slight if you bed elsewhere.”

The clever young woman reached up to pull at Jon’s tunic, making a show of straightening it.

“If a wife did have a tiring journey, all in hopes of finding her husband, would it not be a good thing for them to share a bed? She would surely sleep better with him by her side. Especially if they are to have only one night together before she is sent away.”

Sansa smiled shyly towards the end, Jon marvelling at the way she was winning him over without once stating her true desires.

He cupped Sansa’s cheek, his face drawing close to hers again before he gave voice to his own wants.

*“Kostilus ynot renignon.”* He whispered, his lips hovering just over hers. “Please let me touch.”

Sansa recognized the phrase swiftly, wetting her lips to arch upwards.

“You can touch.”

And he did.

**SANSA**

The sounds of their grunting were loud in the tent.

Each time Jon thrust inside Sansa they both gave voice to their pleasure with abandon. Jon was pressing down on her, his hips driving between her legs which she had wrapped tight around his hips. His mouth left hers to kiss at her neck, leaving Sansa to stare up at the roof of the tent as she clawed at his back in lust. The whole pavilion was beginning to lighten as morning dawned anew and Sansa cursed the sun for rising.

*Another hour… another ten... not yet… not yet…*

It all felt too good to end but she knew it had to. The camp would awaken soon, their journeys to start once more.

Sansa knew Jon’s release was nearing, she recognized all the signs. The way his hand kneaded her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers, his kisses giving way to gritted teeth and muttered
curses in her neck. His thrusts were growing more powerful, his cock plunging so deep inside her that a change in position might make it painful. The way it was angled now made her feel full of Jon and lost to desire, her cries becoming all the more guttural.

It was embarrassing. She wanted to be quieter, to sound more lady-like, but there was nothing she could do save bite Jon’s shoulder. She dare not cover her mouth with her hand. It still stung from where she bit it earlier.

Jon hadn’t returned to their tent from his patrol until late in the night, his body damp from the rain and exhausted otherwise. Usually the night was their time for love-making but her husband was in no state for it. When he’d climbed into their stiff bed, she simply rolled over to embrace him, pressing her body against his cold flesh to warm him. She’d fallen asleep, face resting in the crook of his neck.

Only to be awoken by Jon’s mouth kissing away at her neck. She didn't have a chance to return his kisses before her gown was unlaced and his mouth traced a wet, warm trail down her body. Sansa hadn't understood why Jon's face was lowered between her thighs until his tongue flicked out to taste her.

It was wrong, the prince’s kiss. Improper. An affront to the Seven most likely. Yet she'd gasped and covered her mouth, any protests lost as Jon kissed and licked her through to a sweet release. She’d bit her hand horribly during, out of embarrassment at the guards without possibly hearing her cries.

Jon was not so worried now.

“Sansa.” Jon grunted as he thrust harder. “Sansa… my god…”

Jon muffled his groans by locking his lips onto hers again. Something about this part always felt wonderful. Her mouth captured each grunt, his passion flowing through his mouth into hers. His thrusts started slowing, becoming deep and determined, like he was trying to draw out what was fated. They both cried into each other’s mouths when he drove in one last time, his hips jerking and body tensing as he spilled his seed within her.

Their skin was slick with sweat, Jon’s weight forcing her deeper into the furs. It wasn’t very comfortable but she wouldn’t move for the world. Not while Jon's tongue licked at hers. Not while he stayed hard within her. When he finally broke the kiss and rolled away from her naked body, she could hear him muttering words in the native tongue of the empire.

“Kirimvose…” He exhaled, half of the words lost. “Kirimvose… darilaros… rijes abrazyrys…”

“He gives me thanks, her mind settling on meanings, he calls me princess.

“Kirimvose valzyrys.” She spoke breathlessly. “I give thanks to my husband.”

While Sansa pulled the furs up to cover herself, she knew well enough to leave Jon uncovered. He worked up such a heat in their love-making that he couldn’t tolerate any furs afterwards. She’d come to learn that about him during the many nights they bedded down in this tent while traveling south.

Just like she came to realize that he never fell asleep first, for she always drifted off to the feel of his hands running through her hair. Jon loved her hair. He hadn’t said so, not yet at least, but she knew. The way he touched it, the looks she would catch when he was staring at it in bed or as they rode. It was clear that he loved it.

Just like he loves me, she thought, he’s yet to say that either but I can hope.
Marriage and lust does not always lead to love… but it has for me.

Sansa pulled some at her hair as she watched Jon roll to the side of the bedding and pull his smallclothes and breeches on. She didn’t want him to rise just yet and was thankful when he moved back to kiss her again.

“We should be getting up.” He said, his arm to her other side so he could lean over her. His words punctuated by their kissing. “Robb will be in a hurry… might reach the Twins before the evening… you can sleep in a proper bed this night…”

“I sleep well… as it is…"

She sighed, feeling his hardness rising once more and press against her leg. A wicked thought of how swiftly she might get Jon’s breeches off came to her mind then. She found that her husband was rarely ever sated by just one release. Nor was she. It would be a sweet thing for him to take her once more. To do those things with his hands and mouth that no girlish gossip with her friends could have ever prepared her for. They could stay just a little longer for that, she thought selfishly.

“Hey!” Jon broke their kiss, jerking up and looking to the side of the bed. “Hey! Get! Not again!”

For a moment she worried that someone had crept into their tent during their lovemaking, too lost to their passions to notice but Sansa quickly breathed a sigh of relief. It was only Ghost watching them from the edge of the tent. Jon did not like it when the wolf watched them at this and lunged to grab his boot, tossing it at the wolf. It sailed by harmlessly but Ghost took the message, running off and out into the distance. Jon stood up from the bed then, grumbling.

“Oh Jon.” She chided. “Ghost’s just curious… he means no harm.”

“Harm or no, I’m the jealous sort.” Jon replied, giving her a rare smile as he gazed down at Sansa while she clutched the furs about herself. “I’d not share such a sight with anyone else.”

She wanted him to come back to bed so she could reward him for such sweet words when the tent flap burst inward, the poorly dressed and wild-haired form of her youngest brother flying through it.

“Jon!” Rickon exclaimed happily to see Jon standing. “I saw Ghost coming out and figured you were up! Can I ride with you and Robb today? All three of us? No girls-”

“Rickon Stark!” Sansa shouted, pulling the furs even more tightly about her body as she gaped in horror. “Get out! Get out this instant!”

Rickon took notice of Sansa’s bare shoulders and legs then and began to giggle and point. Jon was beginning to usher the boy out when she grabbed up his remaining boot and threw it straight into Rickon’s chest. The boy let out a cry when it struck.

“Hey! It’s not my fault! Half the camp is up-”

“Then go and join them.” Jon firmly guided Rickon out of tent. “We shall be out shortly. Fetch your sister’s ladies. Then go and ask your brother about the riding arrangements.”

“And to teach you some manners!” She added, already pulling the night gown over her head. With Rickon gone, Jon turned to watch this with a mischievous look in his eye.

“Rickon’s just curious. He means no harm.” He jested. “And from what I glimpsed without, he’s also right. Most of the camp is awake. Robb’s already striking his tents and readying for the march.”
“He’s trying to beat your men.” Sansa said as she laced up the front of her gown. “The Dark Order musters far faster than the northern lords. Robb covets that discipline and speed. He wishes that the Stark army had more of it.”

“I wish I could have more of a certain Stark.” Jon spoke in an enticing tone while he wantonly stared at bare breasts. It was almost funny how sad he looked when she finished tying the gown shut, like how Ghost would act when denied a share of her plate. Sansa wanted to let Jon have more of her, and she of him, but there just wasn’t any time.

When they were in bed together it was easy to forget the war. Now that they had risen, she had to face reality and the ugly truth was that the Starks were losing. They’d exited the Neck in an orderly fashion, only to learn from the Blackfish’s outriders that the Tullys had suffered a great defeat. Jaime Lannister had smashed the riverlords outside the walls of Riverrun, capturing her uncle Edmure in the process. Lord Blackwood still defied the Lannister host from within Riverrun, though there was no telling how long that would last.

Meanwhile King Tywin was putting most of the riverlands to torch, sacking the castles of Pinkmaiden, Stone Hedge, and Raventree Hall. The Lannister king now moved to block Robb’s crossing of the Trident at the rocky ford with thirty thousand men at his back. Sansa was happy to hear that the size of the Lannister host had not changed, as sad as that was to admit. It meant Joffrey and the Durrandons had not yet joined their might with King Tywin’s. The foe was more numerous but not insurmountable. There was still hope.

Sadly much of that hope was now pinned on the Freys.

House Frey had always made her father weary. She’d heard him describe the family as undependable at best. Yet most of the king’s criticisms of House Frey had arisen due to its lord at the time, Walder Frey. Robb described Lord Walder as an ancient, sour-faced weasel of a man who sought favor before doing his sworn duty.

“Thank the gods he’s dead.” Robb had declared during their march, earning a rebuke from Sansa for fear of Olyvar overhearing. “You’re right of course, but Olyvar’s nothing like his father. There are too many Freys to count yet I still name Lord Walder the worst. During the last war he refused to help the Tullys lest Edmure marry one of his daughters. Grasping bugger.”

There were few who mourned Lord Walder’s death in the passing spring and it was rumoured that much of House Frey had fallen into disunity afterwards. Stevron Frey, Walder’s firstborn son, now ruled the Twins but had not used his family’s strength to aid in the fight against the Lannisters. Robb’s scouts reported thousands of men marshalled at The Crossing while enemies ravaged their neighbors. Robb needed both the strength of the Freys and their bridge across the Green Fork to join the fight.

Edmure had to marry Roslin Frey to win such boons, what will they ask of Robb?

He’s unpromised... so a marriage is most likely. But that cannot happen, there are better matches out there for Robb... they’ll look to Arya and Bran then...

She was thinking on this when Talia and Jeyne arrived to see to her dressing. Which meant Jon left their tent soon after, her friends grinning to watch her prince peck Sansa on her cheek in farewell. While Jon saw to the Dark Order, her ladies saw to keeping Sansa informed of the camp gossip.

“You should have seen your aunt and uncle.” Talia giggled. “Queen Lyanna and Benjen shared a bottle of wine with the Greatjon and the Karstarks. They all got good and drunk toasting Prince Brandon and King Eddard. Oh, and Eddard Karstark made a vow to live up to his namesake... just
“I was almost kissed.” Jeyne interrupted wistfully. “Ser Olyvar walked with me by the river last night. He gave me his arm all the way back to my tent. He wanted to kiss me, I could tell, but he simply bid me a good night…”

Sansa comforted her friend. “Olyvar’s a good man, he likely didn’t wish to presume on your virtue.”

“It would have been nice if he tried.” Jeyne continued to pout while Talia laughed.

They acted as if they were all still at Winterfell and not marching off to war. Beth’s recent betrothal to Talia’s brother Ethan had meant her staying back at Winterfell and mother refused to even hear Arya's requests at joining the army south. Her sister was furious of course, mother earning the blame, for Sansa would have liked having Arya among them. The young princess’s bravery was missed as Sansa and the others drew closer to the families that had killed her father. The monsters who had tortured her.

Ruined her.

No, I’m not ruined, she reminded herself, I suffered hurts but I made it through.

I healed. I learned. Now it is time to spare others those same lessons.

The first sight to greet her eyes after they left the pavilion was a young man undergoing training his own trials. Karl Bowden, the youngest of Lord Ellard’s sons, was also the Dark Order’s newest recruit. After Sansa finished pleading with Jon to let her stay with the army, Karl had begged a boon himself of her husband.

“My lord, I wish to pledge myself to the Dark Order.” Karl had dropped to a knee before Jon. “Your men fight with the Starks and I wish to fight for you. I’ll do anything you ask.”

“Then I ask you to reconsider.” Jon’s expression had grown as hard as ice, his eyes narrowing on Karl’s youthful features. “If you look at the order and see glory or a chance at traveling the world, think again. That’s what you see in the light of the day. In the darkness we are war and hardship. It’s not your pledge we want, but your very life. Seven years of it or less, depending on what sacrifices you’re called on to make. Reconsider boy.”

“I’m no boy.” Karl had argued. “The marsh seer told me that when I become a man my path will be with the shadow riders. That with them my arrows shall travel farther than any Bowden has ever loosed or ever will. My bow is yours. My life is the Order’s.”

So it was to be. After Lord Ellard gave his assent, Karl was inducted into the Dark Order. The northmen were denied witnessing the secretive ceremony, though Karl’s training was plain for all to see. It was strange to see a northman like the Bowden youth clad in the dark eastern garbs of the Order. Stranger still to see him furiously working to inspect the shoes of a whole line of horses. He was partnered with a young Sisterman recruited from White Harbor, the pair repeating strange chants over and over again.

“Full fist, full stop… half fist, slow pace…” The two youths spoke in exhausted voices. “One left, archers ready… two left, archers loose… split left, hit the flanks…”

“Poort boys.” Talia said as she watched them, for hers was a gentle heart. “They never seem to stop. Chanting. Fighting. Working. That’s no life.”

“That’s because it isn’t their life anymore.” Sansa noted. “Their lives belong to the order now. My
husband went through the same. Asher and Gendry as well.”

Jeyne tittered at that. “And look how well those men turned out.”

Due to the efforts of Karl and the other order men, their entire company was ready to ride out within the hour. Even with the head start Robb had commanded of his bannermen, the northmen still could not match such organization. She thought for sure that that would mean Jon’s men would lead the van but that honor fell to Galbart Glover. Save for the parties of outriders screening their march, most of the Dark Order kept to the rear of the army. They were so far back in the line from where Sansa now rode that she could not even spot them.

Usually Jon would ride alongside her so they could speak of their different realms to each other, practicing Valyrian together, sometimes just talking. Simply passing the time.

She couldn’t imagine anything more wonderful.

However today Jon rode at his place beside Robb. While her brother made sure to engage all of his bannermen in personal conversations whenever possible, as father taught him, it was Jon he wanted with him when they arrived at the Twins. Olyvar as well it seemed, which caused Rickon to sulk, for he was riding back with the women and their guardians. The Highguard flanked Lyanna as she tried to tease a smile from Rickon while Jeyne and Talia did much the same with Gendry. The sergeant was doing his best to be polite as he saw to his duties, though he could not hide his blush and the ladies preyed on it. Gendry, like the other order men guarding the women, held a tall ironwood spear and wore an ugly brown cloak over his dark armor.

“They don’t want the Lannisters to know.” Lyanna explained to her. “Robb and Jon, they wish to keep the Dark Order’s presence here a secret. A surprise for our enemies, hopefully as unwelcome to them as the one you cooked up at Winterfell.”

“It was an idea. Nothing more.” She pointed out. “None ever thought of it because my family had little to offer the Darklyns. Without the Targaryens that plan would be for naught.”

“We Targaryens.” Lyanna corrected, the older woman gesturing to Ethan and Tumco. “The Highguard does not protect women of House Stark. They guard Targaryens, like you, and soon enough you’ll have a Highguard warrior of your own. I’d have Ethan take that task on now, but Rhaegar commanded them to see to my safety before all things and they heed him before all others.”

“Our duty is to the king.” Ethan added gruffly, his scarred face wrinkling to grin at the queen. “A wise king at that, for he knows how his wife enjoys getting into trouble.”

“Silence you.” Lyanna ignored her protector. “Sansa, do yourself a favour, choose a quiet protector. Like Tumco, a much more pleasant sort.”

“I get to choose? But I thought the High King would name one to me?”

“Well he could, but if I know my husband he’ll offer you some choice in the matter. If Rhaegar had his way I would have twenty Highguard slowing me down everywhere I go. Aegon usually keeps four about him but two were lost in the fighting at Meereen. I believe Rhaegar is waiting for Jon to leave the order to name new members, so our son can choose his own protectors. If they can prove their worth that is.”

“I hope I’ve proven mine.” She spoke earnestly, surprising her goodmother. “To you more than most Aunt Lyanna. Bringing me to Moat Cailin, it earned you Jon’s ire. All you did was for my sake and his… I did not think it would cause such a rift…”
“I knew it would.” Lyanna smiled sadly as she looked to Jon. “My son is too much like me to expect different. We’ve quarrelled before, though never for such a good reason. You were worth it Sansa. I did not bring you for your wisdom, nor simply because I owed you. You impressed me by even asking, most women I know would not think to do so. I believe it to be your mother’s influence. Yet when you used my debt to push my decision, I saw something else too. A glimpse of a queen.”

She tried not to let Lyanna’s words intimidate her. Her aunt had been instructing her in the manner of Targaryen court for weeks now. If they were in Volantis Sansa would be expected to host a three day celebration in honor of her marriage. The first day for the royal family, the second for the nobility, and the last and largest for the common folk. Then she would have to oversee the slaughter of a sheep before a clutch of dragon’s eggs kept at Summerhall. Most importantly would be the tour of the many cities of the empire, each with different rites and wants of her.

At first Sansa had thought that Lyanna was simply grooming her to be a proper wife. Over time though it became clear what role Sansa’s aunt wanted her to eventually fill.

*It is hard enough trying to get to know my husband, let alone learn how to rule an empire.*

“You speak too kindly your grace.” She said after a moment, inclining her head to the High Queen. “For I only see one queen among us.”

“One for now, and enough with this your grace business. I am Lyanna, aunt, or mother if you would prefer. I would welcome you calling me such Sansa. I never had a daughter. My son’s birth was a difficult one, it robbed me of the chance for others. Not that I ever lacked for love or pride in Jon. Does my son still treat you well?”

“Very well.” She blushed to think of how well he treated her at night when her eyes settled on Jon as he rode ahead, his dark hair moving in the breeze. He must have sensed her gaze for Jon turned about to look her way. His stern face began warming, his lips pulling into a smile. Lips she wished to kiss again. A mouth Sansa yearned to hear speak of love between them before she covered it with her own.

Instead Robb said something that stole Jon’s attention, leaving her to speak with Lyanna on other matters. They were both hopeful that once they were at the Twins, they could glean some news of the events that Lyanna had set in motion at Winterfell. By now the alliance’s fleet of northern and imperial vessels would have arrived at Dragonstone. The *Jaehaerys* was to begin calling upon Duskendale and the *Alysanne* was ordered to sail about Crackclaw Point. The lords along those coasts were among those that Sansa believed willing to rise up against Joffrey, with proper motivation.

The Stormlords were a trickier lot, many having already lost one rebellion against the Lannister puppets at Storm’s End. The Estermonts, the Conningtons, even the Selmys had reason to hate Joffrey and Cersei. Care had to be put into how to reach out to them, especially considering who Jon would have them paying fealty to when all was said and done. Robb and Jon had heard the women out on their ideas, and both were shocked when Lyanna proposed Gendry as possible way to inspire a Durrandon revolt.

The more pressing issue was securing the Frey support though, something Sansa pondered still when the twin castles of the Crossing appeared ahead. As intimidating as Moat Cailin was, the Twins were even more so. The two castles that stood to either side of the Green Fork had high curtain walls were ringed with arrow slits and murder holes. Inner keeps rose high within both and a tower sat at the middle of the stone bridge which connected them.

It was not long before a party rode out to welcome the army. Ryman, Lord Stevron’s heir, and his
half brother Walton was among them. They bid Robb and Lyanna to come in and feast with the Lord of the Crossing yet Benjen and Ethan refused to consider it.

While Benjen spoke courteously, Ethan was blunt. “Once you’re in their power we might not be able to get you out.”

“Well how else am I treat with them?” Robb asked. “Someone has to go in and I doubt Lord Stevron will be happy with me ordering him outside his own gates.”

“I will go.” Benjen offered and Jon did the same.

“As will I. The Starks and Targaryens should look united in this.”

“Sansa as well.” Lyanna added, earning a baleful look from both Robb and Jon. “I trust my brother and son of course, but I’m afraid you will both see this situation with more martial eyes than needed. I wish to have Sansa’s estimation of the Freys. Also, in truth, her beauty may help us, what lord would not be charmed by her?”

There was an argument on this but Lyanna won Robb over on the idea. Especially after Sansa told him of her potential responses to what the Freys would most likely ask of him, things that would be awkward for him to speak on. Ser Ryman and Walton would stay behind as hostages to their kin’s good conduct while the Blackfish joined with Olyvar to lead them within his family’s home.

As they drew closer, Sansa saw that the eastern castle was an impressive fortress, its gates strong and guarded by numerous men-at-arms. Jon rode close to her the whole way, his eyes moving about cautiously. It was touching and a proper distraction from the fear that came with being in a strange castle again. Surrounded by armed men loyal to others.

An ugly sight awaited them in the courtyard. While grooms took their horses, Sansa spotted a group of men held in stocks along the edge of the yard. Filthy men, barely clothed and clearly having been beaten. The youngest was barely older than Arya, the eldest an old man, his long white hair and beard hiding his face. She thought she could feel him staring at her yet when she looked his way the old man’s head lowered.

They found Lord Stevron in his hall, seated upon a massive chair of black oak, the back carved into the shape of the Twins themselves. A white-haired and wrinkled old man, well past sixty, the Stevron Frey’s weasel-like face turned from the great number of Frey brothers and cousins around him to wave them forward.

“By the Mother! I did not believe it when your riders came!” Stevron wheezed. “Never, never in a hundred years did I think to see the day when we would welcome both our noble King in the North and a High Queen within the Twins! My father would turn in his grave to know it is I who earn such an honor! Yet I do not see the king and queen here. Do they follow behind?”

A man laughed at that, one she would later learn was named Black Walder, Stevron’s grandson. “Is it our fault that Edmure Tully proved himself to be such a piss-poor commander?”

“Begging your pardons my lord.” Benjen bowed. “My nephew and sister are not here for you are not where you’re meant to be. How is it that the Freys stand down while Riverrun is besieged?”

A man laughed at that, one she would later learn was named Black Walder, Stevron’s grandson. “Is it our fault that Edmure Tully proved himself to be such a piss-poor commander?”

“Watch it.” The Blackfish warned. “That’s my nephew you speak of.”

“And Roslin’s husband!” Olyvar shouted back, challenging his nephew who stood a head taller than him. “He is the father of her children! A lady of House Frey is besieged yet you stand here sipping
wine! You would leave Roslin facing the Lannisters alone!?”

“Olyvar, is that you?” Black Walder sneered. “I thought you Rosby gets were all too good for us left at the Twins.”

More Freys shouted from amongst a crowd of weasel-like faces.

“Frey first!”

“The lions are hungry!”

“Why should we offer ourselves up as a meal?”

“Cravens!” Olyvar shot back.

The factions of House Frey almost came to blows then. It took Jon and the others putting themselves between Olyvar and Black Walder to stop them from killing one another. Through it all Sansa noticed that Stevron actually appeared pleased and soon she learned why. The uproar gave him reason to have Walder Rivers clear the hall of his kin, save for Stevron’s bastard brother and his grandson Edwyn. She tried to remember all that Olyvar had told her of Edwyn as Stevron began coughing.

“Forgive that display.” Stevron hacked from behind his hand. “And our lack of action. My family is not united in this. After my father died, I wished to restore goodwill to the name Frey... to show us an amiable family. A reasonable family. A loyal one.”

Stevron began hacking again so it fell to Edwyn to continue.

“But, just like the use of our crossing, all of that comes with a toll. If certain members of our family see my grandfather’s good nature as weakness... well, we could face problems here. Respect must be shown, whether by wolf or dragon, to win our swords and our leave to cross.”

“I take it gold is not the toll you seek.” Jon crossed his arms, causing Edwyn to grin while Stevron’s coughing worsened.

“This is the dark prince I take it?” Edwyn said with a smile that looked out of place on such a harsh face. “We congratulate you and Princess Sansa on your marriage. It seems one of the royal Stark children is married off... while the others remain unprom-”

“Is the dark prince I take it!” Sansa cried out, cutting Edwyn off so she could fill a goblet with water and carry it to the beleaguered Stevron. “Water my lord, a drink to parch your throat before we drink of celebration.”

To her it was a clumsy way to interrupt Edwyn’s attempt at match-making yet Lord Stevron accepted the water gladly. As he gulped deeply, his eyes took in her form.

“To be served by a princess, my many thanks your grace. I remember your mother well... you have her beauty I see... does she ever speak of the dance we shared once? She was only a young thing then...”

“Often.” Sansa lied, putting a hand upon one the old man's own gnarled fist. “Often and with red cheeks. You were quite charming then. Were she not in mourning and caring for my siblings, I assure you she would have made the journey.”

Stevron smiled at that, patting her hand and doing little to hide how his gaze fell to her bosom. It disgusted her, as it did whenever men stole such liberties of her body, yet it helped the cause all the
same.

“My lord, you spoke of being loyal, do you mean it?” She asked and when Stevron nodded she
gestured for him to lean closer, whispering, “There are things I would share with you. Royal
secrets… invite me to a view out the window.”

Stevron’s eyes widened but did as she asked. The whole spectacle earned confused expressions from
Edwyn and the others while Jon looked on bemused. The old lord was happy to offer his arm and
lead her over to a window, where Sansa continued to spin the story she’d come up with on the ride.

“I should not be telling you this but my mother spoke so highly of you, do swear to keep this in
confidence.”

“I swear, on my honor as a Frey.” Stevon promised, whatever that was worth.

“Then know that the Targaryens stand with us. The Martells as well.” Sansa said and she watched as
Stevron gasped at the knowledge of Dornish involvement.

He acts like Jeyne when she hears a promising piece of gossip.

“Edwyn is right, Robb remains unpromised, but that is because he considers a match to a princess.”

“A princess? Which one?” Stevon asked, barely able to hide his excitement.

“I cannot say, but their involvement is key to our lands being free of the lions. Nor do I have leave to
speak on Arya or Bran. My mother kept them at Winterfell to seek northern matches.” Sansa spoke
this part in a grave manner, Lord Stevron nodding his head in response. “My brother’s bannerman
feel cheated of late I fear to admit. Too many spouses from outside the North, you understand that,
don’t you? And she still grieves so much for my father.”

“Of course, I sympathize with your poor mother and all her trials.” Lord Stevron frowned then and
Sansa knew she had to change course. “But still, I must insist—”

“I can also tell you that soon my brother will have to decide the fate of two castles.” The lord perked
up again at that. “The Dreadfort of course... and Harrenhal, for when it is retaken from Kevan
Lannister, a new lord shall have to be raised up. And Robb has two brothers…”

Bargaining for Rickon’s future felt horrible yet Sansa had no doubt that at least one Stark would
have to be promised for the army to cross here. Olyvar had told her of Walda Frey, Edwyn’s
daughter and Lord Stevron’s great-granddaughter. She was of an age with Rickon and third in line
for the Twins. For a third born son like Rickon, a match with Walda was more than agreeable.
Stevron did not take completely to the idea until she made note that a marriage to Rickon would
make Walda a princess.

“A Frey princess...” Lord Stevron muttered in thought.

Robb had laughed to learn of this back at the camp, even louder when Rickon pitched a fit. He
screamed bloody murder, saying he didn’t want to marry a stoat and earning a cuff upside the head
from Robb.

“You’ll speak kindly of your future wife.” Robb commanded. “And if you agree I’ll get you a proper
sword and a new horse.”

“Really?” Rickon’s rage faltered then. “Can I get some chainmail too? And spurs?”
Jon could not help but grin at how quickly Rickon’s mood changed, something she did not care for. She knew nothing of the young Frey girl but resolved then and there to instruct Rickon on how to treat her with courtesy. When Jon took her brother as a squire, she would impress upon her husband the importance of teaching Rickon how to treat his bride well.

The royal party was certainly treated well by the Freys. By most of them anyway. Lord Stevron held a feast in the hall to celebrate the first visit to the Twins by a High Queen of the Targaryen Empire and little Walda’s betrothal to Rickon. Those close to Edwyn were pleased, his father Ryman boasting of having a granddaughter who would be a princess. Walda was a slender little thing, close to Arya’s age and fair-haired like her mother. She was all smiles to meet Rickon while other Freys, like Black Walder and Lame Lothar, did not raise their cups to join Robb’s bannermen in toasting the match. Sansa made silent note of each one of them, and saw Lyanna doing the same.

Jon held her hand during the feast, letting Robb and Lyanna do most of the talking with Lord Stevron.

“You were something with our Lord of Frey.” Jon said, running a finger gently over hers.

“Was I too bold? Stealing him away like that?”

Jon shrugged. “My wife is a bold woman, or so I’m learning. Especially when it comes to protecting what she loves. I was a touch jealous though, watching Stevron hold your hand like that.”

He feigned a hurt expression but the squeeze he gave her belied any true anger. Her husband could be quite charming when he tried. It was a shame that others didn’t see this side like she did.

“You have my hand now.” She smiled to him. “Now and always Jon. I’m thankful to have this chance. To hold you. To be of use. To safeguard what I love…”

Sansa met his grey eyes then. Once she thought them the saddest eyes in the world. That wasn’t so anymore. There was a light there now that hadn’t been there before. One she saw in moments like these.

When they were together.

“To learn Valyrian as well.” Jon added after a moment of content silence. “We did not have our lesson today. Forgive me if I wish to test you some. What does zokia mean?”

“Wolf.” She answered quickly, for he called her this at times, most often during their lovemaking.

“Yes, and what of timpanan zaldrizes?”

That took her a moment. “Dragon… but something more than that? Is it white dragon?”

Jon smiled. “Excellent, you’re amazing Sansa. Truly. I… well this is one is harder. I’ve not said it to you before. Avy jorraelen.”

He was right. This was harder. So much Valyrian lettering sounded the same and its phrase structure was so different than the Common Tongue at times.

“Oh… I’m not sure! You’re declaring something… that’s the avy. We’ve not practiced this one before? That’s not quite fair husband, I’ve had no chance to learn it.”

“You’re right, though I have tried to show it.” Jon pulled her hand up to his mouth, kissing it as he looked to her. “It means I love you.”
Sansa’s mind was trying to remember the word and proper accent when it dawned on her that this was no true lesson. The feast around them was loud, men and women talking and laughing, ignorant to the words that Jon had spoken. Words she’d wished to hear for some time now.

“I needed to say that.” He spoke against her fingers, his brow furrowing. “We’ve had all this time together because of you. I left you once without saying so... without realizing it. I say it now because it is true and I won’t waste another chance before I leave again…”

“Again?” Her hand jerked in his grasp. “What do you mean? You’re to leave? When?”

“On the morrow.” Jon shattered their moment with his words. “With Benjen and almost all the foot, we continue south. I’m sorry… I should have told you sooner but Robb and I only settled on this strategy today-”

Her mind was reeling from this when a commotion arose from the doors to the hall.

While others were celebrating it appeared that Black Walder was intent on darkening the occasion as he had the prisoners from the yard brought into the hall. Many were displeased at the sight of the filthy prisoners, all of whom wore irons. The old man with the white beard she’d seen earlier was bleeding into his shackles and he kept his head low.

“Our king is here! A rare thing!” Black Walder proclaimed, gesturing to the beaten men who all wore irons. “Who better to pass judgement on these men in the king’s name than the king himself?”

“Surely there is better timing?” Benjen asked, earning grunts of agreement from the northmen. “This is a celebration.”

“In a time of war.” Black Walder sneered, yanking the youngest prisoner forward. “And these men are all enemies. Captured on our lands, trying to spy for Tywin Lannister’s advance. Spies against the King in the North!”

“Hang them!” Torrhen Karstark shouted, Robett Glover echoing the same.

“Put them to the sword and be done with it!”

“Hold!” Robb raised his hand, quieting the hall and turning a cold gaze upon the prisoners. “I will hear these men speak before deciding their fate. As is just.”

In truth there was not much to say. Not a one of the men was of higher rank than a man-at-arms or freerider it seemed. Some were accused of attempted pillaging, others of merely being too slow to escape Frey pursuit. Robb was fair, impressing two into service with his army. Three others he deemed worthy of death but he offered them the chance to take the black, which all did. Yet when it came to the old man everything changed.

“I’m no Lannister.” The old man’s voice was muffled, most of his face hidden behind his filthy white hair. “Nor a spy. I am a knight.”

“A knight of the hedges at best.” Edwyn jested, several laughing disdainfully at the man. “He calls himself Ser Arstan Whitebeard. A village headman farther south turned this one in. Claimed he was singing the praises of King Tywin of the Rock.”

“A liar I name him.” Ser Arstan spoke hotly, causing Sansa to sit a bit straighter. Something rang familiar then. “On my honor, I have never taken service with House Lannister. A family at that village let me bed in their barn. The headman came to take advantage of their daughter and I did my duty as a knight. I drove him off. Your men took me on the road the next day.”
“On his honor… his duty as a knight… I have heard these words.

I have heard this voice.

“This tale smells like something that came out of a barn.” Lord Stevron wheezed. “Your honor as a knight? Well then who knighted you ser? Which hedge boasts the honor of knighting Ser Arstan?”

“No hedge. Just a good man, a lord.”

“His name?” Robb asked but Arstan remained silent. Stubbornly silent, until a Frey guardsmen jabbed his ribs roughly with the end of his spear.

“I cannot say.” Arstan rasped. “I am not free to do so.”

“Then I have no proof you are a knight.” Robb shook his head. “And thus your swearing on that title means nothing. I must go on what my bannermen claim. This could mean your life.”

“So be it.” The old man spoke defiantly, his eyes finally raising. Blue eyes. Familiar eyes. His mouth speaking words she’d heard before. “I lived a knight. I’ll die a knight. By your leave or not.”

“As you wish. Arstan Whitebeard I hereby sentence you to-”

“He lies!” She nearly shouted, causing Jon to spin about and the entire hall to stare her way. “He lies I say!”

“We know Sansa.” Robb raised an eyebrow as she rose. “He is a mummer’s knight.”

“No, not about that.”

Sansa left her seat, Jon following after as she made to round the table, heading towards the knight who tried to hide his face from her. It made no matter anymore. She’d seen enough of this wrinkled face. Beneath all the filth it was much like it had been years past. When he had stood before a different king. Defiant. Proud.

“This man is a knight.” She said. “But not one named Arstan Whitebeard.”

“Your grace, don’t.” The old knight shook his head, trying to shuffle away from her. “Princess, you of all people… do not speak for me…”

“He squired for Lord Manfred Swann. He was knighted by King Ormund Durrandon in battle. He has never served a Lannister king, for he was a champion to the Storm Kings. Two of them before he was dismissed by a third!”

“By the gods!” The Greatjon roared, rising from his seat as the Blackfish gave a cry as well.

“Champion to the Storm Kings? You can’t mean-”

“I do.” She was an arms length from the knight before he dared to meet her gaze again. Through his ragged hair, his sad eyes gazed up at her. As they had the day he’d left Storm’s End. His hair had grown but she knew him still.

“This is no hedge knight. Nor a Lannister spy. I’ve only seen one knight act so bold before a king.”

“Here stands Ser Barristan of House Selmy!”

“Barristan the Bold himself!”
Stay quiet. Steady pace. Let the darkness be our friend.

Jon repeated that to himself as his horse moved slowly through the mist. Gendry and Asher were on each side of him, a long column of riders following behind. Ghost blended in well with the haze, barely visible as it led the way on.

If Jon squinted hard through the early morning mist he could make out the other columns as well. Thoros and his command was to the right, Balaq’s between them and Greenbeard’s off on the left. The entire Dark Order rode like this, separated into different parts but united in their goal. All eyes focused on the camp ahead which was not as well hidden by the mist as they were.

That would change, for the sun was soon to rise, the sky beginning to lighten. What worried him more was how the morning calm was punctuated by the sounds of thousands of horses and their hooves tromping upon the dewy grass. It was entirely possibly some Lannister watchman could hear their advance before seeing it.

The Blackfish and his men are seeing to that, he reminded himself, Brynden knows these lands and he’s never failed you.

Failure was not an option here. Not with the odds stacked against them as they were. While the Dark Order could advance unnoticed, the camp ahead shined like a town at the edge of the Dothraki Sea. The torches and cook fires of thirty thousand Lannister men guided their way. An army come to drive the Starks from the south and kill all that stood in their way. They certainly had the numbers to do so here, for the Lannisters outnumbered the order ten to one. By all accounts Tywin Lannister commanded twice the horse that Jon did and few men in Westeros were feared as much as the shrewd and ruthless commander of the West.

Yet it was not this commander nor this battle that Jon worried on.

Robb would be fighting to break the Lannister siege of Riverrun. His cousin also faced greater odds against him but Jon tried to focus on what Robb did have rather than what he lacked. A keen mind for one. Robb’s strategies were inventive and defied expectation, his ability to come up with strategies and changes at a moment's notice inspiring. A swift and mobile force for another. Almost the entire northern horse was with him. The element of surprise as well, for the Lannisters thought that Robb was marching here. Just as Robb wanted them to.

He also guards my wife. I told Sansa I loved her only to leave her again.

Vhagar, the seven, the old gods, whomever. Watch over them. Protect her.

The whole spectacle of discovering Barristan Selmy at the Twins had forestalled Sansa’s anger with him for a few hours. It was actually Jon who grew wroth to learn that a former sworn shield of the Durrandons stood before them. Barristan the Bold’s legend was known even in the empire, his disappearance during the Clash of Stags a mystery to all. Once he’d hoped to meet such a knight but that was before Sansa became his wife. Before he learned that Barristan witnessed the crimes done to Sansa and did nothing.

“That is my shame.” The old knight had admitted before the hall. “Not that King Robert died under my care, or that the boy king stripped me of my title as a Durrandon champion. None of that mattered in the end… I saw what they did to you Princess Sansa… I knew what they could do, what
Joffrey promised to do… and I did nothing…”

“Nonsense.” Sansa argued, her voice gentle and sad. “I remember that day well ser. Even after Joffrey chose another as his champion, you stayed at court. You spoke out at my treatment… you acted a champion for me. Cersei stripped you of your lands and title and—”

“And I left.” Barristan spoke with a deep shame. “My words were no shield your grace. They did not protect you when I left to join Lord Stannis’s cause. When both Renly and Stannis lay dead at my feet, I was a knight without a king. I heard of Joffrey’s vile treatment of you… how it was the Hound who rescued you… if a brute like Sandor Clegane—”

Sansa had bristled at that. “Sandor Clegane was a good man. Worthy of being a knight.”

“Worthier than I it seems.” Barristan had looked to his manacled wrists. “The Hound’s deeds showed me how far I’d fallen. I stood by and let the stags be overrun by lions. I abandoned a princess to treatment not fit for the vilest of men. I aided in the great sin of kinslaying… I was no true knight.”

“So you became a sellsword?” Robb had asked, as enraptured by the sight of the old man as the rest of the hall.

“No… I became Ser Arstan the Whitebeard. A hedge knight. The open road and good deeds became my cause. By upholding the vows of chivalry and defending the helpless with whomever I so chose, I hoped for some redemption. To be worthy of being a knight again…”

As badly as the old man had been treated, Jon saw strength in his stance and a tenseness in his shoulders that only came with the most skilled of warriors. He was defiant to his captors and Robb both, willing to die to avoid this moment. Yet when Sansa cupped his cheek in her hand, Jon watched the man’s strength falter, his defiance turn to shame.

“You were always a knight Ser Barristan. To me at least. Your word carries great weight and I’m sure my brother knows now that you are innocent of the charges laid against you.”

“Of those crimes I am.” Barristan shook his head. “But not the charges levied on me by the Father for failing to uphold my vows… you poor child…”

“I’m no child anymore ser.” Sansa looked to Jon. “I am a woman wed. To a good man. Safe in his care and that of my family’s. So now let me see to yours. You shall be bathed, fed, and given a warm bed. We shall discuss anything more come morning.”

Barristan had protested, as had some of the Freys, but Robb backed Sansa in all that she demanded. Jon was not able to do the same when they retired to their chambers. His wife had been furious at him for leaving. At Robb for keeping the plans from her. At herself for being so angry in the first place.

“This is war.” She’d said, laying on the bed, still gowned and facing away from him. “I knew you’d have to fight, I just thought I’d be near. That I could be there after you, to tend to your hurts like I tried to do after the ambush…”

“Let’s pray I have no hurts then.” Jon had curled up behind her and kissed her shoulder.

“Your path is the most dangerous though. To face Tywin Lannister’s army. Perhaps even Joffrey’s.”

“I hope it is so.” He spoke truthfully. “It means less danger facing Robb and Benjen. I’ll be with my men and they’ve kept me alive nigh on seven years. They’ll bring me back to you.”
"Like my father’s men brought him back.” Sansa had snapped, refusing to look at him. “At least allow me to journey with Benjen’s foot…”

“No. Not this time Sansa, it’s too risky. Robb’s path is the more secure one. My mother goes that way and so shall you. I’m sorry.”

He apologized in Valyrian as well but Sansa would not face him. She might have wept, he could not tell. Jon had simply lain there, staring at his wife’s back as he ran his fingers through her hair for what felt like hours. It was such beautiful hair, even when the fire died down it shone like copper. He was admiring it still when he thought Sansa had fallen asleep and drifted off himself.

Only to be awoken by her kiss. Perhaps she’d been awake the whole time or had risen at some point. It did not matter. He could see little through the darkness but could feel all the same. Sansa had stripped herself bare, pressing her soft and naked body against his as she tugged at his clothes. Repeating the same words in Valyrian, over and over.


He begged the same of her. Their lovemaking was different this time. Less lust and more gentleness. Perhaps because that was the first time that Sansa had mounted him. She was shy about it and surprised Jon by climbing atop him in the first place. Whatever spurred her on, the world fell away when she took his cock in her hand and slowly lowered herself. He cursed the darkness then, for it robbed him of the sight of her body, though nothing could stop the feeling of Sansa drawing him deep inside of her.

There was doubt about so many things when he left the next morning. Of how well their plans might work. If the rumors that the Freys had heard of Duskendale were true. The fate of the disgraced Barristan Selmy. Yet as Jon rode away, watching Sansa grow more and more distant beside his mother, he had no doubt that she still cared for him.

That he was becoming a better man. One worthy of her.

A thought which made Jon grimace now as the Lannister camp spread out before them. They were so close now he could see the staked edges. The river running to the west. He could hear the sounds of men and horses as the army came alive.

*My men need me to be who I was,* he reminded himself, *I’ve gotten them through worse but not with my mind so muddled.*

*I cannot fight Tywin Lannister as Sansa’s husband alone. The lion must face the monster I am.*

“Sun’s almost up.” Asher rasped from his right, spear at the ready. “The Blackfish better be ready…”

“He will be.” Jon answered, pulling at Dark Sister to make sure the blade did not stick in the sheath. He looked to Gendry, his friend already wearing his dark helm and wielding a spear while a warhammer was strapped to his back. “I worry that the hammer weighs you down brother.”

“My horse is as strong as me, it can bear it.” Gendry’s voice echoed in the helm. “Do not worry on me Jon. I’ll be right there with you. The whole way. Khal Drogo wasn’t the end of us. Some lions won’t be.”

“Then I’ll see you on the other side.”

He turned back in his saddle to gaze down the line. He held up his hand and made two quick fists. An action repeated by every sergeant who saw it. Soon every man was donning his helm and
checking their armor. It was good to see that Karl Bowden had not hesitated at the command. The young man was undergoing the worst part of joining the order. The training. The endless chanting, burning the meaning of these signals so far into a recruit’s head that Jon remembered dreaming of them. That was necessary, for in the heat of battle a man’s wits could melt away. Knowing the signals like the back of your hand could be the difference between defeat and victory.

That and having the right man beside you.

Jon had just put on his helm when a horn cut through the quiet. A long, ugly sound that sounded more like a beast dying than anything else. It came from direction of the Lannister camp. From near its staked edges.

“The Blackfish.” He gritted his teeth. “This is it!”

Four more horns then joined in. All blowing as long as they could, giving Jon and the commanders of the other columns a chance to follow the sounds.

“On me!” He raised his hand and signaled the charge, kicking at his horse. “For the empire!”

“For the empire!”

Jon spurred his mount on, careful to give it time to work up to a full charge. He would be asking a lot of it in the next little while and needed it ready. Gendry and Asher were with him, the rest of his column following behind. The horns continued to blow as the Lannister camp began to writhe with activity. Many likely saw the four columns of the Dark Order charging out of the mist. The narrow formations hid their numbers but that was only part of the reason for them. It had more to do with why the horns continued to blow, guiding Jon and his men straight towards a part of the stakes that had been uprooted.

Where the Blackfish and a few men now knelt over some dead Lannisters and waved their comrades onward.

“I hope you remembered my horse!” The old knight shouted as Jon rode by.

Surely they had. Men towards the end of the line would be leading the mounts of the Blackfish’s men. Two score brave souls had crawled up to the Lannister camp to kill their watches and dig up what stakes they could. Clearing the way for a charge that Jon now led. His other captains were doing much the same, guided by the horns and moving swiftly through the camp defenses.

Ahead some brave and dutiful Lannister soldiers had begun to form ranks. Yet many began to shout and flee the moment they realized that the riders weren’t being held back by the stakes. A ditch slowed them some but it only gave Jon time to scan the defenders and the makings of the camp. A few hundred men lined the edges, thousands more darting about among the tents, likely trying to armor and organize themselves. Trumpets were blowing and banners were being raised. Jon lifted his own hand then, signaling the raising of their banners and for the charge to split.

It’s time to show them what the order can do. It’s time to sow some chaos.

Once they were through the ditch, Jon’s column split in three directions. Asher and Gendry stayed by his side and a few hundred more followed as they drove straight into the fraying ranks of defenders.

A man-at-arms screamed when Ghost lunged forward and drove him off his feet. His grisly end only added to the dead that Jon’s men were making. Spears thrust out, swift and disciplined blows, stabbing down and through the defenders. Dark Sister was in his hand then, cutting a man’s arm free
and carving through a helm as he rode by.

Then they were in the camp itself, galloping between the tents, screaming and killing as they went. Men ran to and fro, some standing to fight, others trying to flee, most ending up on the ground and trampled by the horses. If he turned either way he caught glimpses of the other columns, all doing much the same. They were all driving south but one outpaced them all. The only company that hadn’t broken apart, Balaq and his five hundred archers. Their bows were slung on their backs, spears at the ready, riding hard for the other end of camp. Doing as Jon had instructed.

He lost sight of them when he came to a mess of tents blocking their advance. When he slowed to consider their route, an arrow clanged off his helm. The archer who’d loosed it was among a number of men gathered around a lord with a badger on his surcoat. He was shouting at his squire to armor him faster when he met Jon’s gaze.

Whatever bravery the man had fell to fear, for he stood in the way of the route that Jon had chosen. It was Asher who rode the lord down, a war cry escaping his helm as the spear pierced the foe’s chest. Jon was cutting at a swordsman’s neck when the badger lord’s squire was knocked into his path. A boy no older than Rickon.

The boy was scared.

He could only watch as the squire fell beneath his mount’s hooves. Listen as a terrified shriek turned to sickening cracks and thuds as the child was trampled.

*A monster... child-killer... you forgot what you were...*  

**This is you.**

“This is it!” Gendry shouted, pointing his bloody spear to the west. “Jon! Jon they’re forming up!”

The sun had appeared and with it rose the power of House Lannister. While a good part of the camp was falling to disorder, a sizeable force was banding together

In a clearing surrounded by grand and golden pavilions were warriors garbed in the Lannister crimson, banners flying their golden lions, many already gaining their horses. A quick guess put their number at more than a thousand already and droves more were joining the rallying cry of their trumpets.

The reason why became apparent when a few score armored riders appeared, escorting a man who made the gleaming knights appear to be beggars. His armor was deep crimson, highlighted by gold. His cape was golden too, as was the crown forged into his helm. Jon was the son of a High King of the Targaryen Empire, and even he thought this man a grand sight.

“That be Tywin Lannister!” Asher growled, whipping his horse around and staring at the foe. “If I’m wrong may I shit gold.”

“That’s what they say about Tywin.” Gendry added, rallying the men about them and looking back at the stalled advance with worry. “Lord Commander, we cannot stay put.”

“No we cannot.” Jon agreed as the Order threw back the frenzy attacks from the Lannister men. They were throwing back the assault with ease and Jon wondered if they could form into a wedge before Tywin’s force was ready to strike at them. There was a chance he could cut through the Lannister line and meet the King of the Rock himself.

*The man who arranged your uncle’s death... whose support allowed Sansa to be kept a prisoner for*
years…

She was tortured… he made that possible…

Asher cried out then, his man pulling at an arrow embedded in his mail. It had not gone deep but there was blood on the tip when he cast it aside. More arrows were being loosed from behind them, a rank of archers following a press of spearmen advancing on their position. Men that would cut off their escape if he tried to attack King Tywin’s growing force.

“We cannot stay here.” He gritted his teeth. “Our place is elsewhere. South. Push south! Through the camp!”

As his men shouted their agreement, Jon swore that King Tywin’s helmed head turned his way. He felt the King of the Rock was staring at him. Taking his measure. That bid him to pull on his reins and bring his horse up into a rear. With his horse screaming and the camps doing much the same, Jon pointed Dark Sister towards the king.

“Sansa Stark!” He shouted, not caring if the man heard. “I am here for Sansa Stark!”

It wasn’t true. Jon was here to conquer new land for the empire. To give his father a place to settle those people it had hurt the most. Yet he wanted this king to know his family’s crimes against Sansa would be held to account. That her brand was their damnation. That it would be for her that Jon made them suffer.

And to do all that he had to abandon a fight with Tywin Lannister here and now. His party beat their horses and rode at a gallop through the tents. They had to fight harder now to escape the wrath of its defenders. Their surprise had worked but that was gone. The camp was too large and foes too many to overcome by themselves. That had never been the plan. The Dark Order’s strength was meant for a different kind of battle.

They would’ve faced a terrible battle at the southern edge of the Lannister camp if it wasn’t for the brutal bombardment the westermen now suffered. Balaq had broken through to the south ahead of the rest. His archers had dismounted and were raining hell down upon the camp, thinning the enemy’s number so that the rest of the order could blow through like a strong wind.

Jon’s was the last party to join the mass of dark riders, all awaiting his coming and cheering as Balaq’s archers took a grim toll on their enemy. The Lannisters were drawing back and forming up, likely anticipating the order to hit them again.

“Made it through did you?” The Blackfish hailed, riding up and pointing to the western part of the Lannister encampment. “They’ve got about two thousand heavy horse mounted already. If they figure out what we’re up to, with our horses in the state they’re in, we might not outride them Jon. We best go now.”

“We could end this here.” Asher put in. “Look at them. They’re barely fit for a fight! When Benjen gets here-”

“He is here.” Gendry interrupted, staring north and bidding all to follow his gaze.

There he saw a dark blur in the distance. Still too far to make out for sure but Jon knew what it was. They’d left Benjen and the Stark infantry only a day ago. More than twenty thousand men flying the banners of the Umbers, Cerwyns, Glovers, and Freys, to name a few. The direwolf of House Stark would be more numerous than the rest and Jon could almost picture Benjen riding beneath it, one of the few men in that army with a horse.
The rest were with Robb. The king needed them to do his part. Just as Robb needed Benjen and Jon to do theirs.

“This is Benjen’s fight.” Jon said, removing his helm and letting his hair fly about his face. “We soften up the Lannisters. Weaken them. Make them wary of their rear. But the battle is for the North to wage. Our place is the rocky ford. We take it. We cross it and keep Joffrey and Tywin apart.”

Brynden nodded. “Going now is the only way to be sure of that.”

*If Benjen wins then the Lannisters will retreat. We'll hold the ford and box them in.*

*If my uncle loses, he can retreat back to the Twins… but I need to be across the Trident… everything hinges on that.*

_Fuck you RobbTheStark stop stealing my fic, love DolorousEdditor_

He hated to think of leaving his uncle to the fight here but this was the strategy they had formed. They had to keep Tywin’s eyes anywhere save on Riverrun. Joffrey’s army had to be kept south. That’s where the empire’s conquest was meant to happen. Where Aegon expected Jon to be.

Far from where he wanted to be.

He could not help but think of Sansa as he commanded the Order to ready for the ride on. The best way to help her and the Starks was to ensure victory over their foes. His leaving this fight made that possible. The Lannisters did not give pursuit, having taken notice of the approaching Stark army. Benjen was still outnumbered by ten thousand or more but his foe was disorganized, panicked, and bloodied.

Now Jon had to do the same to Joffrey’s army. That and worse.

His mind clouded with dark thoughts as they rode south, the sounds of trumpets and horns blowing behind them. Of two armies readying to clash. He thought of Sansa’s brand, her fear, and what Dark Sister would do to the man who had caused it.

What Jon would do. He’d just killed a half score of men and none of their faces stood out. Save the boy’s.

_A monster killed him, he told himself, the same beast that’s coming for Joffrey._

*I’ll do my worst to see this done. The empire be damned. I’ll do it for her._

*I’ll become that thing I was before I had her… to do right by Sansa…_

_To be a better man._
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The war rages on, a time of fire of blood.

A princess acts a queen, fighting for what's hers.

A prince battles a king, riding hard into the darkness.

DRAGONSTONE

Dragonstone has long been the place where the Targaryen Empire and the Seven Kingdoms meet. The island, along with Driftmark and Claw Isle, represent the westernmost of the empire’s dominions. A far-flung outpost of little import to most within the empire. To the people of Westeros, Dragonstone appears a pitiful holding considering the wealth of the empire.

After Aegon the Conqueror and his sister-wives left Dragonstone to forge the Targaryen Empire many believed they’d abandon Westeros entirely. Yet for some strange reason, Aegon held onto the damp, stormy islands. Some claimed it was a sentimental attachment to his birthplace. Others contend he held out hope to use Dragonstone as a base to launch a conquest of Westeros. A wiser few believed the island to be the preferred hatchery for the Targaryen dragons before they died out.

Whatever the reason the island has remained a holding of the Targaryen imperial family ever since. Traditionally, once an heir is chosen, they are styled the Prince of Dragonstone. To remind all of where the Targaryens had once been and how high the dragons could soar.

The importance of Dragonstone is more than matched by the regard House Velaryon holds for Driftmark. Due to their history of loyalty and intermarriage with the Targaryens, the Velaryons are seen as the empire’s second family. They are both wealthy and influential, with great estates along the Rhoyne and Myrish coast. Yet it is Driftmark the Velaryons prize first and foremost. It is common for Velaryon sons to covet the title of Lord of the Tides and Master of Driftmark.

While small and distant, these islands have played important roles in the history of the empire time and time again. Most notably in the Blackfyre Exodus and the birth of High King Rhaegar’s second son, Jonarys.

Yet those are tales for another chapter…

SANSA

“Princess, are you sure I should be here?”
Barristan’s words echoed through Riverrun’s empty sept, for Sansa and the knight were the only ones within. The sunlight streamed in through the doorway and windows of the seven-sided structure as she moved to light seven candles.

“I am more than certain. It can only be you, good ser.” Sansa smiled to the old knight as she lit a candle below a statue of the Mother. The light drove away some shadows but not Barristan, who had been acting as hers for days now. “And I pray that one day you’ll stop asking me if I want you around.”

“You have enough prayers to offer without wasting any on me, young lady.”

Barristan’s kind voice fit well with the gentle admonishment he offered. With his hair cut and his face shaved, it was hard to picture the ser as the scruffy hedge knight he’d been only moons ago. Barristan had joined their party at Sansa and Robb’s insistence. She didn’t trust the Freys to let him depart their lands peaceably and Robb was wary of letting a former Durrandon knight loose at their rear.

He’d had little choice in the matter, though Sansa made sure he was not treated as a prisoner. She did all she could to win him over. Having Ser Barristan join their cause would be a grand thing indeed. While the knight refused to declare for Robb he was insistent on staying by Sansa’s side during their travels. Truly, Barristan acted fearful of what could happen if the Lannisters captured her again.

It is the Lannisters who should be wary. Jaime Lannister learned that lesson.

My uncle keeps the Prince of Lions locked away while I wander about freely and Robb invades his homeland.

It was not idle praise that Barristan the Bold called Robb’s invasion of the Westerlands the boldest of actions. Her brother was earning a fierce reputation since his entry into the war. Robb’s capture of Jaime Lannister at the Whispering Wood, as well as his victory during the Battle of the Camps, had not only lifted the siege of the Tully castle, it had shifted the momentum of the war.

Tywin Lannister might have defeated the northern army at the Green Fork yet it cost him his heir and his stranglehold on the riverlands. Uncle Benjen was forced to retreat and reform his men but the King of the Rock had to do much the same. The Lannister army had holed up at Harrenhal ever since, ravaging the nearest lands for supplies and waiting for Robb to come to them.

Many had worried that Robb would be forced to besiege Harrenhal and break his men against its strong walls. Or that Robb could be caught between King Tywin and a new force being raised in the west. Instead, against anyone’s predictions, Robb had taken his small army of cavalry and struck at the Westerlands. Only days ago, news came of a great victory at Oxcross where Robb surprised the newly formed Lannister host under Ser Stafford Lannister. Word must have reached Harrenhal as well, since outriders reported that King Tywin was moving west to stop Robb’s rampage across his kingdom.

Unless Uncle Edmure has his way, Sansa thought as she lit another candle, which he shouldn’t.

Robb knew what he was doing… he left orders for a reason… at least, I believe so.

She needed to make Edmure believe the same and Ser Barristan was important in helping her do so. At the moment, however, he was eyeing Sansa in a queer fashion. When Barristan realized she’d caught him watching the knight shifted uncomfortably.

“I apologize, I did not mean to stare.” He bowed. “It is just that... I have noticed how often you’ve
been visiting the sept. At Storm’s End, I recall you attending the godswood more often than not. Do you no longer hold to the old gods?”

“I shall always keep the Old Ways close to my heart, they were the gods of my father. After my brother broke the siege, Robb and I shared a prayer together within this castle’s godswood. But I was raised in the Faith as well and was married before the Seven. It’s important to my husband that we embrace such things, so I will implore the Seven to see to his safety.”

Sansa was not speaking idly. Just as she had relied upon Jon to learn High Valyrian he would need her to guide him in the Faith. A duty she would relish, for it meant they would be together again. She lit candles for such a thing every day. To drive her fear away, to bring Jon back to her. To protect all that their love promised for the future.

“Your prince surely has the Warrior’s favor.” Barristan said. “His feats speak to that. King Robb’s as well. They prove themselves brave men-”

“Daryn Hornwood was a brave man.” She felt a pang of hurt to speak the poor lordling’s name. “As were Torrhen and Eddard Karstark. They all rose to meet the threat that Prince Jaime posed to Robb…and now they’re all dead.”

Whatever else Eddard Karstark was, he died nobly and I shall mourn him as a hero.

Poor Alys Karstark will be asked to mourn her two brothers, and her loving husband, Daryn.

Her child will grow up without a father.

Barristan did not get the chance to ease her mind as her uncle Edmure appeared in the sept. The Lord of Riverrun was a Tully through and through, his auburn hair and blue eyes spoke to that. She suspected that Robb would one day grow a beard very similar to the fierce one that Edmure had.

“Ser Barristan!” Edmure’s happy voice rang out in the sept as he beamed to take in the knight before him. “I sought you out earlier ser! I was having a disagreement with some men over whether you slew only two or all three of the Hoare sons at Harrenhal.”

“It was only the two.” Barristan shook Edmure’s offered hand. “Enough blood was spilt that day that two sufficed.”

“Then I was right! I remain an expert on your legend.” Edmure smiled broadly before moving to kiss Sansa’s cheeks politely. “A good day to you, dear niece. Every time I see you in here, I cannot help but think of Cat. She married your father just over there. I imagine you looked just as radiant during your wedding. I wish I had been there.”

“Thank you uncle, you’re too kind.” Sansa curtsied, an honor a princess did not usually accord to a lord but she needed her uncle to feel respected. “Though it surprises me to hear you speak of enjoying my company. You seem quite eager to leave it.”

Edmure was taken aback by that. “There’s a war on, princess. As Lord of the Southern Marches, I have duties that must be seen to. We have a chance to trap King Tywin and I mean to take it. I can’t let my royal nephew have all the glory.”

The chance that Edmure spoke of was his plan to have the riverlords block the Lannister crossing of the Red Fork. Something that bothered her greatly, especially since Robb had been clear in his expectations of her uncle.

“My lord... is there not pride in defending one’s home and family? His people?” She asked. “That’s
what you said to Robb if I remember correctly, when you asked him to give the riverlords leave to protect their lands. If Tywin Lannister means to leave their castles and smallfolk in peace, after all this destruction... should we not allow him?”

“My my…” Edmure smiled and patted her hand. “Pious and spirited all at once, Catelyn’s daughter to be sure. Do not fret Sansa. Leave the warfare to us lords and I promise that you’ll be well taken care of. Why, you have Barristan the Bold here to watch over you! Perhaps once I am gone, you can ask him for a tale or two on why noble lords must not allow villains free reign in their lands.”

The lord’s tone was akin to how he would speak to his own children. Sansa was no child though, not anymore, and she wished to point that out. Yet she held her tongue all the same, a respectful tone was needed here.

“Barristan is lovely company.” She said demurely. “Yet as wonderful as his tales might be, I think the ser’s counsel is of more value.”

“Surely that's so.” Edmure agreed. “Ser, you disappointed many when you chose to avoid my war councils. Most of my bannermen fought beside you against the Hoares, and I'd have you ride out with me against the lions, if I didn't think my niece would lose heart at your absence.”

“This princess is not so easily shaken.” Barristan countered, exchanging a knowing look with Sansa. She gave a nod and the knight cleared his throat before setting to his task. "In truth, I would not be so eager to take the fight to King Tywin. His army is bloodied and his lands are being invaded. An animal is most dangerous when wounded."

“That's why we should trap the lions here.” Edmure pressed. “If Prince Benjen takes Harrenhal and we hold the Red Fork—”

"Caging Tywin Lannister in your lands is a dangerous proposition, my lord. The King of the Rock has already shown himself willing to perform wanton cruelty and destruction for small gain. He did so while victorious at every step. Imagine the horrors that could befall your people should he lose and become trapped here?"

Edmure grew quiet then. Clearly he had not expected the great Ser Barristan Selmy to challenge him on his marching orders. Barristan might have served the Durrandons but all manner of men still bowed and sought his favour. Many young lords had grown up listening to tales of Barristan the Bold’s feats, some even witnessing them first hand as squires. Men like Edmure.

“What of glory?” Her uncle asked, a tad crestfallen. “To make war against these fiends is my right…”

Barristan grimaced. "Renly spoke of glory. Stannis of rights. After they both lay dead, it was King Joffrey that triumphed. The Lannisters as well. Those men put their own wants before their duties to the people. Your father lived by the words of House Tully. Family, duty, honor. All of which lay here at Riverrun, Lord Edmure. Your king asked the lord to defend his lands and as the princess says... that is surely a noble task.”

It filled her with hope to see Edmure’s confidence shake, the lord hanging on Barristan’s words. Some of them were the knight’s own while many of the others were Sansa’s. She could not let Edmure risk House Tully or the other riverlords' strength right now. Not when Jon fought alone and outnumbered.

She had become spoiled by so much good news of late. After Jon crossed the Trident, the Dark Order sacked Darry and a number of other holdfasts. They had even captured Maidenpool with the help of the imperial fleet. Joffrey had not been there to stop them, he was too busy laying siege to
Duskendale. The Darklys had rebelled against Joffrey’s rule, Lord Royner declaring that no man from Duskendale would serve such a tyrant. Vain and petty as he was, Joffrey sought to end the Defiance of Duskendale before meeting Jon in battle. Not that Joffrey lacked for enemies.

In the south, Prince Aegon and the Dornish had launched their invasion of the Stormlands. From all they heard, the Golden Legion and the Martells had come streaming out of the Prince’s Pass and overwhelmed the castle Nightsong. The setback came at the Boneway, where a host led by the Yronwoods had failed to capture Blackhaven. That left Aegon without a third of his Dornish allies, which had created a delay in his plans to march straight to Storm’s End. By all accounts, the Stormlords were rallying to meet this threat but were rallying to send reinforcements to Joffrey.

_Thousands more to help Joffrey murder Jon. King Tywin wants to lead his army out of this fight and far away from Jon... and Edmure would stop him._

_We need fewer enemies and more allies. Jon needs help._

“Sansa is right.” Edmure said then, rubbing his chin and nodding at whatever Ser Barristan had just said. “Your counsel is sage ser. My father always said you were as wise as you were bold. Some of my lords were... hesitant... to hold the fords. You’ve given me much to think on.”

“Not I.” Barristan spoke humbly, gesturing to Sansa. “If you look for guidance-”

“Where better to seek it than here?” She stepped aside so that the statue of the Crone was displayed to Edmure. “Roslin told me that she spent much of the siege here with your children, praying for deliverance and your safe return from the Lannisters. I just lit a candle hoping for wisdom in these dark times. It appears both our prayers have been answered, nuncle.”

She did all she could to focus Edmure’s mind on his wife and children here at Riverrun. Robb had told her that the lord’s first thoughts after being freed were of his family trapped in the castle. Having Edmure think on those hardships might help harden his newfound doubt in fighting at the fords. Whatever his faults, Edmure appeared to be a loving and caring father, and it was not long before he was boasting to Sansa and Barristan of his children, any talk of military matters completely forgotten. Young Hosten was only three but Edmure swore that he’d make a fine squire. He was saddened to note the babe, Bethany, had her first name day while he was held prisoner.

“I won’t miss her second though.” Edmure vowed in a sweet manner. “Or this next one’s birth. It’s a sad thing to admit, but I’m glad Roslin only told me she was with child again after my return. Worrying after my wife was hard enough in captivity without fearing for an unborn babe too.”

Sansa cringed at that, earning a strange look from Barristan. Her uncle’s words were well said and kindly meant. It was not his fault that they troubled her so. Rather than reflect on them she pressed on, for there were other matters to discuss.

“Has there been any word from Maidenpool?” She asked. “Of my aunt? Of my husband?”

Edmure nodded. “We had a raven from Duskendale. Most of the Stormlords have abandoned the siege, leaving only a token force outside the walls. I’m sorry Sansa, it looks like Joffrey’s leading the main strength of his army north again. After Maidenpool fell, it would make sense-”

“How many? How many men does Joffrey have?”

“Lord Darklyn wrote of eighteen thousand… perhaps twenty.”

His words felt like a punch to her stomach, which rolled in response and she fought back the urge to retch. Here she was, safe and sound at Riverrun, while Jon warred against overwhelming odds.
Lyanna was doing her part to try and help him. Unhappy to simply wait at Riverrun, the High Queen had set sail on a river galley to visit the lords of Crackclaw Point. The Highguard had left with Lyanna, Rickon too, but her aunt had forbidden Sansa from joining, promising to send for her as soon as their new allies were won over. As of yet, no summons had come and Sansa felt utterly useless.

_Aunt Lyanna might have failed,_ she worried, _Uncle Benjen might not be able to take Harrenhal._

_Jon and his men will be alone… just like father…_

After Edmure had shared a few more details of the war, her uncle took his leave of the sept. Sansa took her own soon after. Barristan moved to escort her back to her chambers where Jeyne and Talia likely waited but she refused. The thought of being in a room rather than the open air made her feel stifled and nervous, the bile rising up in her throat again. So the knight joined her for a walk upon Riverrun’s battlements.

The river lapped loudly against the lowest parts of the castle wall. Its strong current protected them here but she couldn’t help but feel trapped. Her eyes swept over the lush green fields and the woods of the Tully lands and she wondered if Jon was looking at a similar landscape.

_The south is rich and lovely, yet all it's ever offered me is pain. Jon made me forget that for a time… he gave me hope…_

_And I offer him nothing but prayers and tears._

“**I hope I did well.**” Barristan said, looking down at Sansa with concern. “Lord Tully appeared convinced, though my words were not near any equal of yours.”

“Your words were as good as your heart.” She reached out and Barristan let her put a hand to his arm. “Another man might have refused to speak on my behalf.”

“I owe you a debt beyond words, your grace. A better knight would be able to give you some fine speech or spin some tale to set aside your worries. I’m little more than an old man who can still wield a sword.”

“Yet one who wields it well.” Sansa knew the truth of that firsthand, having watched Barristan best a score of knights larger in size and half his age in the practice yard. Yet it was not his sword she wished to have now. “My uncle was right in the sept ser. Your counsel and wisdom is most welcome. I’d ask your estimation of what Edmure spoke of, in regards to Lord Darklyn.”

Barristan nodded. “I think he was right. House Darklyn were once kings in their own right and are still strong. They could put enough knights and heavy horse in the field to threaten Joffrey’s rear but Lord Royner is not likely to muster. Duskendale was willing to defy their king’s call to arms, yet their lord is a cautious man. His wife even more so. Their walls held off a siege, they’ll trust in them for the- princess?”

Barristan reached out to steady her as Sansa paused her steps. The nausea was back again and she had to seek the edge of the wall. The damp breeze off the river helped her fight back the urge to retch but not the troubles in her mind.

“Edmure wants to march when he should stay put… the Darklys hold back when they should fight… why must lords be **convinced** to do the right thing?”

“The right thing is often in the eye of the beholder princess.” Barristan leaned against the wall to her right. “I once ignored the crimes done to you, all because I thought that my duty was to the Storm
Kings. That seemed like the right thing. Many hold the Hound as a traitor for freeing you but we both know he did the right thing. He inspired me to act as a knight again.”

“Well how do we inspire House Darklyn to march?” She swallowed carefully. “My husband needs those men ser, not Lord Royner’s excuses.”

“Robert had the same problem. During the war against the ironmen. The Darklyns paid tribute to the Hoares and were content to refuse them that, yet little more. Even Hoster Tully promising his daughter as a bride did not convince Royner. It took us showing up outside Duskendale’s gates and Robert shaming the lord to his face before the Darklyns rose up.”

“That’s it!” Sansa rose up from her place on the wall. She looked to Barristan and felt the sudden urge to embrace him as well as retch. When her eyes darted to where a galley was docked against the side of the castle, Barristan raised his hands up.

“Your grace-”

“Lord Royner’s defiance was bought with promises of trade but words on parchment cannot win his might. We must inspire him to act. Shame him into it even, just as King Robert once did.”

“We? Princess, tell me you mean the High Queen-”

“It cannot be Aunt Lyanna.” She wrung her hands as her mind worked away. “There’s no telling which Crackclaw castle she’s at, or when my aunt would get our message. Besides, Royner knows her not. For a decent case to be made, it must be made by those who know the lord. You and I, Barristan. You and I. We must go to Duskendale.”

“Out of the question.” Barristan’s tone was stern and uncompromising. “Princess, your uncle would never allow it.”

“Once the Lannisters retreat past the Golden Tooth, he can make no argument against it! Our ships rule the Trident and the nearest seas. Nor is it in Lord Edmure’s power to hold me here. I am sister to his king and wife to a Targaryen-”

“And with child.” The old knight spoke so simply that it took Sansa a moment to accept what he’d said. She was still gaping when he pressed on. “Young lady, I have lived enough years to know the signs. King Robert bedded many of his servants, and Cersei’s ire towards such women was so horrid that most went to great lengths to hide the truth. I became quite adept at spotting the symptoms in turn. If I am wrong in saying so, I will give apologies instead of congratulations.”

Sansa could not meet the knight’s gaze as her hands went to her middle. There was little to show yet, but she’d done all she could to hide the truth. Once it was her brand she worked the hardest to keep hidden from the world. That mark of shame was a distant thought compared to protecting the life growing within her. Jon had left her with more than a kiss, her prince had given her a babe. She hadn't been sure until her second moon blood did not occur and by then she knew the babe had to stay a secret.

*I was barely allowed to come here in the first place. If Lyanna sent for me, I wouldn’t be allowed to go to her.

Edmure worries on Roslin so much... if he learns I am with child he’ll never let me leave.

“Princess?” Barristan pressed softly. “I’m not wrong am I?”

“You’re not.” She whispered, meeting his gaze and failing to keep the smile from her lips. “I am with
child. I’m to be a mother. My prince, my Jon is to be a father.”

“A thousand blessings upon you then. A child is a gift from the gods in such foul times. It is that babe you must think on now-”

“I do think of my child!” She argued, standing straight and pointing east. “I think of how my father loved me so much. I think of how difficult it will be for my child to grow up without a father. That is why I must go to Duskendale ser. I beg you to keep this to yourself… to join me in my journeys…”

“Why us, child? Why not send your brother’s bannermen?”

“Your name still carries great weight, ser. Edmure wouldn’t have been convinced by my words. It had to be those of Barristan the Bold. You said men must be inspired to do the right thing.”

Barristan grunted at that. “This is not my war. I hold no fealty to the Starks and neither do the Darklyns. So how would Sansa Stark appearing at his gates inspire their lord?”

“You misunderstand, my purpose there would be to shame Lord Royner. He once spoke against Joffrey’s treatment of me, for it offended his honor. It was a decent thing to do, but the lord did little more, even though I sensed he wished to. I shall remind him of that and give him the chance to confront Joffrey once more. To do as he wished to all those years ago. Good men are often haunted by the deeds they failed to perform.”

There was no accusation in her tone but Barristan proved the truth of her words nonetheless. The old knight appeared stricken, much as he had when they were first reunited at the Twins. She should have let his shame lead him into doing as she willed but it felt wrong to hurt him then, for Barristan had never hurt her.

“Please ser, you know that I bear you no ill will. In your time wandering the realm, I’m certain you’ve saved a hundred maidens from fates far worse than mine. I’m only asking that you help me spare my husband from the same fate as my father.”

“I’m an old man. My best years are behind me.” Barristan gestured to the castle around them. “Riverrun is full of younger men, loyal to your family. Any one of them-”

“Is not half as noble as you.” She stepped forward to take his hand. “Brave. Strong. Wise. You are all these things, but above all that, I know you to have a good heart ser. Those men you speak of are loyal to the Starks but I am a Targaryen now. A dragon. I’ve none sworn to me save Jon.”

“What of Queen Lyanna’s Highguard?”

“They are not here, off at Crackclaw Point with their Queen, for the simple truth is that they are hers. Not mine. She told me that one day I would be able to choose my own protector… a warrior I trust…”

Barristan closed his eyes. “Princess, if you seek a man worthy of the white cloak, I urge you to look elsewhere.”

“None are more worthy than you.”

“I failed you before… I helped lead a great house to ruin…”

“Now you can help a new power rise from its ashes.” Sansa squeezed Barristan’s hand as she placed another over her middle. “And if you wish to atone for what Joffrey did to me, I beseech you now, help me spare my child from ever knowing such suffering. I beg it of you ser. You couldn’t help me
before… but now you can…”

“A princess should not beg.” Barristan spoke gruffly, pulling free from her hold and turning to stare off into the distance.

Neither spoke as the breeze wafted over them. It came from the east, and the silly girl she once was wondered if this wind had once caressed Jon's face before traveling all this way to her. If the gods were good, soon Sansa would be able to touch Jon as she yearned to do each waking moment. All of that depended on what Ser Barristan said next. She was growing fearful on his answer when he finally straightened and made to face her again.

“Good men are haunted by their failures.” Barristan’s eyes burned into hers. “My mind screams against doing as you ask. It tells me to go straight to your uncle and tell him of this child and ride from this castle. Back to the hedges…”

“Ser-”

“You call my counsel wise but it’s led me to poor decisions before. Once I thought to spirit you away from Storm’s End… and I balked. I did not heed the duty I knew in my heart was true. To protect the helpless. To defend the innocent. To act a knight.”

Barristan dropped to one knee then before her. Head bowed, one hand on his sword, the other to his heart.

“I will not make the same mistake again.” His voice echoed with the same strength it had to slight Joffrey years past. “If it means I might right a wrong and spare you any pain, then Sansa of House Targaryen, I offer you my sword. My shield. My vow. I will lay down my life for you and your child. If you would have me.”

Sansa thought of her wedding then. When Jon had sworn himself to her, vowing to protect and honor her. Binding his life to hers.

She had done the same for him and now Barristan the Bold gave her the chance to keep her vows.

Lyanna acts as a High Queen should… Jon acts as a prince must…

With Barristan acting as my Highguard, it is time I did my part...

It is time I acted a dragon.

JON

“I curse you, dragon.”

Meryn Trant spit at Jon, the knight’s bloody mouth sending red tinged spittle onto his boots. Asher answered that by punching Trant so hard in the gut that it drove the man to his knees.

Which is where Jon wanted him. The battle had left the knight’s armor dented and marred by gore, his knees sinking into the torn and blood soaked earth of this field. His body was about to join the countless others scattered about them and stretching far into the distance. The groans of dying men were constant but Jon’s attention was for the knight who Asher and Grenn held before him. Gendry watched all of this with his warhammer in hand, for it had been him who had captured Trant.
“You eastern bastard.” Ser Meryn rasped between gasps. “I should be ransomed… I’m the son… the son of a noble house… champion to a king…”

“Torturer of a princess.” Jon finished, tearing his gloves free and tossing them aside. “I know who you are, Trant. My wife told me all about the tainted knight who beat her at the will of a tyrant. You remember her don’t you? Sansa Stark?”

Ser Meryn’s eyes narrowed as Jon held out his hand, one of his men placing Dark Sister back in his grasp. Ethan and mother had taught him that the old ways meant the man passing the sentence should swing the sword. The blade was slick with blood and its handle felt cool against his skin. He wanted no gloves or gauntlets between his hand and the sword now. Jon wanted no confusion as to whose hand this man would meet his gods by. Nor any confusion as to the reason why.

“Admit to what you did.” He held out the sword before him, pointing the tip to Meryn’s chest. “Of how you brutalized a defenseless girl. How a knight trained to war against grown men came to abuse a princess.”

“I did as I was told. As my king bid me.”

“Then let that comfort you now.” He nodded to Asher and Grenn, who then forced Ser Meryn forward, baring his neck. “You are no true knight, Meryn Trant. Remember to thank Joffrey when you meet him again in whatever hell I send you to.”

He did not invoke his father’s name as he often would. This war was being waged at the will of the High King but Ser Meryn’s death was an act of justice, far removed from the interests of the empire. His crimes were against a daughter of House Stark, done in the name of the Durrandons, in a land not under Targaryen rule.

As he raised the blade high, Meryn’s eyes fell to the ground. Then the sword came down, the strike swift and clean, so the next thing to hit the earth was the knight’s head. It rolled into a puddle of mud near to Gendry, staring up at the warrior who grimaced in disgust.

“Fitting isn’t it?” Asher wiped blood spatter from his face. “Champion to a Durrandon. Defeated by a Durrandon-”

“I’m no Durrandon.” Gendry frowned. “I remember when King Robert used to ride through my village with this knight... I helped mend his plate once. I also remember him dragging me from my home at Queen Cersei’s word. This noble knight who gave me over to the slavers-”

“Then we had justice for you as well this day.” Jon grasped Gendry’s shoulder, giving him a reassuring shake. “I want this man’s head carried ahead of the Durrandon retreat and put on a spike for Joffrey to see. Let the Storm King know there is no escape.”

“I’ll do it myself.” Asher said with a scratch of his head as he gazed off to the south. “I best get a move on though. The buggers flee better than they fight.”

All turned to look south then. Bodies of both men and horses covered the length of the land, as far as the eyes could see.

Fresh from a victory over the Stauntons and Buckwells near Rook’s Rest, two riders had arrived to share with Jon news which pleased him greatly. The first bit was from his mother, the High Queen announcing her imminent arrival with an army from Crackclaw Point. Two thousand men to add to the levees that Jon had impressed from the defeated lords Darry and Mooton. Altogether, with the Dark Order added in, he now commanded more than six thousand men. Their enemy had three times
their numbers so his new allies were shocked when Jon had welcomed word that Joffrey’s army was approaching.

*This land is ignorant to the Dark Order and its ways. They field brave and able warriors but their concept of warfare lags behind like a man chasing a horse.*

*That ignorance is an advantage I will not let go to waste.*

Nor had he.

Rather than heading to meet Joffrey’s army, the Dark Order and its allies had retreated north, back through lands they were now familiar with. Lands of hills and ridges that hindered scouting. For days Joffrey’s army chased after them until it rose one morning to find most of Jon’s cavalry formed in lines to meet them while all his foot appeared to have fled.

Joffrey must have smelled blood, bringing up his considerable mounted strength to launch an attack. Thoros counted five thousand knights and heavy cavalry, the Blackfish naming the banners for them. Bucklers, Rosbys, Fells, Masseys and Stokeworths among them. All those men rode under the golden stag of House Durrandon, charging forth to overwhelm Jon and his men.

A charge that turned to a chase after the order fled. A chase their enemy was not prepared for. Most of the knights rode warhorses not meant for long distances. The dark riders were able to stay well ahead of them, leading Joffrey’s horse away from his foot. The longer they rode, the more the Durrandon lines frayed, riders falling behind or rushing ahead while the order stayed in formation. They led them straight to a point between two long hills where Black Balaq’s archers appeared above to either side.

The archers did not lack for targets when they loosed down into the enemy riders. The longbows caused precise damage, but it was the sustained barrage that bled the Durrandons the most. The enemy tried to ride through the storm yet there was no end, Balaq’s men mounting and riding ahead in ranks whenever the foe was nearly out of range.

A trail of dead and dying dragged on behind the Durrandons when those at the fore were finally forced to halt. They had learned Jon’s allies had not truly fled, only reformed on a hill of his choosing. A place where the fierce champions of the Crabbs, Brunes, and Pynes awaited, their greatswords drawn. The missing thousand riders of the Dark Order were there as well, waiting for the fight to come. When Jon wheeled his riders about, they found their nearest foes as disorganized as they were weary. So what came next was mostly a slaughter.

With arrows chewing into them from above, and thousands of infantry streaming down the hill from behind, Joffrey’s cavalry were given no time to reform. Those who fled likely thought themselves wise rather than cowardly. Unfortunately for them, Jon had planned on such a thing, hence why a third of his men had stayed rested and ready. Greenbeard led the chase, riding down the exhausted Durrandon mounts one by one, finishing off those who survived both Balaq’s arrows and the combined Order and Crackclaw ambush.

The few who escaped back to Joffrey must have shared quite the tale. Instead of pressing the attack, the Durrandons had broken ranks and retreated in a near panic. Fleeing south and away from Jon’s wrath.

*I want Joffrey on the run. I want him scared. I want him hurt. Just like he made Sansa feel.*

*Let him know her pain before the Dark Order comes for him. Before I come for him.*
There were things that had to be seen to before that day could come. They made with haste to a sept not far from the battlefield. Joffrey’s army had made use of it before the battle but abandoned it to the mercy of the order in their retreat. His men now guarded the sept and the sheer number of horses tied without told Jon he was late to this gathering.

Outside the sept lay six dead men in roughspun wools and leather jerkins which bore the seven-pointed star. A man in makeshift armor knelt near the bodies while a pair of white robed septons said prayers. Karl Bowden watched all of this with red-rimmed eyes, looking only slightly better than the dead. They were not freshly killed and it was clear that crows had gotten to their eyes.

“Lord-Commander.” Karl saluted as Jon climbed off his horse. “Ser Brynden has returned from his scouting. He is inside with the High Queen. As are the lords Crabb, Pyne, Cave, and Ser Bennard Brune—”

“Where is Margan?” He interrupted, searching the faces of guards for the Sisterman they’d recruited at White Harbor. Every new order man was paired with another but he saw no sign of Karl’s shadow now.

“He fell.” Karl struggled to say, looking back to the battleground. “We were closing in on a knight and I speared the foe proper, just like I was taught. But when Margan went in for the kill… the sword moved so fast and—and I couldn’t…”

Jon did not force the young man to say anymore. It was a tale he knew well. Each man in the order had one just like it. All had lost brothers in battle. Many under Jon’s command.

“Was Margan avenged?” He asked. “This knight who killed your brother, did he suffer for it?”

Karl’s eyes flashed with fury. “He did! I pulled off his helm and stuck a dagger in his fucking eye my lord. I made him know Margan’s name first.”

“Margan died a man of the Dark Order. You honored him as such.” He pressed a fist to his chest, saluting Karl as the young man did the same. “When night falls there is one more duty to be done. Until then, look to Grenn, for he shall be your new shadow.”

Karl nodded as Jon turned his attention to the bodies and a kneeling warrior who had the look of a northman. His full beard nearly hid the dark marks around his neck, bruises similar to those on his wrists. When the man turned his eyes up to him, Jon saw the grief clearly.

“They were dead when we got here.” Karl explained. “Thoros found the septons locked in a cellar and that one there in stocks around back. He says he’s a knight.”

“I am.” The stranger spoke up, rising to his feet. “I am Ser Theodan Wells, named Theodan the True by the High Septon himself. A knight of the Warrior’s Sons… these… these were my men…”

“I am Jonarys Targaryen, Lord-Commander of the Dark Order.” He gestured to the dead. “From one leader to another, I offer my condolences for your men. What happened here?”

“King Joffrey wished to use this holy place as a base of warfare. To do so would defile it, so my men and I stood with the septons to deny him such. The king called us insolent. By his command we were overpowered. He made me watch from the stocks as he killed these brave souls, my brothers… then he left them to rot…”

“Might be their killers got the same treatment.” Gendry inclined his head to the battlefield. “Take heart, ser. The Dark Order gave King Joffrey a taste of justice this day.”
“I take no pleasure in such bloodshed.” Ser Theodan shook his head. “There’s likely good and pious men laying dead in those fields. We’ll see to the burying of as many as we can... but you sin against the Seven by treating your foes in the same manner that King Joffrey did my men. Your Dark Order defiles this sept for war just as he did.”

Gendry and Grenn grew angry at that but Jon held up a hand, finding the comparison to be apt in a way that bothered him.

“I am new to these lands.” He spoke to the knight. “Some of its ways are unfamiliar to me but know that I was wed in a sept. It offends me to think of it being used as this holy place has been. For that I apologize. I swear to leave as swiftly as possible. Karl, Grenn, help Ser Theodan bury his men and see to whatever needs the septons might have.”

The men snapped to his commands and Theodan offered thanks, though Jon still caught the knight eyeing his entry within the sept with displeasure. Once inside, he was greeted with the sight of the High Queen holding a sort of court in the wide empty room. The Highguard men stood watch as several others surrounded his mother. The High Queen made quite the sight with Rickon and Shaggydog at her side.

If anything could steal one’s gaze from Ethan and Tum’s fine white armor, it was the black direwolf who was chest high to the queen. Mother looked much like the dark beast, her movements just as confident, her riding clothes and cloak as black as night. The red dragon on the cloak stood out just as proudly as the blue gold crown upon his mother’s head. When she caught sight of Jon a smile spread out across her face.

“My lords! Good men! Our victor arrives!” Mother curtsied to him, a very improper act considering he was but a lord and her a queen. The other men raised no objection, only cheers as they bowed at Jon’s coming. The Blackfish and Thoros were far more restrained, saluting him as he made to kiss his mother’s hand.

“The victory was not mine alone.” He said before patting Rickon’s head. “All did their parts, didn’t they Rickon? Were you by my mother’s side throughout the battle? Guarding her as I asked?”

“Yes Jon.” Rickon beamed, throwing an arm around his direwolf’s neck. “Shaggy and me guarded Aunt Lyanna and watched the whole battle! It was even better than the Whispering Wood! What with the sun out and Sansa not trying to cover my eyes.”

The mention of Sansa shook him some. Jon hadn’t been altogether pleased with his mother bringing Rickon to Crackclaw Point. Nor when he learned that she meant to send for Sansa as well. Unfortunately, with the hurried nature of their allies必须ering, there had been no time to bring his wife to join the march. A part of Jon was glad that Sansa remained safe in the care of the Tullys. His heart was far less reasonable. It was that part of him which hurt to have Sansa so far. The part that desired to fall asleep with her in his arms and awake to find her there still.

Yet to think of Sansa in the midst of war and death was to sully his memory of her. So he pushed it away, making to address the highborns who mother had gathered here.

“This victory belongs to all of us.” He repeated. “When the High Queen told me she found good men at Crackclaw Point I took her word for it. Not once did she warn me of what fierce warriors would be joining our cause. Your men fought well, they fought bravely, so they must be rewarded. We might have need for some armor and horses taken this day but I gift over most of the riches and spoils to our new allies.”

A murmur of appreciation moved through the gathering of Crackclaw lords before one burly knight,
Ser Bennard Brune, let out a bark of laughter.

“We’ll put all that to good use, your grace.” Ser Bennard chuckled. “Though our men could outfight the Durrandon dogs in shoddy boots and leathers. Wait and see what we can do armored and mounted.”

His allies were united in good humor when one youth suddenly stepped forward and knelt before him. Jon knew him as Lyman Darry, a lord at the age of fifteen, and a guest of Jon’s since they took his castle moons back. To call him a captive would be unfair, since Castle Darry and its lord had been held in the grasp of a castellan and garrison loyal to House Lannister for years prior to the order freeing both.

Something that young Lyman was clearly eager to repay.

“My prince, let me fight in the next battle!” Lyman pleaded from where he knelt. “Queen Cersei had my father executed! Prince Jaime killed my uncles! House Darry would be for the dragons, just give me leave to show it.”

“Please, don’t call me prince. And the war’s a long way from being done.” Jon said, waving Lyman to his feet and looking to the Blackfish. “The next battle might be closer than you think, depending on what Ser Brynden has to say.”

All looked to the older knight as he and Thoros stepped towards a table and the red warrior laid out a map of these lands.

“My riders did as you asked.” The Blackfish said, putting a finger to the map. “We followed Joffrey’s army and found that it is in full retreat, heading southeast, towards Rook’s Rest from my guess.”

“He seeks shelter and supplies.” Thoros added with a grim expression. “Their retreat was so hurried, there was barely any fight when my company hit their baggage train. We were able to spirit away with half their wagons before some Lord Fell drove us back. Most of the rest we burned. A fine offering to R’hllor.”

“And good enough reason for Joffrey to seek Rook’s Rest.” He tapped the map and looked to Brynden. “Can we make that route an unattractive option?”

Brynden grinned. “Few hours rest for the horses and I guarantee that we can be between Joffrey and that castle in a day’s ride.”

“Good.” Jon then turned to Ser Bennard and the Crackclaw men. “I will be taking the Dark Order to block Joffrey’s retreat to Rook’s Rest. I task you all with putting your knowledge of these lands to use. With your new horses, I want you to visit every village, farm, holdfast, any place the enemy might seek rest and food.”

“The elephant and the jackals.” Gendry spoke with some distaste. “Thought we left that behind in the Braavosi foothills.”

“I’m sorry?” Mother asked, eyebrow raised. “What is this talk of elephants?”

“Elephant, my queen.” Thoros bowed. “It is a strategy used by the order to great success against large, slow moving enemy forces. The elephant is mighty but ponderous, with a great hunger and thirst. We are to act as the jackals. The order splits into companies that surround the enemy. Wherever the elephants looks, he sees the jackal. The lands he travels through will be burnt to ruin. All the while, the jackal nips at his feet, driving him on and on…”
“Until the elephant falls.” He finished. “Or he grows weak enough for the jackals to strike. To tear their prey apart.”

The High Queen shook her head at that. “So much destruction and too much risk. Why not simply trap Joffrey in along the coast? Have our fleet sail from Maidenpool and summon Benjen’s army from Harrenhal?"

“That all takes time and we will lose the momentum of battle.” Jon pointed to the map, where Harrenhal lay. “Benjen’s army is mostly foot and would take the better part of a moon’s turn to make it here. Not only that, but with King Robb warring in the west, I wouldn’t wish to deprive the Riverlands of my uncle’s protection. Joffrey is on the run so we must keep him running. Lest this king remembers that he still outnumbers us and makes a stand that could cost us dearly.”

His words echoed through the sept where most had become as silent as the seven statues which stared down at him. His mother clearly despised this strategy as much as Jon did, yet that would not stop him from seeing it through. These lands were lush and still pledged loyalty to Joffrey. Each village or holdfast that the king’s army stopped at could offer food and men for him to continue fighting. The longer the war lasted, the more suffered.

*Tell yourself it’s better to burn a hundred villages to end the war in a few months than to see a thousand destroyed as the war drags on.*

*Tell yourself that and pretend that Sansa married anything less than a monster.*

He did all that and more as he made to lay out his plans in full. If they were successful in driving Joffrey away from Rook’s Rest, the Order would divide into four columns. The Blackfish would command the company riding at the fore of the Durrandon march, scouring the land ahead. Thoros and Greenbeard would lead the companies at the flanks, doing much the same while leading raids and hemming the enemy in. Jon would ride with the foot, the larger force following at Joffrey’s rear and giving the Storm King a constant threat to worry on while driving his flight forward.

Before any of this could happen however, they needed to give Joffrey reason to flee. That meant robbing him of food and fodder in these lands and it was a task that the Crackclaw lords accepted with relish.

“None better than us to do so.” Ser Bennard smiled. “Brunes, Crabbs, Caves, all of us Crackclaw folk have been raiding these lands since before the Andals came. We’ll burn the crops and steal the cattle, aye, but what of the gold? Some of these villages and septs are well off.”

“I forbid that the septs to be touched.” Jon spoke firmly, remembering Ser Theodan’s words outside. The knight’s men had died to keep this place free from war and Jon would try to keep some of his decency. “There must be places that the smallfolk we put out can seek relief... and they must be allowed the safety to do so. No innocents or any in service to the Faith, whether he be a septon or Warrior’s Son, is to be molested by any under my command. Wherever gold is found and bounty seized I want at least a half portion given over to the nearest septry. Is that understood?”

“As you will it.” Ser Bennard nodded with too much grumbling. “Any sept I visit will hear of the generosity of the dragons.”

“No, not of dragons.” His mind went to the reason he held the septs so dear. “Let it be in my wife’s name that all carry these orders out. All relief and mercy shown shall be done by the honor of Princess Sansa Stark. Rickon, does that not sound like something your sister would do?”

“That’s Sansa for sure.” Rickon nodded enthusiastically, smiling up to the lords. “Even if she was
mad at me for poor manners or something, she’d always share her lemoncakes.”

A Pyne lord guffawed. “Dear boy, gold is tad more valuable than lemoncakes.”

“Try telling that to Sansa.” Rickon answered and Jon grinned, ruffling the boy’s hair.

“What of the prisoners?” Gendry asked. “We took hundreds in the battle and more that fell behind in the retreat. Far too many to drag around with us at any rate.”

“Allow me to treat with the highborn.” Mother put in with a look to Lyman. “There might be more lords or knights willing to abandon King Joffrey. We can welcome those men to our cause and send the others worthy of ransom off to Maidenpool.”

“Most of our prisoners aren’t so well off.” Gendry crossed his arms, for he knew the most common fate for prisoners during the kind of campaign Jon proposed. A quick death or a long march to the slavers was standard in the empire.

*There is to be no slavery in this land… killing them all would be the wisest course…*

*It’s not like I haven’t ordered such a thing before. These are Joffrey’s men after all. Men who took up swords to defend the man who tortured Sansa.*

*What mercy do I owe them?*

He looked to the statues of the Seven then. His eyes fell on those of the Mother and Father. The pair of gods that had watched over Jon and Sansa as they wed. When his bride had been terrified and him worried that she was marrying a monster. He had done everything he could to spare Sansa that.

“We’ll spare them.” Jon said to the surprise of many. “Any unwilling to join our march shall lose their weapons but not their lives... have Ser Theodan put them to work digging graves for the fallen. Perhaps he can even find work for some of the stronger ones guarding septs as new levees for this Faith Militant… it matters not, just let it be known-”

“That this mercy is done in Prince Jon’s name.” Mother interrupted, grabbing at his arm and shooting a fierce glare his way. “May all in these lands see, even in the midst of a horrible war, how my son and his wife are good and caring people. Who respect the Faith and its teachings of mercy… something that the tyrant King Joffrey scoffs at.”

He didn’t care for how mother interjected herself into the affair, yet the others responded so well to her words that he let them pass without protest. Just as Ser Theodan and the septons allowed Jon and his party to leave the sept without admonishing them. After being told of all the help he was soon to receive for grave digging and guarding nearby septries, Ser Theodan actually bowed to Jon briefly when he rode away.

While men set to stripping and preparing the dead of both friend and foe for burial, the Dark Order’s dead were treated in a far different manner. Each fallen brother was bound in their cloak and tied to a horse. When it came time for Jon to lead his men on towards Rook’s Rest, the order’s dead went with them.

One last ride with their brothers.

When night fell and camp was struck, nearly every order man pitched in to help build the pyres for their comrades. Nearly three score had fallen in the fighting, relatively few compared to their enemy’s losses, yet a blow all the same. A glance to Karl Bowden proved that. The young warrior moved as if in a daze as he and Grenn carried the cloaked form of Margan to lay upon the pyre.
They had only known each other for less than half a year, but in that time Karl and Margan were rarely separated. They rode together, they bedded down together, and they rose to serve again each day together.

Gendry and Jon had called each other brother before joining the Dark Order, yet it was their time acting as each other’s shadow that made them brothers in everything but blood. He looked to Gendry then and the sergeant met his gaze, the pair of them sharing a silent understanding. A grim one.

*Were it Gendry that fell today, it would be me carrying him to the pyre. As he would do for me.*

It was strange to think that soon both would be free of their vows. Their time in the Dark Order would come to an end. No longer would it be the order that Jon lived and died for. Nor his brothers that he would bed down with and wake to each new day.

Once he was free of this vow, it was the one he swore to Sansa that would become his new purpose. It was his wife that he would serve for the rest of his days. Her that he would live and die for.

Until then, Jon still had duties to perform. When all the dead were in their places, the order took theirs. A great black ring, as dark as the night sky above, surrounded the pyre. Just as the sky was lit here and there by stars, so did torches burn among the dark riders. No prayers were spoken aloud, the faiths of the order were as diverse as the men. All were united in looking to Jon as he stepped forward. As lord-commander, it fell to him to do honor by the dead.

“Look.” He spoke clearly into the cool night air. “Look hard into this night. They are quiet now but our brothers are here still. They wait for us to send them on, to where all shall go. Where we will meet again.”

*We will meet again.* Three thousand voices repeated in the night.

“The flames will take them, our brothers riding the smoke up into the black. It was in the darkness that we found each other. Against the terrors of the night, we are brothers.”

*We are brothers.*

“They ride on into the shadows. To stand bravely against all fear. To bring order to the chaos. A Dark Order.”

*A Dark Order.*

All became silent as Jon raised his hand up and made the signal for the men to ride on. Thus the torch bearers made to light the pyres. The flames spread quickly, the men well practiced at building such things. As the fire grew and enveloped the cloaked forms of his men, Jon’s mind wandered to what lay ahead.

*These men will not be the last to fall. The fires we set here will spread out across this land.*

*Just let Sansa’s name ring out as well. A mercy to the afflicted. A light in the darkness.*

*Far from this hell.*

**SANSA**

*The night was dark and full of death.*
Burning arrows and torches surrounded her. Men with swords and spears fighting and killing one another. There were hundreds of them. Thousands. The dead already on the ground were enough to feed her pack for weeks.

This was no time to stop and feed though. Men were trying to kill her. She was running swiftly through the trenches, climbing their man-made earthen mounds and darting between sharpened tree branches. Arrows stuck in the ground near her, spears stabbed her way, one metal warrior was so foolish as to come to her with a sword.

His screams mingled with the rest, ringing in the air as she wrenched his sword arm free with her jaws. The steel hurt her fangs as she tightened her jaw and yanked with all her might. The hard skin beneath held firm to a point but had enough give for flesh and bone to tear under the bent steel. Blood was running in rivers from his shoulder when she leapt off and continued out into the fight.

Some of the men meant her no harm. They fought the ones who would like to kill her. The old warrior was there, just ahead of her. One who smelled so old should not be so fast. Even her eyes had trouble catching how quickly his blade moved in the night. His fight had taken him to the top of the last large dirt mound. Others were climbing to join him when she rushed by, reaching the top just as he felled two more foes. Two others were moving in on his back, a smaller boy being pushed ahead by a fatter man.

A man she knew. He was clad in the warrior’s steel and over it he wore a green cloth with two black porcupines. She disliked those beasts, but it was his sweaty face with quivering jowls and flat nose that inspired her hatred. That face had once smiled greedily as it hurt her.

Boros Blount. His name was Boros Blount. It was Boros who used his fists against a scared, weak thing. All while a golden monster watched with his cruel green eyes. He would laugh. Boros would laugh. They all laughed at her tears. Her pain. Her fear.

Boros was the scared one now as he pushed his comrade on to attack the old warrior’s back. She growled to warn him, giving the old one time to whip around and meet the sword thrust. Boros made to strike before the pair disentangled but he never made it so close. His war cry turned into a scream of pain as she lunged at his leg.

Blood ran into her mouth as she pulled him down. His cry made her happy. The fear in his eyes gave her power. Hurting him felt right.

His flesh tasted good.

‘Please! Stop!’ Boros pleaded as she tore into him. ‘Don’t- ah! Don’t hurt me!’

Those words made her stop. In another life she’d said the same. A time when she could not imagine anyone being so cruel as to take pleasure from hurting others. The blood in her mouth no longer tasted sweet. Boros’s suffering did not make her happy.

Yet her pause gave him the chance to grab his sword. Boros was making to stab her when the old one stepped over him and drove his own sword down into the knight’s throat. There was no scream. Only a gurgle as the fat foe died. The fires around reflected in his eyes but there was no light behind them anymore. Not like the light in the old one’s eyes as he looked to her.

‘Thank you Lady.’ His blues stared into hers. ‘I owed you one.’

She licked at his face and tasted the blood but beneath it was only a sweet man. One who cared for her. It was the old one that the others rallied around when they climbed the mound. Then it was him
who led them all down into the camp ahead. Where their foes were making lines and making to kill them-

“Kill them all!”

The child’s cry caused Sansa to jerk and sway. She felt lost and confused as she took in the battlements around her and the dark sky above. When hands grabbed to steady her she almost screamed, fearful that they were enemies about to attack.

“Sansa? What’s wrong?” Talia asked, the young lady’s face full of worry as she drew in tight to her right. Jeyne was to her left, holding her arm and sharing Talia’s concerned expression.

“Do you feel faint?” Jeyne reached up to touch Sansa’s forehead and everything came back to her at once.

She was standing on the walls of Duskendale. The ladies were part of an audience gathered to watch the battle outside the town. The siege lines Joffrey had left in place after his departure were formidable enough to keep the defenders wary and penned in, yet did little more. In the moons since Joffrey’s departure, the siege of Duskendale had amounted to little more than raids and skirmishes.

Tonight that was all to end. After weeks of prodding, Lord Royner had finally agreed to launch an attack against the siege lines. All it had taken was Ser Barristan agreeing to lead the attack and Aurane Velaryon adding his men to the effort.

*That and unending patience from Barristan and myself,* she thought. *There were times I thought to attack the siege lines with my own hands I grew so wroth...*

It was a strange thing to feel that she'd actually been a part of the battle raging outside the town walls. She was thinking about Barristan and Lady being down there and somehow let her mind wander. There were foggy memories of men fighting and dying, and of her taking part. Yet it was clearly all nonsense. The most Sansa saw of this battle were the glimpses of flaming arrows and torches flashing in the darkness.

And now she acted as if that was too much for her. Talia was rubbing Sansa’s back as Jeyne waved forward a page with a cup of water.

“Here Sansa, drink.” Jeyne held the cup out, her eyes falling to Sansa’s middle. “Maybe your aunt was right. This is no place for a woman with child-”

Her friend’s words were cut off by the enthusiastic cheers of a boy leaning against the parapet.

“Go father! Kill them all!” Robin Darklyn shouted. The thirteen-year-old heir was jumping up and down in excitement. She knew men were dying out there, and to see a boy treating it all as sport caused her to frown.

“Look at that Jeyne.” She spoke the words so only her ladies would hear. “My aunt thinks I should stay at the castle but lets her child bask in the horrors of battle. Foolishness I name it, for I am fine and will see this night through.”

A howl then reached her ears and many of the Darklyn household seemed amused by that, young Robin especially. The skinny boy whirled about, his long hair nearly touching his shoulders. It framed his pale face in such a way that his dark eyes looked like holes in a pale mask. It was an unsettling comparison, especially considering the smile that stretched across his face.

“That’s your wolf isn’t it?” Robin asked. “Is it howling because it killed someone? Tore their throats
out? Ate them up?"

“I have no idea. Though I doubt she cheers on any killing.” She chided the young lordling. “That
would be in poor taste. Men on both sides likely fall as we speak.”

Robin rolled his eyes at her. “That’s what battle is.”

“Quite right my son.” A woman broke free of the crowd. “And that is why war is a man’s duty, not a
lady’s.”

The voice belonged to Sansa’s aunt and Robin’s mother, who now stepped forward to put a hand on
her son’s shoulder. In the same motion, Lysa turned to glare Sansa’s way, for there was little love
between them. That her mother and Lysa were sisters was plain to see, though Sansa believed that
most would be hard-pressed to guess that the Lady of Duskendale was younger. Lysa was an
attractive enough woman, a tad thinner than Sansa’s mother and willowy in look, yet her lips always
had a pinched, disapproving manner about them.

It was that same expression that Lady Darklyn bore as she shook her head at Sansa.

“Your words do not match your actions it seems Lady Sansa.” Lysa turned up her nose. “Wasn’t it
you who pushed for this battle? You insinuated that there was a lack of martial spirit within House
Darklyn, bothering my dear husband so. Yet when he fights your foes, you shame his son for taking
pride in his father’s brave deeds?”

“I meant no such thing.” Sansa bit back her irritation. “Lord Royner shows himself to be a brave
man, one willing to fight for good causes. My lady must take heart and see that her objections to this
battle were as misguided as my chastisement of young Robin.”

Lysa’s eyes narrowed at those words, her lips pursing even more. She had looked much the same
when Sansa and Ser Barristan convinced Lord Royner to launch this attack. An action that Lysa had
argued vehemently against.

When Sansa set out to reach Duskendale she’d had to endure many obstacles. First came Edmure’s
protests when she made to depart Riverrun. Then there was the delay in securing a proper escort at
Maidenpool. At the time, she’d thought the worst part of the journey were the storms that forced
them to anchor at Driftmark and seek shelter at the castle High Tide.

Yet Aunt Lysa proved to be the greatest barrier to Sansa’s efforts. Whenever Barristan sought to
inspire bravery in Lord Royner, Lysa would fill his head with fears, for the fate of their son should
Joffrey win the war, for the fate of their castle and people should it be sacked. When Sansa would
remind him that Joffrey’s cruelty knew no bounds, Lysa would point out that the Darklyn army had
limits and should not be wasted. Her aunt did all she could to paint Sansa as a frightened young wife,
willingly to risk anything to safeguard her husband’s life.

To that end, Lysa had gone so far as to betray her niece’s closely guarded secret. The travels by sea
were horrible for Sansa, the nausea that came from being with child only worsened with the bucking
waves. Even after arriving at Duskendale, the mere smell of saltwater would cause bile to rise in her
throat. Sansa had sought out the Dun Fort’s maester for relief, claiming to be ill and foolishly
believing that the man accepted her lies. The next day, all in the town knew she was with child,
courtesy of Lady Lysa.

“It’s wonderful news.” The shrew had said, with false smiles and feigned cheer. “I can only imagine
the joy on Catelyn’s face when the raven I sent reaches Winterfell. Or Edmure at Riverrun. Even
Benjen Stark at Harrenhal. I would’ve gladly delivered the announcement to your husband but he
sacks castles more often than he guests at them.”

While Lysa tried to imply that Sansa’s being with child made her unreasonable, the horrible woman had also tried to use Jon’s victories against him. Her aunt claimed that if Jon could burn half the lands north of the Blackwater then he had scant need of Darklyn men. Indeed she went even further, pointing out that all the recent setbacks to the Lannisters and the Durrandons proved the alliance as needing little more from Duskendale.

Robb continued to war in the west, sacking the castles Ashemark and the Crag, all the while threatening to move on Lannisport. More importantly, he had captured Cersei’s daughter, Princess Myrcella Durrandon. From what they heard, Myrcella had been sent west when the war began and was between castles when Robb’s men overtook her party. Sansa could only imagine Cersei’s fury as the golden queen sat besieged at Storm’s End.

The Golden Legion and the Martells had won a great victory over the Stormlords near Grandview. Word had reached Duskendale only days before their arrival that Storm’s End itself was now under siege by Prince Aegon. Jon’s brother had taken all the horse from his own men and the Martells and rode hard to invest the Durrandon seat after smashing their host south of the castle. A feat easily accomplished, since Cersei had sent nearly all her remaining men north.

Joffrey was now driving his beleaguered army at all costs to meet those reinforcements at the mouth of the Blackwater. In a way, Sansa felt almost thankful to Cersei for sending those men north, for it was their approach that she used to convince Lord Royner to act.

The Lord of Duskendale was an indecisive man but not a stupid one. He knew full well that if Joffrey defeated Jon, the king would turn his cruel gaze on House Darklyn next. Thus, to Lysa’s chagrin, the lord had committed his scores of knights and thousands of men to break the siege. Ser Barristan led the main attack through the main gate, which served as a distraction for Lord Royner and his selection of knights to ride out from a postern gate and set fire to the siege engines.

It was those three large trebuchets that now lit up the night. Robin gave a cheer and Lady Lysa led her household in a round of applause at the sight of the burning weaponry.

“Father did it!” Robin beamed. “I bet Ser Dontos and father killed a hundred men all alone!”

“Your lord father is surely capable.” Lysa smoothed her son’s hair behind his ears. “I will impress upon the importance of throwing a feast in honor of his courage! Days of celebration to show the strength of our walls and lord both! To the Defiance of Duskendale!”

More applause followed that as Talia leaned in to whisper to Jeyne and Sansa.

“If it was up to her there’d be nothing to celebrate. The Darklyns would still be sitting on their arses.”

“Talia! You sound like Asher.” Jeyne grinned for a moment before it fell away as Lysa continued to prattle on. “Gods Sansa, I know she’s your aunt but that woman is infuriating. Did she say days of celebration?”

“She did.” Sansa fumed. “The Lady Lysa knows full well that Barristan and I wish for her husband to follow this action up with a march, and at great haste. She clearly means to delay Lord Royner…”

“Maybe this fight will get his blood up.” Talia put in. “Rodrik and Ash always said that after a battle they feel like they can take on the world. ”

Jeyne smiled wickedly then. “Or perhaps the lord will simply ride out to escape Lysa’s shrill voice.”
“Jeyne!” Sansa said before her laughter escaped and she was forced to cover her mouth. Talia did much the same but the damage was done, for Lysa regarded them all once more.

“From disapproving of violence to laughing at a world aflame.” Lysa gestured to the chaos of the siege lines and the tents being fired as well. “With a war lord and a dragon for a husband, I imagine you must become used to such carnage. Though I worry on how you keep attracting the most violent of men, young lady.”

“Your grace, Lady Lysa.” She corrected, holding her temper to only that as Lysa’s mouth opened in disbelief. “My father is King Eddard Stark. My mother, your older sister, is his queen and thus I am a princess. I will be addressed properly and not hear my husband slighted.”

Lysa bristled. “Well, your grace, do you deny that Jonarys Targaryen ravages the countryside? That wherever the dark menace rides, fire and death go with him.”

“I will not deny it.” She shot back. “Nor will I speak to how a war is being waged far beyond these walls, for I would be doing so in ignorance. As ignorant as any who condemn with certainty my husband’s actions. Surely you would not do so, dear lady, for war is a man’s duty. Is that not what you said?”

Lysa scowled at Sansa throwing her own words back at her and did not dare answer, instead turning back to watch as enemies began to flee into the darkness. Sansa could make out men deep in the lines waving Darklyn banners in victory. Less numerous were the Targaryen banners, though a large one stood out as it was raised high on a pole above the burning Durrandon pavilions.

Lysa’s accusations came back to haunt her then. It was not the first time that foul rumors regarding Jon had reached her ears. Joffrey’s retreat across his northern holdings had led to hundreds dropping dead from disease or want of food in only a few weeks. Worse tales spoke of the Dark Order burning villages with the smallfolk barred within their homes, others being put to the sword. Barristan was quick to note that most ravens claiming such things came from castles loyal to Joffrey, like Rosby and Stokeworth.

_They spread lies to besmirch Jon’s good name, she told herself, my love could never perform such horrors._

A part of her was not so convinced. She’d once blinded herself to Joffrey’s evil and she’d spent more time apart from Jon than with him. How well did she truly know her husband? By his own words Jon had named himself a monster.

_But I’ve known monsters… in my heart I cannot think that way of Jon, for he’s good and kind._

_If Jon does violence, it is for the sake of all of us. For this child he does not know exists._

Her hands were at her middle still when the last of the fighting ended. A summons came for the Darklyns and Sansa’s party greeted the returning lord.

The Lord of Duskendale was among the first through the town’s gates. Royner Darklyn was comely for an older man, his brown hair flecked with only a few bits of grey. His cheeks and neck were clean shaven but his beard grew so long below his chin as to touch the top of his chest plate. Beside him rode a far more ordinary looking man who was, in truth, a rather extraordinary knight. Ser Dontos Hollard was kin to the Darklyns and the finest swordsman and rider in the town. The gathered ladies clapped for him just as loudly as they did for their lord. The next man to arrive had his share of admirers as well.
Aurane Velaryon’s grey-green eyes were captivating to look upon and his long silver-gold hair was quite lovely. In all ways he was handsome and charming, to a point where Sansa was somewhat wary of him. It was unfair of her to think so though, for Aurane captained the Alysanne, the ship which had brought her party to Duskendale. It was also Aurane who arranged for a portion of the imperial fleet to deliver hundreds of Velaryon men-at-arms to assist in this battle. He was the acting Master of Driftmark, and had fought hard to win Jon the support of the Darklys. Yet something in his constant flattery and needling for information from her made Sansa liken him more to a fishmonger than a friend.

Still, when Aurane smiled and bowed to her from his horse she smiled back. Only half as widely as she did to see Barristan and Lady appear through the gates though. Her knight was bloodied, as was the direwolf, yet both were in good health as they came to her. Lady pressing her head against Sansa’s middle in such a caring manner that she did not care one bit at blood staining her gown.

“That wolf is something, my princess.” Barristan said as he held out a bundle to her. “A gift, courtesy of your Lady and myself.”

She unwrapped it, somehow knowing what it would be. Namely the torn tunic of Ser Boros Blount. Sansa could picture his dead eyes as clearly in her mind as she could see Lady’s golden ones staring up at her now.

“Where is my son?!” Royner shouted as he wheeled his horse about. “Where is my little lord?”

“Here father!” Robin was ushered forward by Lysa, the boy running to stand before the lord’s horse.

“Robin! You’re too young to take up the sword, but you’re old enough to carry mine back to the castle!” Royner laughed as he unstrapped his swordbelt and handed the sheathed weapon to the giggling boy. Lysa managed a smile herself as Royner displayed to his wife that he still bore her favor on his wrist.

“You’re well my lord?” She asked fretfully. “The fiends did not harm you?”

“Not with the valiant Ser Dontos by my side!” Royner gestured to his champion. “We routed the foe and put them to flight! They ran like the dawn would show them for the cowards they are!”

A cheer met the lord’s claims and he was clearly in good spirits as he basked in the glory of a victory. She glanced to Barristan who took all of this in with a stoic manner before meeting her gaze.

“Indeed they fled.” The ser said simply. “Thousands of men... heading south. If they don’t move to link up with Joffrey at the Blackwater, I’d be shocked your grace.”

“As would I.” Aurane added as he led his horse over to them, a sly smile on his charming face. “I worry now that those men might make to seize the crossing over the Blackwater Rush. If we wish the fleet to do as Lord Jon tasked, we’d best send a raven to Driftmark now. Should the crossing remain in enemy hands—”

“It would be a disaster.” She finished. “One we created by driving this enemy army off, adding to the threats facing my husband. Let us see about bringing some friends as well.”

With that, Sansa joined the crowd forming around Royner, who was regaling his people with tales of his heroics. The lord was standing with his son cradled to his side and Lysa holding his arm. It was her aunt that caught sight of Sansa’s approach first and her expression darkened.

“My lord.” Lysa pulled on her husband. “Surely you are tired. Perhaps hungry? Let us retire to the Dun Fort.”
“What say you, Dontos?” Royner hailed his champion. “It’s a tad early but shall you share a cup of wine with your lord?”

Dontos grunted. “You know me. One cup before bed, if that. Wine dulls the reflexes—”

“But not your fighting spirit!” Sansa smiled to say as she blocked Lysa’s attempted departure with her husband. Royner was taken aback by her sudden appearance and she curtsied quickly. “Dear nuncle, your men fought like the Warrior himself was at their backs! I beg the honor of pouring the first cup for you.”

“A princess pouring my wine?” Royner blinked in bemusement. “I would never allow such a thing. I would however raise a toast in your honor. I let my men know that we acted to show Joffrey’s lapdogs what happens to those men who abuse princesses.”

“She’s truly grateful.” Lysa added. “And understands that such heroes will need rest—”

“I’m more than grateful.” She spoke with deep conviction. “My lord has left me proud to name him an uncle. I will let all of my new kin in the Targaryen imperial family know of his great deeds. When the war is at an end and I am presented to the High King, I do hope you attend us—”

“You’d have me meet King Rhaegar?”

“Why, yes.” Sansa held her hand up to the lord. “At the imperial court. If you and my aunt would join my retinue.”

“Of course!” Royner took her hand and kissed it in awe. “The High Queen promised she would visit Duskendale, but no Darklyn lord has ever been welcomed to Summerhall. To travel so far…”

She did not let Royner’s hand escape her grasp and the lord pulled away from a frowning Lysa to welcome Sansa on his arm. Robin was distracted by Lady and she stole Royner’s attention as they made their way to a waiting carriage.

“A journey to the empire, it shall be a first for me too. It would be good to have friends by my side. I can call you a friend, can’t I? To myself and my husband?”

“Yes, I’d beg that you to do so.” Royner’s eyes were distant, his mind likely bubbling over with possibilities for influence and future grandeur. “Whenever and wherever my royal niece shall go, I and House Darklyn will be your firm friend and escort.”

“I’m so happy to hear that.” She let the lord see her put a hand to her middle. “There’s much I need to keep safe now and Ser Barristan does worry. He’s quite concerned that the Velaryon company is too small to intimidate the Durrandons from attacking once we give chase to them—”

“They are far too few!” Royner was aghast. “I thought for sure you’d stay here in Duskendale—”

“My place is with my husband... who fights to begin a new era in Westeros.” Sansa blinked several times as she looked to the lord. “And if I am to be worthy to travel to Summerhall and be presented to the High King, I must make this shorter journey.”

“Shorter yes, yet far more treacherous.” Royner spoke with fatherly worry as he stroked his whiskers. “And one a true friend would not let you make alone.”

“Husband!” Lysa tried to break in. “We should speak before—”

“Hush my lady, I am speaking with the princess.” The lord snapped, which took Lysa aback and
forced Sansa to hold in a smile as Royner helped her up into the carriage. “You must tell me if this carriage is to your liking princess. After we depart, I’d have you and your ladies ride in it under guard of my finest men. I cannot keep you behind my walls, but if my army is to escort a Targaryen bride, she would travel as befitting her rank…”

Sansa was all graciousness and charm as Royner went on and on about the arrangements he’d make for her travels. The words she clung to were of the numbers of knights and spearmen now being pledged to Jon and his future battles. How the lord would send riders out to seek her prince’s army to share their plans with Jon.

He even offered to let Sansa send a letter on as well but she couldn't settle her mind to think properly on that.

She was too lost in the idea of seeing Jon again. Of being able to tell him of their child.

To be there when the monsters fell and Jon proved himself a true prince.

JON

“The wind’s not the worst.”

Balaq dropped a bit of dirt into the air to prove his point. The gathered captains and sergeants watched in earnest as the dust was carried gently toward the west.

“The arrows will climb but we’ll need to get closer than I like.”

“How close?” The Blackfish asked and the Summer Islander’s grin was almost wolfish.

“Close enough to smell the stink off those Westerosi bastards. All you lot smell of shit and piss.”

While the men laughed Jon did not feel right joining them. Not while his army prepared for battle against an enemy in a far better position. They’d trapped Joffrey just north of the Blackwater Rush, the river waters running strong and swift at the farthest edge south of the battlefield. Three hills dominated a landscape filled with grassy fields, bogs, and trees. The men had taken to calling the tallest hill Aegon’s hill, after the Conqueror himself. The smaller two they styled after his sister-wives, Visenya and Rhaenys.

The Dark Order and its allies were arrayed into battle lines between the sisters’ hills but it was Aegon’s Hill that Jon’s eyes were drawn to. That was where the enemy had amassed itself. Most of the Durrandon men were formed into shieldwalls at its lowest approaches while companies of archers were higher up, right below a token force arrayed upon the hilltop. Jon could see the royal banner of King Joffrey flying there. Even at this distance it appeared faded and frayed, much like the tunics and armor of the Durrandon army.

They’re better off than the thousands we left starving between here and Rook’s Rest.

Weeks spent riding and killing. Hunting and burning. Acting monstrous towards a monster.

After the Battle of the Ridgeway Sept, the enemy had numbered around fourteen thousand. By the time they reached the Blackwater there was barely more than ten thousand left in Joffrey’s army. It had been a mighty force… yet one with needs, with weaknesses that the Dark Order exploited. He couldn’t count the number of villages and farms that they set aflame. Those ruined places all blended together like the emaciated corpses of Joffrey’s dead that Jon rode by during their pursuit.
The smallfolk might have faired just as poorly if Jon hadn’t kept true to his word. After Joffrey marched through the decimated lands the order would leave whatever supplies they’d seized at the roadside. Travelling members of the Faith Militant would then take such supplies and distribute them among the septs and smallfolk. What had started as a passing idea to spare some innocents had become routine by the end of their march.

While the Dark Order spared the septries, the Durrandon army was not so merciful. Nor did they extend any mercy to the smallfolk, who they would often capture and torture for supplies and secrets, whether they had such or not. The bodies of the dead were usually found hanging from trees. Septons and septas, men and women, old and young, it made no difference. Their bloated, purple faces all had the same accusing expressions when Jon ordered them cut down and marked for the Faith to bury.

_Joffrey strung them up but I drove him to this. I knew what desperate men are capable of._

_It’s the weak and innocent who suffer when monsters roam free…_

He sometimes dreamt of the dead. There was one maiden with bright auburn hair that stuck out in his memory. Joffrey’s men had stripped her naked and burned the mark of a stag on her breast before hanging her. Jon would thrash and shout at night when he dreamt of her. The nights when he woke without that girl’s face changing into Sansa’s were the ones he was most thankful for.

Thinking of his wife bid him to look north, where the Darklings were formed up below Rhaenys’s Hill. Somewhere behind their lines was his wife, at a higher point of the hill and safe. He’d been surprised to hear a few thousand Durrandon men and a Darklyn army were racing to reach the Blackwater first. That surprise fell away to shock when he learned that Sansa was among them.

_“That girl is full of surprises.” Mother had smiled at the news. “Here I thought that Sansa would be angry with me for not sending for her, stewing over her idleness like I might. Instead she moved to gain us fifteen hundred men, many of them knights! Thank the gods for Sansa Stark…”_

Jon wanted to do more than thank her. He wanted to rage at her. To speak words of love to her. To hold her. To kiss her lips and run his fingers through her hair. He wanted so much more than the short, sweet letter she’d sent along with the rider. In it had been words of love and hope, a desire to share some fine tidings with him.

The letter was tucked beneath his mail and close to his heart even now. Yet that was as close as Jon would let Sansa come to him. There was a battle to be waged and he needed to keep his mind focused. Sansa caused such turmoil in him and Jon wasn’t sure he could do what needed to be done to see his men through this fight with her watching.

A battle they were already hard-pressed to win.

_“They’re dug in good and proper.” Greenbeard ran a finger down the length of his blade as he glared up at the hill. “In Tyrosh we have a saying. Better to let the foe piss down on you than try and climb his mountain. We should just starve them out.”_

_The Blackfish nodded. “I’d say the same… except that’s what Joffrey wants. They’ve got superior numbers and reinforcements coming from the south. If those forces hit the crossing while we’re besieging Joffrey here, we’ll have to split our forces.”_

_“Then there’ll be more than piss coming down that hill.” Asher spat and Gendry narrowed his eyes on the enemy._
“They’ll roll right over whatever men we leave here... one way or another, we’re facing another bloody fight.”

Gendry was right. They all were. Whatever plans Aegon and Jon had worked out together in Summerhall had gone to shit. Aegon was meant to keep the Stormlords occupied in the south, but Jon now faced nearly half their strength alone. The fleet was supposed to seize the crossing at the Blackwater with levees from Dragonstone, Driftmark, and even White Harbor, yet only a token force arrived. Aegon had pressed more than half of their ships into joining him at the siege of Storm’s End. That meant Jon’s hold on the Blackwater crossing was not as secure as it could be.

So I must defeat Joffrey now or face worse odds on the morrow.

I’ve fought in battles like this before... commanded my men to ride into certain death... even been ready to die myself.

This time was different though. Jon had never had so much to lose before. The freedom of countless masses. The survival of the Kingdom of the North. A new realm here in Westeros.

A future with Sansa.

“Brothers.” Thoros broke through all their talk and Jon’s worries. He threw his red cloak over the dark armor he wore and held out his arms to beseech them. “My dark brothers, our doubts are well-founded but they don’t change what must be. The Dark Order fights when it has to, not when it wants to. We fight, and we win.”

Asher scratched his head. “Don’t start saying your red rahloo is going to see us through. I’d rather charge up that hill ass backwards with my breeches down than have to hear about the glory of-”

“I pray that R’hllo will let me survive this day.” Thoros grinned as he patted Asher on the back. “But my faith rests in my brothers. And our Lord-Commander, whose strategy is as sound as we can ask for.”

“Arse kisser.” The Blackfish chuckled and many of the others did the same. All save for Jon, who just took in the moment for what it was.

The calm before the storm.

“Thoros is right, you know your duties.” Jon put a fist to his chest, saluting his men. “Go and see to them. After this is done we’ll meet again.”

“We’ll meet again.” The men answered in a chorus before departing to their different stations for the fight ahead. Gendry and Asher’s place was with him though, and they were not the only escort that Jon had as he made to take command of the army.

Ghost and Shaggydog kept a respectful distance from his horse but Lady made it difficult to mount his steed. The grey direwolf pressed and nuzzled at him so much that Jon was forced to gently push the beast aside. Still, Lady followed behind with the other direwolves as the three men rode to the center of the army.

Most of the Dark Order was mounted and ready yet their role would be a far different one than usual. They were to act as a reserve during this battle while Balaq’s archers and their allies’ foot would lead the attack. The Darklyns made up the left, the Crackclaws the center, while the Velaryon, Mooton, and Darry men united to form the right. Marching behind the center would be Balaq’s archers, dismounted and with orders to thin the enemy shield wall as best they could.
The ranks of spearmen and archers were forming a half moon around the hill while Jon’s eyes were drawn to Rhaenys’s Hill again and again. He could make out a small party there, two white-cloaked warriors among them. If he strained his eyes, he could almost see his mother standing beside a woman with hair the color of fire and soft to the touch. Eyes as blue as the sky. A body as perfect as a Lyseni goddess, not marred in the least by the many cruelties done to it.

“She got your letter.” Gendry spoke quietly, causing Jon to feel embarrassed for being caught. “I delivered it like you asked. Won’t lie though, I wasn’t the man she wanted to see. The princess didn’t cry or anything but she was upset that it wasn’t you to learn about…”

“Learn about what?” He asked when Gendry’s voice trailed off. “Is Sansa alright?”

“She’s fine Jon… as beautiful as ever. Just trust me, you should have seen her.”

“I will when this is over.”

_When I drag Joffrey before her in chains. He is the hostage that will win this war for us. Whatever else happens, he’ll know the price for what he’s done._

“Good enough reason enough to live.” Asher smirked. “I for one am glad the ladies are here. After all this time at war, I’d welcome one of Talia’s songs. Something sweet… something peaceful. She’s got a fine voice you know. One day I hope that it will get her a finer man. Until then, she’ll have to waste a song on her big brother.”

“I’d beg you to share such a thing.” Jon said. “There’s not many minstrels about and Sansa does like music… she might dance to a singer.”

Asher bowed in his saddle. “If it gets my lord a dance, I’ll gladly share Tal’s song.”

A different song was played across the battlefield when Jon signaled the advance. Trumpets sounded to drive the ranks of foot forward, their spears and swords at the ready. Horns blew as the archers drew up behind. It was queer for Jon to see the black clad bowmen of the order walking rather than riding. Karl and his longbow would be there, and Grenn with him, one of many men carrying shields to cover their archer brethren.

They would need to be shielded. Joffrey’s archers further up the hill began to call to ranks. The enemy had the advantage of high ground and those arrows would cost them. Jon would make it worth the trouble as he led his line of horse to follow the advance. The Blackfish and Greenbeard held the flanks while the Darklyn knights ambled in from the north and Crackclaw riders pushed in along the river.

A breeze moved over the field and through his hair. It caused the tall grass to ripple like waves that broke over the massive bodies of the three direwolves. They moved as a pack before him, powerful and serene all at once. The wolves seemed out of place at first, until all three bore their fangs. Balaq chose that moment to show his own teeth. The longbowmen stopped advancing to loose a volley up at the defenders. The arrows flew into the lines of men making up the Durrandon shieldwall. Shouts and cries rose up as some found their mark. More hadn’t or were blocked by shields. In the time it took for all this to happen, Balaq had already loosed another barrage.

Then the enemy archers took their own shot. Hundreds of arrows arched down from the hillside to hit the front ranks. Jon cringed to hear more men screaming than he expected, scores falling to the ground. Yet the advance did not fall apart, instead it charged. Balaq had all his archers stop to loose straight at the shieldwall as thousands of men ran up the hill.
The crash when the two armies met echoed across the field. Thousands of shields crushed together. Swords met swords. Spears stabbed into flesh. Men fought while others died.

He frowned to see the enemy ranks bending but failing to break. Archers continued to loose from both sides, trying to bleed the numbers of those pushing back and forth. The archers were fair game too, for Balaq had his longbowmen firing freely into their Durrandon counterparts.

Still the line did not move. This stalemate seemed to drag on and on.

The sun travelled farther across the sky than the Durrandon shieldwall moved upon the hill. Jon watched as wounded and dying men were carried down from the battle, in greater numbers with each passing hour. He knew it was only a matter of time before the inevitable happened. Jon wasn’t surprised when the attack began to falter. Towards the center, the Crackclaw line was being slowly pushed back. Once something like that started, it would not be long before men began to flee.

“That is time.” He said firmly, hefting his helm up to his chest. “The center is weakest so we’ll have them pull back. Greenbeard’s column will come too, we’ll need his men.”

“Fuck.” Asher cursed. “I was really hoping they’d be too exhausted to hold.”

“They’re desperate.” Gendry’s voice echoed behind his dark helm. “We have full bellies and open lands to flee to. They are starved and have nowhere else to go.”

“There is no retreat for them.” Jon agreed, donning his helm. “Nor for us. Not today at least. We are going up that hill Gendry…”

And some of us will never come down… if I fall, mother will look to Sansa… she’ll get her back to Winterfell.

I’ll just be a bad memory, though I pray not as bad as some.

His anger towards Joffrey boiled up again as he pulled Dark Sister free and pointed the Valyrian steel up the hill. Gendry and Asher raised their spears and a thousand others did the same before Jon led them all towards the fight. The center was buckling, its leaders already pulling their men back. That’s when the Dark Order drew near to the foe.

The enemy shieldwall loomed ahead, holding steady with spears and pikes aimed downward. He’d faced worse in the Unsullied, but rarely ever uphill. That didn’t stop Jon or his men from forcing their horses to start the climb.

“For the order!” Greenbeard’s voice rose up from somewhere to the right. His loud bellow pierced through the sound of pounding hooves. “For the empire!”

“For the empire!” Asher answered, he and Gendry both cutting in front of Jon.

It was a mad attempt to spare him harm and it meant his friends hitting the shields first. A spear barely missed Gendry’s throat as he drove his own into the shoulder of another man. Asher’s horse shied away at the last moment, rearing and kicking at the pikes raised against him. Jon cut one down with Dark Sister as he tried to urge his horse through the press of men.

“Fucking monster!” A scarred man screamed as he sent his spear against Jon’s shield. “You killed my brothers!”

He had no answer for that but Asher did. The northman skewered the screaming foe yet there were thousands more fighting for their chance to kill them. They’d broken through the front ranks of the
shieldwall in some places, a chaotic skirmish of riders and infantry. Ghost and his siblings worked as one, grabbing at the exposed legs of the enemy and pulling a man down for the others to finish. Yet more men rushed to fill those gaps, holding back the order and pressing them hard.

Jon cleaved about with Dark Sister, keeping spears at bay but doing little damage otherwise. Worse was being done to his men all around him. Horses and riders were being impaled all down the line, falling in ever growing numbers. Then the arrows came, Joffrey’s archers loosing down into the fight, striking just as many of their own men to get at Jon’s. One chewed into the mail at his side but failed to find purchase.

Greenbeard was not so lucky.

Pello of Tyrosh he was named. He had served more time in the Dark Order than Jon had seen years, and he fell before Jon’s eyes. Greenbeard had lost his horse and helm at some point, his green hair flying about as he continued to fight afoot. That was where the arrow found him, plunging through Pello’s neck and out the other side. Even then, it still took two men stabbing their spears through Greenbeard’s chest to bring him low.

The captain’s body was added to the hundreds of other Dark Order men already slain. To anyone watching, it was clear that they weren’t winning. If they continued to fight like this defeat was certain.

Yet still the Dark Order fought on. They would not retreat until their Lord-Commander ordered it. An order Jon could not give, not yet. Through the slit in his helm and the sweat stinging his eyes, Jon could see the last of Joffrey’s reserves farther up the hill. A force of men he needed to tempt downwards and into the fray.

_Come on… come on, _he urged as blood leaked from his side, _look at us, we’re falling to pieces._

_My men are dying… move in for the kill… overwhelm us…_

_Please… don’t let me be the only monster on this hill…_

An arrow then struck into his shield and a spear cut through his horse’s armor, the poor beast kicking and snorting in pain. Ghost killed the man who’d landed the blow while Jon struggled to get his mount back under control. Gendry threw aside his broken spear and lifted his warhammer one-handed to bring it crashing down on the half-helm of a foe. He was hefting it up again when he gave a shout.

“Jon!” Gendry pointed up the hill. “They’re charging! They’re coming!”

He was right. The reserve ranks were doing just that. Charging down the hill, running to join the fight and overwhelm the order. Jon silently thanked Vhagar, the seven, the old gods, and any other god he could think of to see such a sight.

Finally, he could act a coward.

“Retreat!” He roared, raising his open hand up to the sky and shouting again. “Dark Order! Fall back!”

The men did not need to be told twice. They broke like a rabble of hares, their flight panicked and marked by men beating their horses and screaming. As they fled down the hill the enemy cheered, shouting curses and insults. After weeks of being hunted by the order night after night, the Durrandons finally felt powerful and their bloodlust was up. Few hesitated to give chase, not with reinforcements at their backs and a broken foe ahead.
Their charge was brave yet chaotic, men forcing shields and swords to clamor together up as they raced after the dark riders. This meant that the enemy began to roll over the attacking right and left flanks as well, all the makings of a disaster. Every part of this looked like the type of retreat that would break an army's morale. The kind of flight that led to defeat.

Yet this retreat was not borne of fear or defeat. It came from discipline.

Joffrey realized this too late. The enemy still uphill could see what those chasing after Jon’s men could not. Trumpets tried to call a halt to the charge but most of the men couldn’t hear over their own war cries. That’s why the Dark Order used silent signals. His captains and sergeants knew where to look and understood without explanation when Jon signaled them to form columns.

Bloodied and exhausted, the men did just that. The mass of riders formed together into tight columns so Balaq’s archers further back could get a glimpse of their targets. They had to do so quickly, for the Blackfish and Thoros’s reserve riders were now charging forward through the gaps. The red priest made quite the sight, raising a burning sword to Jon as he rode by. The Durrandon men, hungry for blood only moments before, stopped in their tracks to behold the Dark Order’s reserves charging at them over open field unopposed.

Some made to hastily form a new shieldwall but the arrows already sailing through the air shredded that effort to pieces. Balaq’s men were able to send three volleys up and over Jon’s head and down onto the enemy’s before the Blackfish and Thoros’s charge met them.

The cavalry rode right over their confused and disorganized foes. Spears stabbed and cut, hooves crushed and killed. The dark warriors were outnumbered but they crashed through the enemy all the same. Cutting an opening through their lines and opening up a path to the hill above.

With a way forward now open to them, Jon quickly ordered the retreating columns into swinging around. The Crackclaw foot had reformed and ran forth to follow Jon and the others as they rejoined the fight, hungry for vengeance. They all rushed as swiftly as they could through the gap and up the hill. The direwolves raced ahead of him until Ghost and Shaggydog hit the broken lines and both found foes and fell behind. Gendry’s horse took a blow meant for Jon and he too dropped back, his friend shouting encouragement while the rest pressed on.

When the hill became too steep for his tired and injured horse Jon dismounted, continuing the climb despite his chainmail weighing him down. Asher did the same, Thoros as well, the man now wielding a pair of fiery swords. The warrior likely made a tempting target to Joffrey’s archers as they charged right into the line of fire. Fear helped their advance, as only a small number of enemy bowmen continued to loose while most broke and fled uphill. Those brave enough to hold their ground simply met swifter deaths when the Blackfish’s men overran their position.

No mercy was shown by the order, his men slew any they found. Some went so far as to force cornered foes to the edges of a ridge by spearpoint. Those who did not leap to their deaths were stabbed all the same. There were men cowering on the ground that Jon could have killed but he passed them by.

*It’s not them I want. It’s not here the fight will end.*

*The top. I have to get to the top. This doesn’t end until I reach the top.*

That’s where everyone was heading. The Durrandon army was breaking, fleeing to the hilltop where their king awaited. Right on their heels was the Dark Order and its allies, Jon among them. Each step up the hill brought a new enemy to fight, the climb itself becoming a blood-soaked hell. Men who fled were killed. Men who fought were killed. Those who pled for mercy were killed.
He saw a young squire with a blue rooster on his doublet nearly split in two by the blow of a greatsword. A man-at-arms stumbled by, gurgling in agony through a face smashed into a mess of flesh and bone. An old praying on his knees had his throat slit by a Velaryon marine who did not cut deep enough, leaving his victim to sputter and drown in his own blood.

Jon saw little more before a flail knocked his helm free, the blow caving in a part about his eye and cutting it painfully. The blood ran freely down his face but it was his foe’s that Jon tasted when he cut through the man’s windpipe. Another red mist sprayed through the air only moments later when an arrow sliced across Asher’s cheek. The northman cursed in rage, taking his fury out on a Fell swordsman that he opened from gut to groin. When a longaxe nearly took Jon’s head off, it was Lady’s turn to get bloody, the direwolf barreling into the attacker and sinking her fangs into his neck.

They were all a gory mess by the time they crested the hill. Jon’s breathing was labored, his legs burning as he took in the flat, spacious hilltop. Durrandon knights and men-at-arms were still fighting valiantly but they were being overwhelmed by the steady stream of men flowing over the northern crest. The Darklyns must have had an easier climb than the rest of the army, which was fine by Jon. At the moment they were decimating the remaining fighters.

A sight that enraged a gold-clad rider as he wheeled about and screamed at his men.

“Throw them back! Back! You cowards! Fight for your king!”

Jon had always pictured Joffrey’s looks to match his vile reputation. Yet the king was not ugly. In fact, he knew that some would find Joffrey handsome, though Jon thought his features somewhat girlish. Joffrey’s long hair was curled and shining in the sunlight, much like the golden crown upon his head. It was bejeweled with fine stones, the rubies matching his crimson cloak, the emeralds shining as green as his eyes which burned now with fury. His pouting lips twisted into an evil sneer as he watched his men fall trying to defend him from spear and swordpoint.

“Kill them!” Joffrey screamed, waving a sword around wildly and kicking at his horse. “All you had to do was kill them! Mother was coming! We could’ve killed them all!”

“JOFFREY!”

Jon’s bellow was loud enough that it drew the king’s eyes, which widened in fear at the sight of his approach. His legs had already begun to carry him forward without his knowledge. Jon used his teeth to tear away his gloves. He wanted nothing between his hands and Dark Sister now. Guards around Joffrey rushed to his defense, just as others made to clear the way for Jon. Asher took the knight to the right, Thoros two men on the left, and Lady drove back a fourth. Leaving a king for Jon. One who was mounted and had a sword pointed right at him.

“Do you know what I am?” Jon asked, spitting blood away from his lips. “I see you Joffrey Durrandon. Tell me what you see.”

“Some eastern bastard!” Joffrey snarled back, kicking his horse and charging forward. “Some dead fool I’ll carve my name into! I’ll kill you all!”

The king rode straight at him, sword slashing downwards. Jon was faster, meeting the blow and throwing it aside as Joffrey passed. His foe wheeled about and readied for another pass so Jon tightened his grip on the Valyrian blade.

“Sansa Stark.” He growled, watching that name give Joffrey pause. “I am Sansa Stark’s husband… and you’ll answer for her. You’ll hurt no one else. That I promise you.”
“You married that whore?” Joffrey laughed. “The filthy fucking northern savage!? I had to brand her so she’d stop spreading her legs for every stable boy and peasant at Storm’s End. I had to remind that slut who owned her, now and forever-”

“Liar!”

Jon surprised Joffrey by rushing him this time. The king recovered soon enough, snapping his reins and charging again. Both closed much quicker than before. Joffrey was a poor swordsman and left an opening below his arm that Jon could easily use to kill him. Yet he wanted Joffrey to suffer. To feel some fear. So instead he sidestepped the king’s attack and cut at the horse’s leg.

Both Joffrey and the horse screamed horribly as the beast tumbled and threw him from the saddle. The king went rolling end over end until he collided with the bodies of his men.

“Jon!” Gendry’s shout let him know that his friend had gained the ridge. The Blackfish was there too, Ghost and Shaggydog following after. “Jon! They’re laying down arms all across the hill! We’ve won!”

Others heard this and cheered while most of the Durrandon men still fighting began to drop their weapons. The rest did the same when three more warriors led a large party up the northern crest. Ethan looked terrifying with his longaxe at the ready while Tum stood shoulder to shoulder with an older man who looked formidable and familiar to Jon.

“You hear that you little shit!” Asher shouted, pulling his sword free from a dead knight’s chest and hurrying to Jon’s side as they closed in on Joffrey. The king was crawling over the bodies of his men, attempting a hopeless escape.

“Hold Joffrey.” Jon commanded while Asher laughed.

“Yeah, hold still. I wonder how many pieces we should cut the coward into my lord?”

Jon was about to tell Asher to quiet himself when Joffrey did something curious. The craven king stopped crawling beside the body of a dead man, pulling and struggling to roll the corpse over. Jon was confused by this until Joffrey turned around, a crossbow in hand.

“I’m the king!” Joffrey raged as he pointed the weapon right at Jon. “Not a coward! The king!”

Before Joffrey even pulled the trigger, Jon knew he was about to die. They were too close. He had no shield. His mind turned to Sansa as Joffrey fired… until Asher jumped into his thoughts and the bolt’s path.

The bolt took Asher right in the chest, the northman grunting from the impact and falling to a knee soon after. The bolt had gone right through his mail, burying itself so deep in his chest that the fletching was barely visible.

“No! NO! Asher! Asher no!”

Jon tried to hold his friend up but Asher’s body had grown limp and heavy. The northman slumped to the ground, his face turned upwards. Blood was trickling down his mouth as his eyes looked about in a daze, finally locking on the bolt in his chest.

“Oh gods… hear me.” Asher rasped, his voice a whisper. “Tell Rodrik… take care of them… of home…”

“I will but just hold on-”
“My mother...” Asher’s eyes moved to his, the usual rebellious strength that was always there lost to sadness. “I didn’t get… to see her… to ask…”

The man’s final words drifted away, his last breath lost on the nape of Jon’s neck. His eyes were wide and unseeing and Jon swallowed a sob to feel the life leave Asher’s body. Asher was a man who had never backed down from a fight and relished every moment he got to prove it. Now he was silent and still while his killer struggled to reload the crossbow.

“Murderer.” Jon croaked as he rose up, laying Asher on the ground. “You murdering piece of shit!”

“Another step and you’re next!” Joffrey was almost giddy as he cocked the crossbow back and made to raise it again. Yet when he looked up, his joy turned to terror, for Jon was almost upon him. “No! No wait! I surrender! I order you-”

Joffrey tried to point the crossbow at him but never got the chance to fire. Dark Sister lashed out at the weapon, cutting into it so hard that the sword stuck in the wood. The king screamed in terror and both men let their weapons fall away then. Joffrey tried to turn and run when Jon grabbed a hold of his hair and wrenched him back. His foe was squealing like a pig when Jon struck him square across the face.

His crown fell away as blood spilled forth from Joffrey’s broken nose. He stumbled backwards but Jon stayed with him, hitting the golden king in the face again as he drove the whoreson into the ground. In his mind, he saw Asher collapsing once more so his fist came down again. He saw Pello’s death so Jon landed another blow. He thought of poor young Margan and cut a knuckle over Joffrey’s teeth.

Someone was shouting Jon’s name but all he could see was the dead girl from the road. The memory of the maid’s bloated, purple face and the brand on her flesh fueled Jon’s rage until all he saw was red. Joffrey’s face was an unrecognizable, bloody mess when Jon wrapped his hands around the king’s throat. He tightened his grip until it was as tight as a noose. He felt Joffrey’s struggles for air, the monster clawing at Jon’s hands as he squeezed tighter and tighter.

Then other hands were pulling at Jon, wrapping around his body and trying to separate him from Joffrey. Voices that sounded like Gendry and Brynden were shouting his name as they fought to break his hold around Joffrey’s throat. They tried to pry his hands away as Joffrey’s face turned purple before Jon’s eyes. The king’s green eyes were bulging out from his skull, white turning red as the life was choked out of him.

The only eyes that mattered then were Sansa’s. Bright blues eyes, eyes that had been filled with fear and shame when Jon saw her brand for the first time.

A monster had done that to her. It was a monster’s blood that stained Jon’s hands. A monster’s hands that slowly seized their frantic efforts. A monster who made one final choking gag as Jon strangled the last bit of life from him.

By the time he let go of Joffrey’s throat, no one else was touching him. He raised his bloodied fingers up to look upon them, slowly realizing that others were looking to him as well. Gendry and the Blackfish gazed at him with grim expressions and Ethan looked much the same as he held out an arm, barring the High Queen from getting any closer.

His mother’s expression was one of shock as she looked to her son.

None of that mattered when he saw who stood just behind Ser Barristan. The knight held Sansa’s arm as she stared down at Jon and the corpse of Joffrey beneath him.
Her eyes were locked on his bloody hands.

Eyes full of fear… like she was afraid of him.

*Or some* monster.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Victory brings trials of its own. Times of death and woe. The perils of peace.

The Conquests

The Targaryen Empire is the largest and most populous realm of its kind. Yet, in its past, the empire was once far grander.

After Aegon the Conqueror built his empire out of the ashes of the Valyrian Freehold he turned his gaze to the free city of Braavos. Twice were great swathes of Braavos burned to ruin by Aegon and his sisters’ dragons. Yet no army was ever able to overcome the Titan of Braavos or the treacherous trails of the Braavosi hills. Nor did any campaign cost Aegon as dearly. During the second attempt to conquer Braavos, High Queen Rhaenys, Aegon’s beloved sister-wife, was killed whilst attacking the Titan atop her dragon, Meraxes. The beast was struck by a scorpion bolt and both queen and dragon sunk into the depths of the city’s lagoon.

Many still question why Aegon did not press his invasion and it remains a mystery to this day. Some credit it to the visit of a mysterious Braavosi envoy, known only as ‘The Kindly Man.’ Whatever was spoken between the High King and this stranger has never been learned. What is known is that Braavos was spared Aegon’s wrath and the Ghiscari suffered instead. By the end of his reign Aegon ruled all the cities of Slaver’s Bay.

Later kings would lose those domains and it was not until the reign of High King Daeron, the Young Dragon, that the Targaryens would reach new heights of greatness.

After crushing the Ghiscari once more, Daeron built himself a vast armada. The Young Dragon used his unmatched sea power to conquer the rocky Stepstones, the pirate-laden Basilisk Isles, peaceful Naath, and the distant Summer Islands. The plunder from these campaigns enriched the imperial coffers and filled the slavers markets with exotic flesh.

Emboldened by these victorious campaigns, Daeron set his sights on a different kind of sea altogether. When the Young Dragon set out to invade the grasslands of the Dothraki Sea, he did so with his famed Golden Legion and an army of no less than one hundred thousand men. Daeron boasted he would sack the Dothraki capital of Vaes Dothrak and rescue all the gods stolen by the horselords.

It was never meant to be. The Dothraki slaves Daeron used as guides to navigate the grasslands led him right into the jaws of his enemies. The khalasars that fell upon the imperial army blotted out the sun with their arrows. The Young Dragon would reach Vaes Dothrak but not as a conqueror. The Dothraki carried his corpse there as a trophy.

Only one in ten of Daeron’s army would make it home again. While the Dark Order would
recover the bones of the Young Dragon in a daring raid, most of his conquests were lost within a year of his death.

The empire has not seen the like of The Conqueror or the Young Dragon since.

SANSA

“How could he be so reckless?”

Sansa fumed in anger at Lyanna’s news while Jeyne finished tying off the back of her gown. Her irritation only grew with how uncomfortable the dress felt.

“It’s tight, isn’t it?” Lyanna put a hand to Sansa’s middle, where it looked like she was trying to smuggle a melon under her gown. “Jeyne, we shall have to get to work on new gowns for Sansa. Having her bed down in this camp is bad enough, we can at least have her be comfortable in her own clothing.”

“This is a new gown.” Jeyne frowned. “The seamstress finished it only last week, she’s growing as fast as we can make them.”

“Thank you Jeyne!” Sansa snapped. “Your grace… aunt, I think we have more pressing worries than my gowns.”

Her frustration could not be restrained. They were right of course, Sansa’s middle had grown obscenely over the last couple months. It was a daily struggle in her pavilion to find garments that fit and her back often ached come morning. She felt horrible for those complaints since Jon had done everything he could to see to her comfort.

The pavilions of two defeated lords had been remade to create one expansive shelter for Sansa and her ladies. The floors were made of newly felled logs and covered with clean rushes daily. Fresh flowers and incense were on hand and if she wanted for anything, three pages awaited her beck and call at all hours.

Yet the one thing Sansa had wanted this was morning hadn’t been there when she awoke. She’d silently cursed to find the bed empty beside her, Jon having snuck away at some point in the night. Foul dreams often tainted what little rest Jon allowed himself these days, terrors that he refused to share with her. Sansa was at a loss for how to help Jon but at least she knew where to find him. Before she could dress and seek Jon out though, Lyanna had arrived, bringing dark words with her.

“Sansa, this is not your problem.” Lyanna cupped her cheeks and placed a kiss to her forehead. “Your duty is to give Jon an heir and me a grandchild to spoil. None will hold you to account for-”

“You’re a poor liar, Lyanna.” She met her aunt’s gaze. “We both know my duties aren’t limited to the birthing bed or you would not have brought this letter to me first.”

Her aunt smiled then. “I pray this child has half your wits. Yes Sansa, I knew I had to come to you with this. It wouldn’t be wise of me to risk earning the ire of the princess who can conjure up armies out of thin air. On the other hand, none here know Robb as well as you and, considering his actions, your counsel is a necessity. Be honest, do you think Robb has betrayed us?”

“No, he wouldn’t.”

Not on purpose at least.
The war in the Westerlands was far removed from the battles here in the east but word still reached their ears of Robb’s campaign. Her brother and King Tywin had met in battle at the ruins of Castamere, the wolf besting the lion in his own lands. Robb’s victory in that battle and Uncle Benjen’s sacking of the Golden Tooth meant the Lannisters were in dire straights.

Though they were not so badly off as the Kingdom of the Storm.

Or what was left of it.

With Joffrey dead and his armies defeated or in disarray, little remained of the Durrandon realm. Young King Tommen and Cersei were besieged at Storm’s End, where Prince Tyrion Lannister continued to defy Aegon’s many assaults against the castle. Most of the Stormlords had bent the knee or were facing certain defeat in the days to come. Their enemies were on their last legs, the victory Jon and Robb had envisioned before leaving Winterfell within their grasp.

So it defied all sense why Robb chose to marry one of their most important hostages, Myrcella Durrandon. To Sansa, Myrcella had always been kind and charmingly willful, yet she was an enemy to both Stark and Targaryen.

Now she’s my goodsister, she thought sourly, Robb has crowned a Durrandon as Queen in the North.

How could he? How could he insult father’s memory like this? How could Robb turn his back on Jon and the empire?

Her eyes went again to the letter in her hand. Recently delivered from Rosby, it gave her Benjen’s account of Robb’s marriage to Myrcella at some sept in the Westerlands. A folly her uncle had not been invited to.

“Benjy’s not happy.” Lyanna summed the letter up well. “Nor is he any man’s fool, he sees this as I do. Even you must admit to how it appears. Like a king making a separate peace with our enemies... perhaps even joining with them against us.”

“No.” Sansa shook her head again. “Whatever Robb is doing, it’s not that. He would rather die before fighting beside Tywin Lannister. Or siding with Cersei. His bannermen would never accept it!”

“Not the Greatjon that’s for sure.” Lyanna sighed. “But what of others? Ones whose lands are under threat by the krakens? Robb has to have heard of the Greyjoys attacking the North by now.”

“And if he has, Robb will know that Bran has it well in hand.” Sansa countered.

That’s what Bran’s letter had said anyway. Some weeks back, the ironmen had launched several attacks against the North. Bran wrote of the Flint Cliffs being overrun and villages along the Stoney Shore being ravaged. The silver lining was that Moat Cailin had defied an attack by King Balon’s younger brother and captain of the Iron Fleet, Victarion. Lord Bowden’s archers had cut down hundreds and threw back multiple assaults. Bran was not idle in all this. He had set the remaining lords of the North into mustering men and defending their coasts.

While the Greyjoys had split off their forces in search of easier prey.

“The krakens aren’t just attacking the North.” She reminded her aunt. “They’ve taken Fair Isle and hit other fishing villages in the west. The Greyjoys might not be our allies but if they’re weakening the West then that surely helps Robb. Why would he sue for peace now?”
“I’ve no idea.” Lyanna admitted. “All we know for certain is that Robb wedding Myrcella creates a real threat to my husband’s plans for Storm’s End. Plans that Robb claimed to support after Jon agreed to wed you.”

That was something that Sansa was already dwelling on. Jon could have had married any number of highborn women better suited to being a Targaryen wife. Instead he’d accepted Sansa, with her tainted reputation and scarred body. All to gain the North’s help in conquering new lands for the empire.

_I got to marry a brave and kind man_, she thought, _only for Robb to betray the only benefit that Jon got out of this marriage._

“It’s not right.” She whispered. “I’ll write to Robb myself… to mother… to anyone. Jon earned my brother’s loyalty. I’m sorry, Lyanna, I know that… that I’m not…”

“Not to blame? Quite right.” Her aunt took her arm and leaned down to speak to Sansa’s middle. “Little one, if you’re listening, let your mother know we wouldn’t be winning this war without her help. That I seek her keen mind, not to blame her for another’s follies.”

Sansa couldn’t help but smile at that, for Jon often did the same thing when he thought she was sleeping. His words would be mere whispers, as gentle as his touch, and always in High Valyrian. What little she would hear and understand had confused her, until she realized that Jon was merely repeating the lyrics to Jenai of the Sorrows. Other times it would be his marriage vows with small alterations.

_“I am hers…” _He would whisper. _“She is mine… and you’ll be ours.”_

She never roused when he did so, fearful to interrupt. In those moments she could imagine Jon’s eyes filled happiness, just as they had been when he first learned of the babe. A few short moments before the sadness and pain had returned. Ever since the battle to win this hill, it was like a cloud hung over her husband.

When Lyanna asked where Jon was, Sansa knew the answer in an instant. He would be in the same place that he always went when dread dreams came. They decided to seek Jon together. The three women wouldn’t be alone though. When they left the pavilion arm in arm, they found the Highguard warriors and Barristan waiting without.

_“Your graces.” _Barristan bowed, throwing his grey cloak over a shoulder. It was far less handsome than the white cloaks that Ethan and Tumco wore but the knight stood proudly all the same.

_“Good ser.” _Lyanna said while raising an eyebrow at her protectors. _“You two are lucky that I don’t let Barristan take your fancy cloaks after the thrashing he gave you yesterday.”_

_“The sun was in my eye.” _Ethan grumbled while Tum grinned widely.

_“I don’t think this man will need our cloaks, my queen. Some day soon, High King Rhaegar will give him his own, I swear it on the harpy.”_

_“They’re fine warriors.” _Barristan added humbly. _“Fortune smiled on me during our practice, that is all.”_

_“Oh Barristan, you know you had help.” _Sansa looked to Ethan. _“The sun was it not?”_

Ethan grunted as Lyanna and Tumco’s laughter mixed with the sounds of the waking camp. The top of Aegon’s Hill was a bustling settlement of horse lines, tents, and larger pavilions. Sansa still
marveled at how quickly the order’s engineers could raise a palisade wall of sharpened logs around the hilltop. From below it looked like the hill had been crowned and the view from the top was just as impressive.

Tens of thousands of men were camped along the approaches to the hill. The Dark Order’s disciplined line of tents butted up against the sprawling camp which seemed to grow larger every day. Upwards of sixteen thousand men had joined Jon’s grand army and he had taken thousands of more as captives. Those men now acted as laborers, helping to raise the palisade wall and build the makeshift docks along the edges of the Blackwater Rush. Two score warships were tied off at anchor now, a mix of Manderly galleys and Targaryen dromonds.

They crossed through a sea of heraldry as Lyanna and Sansa led their protectors across the camp. Lord Royner’s pavilion dwarfed Jon’s and was the largest after her own. Near to it she saw tents bearing the plowman of House Darry, the red salmon of House Mooton, and the Velaryon seahorse. Several banners which had previously flown with Joffrey’s army were now raised alongside theirs. The Bar Emmons, the Hayfords, the Masseys, and the Wendwaters had all come over after Jon spared the lives of their lords.

“The Stauntons should be here today.” Lyanna said as they continue their walk to the far side of the hill. “The Buckwells too. We were right to send the Blackfish into coaxing them out of their castles. Your great uncle can be quite intimidating.”

“I find Uncle Brynden quite courteous.” Sansa said. “It surely helped to have hundreds of Dark Order men with him.”

They likely feared their castles being taken like Rosby and Stokeworth.

Or meeting the same end that Joffrey did when he met Jon in battle…

That day was still etched into her memory. The battle had been terrible, worse when the Durrandon lines broke and the long climb up the hill began. Barristan said the battle was over then, but to her the screams only grew shriller and higher as the fighting ended and the killing began. None of their guards had agreed when she and Lyanna decided to travel to the hilltop. The women would not be deterred though. The horrors that Sansa saw during their ascent nearly made her retch, half in disgust, half in fear to find Jon among the dead or dying. A victim of some monstrous violence.

When she reached the top to find her husband alive, tears had sprung to her eyes. Jon had been in the midst of a group of grappling men, his hands choking the life from Joffrey. Seeing her tormentor’s face flooded her mind with memories. The searing touch of the brand. His laughter. She could still hear it as Jon strangled the last breath from Joffrey.

In that moment she didn’t recognize Jon, for his hands had only ever held her with care. When it was done and Jon knelt over Joffrey’s body, she saw that his hands were bloody and shaking, his broken armor betraying ghastly wounds. Her prince looked like he’d been through hell.

When he turned her way, Sansa feared that he was lost in that hell. Jon’s eyes met hers, the grey awash with such grief and turmoil that they couldn’t focus. No one could stop her from going to him then. Her gown was ruined by mud and blood and worse but she hadn’t cared. All she wanted was to get him away from Joffrey. To save him from whatever torment Joffrey had put him through. A pain she knew well.

One that Jon had yet to escape.

They found Jon where she knew he would be. Standing near the spot where Joffrey and Asher
Forrester had been killed. His shoulders were slumped, his stern expression etched with hurt as he stared down at the patch of grass where Asher fell. Wildflowers, some withered, dotted the ground as Talia knelt to lay new ones there.

“They don’t live long.” Talia spoke softly to Jon. “The flowers… I pick new ones everyday and they just wither away. They’re not strong enough to last, not like my brother. I would plant some but Ash would make fun of me. He would say flowers are for fields and girls who deserve them.”

“Sounds like Asher.” Jon replied quietly and Talia sniffed.

“I have to do something. At home, everyone tried to forget Ash. No one would even say his name. I won’t let that happen again. I want people to remember who he was…”

Talia began to weep then. The night that Asher’s body had joined hundreds of other Dark Order dead in burning, Talia had sung a song for her brother. A lovely piece that drifted like the smoke and embers from the hundreds of pyres to rest high into the quiet night. Towards the end, when Asher’s body was lost to the flames, Talia’s tears had come in earnest and Sansa could do nothing but embrace her. Her friend had allowed such comfort while Jon stood alone, grim faced as he took in the growing inferno.

She watched now as he raised a hand towards Talia, perhaps to reassure the poor girl. Yet it stopped far from her shoulder. After a moment’s pause it fell away. It was often the same when Sansa tried to make Jon speak to her of his worries, of whatever nightmares awaited him at night. He would come so close to sharing that pain... before his eyes would cloud over and the walls would go up again.

*They come down for the babe though,* she reminded herself, *Jon finds his way out for the babe.*

*He’s not lost to us, to me. I just wish I knew what to do for him…*

She knew what to do for Talia at least.

“Talia, those flowers are lovely.” Sansa said as she announced their presence to the pair, moving to put a kiss to both of Talia’s stained cheeks. “You’re my dear friend and when you hurt, I hurt with you. Please, let me help. Might I join you today in picking some fresh flowers for Asher? We shall think of a way to honor your brother in a way that befits him. Together.”

“Thank you, Sansa, I would like that.” Talia nodded as she pressed her face into Sansa’s shoulder. Her grief could dampen Sansa’s shoulder but the tears would dry with time. The hurt she saw on Jon’s face was nearly constant.

It did not falter at all when Lyanna squeezed his arm, earning only a curt nod of acknowledgement.

“Jon, I’d like permission to send Gendry on a quest of sorts.” Lyanna whispered before waving Jeyne forward. “Talia, sweetling, I’m sorry to ask this of you now, but Sansa’s having a frightful time with gowns. Would you and Jeyne be so kind as to join our newly made captain and some men for a ride to Castle Stokeworth? The ladies there seemed... generous enough in size. Their gowns might be hemmed to Sansa’s uses.”

“A ride would be nice.” Sansa smiled to Talia, swallowing her annoyance as all gathered gazed at her swollen middle. “I’m jealous of you both, truly. You can play the game of making Gendry blush.”

“That is fun.” Talia grinned. “And I like his stories about Asher. It’s nice hearing what my brother was up to when he was away from us.”
“Gendry’s a captain now so he can take the fifth company of riders.” Jon said with an eye to Sansa. “We hold Stokeworth but there’s broken men about and it’s best to be safe. I also want Stokeworth’s maester brought here. I was told that the Lady Tanda suffered from a broken hip for many years before her death. He might have more experience in easing Sansa’s back pain than our healers.”

It was touching that he thought of her pain, especially since Sansa tried not to complain of her aches. She didn’t want to be a bother.

“Jon really, being with child is not a broken hip. I’ll be fine…”

“You won’t be.” Lyanna sided with her son. “It’s only going to get worse, Sansa. I’ve no idea how Tully women carry, but your middle is as big as mine was when Jon was at seven moons. You are sure it’s only been five?”

“I’m certain.” She blushed some. “My last moonblood came after we left Moat Cailin and didn’t come again after the Twins.”

“Fine work, Jon.” Ethan’s scarred face pulled into a rare smile. “It sounds like your son is going to come out strapping enough to head straight to the training yard. A sword in his hand before he can walk.”

It was meant well but Jon grimaced. “I pray that isn’t so… I want my child to have some peace. More so, I want his mother to be well. Sansa could suffer if this child is too large.”

“Maybe its twins.”

All eyes turned to Talia then, whose eyes were now lively and full of cheer.

“When my mother had me and Ethan, she said that we made her swell up twice as big as the others did.” The lady smiled sadly then. “Asher said it was because Ethan’s head was so fat… and my heart was so big.”

“Of course, I’m an old fool.” Barristan struck his forehead then. “King Steffon and I visited Casterly Rock when Queen Joanna was this far along with her twins. All the ladies could gossip about was how quickly she grew… by the seven, I would have made a poor midwife.”

The others laughed while Sansa came to grips with what they were saying. A moment before her mind had been awash in worries for the babe. Now she was stunned. Twins had never even occurred to her. Nor to Jon it seemed.

“Twins?!” He repeated agape. “As in two? Two of them? In there?”

“Well where else?” Lyanna smacked his shoulder.

Jon smiled then. A handsome, genuine smile that made it seem like some veil had been lifted away, that the man Sansa married was returned to her. The joy spread all the way to his eyes, which gazed at her like they had that night at the Twins. When they’d proclaimed their love in the midst of making it. Through the darkness of their rooms, she’d seen the truth of Jon’s words borne across his face. She liked to think that that was the night their babe was conceived. Or babes.

His expression of happiness right now was just as genuine at it was then, his touch as loving when he put his fingers to her middle.

“It would please you?” She asked, enfolding her hands over his. “If it was twins?”
“Twins...” Jon blinked in astonishment, his smile still bright. “Two of them… they’ll be ours…”

Yes, they’ll be ours. Please let it be true. Then he can smile that smile everyday.

“A m-maester.” Jon sputtered, looking about in a panicky manner. “We need a maester. A healer, an expert on twins. Get Thoros up here! I want riders heading to whatever castle or town will have someone learned in birthing twins. Send a raven to Lady Forrester... in fact, maybe we should send for her…”

Jon was too sweet for her to interrupt his frantic commands but Lyanna finally did so. She reminded him how all of that could be done later and that Sansa was doing fine so far. After Jeyne and Talia were sent off to find Gendry she knew what was coming next. All the good cheer left Jon’s face when Lyanna told him of Benjen’s letter. He remained silent while both ladies shared their opinions on the matter and remained quiet long after.

“Benjen gave no reason for the marriage?” He asked finally, remarkably calm.

“I fear my brother understands this as little as we do.” Lyanna answered, to which Jon merely nodded.

“Then we shall have to wait and hope to hear from Robb soon.”

Sansa exchanged looks of worry with Lyanna at that. She felt relieved that Jon was not enraged, a lesser man might have blamed her for Robb’s actions but her husband proved himself to be a better sort. Yet to show no emotion at all seemed a bad sign.

“Hope to hear from him?” Lyanna’s voice betrayed some anger. “Jon, this war is being waged to conquer a new realm, including the Storm Kingdom! Your chief ally just married one of the claimants to Storm’s End! Robb must be taken to task for this betrayal!”

“Who am I to condemn Robb?” Jon shot back. “So he married his hostage? At least he didn’t kill her in cold blood. At least Robb is no murderer…”

There it is… oh Jon… you’re not that. You could never be that.

“Joffrey Durrandon died as he lived. Like a fiend.” Lyanna pointed to the flowers on the ground. “He tried to kill you and murdered a good man in the attempt. He sealed his fate by doing so. All you dealt him was justice.”

“That’s my mother talking.” Jon shook his head. “Not the High Queen. I know what she would say. That Joffrey was more valuable as a prisoner. That with him in our power Storm’s End might have already yielded. That many of those who still fight us might have laid down their arms. The battles at the Rosby and Stokeworth would have never happened. Thousands would still be alive.”

Jon’s eyes were shut and fists clenched tight. As much as he tried to hide it, she saw how every fight since Aegon’s Hill had weighed on him. A routing of Joffrey’s reinforcements had led to few casualties on their side but Jon had spent hours watching those graves be dug. He had not slept that night nor the next when news of Stokeworth and Rosby came. Then Aegon’s ravens delivered word of yet another failed assault at Storm’s End. Jon could not watch those graves being dug but she had no doubt where his mind was focused now.

On the dead.

“How many?” Jon asked with his head lowered. “How many did I doom on this hill? How many more will have to die before this ends? How much more blood will be on my hands?”
“Some.” Sansa answered honestly. “But less than Joffrey would have gladly spilled if he’d lived instead of you.”

She left the others to stand before Jon, who watched her coming numbly. When she was close enough to feel his breath on her face, Sansa took one of his hands in her own

“Sansa…” He sighed, unable to meet her gaze. “I could have lived and spared Joffrey. Instead I killed him.”

“You did.” She whispered back, gently easing Jon’s fist into unclasping. “Perhaps that was a mistake. Some might think so. Others will sing a song about an evil king being brought low by a hero.”

“This is not a song… men will die because I lost control…”

“Men might have died anyways.” She whispered back. “How many people have you spared in this war, innocent and enemy alike? Joffrey would have done neither. If you did something horrible here then you must atone for it. That’s what good men do.”

Sansa pressed Jon’s open hand against her middle. She willed all the goodness and hope that came from their child into him.

“I married a good man, not a perfect one. None of us are perfect. Watching you kill Joffrey… it was horrible, yes, but less because of what you were doing. More because I wanted him dead… and that scared me.”

“I’m sorry, Sansa.” Jon whispered, his hand still on her belly. “I never wanted you to see me like that… a man as ugly as his deeds…”

“Nothing about you could be ugly.” She touched his face, near to his newest scars. “What Joffrey did to me, what he did to Asher, that made him ugly. Not you. I wanted him dead for all he’s done. He filled us both with vengeance and hatred… but now we can let our demons die with him.”

Sansa bid Jon’s face to look to the flowers that Talia had laid out for Asher.

“Let us be better, like Asher was. It is his sacrifice that we should remember, not Joffrey’s evil. Your friend was a good man who did his duty. Who safeguarded others before himself. We shall mourn him and do honor by his memory… for our children.”

She felt her words foolish and feeble. After all this time, thinking night after night on how to reach Jon, this was all she could offer. Some whispered words over a place that haunted him. She was certain she failed when Jon pulled his hand from her belly, that he would walk away and her husband would be lost to her again.

Until Jon gripped her shoulders and pulled her closer to him. He brought her near enough to press his brow against hers, his hard stomach touching her middle.

“I don’t want to be what I was anymore.” Jon’s lips moved but inches from hers. “I want to be this. Your husband. A father. A good man. Worthy of what Asher died for… worthy of having you.”

“I am yours.” She replied in High Valyrian. “You are mine… they’ll be ours.”

Sansa ended her words by kissing his lips and pushing her middle against him. Others were watching but she didn’t care. They had all watched Jon kill Joffrey at this spot. Let them see him for who he truly was.
When the couple broke apart, Jon ran a hand through her hair, and while the sadness remained in his eyes, Sansa saw a bit more of her husband in his face. More in the wicked grin that pulled at his lips as one hand brushed down her side.

“I take it that it is too early to retire to your tent?”

“Far too early. Something to look forward to this evening perhaps?” She smiled, blushing some to catch Lyanna and Barristan pretending not to watch. “Besides, your mother is right, we must do something about Robb. There are also more lords coming in to discuss terms with you—”

“With us.” Jon kissed her hand. “Treating with the others went so well because of you, Sansa. Be by my side when these new lords arrive, and let us speak of Robb until then.”

She did so gladly. Lyanna did not push to learn of what Sansa and Jon spoke of privately yet was clearly delighted by the results. The three broke their fasts together, Jon sitting beside Sansa with a hand on her leg, and went over how Robb’s actions affected things and other concerns. Jon disdained how long the siege at Storm’s End continued, while Sansa worried on the growing number of smallfolk seeking shelter at the edges of the camp. Many had come from lands ravaged by fighting and few were eager to return while bandits roamed about and the war still on.

They came up with possible solutions to many of these problems. Some Sansa welcomed, others that upset her greatly. Yet it was clear what had to be done.

So when Uncle Brynden led the lords into Jon’s tent, they found Sansa and Lyanna by his side. Their allies stood with them, chief among them Royner Darklyn, Lyman Darry, Aurane Velaryon, and Ser Myles Mooton.

“Kneel before her grace, High Queen Lyanna.” Ethan demanded, thudding the end of his long axe against the floor.

“And her grace, Princess Sansa.” Barristan added.

The two men did not hesitate, Ethan’s fearsome appearance and Barristan’s reputation driving them to their knees. When they rose, Uncle Brynden introduced the arrivals.

“Here stands Symon Staunton, Lord of Rook’s Rest, and Ser Jarmiah Buckwell, Lord of Antlers.”

“Thank you both for coming.” Jon said. “We have water and wine if you have a thirst.”

“I did not come here to drink.” Lord Staunton spoke brusquely. “I came here to spare my castle a siege by your men and myself the same fate as King Joffrey.”

Jon’s expression darkened but Sansa would not let him face this alone.

“A fate that Joffrey chose for himself.” She said. “He had many crimes and his rule was mad. Who here did not foresee a day when a good man would hold Joffrey to task?”

“And your husband certainly had reason.” Lord Buckwell nodded to her before addressing Jon. “The princess calls you a good man. I’ve seen the burnt farms and dead men to argue otherwise. And yet... I’ve heard the septons and the dispossessed who sing your praises. I come here to learn the truth of things, to see how I might keep my home. So I ask, Jonarys Targaryen, what do you want from me?”

“I want what you want, my lord.” Jon said. “For both of you to keep your castles and lands so that you may rule over them tomorrow as you did the day before. In peace and security.”
“We ask for little in return.” Lyanna added. “Merely that you submit to the rule of House Targaryen. Swear fealty to us and join with my son in any battles that are to come.”

“Many others already have.” Sansa gestured to Royner and Lyman Darry. “Do so and my husband will honor you as befits your titles and put your lands under the protection of the dragon's might.”

“Half my lands have been burned.” Lord Staunton argued. “The rest plagued by bandits. If my men march with you then things will only get worse. Joffrey is survived by his brother, King Tommen. The Durrandons could still prevail, especially if Tywin Lannister returns.”

Lord Buckwell nodded. “A Lannister pays his debts. You people are strangers to these lands. Foreign. One defeat and you’ll sail back to the Targaryen Empire and leave us all to the mercy of the lions.”

Both men started when Jon suddenly drew Dark Sister from its sheath, the fearsome blade sucking all the air from the room. Yet he did not threaten any, merely laying the sword’s end across his palm.

“This is Dark Sister, wielded during the Conquest.” Jon explained. “The High King gave it to me before I departed for Westeros. Just as it was once used to forge an empire, my father willed that I use Dark Sister to found a new kingdom here in these lands. A new realm, prosperous for your people and ours. My lords, by this blade I swear, a new order shall soon reign. Should any stand in its way, it shall be this sword that meets them.”

“Trust in that.” Sansa said, hoping to do to justice to Jon’s words. “My husband is as brave as he is just. He plans on sending men to hunt down the bandits who plague your lands and deliver seed and fodder to the smallfolk, so that the ravaged lands can be tilled anew. Tell me, have the Durrandons or Lannisters ever been so generous?”

Royner chuckled. “Cersei Lannister is as giving as she is kind, we all know that. Come now, Jarmiah, Symon, the lions ate the stags years ago. Those golden bastards were happy to look down their noses at us but no more. They can’t stand against the dragons.”

“Tell that to Storm’s End.” Lord Staunton remained unconvinced. “Mark my words, as long as Cersei and her boy king stand against the siege, Tywin Lannister will return—”

“He will not have the chance.” Jon declared, turning to look to her as she braced herself for what was to come. “No army, no fortress, no power in the known world has ever stood against the combined might of the Golden Legion and the Dark Order. So I will lead my men to Storm’s End and force the Durrandon capitulation.”

The announcement drew a flurry of activity from the assembled men. Their allies fell over themselves to join the march, the most recent converts proving more than eager to prove their loyalty. The lords Staunton and Buckwell agreed to join as well, as long as their men could continue defending their lands.

Jon accepted that condition with ease, though worry creased his brow all the same. Sansa held her own doubts yet for different reasons. Her husband likely regretted agreeing to let her come with, for she would not be left behind again.

She couldn’t leave Jon’s side, not after everything he’d endured.

Storm’s End was a place of horrors for her. Whatever terror that castle inspired, she would not let Jon face it alone. As he protected her, she would protect him.

They would face these trials together.
“You can’t storm that... hence the name.”

Gendry might have been making a jest yet his tone lacked any mirth as the pair looked to the castle in the distance. They stood at the entrance of Aegon’s pavilion, amidst the siege lines thrown up around Storm’s End.

Its huge drum tower rose up into the sky like a fist challenging the gods above. A massive outer curtain wall surrounded the castle, so smooth and wonderfully curved Jon that thought of the Valyrian-built Summerhall. Built on the edge of a cliff, the castle’s seaward side faced a sharp drop into Shipbreaker Bay where their fleet anchored below.

Lady and Ghost rested at his feet while most of his men were still making the climb up the hill from the beach. Jon and his party had been taken straight to Aegon’s tent, which offered a brief respite from the rain. Of course Aegon hadn’t been there to greet them at the landing, nor in his pavilion when they arrived.

Jon would be more annoyed at his brother’s discourtesy if he weren’t so relieved to have Sansa warm and dry.

Sailing to Storm’s End had been hard on her, not that she uttered one word of complaint. There was no need to. It quickly became apparent that his wife was simply not made for sea travel. The motion of the waves made Sansa so sickly that he’d insisted on the fleet laying anchor at every beachhead they found to spare her health. Helping his wife face her demons had been more difficult.

When Sansa first saw the castle, her eyes had gone wide and she made fists so tight that her knuckles turned white. His wife usually had a soft, delicate touch, yet in her desperation she’d nearly crushed Jon’s hand when he offered it. He’d borne it gladly. Sansa gave him reason each day to rise with hope in his heart. If she needed his strength, it would be there.

Turning back within the tent, he found Sansa warming herself by a cook stove. Jeyne had stripped her damp cloak away while Talia rubbed at her back tenderly. While Sansa had confided to feeling like a whale of late, to him she was as beautiful as ever. He barely noticed the other women in the room as he joined Sansa by the hearth, though courtesy demanded he do so.

Aegon might not see fit to grace them with his presence but others had been in the tent when they arrived. Three women he knew well.

Of all the people Aegon could bring on his march... of all the ladies in Dorne... why did it have to be the Sand Snakes?

Jon kept those thoughts to himself as he watched Sansa and her ladies make polite conversation with three daughters of Prince Oberyn Martell. While the Dornishwomen acted pleasant now, he knew them too well not to be apprehensive. High Queen Elia had hosted many of her natural born nieces at Summerhall during her reign, visits that left an impression on him.

Tyene Sand’s golden-hair and innocent blue eyes hid a mischievousness he did not trust. While Tyene might dress in gowns as white and pure as a septa’s, she had a reputation for treachery, hence why Ser Barristan eyed her every moment warily. Sarella Sand stood in stark contrast to her half sister. The light tan of Sarella’s robes complimented her dark brown skin and curly black hair. Her soft smile and black eyes betrayed a wisdom few might expect from one so young.
It was the eldest of the three that commanded the most attention, for Lady Nym was never one to be overlooked. Slim and slender as a willow, Nym wore her straight black hair in a long braid which called attention to her high cheekbones and full lips. The daughter of a Volantene noblewoman, Nym had been a frequent visitor to the imperial capital and greeted Jon in perfect High Valyrian.

“Jonarys Targaryen.” Nym bowed her head and pulled her silken skirt to the side in a grand gesture. “Son of Rhaegar Targaryen, High King. I bestow the welcome of the Golden Legion and House Martell upon you. Your brother’s camp and its humble servants are yours.”

“We are grateful for the hospitality.” He spoke for Sansa and the others as rain pelted the pavilion’s roof. “In weather like this it is greatly appreciated.”

“Aegon insisted you be given the utmost care.” Nym spoke in perfect High Valyrian. “I am sorry to say we lack the comforts of Volantis or Summerhall. Though, I imagine anything feels quite hospitable after enduring the cold and barren North.”

He did not miss the barb towards Sansa’s homeland. Nor did his wife.

“You are… most kind.” Sansa’s words were slower but her Valyrian accent was well done. “The North… is colder. Yet… I think… not so barren.”

Sansa ended that by running her hands over her stomach, calling attention to how heavy with child she was. All three Sand Snakes looked to each other before laughing in a cheerful manner.

“What a pleasant surprise.” Tyene said sweetly. “It is rare to find companions who speak the eastern tongue here in the Seven Kingdoms. Is that how you Stark women ensnare so many dragons?”

“Not at all.” Sansa smiled. “Truly, I’m still learning. I knew little of Valyrian before Jon and I married but he’s done his best by me.”

“That was less than a year ago, was it not?” Sarella cocked an eyebrow. “Quite impressive. Many of the most learned men of Westeros are ignorant in such things. You must have an excellent teacher.”

“Nonsense.” He wouldn’t let that strand. “Trust me, the credit rests with the student.”

“What a charming couple.” Nym inclined her head towards Ser Barristan. “One worthy of winning the loyalty of Barristan the Bold himself.”

“A great warrior.” Sarella said. “Missing for a time and greatly missed by many.”

“Not by Dornishmen though.” Tyene smiled still. “For he slew our great uncle, the beloved Prince Lewyn.”

Barristan did not bat an eye at that. “Ser Lewyn was a brave man. A skilled knight. It was on his challenge we met in that duel. We fought for different kings and he fought well. My blade might have ended his life but not my respect for the prince. He died a knight.”

Tyene looked ready to retort but Jon was having none if it.

“Past battles are not what brought my army here. Our fleet carried five thousand men to help bring Storm’s End to its knees, so tell me, where is the man tasked with commanding this siege?”

“Why, likely off commanding this siege.” Nym answered, running a hand down her braid. “I imagine he’ll be here shortly, none could miss the arrival of the legendary Dark Order.”
“Or its infamous commander... the Kingslayer.”

He managed to keep from flinching at Tyene’s words, though he felt the shame nonetheless. Sansa was quick to point out Joffrey’s attempt at killing him and the murder of Asher, yet it did stop his memory of strangling the vile king. Of watching Asher die in his arms. Or the hundreds of Dark Order men that burned alongside his friend.

All dead because of him. Them and many more.

_I can be a better man_, he told himself, _Sansa says in the Faith, men can atone for their sins._

_Let me spare lives instead of taking them… let me make peace rather than war… let me be a good man rather a killer._

_For her._

While Jon struggled with his own demons, Sansa was busy learning all she could from the Sand Snakes. The three had accompanied Aegon on his march from Sunspear, alongside their father and elder sister. Prince Oberyn and Obara were waging war in the Rainwood, putting down the last of the resistance there. As Lady Nym described the Red Viper’s daring deeds, Jon made note of how at ease she was ordering about stewards of the Golden Legion. As he took in the lavishness of Aegon’s pavilion, and the silk scarves and gowns arrayed about, it became clear that at least one lady was sharing this space. It was surely not Aegon’s wife, for Rhaenys was back in the empire.

Aegon’s philandering was the least of his worries though. When they’d arrived at the camp, Jon had seen evidence of recent battles around Storm’s End. Aegon’s siege engines were quiet now but the piles of broken stone and rotting corpses below the castle walls were troubling. Jon had explicitly sent word for Aegon to forego all attacks until he arrived, to prevent any further wasted life.

Tyene was beginning to turn her attention to Gendry’s brooding when the tent flaps were thrown open.

Aegon had finally arrived.

His brother walked alongside several of his commanders and allies. Jon recognized the legion’s spymaster, Lysono Maar, and its cavalry commander, Draze Rogare. The others were Dornishmen he knew not. There was no mistaking Aegon when he threw back his hood, for the man looked much as Jon remembered. His silver-gold hair and deep purple eyes only added to Aegon’s handsome features. He wore banded armor over his chest, each overlapping plate as polished as the last. Fastened across his breast by leather straps was a solid gold dragon with its wings outstretched, the emblem of the Golden Legion.

Aegon’s arms stretched out just as wide to behold the sight of them.

“Jon!” Aegon smiled widely, moving quickly towards Sansa and her ladies. “Before you do anything, you must introduce me to these lovely women saddled with your presence.”

“Aegon, this is the Princess Sansa Stark, my wife. These are her companions, the ladies Jeyne Poole and Talia Forrester.”

“How am I supposed to remember all that when their radiance blinds me to reason?” Aegon kissed both ladies’ hands, his eyes meeting theirs in a way that caused Talia to blush and Jeyne to titter some. When he kissed Sansa’s hand, he did so in a drawn out manner, his lips lingering on her skin.

“Your grace, when I heard that Jon had wed, I couldn’t believe it. Now that I see you with mine own eyes, I wonder instead how Jon could win the heart of a such a beauty.”
“You are too kind.” Sansa spoke modestly. “Though my lord’s confusion surprises me. Surely you know that your brother is no stranger to victory? He is a dragon, after all.”

“That he is.” Aegon clapped Jon on his shoulder and lowered his gaze to Sansa’s middle. “And soon to be a father! Jon, most of our family has not even welcomed Sansa to our number. Now you mean to overwhelm our father with a grandchild as well?”

Aegon laughed again and embraced Jon warmly, his brother’s good cheer surprising him. All knew that Aegon disdained his marriage to Rhaenys since it had borne him no heirs. Jon had half expected Sansa’s being with child to add to the rivalry between them. It was a glad thing to be proven wrong and Aegon seemed intent on maintaining the good mood.

“Balerion is smiling on us, brother.” Aegon said. “On our whole family. Tell me you heard of father’s campaign in the east!”

He hadn’t and Aegon was eager to share what he knew. When their father had led his legions forth to challenge the burgeoning Ghiscari and Dothraki alliance, he found their enemies already under attack by a deadlier foe. A plague of the bloody flux had hit the Yunkish camps and spread out to afflict the khalasars as well. Thousands died before the Dothraki fled back to their grasslands and the Ghiscari to their pyramids.

“Father should be returning to Summerhall any day now.” Aegon said. “Though I dare say he’ll find it deserted. Uncle Aemon sent word that Daenerys has retired to his estates in Valysar, and Rhaenys is off doing a pilgrimage to some Red Temple or another. Do tell me that Sansa is not a follower of those R’hlloir fanatics.”

“Sansa keeps the old gods and the Faith.” He drew Sansa in close. “We married before a sept and she’s been teaching me its ways… and being remarkably patient about it.”

“He is too hard on himself.” Sansa said to Aegon who laughed.

“Likely not, we were horrible students. Though not as bad as Viserys. Princess Arianne has her work cut out for herself with him.”

“Arianne Martell?” Sansa asked.

“The heir to Dorne, yes. Prince Doran didn’t want her to marry a Dornishman so I brokered a match between our dear uncle and the princess.” Aegon leaned back to whisper in Jon’s ear at the end.

“Father owes me for getting that fool away from court. In truth, Viserys doesn’t deserve Arianne, her delights are too numerous to name. If the Martells didn’t follow the Faith, I would have taken her as a second bride. Not that the trip to Dorne didn’t offer other pleasures…”

Jon cared less about Aegon’s lustful conquests than he did the idea of Viserys being a consort to the future ruler of Dorne. Such concerns drew his mind back to the matters at hand, namely that of a kingdom they had yet to form.

“Aegon we must speak.” He said, looking to the number gathered here. “On imperial matters.”

“Always so eager to put a damper on things.” Aegon sighed before turning to the rest. “Forgive my brother, the Lord-Commander of the Dark Order prefers to work in the shadows. If you’ll all follow Tyene, she’ll take you to my guesting pavilion where there should be food and wine waiting.”

While most of the others filed out, Jon and Aegon both held back confidants. Aegon appeared intrigued when Sansa and Gendry remained at Jon’s side, though their company was less scandalous than that of Lady Nym.
“Aegon, these are private matters. Not for just anyone's ears. I'm sorry my lady, but I cannot see how your presence is warranted.”

“Forgive me, Jon.” Aegon waved Nym to him, the lady enfolding herself around his arm. “Nymeria and I have become quite attached these last few months. I've taken her as my mistress, officially. You can trust in her as you trust in me.”

Just as I'm sure Aegon puts his trust in Nym’s Volantene kin. Another bit of favor he can use to push himself forward as father’s heir.

“How… lovely.” Sansa spoke without her usual poise. “I hope you make each other very happy.”

“Thank you, Sansa. Do not fret. I won’t raise any objection to your presence.” Aegon’s eyes moved from Sansa to Gendry then. “I see my new goodsister intends to follow in Lyanna’s footsteps. Attending to Targaryen matters is commendable, though have you adopted Gendry as well?”

“As this concerns Storm’s End, it involves Gendry.” Jon replied. “You know full well his role in things to come.”

“Forgive me, Gendry.” Aegon said. “I wasn't sure if you were still being given Storm’s End. I assumed, with Robb Stark marrying that Durrandon princess, that things might have changed… oh Jon, don’t look so shocked. Lysono is a good spy and a king trying to steal a second throne is quite scandalous. Shouldn't it be Robb Stark apologizing to Gendry? For laying claim to his castle—”

“It is not my castle.” Gendry protested before Sansa defended Robb.

“My brother is not trying to steal anything. Robb accepted that Storm’s End was to become part of the Targaryen realm. He might not have known Gendry’s role but—”

“Gendry didn’t know Gendry’s role.” Gendry grumbled, crossing his arms.

His friend had been acting cross ever since his role in things was revealed. Sansa might have had her reasons for disdaining a return to Storm’s End, but so did Gendry. Mother understood this, yet still the High Queen had insisted that Gendry be raised up to lordship over the castle, to act as a loyal vassal to the new Targaryen crown.

“The Stormlords loved Robert and despise his Lannister progeny.” Lyanna had explained. “If we want to win the hearts and minds of those lords and have them accept Targaryen rule, you are our best chance, Gendry. You have the look of your father, if not the family name. His strength as well—”

“I want nothing of his!” Gendry raised his voice to the High Queen, something he had never done before. “Nothing! That’s all I ever had from King Robert. He didn’t want me! He didn’t give two shits about me before or after that golden bitch sold me off. My life didn’t start until I left that place! Until you found me! With you and Jon, I mattered. At Storm’s End I’ll just be a bastard again.”

“You are so much more than that.” Mother had grabbed Gendry’s face and bid the far taller warrior to tilt his gaze down to her. “Powerful, loyal, caring, what more could a people want in their lord? I gave birth to one son but I’ve raised two. Just as I want the best for Jon, I will not accept less for you, my child. Years ago, Rhaegar pledged that he would grant you leave to found a family and rule a home of your own. We just never expected it to be your actual home.”

Gendry’s anger and disdain for the plot lessened with mother’s gentle ministrations yet was still fretful at the prospect of being Lord of Storm’s End. All of which was just talk until the castle actually yielded and the Durrandons were dealt with.
A subject that Jon made to press Aegon on.

“Whatever Robb Stark’s actions, our primary concern is ending this siege.” He drew Aegon’s attention to him. “As long as Storm’s End stands defiant, Cersei Lannister inspires her father to fight on. We take this castle, we end the war here. Peace in the west will surely follow.”

“An interesting statement.” Nym leaned her head against Aegon’s shoulder. “If you were so eager for a quick end to the war, perhaps killing King Joffrey was a tad… rash?”

“If not for my husband this war would have been lost long ago!” Sansa rebutted. “He faced horrible odds and won victory after victory from nothing. Each time he was outnumbered—”

“The Dark Order is always outnumbered.” Aegon interrupted. “Or so they’re fond of saying. Take heart princess, my brother’s value is well known to me.”

“Yet my words mean little.” He took a step towards Aegon. “Did you not receive my letters? The ones telling you to hold off any more assaults?”

Aegon’s face reddened. “Yes, I received your letters but I do not take orders from you, little brother. Keeping the castle garrison on edge and fearful was key to my strategy. Trebuchets may have little effect against those walls but throwing charges of men and elephants against the gates fill our enemies’ hearts with terror.”

“You fill the trenches with your dead!” He wouldn’t stand for Aegon’s indifference on this. “I told you that Ser Barristan was coming with us. He lived in Storm’s End for decades and assures me that he knows of secret ways in. He could have us inside the castle without spilling a drop of blood. We could spare hundreds of lives, thousands of them!”

“Perhaps.” Aegon shrugged. “Though I put more faith in your reputation breaking this siege than some old knight.”

“My reputation?” Jon was taken aback, his rage settling into disquiet. “Make sense.”

“Come now, Jon. Whatever the reasons, you did kill Joffrey Durrandon with your own hands. Tales of the Dark Order’s ruthless ways have spread throughout these lands like wildfire. I dare say that the Kingslayer inspires great fear among the Stormlords. Quite a bit more in Cersei Lannister.”

Aegon moved away to pour some wine then, continuing to speak as he did so.

“After my last assault, I invited the queen and her little Imp to treat with me. Cersei’s a lion alright, if looks could kill I would be torn to shreds. Yet when I made mention of your imminent arrival, the lioness drew back. Nym saw it too so we made use of that fear. I told the queen of King Robb forcing Myrcella to wed him. Of how you were on your way here to kill young Tommen, just as you did Joffrey, to secure the Stark hold on Storm’s End.”

“I would never.” Jon said as much to the others as to himself. “That boy has harmed no one. We will find him some safe exile—”

“Yes, yes, but Cersei didn’t need to know that.” Aegon returned to offer Jon a goblet. “All she needed to hear was that the man who murdered her first son was coming here to kill the last one. Nym made it clear that unless she surrendered the castle to me upon your arrival, I wouldn’t be able to spare poor little Tommen your wrath—”

He struck the goblet from Aegon’s hand, sending it flying through the air and spilling its blood red contents all over the floor. In the blink of an eye Jon was but a hair from his brother’s face, his eyes
burning holes through Aegon’s head.

“You would name me a murderer of children?!” He raged. “I’m not the one who sacks cities and throws orphans into slavery just to line my own pockets.”

“It was a feint!” Aegon shoved him back, reverting to their mother tongue. “Just like that noble display you put on! Jon the Honorable! Jon the True! Jon the False more like! Is this how you stole Dany from me? Pretending to be better than you are?”

“You arrogant shit!” Jon yelled as Gendry threw himself between the pair. His friend kept both men apart with ease yet nothing could hold back their words. “Daenerys has nothing to do with this! You lost her all by yourself by treating her like you did! Like she was yours to own and use as you wished! That’s what you do! You use people!”

“You’ve always been jealous of me!” Aegon shouted back. “Wanting what’s mine! Don’t think I don’t know about your last visit at Summerhall! I was there longer you know, and I showed Daenerys the truth of things! The better man won again!”

“Fucking stop!” Gendry roared, using his strength to send Aegon and Jon both back several steps. Then Sansa was there, standing in front of him and grasping at his chest.

“Jon, please!” She looked up at him and pleaded. “You’re better than this. You are! Remember our vows.”

While Aegon continued to curse him, Jon could not spare his brother a glance. Sansa’s blue eyes had a hold on him, her words reminding him of the man he wanted to be. Not the brute he acted like now.

“He was wrong.” Sansa continued. “So prove that to him. Be as noble as I know you to be. Act my prince.”

He took a deep breath and let Sansa’s soft voice and gentle touch cool his anger as Gendry and Nym saw to Aegon’s. His brother had ceased shouting, and when guards appeared from outside Aegon sent them away, a sign that he too wanted an end to their argument. A part of Jon wanted Aegon to continue though, for he was left with questions.

What was all that talk about Dany? The truth of what? Better man winning?

Those thoughts troubled him and that’s when he took notice that Sansa appeared much the same. Aegon and his barbs had been spoken quickly so he wondered how much Sansa understood.

I’ll have to explain about Aegon and Dany later… I guess my role in all that as well.

That’ll be strange, speaking to my true love about all the follies of young love.

Now was not the time though.

“Aegon.” He said, letting a hand run over Sansa’s stomach. “There are more important things than our quarrels. No matter what I think, what’s done is done. We have a war to win, so let there be peace between us.”

“Fine then.” His brother declared, jerking away from Nym and facing Jon again. “I still think my threats might work, especially with your men parading about the walls for all of Storm’s End to see. But I suppose, just in case it doesn’t, we’ll bring that old knight of yours in here to lay out our plans.”
Barristan seemed to sense the unease in the room when he arrived yet Jon made no move to explain it. He had no doubt that the knight would be just as upset about Aegon’s threats against Tommen. Barristan had pled with Jon only days before to spare the young king’s life. Whatever crimes Cersei and Joffrey were guilty of, Sansa and Barristan both believed Tommen to be innocent and Jon had agreed.

The boy would have to be exiled, so he could never serve as a symbol to rebel lords, but Jon had high hopes that his father might accept Tommen at the Targaryen court. At Summerhall, the young exile would have the finest tutors and one day, when he became of age, Tommen could be matched to a noblewoman and given some lands in the empire. There he could spend the rest of his days in peace.

*I killed Joffrey but I can provide a future for Tommen. One of happiness and comfort.*

To do all that, they had to get into a castle which seemed impervious to attack. Thankfully Barristan held knowledge of a watery passage at the base of the cliffs.

“I believe that was how the Hound freed the princess.” Barristan nodded to Sansa. “I doubt any in the castle even know it exists. Even I would have to get down there to find the entrance again but if nothing’s changed, only some old iron bars block the way up into Storm’s End.”

“A night assault would be best.” Aegon rubbed his chin. “Lead my men within and the castle will be ours.”

“At what cost though?” Jon asked. “The battle could drive Cersei and Tommen into that drum tower and we’ll be waiting them out once more. I say we let Barristan take a small group within. No more than a score, the best from both our armies, then they seize—”

“Commander!” A Golden Legion captain rushed into the pavilion, his face flushed as he saluted.

“I said we were not to be disturbed.” Aegon frowned, returning the salute lazily. “What is it? An elephant get loose again?”

“No, Commander! It’s the castle garrison! They’re surrendering!”

“What?” Jon and Barristan said in unison while the others gaped at the herald. Aegon recovered the quickest, clapping his hands together in celebration.

“I knew it!” Aegon shouted. “Excellent! Simply excellent! Assemble the Dornish lords and my captains! Let’s make a grand showing for this king when he bends the knee!”

Jon couldn’t quite believe it as he bundled Sansa in her cloak and they took off, hand in hand, to seek the truth of this matter. Gendry sent a man ahead to ready the Dark Order for battle while the Golden Legion appeared ready to celebrate. The camp was bustling with shouts of surprise and even some singing. Sansa was in no mood for such a thing.

“Something’s not right.” She said, clutching his hand tightly. “Nothing’s ever been right about this place Jon. I don’t trust this…”

“Neither do I.” He returned her squeeze. “My men will be ready if this surrender is a feint. Gendry and Barristan are with us and I will be at your side. This place will never hurt you again, I swear.”

“As do I, princess.” Barristan spoke from behind them and Gendry put a hand to his sword.

“If Cersei tries anything, she’ll meet her end.”
As if to bolster those words, the direwolves pressed in closer around Jon and Sansa both, Lady and Ghost acting wary. He wondered if they sensed what he did. Sansa was right, something felt very wrong. It was in the air. The stormy midday sky was far more foreboding now than it had seemed when they first arrived. A glance ahead to Storm’s End made its massive tower seem like a dark giant, ready to strike.

None of that made sense though. Sansa appeared to share his worries as they joined Aegon and his retinue before the main gates of the castle.

Dornish spearmen and warriors of the Golden Legion lined the approaches. They were leaving themselves open to archers but Aegon’s confidence knew no bounds. Yet Jon saw no sign of men along the walls or at the arrow slits. However large the castle garrison, there were thousands upon thousands of armed men arrayed around Aegon. If a sortie was launched from the gates it would be cut down long before it reached them.

Still, when the portcullis began to rise with a sharp creaking, Jon’s sword hand flexed above Dark Sister.

Rather than a charge of knights riding through the gate, one lone rider emerged waving a seven-colored flag up high for all to see. As he rode on, more appeared behind him, men who tossed their weapons on the ground beside the gate as they exited. The clattering of their steel rung through the air for a time but soon some commotion could be heard from back within the castle. Aegon’s men tensed as a group of Durrandon men-at-arms passed beneath the gate yet their shouts and taunts were meant for the chained, naked woman they drove forward.

Even at this distance, Jon could tell that this woman was beautiful. She had old marks of childbirth about her stomach but was still long-limbed and straight-backed. Slender of body and fair of skin, her long golden hair hung low enough to help hide some of her breasts but otherwise she was completely bare. Her hands were chained and firmly planted in front of her sex as the shoves and shouting of men drove her toward them.

“By the gods.” Sansa rasped, her eyes narrowed in fury. “That’s- that’s her. The queen... Cersei Lannister.”

“That’s Queen Cersei?” Jon blinked in disbelief at the disgusting treatment that the woman was receiving. Barristan scowled at the sight as well.

“Princess, I know her crimes are legion but I must beg your leave now. When I entered your service, I vowed to become a true knight... one who would not accept such treatment of a lady again.”

He thought that a brazen thing to put before Sansa, especially from a man who had allowed Cersei and Joffrey to abuse her. Yet Sansa did not react as he expected. While he still saw anger in her eyes, they began to glisten as well.

“Jon... I hate her. I always will.” She looked to him. “But if I take joy in this... I become like her. I don’t want to be that. Please, can you make Aegon stop this?”

“Likely not.” He looked to Aegon chuckling alongside Lady Nym at the spectacle. “So I beg you to forgive me for sharing my cloak.”

Sansa was confused by that, even more so when he left her in the care of Barristan and Gendry. He strode forward, ignoring Aegon’s shouts and the stares of those he passed on his way to Cersei Lannister. Men parted before him but the ones pulling on the Storm Queen's chains had not noticed his coming. A particularly violent shove from one man knocked the woman off balance, sending her
sprawling into the mud whilst she wept.

“Get up you murdering bitch!” The man bellowed down at her. “Not so high and mighty anymore, are you? Ordering us to our deaths!? No one’s ever going to die for the likes of you!!”

Cersei’s tormentor was raising a boot to kick her when Jon struck him soundly and sent the brute onto his arse. His companions were angry but none were armed and he made sure they did not miss Dark Sister on his hip.

“This ends now or I’ll end you.” He warned as he unhooked his cloak and bent down to drape it around Cersei’s trembling form. The others dared not interfere, one even pushing his compatriots away.

“He’s Dark Order.” That man warned. “That’s their garb... I seen it from the walls.”

“Dark Order?” Cersei repeated shakily, her green eyes locking on Jon’s face as he helped her to her feet. He was thinking of something to say when Gendry appeared, his expression cold and hard.

“Not letting you do this alone.” Gendry glowered at Cersei. “But damn you for making me help this woman, Jon.”

He wanted to apologize to Gendry for just that when Cersei suddenly lunged at him.

“You!?” She screeched, trying to claw out his eyes with her nails. “Murderer! You killed my babe! My golden boy!”

It took the combined efforts of both men to end Cersei’s attack, Gendry wrapping the struggling woman in a bear hug. Still, she continued to scream and curse at him.

“You took them from me! Monster! Murderer! I wouldn’t let you! Not again! NOT AGAIN!”

W_ouldn’t let me? Wouldn’t let me what? What does she mean?

He doubted he would get any answers from the queen as she continued to spout off bile, and he didn't have a chance to try. Jon's place among the surrendered garrison put him in the path of a wagon being led by a pair of horses. A crimson clad dwarf, who Jon could only assume was Tyrion Lannister, followed behind, his hands bound together by a rope tied to the wagon. His mismatched eyes were reddened but they didn’t appear able to focus on anything.

He simply he stared at what lay inside the wagon.

Jon had seen enough shrouded bodies to recognize one when he saw it. The corpse was covered in a golden banner, bearing the crowned black stag of House Durrandon. Three cats were curled up beside the body, mewling up at him.

“I thought she was comforting him.” Tyrion choked out. “Preparing the boy for being taken prisoner… to spare him from the dark prince… I never thought Cersei could…”

Jon reached out and pulled aside the shroud to reveal a young golden-haired boy. Somewhat pudgy. Far too pale.

“I would never let you have him!” Cersei raged through her tears. “Never! You took Joffrey! Stole Myrcella!”

“Tommens was all I had left!”
“And now he’ll never be yours!”

SANSA

“I have you, sweetling, don’t worry.”

Her mother spoke soothingly as she rubbed at the swelling around Sansa’s ankles. While Sansa lay back in a large canopied bed the Queen in the North sat at her feet, tending the aches that tormented her so.

“Mother, please, a queen should not do such things…”

“I am a dowager queen now, and your mother first.” The older woman admonished as gently as she worked Sansa’s swollen flesh. “So do as I say, relax and let me care for my little girl.”

Sansa wanted to protest further but all her exhaustion and aches made her feel a child in need of her mother once more. When she arrived at Harrenhal to find her mother waiting, Sansa had not been able to hold back her tears. It would have been embarrassing had mother not wept as well.

She’d already been excited to reach Harrenhal, for it was the largest castle in the Seven Kingdoms and surely the only one she could still fit within. Sansa had felt more a cow than a princess of late and a burden to all. Her belly was so enormous now that she had to be propped up on a mountain of pillows just to watch mother rubbing her fat and puffy ankles.

“I feel horrid.” She admitted. “You didn’t travel all this way just to hear me complain and tend to my ankles. Mother, I beg you, courtesy dictates-”

“Oh, hush. It is a joy to see you through this.” Mother shot her a knowing look. “Do you harangue Jon this much when he does the same?”

Her surprise must have been obvious for mother smiled and glanced to the doorway of the chamber.

“Jeyne told me. Do not be cross with her, she was not gossiping. I did not trust you to give me a truthful answer on your care. It put my mind at ease to hear how our dark prince tends to your aches himself.”

“Don’t call him that.” She said sharply. “Jon’s good to me, he is. All the foul things people say about him are lies-”

“I meant no offence, Sansa. He is your prince and he commands the Dark Order, it was but a title. If it bothers you so I won’t use it again.”

“I’m sorry, mother.” She sighed, putting her face in her hands. “It is just so common now for horrible rumors to be spread about Jon.”

“As lies were once told about you.” Mother grabbed her knee and gave it a kindly squeeze. “Now lords I’ve never met and who were once your foes come up to me singing your praises. Your actions speak louder than gossipy whispers and one day the truth of Jon will be-”

The chamber door swung open then as Rickon and Shaggydog burst into the room, Barristan hot on their trail. Both the boy and the wolf were panting, Shaggydog’s tongue hanging low while Rickon’s red face bore a smile ear to ear.
“This castle is great!” Rickon exclaimed with his arms stretched wide. “We found bats at the top of one of the towers and Shaggy ate three of them! I definitely want Harrenhal!”

“I’m sorry, your graces.” Barristan averted his eyes from Sansa’s bare legs, staring up at the ceiling instead. “The lad moves quickly and the wolf was too large to hold back.”

“No apologies are needed from you, ser.” Mother moved swiftly towards Rickon. Shaggydog whined and backed away as she came to tower over the boy. “Who raised you? I want the name of the lady who raised you right now, young man.”

“Um… you?”

“That cannot be so. For no son of mine would go bursting into a lady’s chambers without being announced! If this is how you conduct yourself with the Targaryens I will have you tied to a mule and sent on back to Winterfell! I’m sure Bran and Arya would welcome your return.”

“No! No, I’ll be good! I’m sorry!” Rickon put his hands together and pleaded. “Don’t send me back. Not now, mother. I really, really want to see Robb. If I’m good he’ll give me Harrenhal, won’t he?”

Sansa was enjoying herself as she watched their mother berate Rickon’s horrible manners. It was good to see his wild ways be taken to task. Better still to see mother and son together again. While the queen was certainly angry with Rickon, she was also careful and tender when she raised his chin to face her.

She’s firm but mother would never hurt him. She loves us all too much to ever cause us pain.

But would mother ever go so far as Cersei did?

Once Sansa had dreamed of a day when all of Westeros would see Cersei for what she was. Vain, manipulative, and cruel. Yet even she had never expected Cersei to be named a kinslayer.

Poor Tommen… he was a sweet boy… an innocent child.

We wanted to spare Tommen his brother’s fate, not bury him as well.

Storm’s End was theirs but the cost was great. Tyrion Lannister told them that during the final hours of Tommen’s rule, Cersei had been adamant in her belief Jon would brutally murder her son. The castle garrison was unwilling to risk Jon’s wrath, nor face an army with Barristan the Bold among its number. With her men preparing to surrender Cersei made to protect Tommen in the only way she could think of, by poisoning him. A form of salvation as twisted as Cersei’s mind.

The Kingdom of the Storm was conquered that day. Whatever fight was left in the Durrandon bannermen fell away at the news of Tommen’s death. Between them, Jon and Aegon now controlled a kingdom that reached from the Sea of Dorne to the Bay of Crabs and the Vale in the north. A conquest soured by Tommen’s murder and the anger that now festered between the two Targaryen brothers.

Jon had barely spoken to Aegon since Storm’s End, blaming his brother as much as himself for Tommen’s fate. Sansa’s younger self might have been smitten by Aegon’s comely face and charming ways, yet she was a woman grown now. She saw in Aegon more pride and arrogance than she cared for. All of which had been on display when Aegon cursed Jon for denying him a triumph at Storm’s End. Jon had insisted on burying Tommen as a king and for days of mourning to follow.

You would be so proud of your papa, Sansa spoke silently to her unborn child, he showed honor and respect when others wouldn’t.
Your grandmother’s right. By the time you’re old enough to understand none will dare name him a murderer. A warlord.

A Kingslayer.

She thought Jon acted a king after Storm’s End. Tyrion and Cersei, quite mad in her grief, had been taken into Jon’s care. He also gathered lords from across the Stormlands to secure a lasting peace. Some of the most prominent stormlords had accompanied them here to Harrenhal. Men of influence, like Beric Dondarrion, Jon Connington, and Selwyn Tarth. It was here, at the site of King Robert and her father’s defeat of the Hoares, where this war was to end.

With his allies defeated and all his children held prisoner, King Tywin had sued for peace. Robb and the Lannisters had come to terms but it was at Harrenhal her brother was to meet the Targaryens and broker the final peace.

Robb’s army would be arriving today while others had been here for weeks. Edmure had come from Riverrun, with Jaime Lannister in tow. Many of Jon’s allies from Aegon’s Hill joined their voyage up the Blackwater to reach Harrenhal on the north shore of the God’s Eye. Unfortunately for Sansa, Lysa and Robin had been among those who made the journey.

Lysa had been full of comments on how Sansa would never regain her figure after this pregnancy. Whatever headaches her aunt caused were forgotten when Sansa laid eyes upon her mother though. All were surprised to find Queen Catelyn so far from Winterfell yet mother made it clear her presence was needed.

“I wanted to come as soon as I heard you were with child.” Mother had said during their first embrace. “It was Robb’s marriage that forced my hand though. I wasn’t about to sit waiting at Winterfell to hand off my crown. I helped forge this alliance and I feel as responsible for it as I do you, Sansa. So I shall care for both.”

Sansa was happy enough with how mother’s scolding of Rickon was shaming the boy.

“Apologize to your sister.” Mother demanded as she pet Shaggydog. “Now, Rickon.”

“I’m sorry, Sansa.” Rickon mumbled so sadly she could not help but tease him some.

“I couldn’t quite hear you, Rickon. Perhaps you could apologize again while you rub my feet?”

She wiggled her toes and Rickon made a face. “Gross!”

“Your sister is not gross.” Mother sighed, pushing him back towards the door. “Go on now, find Robin. Get to know your cousin.”

“He’s gross too.” Rickon pouted. “His nose is always running and he’s scared of Shaggy and cries when I hit him.”

“Then don’t hit him!” The two women said in unison as Barristan escorted Rickon out, a notable feat since the knight’s eyes still remained locked on the ceiling.

Mother was soon back soothing Sansa’s aches and speaking of her joy at the possibility of twin grandchildren. Jon had gathered no less than three maesters and five healers at Harrenhal, all claiming experience with twins. None could say for certain if she was carrying two babes and, truly, her prayers were focused mainly on having a healthy child.

“Have you thought of names?” Mother asked and Sansa hesitated to answer.
“When father died I thought to one day name a son after him. But Jon could be High King, mother. Lyanna said small things like the names of his children might influence the council… am I horrid for wanting to choose a Targaryen name?”

“Of course not.” Mother leaned up to kiss her cheek. “You have three brothers and a sister who could all name their sons after Ned. In my youth I dreamed of southerner names but was happy to name all of my babes in the northern fashion. I’ll love a grandchild with a Targaryen name all the same. Did you have any ideas?”

“Perhaps Rhaegar.” She suggested. “Or Aemon. After Jon’s uncle, a man he respects.”

Mother thought both were wonderful choices but, before she could ask about daughters’ names, Barristan interrupted them once more. This time it was Jon who had come calling, flanked by Lady and Ghost.

“He’s here.” Jon said, stroking her forehead and kissing her hand. “Robb sent a rider on ahead, he’ll be through the gates with his men soon enough.”

“Then help me up.” She replied, putting a finger to his lips before he could argue. “I did not come all this way to sit idle in bed.”

He leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Since when have you ever been idle in our bed?”

Sansa answered that with a gentle slap to his shoulder, thankful mother hadn’t heard.

Soon all were descending the unending stairs of the Kingspire Tower, the largest and tallest of Harrenhal’s massive towers. Jon could have claimed the spacious lord’s chambers far higher up but have given them over to Aegon. He wanted lower rooms to ease Sansa’s journeys up and down the stairs.

She was eight moons along now so their descent went at sluggish pace. By the time they entered wide courtyard before the main gate several hundred of Robb’s men had already arrived. Benjen was among the first she spotted, he was shaking the hand of Harrion Karstark, who had acted as Harrenhal’s castellan since its capture. The growing number of northmen soon provided more familiar faces.

Maege Mormont and her daughter, Dacey, rode side by side. The Greatjon was draped in the spoils of war, including a fine cloak of sable, and raised a golden horn of ale in greeting to all. Rickard Karstark’s decorations were grimmer, for tied to his saddle were several bloodied Lannister banners. It was well know the lord had slain a number of Lannisters in the west, including Stafford and Lancel Lannister. She wondered if that was enough to sate the lord’s bloodlust after losing his sons. Only Grey Wind looked as fearsome in her eyes.

Robb’s appearance brought with it a far more pleasant mood, for hundreds cheered at the sight of the King of the North.

Her brother wore heavy furs and his bronze crown, yet Robb’s smile was only for the woman at his side. Myrcella bore such a striking resemblance to Cersei she felt Jon’s hand jerk in her grasp. The young woman’s hair was a magnificent mane of blonde ringlets, which the sunlight turned to spun gold. She had a woman’s figure and, when she caught Robb staring, her fair skin made the reddening of her cheeks quite noticeable. The young lady Sansa had known at Storm’s End had grown into a woman.

One that differed from Cersei in a striking manner. Rather than being clad in the gold and crimson of
House Lannister, Myrcella wore a simple gown of grey wool.

“She dresses in the northern fashion.” Sansa whispered to her mother, who watched Myrcella’s every move.

“From the looks of the Greatjon he left little in the Westerlands for her to wear.”

Jon stifled a laugh while Talia could not hide her joy when she caught sight of her eldest brother.

“Rodrik!” Talia cried out, running through the press of men into Rodrik Forrester’s outstretched arms. His face bore the scar of some battle yet Rodrik’s smile was a handsome thing to see as he lifted his little sister high for a touching reunion.

Sansa’s attention was then drawn to how Olyvar Frey sought Jeyne out. She thought the young warrior likely to grab hold of Jeyne and kiss the lady just like some knight from a song. Jeyne was clearly willing, for she closed her eyes and tilted her face up to welcome a kiss. It never came though. Olyvar had stopped but a step from Jeyne, awkwardly holding out some object shrouded in a fine blue cloth.

“Were we ever that awkward?” Jon asked.

“Yes.” Mother and Gendry replied without hesitation, Rickon nodding as well.

It was then Sansa noted who wasn’t in the yard. Aegon and most of the Sand Snakes were absent, save for Sarella who watched all this with curiosity. Lyanna was missing too but that was to be expected, the High Queen waited elsewhere for what was to come.

“Now there’s reason to celebrate!” Robb shouted, staring openly at her size and laughing as he came to them. “Victories and conquests aside, look at how my little sister glows! Mother, be honest, who are you more proud of?”

“It is not a competition.” Mother accepted Robb’s kiss to her cheeks. “I leave those to you and Jon.”

“So what’s the tally now?” Robb asked warmly, kissing Sansa’s cheek before shaking Jon’s hand. “We’ll drain a barrel of wine comparing victories, but I’ll happily concede you being the first to father an heir. My congratulations to you, Jon. To both of you.”

Those kind words were followed by more praise and compliments from Robb. All of which were welcome yet it was clear to Sansa how Robb was trying to keep the mood jovial. Which made sense when he finally turned to beckon the waiting Myrcella forward.

The young woman did not move. Myrcella had her mother’s green eyes yet Sansa had always found them softer, in a good way. Now they were filled with fear as she stared at Jon. When Myrcella realized Sansa was watching her eyes dropped and she swore a tremble went through the lady.

“Cella?” Robb went to Myrcella, taking her hands in his. “It’s alright. All is well. This is my family and I’m right here with you…”

Their conversation fell to whispers after that. Mother shared a worried look with her and Jon shifted uncomfortably.

“I shouldn’t be here.” He said. “Her brothers are dead because of me.”

“My husband is dead because of her family.” Mother whispered a reply. “You’re staying, Jon. I’ll hear no more talk of who deserves to be here. For my Ned surely does.”
Sansa took mother’s hand when Robb finally bid Myrcella to come before them. All eyes on were on the Durrandon lady yet she kept her own lowered and curtsied well all the same.

“Queen Catelyn, I am so honored to be in your presence.” Myrcella took a tone of deference. “I treasured my visit to Winterfell all those years ago. You were the kindest host, I still have the needlework I made with your daughters.”

“Septa Mordane spoke well of your work.” Mother nodded. “We treasured Mordane and her opinions, my husband and I. Ned quite enjoyed your visit as well.”

The mention of father and Mordane caused Myrcella to flinch and Sansa to remember her septa’s rotting head and father’s statue at Winterfell.

Robb acted quickly. “You should hear Myrcella talk of Winterfell, mother. Her tales make it sound like I’ve taken our home for granted. Truly, I look a fool in her telling! I was too busy practicing at swords to realize I had a princess for an admirer...”

“He was dashing, he still is.” Myrcella brightened to look to Robb. “I followed him about and cherished every word between us. I was so shy I had to use Tommen as an excuse…”

Her voice fell away at the mention of Tommen and grief spread like a shadow across Myrcella’s face. For the briefest of moments she glanced to Jon and Sansa swore she saw accusation there.

“Your grace.” Jon bowed stiffly. “My condolences on the loss of your brothers. Know that Tommen was buried as befit a king... I wanted to have him treated so…”

“Tommen had a goodness to him.” Sansa added. “A light he never failed to share with all those around him. Jon and I very much wanted to protect that light. We mourned when Cersei chose to dose it.”

It was a harsh thing to say but she was in no mood to spare Myrcella the truth. While Sansa’s back screamed and feet ached she knew Jon’s pain was a deeper one. She would not stand here and let anyone twist the blade guilt had plunged into his heart.

Robb appeared disappointed in her but had little chance to speak to it. Edmure and Harrion interrupted to beg permission to lead the northmen and riverlords in to the Hall of the Hundred Hearths. There the men would be made good and drunk on captured wine, awaiting the arrival of the royals to truly begin the celebration.

*They will be waiting some time, she suspected, there’s much to be decided before we can truly declare peace.*

*The victory is won but now we must battle for the spoils of war.*

Lyanna was eager to do just that when the royals met her in the godswood. The walled area was a good twenty acres with a small stream running through the trees and brush. A long table had been set up beside that stream, with tall, thin poles holding up a yellow canopy to offer shade to those who sat beneath it. Lyanna and Aegon were already doing so, the High Queen wearing her crown of blue-gold roses and Aegon in a doublet of deep violet.

“Well this is a surprise.” Robb said after the introductions were made. “This castle doesn’t lack for halls and solars, why set up your own here?”

“To remind all of how we came to this place.” Lyanna tapped her fingers on the tabletop. “This alliance began in a godswood, may this one bring to mind all of the promises made there.”
“It is quite lovely.” Myrcella observed politely. “When my Uncle Kevan ruled here his daughter Janei and I used to lay down a blanket just over there. We would fall asleep listening to the stream running over the rocks.”

“We must hope Lord Kevan finds a new home in the west.” Lyanna said before catching a small nod from Sansa’s mother. “Speaking of sleep, you must be tired from your journeys, Myrcella. Rickon, be a good little prince and escort your brother’s wife to her chambers. There’s a feast she must prepare for.”

Rickon was as disappointed as Myrcella to hear Lyanna’s words. Yet Robb, forewarned by mother, quickly agreed that his wife should attend their chambers. Sansa wondered if Myrcella saw through the ploy, if she did the lady gave no sign as she kissed Robb farewell.

Robb watched Myrcella’s departure with an expression similar to one Jon would give Sansa whenever she left their bed. One of love and longing.

When Robb turned back to face them he was met with hard looks of disapproval.

“I know what you’re going to say.” Robb raised his hands. “Trust me, my bannermen had my ears ringing after I married Myrcella but hear me out.”

“That’s what we intend to do, Robb.” Mother folded her hands before her. “I’m sure all here assume you have good reason for marrying as you did.”

Reasons to explain upsetting your allies and scorning future ones.

Robb could have made peace with the Reach and asked for Margaery’s hand once more. Or made firmer friends of the Martells by wedding Arianne.

There was even a chance of a Targaryen bride…

Sansa stopped short of naming Daenerys Targaryen, for the name made her nervous. There was some history between Jon and his aunt that fueled his rivalry with Aegon. She knew that from what little she understood of their argument at Storm’s End. After Tommen’s death, and the guilt Jon bore for it, Sansa had refrained from prying into his past or Daenerys’s role in it. Jon had never pressed her for details on her life before they married, content with whatever she was willing to share. She marveled at how accepting her prince had been of a bride that came to his bed sullied.

“It was done out of love.” Sansa explained after their first time making love. “Joffrey always threatened to do rape me but never did… I chose when I did it and with who… I’m sorry if that upset you…”

“Why be sorry?” Jon had asked. “As much as you’ve suffered, I am thankful you had love in your life.”

Such understanding was a sign of the good heart she’d married. Yet it was a view Sansa struggled to adopt when picturing Jon with another woman. A Targaryen princess. A better match for a High King. A bride Jon might have chosen if he wasn’t forced into a marriage with her.

“I love her.” Robb’s declaration interrupted Sansa’s worrying, his voice loud and firm. “I fell in love with her. Myrcella was my captive and I hated her family as much as mother or Sansa. Yet Myrcella was nothing like her kin. She was innocent to their crimes and I treated her as Sansa should have been treated. As father would’ve wanted.”

Robb paused then, his attention shifting to her.
“When we heard Joffrey died, Myrcella wept. Her tears were not for him though, they were for you, Sansa. They were for you and all the others Joffrey hurt and deserved to die for. She felt horrid that had you suffered at all and a fiend for being thankful her brother was dead.”

“Let me guess.” Aegon spoke up, a goblet in hand. “The talk went on and on so you tried to quell the lady’s tears. Her beauty and grace bidding you to do so. Some wine was shared, some laughter. Your eyes met, an errant touch, and then, sweet love.”

“You mock me?”

“I salute you.” Aegon raised his goblet. “That’s a tried and true strategy for winning the hearts of captive ladies. Charm is the sport of kings and the prizes, well...”

“Myrcella was no prize!” Robb slammed a fist into table, wiping the grin from Aegon’s face. “She was a princess, my captive, a lady of noble blood and pure repute. My father taught me to treat woman honorably. With respect. Not to take advantage of them at their weakest.”

Mother put a hand overtop his fist. “Oh Robb, transgressions are sometimes made...”

“Not by me. Not by a son of Eddard Stark. Myrcella won my heart, I would not break hers. I’d treat her well.”

Sansa felt Jon’s touch then, he had slipped his hand below the table to grasp hers. He said not a word and she found no disdain at Robb’s words in his expression. No condemnation of her brother, who had married so poorly, yet loved his wife all the same.

Lyanna was not so forgiving. “A stain to your honor would surely have been preferable to you breaking the terms of our alliance, Robb. Storm’s End and all the Durrandon holdings were to be ours, not yours.”

“Do not think the worst of me.” Robb shook his head. “I never meant to interfere in your new kingdom. Nor will I. Name whatever castellan you want to rule Storm’s End. Let them hold it in trust until Myrcella gives me a son that can serve as your vassal and rule over her claim—”

“Claim?” Lyanna’s expression darkened. “Dear nephew, Myrcella has no claim to Storm’s End.”

“What do you mean? She is the last child of King Robert. His rightful heir.”

“Rights? Whatever rights Myrcella had to Storm’s End were lost the moment it was conquered by House Targaryen. She’s welcome to try and press her claim to it, if she means to fight the Dark Order and Golden Legion to do so.”

The silence that followed was filled with the sounds of birds singing and the wind blowing through the trees. Lyanna’s tone had never risen beyond a mild chastisement yet Sansa saw more a queen than a caring aunt across the table from her. Robb saw something worse.

“Do you threaten my wife?” He asked, rising from his seat and causing Ethan and Tumco to move to Lyanna’s sides.

“I warn her husband—”

“You do no such thing.” Jon broke in, standing as well. “Robb, what my mother is trying to say, is that we wish you and Myrcella well. I hope her journey to Winterfell is pleasant and you rule the North together in a long and splendid reign. Your kingdom is vast and full of wonder... but it does not include Storm’s End.”
“Nor will it ever.” Sansa said, touching Jon’s arm as a sign of support that caught Robb by surprise. “You married Myrcella out of respect and love. Not for her lands, which belong to the Targaryens now. As you agreed they would.”

“What of my bannermen?” Robb grew wroth. “If I walk away from here, abandoning my wife’s rights, what kind of king does that make me?”

“The very kind you wanted to be when you married Myrcella. An honorable one. A king who stands by the pledges he swore in good faith. Father would surely have kept his promises to Lyanna. I pray you uphold the one you made to Jon as he has honored his vows to me.”

She put touched her stomach and returned the fierce glare Robb sent her way. It was a challenge of sorts, to Robb or any other who would deny Jon had given her all he vowed to before the sept. Robb was her big brother and she loved him so, yet she wasn’t just his little sister anymore. Or a Stark.

_I’m a Targaryen now. A wife to a dragon. I shall be a mother of dragons._

_I must act the part._

“Robb, Jon, please.” Mother spoke then, gesturing for both men to take their seats. “I have had time to think on this and Lyanna has shared much of late that makes me believe there is a solution which benefits us all. So sit and hear me.”

Jon sat with no hesitation whatsoever while Robb stayed standing for a moment or two. He looked somewhat foolish with no challengers to face so, with a grumble, Robb took his seat as well. Their mother then ran a hand through her auburn hair in a thoughtful manner.

“As Lyanna tells me she is set on naming Gendry as the new Lord of Storm’s End.”

“Gendry?!” Robb jerked in his seat. “A sergeant will take Myrcella’s castle?”

“Captain.” Jon corrected. “Gendry’s a captain now. He’s also a fine warrior and a son of King Robert.”

Mother raised a hand “A bastard son. I am the first to say it is easy to look upon Gendry and see Robert or Renly Durrandon in him. I’m sure many Stormlords will see the same but, first and foremost, they’ll know him as a bastard. He will have to marry well to earn some respectability.”

“Very true.” Lyanna agreed. “Even with the esteem granted to Gendry by Rhaegar’s favor, a well-connected bride is needed. I’ve thought to offer him to a daughter of House Estermont or Jon Connington’s niece.”

Mother shook her head. “Neither match helps Robb save face with his bannermen. To that end I suggest we honor an old marriage pact once made between the kings of Winterfell and Storm’s End. If a Stark son cannot rule over the Durrandon castle, let a Stark daughter become its lady.”

When Sansa grasped her mother’s meaning she snorted in mirth. Not at the expense of her little sister though. Nor at the idea of arranging Arya’s marriage. Rather it was the image of quiet, shy Gendry facing off against her willful sister in a wedding gown.

Robb and Jon shared the same bemused expressions at mother’s proposal while Lyanna leaned back in consideration.

“Should I summon Gendry?” Jon asked and Lyanna shook her head.
“He’s in the hall with the Blackfish. Likely well on his way to getting drunk.”

“That sounds like a son of Robert.” Robb put his face in his hands. “I’ll have to do the same if this match happens… I can just hear Arya now…”

The discussion on that subject lasted most of the hour, as much depended on decisions the High Septon had yet to deliver to the imperial envoys in Oldtown. As their talk continued Storm’s End proved to be the biggest hurdle to agreeing on the peace.

Tywin Lannister had already paid hefty tributes for Robb’s army to depart his lands and more gold was expected following the ransoming of his children. Jon had no issue with the Starks keeping the vast majority of the wealth, much to the chagrin of Aegon.

“We came here for land, not gold.” Jon reminded his brother curtly. “There were plenty of ransoms for the prisoners taken in the Stormlands. More to come if Tywin wants Cersei back.”

Jaime and Cersei would both be returned to Casterly Rock yet Jon had rejected the feeble payment Tywin offered for Tyrion. Instead he decided to keep Tyrion as a hostage to Lannister good conduct in the future. Aegon had already acceded on behalf of the Targaryens to the Martell demands. Half the Dornish Marches would now belong to Dorne, namely the lands around the Prince’s Pass and Castle Nightsong. What was left of the Storm Kingdom and the lands north of the Blackwater would come under Targaryen rule. Their northern border resting near Castle Darry and where the three forks of the Trident converged.

“The riverlands east of the God’s Eye and Blackwater Rush are yours.” Robb said, running his land over the map. “Everything west and Harrenhal itself is mine to rule, as we agreed.”

“You are welcome to it.” Jon looked about at the massive towers and walls. “This dragon has little want for such a place. I feel trapped by these walls.”

“Rickon is quite taken with them.” Robb grinned for the first time in hours. “I’ll be giving Bran the Dreadfort and I can’t have Rickon thinking I love him any less. When he’s old enough, he’ll be Lord of Harrenhal. Though we’ll need a castellan in the meanwhile.”

“Choose a Frey.” Sansa suggested. “Ask Lord Stevron for a suggestion. It’ll foster some goodwill between Rickon and his future in-laws.”

Robb chuckled at that. “I remember when all you talked about were dances and songs. Now you’re telling me which lords to name and how to act a king. Is this your influence, Jon?”

“This is the only Sansa I’ve ever known.” Jon answered, smiling his rare smile and speaking to her in Valyrian. “The love I am thankful for. Every day.”

“What’s that mean?” Robb furrowed his brow in confusion as Aegon finished his wine and pushed away from the table.

“Well, if this is all finished with I hear there’s a feast awaiting us. Nym is likely growing impatient.”

“Myrcella as well.” Robb rose and helped mother do the same. “Mother, would you mind coming with? Cella is nervous and it be good if you could share some kind words.”

“Robb, I’d prefer to stay with Sansa.”

“I’m fine, mother.” She lied as Jon helped her to her feet.
The whole discussion had been terribly stressful and the chair very uncomfortable.

Her back and legs felt like they were on fire and painful cramps added to her woes. The cramps were common enough these days and usually went away with time. While she didn’t feel well enough to attend the feast just yet, Sansa would not deny everyone else to going on to celebrate.

“Go with Robb.” Sansa urged her mother and leaned against Jon. “You can go too, Jon. I just need to stretch my legs before sitting again.”

“A walk sounds fine.” Jon said softly. “Unless my wife would prefer I carry her.”

That earned a small laugh from her and Jon smiled to act Sansa’s escort as the others departed.

Soon it was just the two of them, walking a well-worn path through the strange godswood. Evening was swiftly descending and the cooler air caused her to shiver some. Jon held her even closer after that, his touch helping to drive off the cold and aches for a time. The godswood was empty, their only companions being the tall trees and the birds within them. Everything around the couple was at peace and Sansa breathed deeply in relief.

“It’s over.” She said without believing it. “The war, us having to rush from battle to battle, it’s finally over. I feel so strange to say that… I mean, this what we are, Jon. Our marriage, it’s always been about war.”

“I thought it was about hope.” Jon touched her chin. “For my family, for yours. The war is over but there’s a kingdom to build in this peace. One I want to share with my wife, something I wouldn’t be able to enjoy without her.”

“I want that. I want us to be happy. Soon you’ll be free of the Dark Order and I’m about ready to burst… what happens after all that? Are we to go back to the empire?”

She paused then, struggling to find some comfortable stance as the aches took their toll. Jon rubbed her shoulders and pressed his cheek against her hair, breathing deeply.

“My father usually keeps his plans secret until he is ready to put them in motion. If we are lucky, word of the conquest here will reach his ears soon and we might have some answers. I know one thing for certain, whatever my father’s designs, I will not make war for him anymore. I’ve never asked for much from the High King but I’ll demand some position that keeps me by your side. Some place where our children can be happy and all can marvel at my beautiful wife.”

“Aegon and Robb should take lessons from you on charm.” She lifted her lips so they could meet Jon’s. Again, the pain drifted away as their lips and tongues touched and slipped over one another’s.

“Let those two shine at the feast.” Jon said between kisses. “The whole hall can fall for their charms. I want to be at your side. I want you.”

His kiss was passionate and hard to break but she had to.

“I don’t want to go to the hall…”

“Really?” Jon began kissing at her neck. “Sansa... people will notice. Not that I don’t want to lay you down…”

“No, Jon, not that.” She grunted as her stomach felt like it made a tight fist within her. “Ugh… I’m not feeling right… it hurts.”

“Everything.” She wheezed, clutching at her middle. “My stomach… I need to lay down… it hurts…”

“Sansa? Sansa!” Jon’s face twisted in terror and he turned away to roar into the distance. “Help! Someone get help! Fetch the maester!”

While Jon was panicking she tried to focus on what everyone had told her about birthing babes. They were supposed to come at nine moons.

She was only at eight.

Her babe was coming early.

Shattering whatever peace had reigned in the godswood for those few short moments.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Dragons.

Those new and old. Some bring mystery. Others folly. All coming to Westeros.

THE BLACKFYRE EXODUS

Of all the rulers of the Targaryen Empire, High King Aegon IV is held to be the worst. So poorly did the council decide in their choice of heir it was they who first called him Aegon the Unworthy.

Aegon’s failings were legion, none more so than his unrelenting lust. He gathered mistresses from across the world, preferring those from the distant Sunset Kingdoms. The bastards born from those dalliances ensured Aegon’s legacy of rebellion and folly.

The greatest of these bastards, Daemon, was given leave by the king to form his own family, House Blackfyre. Under Daemon’s charismatic leadership and with the support of his half-brother, Aegor the Bittersteel, commander of the Golden Legion, the Blackfyres swiftly became one of the empire’s most influential families. Some believed Daemon could follow his father as the next High King.

Yet it was Daeron, Aegon’s legitimate son by High Queen Naerys, who rose to the throne. Following Daeron’s ascension, Daemon and his allies adopted a strange faith that widened the divide between them and the Targaryens. The Blackfyre claimed a seer had foretold the end of the Targaryen Empire through a second Doom. A cataclysm of ice that could only be avoided through a war unlike any other. The Blackfyres held that fabled war to be the invasion and conquest of Westeros, like Aegon the First had wanted. A new realm which would be ruled by Daemon, who the Blackfyres viewed as a natural warrior and savior rather than the bookish Daeron.

The Blackfyre cult preached these views far and wide. They slandered the king, spread fear among the commonfolk, and many questioned whether Daeron was truly Aegon’s son. In that they went too far, and the doom the Blackfyres warned against was soon brought down upon them.

Fearful of these fanatics, King Daeron turned to Brynden Bloodraven, another royal bastard and the Lord-Commander of the Dark Order. Cunning and ruthless, Bloodraven moved swiftly to deal with the Blackfyre threat. His Dark Order violently purged Volantis of the Blackfyre taint and influence at all levels. Most legions were loyal to the king or the council and those that weren’t soon found their leaders’ heads adorning the Long Bridge.

His followers falling in droves, Daemon rallied the Golden Legion and his supporters to the ruins of Ny Sar, where Princess Nymeria had once ruled. It was there Daeron’s sons, Baelor
Breakspear and Maekar, brought five legions to join with the Dark Order to give battle to Daemon and Aegor.

Unlike Nymeria, who guided her people away certain death, Daemon led his followers straight into its jaws. That folly cost Daemon his life, and those of his eldest sons. The Golden Legion was crushed and Aegor fled with the rest of the Blackfyre survivors to Dragonstone. Throughout the empire, their cult was driven underground, its followers hunted by Bloodraven and his thousand eyes. With his enemies distant and isolated, Daeron felt content to leave the Blackfyres to their exile on that dreary island.

To the Blackfyres this was an exodus, like the one Aenar Targaryen had led from the Freehold. Dragonstone was a holy place to them and, in time, their strange beliefs hardened. They prepared for the coming war, raising gold by launching slave raids into Westeros. Such was how a young lad was delivered to Essos and would grow to become the famed Highguard, Duncan the Tall.

Now and again, the Blackfyres returned to the empire, launching short-lived uprisings before slinking back in defeat to Dragonstone. Decades would pass and several High Kings would rise and fall before the Blackfyre cult was finally crushed.

So bloody and cruel was its end that even High King Aegon V condemned it. In its aftermath a great man was banished to the Wall. The prophecy of a second Doom and a new realm was largely forgotten. The few Blackfyres left alive were scattered to the winds of exile.

The Blackfyre Exodus enduring to this day.

JON

The cradle was made of the finest polished oak, dark and smooth to the touch. The headboard bore carved depictions of dragons and wolves. All watching over whatever laid within.

Yet the cradle sat empty. Its white sheets were pristine, smooth and untouched. A drop of rainwater dripped off his cloak and landed within as lightning flashed. Outside, the wind and rain assailed Harrenhal with a horrible fury. When the boom of thunder reached his ears, Jon gripped the cradle’s edges suddenly.

The castle hadn’t seen a storm like this in a moon’s turn, the night that Sansa had taken to her birthing bed. The sound of the wind had been as loud as the direwolves howling without, all of it climbing up the tower as Sansa screamed in pain and fear.

Jon suddenly felt himself there again, on that fateful night, standing outside Sansa’s chamber doors with Robb and Gendry. The healers’ panicked words had made little sense to him as his mind reeled in terror his wife and unborn child. Sansa’s cries had shaken him worse than any battle. In the end that was what broke him. When Sansa screamed his name, Westerosi customs were all but forgotten. He had fought his way past Robb and Gendry and broke into the birthing chamber.

Never had the sight of blood chilled him so. Sansa bore the agony with clenched teeth, her face drenched with sweat. Their mothers each holding one of her hands. Her eyes were for him though.

The tears ran like the rain itself. Her screams louder than thunder.
Jon was a warrior. The son of a king. A commander of the Dark Order.

Yet he learned what it meant to be powerless that night. Weeks later, and still his strength had not returned. Staring down into the cradle weakened him even more.

The drain only grew when the chamber door opened and Ghost appeared. The white direwolf ambled ahead of two queens, both carrying bundles in their arms. Two tiny lives that now held such power over him.

For there, nestled in their arms, were his children.

“Jon, when did you return?” Mother smiled, rocking one of the bundled babes. “Fantastic timing, they’ve just been bathed and smell like the heavens themselves.”

“We only just arrived.” He said, giving his damp hair a shake. “I see Ghost kept a good watch while I was away. How are they?”

“They’re perfect.” Catelyn answered, cooing down at the second bundle. “The storm doesn’t trouble them one bit. Such brave little treasures.”

“They take after their mother.” He said as they brought the twins before him. “In so many ways.”

Two tiny faces looked up at him then with innocent eyes. That alone took command of his body and soul in a way that only Sansa ever had. He barely felt mother kissing his cheek before she addressed the babes themselves.

“Say hello to your papa, girls.”

The twins were far too young to do such a thing, yet his heart leapt when the tiny girl in Lady Catelyn’s arms gurgled a bit.

*Rhaegina, this little one can only be Rhaegina.*

Jon knew he was right when the babe’s dark indigo eyes focused on his face, a shade of indigo so much like his father’s. His eldest daughter rarely ever just glanced at anything. Those who found themselves under her gaze always mentioned how intently Rhaegina stared at them. Mother liked to say that it was the dragon in her that made the babe so bold. Sansa thought it marked her as having a keen mind. Either way, Rhaegina was a treasure to him.

A small cry came then from his youngest girl, who was also the noisier of the two.

*Aemma, you go right ahead and make all the noise you want.*

He was thankful Aemma could wail at all. She was the one that they’d almost lost. While Rhaegina had been born strong and wailing, Aemma had come out quiet. Sansa and Jon had held their breath to learn that their daughter drew none. The healers had tried everything. Dunking her in water, smacking her small back. In the end, it was Thoros who saved their child. The warrior priest had put his lips over Aemma’s and breathed life back into her.

Her first cry was the sweetest sound that Jon had ever heard.

Jon began running his finger down Aemma’s brow, to stop her fussing. Her deep blue eyes stared up at him then, darker than Sansa’s yet just as lovely. The babe’s cries must have acted like a siren’s song of sorts, for his wife arrived in the twins’ room soon after.
Sansa’s hair was unbound, an auburn wave flowing over her shoulders and down the comely robe of blue. Soft rabbit fur lined the collar and sleeves and it looked almost as warm as her weary smile.

“Is that Aemma again?” Sansa asked with a yawn, walking to him so they could embrace and kiss one another.

“Yes, but I welcome the sound. My daughter welcomes me back with a sweet song.”

Jon kissed Sansa again, savoring the lips that he’d gone two days without feeling. The short journey was a trial for him, for it was the longest time he had spent away from Sansa and the girls since they were born. He had not slept right the whole time, yearning to hold Sansa as tightly as he did now. Sansa mentioned being bothered by the weight she’d gained from childbirth, but it didn’t matter one bit to Jon. If anything he lusted after her even more. Sansa accepted his attentions with an equal hunger, their kisses drawing out until someone cleared their throat.

When Sansa drew back, they found two sets of highborn ladies watching them with guarded interest. The younger pair was less comprehending than their amused grandmothers.

“See, little ones.” Mother grinned. “That’s what led to you two coming about.”

“My apologies…” Sansa said, touching her lips in mild embarrassment. “Did you bathe the girls? I thought their nursemaids were tending them.”

“They were, but we sent them away.” Catelyn lifted Rhaegina up to kiss babe’s head. “Bathing this child was a joy I’d keep to myself. I did not realize how much I missed it.”

“Thank the gods there’s two of them then, else we’d be proper rivals.” Mother laughed with Catelyn before turning to Jon. “Speaking of, how did things turn out at Darry?”

“Well enough.” Jon cupped Aemma’s head as she continued to fuss. “I made it clear to the Vale envoy that our troubles are ended for the time being. We’re content with the peace we have.”

The Kingdom of Mountain and Vale had lacked any sort of peace for years now. After Jon Arryn, the Falcon King and friend to his father, had died of illness, his kingdom had been torn asunder by rival claims to the Vale. Two men, Prince Elbert Arryn and Ser Denys Arryn, both styled themselves the new king. After a war of savage bloodletting and lengthy sieges, it appeared neither side had gained an advantage against the other.

A stalemate that Elbert thought to end. The aspiring king had sent a party of envoys to Darry, demanding the right to speak with High Queen Lyanna and Jon himself. He made the trip for both of them, meeting a Lord Lyonel Corbray in Vyman Darry’s small hall. Once the pleasantries were done, it was made obvious that the swift collapse of the Durrandons was not lost on Elbert, who now wished to elicit Targaryen help for his cause.

“The mere appearance of the Dark Order on the field of battle is all our king asks for.” Lord Lyonel had spoken over their meal. “The Usurper’s forces will surely lose heart when faced by the black riders of the Kingslayer.”

The lord meant it as flattery but Jon hated that title. That was but the first of many missteps that Lord Corbray had made in their meeting. The second was when he assumed that the Dark Order was some sellsword company to be bought. The form of payment he offered was equally offensive.

“Young maidens of radiance and virtue, for you to take as wife.” Lord Corbray grinned in an obvious manner.
“I am wed.” He’d replied simply, to which the lord had laughed.

“Yes, but you Targaryens are known for enjoying the charms of many wives. Though you need not wed them, perhaps you could take one as a mistress. Then you can shape the girl to your uses. I can assure you that King Elbert, unlike the dreaded Joffrey Durrandon, has been chivalrous with all of his lady hostages. They are untouched and un- um… unmarked…”

Jon’s glare might have been enough, but his sword hand forming into a fist on the table signaled to lord to change tactics.

“There are certainly other considerations.” Lyonel had dabbed at his sweating brow. “We also have many hightborn widows in our care, ladies proven to be fertile and capable of bearing sons. A prince would surely be in need of a proper heir…”

That had sealed Jon’s dislike of the lord and the king he served. Lord Corbray left Darry disappointed, just as many others were when Sansa gave birth to their little girls rather than a son.

Queen Catelyn and Robb had been overjoyed to welcome the twins’ arrival. After himself, Robb was the second man to hold the girls and bore a sincere grin to say he saw much of Sansa and Arya in them. The Starks’ enthusiasm was a sharp contrast to that of Jon’s own family. Aegon’s smile appeared genuine enough, but not for the right reasons.

“Fine looking girls, Jonarys.” Aegon had proclaimed. “Truly, who needs a son when they have such darling daughters?”

However thankful Aegon was that Jon had been denied a son, his mother’s reaction hurt far worse. When both twins were declared to be girls, he saw the disappointment flash across the High Queen’s face. He had no doubt mother loved the girls, but it was clear how much she had hoped that Sansa would give him a son.

A dream that Sansa had shared as well. The first time that the parents were left alone with their twins, Sansa held the tiny girls against her bosom, her joy tempered by shame.

“I’m so sorry.” Sansa had spoken to him in a weak voice. “Lyanna told me how much it would help if I gave you a son…”

“I have two daughters.” He had kissed her and stared in awe at the babes. “You gave me more than I could have ever dreamed. More than I deserve. Look at them. They’re perfect… what do we even call them? How can you put a name to something so beautiful?”

When she had prayed for sons, Sansa thought to name them after his father and uncle. Jon saw no reason why they couldn’t do the same with their daughters.

Sadly Jon was still too wet from the storm to hold his darling girls, so he had to be content with kissing Rhaegina and Aemma before they were laid down in the cradle.

“Uncle Edmure was too kind in having this made.” Sansa said, running her hands along the oaken carved bars. “He and Roslin have a newborn of their own to worry on.”

“I’m sure little Perwyn is well looked after.” Catelyn spoke of the newest Tully son in a whisper, trying to avoid disturbing his quieting daughters. “Bran wrote from Winterfell, he speaks of Wynafryd and her children settling in quite nicely.”

“I do hope Benjen gets to visit Winterfell.” Mother added. “Poor man hasn’t seen his own children in over a year. Little Lyarra might not even recognize him. Damn the Greyjoy’s.”
While the lions were tamed here in the south, the krakens had risen in fury throughout the Sunset Sea. Balon Greyjoy was using his massive fleet to torment the western coasts of Westeros, including the North. The Greyjoys had taken Deepwood Motte and Torrhen’s Square and Bear Island were feared to be next. Almost the entire Stark army had departed Harrenhal, heading north to defend their homelands. Benjen commanded the march in Robb’s stead, for the King in the North still had business here in the south.

They all did.

Such business was why Jon couldn’t linger as long as he wanted with the babes. The Darry excursion had been the last task to conclude before they could depart Harrenhal for Dragonstone. The High King of the Targaryen Empire would await them there. His father was coming to the Seven Kingdoms. It was a rare event which would soon draw the most powerful lords in Westeros to the stormy island.

Aegon had left for Dragonstone as soon as they learned of father’s plans. His brother said he meant to ready the small castle for such a historic event, yet mother believed otherwise.

“He’s hoping the High King will arrive before we do.” Mother told him later. “That way he’ll have Rhaegar all to himself. Aegon’s version of the war will, no doubt, paint him in a wonderful light and you in a poorer one.”

_That won’t be hard to do, Jon lamented, I prolonged the war by killing a king in my rage._

_I ended it by causing the death of a child, with nothing but the use of my name._

Amending his tarnished reputation was one of the reasons that Sansa and Queen Catelyn were leading him to Harrenhal’s sept. Septon Luceon, the envoy sent from Oldtown, was leading prayers there at this very moment. His stated purpose was ensuring the Targaryens respected the septs and other such holdings of the Faith throughout their new domains. Catelyn suspected it was more likely that Luceon was here to report back to the High Septon on the imperials and all their dealings.

Thus Sansa had dedicated herself to ensuring any reports on Jon would be glowing. Lightning flashed in the distance as they journeyed through Harrenhal’s expansive hallways on their way to the sept. They were crossing a covered bridge between two towers when Sansa took hold of his wet cloak.

“It will look good that you come tonight.” She said, rain pattering against the roof above him. “Riding out of a storm and seeking the sept soon after, it demonstrates piety.”

“You never told me that the Seven hold such high regard for soggy boots.”

Sansa smiled. “Really make them squish. Then surely you will rise higher in Luceon’s eyes, though I’m sure he already respects you, Jon. It was no small thing that the Septon anointed the girls with the seven oils for us. He’s a member of the Most Devout, the highest council of clergy there is. A truly rare honor.”

“I’m still surprised he did so.” Catelyn said. “Luceon’s a son of Walder Frey and certainly acted as such when I asked him to anoint the twins. He refused to give me a firm answer one way or another. He did the same to Olyvar and some of his kin after Robb bid them to ask as well. Your brother did not take Luceon’s dithering well…”

“I remember. It was sweet of Robb.” Sansa replied. “In the end it all worked out though, after we showed charity to the Faith.”
He wanted to think that Sansa was right, but he doubted it. The ransoms they received for captured stormlords, along with their sack of Storm’s End, had yielded Aegon and Jon respectable amounts of plunder. When he gave over a portion of the Durrandon wealth to rebuild some damaged septs, Septon Luceon had acted mildly grateful. Truthfully the weasel-faced man seemed disappointed not to receive a greater share.

Myrcella, on the other hand, appeared genuinely surprised to be given anything at all. Jon’s family was stripping away Myrcella’s castle and lands but he could not abide taking everything from the lady. She acted frightened when he’d arrived at her chambers carrying a small chest but Robb’s presence reassured her.

“He means well, ‘Cella.” Robb had kissed her hand. “Hear him out.”

Myrcella’s unease abated only the smallest bit, her green eyes following Jon’s movements carefully as he placed the chest on her dressing table. If she expected a snake to leap out at her when the lid was opened, he was happy to disappoint. Instead she found a number of items that he’d managed to save from Storm’s End.

“I knew not what was yours among the plunder, but Prince Tyrion was of great assistance.” He explained when Myrcella lifted up a golden necklace with large, square rubies. “What happened in the war cannot be undone… I wish it was different, but that is the truth. Soon you will make a new home in Winterfell, and I thought to let you take some tokens of your past along the way.”

“My mother gave me this.” Myrcella whispered as Robb fastened the necklace on her. “It was her favorite piece…”

Within the chest Myrcella would find a diadem bejeweled with emeralds along with other such baubles. Yet it was a small wooden lion that caused tears to spring to Myrcella’s eyes. When she pulled free a small blanket with a black doe stitched along the middle, the lady had clutched it tight.

“These were Tommen’s.” Myrcella sniffed at the blanket and looked at him thankfully. “I made this for him… he slept with it every day until mother made him stop… it still smells like him. I never thought to see any of this again. I thank you.”

“Please, don’t.” He had urged. “I do this not for thanks. Nor forgiveness.”

“Why then?”

“For my daughters. For Sansa. They are worthy of a better sort than me. I want to be worthy of such a family.”

Myrcella accepted the meager offerings with grace, as she did when the loss of Storm’s End was made known to her. None of which upset Myrcella as greatly as the day she bid farewell to her mother. The newly made Queen in the North was wearing her golden necklace when Cersei and Jaime Lannister departed for the west, leaving Tyrion and Myrcella behind. Prince Jaime had accorded himself well enough, staying silent save for the occasional barb or challenge sent Robb’s way.

Myrcella was not spared either, for Cersei had shared desperate, whispered words with her daughter that left her pale and shaking. The woman was prone to mad fits ever since Tommen’s death, so when Cersei pointed to Sansa and Jon with hate in her eyes, Jon thought he was ready for the worst.

Yet it seemed he knew nothing.

“May your children die in your arms!” Cersei had screamed in the yard. “By the Seven, by whatever
dark sorcery that gives you strength, I curse you child-killer! Child-murderer! You and your dim-witted whore of a wife! Your children are doomed!"

The woman was still cursing when Jaime and several other westermen had forced Cersei into her wagon. Her ravings drifted in the air until they were through the gates and on the road. The whole affair had troubled Sansa almost as deeply as Myrcella.

Fortunately Septon Luceon agreed to anoint the twins the next day and Sansa’s worries over Cersei’s curse were set aside by their daughters’ blessings.

When the time came, Harrenhal’s sept was packed with onlookers, bright light streaming through its ornate windows. It was a far different place than the one that Jon and the ladies arrived to this night.

The sept was a long room with tall ceilings that were largely hidden by shadows at this late hour. The scores of candles burning before the statues of the Seven barely held against the darkness of night. Luceon’s soft-spoken sermon to the few faithful in attendance couldn’t compete with the sounds of the storm.

Jon spotted Robb and Myrcella then. While the lady knelt before the Mother’s statue, Robb stood a ways back, appearing bored until he caught sight of their entry.

“Oh no.” Catelyn muttered as Robb approached them, looking less than pleased.

“There you are.” Robb whispered harshly. “What happened to you, mother? We were supposed to share a quiet meal together, just you, Myrcella and I. We waited for over an hour…”

“I’m sorry. Sansa went down for a rest and I took the chance to care for the twins. The dinner just slipped my mind.”

Robb scowled. “Myrcella was looking forward to this. Gods, she’s not asking much. Just talk to her. She’s trying so hard and you won’t even give her a chance. Myrcella isn’t her family. She didn’t choose them.”

“And I didn’t choose her.” Catelyn shot back. “You did. She’s your wife, Robb, your responsibility. Whatever you see when you look at her, I only see the husband that I lost because of her kin. I see the people who tortured your sister. The woman who cursed my grandchildren.”

“Mother-” Sansa tried to calm the situation but Robb moved in to whisper sharply.

“Myrcella is not Cersei. What the queen said about Sansa and the girls… Myrcella spent most of the night crying about it. The rest of the time she was here, praying. I didn’t see her smile again until the twins were blessed. You saw that too, didn’t you Sansa? How happy she was for you?”

“I saw.” Sansa drew closer to her mother, giving Myrcella an uneasy look. “I saw her with Cersei too. Sharing whispered words, plotting perhaps, I don’t know. I do know Cersei means my children harm… Myrcella could mean the same…”

“Are you serious?” Robb looked horrified by Sansa’s words. “Myrcella wishes to hold my nieces, not hurt them. She’s forgiven all our wrongs against her, can’t we do the same for her?”

Robb shook his head at that while Jon stepped back, hoping to avoid being dragged into the conversation. He liked Robb, very much so, and when he thought of how much he loved Sansa, he understood the king wanting to defend his new queen in all ways. Yet this was a matter for the Starks to work out, no matter how personally responsible he felt for Myrcella’s misery.
He then glanced over at Robb’s wife, noting how she had not moved from kneeling in prayer this entire time. Her gown was simple and unassuming, perhaps as a sign of humility before the gods.

*From all that Sansa has taught me, they seem to like that type of thing.*

Myrcella even removed her jewels. She couldn’t bear to be apart from them when I left-

“Prince Jon!” Septon Luceon called to him, holding out his hands in expectation. “A fine night to seek the Seven, come, come.”

He was all too happy for the excuse to leave the Starks and their family squabbles. It was almost worth having to bow and kiss Luceon’s weathered, aged hand.

“Rise, my lord.” Luceon grinned to lead him by Myrcella and the rest of the faithful. “Your presence was missed during my sermons. You were off at Darry, were you not?”

“I was. Lord Vyman was gracious host.”

“Ah, yes, but will Lord Corbray leave with the same impression?” Luceon chuckled at the surprise which crossed Jon’s face. The visit from the Vale envoys had been kept quiet, or so he thought. “Mayhaps the lord was disappointed? Will King Elbert be as well? Or is it King Denys who will rue whatever was discussed?”

“I’m afraid I don’t take your meaning.” He said as Luceon stopped them in front of the Crone, amused once more.

“Do not fear to unburden yourself to me, young man. From the lowest serf to the highest lord, even kings themselves, every man seeks the wisdom of the Faith and its humble servants. We make it our duty to understand the state of our earthly realm, to better guide the pious to salvation. Seven Kingdoms there may be, but the Faith is not bound by borders or fealty to any one crown.”

*They are powerful,* he thought, *that’s what I’m to take from this.*

*Am I meant to be intimidated by this power? Or enticed to make it mine own?*

Luceon bid them to kneel in front of the statue then, bending his head in prayer while doing anything but.

“A frightful situation in the Vale.” Luceon made a disapproving sound. “Prince Elbert was the chosen heir yet not overly popular… especially with High Septon Hugor. Ser Denys is far more amiable, eager to seek the counsel of the clergy. Is it any wonder that Denys was blessed by the Mother with two heirs while Elbert has none?”

He did not bother to answer. Jon was no fool. The old septon was building to something and he saw no point in playing along. Luceon finally saw fit to continue after a long silence.

“I speak with certainty when I say that His Holiness trusts in the Seven to end the conflict in the Vale. If any outsiders were to interfere in the war, especially on Elbert’s side… the High Septon would be displeased. Things should be left-”

“To the Seven, yes.” Jon said, deciding then to give the man something so they could end this farce. “I find myself agreeing with the High Septon. May the Vale find a peace of its own. My focus is only on the lands we Targaryens now rule.”

“Praise the Seven.” Luceon raised his hands to the statue above them. “I must say, Oldtown is
brimming with talk on the empire’s designs for this new kingdom. Some are excited… others wary. The prospect of a strange rabble populating these lands is somewhat… troubling. I heard the High King intends on settling hundreds of thousands of slaves here.”

“Not nearly so many.”

*Father hopes it won’t come to that. We all do.*

The time was drawing close for the true purpose of this conquest to begin. Slavery was a blight on the empire, one that his father wished to end. Yet if the High King freed all the slaves today, by tomorrow his power would be gone. The chaos that such an act could cause would be all encompassing, tearing the empire apart. So, rather than hacking the rot of slavery away, his father planned to heal it over time.

The High King’s effort would focus first on Volantis, the imperial capital. It was the empire’s greatest city and the most addicted to slavery, with five slaves to every free man. The aim was to cut that number in half within a generation through a number of edicts and taxes. An influx of freedmen brought problems of its own however, such as finding them work and lands. The politics of land division in the empire did not lend itself well to father’s plan.

Expanding east meant full-scale war with the Dothraki, a conflict that would likely never end. Yet to look across the Narrow Sea was to see tracts of sparsely populated lands of no consequence to imperial interests. They had known for many years that the nearest lands to Dragonstone were fertile and lacking in any great settlements.

The whole area held great promise, according to his uncle Aemon. To both the freed slaves in search of new lives, and House Targaryen itself.

“Aegon the Conqueror once thought to look west.” Aemon had spoken a year ago at Summerhall. “The Blackfyres believed our future lay there as well. It is in our power and our wisdom to build something magnificent in the west. There will be fire and blood to be sure… but from the ashes of such destruction, something beautiful could grow. A new realm. A better realm.”

Father and mother both believed in such a dream. Jon did as well.

*We Targaryens have been destroyers and slavers long enough.*

*Let us build a kingdom where no man is another’s slave.*

Jon rose from his knees at the thought, offering a hand to help Luceon do the same.

“Ten thousand, maybe twenty.” He said simply. “That’s how many new freedmen my father hopes to send this first year. Mostly those with no homes left to return to, wandering the streets without purpose. Men and women who were born into bondage.”

“All of whom will embrace the Seven, yes?” Luceon pressed. “That was what High King Rhaegar promised His Holiness. The false gods and faiths of the empire should never taint the Seven Kingdoms.”

“This kingdom will hold to the Faith of the Seven. Conversion is the price that the freed must pay to reach Westeros.”

That was his father’s decree, yet Jon suspected that many of the new converts would be mummers at best.
Most slaves had little to call their own, save their gods. They’ll say the Seven’s words… but I doubt many will hold them dear.

Not like I do… for I said them for Sansa.

“That is comforting to hear, from you especially, my prince.”

“I am a lord, not a prince.”

“Married to a princess though.” Luceon gestured to where Sansa now knelt in prayer while Robb and Catelyn continued their discussion to the rear of the sept. Myrcella and Sansa were now the only ones left actually praying, though as far apart as could be. “I speak often with the princess. She insists that you are dedicated to the Faith and its teachings.”

“I am as dedicated to the Seven as I am to my wife. Sansa has helped me view the Andal faith in a way no.”

“A woman’s teachings.” Luceon dismissed with a wave of his hand. “It would be better if you enlisted a septon to continue your lessons. There are several I could recommend. Good, loyal men. They serve me faithfully and would do the same for you. I trust them… as the High Septon trusts me. He is quite eager to hear of my visit here… though I fear to disappoint him.”

“Oh?” He eyed the septon rubbing his hands together, his eyes narrowing in a way that Jon didn’t care for.

“Your words sound pleasant yet we have a saying here in the Seven Kingdoms. Words are wind. Marrying before the Seven, showing mercy to the faithful, these are all fine and good. Yet you remain an outsider to us. That could change if you were anointed in the seven oils.”

Jon kept the grimace from his face. The twins’ ceremony had been lengthy and tedious. The only part he enjoyed was how long he got to hold Rhaegina during. Kneeling for hours so this old weasel could drip oil upon his brow held little appeal to him. Yet Luceon appeared excited at the chance.

“I would be happy to perform the rite for you.” Luceon bowed somewhat before his greedy grin returned. “Though salvation is no easy thing to grant, nor cheap to afford. I am a member of the Most Devout, I cannot anoint just any. I’d expect a similar, hmm, endowment as the one I received for your daughters.”

“Endowment?” Jon asked, thoroughly confused. “What do you mean?”

Luceon’s chuckling grated on his patience again. “I’ll admit, it was clever of you to try and purchase my favor by donating your spoils to those Blackwater septs, His Holiness will be won over by such news, but you erred somewhat. The septons in charge of those funds owe loyalty to other clergymen, so your gold went to their pockets instead of mine. The direct approach worked far better. The jewelry will gain me much favor with certain young septas…”

He began to piece things together and struggled to keep his anger in check as thunder and wind shook the sept.

“You anointed Rhaegina and Aemma because someone paid you?” Jon spoke carefully, keeping his temper so as not to shame Sansa by taking umbrage with Luceon before all. “Who did so?”

“It was not you? My, my, this is interesting.”

Luceon raised a hairy eyebrow and a gnarled finger to point towards Robb and Catelyn, who were
now joined by Myrcella. The young queen had no sooner curtsied to her goodmother then Queen Catelyn offered whispered words to the married couple and sought Sansa’s side instead. Myrcella stared in shock and despair at the spot where Catelyn had stood moments ago as Robb swiftly enfolded her in his arms.

“IT was her, the Princess, er- I’m sorry, Queen Myrcella now.” Luceon said as Robb and Myrcella left the sept together. “She sought me out. Offered me a fine necklace made of Lannister gold, of the most quality craftsmanship. I do love rubies so and the lions know their craft.”

“Myrcella gave you that?” He blinked as the storm raged without, lightning flashing lances of light over the statue of the Maiden. “Robb would never ask that of her…”

“I thought it was you who bid her.” Luceon shrugged. “When I asked her why, she said that it was for your daughters. For your wife.”

“To be worthy of such a family.”

SANSA

“Thank you Myrcella.”

She did her best to smile sincerely as Jeyne handed Aemma over to Robb’s wife. Rhaegina was sleeping peacefully in Sansa’s arms, but Aemma had been fussing some before Myrcella offered to take the whimpering babe. Myrcella now held Aemma so that young queen’s tumbling hair acted a golden shield against the sun and breeze here on Driftmark.

“It’s my pleasure, really.” Myrcella took one of her golden curls and dangled it over Aemma’s face. “Did Robb tell you how jealous I was that he got to hold the girls? I’ve been looking forward to this. Haven’t I, little one?”

Aemma quieted down at the sight of Myrcella’s curls, her daughter showing none of the unease that Sansa felt right now. Before she could stop herself, the image of Myrcella twisted into that of Cersei. The vile woman clutching Aemma in her horrid grasp.

All at once Cersei was gone and Myrcella returned, the young woman cooing down at the girl in her arms.

Myrcella’s not her mother, Sansa reminded herself, she wouldn’t hurt my children.

Cersei cursed my girls, but Myrcella had them blessed.

Myrcella had her gratitude for that, yet others were not so easily won over. Sansa needed only to glance at her mother to see the truth of that. The dowager Queen in the North watched Robb’s wife carefully as they continued their walk along Driftmark’s seashore.

The sand twinkled like thousands of tiny diamonds on the windswept beach. The waves lapping against the shore were calm, the air carrying a scent of salt. She much preferred to enjoy the sea in this manner rather than aboard a rocking and pitching ship.

Their overnight stay at High Tide had been a welcome respite. The Jaehaerys might have made Dragonstone by nightfall but Jon had refused to try. The skies had been grown dark with clouds and her husband feared a storm brewing. He refused to risk their children’s lives, or hers. Nor did he entertain the notion of leaving them behind while pressing on to Dragonstone, as Lyanna did in the
Alysanne with Gendry and Tyrion Lannister.

High King Rhaegar has been at Dragonstone for days now, Aegon whispering in his ear thw whole time.

Trying to steal a crown that I know Jon is worthy of.

To Sansa’s shame, she had likely helped Aegon in those efforts. Her heart filled with joy to think of Rhaegina’s purple eyes or Aemma’s tuft of soft auburn hair. The twins had been a part of her and they always would be. But as much as she loved her two daughters with all her being, Sansa knew they were worth less than a son.

Jon might not fault her for the girls, yet she had failed him all the same.

On Dragonstone she was to meet Jon’s family. He would present her as his wife, but that wouldn’t change what she really was. A broken woman, married into the most powerful family in the known world.

The power and prestige of House Targaryen was apparent in the company the High King’s visit had drawn from across Westeros.

At this moment Sansa walked amidst several of those highborn guests, following after Aurane Velaryon as he showed off Driftmark’s beaches. On the arm of the handsome lord was Princess Margaery of House Gardener. The only daughter of King Mace, Margaery was a pretty, confident young woman, able to bandy about witticisms with the lordling in a carefree manner. Her thick, softly curling brown hair bounded whenever she laughed, which was often.

Following closely behind were the ladies from Margaery’s retinue, daughters of the Gardener bannermen like Desmera Redwyne, Talla Tarly, and Leonette Fossoway. Behind them walked Alyyne Connington and Eleanor Mooton, who came from lands newly won over by Jon. Though of course, the most familiar faces were those from the North. Wylla Manderly had come with her father, Ser Wyllis, and his party, while Mira Forrester had arrived with her husband, Brynden Blackwood.

While Talia and her older sister kept close together, enjoying their reunion, none of the Reach or Stormland ladies dared to approach Myrcella. All likely knew her, whether as a Durrandon princess or from her time with the Gardener court at Highgarden, yet still they kept their distance. Whether out of fear for Myrcella’s new allegiances or her old ones, she couldn’t say. The whole thing reminded Sansa of when she was an outcast at Storm’s End, shunned by many.

A lonely, dreadful time that she wouldn’t wish on anyone.

So Sansa reached out to Myrcella herself, allowing her goodsister to hold Aemma. Myrcella’s jewels had helped bless the girl, it seemed the least she could do in return. The gesture appeared to gladden Myrcella greatly, for her green eyes ignored the scenery to gaze upon Aemma as she hummed a tune.

“There’s another Lannister on this island.” Mother spoke quietly, the words clearly meant for her ears alone as she watched Myrcella. “Genna Lannister, Tywin’s sister, a princess of the Rock.”

“Yes, Robb told me.” She whispered back. “She’s guesting at Hull with her husband and the other Reach lords. Aurane clearly thought better of inviting her here.”

“Genna’s no fool. She’s a shrewd, with decent influence among the Gardeners. A dangerous woman. It would be a good thing to keep these lions apart.”

“Myrcella helps us in that.” Sansa said, to her mother’s surprise. “She rejected an invitation from
Genna’s handmaiden just this morning, then burned her aunt’s letter without reading it.”

“Who saw this?” Catelyn asked suspiciously.

“Her maid. Rickon as well.” She was unhappy to admit it. The two of them had recruited many to spy on Robb’s wife. Sansa took as little joy in that as Mother did to hear this report.

“Dragonstone will be the true test. Tyron and Genna must not be permitted any private meetings with each other, nor Myrcella. I worry of what Robb shares with his wife, and what she could share with her kin. I wish he had not brought her here. It was smart not leaving Myrcella at Harrenhal, many there served Kevan Lannister before us. Still, Robb should have sent her to White Harbor.”

“Myrcella does well here.” She bid her mother to watch Myrcella fawn over Aemma. “Not just with Aemma. Or the bribing of Lucret. She told Robb not press her claim to Storm’s End any further, and promised she would say the same to the High Septon. Truthfully mother, I am… I am glad Myrcella is with us.”

Mother grew quiet, letting the waves and the chatter of other women fill the silence between them. All she said was already known to her royal mother, save the last part. When mother looked to her then, there was no anger in her eyes, only a sort of sadness. One that grew deeper when her gaze moved to Myrcella with Aemma, who now slept peacefully.

“She’s good with her.” Mother said after a time, her face like stone. “Tender, caring even. With a family like hers, I did not think it likely… not after everything they did to you.”

“Those who hurt me are dead or gone away.” Sansa whispered back. “I cannot fear Myrcella like I did Joffrey. Or how Cersei feared Jon. I cannot stop thinking that Robb is right. Myrcella wants to be one of us… is that foolish of me? To want to believe the best in her?”

Mother sighed, reaching up to adjust one of Sansa’s braids. “No. That makes you the sweet girl Ned was so proud of. Our little lady, who shames me by finding the strength to do what I cannot…”

Her mother’s morose words clashed greatly with the sound of Margaery and her company’s laughter then.

“Queen Catelyn!” The princess turned about to address them. “I must commend you on your daughter’s splendid escort!”

“Her escort?” Mother asked in a confusion, looking about at Sansa’s ladies and then back at Barristan, who followed at a respectful distance. “Do you mean Ser Barristan?”

“Margaery isn’t speaking of Sansa.” Myrcella noted, pointing farther up the beach. “Is that not Arya?”

Sansa swallowed a groan to catch sight of her sister in the distance. Making a spectacle of herself, as always.

Arya was riding towards them atop a massive black stallion that she kept close to the surf, its hooves kicking water into the air. The five Stark direwolves collected on the island ran with her, Nymeria and Shaggydog leaping up to snap at the splashes. Arya acted just as wild, standing high in her stirrups with her cloak flapping in the wind.

When they arrived at Driftmark, Arya was there waiting. Somehow she had won over the Velaryons to such a degree that they gave her free reign over their stables. A privilege Arya continued to abuse, despite mother’s insistence that she attend some seamstresses in preparation for her wedding.
“Princess Arya!” Aurane hailed when she drew close. “Do we catch you returning from another ride to Spicetown?”

“Ha! Farther than that.” Arya tossed some errant strands of hair from her face before grinning at the twins. “So that’s the reason! I wondered why Lady and Ghost took us this way. They must have caught the girls’ scent as far off as those cliffs, even though the wind is all wrong…”

“They truly are magnificent.” Margaery spoke admiringly as her gaze moved from the wolves to Arya. “My brother Willas boasts the largest hounds in the Reach and they are only half the size of your pets.”

“A direwolf is not a pet.” Sansa corrected while Arya dismounted. “They are too strong to be treated as such. Respect must be given to them if you want any shown in return.”

“They’re as fierce as they are loyal.” Arya added with a toothy smile. “Well, loyal to those who are loyal to them.’

Margaery raised an eyebrow. “Then a direwolf can never truly be tamed?”

“Tamed? No.” Mother said simply before stand in front of Arya, brushing some sand from her shoulder. “Nor should they be. There is a beauty in their wild hearts, for those willing to seek it. That is, if they are given the chance.”

Arya lowered her eyes then. A marked difference from how she glared at Robb when the sibling first reunited at High Tide. Arya’s intense stare had broken their brother, who she was evidently furious at for promising her to Gendry. Long forgotten were the smiles and stolen looks that Arya had sent Gendry’s way at Winterfell. Her sister’s heart had apparently hardened against her betrothed.

Sansa had tried to speak to Arya about the betrothal but her sister ignored that in favor of playing with the twins. She might have pressed things further if Arya’s tickling and foolish faces hadn’t had such an effect on Rhaegina. Both sisters swore that the babe smiled her first smile for Arya.

“No smile for me today?” Arya asked Rhaegina now, leading her horse onward so she could get a look at the sleeping girl in Sansa’s arms. “That’s alright, you rest up to howl at some dragons.”

“I pray she does no such thing.” She swatted at Arya. “I want the girls to be as peaceful as they are now when Jon presents them to his family.”

Arya scoffed. “They’re practically septas compared to most of the men on this island. I’ve heard nearly every lord complaining about having to wait here before going to Dragonstone. The worst is the Greenha-”

“Thank you, Arya!” She cut her sister’s slight towards Margaery’s father there. “Let’s hope all get to welcome the High King to Westeros soon enough.”

While she lacked in courtesy, Arya was certainly right. Besides the High Septon, only the Stark and Martell royal families were permitted to sail straight on to Dragonstone. All other guests of the High King were to await summons at Driftmark. Mace Gardener considered that an insult, believing his status as a king should afford him the same privileges as Robb. Jon had spent much of the night treating with the Gardener King, promising that his stay at High Tide would be a short one.

Not so short as their own though.

Arya was not the only member of their family to interrupt Aurane’s tour. Uncle Brynden and Rickon rode up soon after, with carriages and word from Jon. The skies were clear and the ships were ready.
The final leg of their journey to Dragonstone was set to begin.

Their farewells to Margaery and the others were hurried. Their journey back to the docks swift. The High King of the Targaryen Empire surely deserved such haste.

When she met Jon upon the deck of the Jaehaerys, the rocking of the boat was only part of the reason she felt queasy. Men were moving all about, preparing the sails and oars to depart, yet it was her that Jon worried on.

“This will be a short trip.” Jon said, kissing her brow and rubbing her shoulder. “A few hours and we’ll be on Dragonstone. After that, I swear, no ships for at least a moon’s turn.”

“What if your father wishes you back to the empire at once?” She asked, watching Arya and mother carry the twins about the deck. Jon’s eyes followed them as well, a grin pulling at his mouth.

“I doubt that very much.” He spoke in High Valyrian, more practice for what was to come. “The High Septon brought five ships and hundreds of his people to Dragonstone. I’m guessing there’s more talks ahead. I’ll likely be called upon for such, or to advise the new viceroy of these lands. From what Aurane has told me of Dragonstone’s newest guests, this isn’t going to be a short stay. Father wouldn’t bring our entire family here otherwise.”

“Your whole family?” She felt both nervous and excited all at once.

Jon nodded. “Well, I could do without Viserys... but it'll be nice to present you and the girls with Aemon there. Daenerys too. Don’t worry if Aemon takes to touching the twins’ faces some, he lost his eyesight long ago and…”

He was still speaking when her mind seized on the name. Daenerys. The ship was pulling away from the docks at High Tide, leading Robb’s galley and many others on to Dragonstone.

Yet Sansa’s mind was back at Harrenhal. To a night where she laid abed with Jon, wrapped in his arms. A moment when she’d finally found the courage to ask her husband something she’d worried on for months. Ever since Aegon’s angry words at Storm’s End first planted the idea of a dalliance between Jon and his aunt. The murder of Tommen, the ending of the war, the birth of their girls, so much had kept Sansa from asking the question she could no longer ignore.

“Jon, I wish to ask you something…” She’d laid a hand upon his bare chest, over top the heart he swore beat for her. “It’s about Daenerys. It’s about what your brother said at Storm’s End”

“Ah.” Jon had cringed some. “Aegon always had a big mouth… I didn’t know how much you understood of our talk.”

“Enough.” Sansa could not meet his eyes. “Aegon... he loved your aunt, yes?”

“He says he did.” Jon grumbled before shaking his head. “Damn, that’s not fair. Aegon loved Dany. Not as much as himself I think, but she was his first love and he was hers. They had something special for a time.”

She dared to look into his eyes then. “And you? Did you love Daenerys?”

Her deepest want was for him to say no. Perhaps even act offended at the question. That if he had loved Daenerys, it was simply the love of a nephew for his aunt. Instead Jon simply nodded.

“Yes, many years ago. We were lovers. I was young, and I loved Dany with all my heart. I owe her a great deal.”
The simple manner in which he spoke and the lack of humility he had admitting to such, hurt her deeply. Men were like to boast of their fornications yet Jon was not such a man, nor did he speak of Daenerys Targaryen in that manner.

He spoke her name with love. She saw the truth of that in his eyes.

*She was who he was meant to marry. A Targaryen princess.*

*Not some scarred girl whose family forced him into it.*

“You wished to marry her.” She had choked out, separating their bodies and looking down upon her husband. “Didn’t you?”

“I did. She rejected me. Twice.” Jon took hold of her chin and bid her to meet his gaze. “And for that I will forever be in her debt. Had she said yes, I would have never found you. I was a young boy, ignorant to the world, fumbling about at what he thought was love. The man who came to Winterfell didn’t believe in true love anymore. *He knew nothing.*”

The last part he spoke in High Valyrian and she understood well enough. Jon was professing his love to her, yet all Sansa could think about were comparisons between herself and this woman she had never met. Daenerys would speak Valyrian fluently of course. Her body was likely free of scars. She would be wise in the ways of the empire. A proper Targaryen princess.

*Stop! Stop! This is madness. You would never compare Jon to Sandor.*

*That’s not how love works… not really… they are not numbers added up in a ledger…*

A cry had erupted from beyond their chambers doors, one of the twins waking in their nursery and waking her sister as well. Sansa had risen to tend them, with tears in her eyes, when Jon barred her path. She spoke not a word of her turmoil yet he knew. He knew and he forced her to hear him out.

“Sansa… the life I led before you is over, my life with you is the one I want.” Jon pledged as he ran his hand through her hair. She loved it so when he did that. “Whatever loves I’ve held, whatever loyalties I had, this is the family I shall love and cherish before any other. *I am yours. You are mine. They-*”

“They are ours.” She finished as the twins began to wail and Jon kissed her again.

Her heart had ached only slightly worse than her breasts at that moment. The twins needed to be fed and her body joined with them in telling her so. When she left to nurse the girls, Jon had followed. Sansa still had a thousand more questions to ask about Daenerys but watching Jon cradle Aemma as she nursed Rhaegina caused them to drift away.

The pride she took in her family overtaking her worries.

Though now Sansa fretted over impressing Jon’s family. Their ship was moving swiftly through Blackwater Bay and the Targaryens grew closer with each passing moment

The next few hours were spent readying herself and the twins for their arrival at Dragonstone. While the girls napped, Jeyne and Talia came to see to her dressing. Her gown was a gift from Royner Darklyn, who would be a part of Jon’s retinue at Dragonstone. An honor that the lord clearly esteemed, for her new dress was wonderful. Made of the softest black silks, Sansa was especially fond of the white embroidery stitched about the bust and sleeves. The skirts were wide and billowing, meaning her every step would draw the eye.
Since she wore Jon’s colors, so would their babes. Rhaegina was garbed in a long gown of black with pearls sewn all along the sides. Aemma’s gown was white with black obsidian sequins. Neither child cared for the uncomfortable clothing, yet by the time they reached Dragonstone, their cries had calmed again.

Barristan knocked lightly on her cabin door to announce their imminent arrival. When she bid him within, the older knight blushed as he was wont to do.

“How do they look ser?” Sansa asked, gesturing to the babes in Jeyne and Talia’s arms. A smile creased Barristan’s weathered face. He reached out to let Aemma take hold of his finger.

“I wish there were three of me, so I might lay down my life for three great beauties.”

Jeyne shot a glance to Talia. “Not five? Ser, you do offend.”

“Are we so ugly?” Talia blinked her eyes in mock hurt.

“No! No, you mistake me!”

Barristan was one of the finest warriors in the Seven Kingdoms. Yet when her ladies played at torturing him, it was too easy to be called sport. Jeyne and Talia had Barristan nearly on his knees in apology before she saved him, requesting that he escort her back to Jon.

“I’m nervous.” She admitted to the older knight as they climbed to the upper deck. “Like my wedding day all over again.”

“The best swordsmen are always wary.” Barristan patted her arm. “Overconfidence is a failing. As is cowardice, yet you persevere. You might not wield a sword, your grace, but you’re more sensible than most knights I’ve known. I believe the Targaryens will see that.”

She wanted to believe Barristan yet she found herself wishing for some overconfidence when the island of Dragonstone appeared ahead of the Jaehaerys. A large volcano jutted from up the rocky isle and, upon its face, stood the Castle Dragonstone. The port they sailed towards had been a simple fishing village in Aegon the Conqueror’s time. Now it was a sprawling town with guard towers and keeps dotting the harbor. What looked to be scores of ships were anchored there, nearly all flying the Targaryen banner.

The town itself was well ordered, its buildings and pillars made of black marble, the streets teeming with life as trumpets and bells announced their arrival. Ghost and Lady did not care for the noise, the two wolves pressing close to Mother and Arya as they held the twins.

When they docked a large carriage of foreign design and Highguard warriors awaited them. So while Robb and the rest of their companions were still sailing into the harbor, Jon and Sansa’s party was spirited through the town. Arya took in the strange place with wide eyes, mother also displaying some curiosity as she peered out the carriage windows. Outside them Barristan and Uncle Brynden clung to either side of the carriage, on guard like the direwolves which followed behind.

Jon was holding her hand when their travels brought them to the dark fortress of Dragonstone. She had never seen a castle of its like in her life. Its black towers were carved in the shape of dragons using some sort of masonry beyond her grasp. Hundreds of gargoyles lined the walls and everywhere she looked there were dragons. The beasts were even carved into the gates that they passed beneath to enter the castle.

Two men awaited them without, taking Jon quite by surprise. One was a young man that Sansa nearly mistook for Aegon, with his silvery hair and handsome features. Yet this stranger was lankier
and armored like a knight. His shield bore a black dragon on red, which she had a vague memory of from one of Maester Luwin’s lessons. Before she could rightly remember it Jon moved towards the second man.

He was of middling age, with dyed purple hair and whiskers. She thought him of Valyrian descent and he wore armor similar to the Golden Legion yet plainer and dented from battle.

“Legate Qoherys.” Jon saluted in the imperial fashion, which the stranger returned. “It is always good to see a man of the Ninth Legion. Though I thought you had retired from your command, Garmon?”

“Where Targaryens lead, House Qoherys follows, yes?” The man spoke the Common Tongue with a heavy Valyrian accent. He then gestured towards the inner castle. “High King, he wait inside. Happy to see the son again.”

“His son and his family.” The young knight added, his queer blue eyes blinking with nervousness. “Lord-Commander, princess, if you would follow us. The court awaits.”

Jon eyed that one in a wary manner and she caught him hiding a hand behind his back, signaling Brynden in two swift movements. Whatever this meant caused her uncle to whisper something quickly to Barristan, whose expression was stern. She only caught one of her uncle’s words as the men moved in close around them.

‘Blackfyre.’

_This knight is a Blackfyre? I thought the cult of pretenders was wiped out._

_Why would Rhaegar have one with his court?_

Her confusion only grew as they were led to a building carved into the shape of a huge dragon lying on its belly. Its tall doors were set in the dragon’s stone mouth, which gave Sansa the sensation of being swallowed by the beast when they went inside.

They found a spacious hall within and their path ahead flanked by lines of Highguard warriors. Each of their number wore white cloaks and armor yet Sansa spotted all manner of men among them. Westerosi knights, Tyroshi bluebeards, Norvosi axemen, all quite ordinary compared to some others. There was a copper-skinned Dothraki who had a braid full of bells and a curved blade at his waist. Another man, possibly the tallest she had ever seen, wore a spider silk sash and watched her with coal black eyes. The oddest was a short, bowlegged man, whose large head peaked like a cone and bore only a single strip of hair down the center.

Some frightened her but she kept her face impassive. It helped to have Arya and her mother so close, and the twins in her arms. She held her head high as the three generations of Stark women passed the ranks of staring strangers.

_No, not strangers. Subjects of the empire._

_People you must learn to care for, should Jon become High King one day._

That was where their path took them. Straight to the High King of the Targaryen Empire.

The Targaryens awaited their coming on a raised marble platform. Around them stood three tall pillars, each with an obsidian statue of dragon atop it, their wings outstretched and mouths gaping. Sansa understood the feeling when she saw the king.
Rhaegar sat upon a black throne, handsomely garbed in purple silks as dark as the first signs of dawn. His crown was a simple gold band with different colored stones inset. Beneath it his hair was a lengthy, pale mane which fell to his chest. One of the king’s hands was entwined with Lyanna’s, who sat in a throne of her own at Rhaegar’s side. Her aunt wearing her rose crown and a strained expression.

There were others on the platform too. More dragons eyeing her approach.

Aegon kept an awkward distance from a lithe woman with Dornish features who wore a bright red gown. She thought perhaps that to be Aegon’s wife and Jon’s half-sister, Rhaenys. Near to Rhaenys stood an ornately dressed man, who shared in Rhaegar’s good looks, yet Sansa did not care for how his lip curled in a dismissive manner. Sansa named him Viserys but paid Jon’s uncle less care than the odd pair closest to Rhaegar.

There an ancient, shrunken looking man sat in a simple wooden seat, peering about out with sightless eyes. He nodded now and again at whatever whispered words were spoken to him by the striking young woman to his side. She wore a billowing gown of violet, but its loveliness could not compare to her long, silver-blonde hair and aquiline features.

In this woman, Sansa saw the beauty of Old Valyria. This was Daenerys Targaryen, the princess that Jon had loved before her. A beauty who now smiled widely at Jon, in a manner that made Sansa want to take hold of her husband.

Yet she could not. Now was not the time for her to make any claims on Jon. Soon it would be him presenting her to the king.

When they halted in front of the platform, Sansa handed off the girls to Jon, who disappointed her by stirring some.

“They’ll be fine.” He whispered as she smoothed her skirts. “As will you. Sansa, you know this rite better than I by now-”

His words were lost as Ethan Glover stepped off of the platform, beating the end of his longaxe into the floor.

“Who comes before Rhaegar Targaryen, Highest of Kings?” Ethan demanded, his scarred face offering a small smile.

“His son!” Jon’s Valyrian was spoken with elegance. “I am Jonarys Targaryen, a proud son of Summerhall and the empire. Raised beneath the three-headed dragon of House Targaryen. Wed to this woman, who I beg leave to present to my king. To my father.”

“Let her be seen.” Rhaegar’s iron tones rang throughout the hall. “Let her stand before the dragons.”

Sansa took hold of her skirts and walked on, leaving Jon and the girls behind. None could come with her. Not mother, nor Arya or Barristan, she had to do this alone. The brand on her back suddenly hurt as it had years ago. She feared it burned so bright it would be seen from beneath her gown. A mark to remind all of how unworthy she was to wed Jon or to kneel before the likes of the High King.

Yet she did so anyway, ignoring the instinct to lower her head as well. The Targaryen custom demanded that Sansa face the man who judged her. She watched as Jon’s father rose from his throne, his violet eyes meeting hers.
“You are bold to meet my gaze.” Rhaegar spoke firmly. “Who are you to do so? By what right do you challenge the blood of the Conqueror?”

“It is my right.” Her words were careful, every bit of attention given to her accent. “I am Sansa Stark, born a daughter of the North. Now I am bound to a dragon. He names me a dragon. I embrace the power of fire and blood. I challenge any who would deny it.”

“I am High King.” Rhaegar began to descend the marble steps towards her, his fists raised before him. “You must bend to my will alone. You are loyal to me before all others. I am the power you must fear. I am the blood.”

She spread out her arms but not in submission. Instead Sansa was meant to appear as if tempting the towering king to strike her.

“I serve my king, I kneel to my king, but a dragon is no slave. There is none I am more loyal to than my husband. He is the only dragonlord I shall ever have. For the rest of his days and mine. Until then we are together. Soaring as one.”

Rhaegar paused above her, as silent as the hall itself, save for the fussing babes. She wanted to go to them, to be back with her family. Sansa thought she could see herself in the king’s unyielding stare. A small thing, pretending to be something she wasn’t.

“Sansa Stark.” Rhaegar unclenched his fists and lowered his open hands down to her. “By the fire and blood which forged our realm, I raise you up. Whatever you were when you knelt, rise now a dragon of House Targaryen.”

He took Sansa by her hands, which felt small in the king’s grasp, and helped her rise. Rhaegar smiled to plant a kiss upon the back of her hand.

“Welcome to our family, my daughter.” Rhaegar spoke softly in the Common Tongue. “Forgive my delay in saying so. Rituals and pretense must be served. Would it be alright if I kissed you as a father might?”

“I would be honored, your grace.” She felt a blush climbing her cheeks when Rhaegar did so.

“Rhaegar, or father if you would allow.” Rhaegar guided her to face Jon and the rest of the onlookers then. “Allow me to present Sansa Targaryen! Let all know that I look upon her as a daughter! That I name her a princess of the empire! To Princess Sansa!”

“Princess Sansa!”

Hundreds of voices answered in several accents. None as loud as Arya or Barristan, though even they could not best the shrill cries coming from the twins. Jon looked somewhat like an overwhelmed juggler as he tried to calm them.

“I’m sorry.” She apologized to the king. “They are still very young and all the noise-”

“Look at my son.” He sighed in a sad way. “I feared that I would never see him with children of his own… that he would die before ever knowing such joy. I thank you Sansa. You have my eternal gratitude. For this gift, for all my wife has said that you’ve done for my house and Jon. Might I meet my granddaughters now?”

The introductions fell to Jon again. He walked proudly with the twins in his arms, only wincing a little as Aemma’s cries reached shrieking levels. The king was chuckling when Rhaegina was passed to him. The Targaryen rite for accepting the twins proved to be far simpler. Jon merely claimed each
girl as his, and Rhaegar lifted one after the other into the air, shouting their names for all to hear.

“Rhaegina and Aemma Targaryen!” Rhaegar boomed. The applause that followed rose high enough to cover the girls’ wailing for a moment.

Afterwards, she made to spare the king any more noise by taking Aemma from him but the High King waved her off.

“I’ve become accustomed to this sound again of late.” Rhaegar said as Lyanna joined them, Aemon and Daenerys following after. “It will be just like it was at Summerhall, after you and I were crowned my love.”

“I imagine it will.” Lyanna said with little cheer as she made to kiss Jon and Rhaegina. “Though Dragonstone is no Summerhall, husband.”

“After the war, Summerhall was dreary enough.” Aemon’s weathered voice added, his eyes moving about, trying to seek the source of the crying. “The little children made it a better place. I remember. It was common then to hear three little dragons, singing at once. Jon, Aegon, Daenerys. All babes, all born within a year of each other, all eager to be heard.”

Daenerys laughed happily. “At least that will never change. Not like everything else it seems. Jon, Jon, Jon... you left a warrior and come back to us a father! Congratulations!”

The princess went straight to Jon, doing as Lyanna had done, kissing Sansa’s husband, then her children. A pang of jealousy sprung in Sansa’s heart, tainting the happy moment. She stamped that feeling down when Daenerys turned to her and curtsied in the Westerosi fashion.

“Congratulations, Sansa.” Daenerys put a hand to Jon’s arm. “You have a fine husband, and I’ve never seen such lovely little girls. I am almost jealous.”

“You are too kind.” Sansa answered in High Valyrian. “As lovely as my daughters are, they are surely just as loud. I fear these tales of babes making a palace shake with their cries will be a bad influence on them. There’s only two of them but they might be noisy enough for three.”

It was meant to be a jest but no one laughed.

“They’ll have help, trust me.” Daenerys said before shooting a knowing look to Rhaegar. The king nodded and raised a hand to some unseen person at the edge of the hall. Jon shared Sansa’s confusion in this.

“Why?” He asked, inclining his head to where Aegon, Rhaenys, and Viserys still stood watching on the platform. “Is Viserys going to pitch a fit over something?”

“Do be courteous, Jon.” Rhaegar chided gently. “Remember what I taught you. Courtesy is important to a peaceful court. That is why Daenerys waited to do this until after your new wife and daughters had a moment to all their own.”

Daenerys was smiling when the Highguard parted to allow a dusky-skinned, golden-eyed girl to pass. She carried a bundle of black cloth in such a way that Sansa knew it to be a babe. One Daenerys soon cradled and held out for all to see.

“Jon, I want you to meet my son.”

His eyes were the color of amethysts. His hair as pale as the king’s.
His demeanor as silent as Jon’s.

Her husband, who now paled as he stared down at the child. Likely thinking the babe to be exactly what she feared.

Everything Sansa had failed to give him.

JON

All of Westeros lay before him.

The massive, painted table stretched from one end of the chamber to the other. It was carved in the shape of Westeros itself, a detailed map made to guide a conquest Jon’s ancestor had abandoned in favor of a grander one.

“Would the Conqueror smile to see us now?” Aemon’s voice carried over to him.

The old man was sitting near the northern part of the table, near to where the Wall was depicted. Aemon’s words bid a grin to pull at the High King’s mouth as he strolled along the other side. His father had summoned them both here, to the top floor of the Stone Drum. The large, rounded chamber had four tall windows facing the north, south, east, and west. Each offered an excellent view of Dragonstone’s approaches and illuminated his father in the morning’s heavenly glow.

“You and your brother brought us here.” Father said, running his hand near to Lannisport. “My sons, waging war to establish a Targaryen realm here in Westeros. Something the first High King only ever dreamed of.”

“The Conqueror wanted far more.” Jon shook his head. “Look at this map, there are no borders. He sought to conquer all the Seven Kingdoms, not just one of them.”

Aemon chuckled. “Balerion the Black Dread began as a mere egg. Our empire was born of this tiny island. Beginnings Jonarys. Humble beginnings for great things.”

He pushed away from the table then, growing impatient. The summons had come at dawn, the steward finding Jon already awake in his chambers. That’s where he had tried to sleep after the argument with Sansa, which proved to be a fool’s errand. When the light of a new day broke he had hopes to mend what Daenerys had broken between them.

None of this is fair to Sansa, the burden should be mine to bear alone. Not shared by my wife.

Sadly, Jon had no choice but to follow his father’s messenger here. He had expected that matters regarding this new kingdom would call for his involvement, but never with such urgency. Setting things right with Sansa would have to wait, which made waiting on his mother even more maddening as father refused to speak on any issues of import until she arrived.

Something was off between his parents, Jon had sensed that during Sansa’s presentation. Mother’s smiles were strained, her demeanor towards father bordering on cold. Nor was she the only one in poor spirits among his family. The successes the High King and his sons enjoyed of late had left Viserys acting petty and jealous. Rhaenys’s ire had been stoked as well, her sister begrudging father’s welcoming of the High Septon and his Andal faith to the island, for her red god was a jealous one. Though her anger paled in comparison to Aegon’s, who likely stormed about Dragonstone's keep in
a black rage even now.

Aegon has reason to be angry. With Daenerys. With me. Even himself.

None of us are innocent in this.

Unlike Aegon’s temper, the skies around Dragonstone were calm for once. The sun’s golden rays lifted the bleakness from the rocky isle. A fine day for Jon to take his wife and children on a walk about the grounds... if Sansa would have him.

Those thoughts lingered still when the High Queen finally arrived. Her hair was done in two tight northern braids, her grey eyes refusing to even glance at her husband.

“Am I late?” Mother asked of no one in particular, making her way to Jon. “I do apologize, my rest was fitful. Unlike my last stay on Dragonstone, I could find little peace when I bed down.”

“Peace?” Jon noted with surprise. “Mother, when you here a battle waged without. You nearly died birthing me.”

“Yes, but when I held you in my arms for the first time... all that war and pain went far, far away. In the end we both survived. Aerys’s fleet was broken and my little prince of Dragonstone slept against my breast. So quiet. So full of promise.”

Father smiled at that. “Which you have lived up to, Jon. Time and time again. I will be honest, I did not sleep either. For the first time in a long while, I can sense House Targaryen on the cusp of something great. A feeling I could not wait to share.”

“Then it was good we bedded in separate chambers.” Mother shot father a sharp look that he endured in his stoic manner. This only fueled the queen’s annoyance. “Did you tell him yet? Or did you wait to crush Jon in my presence? Why not gather his wife and babes here as well?”

“Lyanna...”

“Crush me?” Jon asked, mindful of how somber the room became. A worry began nagging at the back of his mind. “Father, you cannot mean to send me on another campaign? My service in the order is nearly done. I promised Sansa that we would be free of marches and war. I want-”

“Jon, Jon.” The king came to grab his shoulders, steadying him. His father cupped his face, and his strength made Jon feel like a boy again. “May the gods of Old Valyria help give your family such a life. Let the Seven do the same. I would weep with joy to know my son had such happiness.”

“We all would.” Aemon spoke, rising from his seat with a wrinkled hand to his heart. “Remember that, and remember that your father knows your worth.”

Mother cringed then, and father released him. The king's eyes were twin storms of purple turmoil. None of which made sense to Jon.

“So I will not be sent to war?”

“No my son. I swear, you will never again be commanded to war on my behalf.” Father spoke in iron tones. “Not by me or my successor.”

The words were so welcome that it took him a moment to comprehend what he heard. When the meaning sunk in he spoke to it without hesitation.
“You’ve made your choice, then.” Jon said numbly. “Aegon will be named heir. You will support him and not me.”

Father’s nod was a small one. “That is how it must be. With my approval, and his support on the council... Aegon will be named heir within the year.”

He was surprised at how much it hurt to hear that. The crown had never appealed to Jon. It was forever a duty that his mother and others pushed him toward. What hurt more was his father judging his two sons... and finding Jon wanting.

“A fine choice, your grace.” He managed to salute his father. “May your reign be long, and Aegon’s longer still.”

“We must hope so.” The High King became grim. “Know that this decision was not made lightly. The empire enters a difficult time. Possibly one of its darkest.”

Aemon tapped his cane. “Today we have victories, glory. Tomorrow our enemies will rise again. The Dothraki grow bolder. The Ghiscari seek alliances with Qarth and Asshai. Then there are the threats from within the empire.”

“Rebellion? Treason?” Jon was startled by the thought.

“Perhaps.” Father answered. “There are those who dislike how I rule. Others who dream of an end to the empire and a land of free cities. To survive, the empire will need unity. You inspire fierce loyalty among your men, Jon, yet they are few. Aegon has earned the love of many across the entirety of the realm.”

“Like slavers.” Mother’s tone was ice cold. “Lyseni money lenders. Warmongers. The worst of the empire-”

“And the best.” Jon’s words were as much a surprise to himself as they were to his mother. “Archons, triarchs, legates, many fine men hold great esteem for Aegon, more than me. They would follow him. As will I, when the day comes.”

That was his duty after all. He would not play the selfish fool and lead the Targaryens into another dance over petty differences between him and Aegon. Things were broken between them now, but they were blood before anything else. Such wounds could heal with time.

He is my brother. I will always be loyal to him.

May he feel the same for me.

“Lyanna, look at our son.” Father clasped the side of his head, a touch of tenderness quite rare of the king. “Clever, noble... and true. You shall make a fine king, Jon. Better than me, of this I have no doubt.”

He blinked. “King? Father, you just said Aegon would be-”

“The next High King, yes. Aegon will inherit my realm, but you shall rule another. A kingdom of your own.”

His father took hold of Jon and brought him before the table, running his hand over their new holdings in Westeros.

“This is what I give to you, my son. The burden of a crown. The power of a king. Freedom from any
“A realm apart.” Aemon shuffled over to his side. “Something we have not seen before. A union of Westeros and the Targaryen Empire, yet beholden only to the lands and people it calls its own. Capable of building a better legacy than its parents.”

“Which will be a challenge but one we trust you to overcome.” Father spoke as much to him as to mother. “Jon, you were born to rule this kingdom. Destined for greatness.”

“These people won’t have me.” He shook his head, remembering the war and all his follies. “They call me Kingslayer. I burned half these lands and the other half names me the murderer of kings. One of them a child.”

Aemon put a shaky hand on his arm. “Aegon the Conqueror did worse, I assure you. Thousands of noblemen and their beloved leaders, fathers, brothers, sons, all killed in the conquest. The survivors still knelt and did fealty to him. And he is still remembered fondly for his great accomplishments.”

“He had dragons—”

“And you will have allies.” Father pointed to the north and south parts of the map. “The Martells and the Starks here in Westeros, the empire across the Narrow Sea. We need these lands to settle the newly freed, so should you be in need, we shall be there.”

“The Dark Order will stay with you.” Mother broke her silence, breathing deeply and crossing her arms. “For a time at least, I insisted on that. Rhaegar is also sending Garmon Qoherys and thousands of other veterans here. They shall settle the lands you give them, to tend and protect your kingdom, their swords and spears loyal to their new king. A better king.”

“We can only hope.” Father replied, to which mother shook her head.

“No, we can do more than that. We can help.”

The three royals all began to speak in earnest then. They discussed what other resources Jon would have to build his rule here in Westeros. Of gold and loans, ships and craftsman, all things that would come in the future. Yet his mind was stuck on the problems that he faced in the present. He thought of the past, and all the actions which brought him here.

“Sansa.” His words interrupted their conversation, all three turning to him. “I must speak to my wife.”

They would make her a queen. Queen of a fragile realm in a land prone to war.

This is not the life I promised her... would she even want it?

“That can wait.” Father admonished him like a child. “Robb Stark and Arianne Martell must be told first, to respect your alliances. Much needs to be discussed with the High Septon as well. I underestimated his cunning. He wrangled many promises from me before he would agree to anoint you as King of—”

“Are you set on naming me king?” Jon interrupted his father. Something few dared to do and never in such a tone. “Ruler of a free kingdom?”

“I would have no other rule such a realm.”

“Then I do not need your leave to seek my wife.” He met his father’s gaze. “Sansa should have been
here. If we are to discuss her fate and that of our children. Sansa has earned that much.”

His parents were stunned when he left their side. He wore no crown but he felt its weight in that moment. Something he would not burden Sansa with like he had so much of late. He strode by the Highguard at the door and was halfway down the dark stone corridor when he heard the tapping.

“Jonarys.” Aemon’s voice called down to him, the small man leaning heavily on his cane as he followed after. “Jon, dear boy. Would you begrudge the company of an old man?”

He would. Aemon had a hand in much of the woes that had awaited Jon at Dragonstone. There was little doubt in Jon's mind that the old man had helped push father into naming him king as well. Growing up, Aemon had been like a grandfather to him. A teacher. Someone to respect.

Now he saw Aemon for what he really was. A puppet master of sorts, pulling all their strings, having them dance to a tune of his making. All while blind to the world and making Jon feel much the same.

Following Dany's revelation in the hall, every bone in Jon's body had yearned to learn the truth of her son’s parentage. Sansa was no fool. When that boy was presented in that manner, with no father being named, she shared the same thoughts as him.

That this could be his child.

_She barely accepted that Dany and I were once lovers…_

_Andals and First Men... they think themselves so different from each other, yet in this they are exactly the same._

_To them, sex outside of marriage is a sin and a folly… and I might have proved that last part correct._

Much was wrong in how things unfolded after the hall. He was forced to separate from Sansa and rather than meeting with just Dany, Jon found himself cramped and crowded in Aemon’s chambers. The blind man’s presence was odd, yet Aegon took up Jon's full attention, his temper flaring before Daenerys could even start explaining.

“Why? Why must you always be so defiant!” Aegon had demanded of her, cursing to see Jon and Aemon present at well. “Don’t you dare, Jon! If you try and steal this from me, I swear-”

“Jon has stolen nothing from you!” Dany had bared her teeth in fury at Aegon. “You might think everything you want is yours by rights, but not me! Not again, Aegon! Not my son! Never my son!!”

That Aegon laid claim to Dany’s child was no surprise. His brother had long wished for a son, and lusted for Daenerys longer still. Evidently they'd reconciled at some point following Dany and Jon’s last night together. That peace had clearly fractured as Aegon and Dany continued to battle. A conflict Jon was eventually drawn into.

“Is that my son?” Jon had cut through their shouting. “Dany please, tell me honestly, is that child mine?”

“Baelyon.” She whispered, her hands at her middle. “His name is Baelyon and he is mine. Before anyone else’s, he is mine.”

That answer did little to impress him, nor Aegon. His brother accused Jon of trying to steal his son, to make up for the one that Sansa had failed to give him. That had nearly led them to blows.

It was all nonsense in the end. In truth, he would be happy if the boy was Aegon’s. If Jon was the
father, he would have no choice but to care for the child. A duty which would shame him, for it
would hurt Sansa more. He knew he would care for such a son nonetheless, it was his way. So for
Sansa’s sake more than anyone, he wanted the babe to be Aegon’s. To be anyone’s but his.

Which turned out to be the case.

“The child is mine.” Aemon had startled Aegon and Jon both, pressing them apart with his cane. “I
am to be father to Daenerys’s son.”

“Have you gone mad, uncle?” Aegon had asked and Aemon clucked in disappointment.

“My brother Aerion was mad. As was your grandfather, Aerys. Not I. Not quite yet. So hear me
well, the both of you. Baelyon Targaryen is my son.”

Aegon scowled, and Jon had found it hard to believe as well, even when Dany moved to Aemon’s
side.

“No Aegon, it is not nonsense. Aemon has adopted Baelyon as his son and heir. Rhaegar has already
granted his imperial seal to the adoption. To spare the imperial family any further scandal.”

Things made more sense after that. Aemon was not claiming to have fathered Dany’s son, but by all
the laws of the empire, the babe would be his lawful child. Such a thing was a common arrangement
for older statesmen with no children of their own. It was a way to keep their estates within the family
and reinforce old alliances. As Aemon’s son, Baelyon could inherit fine manses and the position of
triarch of Valysar.

Jon saw the wisdom in such an arrangement, but hearing the news broke something within Aegon.

“Daenerys, why?” Aegon had reached for her, tears glistening in his eyes. “When I saw the boy… I-
I could feel it. I knew. Why have Aemon pretend to be his father when I am right here? Just tell me
the truth. Let me know that boy is mine-”

Dany had pulled away from him, her face wrinkled in disgust.

“All you care about is what you can claim. I trust Aemon. Do not pretend that my son would be
anything more to you than some pawn in this game of thrones that you like to play with Jon. Either
of you could be Baelyon’s father, and neither of you will ever use him. If that upsets you seek out
your wife. Or your mistress. Just not my son. His only father will be Aemon.”

“Dany…”

Aegon looked torn between rage and heartache at her words. Jon remembered him looking much the
same when Dany ended their first relationship. Aegon had departed Summerhall without a word to
join the Golden Legion after that, just as he had departed Aemon’s chambers, slamming the chamber
door behind him.

“You must think the worst of me.” Dany had said after a moment, looking to Jon with a strange
detachment.

“No more than you do of me it seems.” Jon replied, trying to tamp down his annoyance. “I would
not use your son to gain the council’s favor, Dany. I am not Aegon. I thought you knew that.”

“But you could. When I learned I was with child, I knew what would happen. I saw it in my dreams,
many a restless night. If I were to name either of you as Baelyon’s father, the council could choose
an heir based simply on that. I would not let my son become the kingmaker.”
“Or a target of war.” Aemon’s grim tone sent a shiver through Jon. “I have lived long enough to see how easily we Targaryens can turn on one another. Let the boy do as I have done, become an observer rather than a player in this game. I can protect Baelyon. Offer him a good life, a peaceful one. Could you do the same?”

“I will give my daughters that kind of life.” Jon had returned, evading Dany’s attempt to take his hand. “Do you truly have no idea if the boy is mine?”

Dany paused and glanced to the door then, a brief betrayal of the truth he suspected. Yet one that she refused to give voice to.

“All men want to claim what is mine. If Baelyon was yours, you would want to raise him, as your mother’s Northern honor dictates. And Aegon, he... he’s good deep inside, but he can be so jealous at times and... and if he believed Baelyon to be his son... I just know he would snatch my boy away from me... force me to wed him...”

She was right. If Dany named Aegon the father of her child, by law he had the rights to take the boy away and raise him in any way he saw fit. A part of Jon wanted to think his brother could never do such a thing to Dany. Yet Aegon had disappointed him before.

“All of that is harder for Aegon to do if Baelyon is named my heir.” Aemon had finished for her. “Not impossible though. Hence your role in this Jonarys. Aegon's desire for a son is great, but his pride is greater. He would never move to take the boy if there was a chance... any doubt... that Baelyon is another man's son...”

Aemon had taken hold of Jon’s arm then, just as he did now in the stairwell of the Stone Drum.

“This changes nothing.” Aemon whispered as they climbed down the winding steps. Each step was a possible broken hip for his uncle if Jon did not steady him. “With Daenerys. With the boy. You understand this?”

“It could.” Jon had already thought on this. “I am to be a king, uncle. With a kingdom of my own. Dany and Baelyon could live here, someplace where they would be happy. I could protect them, the truth could be known, and I would-”

“Risk the wrath of the next High King.” Aemon wheezed some. “It is the doubt that protects the boy. By refusing to claim or deny the child, you shield him. Like these walls once shielded you.”

That wasn’t what Jon wanted to hear. Mostly since they confirmed his own arguments against using the new kingdom to host Dany. And he knew Sansa wouldn't have welcomed that solution at all. Sansa knew the truth of this plot, and she made her disdain of it plain. Aemon could reason all he wanted, but none of that eased the hurt that Jon did to Sansa in accepting his role in Baelyon’s life.

*Whisperers will name me his father. Baelyon Targaryen. My bastard son.*

*Tales that already do Sansa harm.*

After he and Aemon parted ways, it was Sansa whom he sought. She was not in her chambers, instead he found Catelyn minding the twins. The queen was courteous when answering his queries yet he sensed that she might be one of those thinking the worst of him now.

His search took him to the best part of the castle, Aegon’s Garden. Built near to the arch of the Dragon’s Tail, it was a lovely place. Tall trees and wild roses grew to all the sides of the walls. His mother had told him once that she would bring him here as a newborn, to enjoy the smell of pines and remind herself of the distant north.
Many were enjoying the garden this morning, far more than he expected. Two parties of ladies sat upon blankets, watching a sparring match. Sansa was with Arya, Talia, and Myrcella on one, while Arianne Martell shared hers with Tyene, Sarella, and Gwyneth Yronwood, her goodsister. No one noticed him at first, their eyes all locked on Gendry as he sparred against the Blackfyre knight.

“Daegon Blackfyre.” The High King had named him. “A hedge knight Varys reached out too. I lifted his exile in hopes that he could be of use to us. The Blackfyres once held great influence. He represents the last of that line.”

A long line of rebels and fanatics as far as Jon knew. He saw little of that now though as Daegon and Gendry battled. Daegon’s face was calm, his strikes careful and defense firm whenever Gendry launched an attack. Both wore light armor, suitable for training. Ser Barristan watched with an appraising eye while Ser Olyvar whispered observations to Jeyne as they stood beneath a tree together.

Sansa believed they made a handsome couple. She expected Olyvar to write Winterfell any day now, begging leave of Vayon Poole to wed Jeyne. Something his wife welcomed more than she did Jon’s arrival before the women.

“Ladies.” He bowed as Sansa averted her eyes from him. “I was not aware the garden had become a training yard.”

“Things change quickly these days, my lord.” Arianne laughed. Her smile was warm but her eyes were sharp as she brushed back some of her long, lustrous black hair away from her buxom form. “Your wife invited us to break our fast with a picnic. I thought we should liven things up more. Add some spice to our meal.”

“A pleasant distraction.” Sansa added, moving to fix Arya’s hair some. “Gendry was kind to agree to the match. You should have given him your favor, Arya.”

“Why?” Arya blushed. “It’s not a tourney. They’re just poking each other with practice swords. He’s best with his hammer anyways.”

“He would be pleased if you say so.” Jon said quickly, trying to help Sansa ease the awkwardness between Arya and Gendry. “My brother might not act like it, but he’s a glutton for compliments. Especially from fair maidens.”

“Brother?” Gwyneth eyed him in confusion. “I thought Captain Gendry was King Robert’s son.”

“He is.” Myrcella spoke softly, pulling at her golden hair as Gendry pushed some coal-black locks off of his sweaty brow. “Anyone can see that.”

“Queen Myrcella is right.” He said. “Gendry is King Robert’s son, but my mother found and raised him like he was her own blood. We grew up together, fought together. He will forever be a brother to me.”

Gwyneth brightened then. “Oh! So he was a ward. Like Quentyn was to my father before we wed.”

“Well, not exactly-”

“Targaryens do things differently.” Sansa’s voice was sharper than she probably intended. “Their ways can be strange. Foreign. Hard to understand-”

“Ow!” Arya cried out before slapping Sansa’s hands away. “Gods, Sansa. Keep that up and I’ll be as bald as Rhaegina.”
After Sansa muttered an apology, he begged a chance to speak with her in private. He feared for a moment that she would reject him but she proved herself the better person. Soon enough, they had disappeared together to a small corner of the garden. He pointed out the rarer flowers as they went, the ones brought from Valyria which survived the Doom itself, hoping to pique her curiosity. Sansa merely nodded, following in silence until he believed they had privacy.

When he stopped, Sansa continued on to a rosebush, admiring it in an idle manner.

“I met with my parents this morning.” He said, causing her hand to pause just above the petals of one rose.

“So that’s where you were. I sought you at first light and could not find you. I wondered if you’d slept there at all.”

“Where else would I...”

*She thinks I would go to Dany. That I could share another’s bed when all I wanted last night was to be in her’s.*

*I want nothing more than her.*

“People are already whispering.” Sansa made a fist at her side, her shoulders tensing. “Spreading that woman’s lies, tarnishing your name. Has she no shame? She forces *my* husband to perform some mummary for the sake of a child you believe to be Aegon’s. Mother and Robb both asked me about it-”

“What did you say?” He pressed her, already unhappy at how loud her words grew near the end. “Sansa, I asked you to never speak of this to anyone.”

“I told them the truth!” Sansa snapped. “That as far as I’m concerned, you are father to our daughters. How they are the only children you owe any duty to. Not Daenery’s bastard, *never* him. That’s all they need to know.”

It was a relief to hear her say so, yet her harshness towards Baelyon tore at his heart. His wife was a gentle, caring soul, and he had pushed her too far. He could have excluded Sansa from the lie, let her think the worst of him. Had the girls been born as boys, he might have. Yet that would be too cruel. To allow Sansa to believe that Dany had given him the son that she did not.

What was his was hers, that was Jon’s vow before the sept, so he had shared the truth with Sansa. She was given no choice in playing along though. Strangers had once died outside these walls to protect him as babe. He would do no less for his newborn cousin.

“The boy is my blood, Sansa.” He spoke brusquely. “That’s all anyone need know. Let them see how I only act as a father to *our* children. My daughters. That is truth enough.”

Sansa said nothing more to that. Her fingers moved deftly over the leaves and petals of the roses. When they slid down the stem of one, her thumb lingering about a thorn, he feared she might hurt herself. Perhaps worse than he already had.

“Is that what King Rhaegar wished to discuss?” Sansa asked, thumbing the thorn. “The boy? I saw Aegon this morning. He was most displeased.”

*My brother will have plenty of reason to be happy soon enough.*

“I am not to be my father’s heir.”
The words came out so plainly that they almost sounded like jest. Sansa was in no jesting mood however. She spun about so quickly her skirts twirled some and he thought of their first dance at Winterfell. Sansa had smiled for him then. Now her eyes were widened in disbelief, her sweet lips twisted in shock.

“Aegon.” He went on. “It is to be him, if the council agrees. Which they will.”

“Oh, Jon… I’m-I’m sorry.” Sansa took a small step toward him “This is so sudden… Lyanna led me to believe that such a decision would be years away.”

“My father has his reasons.”

“Was it…” Sansa lowered her eyes and wrung her hands then. “Was it something I did during the ceremony? Our marriage? Did he wish you had wed another?”

“No Sansa, that has-”

“Is it the girls then?” She raised her chin up proudly, yet her voice was heavy with sadness. “After the hall, your father seemed so taken with them that I thought… I can still give you a son, Jon. Not one made of whispers. Tell your father I can, please…”

He closed the space between them and took hold of her hips, the touch sending a jolt through him. This was not a touch of lust though. His pull brought her a step closer so that there was no chance of her mishearing his words.

“None of this, not one bit, is about you and the girls. Who I am, and what I did long before I met you, these things made the decision for my father. Heed me, Sansa. Father bears you no ill will. In truth, he wants to make you a queen.”

Like it was for him in the tower, it was Sansa’s turn to be baffled. He explained it all the best he could. It was strange. They had come to Dragonstone with so much uncertainty surrounding their future. Now that the High King’s plans and their role in them had been made clear, Jon could not say he felt any more assured. Their futures would soon be tied to the fate of a kingdom built on the ashes of another.

A reality that Sansa accepted with such swiftness it baffled him.

“Where shall you rule from?” Sansa pressed two fingers pressed to her lower lip. “Will it be Storm’s End?”

“Never.” He would not abide returning Sansa to her former prison. “Somewhere else.”

“Dragonstone then?” She asked, but he realized then that he wasn’t sure if the island would be counted among his domains or remain with the empire. “No, it will not do. It is far too removed. Your name is spreading, Jon, but to most you are still a stranger. Your lords must learn to love you. Renly had more men than Stannis and Joffrey because he lured them to Tumbleton first. It was easy to reach and bustled with life. He held feasts and jousts-”

“This is what you want?” He asked, searching Sansa’s eyes for fear. Instead they appeared lively and bright. “I can reject the crown if you want. Insist on some quiet life in the empire, if that’s what you would like.”

Sansa put her hands to his chest, running her fingers over his doublet as her brow furrowed in thought.
“This is not the crown that Lyanna wanted for you. We spent so long talking about you being High King. I wanted that for you. The idea of the empire scared me, but in my heart, I know you would make a good kin. If you cannot be a king of the empire, then I wouldn’t deprive Westeros a ruler of your like.”

“I am the Kingslayer-”

“Stop that.” Sansa snatched at his chin, her usually tender touch now firm and unyielding. “Daenerys already has you pretending to be something you’re not. Don’t add to it. Take the crown, husband. You have my blessing.”

“I want more than that.” He took one of her hands and tried to ignore how unsure Sansa acted at his touch. “I need you as my queen Sansa. To rule by my side. To be the one I trust most. This must be our reign. Yours and mine.”

These were no idle words. If this kingdom were to have any chance at success, it would depend on Sansa. She knew the lords, the customs, and she him better than most.

*Father sees me as the union of the Targaryen Empire and Sunset Kingdoms, but he’s wrong.*

*I am a son of the empire first and foremost. My wife is a daughter of Westeros.*

*It is in our children that my father’s dream is made reality.*

“I swore vows.” Sansa held his hand in her soft grasp. “We share in all things now. Whether fair or foul. Winter is coming, and when it does, I shall be at your side.”

He wished to kiss Sansa then. To embrace his wife tight and show her what such words meant to him. Yet Sansa made no move to close the gulf between them and he would not force it.

Enough had been asked of her and more was surely to come. He settled for presenting Sansa his arm, to lead her back to the Stone Drum. His parents were waiting for them there, their future kingdom as well.

“I would check in on Aemma and Rhaegina first.” Sansa took his arm in a formal way, a small smile breaking free. “If my king would not mind a delay to see our little princesses.”

“He would welcome it.” His heart bid him to say. “To hold both pride and joy in his arms.”

“And do his queen’s bidding.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The closing of an old era, the beginnings of a new one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

THE FALCON AND THE MAD KING

Aerys, the Mad King, did much to earn that title. A High King who delighted in burning men alive and came to think of himself as a dragon in the end. To his shame, Aerys nearly became something far worse before his death.

A kinslayer.

Prince Rhaegar’s rebellion against his father was raging when he sought a safe harbor for his pregnant wife, Lyanna Stark. Princess Elia and her children had already been spirited away to Qohor by the Highguard, Arthur Dayne, but Rhaegar trusted none in Pentos to care for Lyanna. Thus he sent her on to Dragonstone, believing it to be too distant for Aerys to bother about.

Sadly, Aerys did learn of Lyanna being hidden away at Dragonstone. His fury towards his son was so great the Mad King dispatched an entire fleet to the far-flung isle. Their orders were not to capture Lyanna, or her child, but to put them to a traitor’s death. Surely both would have perished if not for Jon Arryn, the Falcon King.

In his youth, Rhaegar had visited the Kingdom of Mountain and Vale. The older king took a liking to the young Targaryen, with some Vale lords saying King Jon treated Rhaegar like the son he never had. So there was little doubt when Rhaegar sent word to the Eyrie, pleading for aid against Aerys’s fleet, that the falcon would soar.

When the Targaryen fleet arrived at Dragonstone, they found an Arryn armada out of Gulltown awaiting them. For two days the battle did rage, on the seas and on the isle, reaching the walls of the castle itself. Ships burned, men died, and during all this savagery Lyanna gave birth to Rhaegar’s second son.

Jon Arryn and his valiant men would defeat their foes, driving off Aerys’s fleet and securing Dragonstone for the rebel cause. The king asked for no reward for his deeds yet Lyanna insisted on honoring him all the same.

Thus the princess who would one day become High Queen named her first and only son after that noble king. Jonarys Targaryen, the first Targaryen in be born in Westeros since the times of Aegon the Conqueror.
SANSA

“You’re Samwell Tarly, aren’t you?”

Her question was put gently, her smile a genuine one. Still, the large lordling she addressed quivered under her gaze. Samwell Tarly was soft-bodied, with dark hair and a large-moon face. He outweighed her by a vast amount yet his pale eyes were wide with fear as he looked up from his book. The alcove the lordling sat within barely fit his girth, which made his efforts to rise all the more awkward.

“I-I am, your grace.” Samwell stumbled to his feet, knocking a plate of cakes he’d been snacking upon onto the ground. One splattered upon her skirts, staining them dark with blackberry juices. “Forgive me! I, uh, I’m so clumsy! I did not mean-”

“I’ve suffered worse, my lord.” She folded her hands before her, continuing to smile. “A stain is a small price to pay to discover a truly peaceful corner to read in. Especially on such a dreary day.”

They both turned to the window within the alcove, where the rain could be seen falling on the castle without. She had hopes the storm would be a passing one, since the twins disliked thunder so and it could clash with tomorrow’s events.

“Aegon’s Garden is a fine spot as well.” Sansa continued, having grown quite fond of Dragonstone’s small garden. “I’m there quite often, have you had a chance to visit it?”

“I have.” Samwell nodded in a nervous manner. “A short visit really. It can become crowded at times, the men bring their ladies for walks there after the practice yard. I like to read in peace… to have moments all to myself. Escapes of sorts.”

“I understand.”

Truly she did. To look at them, few would think Sansa and Samwell Tarly had much in common. He was a son of the Reach, her a daughter of the North. Him a lordling, her a princess. Yet they shared one crucial experience few others could attest to.

Samwell was a captive, much like Sansa had once been.

The eldest son and heir of Lord Randyll Tarly, Samwell had been captured by the Dornish two years past during a raid. Ever since he’d been kept captive in Dorne, a hostage of Prince Doran Martell. Though by all accounts he was not as valuable a prize as the Martells had hoped.

“Lord Tarly cares little for Sam.” Sarella Sand had told Sansa when she inquired about the lordling. “His father is a warrior, the finest commander in the Reach, and the slayer of a good many Dornishman. The only thing Sam has ever slain is his father’s expectations of him.”

Sarella told Sansa how, rather than ransom his son, Lord Tarly had made several attempts to provoke the Martells. As if he was trying to force their hand, whereby Samwell would be slain. Sansa thought that a sad thing, yet felt altogether confused as to why Sarella chose to share that with her. The Dornishwoman had not batted an eye to explain herself.

“You’re to be a queen of a new kingdom.” Sarella explained. “A court shall soon spring up around you and Samwell could be a part of it. He might not be a warrior but he has the potential to do good in this world. My uncle Doran sees that too, but his bannermen would take it for weakness if he simply freed Sam. Yet to trade him… that’s a different matter.”
Though intrigued and sympathetic to Sam’s plight, Sansa needed to learn more about him before considering Sarella’s suggestion. Thus she now came to him with an invitation.

“Samwell, may I call you Samwell?” She asked and he nodded sheepishly. “Splendid, well I’ve come to invite you to attend my sister’s wedding on the morrow.”

“Me?” Samwell blinked incredulously. “Prince Quentyn spoke of the wedding as a small affair. Only for the likes of royals and their closest retainers. I’m but a captive—”

“As is Tyrion Lannister and he shall be attending. I’ve already sought the permission of Princess Arianne, and if you’re willing, she’s granted you leave to join us. It be a great boon for Lord Gendry if more stood on his side of the sept. Outside of the High Queen and my husband, he has few to play such a role.”

“I’d be honored.” Samwell smiled then, an earnest cherubic grin that faded too soon. “Oh. I’ve no gift. My mother told me never to come to a wedding without a gift. Truly I don’t have much to offer… this is embarrassing…”

_May that be the worst embarrassment suffered during this wedding_, Sansa thought, _Let Arya be calm and Gendry keep his nerve._

_I’ll count my blessings if Aegon remains civil…_  

Or kiss the High Septon’s hands if Daenerys stays away altogether.

Sansa had a bad taste in her mouth when Samwell suddenly jerked his book up between them.

“Would Princess Arya enjoy a book?” He asked excitedly. “I brought several here. Not this one mind you, I borrowed it from the castle’s library. A Targaryen version of _Red Sands_, all about the conquest of Dorne by the Reach and Storm kings. It really is a marvelous read. The imperial scribe takes a much different take on things. _Red Sands_ is all about the folly of a king trying to rule lands he doesn’t understand or belong in, but this scribe argues…”

Samwell paused awkwardly, obviously acknowledging the parallels between the failed conquest of Dorne and the new kingdom that Jon and Sansa were meant to build. It wasn’t an example she’d considered yet, not that such worries were new. She simply did not have time to wallow on them now.

“A book would be most welcome. Our maester at Winterfell called them the gift of wisdom, the most important trait for any person to have.”

Samwell lowered his gaze. “My father would say strength is more important. He doesn’t care much for maesters or books. Or me, really. Though I do have a book your sister might care for. Is it true that the princess named her direwolf Nymeria?”

When she nodded the lordling perked up. Samwell had a book all about the Rhoynar warrior princess and Sansa agreed that it would be a perfect gift. They continued to speak about Samwell’s stay on Dragonstone after that. She learned that he was quite enamored with Aemon Targaryen but was hesitant to voice an opinion on Viserys, who was to marry Princess Arianne.

Talks like this had become routine during her stay at Dragonstone. In the last several weeks, Sansa had met with nearly every highborn guest here on the isle. Those were weeks of feasting and balls, where minstrels and performers from across the empire and the Seven Kingdoms enthralled a crowd just as diverse. Many were brought to tears when the High King and Princess Margaery played their high harps together. Those from the North could take pride in Talia, who sang so wonderfully that
none in the hall dared to touch their food until she finished.

Arya’s wedding was meant to be another grand occasion. Unfortunately, like many other things on Dragonstone, it proved to be a confusing and stressful affair.

She was still speaking with Samwell when they were discovered by one of those who frustrated her of late. The poor lordling caught sight of Robb first, his eyes growing wide with fear at the king’s choice of companions.

“Oh by the Mother… they’re so much bigger than I thought…”

Her brother was striding down the corridor with Grey Wind and Lady flanking his approach. The two direwolves inspired such fear in Samwell that he was pressed up against the wall by the time they arrived.

“They won’t bite.” Robb eyed the lordling with a mischievous glint in his eye. “Not unless I tell them to. Or they’re hungry. Perhaps if they become bored…”

“Robb!” Sansa chided her brother before offering Samwell her hand. “I’m sorry we interrupted your reading, my lord. Do enjoy your book. I look forward to seeing you on the morrow.”

Samwell kissed her hand graciously. Whether for the invitation or for leading Robb and the direwolves away, she couldn’t be sure. Once Samwell was out of hearing, Robb’s smile melted away.

“You have to speak to her.” Robb took her arm as an escort, or to make sure she didn’t try and escape. “She won’t listen to reason…”

“Which her are we speaking of?” She sighed. “Arya or mother?”


“Arya’s being Arya. The last we spoke she agreed to go through with the wedding but I’m worried she’ll change her mind again-”

“I’ll speak to Arya if you’ll speak to mother.” Robb shook his head in anger. “I can’t believe her. She’s adamant about not coming back to Winterfell with us. It’s her home! Whatever welcome Uncle Edmure offers at Riverrun won’t last forever. And it will be even worse at Duskendale with Aunt Lysa. Her place is at Winterfell with her children. Sansa, you have to help her to see-”

“It’s mother who will be helping me.” She took a deep breath, preparing herself for Robb’s wrath. “She’s asked to stay with us when Jon and I move to our new home. Jon’s agreed and she will be welcome to stay as long as she wants.”

Robb stopped midstride and looked at her like he did when they were children, as if she was a naïve little girl and not a woman grown.

“Stay with you? Where? At that fort on the Blackwater?”

“At Castle Rosby for a time… and then yes, at the Aegonfort, when the work there is finished.”

There was no denying that much work needed to be done to make that place fit for her family. A palisade wall and timber keep had been raised by the Dark Order’s engineers atop Aegon’s Hill in a relatively short time but Jon wanted more amenities built before he would even consider moving the girls there permanently.
For one day it would be the capital of their new kingdom. Unlike his decision regarding Daenerys’s bastard, Jon had sought her insight on where to build their new home.

“You’re sure about this?” He’d asked, pointing to where the three hills nestled against the mouth of the Blackwater Rush. “There’s very little there Sansa. Everything we need we’ll have to build ourselves. It’ll take time and we’ll lack for luxury—”

“It’s perfect.” Sansa couldn’t help picturing a paradise of their own making springing up where those empty fields and hills now sat. “What better place could there be then the very spot where you won the kingdom? That’s what the singers will remember when people speak of how your dynasty started.”

“It is a strong position.” He had agreed, “The hills are easily defended, and when it comes time to build walls the lands all around are flat. Storm’s End and Duskendale would be near enough and I do like how the docks there are already built… the first landings of freedmen could come tomorrow if we wanted.”

“And we will be there to welcome them! Any who wish to work can help us build our new home. It will be a port unlike any other. A sanctuary, a haven for all…”

One day perhaps they would build such a place. Until then Sansa would have to find space for her mother in the simple, martial fort that now sat upon Aegon’s Hill.

“Mother would choose a damp stack of timber over Winterfell?” Robb asked. “Father built a sept for her there. They raised all of us there. They built a life there…”

“And now father is dead.” Her words caused Robb to flinch. However put out he sounded, she sensed that much of this came from his wounded pride. “Robb, this isn’t about Myrcella. However father’s death hurts us, it hurts mother more. I can’t imagine how she must feel, the idea of returning to Winterfell without him there…”

“What of Bran? What am I to say to our little brother when I return home without her?”

“Bran’s almost a man grown, and you’ll be sending him on to rule the Dreadfort soon enough. Rickon’s still young and he is staying with us. Mother wants to enjoy his last few years of boyhood and to watch the twins grow. She loves them so, Robb. Please don’t make her feel poorly for wanting to be with them.”

“I know she loves the girls.” Robb ran a hand through his auburn locks, furrowing his brow. “I didn’t just ride south to avenge father. I wanted to protect our family. We won the war and… and now I feel like I’m returning to Winterfell in defeat. I’ve lost all of you.”

“You won’t ride through the gates alone.” Sansa leaned up to peck at her older brother’s cheek, cupping his bearded jaw to steady his gaze upon her. “Myrcella will be there. You’ll come back a victor of great battles with a beauty of a wife on your arm. Father had to wait for that. Mother came to Winterfell without him and you were already been born when he got back. Take heart in your fortunes.”

“I do… I will.” Robb’s blue eyes, which all said were like her own, glistened some. “It’s just… after seeing how good mother is with the girls, I wanted her to be there when… well, when Myrcella has my child.”

“I’m sure she would make the journey…” She trailed off, for something in Robb’s tone gave her pause. “Wait, is Myrcella with child? Robb?”
His smile was all the answer she needed. A moment later her happy cry echoed down the corridor and Robb’s smile broke free as they embraced. The wolves whined some at the sudden activity but Sansa was too intent on squeezing her brother so tight she felt her arms might break.

“She only told me because I noticed how sick she’s been lately… I’m so thick. I thought Lady Genna’s pestering was the cause—”

“Forget Genna Lannister! You’re to be a father!”

Whatever squabbles the two siblings had, they were forgotten as Robb shared his joy with her. She was truly happy for him and Myrcella, though that joy was tempered by how guilty she felt for suspecting worse than Robb had. Myrcella’s absence from morning meals and other activities had made mother suspicious, and Sansa in turn. It was a welcome thing when Ser Barristan reported no meetings or messages between Myrcella and the other Lannisters at the castle.

Though not for a lack of trying by Princess Genna. The Lannister woman was a force unto herself. When Genna and her husband were first presented before High King Rhaegar and Lyanna, the lioness made such an impression Sansa doubted any could describe the lord afterwards. Princess Genna was the rare type of handsome beauty that came to women of her age. Her form was shapely if not a little plump, with the green eyes and golden curls that marked her a Lannister.

Yet by marriage, Genna came before them an Osgrey.

During Sansa’s captivity at Storm’s End, Genna’s marriage was often the subject of ridicule. King Tytos Lannister could have secured any number of marriages for his only daughter, yet he’d handed her off to a minor marcher lord of the Reach. Eustifer Osgrey came from a house that once held great esteem, but their steady decline over the years left them a minor family. With Genna as their lady, House Osgrey’s esteem had risen in recent years so that they were now a part of King Mace’s court. Some remarked that the king’s mother, the Queen of Thorns, enjoyed trading barbs with lioness.

Myrcella plainly did not. While Myrcella had enjoyed several meals with Tyrion among mixed company, she steadfastly refused to do the same with Genna. Sansa’s mother, while remaining wary, spoke well of Myrcella for that. Genna earned their ire for her repeated requests of minstrels to play the Rains of Castamere.

It spoke volumes that the Lannister lady was only Sansa’s second least favorite woman on the isle.

*Daenerys Targaryen… men call her beautiful but I name her a liar… that and worse.*

The confusing arrangement Daenerys had forced Jon into still enraged Sansa every time she thought about it. He was a good man, a caring man, and the silver princess had exploited her husband’s unending kindness. Whenever Daenerys was near, Sansa made it a point to turn her back. When Rhaegar or Aemon suggested that the twins and Daenerys’s son share a cradle, as Jon had done with Aegon and the princess, she refused to consider it.

Baelyon Targaryen was an innocent child. She knew that in her heart, and wished no harm upon the little boy, but he wasn’t Jon’s son. That Jon could allow such rumors to persist not only embarrassed her, it made her fear for their children’s future.

*What if Daenerys isn’t content with Aemon’s lands in the empire? What if she wants her boy to steal what rightfully belongs to our children here in Westeros?*

*What if I never give Jon the son he needs?*
She was thinking on this after Robb left her side to seek Arya, while Sansa returned to the twins. They would be growing hungry soon, so Sansa was pleasantly surprised to hear no cries as she neared her chambers.

Yet when she entered, Sansa found something else to be upset about.

“…Arya.”

She almost groaned her sister’s name. Arya was kneeling beside the bed with Nymeria by her side, both focused on entertaining the two mewling babes laid out across the blankets. Rhaegina and Aemma were both lying on their chests, lifting their heads to follow the toy that Arya dangled before their faces. Aemma was calm as Rhaegina giggled and waved her arms at it. Perhaps that was why Nymeria began licking at Aemma’s cheek, to liven her up.

It certainly worked, for the babe began to kick in excitement as the direwolf’s tongue lapped over her face.

“Nymeria, stop that.” Sansa softly chided the wolf as Lady ambled by her to force the other direwolf back. “Arya, I’ve told you not to let her do that. Where are Jeyne and Talia?”

“I told them to go away.” Arya cradled her head in her arms, refusing to look away from the girls. “And that I’m not getting married.”

*Mother above, give me strength.*

“You didn’t say that. Tell me you didn’t.” She pled with both Arya and the gods. Only her sister answered, with a long exhale.

“I didn’t… but I should’ve. Jeyne wouldn’t shut up about her gown and Olyvar being her escort. Let her get married if she wants a wedding so bad.”

“Arya please, we talked about this.” Sansa shut the door and moved quickly to drop down beside her sister. She had to pull Arya about for the princess to even look her way. “This is so important. Gendry needs a highborn bride, with ties to House Stark and respectable enough for the Stormlords to accept. After Robb married Myrcella-”

“That’s not my fault.” Arya grumbled. “Why do I have to marry that dumb aurochs just because Robb married a Lannister? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“This isn’t a punishment.” She groaned which set Rhaegina to whining, so Sansa set to rubbing the babe’s back while trying to ease Arya’s mind. “I know you’re scared. So was I. Marrying Jon was terrifying but when it was done and we were together… I’ve never been happier.”

Arya scowled and rose to her feet, dropping the toy which Aemma happily stuck in her mouth. There was no mirth in Arya as she began to pace about the room.

“That’s different! You and Jon are perfect for each other.”

“We weren’t, not at first.”

“Sure you were, everyone saw it. Even Hodor.” Arya went to the window and stared out at the rain. “Gendry’s a lord now. A new lord with a new house, so let him find a new betrothed instead of me.”

“It’s not that simple.”
That was true. Rhaegar and Jon’s negotiations with the High Septon were successful in many ways. The Faith would accept the founding of a new kingdom, with a Targaryen king, as long as some conditions were met. Yet their attempts to have Gendry legitimized as a Durrandon had not borne fruit.

“It would be an affront to the Seven and lords alike.” The High Septon had said, his bushy eyebrows rising in alarm. “King Robert acknowledged the boy Gendry as a bastard, but never as a son. To raise a bastard up when trueborn children still live would create a dangerous precedent across the Seven Kingdoms. You may name him as Lord of Storm’s End, but I cannot name him a son of that castle, nor the noble house of the Durrandons.”

Lyanna was furious until Jon proposed an entirely new option. Rather than trying to name Gendry as heir to an existing house, he sought to resurrect an extinct one.

“House Baratheon.” Aemon had spoken the name with a grave respect. “Orys Baratheon was Aegon the First’s greatest commander and his strong right hand. Yet when he died, his house died with him. Orys left no heirs of his body… none in the empire that is.”

Aemon had produced scrolls, written by Orys’s own scribes, which declared him the father of the Storm Queen Argella Durrandon’s bastard son, a boy who saved the unmarried Argella from being the last Durrandon. That bastard heir had allowed the Durrandon dynasty to survive by fathering a line of kings.

“You are not the Durrandon heir by the laws of bastardy.” Rhaegar told Gendry with grave significance. “Yet if you were to take the esteemed and old name of House Baratheon, you would have irrefutable blood rights to that once great house.”

Gendry accepted their will, jesting dryly that he had no better ideas. The High Septon held little objection to blessing a restored house with an esteemed name to match it. Yet Gendry Baratheon would require more than just a name, and the Faith’s approval, to rule the Stormlands. He needed what Arya represented, namely the backing of both the Targaryens and the Starks. Nor could any child of Myrcella and Robb’s union make to claim rights to Storm’s End without facing the prospect of kinslaying.

None of that served to comfort Arya it seemed. Her sister was trembling when she hugged herself and turned her back to Sansa.

“I don’t want this, Sansa. I don’t. Please don’t make me…”

The last part had a pleading note to it. One Sansa couldn’t ignore. Up until then, Arya’s complaints were mostly about Gendry’s alleged stupidity, or that Robb should be the one to marry Gendry to mend his folly with Myrcella. Protests which sounded immature and stubborn, considering how few ladies were ever consulted before being handed off in marriage.

Most weren’t given the choice Sansa had and she couldn’t help but look to the twins then. She felt ashamed to be pressuring Arya in front of them. With a new sense of understanding, she rose to seek Arya. Lady leapt up onto the bed in her stead, laying near enough to Aemma and Rhaegina to comfort them as Sansa made to do the same to her sister.

“Oh Arya.” She laid a hand upon Arya’s shoulder, taking notice how a tear traced a tear down her sister’s face. “I swear I won’t force you to marry. Neither will Jon. If I tell him how you feel, he’ll stop the wedding. He’ll find a way.”

“Really?” Arya wiped at her face and she nodded.
“He would. Jon was willing to spare me such once. To be honest, I think Gendry is of the same sort. If he knew how much you didn’t want this, he would understand. All I’ve heard him speak about is treating you right.”

Arya said nothing to that but her fists flexed in such a way that confused her.

“We weren’t trying to make you unhappy.” Sansa continued. “Mother and I thought you might be happy with Gendry. You seemed quite fond of him at Winterfell.”

“Winterfell was awhile ago.”

“Did something happen?” She grew worried. Perhaps Gendry had fooled them all like Joffrey had fooled her. “You danced with him at the wedding… did he try and force you to do something more?”

“What?” Arya screwed up her face in anger. “No, Gendry didn’t do anything! I mean, it was me who kissed him.”

“You kissed Gendry?!” Sansa cried in shock before Arya stuck a hand over her mouth to quiet her. They both looked back at the twins, who were more interested in swatting at Lady.

“You’ll set the girls off after I got them all quiet.” Arya shook her head and lowered her hand away.

“I kissed him, after we left you and Jon. We didn’t go back to the feast, only the godswood. He had a skin of wine and it tasted good. I figured he tasted better. So I kissed him.”

Sansa wanted to be upset but who was she to judge? A part of her found it somewhat romantic. Arya and Gendry, standing in the godswood, the stars shining over them as the princess stole a kiss from the warrior. It fit bold little Arya well. What didn’t fit was Arya’s reaction now.

“Was it a bad kiss? Did he go too far?”

“No…” Arya bit her lip. “It was nice. Jeyne went on and on about his muscles, and I like that, but his lips are soft and I like that too. I liked … I liked all of it. Then the idiot ruined everything. He made us stop and started apologizing, acting like he was the one who kissed me! Saying things like, like how a bastard had no right to kiss a princess, that he was being unfair to me. He wouldn’t listen to me and then- and then we were fighting! He made me feel like a fool for kissing him at all- Hey! Stop smiling!”

“I can’t help it.” Sansa admitted, trying to force the grin from her face. A part of her wished she could have seen the whole thing. “Arya, it sounds like Gendry was trying to be gallant.”

“He was being an arse. The rest of the time he was at Winterfell, he wouldn’t even look at me. Like nothing even happened! Not that I cared. I was too busy ignoring him. Now I get down south and he’s trying to give me flowers and talk about riding… I can outride him any day…”

“So this is why you won’t marry him?” She asked, eyeing how Nymeria was once more moving towards Aemma’s face. “Because of some silly fight? Arya, Jon and I were awkward as well-”

“Really awkward.” It was Arya’s turn to grin. “Bran thought Jon was going to faint at the wedding. I wagered his new bow that Jon would retch first.”

She bit her tongue to hold back her defense of Jon’s nerves. He might have acted nervous but he had also been caring and gentle with her. Memories from their wedding came flooding back and it stung to think how far they’d come since then… only for Daenerys to drive this wedge between them.
She didn’t steal him away truly, it was I who pushed him from my bed.

He makes to dance with me but none we’ve shared here have been as sweet as those in Winterfell…

I miss the dancing… I miss his touch… I miss him.

She forced herself to focus on Arya once more. Nothing Arya mentioned seemed to be what was stoking the girl’s turmoil so Sansa pressed her.

“I think you like Gendry.” Her words caused Arya to make a face that she ignored. “I would go so far as to say that you are fond of him, a feeling which could grow if you gave it a chance. So why fight this marriage? You’ll have to tell Jon something if he’s going to argue for any changes to the High King’s plans for Storm’s End.”

“It is Storm’s End!” Arya snapped. “Alright? I don’t want it! How could you think I would? After everything they did to you there!? I hate that place!!”

“You’ve never even been there-”

“I still cursed it! For years and years! For every day they had you, I prayed it would break and burn so you could escape! After you came back and I saw what they did… I wanted it gone. I wanted Storm’s End to be torn apart! To be scorched and ruined!”

Like Joffrey did to me…

No… like he tried to do to me… I must remember that.

She tried to comfort Arya but her sister turned back to the window again, her eyes as grey as the clouds as she watched the rain falling with a stubborn pride.

“All of you want me to live in a castle I cursed. Robb and mother go on and on about how I’ll have to help Gendry rule and make the Stormlords our friends. Our friends? How am I supposed to do that? A few years ago they were killing northmen and helping Joffrey keep you prisoner!”

“They served a foul king but now they will serve a new one.” She put a reassuring hand on Arya’s back, surprised that her sister didn’t shake it off.

“Not if you make me Lady of Storm’s End.” Arya bit her lip again. “Gendry could be a great lord but I’d only ruin things. Septa Mordane couldn’t make me a lady. They killed her at Storm’s End. My new home. You are sweet and kind and know all your courtesies and the sigils and look how they hurt you.”

“The guilty have suffered for that-”

“And your kingdom will be worse off if I marry Gendry.” Arya pressed her face into her hands. “I’m glad you’re a queen now, Sansa, really I am, but I can’t rule over those people. I’m not like you… I can’t do this.”

All this took Sansa off guard, Arya had done well in hiding these worries. There was no question that Gendry’s lordship of Storm’s End would be hard for others to accept, leading to difficulties and, perhaps, more fighting. Yet the idea that the Stormlords might not accept Arya as a lady had never been a great concern, to Sansa or to the others.

“We’re very different, you and I” She leaned against the wall, preening Arya’s hair some. “You’re right, you’re not like me. You’re more like mother.”
Arya laughed without mirth. “You’re mad.”

“I’m not. Think of mother and how it was for her when she first came to Winterfell. A southron flower suddenly made the Queen in the North. She had to face Roose Bolton, the Greatjon, Rickard Karstark, the mountain clans, but did she ever hide from them?”

“Never.” Arya spoke with pride. “I remember the time the Greatjon got too drunk and made Bran cry so she had the servants deny him wine. She kept the Greatjon from wine! He nearly flipped a table but mother stood her ground.”

“I’m sure she did. Some would call that stubbornness though.” Sansa was now smiling at all she’d never considered before. “To earn the respect of father’s bannermen, mother had to be strong, and brave, and have a stubborn dedication to winning them over. Does that remind you of someone?”

“That’s different! You’re twisting things around!”

“Arya, you make friends with everybody. Already you stand up to men who other ladies shy from. Any you don’t win over at least learn to respect you. That’s why we want you at Storm’s End. I never once worried about how you would rule. If anything, Gendry needs your help. We all do. I trust you to do this Arya.”

Sansa meant it with all her heart. Somehow in the midst of her words, her hand had started stroking Arya’s cheek. The sisters had never been close but something felt natural about this. Arya didn’t pull away from her touch. In fact she leaned into it some, like the direwolves would when Sansa acted so tender with them.

It was Nymeria who broke them apart. The wolf had started licking Aemma’s face again and this time it set the babe to wailing. Sansa made to snatch the little one into her arms but paused mid-step.

“Would you mind?” She looked to Arya, who acted confused at first but quickly had Aemma cradled against her chest. When Arya offered the babe back to her Sansa shook her head.

“Give it time. She’ll settle.” She lifted Rhaegina up into her arms, being sure to show Arya how the babe’s purple eyes were locked right on her aunt. “They trust you too, my girls. It’s them I worry on. All of this is about more than a new kingdom for me, Arya. It’s about building a future for these two. For all of us.”

“What if I keep you from that?” Arya asked, lifting the calming Aemma up so they were face to face. “I love you, Sansa. I love Aemma and Rhaegina. I’m pretty sure I like Gendry. I don’t want to ruin things for any of you.”

“You could never. Not this lady who holds my daughter with such care. Storm’s End was a place of nightmares for me, Arya. For me and many others. You are strong enough to change things. Storm’s End needs you. I need you.”

Those words came from her heart, so she was distressed when Arya sighed at them. The princess’s gaze moved ponderously between Rhaegina and Aemma before Arya closed her eyes and furrowed her brow in thought. When they opened, Arya kissed Aemma’s tiny brow and rested the babe against her shoulder. Aemma nuzzled there as Arya leaned down to whisper in her daughter’s ear.

“I thought Bran was going to have a hard time with the Dreadfort.” Arya whispered, closing her eyes again. “Can’t let him look better than me now can I, little one? I couldn’t help your mother when she needed it so I can’t very well let her down now. Let us make a deal, Aemma. When you’re older, you and your sister, you must come visit me at Storm’s End. I swear it’ll be a better place by then.”
Arya met Sansa’s gaze and the two sisters reached out to hold each other’s hands.

“I’ll marry the fool.” Arya’s face was firm with determination. “I’ll marry him and tell him about my promise to the twins. That we have to make Storm’s End the best damn castle in all of…”

She paused then and cocked her head in confusion.

“Hey, I still don’t know its name. What are you calling your kingdom?”

**JON**

“To the Kingdom of the Highlands!”

Ser Dontos Holland raised his sword in victory, earning a mighty cheer from the many onlookers. Hundreds ringed the castle yard or watched from the stands as Dontos’s challenger was being helped to his feet. The crowd was becoming livelier as the day went on, though none more so than Rickon, who jumped up and down between Robb and Jon.

“The Daunting! That’s three now!” Rickon clapped excitedly until Robb cuffed him upside the head. “Hey! What was that for?”

“You spilled my wine!” Robb frowned and Rickon quickly searched the boards, finding no sign of any wine.

“No I didn’t!”

“Oh, well my cup is still empty.” Robb smiled Jon’s way. “Could I bother you by sending having your squire fetch me some more wine, King Jon?”

He nodded to Rickon’s dismay. “I’m sure he would be honored, King Robb.”

“Oh no, please! I might miss Thoros! He always sets his blades on fire!”

“Then you had best hurry.” Sansa leaned in from Jon’s other side, her expression stern. “And it is a poor squire who argues against the wishes of his king.”

Rickon grumbled at that but took Robb’s cup nonetheless before running off. His movements were so hurried that he jostled Myrcella’s chair some and Robb made to swat at his brother again.

“That little- Jon, let me take him back to Winterfell. I’ll have him mucking out stables until he’s cleared out more shit than he has in his-”

“It was an accident.” Myrcella reached out to take Robb’s hand, her other hand pressed against her middle. “No harm done, we’re all still here.”

The Queen in the North wore a jade gown which brought out her eyes yet paled in radiance to the smile she gave Robb. Their happiness matched the jovial mood of the festivities. The duels being fought today were the last in a long contest, drawn from the finest warriors gathered here on the island. Westerosi knights and lords joined with imperial warriors and members of the Highguard in fantastic displays of skill.

The High King and Queen sat upon the tallest part of the stands where Jon’s father showed little interest in the duels, preferring to converse with King Mace one seat below him. The seating had been carefully arranged, with the Dornish and the Reach lords kept as far apart as possible. The
Martells sat to the left of Robb’s party, the Gardeners to the right of the imperial family, with Jon’s party spread out in between.

It was queer to see Queen Catelyn and Tyrion Lannister sitting side by side. The dowager queen had insisted on such an arrangement. Sansa explained that it was to keep Tyrion and Myrcella as far apart as possible. It didn’t escape his notice that this also created distance between Sansa and Daenerys as well. His wife wanted nothing to do with Dany, and Jon would not force her to act any differently.

Not when things were finally getting better between them.

A trumpet broke into his musings as the next challengers appeared in the dueling square. Murmurs of excitement went up when Mace’s third son, Prince Loras, strode into the yard to challenge a Highguard warrior, a Sarnori who towered over the knight. Jon was more interested in how Sansa’s hand entwined with his own. Such a simple touch, yet one he still felt unworthy after all his failings.

“The Prince of Flowers must be mad.” Sansa blinked in disbelief. “That man is taller than the Mountain! What manner of person is he?”

“A Sarnori.” Arya answered before he could. She sat to the other side of Sansa with her eyes glued on the challengers as well. “They’re called the Tall Men and there’s not many of them left. The Dothraki destroyed their kingdom, right Gendry?”

“My lady has a good memory.” Gendry nodded from Arya’s right, earning a mild slap to his shoulder for that.

“Don’t call me my lady.”

“As you command, lady wife.”

That earned another slap from Arya but a laugh as well. Sansa squeezed Jon’s hand some to watch the newlyweds behave so warmly.

Things had been going well since the wedding, a truly touching event that Jon counted his blessing to have witnessed. Arya was smaller in stature than Gendry, but in her wedding gown she’d made an impressive sight. Her slender shape had been complimented well by the white dress she wore that day. The blue flowers interwoven through her dark braids had made Arya look every bit a true princess.

It fell to Gendry to make her the new Lady of Storm’s End.

He might not have been able to use the Durrandon name, yet mother made sure that none would question who Gendry’s father was. The new House Baratheon had adopted the Durrandon sigil and words, so when Gendry draped the golden bridal cloak over Arya’s shoulders it bore a black, crowned stag. The whole affair was a strange one for Jon. Seven years ago he and Gendry had donned the black cloaks of the Dark Order together as sworn brothers. Now they were free of those vows, and made good brothers by marriage. Their futures tied to the new vows they swore to their wives.

It was during Gendry’s wedding feast that Sansa gave Jon the chance to act a proper husband again. They danced for Arya and Gendry’s happiness and then for their own. No mention of Dany or Baelyn was made. Only talk of their beloved daughters and all the hopes that Sansa held for them and their new kingdom. Not long after the bedding, Sansa had invited Jon back to her rooms and shared her bed with him once more. Little rest was had that night, and his exhaustion the next morning was of the most welcome kind.
It would be good to wake that tired on the morrow... perhaps Catelyn could watch over the girls so that I might tend to their mother...

“Jon, that’s not kind.” Sansa jerked on his hand some, bidding him to pay attention to the dueling warriors below. “How can you smile at poor Loras’s suffering?”

“I didn’t realize I was.” He spoke truthfully, for he barely registered the young prince being knocked down by the Highguard. “Loras is not done yet. Look, he rises as we speak.”

Not only did the Loras gain his feet again, but the handsomely armored prince took his challenger to task for daring to dirty his gleaming armor. Loras’s sword became a blur, his attacks carefully timed to take advantage of the Highguard’s wide arcs. Jon and Gendry shared a nod of respect for Loras’s abilities. They agreed earlier that the Reach prince was one of the finest swordsmen either of them had ever seen. Thus it came as little shock when Loras succeeded in knocking the taller man off balance, and then onto his knees, where the prince forced him to yield.

“Loras!” Margaery cheered her brother, standing to clap. “Loras! Highgarden!”

Half the castle joined in the applause at Loras’s victory. Sansa and Jon did the same but her expression betrayed some worry.

“Oh no.” Sansa whispered to him as they sat down. “That means Barristan could face Loras next. I fear that Loras is too fast for my dear knight.”

“I wouldn’t worry about Barristan.” He placed his hand over her leg in comfort. “He’s the last man I’d want to face in this contest. If I was to wager on the victor, my coin would be on the Bold.”

“A king should not wager.” She smiled and raised her chin a haughty way before teasing him. “Were you made a king only yesterday?”

“At least three days past, by my reckoning. Alas, I will never match my queen in grace or refinement. My children were fortunate to take after her in looks-”

“Ugh.” Arya rolled her eyes before turning to Gendry. “Don’t you ever speak to me like that.”

“Yes, my dear lady wife- OW!”

Gendry was battling off Arya’s attack when he suddenly stiffed and stared at something in the yard, jerking his chin to grab Jon’s attention.

“Jon, it’s the Blackfyre.”

Indeed it was. Daegon Blackfyre stepped out into the cobbled yard in a dull grey suit of armor. The brightest thing the exile carried was his shield, painted bright red and bearing the black dragon of his house. What Daegon lacked in decoration the knight made up for in martial skill. He held a string of victories over stiff opponents and his next challenger was as fierce a fighter as any.

“It’s Thoros!” Rickon’s bellowed as he returned, the squire holding two goblets of wine in his hand. Only one of which he gave to Robb. “Ser Daegon challenged him! I saw it! The Dark Order men were shouting things at him and then he called out Thoros. I don’t think the order men liked that.”

“No, they wouldn’t.” Jon watched Thoros square off with the Blackfyre, an oiled sword in each hand. Both men glaring at one another. “The Blackfyres and the Dark Order have a long and ugly history.”
“It might get uglier in a few moments.” Gendry added to which Robb raised an eyebrow.

“I thought the Golden Legion were the order’s rivals?”

“There’s more blood than rivalry between us and Daegon’s family. The Blackfyres once named us their blood enemies.”

“The order, not you.” Sansa touched his shoulder. “Not any longer. And your father said that was all in the past. Would he lift Ser Daegon’s exile if it wasn’t so?”

“Thoros is still in the order though.” Rickon sipped from his goblet, eyes locked on the yard. “Do you think they might fight to the death-”

“Hey!” Robb grabbed at Rickon’s wrist. “Whose wine is that?”

“Mine!”

“You mean Lord Baratheon’s.” Jon commanded gruffly. “Give it over to Gendry before I decide my armor needs polishing.”

A sharp clang interrupted his admonishing of Rickon, for the duel had started. Thoros began as he always did, striking his swords together so sparks ignited the oil on his blades. The flames drew an awed sound from the spectators before the two warriors came together in a flurry of steel and fire. Daegon and Thoros battled less like men in a sporting duel and more like two combatants locked in a fight for survival. Gone was the calm grace Daegon had shown while sparring with Gendry in the gardens.

Thoros appeared intent on hacking away Daegon’s shield bit by bit. The knight’s sword lashed out like a whip to defend against Thoros’s burning blades before launching strikes of his own. Jon wasn’t surprised when blood was shed. One of Daegon’s cuts sliced through the mail on Thoros’s side, his blade coming away reddened. Sansa gasped then. She held a special liking of Thoros after what he did for Aemma.

Thoros showed no signs of slowing though. The warrior priest waved his swords between the dueling warriors again and again, an old trick where the flames confused the eyes. When Thoros struck again, Daegon moved his shield a bit too far to his left, the following blow loosening his grip terribly. As the knight fumbled to regain it, Thoros cut with both blades against Daegon’s one, tearing the sword from his grasp. Without a weapon, Daegon tried to fight with only his shield, which was hacked half to ruin by the time Thoros pointed the fiery tip of his blade inches from the knight’s face.

“Yield, ser.” Thoros spoke breathlessly. “You fought well, you drew blood. The insult was answered. Yield.”

Daegon looked ready to spit when he spoke. “Yield.”

The crowd swiftly took to clapping afterwards, with Rickon shouting Thoros’s name so loudly that his voice cracked. Yet Jon took no joy in the bout. As Daegon stormed into the sidelines several order men eyed the knight with dangerous malice. That caused Jon to feel a pull of responsibility too hard to ignore.

“If you would excuse me, I feel the need to stretch my legs.”

“But Darkstar is next!” Rickon pointed to the yard. “Aren’t you mad at him for what he did to Tumco?”
“Tumco will heal.” Jon waved the boy off but found Sansa gripping his arm.

“This is about the order, isn’t it?” She whispered up to him. “You’re the King of the Highlands now, not their Lord-Commander. Let someone else—”

He leaned down to kiss her cheek. “There is no one else, not yet at least. They haven’t elected a new leader and if I can head off trouble I will.”

Sansa wasn’t convinced but she still let him go all the same. He wanted to prevent any further bloodshed between the order and Blackfyres, even if he still wasn’t convinced of his father’s reasons for bringing Daegon to the island.

“The Blackfyres saw this day coming.” Father had told him. “The day a Targaryen would forge a kingdom here in Westeros. This young man has done us no harm, and through him we could set aside troubles of the past. Give him a chance, my son.”

A fresh beginning was something Jon could appreciate. As he descended the stands, he passed many men who had once taken up arms against him. Riverlords and Stormlords, lords from north of the Blackwater, many had fought him but now all called Jon their king. Some, like Royner Darklyn and Myles Mooton, regarded him warmly and smiled when he passed. Others, such as Jon Connington and Selwyn Tarth, were more cautious, and he worried for how many outright despised him.

He was in the middle of making a silent list when a voice called out to him.

“King Jon!”

He turned to see Tyrion Lannister atop the stairs he’d just climbed down. The dwarf prince’s mismatched eyes stared back into Jon’s as he hobbled with his strange gait.

“I overheard you saying you wished to stretch your legs. Seeing as mine are quite crooked, I thought I would join you. Unless I’m meant to be chained to my seat?”

“Queen Catelyn gave you leave to follow me?” He asked his captive, noting how Tyrion was being followed by two Targaryen spearmen.

“I told her I needed to use the privy. Do not fret, I intend to let one of my protectors help me wipe, and to task the second one with comforting the first.”

Jon frowned at the jest, feeling quite sure he did not want Tyrion Lannister following him as he dealt with this Blackfyre business.

“It would be better if you went back. I have matters to attend to. This is no true pleasure stroll.”

“And I do not truly have to shit. So let us talk on what else we have in common, besides being liars.”

Jon was incredulous. “You name me a liar?”

“You just named yourself a liar. I simply agreed.” Tyrion grinned in a lopsided manner. “Your grace, a few moments of shared words during your walk and then you can discard me at your leisure.”

A cheer went up from the crowd and he knew he’d been delayed long enough, so Jon nodded and bid Tyrion to follow him. As they moved about the edges of the spectators, many bowed before his coming.

Jon sighed. “If you mean to ask for your freedom once more, I must refuse you again.”
“Actually, I beg leave to write a letter to Casterly Rock.” Tyrion replied. “To inform my father and the rest of my family that Myrcella is with child. I also hope to secure a stipend from my father for my needs here in your new kingdom.”

“King Tywin has made it known that he does not recognize the Highlands as a kingdom.”

“You would be surprised at the ugly truths that my father has grown to accept.” Tyrion replied. “I for one am quite intrigued to see how this all works out. You’re aiming to raise a new port at the mouth of the Blackwater. Will you be building in the imperial or Westerosi style?”

“A mix.” Jon paused then, hearing a commotion off to the side of the yard.

Out of a group of Highguard, Ethan appeared. The scarred man donned his helm and lifted his axe before heading on to the dueling yard. It did not take Jon long to realize who Darkstar had challenged for his next bout.

He just hurt Ethan’s comrade and now Darkstar wants to risk his wrath?

Is the man as dim as his name suggests?

“Oh, he is an ally.” Jon said as the grim warrior walked by. “Try not to hurt him.”

“I’ll try.” Ethan grunted unconvincingly as he moved through the onlookers to meet his challenger.

“Charming man.” Tyrion watched Ethan’s departure. “Queen Lyanna’s Highguard, is he not? I think I saw him nearly smile during your coronation. A fine affair, the High Septon was in top form. You purchased the best of the Faith.”

Jon grimaced at the truth of that. Unlike Luceon, the High Septon came off as a kindly old man. Yet to win his support, and the Faith’s, much had been given. The empire would build a grand new septry in Andalos, near to the sacred hills of Hugor, the first king of the Andals. Father pledged imperial protection for all pilgrimages by the faithful to the holy place. The High King intended to join the High Septon in the first of such journeys and had already sent word to Volantis for Arthur Dayne to prepare a magnificent procession for them when the time came.

All of this earned Jon the right to have the High Septon anointed him with the seven oils and placed the crown upon his head. A crown his father had gifted him, the same crown that Aegon the Conqueror had worn during his reign. Jon held a healthy respect for that crown, yet had not worn it since that ceremony, declaring that he would only do so again when Sansa had a matching crown of her own.

How can I act a king without my queen?

“Have you exercised the king’s right yet?” Tyrion asked. “To choose your advisor from the Faith? The Most Devout might select the High Septon, but it is for you and any other king to choose which of the Faithful will serve you in all things.”

“Yes, the High Septon told me of this. He has offered a list of men who he thinks are capable—”

“Throw it away, all spies and lickspittles no doubt. If there are any lords you trust, seek their views on who to choose. You must have a man beholden to you and not the High Septon. It matters not if Holy Hugor cares for your choice, only that you make the right one.”

That made sense to him. What didn’t make sense was why this advice was coming from a Lannister. He was about to question Tyrion’s motives in offering such wisdom when a loud crash and a wave
of gasps bid Jon to look toward the yard. He saw Darkstar crumpled on the ground, his helm smashed in and twisted nearly all the way around. As the man writhed about, Ethan departed the yard with a small smile, secure in his victory, his longaxe resting against his shoulder.

“I said try and not hurt him.” Jon said when Ethan drew near.

“I did.”

“And you hurt him.”

“I did.”

The Highguard’s unapologetic crushing of Darkstar was something mother would have to deal with, or perhaps Sansa. He imagined one of them was already seeking Princess Arianne to soothe any insult done. Yet when he looked to the royal viewing stands, he saw Viserys at the princess’s side, whispering in her ear.

There was no reason to suspect Viserys’s words to be any sort of poison. The couple was betrothed after all but his uncle made it easy for Jon to think the worst of him. Such was why he had kept Viserys from taking part in Arya’s bedding. Viserys had made one too many vulgar comments regarding his taste for northern flesh for Jon to feel comfortable allowing him a hand in the strange bedding custom. As the women started to strip Gendry of his doublet, and the men lifted Arya onto their shoulders, Jon had ordered Viserys to keep his seat.

“Whatever Rhaegar’s follies, you are no king of mine.” Viserys had hissed in Valyrian before trying to rise again. Jon had taken hold of his shoulder then, causing his uncle to wince.

“I could break your collarbone right now for a thousand reasons, uncle. I show restraint, so do the same. Having the power to do a thing does not mean it should be done.”

“Soon I will have power of my own.” Viserys shot back, his eyes full of rage. “An entire kingdom! Then it will be you who is dealt some lessons, nephew.”

The threat felt idle at the time, yet the prospect of Viserys one day ruling Dorne beside Princess Arianne was not a pleasant one. Jon prayed that Prince Doran would live many years more. He hoped the same for his father as well, if only to give him and Aegon time to become civil again. His brother had not bothered to attend the day’s festivities, unlike Jon’s coronation where he had smiled smugly the whole while.

I am granted a kingdom whereas one day Aegon shall rule the empire.

Two realms bound together in a fraternity that eludes my brother and me.

“Hear me!” A steward bellowed from near to where father and mother sat. “The final matches are set to begin! Taking part shall be as follows: Prince Loras of House Gardener, for the Kingdom of the Reach! Ser Barristan Selmy for the Kingdom of the Highlands! Ser Dontos—”

“The name is stupid.” Tyrion’s spoke over the herald, earning a sharp look from Jon. “No offense intended your grace. Some genius named my family’s lands, The Kingdom of the Rock. Not the most attractive of names. What made you settle on Kingdom of the Highlands?”

“My wife and mother chose it together.” Jon grumbled as he quickened his pace, having caught sight of Daegon leading a few order men through a nearby gate. “High King, Highlands, they thought it the best way to harken imperial roots—”
“Yes, yes, clever. What of this new capital of yours? Is it to be called Hightown? Highport? King’s Fall, perhaps?”

Jon stopped midstride and wheeled about to face the smaller man. His fists clenched and the sounds of the crowd caused the battle of Aegon’s Hill to return to him. Asher’s face sprang to mind, his friend choking on blood. Then Joffrey’s face came, purple and bloated as Jon strangled the life from him.

“Your nephew earned his fate.” He growled as took a step forward, causing Tyrion to back away some. “Good men died to bring an end to his tyranny and I will not have you make light of that.”

“A poor jest, sorry.” Tyrion said, looking somewhat abashed. “Though you must know, some will call it that, no matter what name you settle upon. That or worse. Even among your own supporters I’ve heard the word Kingslayer whispered-”

“Enough of your needling.” Jon waved to Tyrion’s escort. “Take the prince to the privy. From what I’ve heard, he’s clearly in need of one.”

Tyrion tried to protest but Jon refused to hear any more, giving the prince leave to write his letters before he was off again. That the Lannister offered sage advice one moment only to insult him in the next breath was maddening. He found Tyrion to be good company at times but less welcome than the white direwolf that padded to his side now.

Of late Sansa had been pressing him into accepting his own contingent of Highguard but he felt Ghost was the only escort he truly needed most days. Yet when he entered one of the inner courtyards the scene he came up made Jon wish he had made the time to look into Sansa’s proposal.

Daegon stood with his back against a stone wall, three order men surrounding him. All had their hands to their swords yet none had drawn them so far. It did not take long for Jon to recognize Daegon’s opponents.

Chief among them was Craghas, a Myrish sergeant who cursed Daegon in the low Valryian of his homeland.

“In Myr, mothers still scare their children with tales of Blackfyres coming to snatch them away for sacrifice. They remember well your crimes there.”

“My family never murdered children.” Daegon shot back in Myrish. “Unlike the Dark Order.”

“You enslaved the young though.” Brendel Byrne barked. “That’s how my family came to Essos. Blackfyres stealing us away from our homes to be put on the auction block.”

“And you serve an empire that does far worse.” Daegon replied. “Our quarrels are ended. The High King bid me to lay down my vendetta against the Dark Order and I have.”

Brendel grunted. “Didn’t look like that to me. Not with Thoros all cut up.”

“That’s our sworn brother.” Malo added as the three closed in. “We stand with him and you did him harm. The High King never commanded us to forgive that.”

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“Then hear me do so.”

The order men spun about at that, each one driving a fist to his chest in salute while Daegon merely watched.
“Lord-Commander-”

“I’m not your commander, not any longer.” Jon walked about, looking the three up and down as if inspecting them. “If I was, I would be forced to punish you for threatening a guest in this castle, a man under the protection of House Targaryen.”

“He drew first blood.” Malo snarled and Jon went straight to him, coming so close that their faces nearly touched.

“In a contest, one Thoros agreed to take part in. Thoros gave every bit as much as he got. He was content with his victory, so should you be. Now go back and add your voices to his cheers.”

“And leave you here?” Brendel asked, jerking a thumb at Daegon. “With that?”

“I am well-guarded.” He gestured to Ghost but none of the order men were won over.

“You might not be our commander, but you are a king.” Craghas spoke for lot of them. “A brother for life. Let our spears and swords be with you.”

Despite his disappointment with them, Jon was heartened by his former comrade’s loyalty. He accepted the three as guards yet made them step back a ways while he took stock of the Blackfyre before him. The two men had not spoken more than a handful of words in weeks and if Jon was to accept Daegon as a part of his new realm, he would need to know this former enemy better.

“I apologize for my- for them.” He eyed how Daegon’s hand remained on the pommel of his sword. “You have no reason to fear me ser. Not so long as you keep the vows you made to my father.”

The young knight surprised him by laughing at that, shaking his head and lowering his guard as he stepped away from the wall.

“You’re all so worried about me.” Daegon ran a hand through his long, pale hair. “If I’m such a threat, why am I the only one terrified of this place? Of all of you Targaryens.”

“If Dragonstone does not appeal to you why did you return?”

“Because I’m sick to death of running.” Daegon bent down to pick up his shield from the ground. The black dragon had lost two of its heads and the knight frowned to look upon it. “I’m the last of the House Blackfyre. Once, this island was full of its sons and daughters. My mother said they prayed every day to reach a better land, for a great warrior to arrive and lead them there.”

Daegon faced him again and there was no missing how he restrained his rage.

“The savior never came. Only Bloodraven and the Dark Order. You know the tale, don’t you?”

He did. The story was as infamous as it was bloody. The Dark Order had done foul deeds in service to the empire, but few as ugly as what Brynden the Bloodraven did to the Blackfyres.

“It was here, in these walls.” Daegon moved his gaze across the yard. “Bloodraven came under a banner of truce and all thought peace could be made. Then it turned to slaughter. Men, women, children, all put to the sword.”

“A horrible crime.” Jon agreed with a foul taste in his mouth. “Such was why Aegon the Fifth condemned Bloodraven to exile. He was sent to the Wall, where criminals of this land are often sent.”
“Will that be where you send me?” Daegon asked. “After the High King leaves I will be at your mercy. Will I be chained up and sent to the Wall or will you simply have my head off?”

Many might welcome such a thing, and that bothered Jon some. The Blackfyres were once a great threat to the empire. Now all that was left of them was a young knight, surrounded by people who wished him dead. To his surprise, Jon could not name himself among their number.

“I intend you no harm.” He told the knight. “My father has granted you safe passage, and as long as you keep the peace in my kingdom, peace you shall have. Soon this realm will be welcoming thousands of people to its shore, all seeking new beginnings. I once needed such a thing myself. I won’t deny you the same opportunity, Daegon Blackfyre.”

“I pray that’s true.” Daegon slung his shield over his back and almost saluted him before thinking better of it. Instead the Blackfyre bowed, as one of Jon’s vassals would. “My family wanted a kingdom in Westeros… all I want is a home. A home and a king I can serve—”

“There’s no lack of them here!”

Aegon’s call bid both Jon and Daegon to take notice of the heir entering the courtyard through a wide arch. Unlike the armored Golden Legion men who flanked his approach, Aegon wore flowing robes of black and gold. The only metal Jon spotted on his brother was the golden jewelry adorning his neck and wrists. While not to his taste, Jon surely preferred baubles to the swords and spears of Aegon’s protectors.

“Brother, we missed you at the duel.” Jon said as the Dark Order men formed up around him, Ghost pressing in even closer.

“My apologies. I go there now to meet Nym.” Aegon’s smile was all teeth and only grew wider to glance at Daegon. “You keep good company these days, Jonarys. Here I thought that wolf of yours was the most lowly of your court.”

“Enjoy yourself at the contests.” He inclined his head and moved aside to let Aegon pass. Yet instead of doing so, Aegon stopped part way and blocked the path himself.

“Giving me orders? Viserys said this newfound power was going to your head. Normally I wouldn’t put much stock in his ravings yet here we are. Tell me, is it true what my spymaster says? That father means to hand Dragonstone over to you?”

It wasn’t entirely true, yet this was the reason father wanted to discuss those matters with Aegon before announcing them to all. Dragonstone was a minor holding, yet its symbolic importance was great.

“Things aren’t so simple.” Jon started to explain. “Driftmark and Claw Isle are to become part of the Highlands but Dragonstone is another matter. Father wants to make it a shared holding between the empire and the new kingdom. A place of unity, where the two halves of House Targaryen—”

“Is there no end to your greed?” Aegon flexed his sword hand, his eyes becoming a violet storm. “I would’ve put you on my council. Let you act as a triarch to guide our freeing of the slaves. You’re my younger brother, your place was by my side, but you were never content with that. You had to have kingdom all to yourself, one that I helped you win. Nothing can ever be fully mine. Nothing.”

Jon wanted to call him a fool, to tell Aegon that the Targaryen Empire and all its vast wealth would be his. The Highlands would likely struggle to survive for many years while Aegon lounged at Summerhall, yet he held his tongue.
This is about Daenerys and the boy again... until his rage about that passes, there’s no reasoning with him.

Let his rage calm, like when we were children, let the storm pass...

“You’re my brother Aegon.” Jon reminded him. “I wish you only the best and covet none of what comes to you. If you’ll excuse us, we’ll make our own way back to the duels.”

After waving the others on, he made to leave the yard with the order men falling in behind. They did not go far. Aegon put himself right in Jon’s path again, the legion men following suit.

“We’re not done here.” Aegon put a hand to Jon’s chest, holding him in place. “I’m speaking now and will be heard. If you wish a duel so badly, there’s no need to leave.”

The only person that Aegon’s men ignored was Daegon, who clearly wanted none of this ugly situation. The Blackfyre knight strode away from the standoff, back through the gate to continue on to the duels. The shouting now echoing off the walls meant another fight was about to begin and he feared that Aegon meant for one to start here.

“Aegon… let me pass.”

His tone was civil but the mood between the two parties was tense. The legion and the order men glared at one another, Ghost baring his fangs in a silent snarl. Still Aegon pushed at Jon’s chest, his nostril’s flaring.

“Ask it of me.”

Suddenly they were little boys again. Aegon keeping a toy Jon wanted from his grasp. Not an heir meant to rule the greatest empire in the world. Nor a king of a land that so many hopes rested upon.

“Ask me… or are you beyond that now?” Aegon carried on, leaning in close. “Am I expected to grant your every whim, your grace? Like father already does?”

The simple way out of this was to ask, but Jon feared what would happen if he did and Aegon still refused. What would be left after that?

“King Jon!”

The shout was followed by the heavy thudding of footsteps as Barristan and Thoros appeared through the gate, a mixed company of order men and Darry guardsmen following after. He spotted Daegon next to Lyman Darry, and it became apparent that the numbers no longer favored Aegon.

“Your grace, there you are.” Barristan’s gaze moved warily over Aegon and his men. “I’ve been challenged by Prince Loras to a duel, and it would strengthen my blade to have you watch.”

“We sent a man on to the High King.” Thoros added. “To ask for a delay until his sons could attend. All await the sons of Rhaegar.”

“Hear that, brother?” Jon put to Aegon, trying to play along. “I’ll go first, so your entrance may be the grander one.”

Aegon stood there, his jaw working, and Jon recognized the signs of his brother trying to control his own temper. He took the chance to ease Aegon’s hand from his chest, which the heir allowed with no struggle at all. It was only then that Aegon took a deep breath and gave a curt nod.
“Go on. I meant what I said though, Jonarys. Things between us are not done. I will be heard.”

They were permitted to leave after that, Jon and his men heading back towards the gate together. He was not so foolish as to think that this was good fortune and looked to Daegon.

The Blackfyre knight met his gaze and Jon inclined his head in thanks. It was an altogether odd thing, a Targaryen thanking a Blackfyre. Stranger still for a Blackfyre to prove himself worthy of such thanks.

*May he prove worthier still, of both my praise and my trust.*

*For unless I can resolve things with Aegon, I will need all the help I can get.*

---

**SANSA**

“I thought the Dark Order were warriors, not builders.”

Jeyne marveled up at the work done to Aegon’s Hill since they’d last been there. Back when the Aegonfort had been little more than a martial camp sitting upon a hill.

In half a year much had changed, not just on Aegon’s Hill, but for all the hills and fields which lay between the bay and river. A palisade wall and numerous turrets now encircled the crest of Aegon’s Hill. Rising up from behind the defences was a tall wooden keep made of newly felled logs. Whatever else lay within the fort Sansa couldn’t see from her place near the riverside docks.

She was surprised at how busy the modest harbor was. More than warships now docked at the quays, with scores of smaller cogs and fishing ships anchored there as well. Jon and Aegon had left thousands of men behind to hold these lands hills and it appeared they had been joined by even more smallfolk. Whether in hopes of plying their trades or to start anew after the war, thousands of people had put down roots here and a small settlement now stretched from the river to the base of Aegon’s Hill.

The shacks and hovels near the river were arranged in a haphazard manner, unlike those built closer to the hill, which appeared more orderly and well-made. That was likely due to the Dark Order’s influence, whose camp was closest to the Aegonfort. Farther off Sansa could see where the Golden Legion had raised watchtowers and barracks upon the other two hills. Sheep and cattle grazed about the edges of Rhaenys’s Hill and it looked like a sepytry was being raised near Visenya’s base.

It was more than she could have imagined. Had someone told Sansa all this could follow from Jon’s horrible battle with Joffrey, she would never have believed it.

*To think all that death could help so much life to spring forth… and there’s more to come.*

*More life. More people. Some in the coming days, thousands more after them.*

Sansa had only just arrived herself, along with Jon and their families. With so much nobility moving about the docks, quite the commotion was being raised. Servants and stewards ran to and fro while guardsmen bellowed for the smallfolk to move aside. Acting aloof to the clamor, Rhaegar and Lyanna walked about with ease, each holding one of the twins. Jon accompanied Sansa’s mother, the dowager queen grasping his arm as he led her away from their ship to where Gendry awaited them.

Arya was not as patient as her husband, and moved quickly to join Talia and Jeyne in gazing about
“Gods, Sansa. Were you lying to me?” Arya asked. “I thought you said there was nothing here.”

“There wasn’t really.” Jeyne blinked at all the smallfolk gathering to stare at them. “Nothing like this at least. In the North this would be a proper town.”

A snide cackle rose up from behind them as Viserys crinkled his nose at the settlement.

“I’ve seen larger slave markets.” He glanced towards Lyanna before continuing in Valyrian. “With better quality flesh as well.”

“More will come.” Sansa replied. “This is only the beginning.”

What she wanted to say was far more rude, for Jon’s uncle was a thoroughly disagreeable man. Still, he would one day be consort to the Princess of Dorne and Sansa would be courteous. Good relations were foremost on her mind when she caught sight of Rhaenys, who had disembarked with Sarella Sand and a number of servants. Jon’s half sister wore a gown with a vibrant red pattern that shimmered like flames when it caught the light in a certain way.

“Your grace!” Sansa hailed Rhaenys, who appeared surprised by her actions. “Would you join us? I heard you inquiring about the victory won here.”

“I care little for the battle.” Rhaenys waved off her attendants so that she and Sarella could approach the northern women. “It was the flames that followed the fighting which were of interest to me. Thoros told me how hundreds were burned here, a pyre so bright it turned night to day. A fine offering to the Lord of Light.”

“My brother was no offering.” Talia glared at Rhaenys and Sansa took hold of her arm to comfort her.

“Talia’s brother died a hero on Aegon’s Hill. My husband lives because of Asher Forrester and his was a sacrifice I shall never forget. Nor the bravery of hundreds of Dark Order men who fell winning the day.”

“I see.” Rhaenys nodded, turning her attention to Talia. “No offense was meant, I pray R’hllor’s grace helped guide your brother and all those other souls into the eternal light.”

“A place of welcome and warmth.” Sarella finished with a soft smile. “My cousin speaks often of her faith to me. Perhaps too often, though I wonder if she does it to unnerve me during our games of cyvasse.”

“Do you play, Sansa?” Rhaenys asked and when Sansa said she hadn’t the future High Queen raised an eyebrow. “You should. Some think it a man’s game, a contest of military strategy alone, and that is truly a narrow-minded view. Nym and I believe all queens should play cyvasse, for it is excellent practice in running a proper court.”

It was a strange thing to hear Rhaenys speak so fondly of Lady Nym. As she did so, Aegon and his mistress could be seen sharing a laugh with Aurane Velaryon. Sansa was often hard-pressed to speak Daenerys’s name and that woman was merely a liar, not some mistress her husband paraded about for all to see.

When Sarella caught Sansa staring at Nym, the darker Sand Snake winked in a knowing way. She had done much the same back on Dragonstone when the topic of Aegon and Nym came up.
“My sisters and I, we love dear Rhaenys.” Sarella had grinned. “Nym more than any. Nothing is quite as it seems, your grace. The sand can play tricks on the eyes, create mirages to lead unwitting travellers off course.”

She hadn’t taken Sarella’s meaning yet wasn’t too troubled by that. The Dornishwoman often spoke in riddles. What did bother Sansa was how Rickon now led the direwolves in running about the settlement. The young squire and wolves were happy to be free of the ship yet Sansa whispered to Jeyne to go and put a stop to the frolicking. The antics clearly terrified the smallfolk.

**Will the freedmen fear the wolves as well?**

The first ships carrying settlers were due any day now. A thousand or so, specially recruited by Rhaegar to aid Jon in establishing their kingdom. Veterans of imperial legions were promised lands in return for defending them. Freedmen who had toiled under artisans and builders in the empire could lend their abilities to the works that lay ahead. Better still was how the High King had purchased the contracts of master builders and smiths to aid in the grander tasks Jon had planned.

She told Rhaenys all this while the two women walked along the riverbank. Barges crossed back and forth across the river, loaded with timber from the large Kingswood forest. While Sarella eyed this with interest Rhaenys was more impressed when Sansa mentioned the name Tobho Mott among those soon to arrive. Apparently the Qohorik armorer was well known in Volantis.

“Warlords from across the world seek his talents.” Rhaenys spoke as she waved away a fish peddler. “I myself had Mott forge a special barding for Aegon’s horse for a wedding gift. I imagine Aegon will be jealous to hear of his departure.”

“Jealous?” She paused, looking back towards the docks and Aegon. “There’s no need. Mott’s contract is only for two years, he’ll likely return to the empire after.”

“Ah yes, but nowadays Aegon views Jonarys and himself at different ends of a scale. Mott is just another pebble on Jon’s side, increasing his value and Aegon’s ire. He’s viewed things as tipped in Jon’s favor for some time now.”

Sansa wrung her hands. “It is Aegon who will be named heir, not Jon. The entire Targaryen Empire will be his, what is this small kingdom to all that splendor?”

“Aegon will have power, yet that’s not all he wants.”

Rhaenys’s dark gaze moved from the river to where Rhaegar was holding Aemma up so the smallfolk could bow to Sansa’s daughter. Rhaegina was soon given the same treatment by Lyanna, which set Aemma off into a bout of loud squalling. The royal grandparents laughed at this, but not Rhaenys, whose expression was a distant one.

“Jon was always a solemn child.” Rhaenys spoke softly. “So silent and serious to Aegon’s jests and smiles. Now things are very different. You have given Jon a happiness Aegon feels I have denied him. I prayed to R’hllor to grant us such and truly, the Lord of Light has given me much to be thankful for. Yet Aegon feels cheated… mother always warned that such selfishness would sour things for him.”

With Aegon walking about with Nym, Sansa saw all the proof she needed to think him a profoundly selfish man. Yet she laid the blame for much of their troubles with him on the selfishness of another. *Daenerys Targaryen, mother of lies.*

Sansa did little to hide her disdain for Daenerys Targaryen, which was likely why the woman had
been surprised by her visit back on Dragonstone. Daenerys had been in the midst of preparing for their travels to the mainland, young Baelyon squirming about on a pile of gowns atop her bed.

The bright smile the babe gave Sansa had not stopped her from doing what she came to do.

“You are unwelcome on this journey.” Sansa had told Daenerys in a flat yet firm tone. “I care not whether you go on to Duskendale or await the High King here. I will not have you with us.”

Those words bid the silver princess to straighten in a defiant manner, her eyes alight with indignation. There was no mistaking the challenge in her stance when she came within a step of Sansa.

“I accept your dislike of me, but none save the High King can order me about.”

“Quite right, on Dragonstone my word means little. Not so on the mainland. Rhaegar named Jon as king of those lands. I am his queen, and this queen denies you stepping foot where Jon and I will build our home. You tainted my stay on this island, and my husband’s good name. I will not give you the chance to do so again. Not where I shall raise my children. Jon’s children.”

“And what of Jon?” Daenerys had asked. “Is this his decree as well or just yours? Or do you act without his leave?”

“I would spare him that. He has been forced into enough hard decisions of late. Though if you wish me to seek another on this, perhaps I should go to Aegon and hear his views.”

Daenerys was a beauty, yet much of her features were tainted then by the anger Sansa’s unspoken threat inspired.

“You would betray us? Out of spite? He would take my son-”

“He could take your son. If I betrayed all I know of what Jon swore to.” Sansa had paused to look at the babe then, who watched all this with a painful innocence. “That is something I could not do. I will not betray my husband. Nor your child. I only wished you to know I had such power and refuse to use it. That I do not want you with us at the Aegonfort. You have the power to defy me, to seek out Rhaegar or Jon on your behalf. Or you can respect my wishes. What choice do you make, Daenerys Targaryen?”

She felt a fool at the time. A weak fool. It would have been smarter to simply threaten Daenerys rather than appeal to her better nature, which was surely suspect. Yet to threaten a mother in front of her child was beyond Sansa. Betraying Jon was out of the question as well, though she was sure if Daenerys told him he’d be furious to learn of what she’d done.

That never came to pass though. After a few moments of contemplation Daenerys came to a decision. With a forlorn expression and a lowered head, she declared her intent to sail on to Duskendale instead.

“They'll ask me why.” Daenerys put to her as she lifted Baelyon into her embrace, kissing her son’s head. “Jon and Rhaegar. I wanted to see the slaves freed so badly, they’ll ask why I miss their arrival. What am I to say?”

“Some lie.” Sansa had said. “A good one no doubt.”

At time it felt good to unburden her anger towards the woman. Now though, Sansa felt a pang of guilt to watch Aemon be guided about by Samwell Tarly. The old man enjoyed Daenerys’s company so.
He’ll see again soon enough, this is not Daenerys’s place.

This is to be my home. Our home.

Tonight would be the first night they treated it as such. Many of their number were to bed down in the Aegonfort this night. Rhaegar and Lyanna did them a great boon by promising to do so, since Sansa knew many would speak of the High King and Queen gracing their modest hall. Space was limited though, so others would ride a few hours and enjoy the comforts of Castle Rosby.

Something Viserys proved eager to do once a few carriages were unloaded from a cog. The man set his servants running about and Sansa’s nerves on edge with his mean-spirited comments.

“I’m the sort of dragon that prefers a bed worthy of my station.” Viserys did not hide his disdain for the settlement. “I was a fool to let Rhaegar talk me into this. My betrothed journeys back to Sunspear and I tour some squalid hovels. The Dornish would not disappoint in such a way. Aegon, come, join me in my carriage, you must tell me of Sunspear again. Bring your mistress if you must.”

Aegon did not take kindly to that but not for the reasons Sansa would have liked. It became apparent Aegon was set on departing as well. Something neither she nor Jon had anticipated, as both expected to host the High King and his heir this night. Rhaegar disappointed by paying Aegon’s decision little mind. Sansa had learned Rhaegar rarely interfered in such matters, preferring to let his sons work out their squabbles.

Yet relations between Jon and Aegon were far too poor for Sansa to accept such an approach. Jon disappointed her too, for he raised no objection to Aegon’s plans, joining Ghost in merely watching as the carriages were readied.

This cannot stand, not after what happened during the duels.

Barristan said they nearly came to blows there… they must make amends here.

Aegon and Nym were speaking quietly about some matter when her presence interrupted them.

“Prince Aegon, I am confused.” She looked between the heir and his carriage. “I was told I’d have the honor of hosting you this night.”

Aegon gave a half-hearted bow. “There appears to be little enough space at your new seat. I wouldn’t add to your burdens by cramming Rhae and my household within. Conditions would surely worsen if I stayed.”

At the last part his gaze moved swiftly to where Jon appeared to be deciding whether or not to assist her in this. While he made up his mind, Sansa set to changing Aegon’s.

“There shall be more than enough room. I promise you will find more enjoyment here than on the bumpy ride to Rosby. Better company too.”

She was hoping Aegon found Viserys as distasteful as she did, or at least disliked his uncle more than Jon. Nym smirked some at the suggestion yet Aegon remained unmoved. He opened his mouth to refuse again but she took hold of his arm to bring his attention to where the Golden Legion camped.

“How long have you away from the legion? Two months? Three? Let your men toast their commander this night, then retire to the Aegonfort and better comforts than you enjoyed during your many campaigns. All under a roof named in your honor.”
“My honor?” Aegon asked, some doubt chipping away at his resolve. “You named that hill and fort after The Conqueror.”

“Are you not a conqueror as well? Without you, Jon and I would not have a kingdom, nor a home to call our own, my prince.”

“That’s twice now you’ve called me a prince. I thought your husband had taught you our ways. My father may have named Jon a king but I’ve yet to be granted any title.”

She knew that all quite well but feigned embarrassment all the same. “Forgive me, I simply think of you as Jon does. He speaks of you as the next High King of the empire and a prince of the blood.”

“Does he?” Aegon sounded unconvinced but before she could answer Jon interrupted them.

“Not quite.” Jon spoke in a stern manner as he made to stand amongst them. “Surely you are all those things, and my brother as well.”

“It is Gendry you love as a brother.” Aegon replied. “He that you honor and respect. Not I. Do not pretend.”

“I’m not pretending. Aegon, I swear it.” Jon looked up at Aegon’s Hill and a shadow passed over his face. A darkness he had struggled to escape ever since the battle. “I’ve made mistakes, and I’d like to mend some of those wrongs. Do us the honor of feasting in our hall. So we might speak. I could listen. You would be heard.”

In that moment, Sansa wanted to leave Aegon and embrace her husband. To let him know how noble he was, how he was every bit the king she hoped he could be. Yet she stayed put, squeezing Aegon’s arm and searching his face for any sign he’d been convinced. If the brothers could make amends, Jon would not toss and turn so at night anymore. They had enough foes without fears of Aegon joining their ranks, the Highlands needed the empire and it would not do to have its heir working against them.

Despite Jon’s words Aegon remained ill at ease, quite unlike Lady Nym. She pulled on her large dark braid and parted her full lips in a grin before whispering something in Aegon’s ear. The heir blinked in surprise at whatever she said.

“I think we should stay.” Nym regarded Sansa with an appraising eye. “If there’s a bed for us, it should be put to use. I’m not quite ready to bid farewell to Sarella, nor miss out on visiting the spot where Joffrey fell. My father is likely to be quite jealous.”

“That you have it then.” Aegon freed himself from Sansa’s hold, only to pull her hand up to his lips. “If you would have me, I would gladly accept your welcome… Queen Sansa.”

That Aegon did not acknowledge Jon was a slight he gladly ignored. The two men needed an opportunity to sort out their grievances before Aegon departed back to the empire. Sansa considered it a victory to guide Aegon and Nym on to the Aegonfort yet still held grand hopes for things to come.

*It would be a gift from the gods if they left on good terms… or at least less hostile ones.*

*If mother could see her way to embracing Myrcella in the end, anything’s possible.*

There was no delaying Robb’s return to the North any longer. The fighting against the Greyjoys raged on and Robb wished to deliver Myrcella to Winterfell himself before joining the fray. There was no talk of war the morning the King and Queen in the North departed Dragonstone, only
heartfelt farewells.

“So now we must attend our kingdoms.” Robb had told Sansa as they hugged, her older brother kissing her cheeks as she blinked back tears. “No tears, sweet Sansa, you were born to be a queen. We shall see each other again. Until that day, let the years blow along like a leaf on the wind.”

Tears would have followed that had they not tensed to see mother approach Myrcella. The two queens both acted unsure and uncomfortable when mother took Myrcella awkwardly in her arms. All were stunned to watch the dowager queen kissing and embracing the gooddaughter she’d barely spoken with this entire trip.

“I trust you will care for my son.” Mother said when she parted from Myrcella. “Him and Winterfell and all its people. They will depend on you as you may depend on them. The North can be harsh, so you must become a wolf. For the sake of my grandchild, be strong, Myrcella Stark. Winter is coming.”

“The Starks endure.” Myrcella answered, hands on her stomach and pride flashing in her green eyes. “May my reign be half as great as the queen which came before me. May my children be spared the sin of my… be spared my sins. I hope to do you proud, Catelyn Stark, Queen in the North.”

Sansa hadn’t minded how hollow her parting words to Myrcella sounded after mother’s. She would miss Myrcella, the pain of their shared time at Storm’s End had withered away with each new day they spent together. Robb and Myrcella deserved to be happy and Sansa willed the winds to carry their ship swiftly on the White Harbor.

Her brother took few ships with him for that journey, nothing compared to the fleet which escorted the Gardener family on to Oldtown. King Mace had left Dragonstone a happy man. The threat from the Iron Islands pushed Robb to accept a pact with the Reach king to battle the reavers together. Much of the northern fleet now travelled on to Oldtown, along with some of Jon’s finest dromonds, including the Alysanne. The fleets of the Redwynes or the Gardeners dwarfed their own, yet Rhaegar had surely gifted them a powerful force.

Jon’s concerns over joining any new conflicts were dissuaded by the advantages they reaped by adding to Oldtown and the Starry Sept’s defense. The High Septon’s gratitude was no meager thing and she’d rather have Mace thinking of Jon as a potential ally than an upstart rival. If Jon could forge strong bonds of friendship across the Seven Kingdoms, they might be able to safeguard the fragile peace the Highlands now enjoyed.

So when evening fell on Blackwater Bay, it was friendship and peace Sansa strived to foster in the Aegonfort’s timber hall.

She hoped the smell of fresh timber and the newness of the hall made up for its dampness and less than lavish furnishings. Lyanna helped with that last part when she set Ethan and Tumco to carrying in a large banner.

“Jon, you have a crown and a kingdom all your own.” Lyanna gathered all attention on her as men set to hefting the banner up on the wall. “Now it is time to set you apart from all other kings on both sides of the Narrow Sea.”

With that the banner was unfurled and all beheld one very similar to that of the Targaryen Empire. The backing was black and a three-headed dragon snarled for all to see. Save that this dragon was the purest white, like snow itself.

“Marvelous!” Sansa clapped in delight, being sure to grab Aegon’s attention. “Now all will forever
remember the kinship between the two halves of House Targaryen.”

“Well said.” Rhaegar lifted a goblet to toast his wife and banner itself. “To the white dragons of Westeros!”

“To the red dragons of the empire!” Jon answered, holding his cup out towards Aegon and Rhaenys. Though he hesitated some, Aegon followed their lead and joined with the rest of those embracing the goodwill of the moment.

“To King Jon and Queen Sansa.” Aegon nodded their way. “May they look back on this time with fond memories.”

“May we all!” Mother added which set Rickon to clinking a goblet with hers and drinking deeply before she could stop him.

Many laughed and more drank which made Sansa sit back and take it all in. As Lyanna returned to her seat she whispered something to Aemon which set the ancient man to smiling and nodding. When the High Queen drew near to Rhaegar he took her arm and kissed at his wife’s hand before looking to his sons with pride. Aegon was actually smiling when he summoned a serving man to refill Rhaenys’s cup, the princess then sharing a knowing look with Nym. When Gendry leaned in to fill Arya’s goblet himself she caught him in a kiss, which left the new lord holding the pitcher half raised between them as he kissed his wife.

Jon was more subtle, his hand sliding up Sansa’s back so his fingers could run through her hair.

“I wish this could last forever.” She whispered to him and looking to where Rhaegar and Lyanna shared a drink from the same cup. “When we are that age, I want this. To be happy, surrounded by family, to see Aemma and Rhaegina grown and with families of their own.”

“A dream we share.” Jon replied, rubbing her back in an absent manner. “Though I want better for our children. I pray our girls are never as divided as Aegon and I have become.”

“That will mend, you will mend it. After the meal, do as you offered along the river. Speak with your brother, listen to him. You won our kingdom with more than the sword, through good deeds and honest words was this conquest made.”

“A half truth at best.” Jon placed a chaste kiss on her lips, the kind which sent a burst of heat working through her chest. “I would be no king if not for my queen. This kingdom was born of your wisdom and bravery, Sansa. If there is any peace to be had between Aegon and I this night, it is thanks to you.”

She was not given the chance to argue against that. Jon kissed her again and it lasted long enough to draw attention this time. Lyanna laughed loudly and pointed their way.

“To my granddaughters, Aemma and Rhaegina!” Lyanna raised her cup. “Who may gain some siblings from this night!”

Her cheeks had burned at the laughter which followed but Jon made no move to remove his hand from her hair. It stayed there as the evening wore on and the good cheer continued. All ate heartily of fresh fish and capons or drank of the wine won from Princess Margaery in a wager. Rhaegar congratulated Barristan once again for his victory over the Prince of Flowers in the duels but her knight acted far too humble.

“Young Loras likely went easy on me due to my age. Time is a far less forgiving adversary.”
“The knight is surely wise.” Aemon weathered face wrinkled in a smile. “For one so young.”

Not long after the old man’s jest, a servant informed Jon that Aegon meant to leave the hall. The heir intended to take in the night with a walk about the grounds of the Aegonfort. Though no invitation was actually offered, Jon took Aegon’s meaning and departed to join him.

Sansa stayed in the hall and worried on what words might pass between the brothers. Not even Rhaegar playing his harp kept her mind from wandering, until a wanderer stole her attention altogether.

Aemon had risen from his seat and found his way to her, looking quite weary.

“Your grace, I have a boon to ask. Might I be permitted to visit with your daughters once more? I know the hour is late so I would do my best not to disturb them.”

Sansa was thankful that Aemon asked, for it gave her a reason to retire from the hall. She guided Aemon by his arm, careful to mind her steps as they left the hall into the damp night air. The keep stood near to it and Dark Order men bowed when they passed within its thick, oak doors.

Their journey up the keep was marked by the creaking of steps and passed with idle chatter. They talk of the plans Jon and her had for the Aegonfort and the lands around. How Jon hoped to raise a proper stone castle as soon as possible and would trade his estates in the empire for the gold needed. He also wanted to build a bridge across the Blackwater Rush, to control the river and the south side of the shore. Sansa named that a daunting task before speaking of how she wanted to raise a wonder of a kind she had never seen before.

“A theatre.” She said. “Like those in Volantis and Lys. Jon has told me of them, places of song and music, where all people can gather to share in things of beauty.”

“As a young man, I spent many a night at the theatre.” Aemon wheezed from the climb. “In the span of a few hours I could go from laughing to weeping to dreaming of adventure. I have not heard of theatres or their like in Westeros.”

“Nor have I. It was Margaery and Rhaegar playing together on Dragonstone that made me think of it. A mix of east and west come together for the joy of us all. That’s why I want a theatre, to help bring our different peoples together.”

“A lovely idea.” Aemon’s Valyrian came out as smooth as silk. “When it is completed, do invite me. I enjoy music so.”

She promised to do so as they finally reached the chambers she shared with her family. They were not large, perhaps about the size of mother’s back in Winterfell. Their grandest feature was a large window and balcony which faced out over the river and bay. Two nursemaids sat sewing to the opposite side of the room, where Aemma and Rhaegina slept peacefully in their cradle. Sansa sent the maids on so Aemon and she could behold the twins alone.

Aemma was pressed close against Rhaegina, their tiny hands touching and chests rising slightly with each new breath. Jon was intent on having a crown forged for her yet Sansa felt these two were the finest treasures he could give her.

“They sleep?” Aemon asked in a whisper.

“They do. The sleep of the innocent.”

“How I envy them.”
Aemon did something odd then. He lifted his hand to hover over the resting babes. Then he set to moving it about in a strange pattern, muttering something in a kind of High Valyrian she could not follow. There was nothing ominous about his actions, for Aemon’s words were spoken in a kindly and caring manner.

After a time his mystery chant ended and the old man smiled to grasp the cradle again.

“A blessing from Old Valyria.” He explained. “Long forgotten until I stumbled on some scrolls during my travels. I wish these young ones long lives and that their dragons soar so high at to tempt the sun and touch the stars.”

“I’d love to learn it.” She returned her gaze to the girls. “So that I might teach Rhaegina and Aemma one day. Then they could teach their children. Let the memory of Valyria reach across the sea and live again, here in a new land.”

A pleased sound escaped from Aemon, who nodded along with her words.

“I shall ask that Tarly fellow to put the rites to parchment for you. Your words of a new land remind me of a tale I used to tell the children. Jon and Aegon heard it as babes, as did Rhaegar and his mother, Rhaella. I’d stand over their cradles and whisper the fables of the Freehold. To keep the memory alive, like you said. Most were about dragons and their riders. Of how simple shepherds tamed the might of fire made flesh. One story I told more than most. An ancient one about a forgotten time when our people shared Valyria with an older, wiser race. Strange creatures that left our lands long before we ascended to greatness. The tales say the old ones chased the sun itself, following it to where it set in some strange land. They scorned simple stone or wood, harnessing the light itself to raise a glittering city of unimaginable magnificence. A place of dreams. One we Valyrians were not fit to share in though the best of us aspired to reach.”

Sansa was enthralled by this. “What was it called?”

“Aevalon.”

She made Aemon tell her more of the tale. How some believed there to be some truth to it. That perhaps the mythical city was Asshai, though it lay east rather than west. Others talked of the mysterious black stone foundation of the Hightower in Oldtown, its origins ancient and unexplained. Aemon himself preferred to think the story was just what it appeared to be, a story.

“Something to inspire us to explore. To seek new lands. A better fate. A better us.”

Some time later, after Aemon was led back to his chambers by a steward, the fable kept her mind alive with interest. When Talia appeared to help her prepare for bed she barely listened to the lady’s talk of Jeyne and Olyvar disappearing into the moonlit night together.

Talia was gone when Sansa stepped out onto her small balcony to take in the view without. The wind blew through her unbraided hair, reaching through her thin shift to raise goose pimples on her skin. The moonlight set the dark waters of the bay to gleaming and she could hear the sound of waves crashing against the rocks far below. The smell of the sea did not bother her here, not like it would on a ship, so she grew bold. She leaned against the rail in hopes of feeling the mist which so often rose from crashing waves. There was no way it could reach so high yet she closed her eyes and hoped all the same.

Only to be graced with a touch she yearned for even more.

“You’ll catch a chill.” Jon brushed the hair from her neck and placed his cloak around her shoulders.
His fingers lingered on her bare skin and his warm breath against her neck set her to sighing.

“Thought to be abed before you returned.” She leaned back into Jon’s embrace, turning her head to seek his face, which was still creased with worry. “How did things go with Aegon?”

“Poorly at first. Then better.” The moon’s brightness turned his grey eyes to silver when they looked into hers. “We spoke on much and one thing is clear, things cannot be what they were between us. Not after all that’s happened, not with who Aegon and I have become. I have gained a crown but lost my brother it seems.”

“Oh Jon…” She stroked his face and beard, for there was a sadness to his words.

“I made my choices, Aegon made his. Tonight though, pledges were made. Aegon swore that should the Highlands ever be in need, we can count on his aid. I pledged to support Aegon whenever he should ascend the throne. If Nym births a son, we will accept his legitimacy, whether Rhaenys does or not.”

That bothered her some, for it made her think of Daenerys and Baelyon. How would she feel if that woman tried to name her bastard as Jon’s legitimate son? Of course Jon held Rhaegina to be his heir and still trusted in Sansa to deliver a son, but the worry still nagged at her.

Perhaps in time Daenerys will change her mind again and tell Aegon the truth.

Or it might be Jon who chooses to abandon the ruse…

“Worry not.” Jon spoke as if hearing her thoughts. “We shall soon be free of the empire’s politics. Or at least be far removed from them. It is the Seven Kingdoms and our place in them that we will think on from this day forward. Just not this night, for I wish to devote myself to something far lovelier.”

“Your father’s harp?” She asked, feigning innocence as Jon slowly bid her back into the chambers.

“The arrival of the freedmen?”

“You mock me.” He backed up against the bed and growled when Sansa avoided his attempts at kissing her, too busy working at the laces of his garments.

“I prepare my husband for bed. Surely he is exhausted and eager to rest.”

When his chest was laid bare and her hands and mouth roamed across it Jon had to choke back a grunt. Both were mindful of the sleeping twins at the other side of the room. A reminder of the love Jon and Sansa shared. Of the passion both were now eagerly giving in to.

When his breeches were unlaced she pushed Jon onto the bed. He refused to lay back and pulled her down so that she straddled his lap. His strong arms lifted her shift above her head, his eyes roaming hungrily over Sansa’s bare body. A hand cupped at her breast, kneading it gently while the other moved onto her shoulder and the scar there. Once Sansa might have cringed at that. Tried to hide.

Now she had not the time to care. Jon pulled her down so their lips met in a mix of hunger and longing. He tasted of wine and something unique to her love alone, his beard scratching against her face in a way that bid her hips to jerk against his cock. Her sex was now pressed right against that hardness, Sansa gasping at how badly she wanted to feel him within her.

When Jon finally eased onto his back he took hold of her hips, looking up from where his cock now rubbed against her to meet her gaze. His face was contorted in a pained expression of lust, she could feel his hips and shoulders tensing.
“Do not make me wait.” His Valyrian came out in a rasp and she bit her lip in anticipation when she raised her hips. “I went too many years without you, Sansa Stark. I cannot go another moment.”

He didn’t. She sank down upon him and both fought to keep their gasps as quiet as possible. They wouldn’t let their lovemaking wake the babes they had made together. Not when they slept so peacefully, here in the home Jon’s men had raised for them. As Sansa lowered herself so their chests touched she thought of the castle Jon promised to build.

Their lips were locked together, his hands pulling her hips back and forth when she pictured the pair of them standing together as a glittering city rose up all around.

Sansa couldn’t imagine how much better things could be through the haze of lust and love she felt right now. Yet she wanted things to be better. For Jon and her to become even happier. To reach new heights together. To create something which would inspire the same kind of hope in others Jon had done with her.

An Aevalon of their own.

Chapter End Notes

Many people offered suggestions for what to name Jon and Sansa's new capital so I'd like to thank you all. Several offered variations of Avalon and I really liked it. Most came on anon but a commenter here named Archangel gets my thanks for that.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

After a long wait, the coming of spring, a return of loved ones, and threats to those held most dear.

Chapter Notes

Myrcella's chapter is more than six and half years from where we left of. Sansa's is around seven.

THE HIGHGUARD

The envy of every ruler, the Highguard are as dedicated to their duty as they are deadly with their blades.

Sworn to protect the High King and the royal family with their lives, the Highguard place their loyalty to the crown above all other things. They can hold no lands, take no wives, nor father any children. Their service to the High King can only end with their dying breath. Most meet that fate by faithfully upholding their vows. Yet if a Highguard fails in his duties, as a shameful few have, his life becomes forfeit.

The elite order was formed following the founding of the Targaryen Empire. After Aegon the Conqueror nearly fell to a sorrowful assassin, High Queen Visenya suggested the founding of the first Highguard. Visenya wanted more than simple bodyguards, she wanted a brotherhood that displayed the grandness and might of the empire itself. Thus a hundred warriors from across the known world were drawn together to form the first Highguard.

Any man willing to pledge their life to the High King may aspire to join the guard, whether he be from the noblest of families or a foreigner from some distant land. To prove himself, a warrior must battle a Highguard of the king’s choosing. Should his blade prove true and victory is won, this warrior true earns the honor of donning the white cloak and handing his life and blade over to the High King.

Some offer their king even more. It is not unheard of for a Highguard to serve upon the Council of Heralds or to serve as regent. Moredo Rogare was the only Highguard among Aegon the Third’s many regents, though some feel he misused that influence to wed his sister Larra to the king’s brother, Viserys.

Few Highguard have played as influential a role in the empire as Ser Arthur Dayne, the Sword of the Morning. Recruited from the hills of Dorne, Arthur Dayne was rumored to be the first of the Highguard to turn from the Mad King in favor of Prince Rhaegar. It was the knight who first
warned Rhaegar that Aerys meant to move against him. Ser Arthur who spirited Princess Elia and her children away from Summerhall to Qohor. The Sword of the Morning who rallied the Qohorik and Norvosi to march against the Mad King’s armies along the Rhoyne.

One of the first acts of Rhaegar’s reign as High King was to name Arthur as his Lord-Commander of the Highguard. He serves in that position to this day, the noblest of guardians, serving the most worthy of causes.

The protection of his king.

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MYRCELLA

Winter had come and gone.

Now spring had arrived at Winterfell and nowhere was that more obvious than in the godswood. The grey gloom had lifted and everywhere snow was melting from the bare branches of oaks and elms, to the needle canopies of great sentinel pines.

It was nothing short of a miracle.

I thought it would never end. Almost three years of winter. Long nights of unending snow and deep, merciless cold.

Old Nan was right. I had to become a Stark to learn what winter truly was.

That was a lesson the little boy holding her hand would never have to learn. Born in the midst of winter, the cold was the only world her youngest son had ever known. Now the two-year-old seemed unsure of what to make of things. He pressed close to her leg, gaping at a nearby pine that was almost entirely free of its snowy cloak.

“Gween.” Her son pointed to the tree, tugging on her hand. “Mama, gween!”

“Yes, it’s very green.” She smiled at the boy, who was so bundled in wools and furs that he looked twice his size. Little of his sweet features could be seen, save for his eyes.

Green, like my eyes. And yours Tommen.

In truth she thought her son’s eyes were a brighter green, twinkling like polished jade. When Tom was born, Myrcella had many fine northern names picked out. All of which Robb cast aside when the boy opened his eyes.

“Cella, look at him.” Robb’s voice had been soft and sad. “I know your mind, love. You gave me your heart so give our son a name that I know you hold close to it.”

That same heart swelled now to lead little Tom through the godswood \ for she and her brother had done the same at Storm’s End as children. Tommen always used to hold her hand as they strolled through the garden, the castle walls echoing with the sounds of waves breaking against the cliffs.

This godswood rang with different sounds. The patter of melting snow striking the ground. The crunch of their feet upon fresh sheets of snow. The splashing of water and outbursts of laughter from two voices, one deeper and robust, the other high-pitched and youthful.

Robb was waist deep in the hot springs, water dripping down his face and thick auburn beard. His
broad chest was steaming in the open air, his thick arms open wide. At the edge of the pool stood a scrawny boy wearing nothing but linen drawers. The five-year-old shook his long, golden locks before taking a mighty leap at his father.

Robb caught their boy with ease yet leapt backwards all the same, disappearing beneath the dark waters of the hot spring with their son. When they came up, both were sputtering and howling with laughter.

These were the Starks of Winterfell.

“Throw me, father!” Eddard demanded as he swam about. “I’ll do a spin!”

“Just the one?” Robb laughed. “I’ll see my boy doing two! Two or I feed you to Grey Wind! He looks mighty hungry.”

The aging direwolf looked anything but as he lay against an ironwood, watching the pair with an exhausted sigh. That is until the wolf’s ears perked up and he looked their way.

“Gwey!” Tom squealed, pulling free from her grasp to toddle at the beast. Grey Wind crossed the distance between them in a flash, his jaws closing around the nape of Tom’s furs and lifting the child high. Once such a thing might have terrified Myrcella, now it made her laugh to see the direwolf carrying Tom about.

“Mother!” Ned waved from the water, beaming with a wide smile. “Watch father throw me again!”

“Again?” She gave Robb a disapproving look, the king sinking into the water in an attempt to hide. “I’d rather you get some clothes on before you catch a chill. I thought we agreed? No swimming until it was warmer.”

“They’re called hot springs, mother.” Ned rolled his Tully blue eyes. “Besides, father says I have wolf’s blood! Cold doesn’t bother us!”

“He’s fine, love.” Robb popped out of the water enough to argue. “I swam with my father in colder weather. Younger too. Why, our boy’s half a man already.”

“Don’t say such things.” She chided, sitting herself on a rock near to the springs. “How do you know I didn’t have other reasons for keeping Ned from swimming? Perhaps I thought to take a swim myself...”

Her raised eyebrow left no mistake to her meaning. Together, she and Robb had enjoyed many a swim in these springs. Times of naked frolicking and passion that often left them clinging to each other as the steam wafted around their bodies. She was sure Tom had been conceived during one of those swims.

“Then come swim now.” Ned suggested innocently. “We can stay in here for hours-”

“No a chance.” Robb swam her way. “You’re getting out right now, son. I’ll throw you another day. There are some tricks your mother needs to show me.”

“Not a chance.” She teased, laughing to jerk her leg away as Robb lunged at her. “There’s no time for such-”

“There’s always time for that.”

“Hush.” Myrcella blushed, enjoying the hungry look Robb gave her. “I was taking Ned to see the
new litter of puppies that Farlen was talking about when a rider came through the East Gate. A Dreadfort man. Your brother will be here shortly.”

Ned choked on the water he was spitting up into the air. “Uncle Bran!? He’s here?”

“He shall be, and won’t you make the sight?”

Ned was already climbing out of the spring. “Hurry! We’re going to look bad! Hey!”

As Grey Wind carried Tom around, the wolf dipped his head down enough for Tom to snatch up Ned’s shirt. Now Robb and Myrcella were treated to the sight of their eldest chasing the direwolf, with a babe in its jaws, waving a shirt about in glee.

“Gods.” Robb rubbed at his temples. “Let Bran see this. If he knew what ruckus these pups get up to he might stop complaining so much about the Dreadfort.”

She hoped this was only an idle thought and not a sign of how Bran’s visit would go.

Bran had shown Myrcella much kindness when she came to Winterfell five years ago. If some strange northern custom confused her, it was Bran who would help with a smile. They’d shared many a dance together in the Great Hall when Robb could not. When he departed for the Dreadfort, Myrcella missed Bran as dearly as a true brother.

At first Bran was excited at the prospect of getting a castle of his own and holding it in service to his brother. Over time though, all things change. The Dreadfort was distant and ill-omened, and while Myrcella had spent the winter among family, Bran weathered it isolated and far away from all he knew. The Dreadfort had become a matter of dispute between the two brothers, leading to a flurry of angry letters flying between their castles.

“How can he be so ungrateful?” Robb had asked after a particularly ugly exchange. “I give him a castle! Lands! How does Bran repay me? By giving me nothing but grief!”

“This isn’t how you want things to be.” Myrcella had tried to soothe his anger. “Nor Bran, I imagine. He misses his home. His family. Invite your brother to visit us here. Time away from the Dreadfort will do him well.”

Though she rarely interfered regarding Robb’s family, he heeded her words. It was awkward to offer opinions on the other Starks, for she was only one in name.

Who am I to lecture anyone? My eldest brother was a monster.

My youngest brother was murdered by our mother, who many whisper has gone mad.

And my father...

Myrcella pushed away such thoughts as Robb emerged from the hot springs and helped gather up the boys. There was much to be done, and both of them wanted Bran to feel welcome back in Winterfell. The castle and its people needed some glad tidings.

The North had spent the winter beset with death. By the time autumn ended, the Greyjoys still held large swaths of the northern coast. Such was her ignorance of the North, Myrcella had expected the fighting to end with the cold winds and snows.

“My people will press the attack.” Robb had told her. “Greybeards, second or third sons, extra mouths that seek not to burden their families. They’ll fight and die like true northmen.”
And so they had. Nearly all of what the ironmen held was retaken, save the lands about Cape Kraken and the castle of Flint’s Finger. The cost had been dire though.

Galbart Glover fell at Sea Dragon Point and Winterfell lost Ser Rodrik Cassel during the fighting along the Stoney Shore. Robb called it a mercy that Helman Tallhart had died during the Westerlands campaigns consider the losses that the ironmen would inflict on his family. The lord’s brother Leobald was slain in a duel with some Harlaw, and his heir Benfred fell near the Rills. Then poor Eddara Tallhart, Helman’s daughter and Lady of Torrhen’s Square, lost her husband Cley to a reaver’s axe.

Cley Cerwyn had been a good friend of Robb’s, and he had vowed vengeance against the Greyjoys come spring. So while Myrcella welcomed an end to winter, it also caused her great unease.

Her heart went out to Lady Eddara, for losing Robb was her greatest fear.

*I could not bear life without him. Whether to lose him to the Stranger… or by my family’s deeds… it would be my end.*

The only life Myrcella wanted was the one that she and Robb had made here in the North. It was hard to keep the dark thoughts at bay when she came face to face with reminders of her past.

Septa Eglantine and Joy Hill awaited them in the Great Keep. Joy wore a blue wool gown and had her honey-colored hair tied into a braid. The older septa was garbed in white from head to toe, a disapproving frown upon her face.

“By the Mother, say you are not wet!” Septa Eglantine touched at Ned’s damp blonde curls while Joy lifted Tom up. “This land is half frozen and so shall you be!”

“You sound like mother.” Ned struggled against the septa’s inspections.

“I tended your royal mother from a small girl to womanhood. It would be a blessing to see you live to become a man, which won’t happen if you catch a chill.”

“This one is dry.” Joy put in with a smile, patting Tom’s bottom. “In all the right places. I wager he’ll cause us some trouble when he gets older, won’t you little one?”

Tom giggled and waved about the end of Joy’s braid while Eglantine tried to dry Ned’s head with one of her skirts. This whole scene was her husband’s doing. It was Robb who had sent word south seeking companionship for his queen.

The Faith were eager to send Eglantine north, yet Robb’s invitation for her cousin Rosamund to join them at Winterfell was met with disdain from Casterly Rock. Instead of Rosamund, King Tywin sent along Joy, the bastard daughter of her Myrcella’s uncle Gerion. The insult was obvious and Joy had arrived with a cloud hanging over her.

Yet Myrcella refused to send the girl away. Joy was a sweet soul and eager to prove herself as a handmaiden to a queen. Truly, both women made life at Winterfell easier, though some of Robb’s bannermen still begrudged their presence.

*They think any associated with Lannisters cannot be trusted.*

*Northmen see Tywin as deceitful and corrupt. They call my mother a kinslayer, a woman who defies the laws of gods and men.*

*If they only knew…*
“We heard Prince Bran is near.” Joy said as she set Tom down once more. “Will her grace be wanting a different gown for the occasion?”

“No, this will be fine.” She opened her cloak to display her light grey, wool gown, embroidered with white branches and red leaves along the bodice.

“You have finer gowns.” The septa continued to battle with Ned. “That crimson one sent by your uncle Tyrion perhaps? After all, this is a Prince of Winterfell, brother to the King of Winter. Surely some amount of grandeur is in order?”

“The North holds little regard for such things. They see it as frivolity, a sign of southron decadence.” Eglantine looked ready to retort when the sound of wood tapping against stone drew their eyes to the stairs.

“The student has become the teacher.” Maester Luwin leaned upon his cane, grinning wearily. “Septa, you made Myrcella into a fine southron princess, yet when it comes to understanding the Stark lands, heed our Queen in the North.”

Joy moved to aid the old man. “I would’ve helped you down the stairs.”

“Nonsense.” Luwin gently waved off her efforts. “I’ve made more journeys on these stairs than some Starks. Speaking of, I’ve yet to see a Stark child catch a chill after a swim in those hot springs. The water may have medicinal qualities…”

“There’s a first for everything.” The septa countered. “And I’d rather garb Prince Eddard in some warm, dry clothes before he becomes a cautionary tale.”

Myrcella nodded at that before looking to Joy. “I’d have you journey to the kitchens. I want a decent meal waiting for Bran. Northmen do respect good fare.” Luwin coughed awkwardly then. “Yes, maester, I know the stores are not what they could be. But this is Bran we speak of and Robb will not want to look miserly. If there’s folly in this, the blame shall fall on my shoulders.”

“How reckless.” Joy smirked as she tied her cloak. “I’m sure the king would punish you most severely. He’d likely harangue you so late into the night, you would both arise late the next morning.”

Myrcella and Luwin gaped at the bawdiness of the comment as Joy took off with a laugh. Septa Eglantine was not so entertained, her hands cupped about Ned’s ears.

“Such lewdness is what led to that girl being born a Hill.” Eglantine said. “Better to be chaste and virtuous than have a bastard born on the wrong side of the sheets.”

She knew the septa meant well but those words unsettled her mind.

Nothing felt right again until she found herself in the throne room with her family.

Eglantine had done such swift work with Ned that when the horns sounded above the East Gate, her eldest boy stood at her feet alongside Tom. Above them Robb sat his throne, winking down at their sons. A whine from Grey Wind warned of their guests’ arrival a moment before the hall doors opened and a party of men entered. Hallis Mollen and Harwin led the way, both having left with Bran to establish his hold over the Dreadfort. As had the large direwolf walking with them.

Summer was the same as ever, unlike his master, who Myrcella hardly recognized. The three years had changed the lanky youth she’d known into a man. Though Bran kept his face clean-shaven, his
hair hung long, just lower than his shoulder in length. He had a stocky build now, and while only ten and nine, Myrcella believed Bran to be taller than Robb. The prince’s garb set him apart as well, for he wore a fine cloak of sable with what looked to be raven feathers sewn about the shoulders.

The only thing that hadn’t changed was his smile, still so bright and warm.

“Brother!” Bran called out. “Forgive a moment’s delay! I see a queen that is in desperate need of a brotherly embrace.”

When Bran came at her with open arms, Myrcella threw propriety aside and accepted his embrace. The lack of bowing and curtsies likely left Septa Eglantine beside herself yet it was worth it to feel Bran’s gentle squeeze.

“You’re so close to how I remember.” Bran whispered in her ear. “The heart of Winterfell, beating as loud as ever. No winter could dampen the good in you.”

“Oh Bran, we’ve missed you dearly. Though I don’t recall you being such a poet.”

“It’s not poetry, only my dreams.” Bran answered as he pulled away. “It is good to be back, I belong here more than there. Though elsewhere more than here.”

Myrcella was perplexed by that yet Bran’s attention soon turned to the boys. Ned bowed in a polite manner, which set Bran to laughing and doing the same. When his eyes fell on Tom, the little boy cowered some behind her skirts.

“Fear me not, little one.” Bran knelt, hand outstretched. “I haven’t had the chance to meet you yet, but I’m your uncle Bran. If you give me the chance, I’ll help you fly.”

That’s what Bran used to call it when he tossed Ned up into the air, something her son clearly remembered with joy.

“I want to fly!” Ned jumped up and down in earnest. “Uncle Bran, let me fly again!”

“That will have to wait.”

Robb had descended the throne to open his arms as well. Though Grey Wind and Summer were playfully nipping at each other, there was no sign of dispute between the Stark brothers as they held one another.

“Too long, too bloody long.” Robb backed away to pat Bran’s shoulders. “Look at you now. The Dreadfort has been good to you. I might have to pay you a visit next time.”

Robb’s smile was not returned.

“Take the Dreadfort for all I care.” Bran said in that same cryptic tone. “It was never meant to be my home.”

She caught the flash of anger across Robb’s face and sought a way to avoid a fight. Thus she made to take her husband’s arm, smiling warmly.

“Bran had a long ride. We should retire to the Great Hall. The kitchens have prepared a fine meal. Some food and drink will make this reunion all the better.”

Robb looked unsure for a moment, but when he caught Bran telling Ned the story of when the direwolves were found, the king guffawed loudly.
“Don’t be filling the boy’s head with lies! I was the one who found the wolves!”

“Oh, you found them.” Bran winked. “But I convinced father to keep them.”

The argument over this delighted Ned and lasted well after all journeyed to the Great Hall. The fare could hardly be called a feast, yet the wine was good and the elk meat was garnished nicely with onions and the last of their Dornish peppers. Hallis Mollen raised quite the clamor to drink alongside Jory and Alyn again. Tom earned a rebuke from Eglantine and a laugh from Joy when he tossed a bone to Summer, only for Grey Wind to snatch it away in midair. To the entertainment of the hall, Grey Wind led Summer on a chase between the trestle tables. Bran was laughing loudly when Robb reached below the table to take hold of her hand.

“A good start to spring.” He said, kissing her cheek. “Though I’m tempted to forego my plans for Bran, the way he’s been acting.”

“He’s likely just weary from his travels.” She suggested.

“My arse is sore from the saddle but my hearing’s just fine.” Bran grinned next to them. “My ears are as sharp’s as a direwolf’s though.”

“And your wit as dry as my wine.” Robb raised an eyebrow as he sipped of his goblet, causing Bran to chuckle some.

“Fine, I apologize. I shouldn’t have been listening in. Though I was hoping to hear some gossip. After weeks on horseback, I’m a bit starved for news of our family to the south. How goes the war with the Reach?”

“Well, as far as the ravens say.” Robb said. “Mace Gardener forgot that Jon's mother is a Stark. None fight a winter war better than those with the wolfsblood. Last we heard, Lord Baratheon defeated an army under Mathis Rowan on the Mander. It was about time Gendry fought with his bannermen rather than against them.”

Myrcella choked back a large gulp of wine then. In the years since Gendry took possession of Storm’s End, he’d had to put down two rebellions against his rule. Rebellions fought in her name and those of her sons. She wanted nothing to do with Storm’s End yet once Eddard was born several Stormlords rose against Jon and Gendry, declaring her son their rightful king. Robb refused any northern support for such a cause and it was crushed soon after. A second rebellion that came a few years later ended the same, which Myrcella felt was just, considering the foul reason it was launched.

“Gendry was right to punish those traitors.” Myrcella said after another sip of wine. “They tried to take advantage of Sansa and Jon’s suffering. To launch a rebellion while their son sat at death’s door… it was too cruel.”

“The boy lived.” Robb rubbed her arm thoughtfully. “His parents made him of too hardy stock to let some fever take him. Oh!” His mood cheered abruptly. “Bran, you would not have heard! You’re an uncle again!”

“Sansa had the babe?” Bran asked, seemingly unsurprised. “A daughter, was it not?”

Bran had guessed right. While Jon was away at war, Sansa had brought their fourth child into this world.

“We’ve yet to learn her name.” Myrcella admitted. “Queen Catelyn wrote to Robb that both mother and babe were well. We had the boys say prayers for both in the sept and to the heart tree.”
“I think Sansa would prefer ships over prayers.” Bran looked sharply at Robb. “Whatever victories Jon has won, we should not have let him fight alone. Uncle Benjen had a whole fleet sitting idle at White Harbor.”

“Those ships are where I need them.” Robb shot back, his mirth gone and replaced with the lord's face he wore for bannermen. “The Highlands and Dorne fought together against the Reach. Our kingdom faces its trials alone. Go and seek Lord Cerwyn and ask after his son, or visit the marker for Ser Rodrik.”

“I could never forget Cley or Rodrik! I wanted to fight with them, but you exiled me to that godsforsaken castle! What if Princess Margaery had convinced her husband to join the war against the Highlands? Jaime Lannister is a killer!”

Myrcella flinched to hear the name, as she had when word first came of the marriage between Princess Margaery and Jaime Lannister. Many of Robb’s bannermen worried that the might of the Rock and Reach would be brought against them, yet no unified army of the west had come to bear. The lions had not strayed from Casterly Rock, something Myrcella was endlessly thankful for.

Sadly, Robb was far from impressed by Bran at the moment.

“Whatever the Lannisters are, I am your king. You will not question me in mine own hall, at my own table. I did not abandon Jon or Sansa. Had the lions stirred, Edmure was ready to rally the riverlords to aid the Highlands in the fight. Sending Benjen and the White Harbor fleet was out of the question. They are needed for our fight against the Iron Islands. The same goes for you.”

“Me?” Bran repeated and Myrcella sensed the moment was not right for this.

“Surely such can be discussed later.” She waved for more wine. “Bran, what have you heard of Gendry and Arya’s child? I’m afraid Arya’s letters are far less frequent—”

“No, Cella.” Robb kept his eyes on Bran. “My brother is full of questions, perhaps some of my answers will finally bring him to heel. Then he might treat me with the respect he once gave our father when he was king.”

Bran blinked in shock. “I—I’m only trying to warn you! The lions will run through fields of green—”

“Forget the lions, it’s the krakens who hold Flint’s Finger and still ravage our shores. With spring upon us, those longships will return. They’ll try and steal away what good men spent the winter fighting and dying to make ours again. I refuse to let that happen and the Lannisters will be key to stopping the ironmen.”

Before Bran could question that Robb’s attention turned to where Jory and Alyn were engaged in an arm wrestling match, an attempt to impress Joy she thought.

“Jory! It’s time to talk of our work at Torrhen’s Square.” Robb folded his fists before him. “All that Lannister gold we won in the war, it was put to good use, was it not?”

“Yes, my king.” Jory answered with pride. “It was enough to buy wood and labor, shipmasters and blacksmiths, and keep them working on a fleet all winter long.”

“An eastern fleet.” Robb added for Bran’s benefit. “One the Greyjoys won’t be expecting. How many ships do we have now, Jory?”

“The last tally Lady Tallhart sent was a large one. A dozen longships and five war galleys at Torrhen’s Square alone. More at Barrowton and Bear Island. Then there’s that dromond. The Winter
Warrior is larger than anything in the Manderly fleet. Bigger than Lord Manderly even.”

Robb laughed. “Be kind, the lord’s girth is matched only by his loyalty. Soon he’ll be entrusting Benjen with his ships for the long voyage to the Sunset Sea. When the krakens come again, they’ll find wolves prowling the waters.”

It’s about time my family’s gold be used for some good... that something good can come from Casterly Rock...

“This is marvelous, Robb.” Bran’s grin had returned, yet he still seemed confused. “But you said I’d have a part in this. Am I to sail with uncle Benjen? I can send word to the Dreadfort to rally the men.”

“Yes, but ready them to march to Torrhen’s Square. I mean to add your strength to the Tallharts, and I’m naming you my new Warden of the Rills and Barrows.”

“That title belongs to House Dustin.” Bran replied and Robb nodded solemnly.

“And Willam Dustin did honor by it, but he’s dead and his only son is still but a boy. You did well ruling the North while I warred in the south. Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik said you heeded sage counsel and that you paired good sense with bravery. I will need that in the days ahead.”

“I’m honored, Robb.” Bran still sounded unsure, and Myrcella noted that his eyes fell. “I truly am, but this title should go to a lord of the west. Lord Ryswell perhaps.”

“You will be a lord of the west.” Robb slapped Bran’s back. “The Tallharts have suffered greatly and lack for men while you have plenty. Lady Eddara is now out of mourning and you are unwed. When I offered you as a husband, she readily agreed.”

“The lady remembers your kindness.” Myrcella added. “She trusts the Starks and has faith that you’ll help keep her lands and family safe.”

“Find someone else.” Bran’s rejection was so abrupt that Myrcella was unsure she heard it right. Robb was staring at his brother in bewilderment.

“What did you say?” Robb asked and Bran met his gaze without hesitation.

“I said find someone else. Marry Eddara to someone else. She can have the Dreadfort men if she needs them. She can have my sword as well. But seek another to marry her.”

“But Bran, she’s a fine woman.” She tried to keep her voice low but others were already looking their way, drawn by Robb’s darkening expression.

“She surely is.” Bran nodded. “So marry her to a good man. Robb, I held the Dreadfort for you. Don’t ask me to do this. I told you what I wanted-”

“Ask?” Robb thudded his goblet against the table, his jaw set in fury. “I do not ask. Your king told you his will, and you argue against it. Again. You talk to me of wants when it is your duty that should concern you. Sansa and Arya married who they were told to. Rickon will do the same. They set aside their wants-”

“Unlike you.” Bran shot back, drawing gasps from Eglantine and Luwin. “You didn’t marry for duty, you married who you wanted. Look how that turned out.”

Myrcella might’ve felt offended yet she heard no slight in Bran’s tone, nor did he look at her with
any malice, yet Robb took it for an insult and rose from the table.

“How dare you?!” Robb bellowed in anger. “Now you insult my wife?”

“I didn’t! That’s not what I meant!”

“Robb, it was nothing.” She tried to ease Robb’s mind and body back into his seat but he jerked free from her efforts to tower over Bran.

“I gave you a castle!” Robb shouted. “I gave you lands and title. Now I hand you a second castle and a noble bride, and you reward my kindness by insulting my Queen! If you mean to act like a petulant child, I will treat you like one. Your evening is at an end, Lord Stark, retire from my hall. Now.”

Bran was trembling in anger when he rose to stand face to face with Robb. The two brothers, so alike in both look and anger, stared hard-eyed at each other. In that moment, Myrcella thought of the direwolves and prayed that these Starks acted more like men than beasts. Her prayers were answered when Bran blinked.

“As my king commands.” He backed away a step to bow curtly before turning and striding away from the table and out of the hall. Tom started crying and Ned stared wide-eyed at his father.

“What did uncle Bran do?” Ned asked but he received no answer, Robb collapsing back into his chair.

“When did he become so selfish?” Robb asked of no one in particular. “Is the Dreadfort truly cursed? Did it make Bran like this?”

Myrcella felt the eyes on her and caught the furtive glances sent her way, northmen whispering amongst themselves. Blaming her for the brothers’ quarrel most likely.

She did not abide it for long. Under the guise of seeing the saddened boys on to bed, Myrcella excused herself from the hall. Robb did not argue and she left it to Jory and Maester Luwin to tend to his foul mood. Just as she tasked others to see to the boys.

*If I am going to be blamed for the bad blood here, I will do my best to remedy it.*

*This is my family now, I will not let it be torn apart.*

From the guardsmen she learned where Bran had gone, a place Myrcella dreaded to follow, where the ghosts of Starks long dead still roamed.

Her steps echoed through the passages of the crypts like Sansa’s cries would in the corridors of Storm’s End. Whenever Joffrey tortured Sansa, Tommen would crawl into Myrcella’s bed so they could weep together. Mother never offered him such comfort, in the end all she gave Tommen was death. Something her grandfather Tywin had dealt the Starks when he had King Eddard murdered.

It was that tomb she found now. Bran stood torch in hand, gazing up at the stone likeness of his father. If he heard her coming, he gave no sign, nor did she speak, fearful to interrupt the prince in paying his respects.

“I didn’t mean it.” Bran spoke first, looking over his shoulder to her with glistening eyes. “Not what Robb thought. He married who he wanted and now he has you as a queen. Who could ever think that was a bad thing?”
“Many people, Bran. A daughter of Cersei Lannister is not the queen many northerners envisioned having after the war. Not much has changed in that regard.”

“Not this.” Bran turned to face the status again. “Father will stay this way long after I’m gone to dust. When I was at the Dreadfort I thought about that. He’s the only one that will stay as I remembered. It’s been seven years since I saw any of the others except for mother.”

“You saw your mother? When?”

Bran exhaled, shaking his head. “I was not supposed to say… she came to visit me at the Dreadfort near the beginning. It was a short stay and she only came because I begged it of her.”

That hurt some to hear, for Robb had begged the same of Queen Catelyn for years now. She’d never come, not even when the boys were born. Robb always put it down to his mother’s dislike of traveling such great distances.

*Don’t fool yourself, it’s not the distance she scorns*

She ignored the hurt to deal with the matter at hand. “I’m glad you had some company at the Dreadfort. Don’t think Robb callous to your unhappiness. That’s why he thought of this marriage. You could make Torrhen’s Square your seat and raise a family there. Years could pass between visits to the Dreadfort.”

“I told Robb I’m not meant to have a family.” Bran tensed and made fists at his sides. “Or even to be a lord. My place is at the Wall.”

“You wish to take the black? But Bran, you’re a prince! You’re so young, with so much promise, why would you throw all of that away for the Wall?”

“I have to.” He spoke with resolve. “When I was at the Dreadfort, I was shown things. I was told where I belong. How I can be of use. I need to make Robb see.”

“Robb doesn’t need to see, he needs his brother.” Myrcella closed the distance between them until he met her gaze. “He’s proud Bran, too proud to tell you the burdens that are weighing on him. Or what’s at stake with this new campaign.”

“Then tell me.” Bran urged and she hesitated to do so. This was a matter for the Starks. To meddle in Robb’s affairs was something her mother would do. Yet after the scene in the hall and hearing Bran’s plans, she couldn’t hold back.

“Robb is caught between the north and south. The Northmen feel that they fought too many wars for the south only to lose their lands to the ironmen in turn. To them, Robb should be raising an army from the Riverlands to fight along the coasts.”

“That is… not unreasonable…”

“It is to the riverlords.” She noted. “Our meal tonight came from their lands. The northern lords left their fields untilled to fight in the south, so the Riverlands were taxed in stores to fill our granaries from theirs. That meant a leaner winter for the riverlords, when some of them believed they had already suffered enough.”

“Does Robb fear a rebellion?” Bran asked.

“Not just yet, but he’s walking a fine line. He’s levied men from the south for the fight against the Greyjoys, but only a small number. They won’t be enough, and he risks losing face to turn to the
Karstarks or the Cerwyns to raise the rest.”

“But not if he turns to me.” Bran ran a hand down his face. “Because I would be married to Eddara and a warden of those coasts. None would question me pledging all my strength to this.”

“That’s the faith Robb holds in you.” She looked to the statue of Eddard Stark, and its long, solemn face. “That’s why he couldn’t send aid to Jon and Sansa, not because he’s indifferent to their need, but because his duty is to his kingdom. To its people. To us.”

Bran became silent then. She told herself that Robb would’ve shared all this with Bran in time. Whatever Bran was telling himself, he didn’t share with her. His brow was furrowed, his shoulders slumped, and in that moment, she saw him as a little boy again.

“My father told me about this.” He finally said. “That I would grow up one day and rule some holdfast and serve my brother as best I could. After everything I’ve been shown since, I thought that meant the Wall…” Bran stiffened then, his chin raising in determination. “Nevermind. If Robb needs me, I’ll be there. As my father wanted. Whatever the future holds, I’ll act a Stark, here and now.”

The relief that washed over her to hear that was so great that she hugged Bran tight once more. It only lasted a moment or two, for Myrcella suddenly felt it wrong to do so in front of King Eddard’s statue. As if it disrespected his memory. Yet when they pulled apart, her memory gave rise to a curiosity she couldn’t ignore.

“Bran, what did you mean you were told you belonged at the Wall. Who told you?”

The prince eyed her carefully then, becoming far more guarded.

“Forgive me my queen, that’s something I’d keep to myself. We all have our secrets.”

Whatever Bran meant by that, Myrcella’s mind took her far and away from the crypts of Winterfell. All the way back to Harrenhal, when the peace was made and her mother was being led out of the castle. It was a memory tinged with anger and shame, as well as a deep sadness. Father was long dead, her brothers gone too, she and Mother, they were all that was left of House Durrandon.

An illusion mother destroyed when she grabbed hold of Myrcella, whispering in her ears the words that terrified her to this day.

“It matters not what name you take, House Lannister is your true family. It is for us that you will seek vengeance. For your blood is pure. Too pure for that Stark to ever accept. Cast him down, cast him down when I bid or he’ll learn the name of your father. Your true father.”

Just as mother’s twin had pulled her away then, Bran took her arm to lead Myrcella out of the crypts.

Taking them away from the father that Robb and Bran still mourned to this day while she battled against the truth of who her father was.

And the abomination that made her.

**SANSA**

The sound of hammer strikes and stone cracking was constant. No matter the season, the workers toiled away, raising a castle here upon Aegon’s Hill and a city in the lands below.
Sansa stood within the fruit of such labors, a towering keep that overlooked much of Aevalon. Made from a pale red stone quarried for use on the Targaryen castle alone, Rhaegar’s Holdfast was an impressive fortress in within a fortress. Smaller timber towers and other structures still dominated the hilltop, which was now ringed by massive red curtain walls. Through the unfinished roof of the Great Hall laborers were seen rushing to and fro, the master builder having fallen behind the schedule.

*Jon will be impressed by the progress either way,* she thought, *one morning we’ll wake and find a completed castle completed awaiting us.*

*I can be old and grey by then but I’d give anything to wake up next to him tomorrow.*

Not since their first meeting at Winterfell had Jon and her been apart for so long. His absence was a dull pain in her chest, one that deepened to look upon her gown. It was a bright turquoise with golden vines wending their way along the front and down the arms to her long, open sleeves. A lovely thing she’d worn for her last dance with Jon before the war.

Before the responsibilities of being king and queen drove husband and wife apart.

“Sansa, it’s your turn.” Sarella’s voice drifted out from inside Sansa’s royal apartments. The Dornish woman sat reclining on a couch, eyeing their cyvasse board with interest. “My spearmen are in play, it is time to say goodbye to your light horse.”

“Is it now?” She asked, turning away from the balcony to return to her seat, reaching out to pet Lady as she did so. “Sarella, we have played too many games for me to be ignorant of your love for spearmen. That’s your father’s Dornish influence.”

“Talk, talk, talk. At some point, you must take action.” The dark-skinned woman gestured to the board. “Sacrifice the cavalry or lose your dragon in two turns. I wager the dragon is more than safe though, such is your husband’s influence.”

She wasn’t sure if Sarella meant the needling to mock her predictability or prick the part of her that missed Jon so. That was the danger with playing games with a Sand Snake, they could bear their fangs during the most innocent of contests. Yet Sansa had lived such a life that such strikes did little harm. Her skin had turned to porcelain, to ivory, to steel, and it would take more than a snakebite to pierce it now.

With but a moment’s thought, Sansa grasped at a piece and moved it to the hills.

“Your rabble?” Sarella sounded amused. “I hope that’s not meant to draw my attention away from the conquests that lay before me.”

“Not at all, I mean only to block you.”

Sarella tilted her head then, staring hard at the board. Sansa guessed at the time it would take Sarella to see what she meant, only for her friend to react far quicker. She was pulling on a braid of hair when Sarella’s expression became one of shock.

“Take my horse.” Sansa shrugged. “Or my dragon. Though I doubt you will. In three moves, you are beaten. The rabble blocks your dragon. My heavy cavalry, my elephant, my trebuchet, it does not matter which, at least one will do for your king by then. *My king stays safe.*”

Her last words in High Valyrian caused Sarella to break free from her spell and let out a laugh. The woman knocked over her king in the same fluid motion she used to hold her cup out towards Sansa. When clinked their cups together, Sarella demonstrated her own skill in the Valyrian tongue.
“Daughter of wolves. Queen of dragons. I salute you.”

“Do you?” She drank of her wine. “Then why underestimate me?”

“Oh, I do no such thing.” Sarella bore all her ivory teeth in a wide smile. “I never expect victory against you, Sansa. In truth, I yearn for defeat. Your mind is sharp yet I’m learning all your tricks. When we play a game that matters, I will be ready.”

“May that day never come.”

Sansa meant those words and raised her cup again, happy to see a moment’s weakness flash over Sarella’s face. There was no guile in the woman when they toasted again, a feat considering her friend’s true role here.

For Sarella was a spy. A simple truth her friend gladly admitted to. Prince Doran wished knowledge of the Targaryen court at Aevalon and Sarella was his source. A fine arrangement as far as Sansa was concerned. Sarella took as much as she gave and proved to be the Targaryen’s best authority on Dorne.

Her wisdom had been of great benefit when the war with the Reach began. The Dornish and Reach marcher lords had been raiding each other for years beforehand and Jon did his best to keep the peace. Then the Reach lords burnt down two villages in the Stormlands, accusing them of sending eastern freedmen to aid in the Dornish raids. Jon could not ignore such aggression, though had he known she was with child Sansa suspected the banners might not have been called with such ease.

Against the might of the Reach, the Highlands stood little chance. Jon knew better than to seek out Viserys for help, and feared Prince Doran too cautious to commit to more than raids. It was Sarella who told him to send envoys not only to Doran, but to her father and Princess Arianne as well.

“Show Arianne respect.” Sarella had advised her. “Whatever her husband says of King Jon, show Arianne that he respects her as the next ruler of Dorne and that the alliance extends beyond Aegon’s vows. Show her that, then show them your strength.”

Together Jon and her did all Sarella suggested, save that it fell to him alone to flex their kingdom’s muscle. While Mace Gardener still had ravens flying about declaring commands and war titles, Jon and the Dark Order rode out and seized Tumbleton. By the time the Rowans and Tarlys raised armies of their own, the Red Viper had taken the field with his Dornish spears while Gendry and Royner Darklyn marched on Bitterbridge with an army of thirty thousand.

The war did rage from there, a year and more now. Winter ended and spring came, she birthed their new babe while Jon was far away. Yet it all meant victory. A victory declared only a month or so ago. Her king had ridden as far as Highgarden itself to secure both peace and more lands for their fledgling kingdom.

_The Reach is the heart of chivalry in the Seven Kingdoms and Jon drove a sword right through it._

_He showed the realm our kingdom is here to stay._

A light rapping on her door was followed by the welcome voice of Ser Barristan.

“Your grace, Tyrion Lannister is without. He says he’s expected.”

“That he is, do come in.” She set, petting Lady once more as a dark-cloaked Barristan and the Lannister dwarf entered. Their former hostage turned guest giving both women a lopsided grin.
“My, my.” Tyrion tapped at the parchments he carried. “Imagine me being invited into a queen’s bed chambers. Something to write home to Casterly Rock about.”

“Do so at your own peril.” Sansa looked Barristan’s way as she smoothed her skirts. “Are those the figures we spoke of?”

“They are.” Tyrion handed the parchments over for her inspection. “I’ll save the suspense, for congratulations are in order. Aevalon has surpassed both Maidenpool and Duskendale in size. The spring arrivals from the empire likely did it.”

“Then it is good we have new lands to settle them on.”

Their newly won lands from the Reach were sorely needed. There was more than enough space within their old boundaries, yet settling the freedmen required a careful touch. Some lords begrudged taking newcomers onto their lands, the same ones who then decried how their less discriminating neighbors grew both in vassals and strength. Aevalon certainly could not hold them all. Jon had been adamant on laying out the city by imperial standards, which meant ordered streets and baths and a firm stand against unconstrained growth. All efforts Tyrion had surprisingly been quite helpful with and she now urged him to speak on.

“Well, for those lucky few that get to plant down roots here, the drains and sewers for the new quarter to the north are ready. Given the space, ten thousand could settle there and not a drop of shit will go anywhere but where you wish it.”

“What of the aqueducts? The maester was worried that late frost might have damaged some.”

“None that I can see.” Tyrion pointed to a parchment which displayed a map of the city. “Those aqueducts were built strong and the water flows as it should. I was more worried about the Blackwater Bridge. I thought for sure the spring deluge would wash the thing away.”

That would never happen. The stone bridge that spanned the Blackwater was a feat that awed all who crossed over those swift waters. Wide enough to allow two carts to travel abreast, the bridge eased travel and gave them command of both riverbanks. Jon had talked of building a small manse on the southern bank, away from the noise of Aevalon, a place to take the children for peace and quiet.

She wanted that dearly.

“Cyvasse again?” Tyrion took note of the board, his mismatched eyes flicking across the pieces. “I see the Highland Queen was victorious.”

Sarella nodded. “Tricky thing, she used her rabble of all things to win the day.”

“Ah yes.” Tyrion noted, touching the piece in question. “You forfeited before taking it?”

“Why prolong the inevitable?” Sansa asked and the Lannister smiled again.

“Many reasons. See, if it was me, I would’ve made you suffer for the win. The rabble there, your smallfolk, I’d have my cavalry ride them down. Then massacred your dragon. Her grace might win the war, but she’d dislike the taste of victory.”

Sarella raised an eyebrow at that while Sansa felt a tad queasy. Tyrion had turned a game of tiny pieces and meaningless moves into something dark. Whatever his wit and intelligence, Tyrion simply did not conduct himself in a way that endeared the Lannister prince to her. His frequent enjoyment of whores had led to her banning them from the Red Keep altogether. She’d not have her children
exposed to such, and it thinking on their well-being that reminded her of the ache in her breasts.

“Thank you for this, Tyrion.” Sansa said as she rose. “And to you for the game, Sarella. It’s time I attend my children, so if you’d excuse me.”

Neither raised any objection, and soon the pair left, chatting away about cyvasse strategies. Which left Sansa with her two most loyal protectors, Lady and Barristan.

“They are in the godswood.” Barristan offered his arm, a warm expression on his lined face. “I do believe that’s where the dowager Queen brought the children for the afternoon. A minstrel as well.”

“For the twins, no doubt.” Sansa sighed. “My mother spoils them so.”

“Do not hold that against her. A certain knight in your service might be guilty of sneaking the Dragons Darling lemoncakes from the kitchens now and again.”

Sansa laughed at that, and teased the old knight about it on their journey through the keep in search of her children. Once outside they passed timber towers and open cuts in the earth meant for future foundations. The godswood was an open acre of trees and greenery at edge of the hill overlooking the Blackwater Rush. Elms, alders, cottonwoods, all manner of trees grew here along with rose and lilac bushes. Sansa’s destination was the heart tree, an ironwood only twice her height and dear to her heart.

This tree had been a gift from House Forrester. A memorial for Asher, who fell near to this very spot. There had never been any question which tree would be the center of their godswood. A tree Sansa’s children now frolicked about. While her mother sat cradling a precious bundle in her arms, a minstrel wandered about plucking a lively tune for the twins to dance to. At only seven years, the two girls could not be more different.

Rhaegina, with her dark hair and purple eyes, did her best to lead a little boy about in formal step. All while Aemma danced more wildly, waving her hands and swishing her skirts as freely as her auburn hair moved through the air.

Their dancing was interrupted the moment Rhaegina’s four-year-old partner caught sight of her. Sansa’s only son had smoky blue eyes and hair the color of red-gold. When he stopped mid-step, a smile teased the corners of his long face.

“Mother!” Aenry broke away from Rhaegina to run her way. “Mother! They scared me!”

“Did they now?” Sansa bent down to scoop the boy into an embrace. “Well there’s nothing to be scared of now.”

Once it had been Aenry that gave her the worst scare of her life. Worse than the years at Storm’s End. Or the moments before Aemma gasped her first breath. When Aenry was born the tiny thing was an answer to her prayers. An heir their bannermen could rally around. Yet just before his first year, the sickness had come. A fever which took thousands from the city, and nearly her boy as well. During that time a rebellion arose in the Stormlands that only added their woes. Jon and her rarely left Aenry’s bedside and, thankfully, Arya and Gendry had crushed the rebels in their stead. What complaints came of the Baratheon methods mattered little after to once Aenry’s fever broke and his survival was assured. Though Sansa worried that sickness had robbed her babe of some strength, and was forever vigilant for threats to his health.

So feeling Aenry half a tremble as he spoke of the twins’ teasing irked her some.
“They said she’d take me.” Aenry pouted in her arms. “The Mad Queen. She’s going to steal me from my bed.”

“Cersei Lannister will do no such thing.” Sansa assured him before seeking out her eldest children, both of whom made to hide behind the ironwood. “Rhaegina! Aemma! What have I said about scaring your brother?”

“We didn’t scare him!” Rhaegina protested and Aemma nodded vigorously.

“No! We told Aenry to stop putting bugs in our hair or the Mad Queen would get him.”

Rhaegina stuck her chin out. “It’s not our fault he kept doing it! Now she’ll get him for sure!”

“Girls.” Mother chided them in a hushed voice. “Quiet down, you’ll wake your sister.”

“She sleeps still?” Sansa asked and Mother nodded, gesturing to the startled minstrel.

“This little one likes music as much as singing. Don’t be cross at the twins, Aenry is guilty of the charges laid against him.”

“Then he shall have to be exiled.” She then handed Aenry off to Barristan, who did not fail in offering the young prince a ride upon his shoulders. “Ser, if you could act an escort.”

“Of course, Prince Aenry will be well guarded.” Barristan smirked before sending a sideways glance the twins’ way. “I do hope no bandits come upon us.”

Aemma and Rhaegina shared a look of unspoken understanding before grinning. Something that panicked Aenry.

“Bandits!” He pointed at his sisters. “Ser Barry! Bandits!”

Barristan then bounded away, Aenry bouncing on his shoulders as the girls gave a battle cry to chase after them. All this uproar roused the babe from her slumber, her wails quite welcome to Sansa. The ache in her breasts was uncomfortable and after mother ordered the minstrel away, they readied to feed the girl. While she cradled her bundled child, mother worked at the laces of Sansa’s gown

“You should use a wet nurse.” Mother noted after Sansa freed her breast to offer the babe a nipple to suckle on. “That would save you from running yourself ragged.”

“My mother never used one.” She replied as the girl latched on and relief flowed through her. “And if I should seek a wet nurse, perhaps we need more nursemaids as well. Watching after four children is no task for a Queen in the North.”

“You’re a cruel child.” Mother kissed her brow as she watched the girl nurse. “Don’t talk of taking these babes from me. I hope to be near when Jon meets this little dragon for the first time.”

The thought was as lovely as the babe herself. When she was born, the bells rang the whole day, tens of thousands sharing in Sansa’s joy. Not yet half a year, her youngest had come along with the spring itself. Mother claimed that meant good tidings yet Sansa took more meaning from the child’s features. As the babe nursed, a pair of lilac eyes stared right back at her. That and the sparse patch of pale blonde hair upon the child’s head left no mystery to her roots.

The blood of Old Valyria ran strong in her veins. Her name was an honored one among the Targaryens.
“Vaelena Targaryen.” Sansa repeated once more, stroking her daughter’s head. “You are named after Valaena, mother of the Conqueror himself. The High King and your grandmother Lyanna freed a hundred child slaves in your name. Little children who owe their freedom to you already.”

Vaelena merely blinked to hear so, but one day Sansa would have her understand how precious a gift freedom was. That future would have to wait for as soon as Vaelena had her fill, a kingdom had need of its queen.

In Jon’s absence, it was Sansa who heard petitions and attended council meetings. Nowhere near as powerful as the empire’s Council of Heralds, their council was but a small body of learned men and influential lords who acted as advisers. Uncle Brynden had jokingly called it the Small Council and the name stuck.

A body whose numbers had shrunk with the coming of war, for only four men awaited her and Barristan in the council chambers. The long table usually sat seven but Royner Darklyn and Garmon Qoherys had joined the march. Of those that remained only Aurane Velaryon was a lord, one who commanded the royal fleet and was charged with the defense of Aevalon.

The handsome man stood out like a sore thumb compared to the other three. Varys, bald and plump, sat plucking at his outrageously bright silks though his ears seemed keen to his companions’ conversations. The loudest was also the smallest man in the room, a septon of fifty years or more with a big mouth and thin brown hair. Though Septon Tom, or Tom of the Seven as he liked to be called, often gave counsel of dubious value, his voice made hymns come alive. The septon was dwarfed by the fat maester seated to his left, though Sansa liked to think Samwell Tarly’s size was an accurate measure of his worth to them.

“Your grace.” Sam rose first, petting at his maester’s chain as he bowed. “I pray this day finds you well.”

“Leave the prayers to me.” Tom of the Seven said while his eyes admired her dress. “The Seven have truly blessed these lands for a queen as lovely as this to rule over them.”

“A septon with a singer’s charm.” Sansa smiled as Barristan pulled out her chair at the head of table. “I imagine the septs of Aevalon are filled with pious women.”

Aurane laughed. “Lest they fall too easily to charm. Why our septon here was just telling a tale of a young lady he once knew-”

“The queen’s time cannot be wasted on tales.” Barristan threw back his Targaryen cloak and sat. His words quieted Aurane and saved the septon some embarrassment. Their representative of the Faith had a rather suspect past yet his follies seemed confined to his youth, for Tom of the Seven had come highly recommended by many lords. And ladies.

“The good ser is correct, of course.” Varys spoke in a soft voice before gesturing to Sam. “I do believe the number of petitioners today is a rather lengthy list. All having come in hopes of being seen by our dear queen.”

“How yes…” Sam sounded confused as he fumbled about his parchments. “I only just had all the names put together.”

Names Sansa suspected Varys already knew. The eunuch spymaster had been a gift from Rhaegar during the early years of their reign. Though useful, Sansa did not fully trust Varys. Not like she did Sam. The Tarly man had grown on Jon and her so they’d been glad to sponsor his training at the Citadel. Giving Sam the chance to forge his chain had required little gold and more influence. It had
been a difficult thing to get House Hightower to guarantee Sam’s well-being, for Randyll Tarly had threatened to abduct his son from Oldtown. Yet the Hightowers kept their word and four years later, with some more dealing with the Citadel, Maester Samwell returned to the Red Keep to serve House Targaryen.

Something he excelled at. For it was Sam that nurtured Aenry back from death’s door. To Sansa, he was a hero, even if Sam was unsure of that truth.

“Here it is!” Sam proclaimed, unfolding some parchment before him. “Yes, yes. There’s the leaders of the Freedmen and Aevalon builders guilds regarding the new northern quarter. Several lords seeking greater titles after their service in the war. An envoy from Jalabhar Xho, Prince of the Summer Islands, regarding trade. A Braavosi merchant seeking a charter to operate in Aevalon…”

“Is that this Baelish character?” Sansa asked, glancing to Barristan. “The one who send lavish gifts to me and my mother? To my daughters?”

“Petyr Baelish.” Varys answered instead, his cheeks quivering. “And yes, he has been the one sending gifts. He’s also the visitor Ser Barristan found speaking to the royal princesses without leave.”

“I thought it an innocent mistake.” Barristan glowered. “The twins were playing their hiding game on me. By the time I found them they were talking to this stranger. He claimed to have lost his way in the castle and the girls were all smiles, so I sent him on without rebuke. Now I suspect that was no accident.”

“A bold act.” She tapped her fingers, thinking of the lemon-scented scarves she’d been gifted by Petyr Baelish’s lackeys. “Jon has fine relations with the Braavosi, why does this merchant seek to win me over with bribes?”

Varys tittered. “Because Baelish is so much more than a merchant. I know him from my time in the empire. There he was a suspected agent of the Iron Bank, yet more evidence pointed to him being a spymaster for hire. One with a penchant for running brothels, where my little birds tell me Baelish peddles less in flesh and more than in stolen whispers and sabotage.”

“Well, there goes the Imp’s secrets.” Aurane noted, earning a laugh from the septon and a dismissive glance from Varys.

“I’ve been told that before arriving at Duskendale, Baelish’s last stop was Gulltown.”

That caught the attention of all for their relations with King Elbert Arryn were poor at best. Many ships out of Maidenpool had become victim to pirates of late, actions Varys and Aurane suspected were committed by privateers out of Gulltown.

Is Petyr Baelish in the employ of those men? Or does he serve a far more important master?

“I should have started with this.” Sam said suddenly, snatching up a tiny letter to pass her way. “I’m sorry, we got to speaking of petitions but I meant to produce this letter from Darry first. The raven only arrived last night and Lord Lyman writes of an odd event regarding the Vale.”

She always looked forward to news from Darry, for it was now the home of Talia, her beloved friend. Talia’s marriage to Lyman Darry kept her friend close and an important bannermen tied to the throne. As the Warden of the River Marches, Lyman knew to be wary once the snows melted and the high road from the Vale opened once more. The letter she now read spoke of how a Darry patrol of the Trident had rescued a party of men out of the Vale beset by mountain clansmen.
As she shared the contents with the others Barristan grunted in disbelief.

“I’ve never heard of clansmen so far south of the Mountains of the Moon.”

“They are savage beasts.” Septon Tom said. “In my youth, I knew many a minstrel and lady lost to the clans while travelling. After what they did to Denys Arryn, they’ve become even worse.”

The reminder of how the Arryn civil war had come to an end caused Sansa to shudder. It was a bloody tale of the fall of a powerful man and the slaughter of innocents. The deaths of a would-be queen and her children. A tale which featured a name mentioned in Lyman’s letter.


Varys raised an eyebrow to hear so. “Harry the Heir? Unless my little birds sing the wrong tune, King Elbert keeps that knight quite close since he lacks any children of his own. Elbert is already unpopular, I cannot see him risking his heir so callously.”

“He didn’t.” She stared at the grave words scribbled upon the letter. “It appears Harry fled the Vale. He begs sanctuary here in the Highlands. And an audience with my husband.”

Sam nodded solemnly. “Lord Lyman has not promised either. He awaits the crown’s decision on the matter.”

“Let him come.” Aurane declared. “Elbert has seized plenty of our ships without being taken to task. Let’s see how he changes his tune once we hold his heir.”

“A deal?” Barristan rubbed at his chin. “To grant sanctuary and then dangle it about is more akin to fishmongers than men of honor.” He then jerked about her way. “Or women.”

“We have no proof of Arryn involvement in the piracy.” The maester pulled on his chain and met Varys’s stare. “Besides our lord admiral’s opinions and the seneshal’s whispers.”

Varys tittered. “Whispers which helped alert Lord Baratheon to the Rowan strategy before the lord’s victory at the Mander. You questioned my birds then as well.”

“My lords.” Tom of the Seven held up his hands. “Sanctuary is less a tool and more an act of mercy. The High Septon decries Elbert Arryn’s vile deeds, I imagine he would welcome any comfort we could offer one afflicted by the Foul Falcon. The Highlands could reap the reward for such an act.”

“Or the whirlwind.” Barristan added. “Our king is not yet returned from the last war, what we decide here could set a whole new one in motion.”

“The bold ser is right.” Sansa finally spoke, having listened to all while weighing all her thoughts and concerns against their words. “We could risk war by granting Harry sanctuary. That is an outcome I most certainly wish to avoid.” She paused to take a deep breath. “Yet, this man apparently flees in fear of his life. I can sympathize with that, so I will not turn my back on Harry Hardyng. Nor will I risk war without good reason.”

“What do we tell Lord Darry then?” Sam asked as all looked to her for an answer.

“We shall tell him to provide his guest safe conduct to Aevalon. Harry shall be granted an audience, but that is all until we hear sufficient reason to shield him as he wishes.”

The others accepted her will, though she caught the reservation on a few of their faces. Worries she
likely shared, and it was her dearest wish that Jon would arrive long before Harry Hardyng did. Not that Sansa wanted to leave the decision to her husband, she just wished to do as they always did.

Sharing the burdens of rule as they shared their bed.

She struggled hard to focus on matters after that, for the council meeting dragged on for hours. Matters of taxation blending in with conflicts between the freedmen and those born of Westeros. The septon’s concerns that, despite vows of conversion, many of the newly arrived clung to their foreign gods. They were just broaching of how to handle Petyr Baelish’s petition when one of the royal wards broke into the meeting chamber.

“Your grace.” Robin Darklyn wheezed, the skinny young man red in the face and lacking breath as he came to her. “Forgive… forgive the intrusion… but… but…”

“Out with it.” Barristan commanded, for he had charge of her cousin’s training in the yard. “You do not barge into the queen’s presence without good-“

“The king!” Robin half-shouted at her. “The Blackfish! That is, uncle Brynden! He just rode into the castle. The royal army is a day away but the king rode ahead to reach the city sooner!”

“Jon is here?” She near knocked her cousin over in her haste to rise, then grabbed at her skirts to keep from throttling him as he choked on an answer.

“He will be. Within the hour. The king returns!”

That was all she needed to hear. The petitions were cancelled for the day. The meeting ended. The king was home and Sansa rushed to make ready for it.

Fortunately Mother had already heard the news and had servants and maids readying the children. The twins were so excited they barely settled long enough to get their finest gowns on and Vaelena cried endlessly at all the activity. The babe’s reaction was far less troubling than Aenry’s.

“I don’t want to go.” The boy fought against their efforts to dress him, tears welling in his eyes. “No. No! Don’t make me!”

“Aenry, stop.” Sansa urged. “Your father hasn’t seen you in so long, we cannot make him wait a moment longer.”

“But I don’t remember him.” Aenry’s pale eyes blinked as tears fell away. “What if he’s scary? He killed the bad king. What if he thinks I’m a bad prince?”

“Aenry…”

“I don’t mean to be bad, I promise. I won’t pull Rhaegina’s hair or bite Aemma ever again! I’ll eat my beets. I’ll say my prayers. Tell father I’ll be good. I promise!”

“Hush now.” She wiped at his tears, cursing the war for this. “Son, the very last thing your father did before he left was to hold you. He told you to be brave. To take care of your sisters and myself. We’re all quite well so your father will be very proud of you.”

“Do you promise?” Aenry sniffed and she kissed his brow.

“Of course. Ser Barristan will tell him how brave you’ve been and Maester Samwell can surely speak of how well you listen to your histories.”
“Aegon the First lived on Dragonstone.” The boy said with pride. “That’s where father was born. That’s very special. Very, very special.”

“As are you, sweetling.”

There was little conflict to deal with after that and soon she delivered Aenry to the courtyard in a handsome little doublet bearing his father’s white dragon. Rhaegina, who had her arms wrapped about Lady’s neck, wore a billowing gown of violet while Aemma spun about in one as blue as her eyes. Tiny Vaelena, who squirmed about in her grandmother’s arms, was draped in a long white gown. Sansa took this all in with prude before looking to the hundreds ringing the courtyard.

Lords and smallfolk alike had gathered to welcome their king. Westerosi knights stood side by side with eastern freedmen who wore short swords tied to their belts. Uncle Brynden looked a mix of both cultures, the older knight pacing about in his dark eastern armor. He made Robin and Samwell quite nervous, though others like Barristan and Varys were as calm as the skies above. Sarella was whispering something to Tyrion when she sent a wink Sansa’s way.

Then the bells took to ringing, an act Septon Tom took credit for wordlessly as he bowed to her. Every moment after that was agony. Absolute agony. Few words had passed between Jon and her during the war. It was not an ideal environment for letters.

What if the fighting darkened the light within him again? Last time I was able to see him through.

Is the king that returns today the same man I bid farewell to last year?

The sound of hooves clattering up the stone road to the castle set her heart to pounding. It was little shock when the wolves were the first ones through the gates, Ghost and Shaggydog both racing to reach the royal family first.

“Ghost!” Rhaegina and Aemma yelled in unison. “Shaggy!”

Sansa groaned loudly when both wolves went straight to the girls, each bowling one other in a frenzy of laughter and licking. Of course that would be the scene the riders arrived to.

Daegon Blackfyre was the first she recognized, since the Lord of Rosby bore a black dragon across his battle-scarred shield. Then men of the Dark Order appeared, Black Balaq and Karl Bowden flanking their Lord-Commander, Thoros of Myr. The red-cloaked warrior did not hesitate to nod Aemma’s way, for the girl admired him so. Garmon Qoherys and Royner Darklyn drew little of Sansa’s attention when Rickon appeared among the riders.

Her brother was ten and six now, powerfully built with hair as wild as his wolf. Across Rickon’s back hung a heavy axe, upon his face several scars he had not had when he departed. Nor did she remember Rickon having such a fine steed or armor, for the young man rode forth on a splendid brown destrier worthy of the greatest lord.

She was gaping at that when Samwell gave the signal and the trumpets sounded, causing Aenry to jump and all to look as their king entered the yard.

His clothes were a becoming mix of white and black, his dark cloak fastened to his shoulders by silver dragons. The hair and beard Sansa longed to lose herself in were not greatly changed, perhaps a tad longer than she preferred. Yet it was his eyes she yearned to see. It was always Jon’s eyes that betrayed his true self.

“Long live King Jon!” Daegon roared with a fist raised high, inspiring Rickon and Barristan to do the same., them and a hundred others.
“Long live King Jon!”

“Long live King Jon!”

That’s what Jon dismounted to, a chorus of cheers that she yearned would bid him to look her way. Vaelena was wailing, Aenry clutching at her skirts, the twins begging to run to him.

It was in the midst of that uproar Jon finally turned to her.

And the moment those grey eyes found hers, she knew the truth of things.

Her husband had found his way back to her.

Her Jon still lived.

JON

Their hands fought for a place on the headboard, fumbling to steady themselves as the bed shook from their lovemaking.

Sansa was bent over, her arms holding onto the frame as Jon pressed his chest against her back, their sweat-slicked skin touching with each of his thrusts. His free arm swung below, fondling at her breasts and teasing her nipples. He did all this blindly, for his face was pressed against Sansa’s shoulder, buried in that glorious tumble of hair. He was embraced by fire and lost to lust.

His hips slapped against her, his cock driving forward in deep, powerful strokes. Something about thrusting upward into her sex like this pulled at him in exquisite torture. The familiar ache was building within him. For the third time this evening. Once more than Sansa and Jon couldn’t let that stand.

So his hand abandoned her swinging breasts and slid up to her mouth. When he kissed at her ear and thrust his cock forward, Sansa’s moan let the fingers wander between her lips. She sucked upon them, first gently like in a kiss, then more powerfully, with the need she put into loving his cock with her mouth. He bit his own lip, freeing the now wet fingers to send them down between her legs. The slick fingertips delving through the hair about her sex and finding the bud he now teased.

Sansa nearly bucked him off when she forced her hips back against his cock. Yet he held on firm. For a short time longer they both did. Until his wife writhed in release and Jon ended his own torment, biting Sansa’s shoulder to shoot his seed within her.

Somehow they did not collapse upon each other. Sansa lay flat upon her front while he was stretched out on his back, staring up at the ceiling in a daze. The world was slowly returning around him as felt his chest heave and cock soften.

“At rest at last.” Sansa sighed as raised up on her elbows, running a finger down his beard. “As was I saying before the… interruption, I think it’s time for another trim, husband. I won’t have my king looking out of sorts.”

“If my queen had her way I’d be sheared daily.” He kissed at her finger when it moved near his lips. “Meanwhile she simply adores Ghost’s magnificent coat of fur.”

“You are not a beast.” Sansa said before catching herself and letting her gaze roam down his naked body. “Well, in these chambers you might be, but that’s a side of my husband only I am allowed to
“Then chain me to the bed.” He grabbed at her arse, earning a mild slap at his hand and a laugh as Sansa rolled away. When she climbed out of bed he marveled at her body, to his eye there was little sign his young wife had born four children already. The weeks since his return had felt like they were newlyweds again, and so when she threw a robe over her naked flesh he grunted in disappointment.

“Calm yourself, Jon.” She chided, tossing his breeches upon the bed. “We were only meant to retire for a short while. Tonight’s performance is being put on especially for us, and now we shall be late. All will be delayed.”

“Let it. I spent the whole day hearing petitions from lords, guild leaders, merchants, all seeking more. That was enough of a performance for me. Now come back and share the bed with me, love. We can think of excuses together…”

He patted the bed in hopes Sansa would acquiesce. They could always watch this acting troupe another day. Aevalon’s theater often put on shows in honor of his family. Partly out of respect, though mostly due to Sansa being their greatest patron. Jon had supplied the gold for building the theater but it was Sansa who gave it life. Minstrels, bards, actors, from across the known world she gathered them, all to share their talents with the city.

Jon didn’t care much for the theater himself, though would not speak to that within his wife’s hearing. For fear of the disappointment that now crossed her face.

“What excuses are we to tell the children?” Sansa ran hands down the length of her hair. “You promised the twins they could go.”

“They still can. Your mother would be happy to take them.”

“It’s their father they want to share this with, that’s why Rhaegina and Aemma invited you. Aenry has talked of nothing else, he has such a thirst for tales and tonight will be a grand one. The rise and fall of Garin, the Rhoynish prince. It’s the perfect opportunity to share something with him… isn’t that what you truly want?”

It was. With those words Sansa laid bare how selfish he was acting.

You didn’t fight to get back here just to listen to petitions. Or lounge about in bed.

I fought to get home to my family. To be with Sansa and the children.

The joy of returning home had been tempered by so much regret. Rhaegina and Aemma were but little girls when he left and now he swore they had become young ladies. Vaelena was a beautiful gift yet it shamed him to have missed her birth.

Then there was Aenry. Barely more than a babe before the war, now a young boy who knew him little. After he’d held the twins tight and met little Vaelena, it was Aenry he made to embrace, only for the boy to cower behind Sansa’s skirts. That’s when Jon knew, for all the land he had won from the Reach, he had lost precious time with his son.

His efforts since had born little fruit for Aenry was such a shy boy. While happy enough to scream and run as he played with Aemma, if Jon interrupted, Aenry would seek the protection of Rhaegina, eyeing him like he was some stranger.

“I want my son back.” Jon grumbled to Sansa as yanked his pants on. “The little boy I bounced on
my knee. He used to laugh so when I put him on Ghost’s back for rides… he would call me papa…”

“He will again.” Sansa came up behind and wrapped her arms around him, pressing a cheek against his bare shoulder. “Aenry loves you still. Just be the man who made a scared princess feel safe again. Be patient, be kind, be his father.”

“Then I must also hurry.” He said. “New clothes are in order if I’m to attend a play.”

Sansa clapped happily before rushing about to toss more of his clothes at him. Soon, he was in the corridor with his wife shouting for servants to ready him in haste.

That was one of the few things Jon hadn’t missed about his home during the war. He’d rather dress himself in a pavilion than have a cluster of minders pawing at him. Truly, he had enjoyed riding with the Dark Order again, though it was hard to merely relay commands to Lord-Commander Thoros rather than give them himself.

An annoyance their victories more than compensated for.

The size of the Reach had worked against it in the war. King Mace had sat at Highgarden for months, waiting to rally an army so massive none could stand against it. An army which never truly came together, Jon denied Mace that. The Dark Order drew the eastern Reach lords to battle while the Martells brought the fight to Randyll Tarly in the foothills of the Red Mountains. By the time Highgarden abandoned their muster, Gendry was crossing the Mander with tens of thousands of Targaryen bannermen and Jon’s mounted advance had free reign in the Gardener heartlands.

The campaign was a long and cold one, at times he felt their true enemy was the winter itself. They lost more men and horse to the elements than to battle. During one blinding snowstorm, Jon’s army was forced to make camp in a valley to weather it. A valley an enemy army under the Gardener princes, Garlan and Loras, also sought shelter in. After the weather cleared some and all was revealed, the battle that followed was chaotic at best. The snow was knee high and formations confused. Jon and Dark Sister never came close to a foe before the storm returned and drove the combatants apart again.

The indecisive battle still managed to give rise to one heroic tale. It was in the thick of the fighting that Rickon of all people crossed blades with Loras Gardener. The Prince of Flowers was held to be one of the finest swordsmen in the realm, so Rickon holding his own in the duel was a feat. To this day, the squire boasted loudly of marring Loras’s handsome face with a cut from his axe.

Few dared to point out Loras had gifted Rickon several himself.

Those scars were plain upon squire’s face when he entered Jon’s chambers. He was dressed and ready by then, wearing the black doublet with white fringe that Sansa so liked. A garment that set Rickon to mocking him.

“Oh how the mighty have fallen.” Rickon smirked from the doorway, waving a hand over his fur cloak and leathers. “This is how I’d dress if I was king, like a warrior.”

“I pity your queen then.” Jon replied. “You’re only granted so much freedom because your mother and Sansa spoil you rotten.”

“There’s benefits to being the youngest son.” Another voice spoke up from the corridor and Rickon stepped aside to let the newcomer enter. Their uncle Benjen cuffed the squire’s arm playfully before bowing Jon’s way. “Forgive the intrusion, Jon, but I’ve been tasked with ensuring you join us for the performance.”
“Sansa ensnared you too?”

“Gods, no.” Benjen laughed. “The Dragons Darling insisted. I’d rather face a storm on the high seas than earn the ire of those fierce little princesses.”

Jon was happy to hear his daughters had secured such fine company. Benjen and much of the Manderly fleet had been at Aevalon for days now, the northern admiral having stopped for respite during the long journey south. His visit was a pleasant surprise, for Jon had not seen Benjen since Wyllya Manderly’s marriage to Aurane Velaryon. Better still, the lord had brought his son Wyllard along, and Jon took pride in showing the young Stark about the city.

Yet when he asked whether Wyllard would be joining them, it was Rickon’s turn to laugh.

“Not a chance. I’m sparing my coz from Sansa’s frilly little play. We’re going to take Shaggy for a night ride across Blackwater Bridge and howl at the moon.”

“Lovely.” Benjen chuckled. “Might as well let the lad enjoy this time on land, he’ll be stuck at sea for weeks soon enough.”

“Let me sail with you.” Rickon urged, and not for the first time. “There’s no more fighting here and my axe grows dull. I’d love to battle under the direwolf banner.”

Their uncle shook his head. “No, Rickon. Even if Robb and Catelyn hadn’t forbid me from taking you, your duties lay here.” Benjen then gestured towards a side table. “Which you should be seeing to, as squire to a king.”

Though clearly displeased, Rickon did as he was bid. It fell to the young man to collect Jon’s crown, a thick ring of gold with large cut rubies inset. The thing was heavy and comfortable, yet Rickon placed it on his head nonetheless. Afterwards they let Rickon wander off, so Benjen and him could descend the keep alone.

“Sorry if I overreached back there.” His uncle apologized as they walked a torchlit corridor. “I saw a tad too much of the fool I used to be in Rickon and couldn’t help myself.”

“Neither can Rickon, he needs to a good tongue-lashing now and again. Though I don’t imagine we’ll have many more chances to do so. Olyvar and Jeyne have kept Harrenhal in good order but Rickon’s nearly of an age to act its proper lord. Soon he’ll rule and Robb will gain a good bannerman.”

“Let’s hope you’re right.” Benjen frowned before lowering his voice. “And pray Rickon was too. There might not being any fighting in your kingdom at moment but this Arryn talk has me worried, Jon.”

“Don’t let the Vale add to your worries, Benjen, the Greyjoys are the threat before you. Besides, the bluster from the Eyrie is just that.”

*At least I hope so. Elbert Arryn threatened me before and nothing came of it.*

*May his good sense win out against his pride and vengeful ways.*

Somehow Jon had managed to keep his kingdom out of the Arryn civil war despite the many attempts by Elbert and Denys Arryn to win his support. Promises of gold and land were common, Denys had gone so far as to pledge his heir’s hand to Aemma at one point. Still, Jon kept the Highlands out of the fighting, sparing his people from an ugly conflict that ended in an even uglier fashion.
Late in the last autumn, Elbert managed to seize the Gates of the Moon and lay siege to the Eyrie, trapping Denys’s wife and children. With winter coming, Denys was unwilling to allow his family to freeze to death, so he proposed to bend the knee to his rival if terms were offered. Yet on route to talks on those terms, Denys was slain in an ambush by the mountain clans, a far too convenient end for some to believe in chance.

Nor could many stomach what happened after the surrender of the Eyrie. As the story went, Denys’s widow threw herself and her children out the Moon Door rather than accept the dishonor of defeat. Thus Elbert climbed to his throne over the graves of innocents, a reign which ushered in a harsh winter for the Vale. Three years of cold and death that Septon Tom called a punishment for Elbert’s sins.

Claims Jon put little stock in, that was until Harrold Hardyng arrived at court. Though looking every bit a prince with his handsome features, Harry the Heir came to them as little more than a beggar.

“I had to flee.” Harry had proclaimed to Sansa and him. “Elbert would have killed me. I spent the whole winter with that man and he kept talking how much I was like Denys. How Denys had been his heir too. What happened to Denys after betraying him. I knew.”

Jon was unconvinced. “We know no such thing. It was not King Elbert’s men that Lord Darry saved you from.”

“But they were!” Harry’s deep blue eyes had gone wide with fright. “The Stone Crows. They’re the ones he used. The savages he gave Denys over to.”

“That’s outrageous.” Sansa had declared. “You say King Elbert arranged the murder of Denys Arryn after they agreed to talks? That an Arryn could employ clansmen for such a deed?”

Harry paled with each furtive nod. “He wanted Denys dead. He wanted the crown and no rival claims. No rivals at all. That’s what those children were to him… rivals.”

There was no doubt which children Harry spoke of yet Jon insisted he do so anyway. That was how they learned Harry had been among those who first seized the Eyrie. How he saw what became the queen and her children.

“She begged. The lady, she begged and begged. The little boys were crying. The girl screaming. Screaming louder than the bloody wind out of the Moon Door. Still Elbert ordered them to be pushed on. They wanted to be falcons. Let them fly. That’s what he kept saying. Let them fly… but they didn’t. They just fell. Screaming like the wind.”

It was a tale that haunted Jon’s dreams later that night. In them it was Sansa and the children being pushed to the edge of same great chasm. His family screaming as the corpses of Meryn Trant and Ramsay Snow forced them on. Then Joffrey was there with a burning brand pointed right at Sansa. When Jon awoke in a cold sweat Sansa held him tight, the pair spending the night comforting each other against those fears.

Jon’s first instinct had been to offer Harry the Heir no sanctuary but that he could find at the Wall. It fell to Sansa and most of the council to argue against that.

“It is foul for Harry to suffer and Elbert to reign.” Sansa had said. “The crimes he helped commit should be exposed to the Kingdom of Mountain and Vale.”

“Suspicions abound but this is proof.” Tom of the Seven had added. “The High Septon held Denys Arryn quite dear and would be most interested in exposing these murders. There are Vale lords who
would see us as true friends for helping do so.”

Sam was the one who erred on caution. “Our king spent years keeping us free of the Vale’s troubles. Yes, we might gain allies in sheltering Harry, but enemies too. I worry on the Highlands risking a war on behalf of another realm’s dead.”

On and on it went, until Ser Barristan, who remained silent throughout most of the discussion, broke through it all.

“Harry was a coward.” Barristan had declared. “He admits that freely, he stood by and did nothing while innocents suffered. As I once did. Queen Sansa would have been in her rights to demand my head, yet she gave me the chance to redeem myself. To help right terrible wrongs. I cannot speak against offering Harry the opportunity to do the same.”

The old knight’s worth to Jon could not be overstated. Thus his argument held much weight. In the end they decided to guarantee Harry’s protection until they could arrange him a place at the imperial court. A decision which raised the ire of King Elbert, who sent raven after raven demanding his heir’s return. Each threatening violent retribution if that did not happen. So far, those words had been wind.

“Elbert knows better than to test us.” Jon tried to ease Benjen’s mind, as well as his own. “My fleet is ready and the crossings at the Trident well guarded. I expect all to stand idle though. The Vale lords need to tend their lands, not wage another war.”

“That would be the life.” Benjen sighed. “I was looking forward to a spring without war. Wynafryd and I were thinking of another child. Lyarra is growing too damn fast. I’d give anything to go back to when she was Aenry’s age. It’s a perfect time, when they’re small enough to hold, old enough to teach.”

That made Jon smile. “The twins used to make me read to them. Sansa says Aenry has a love for history, maybe Sam can find me a decent book for him.”

“A good idea. Your boy’s got a sharp mind but I wouldn’t try reading anything to him tomorrow night. He’ll be too worn out. I promised the prince a tour of my ship, earned myself a handsome little smile from your heir.”

Benjen meant well but Jon felt a pang of jealousy to hear so. Weeks of trying and he could barely get full sentences out of his boy, let alone a smile. The twins, however, acted the complete opposite when they ambushed the men at the entrance of Rhaegar’s Holdfast.

“Father! Are you excited?” Rhaegina laughed happily, her dark hair done up in braids like Sansa. “Everyone says they do real magic in this play!”

“Like Thoros can do.” Aemma smiled, playing with her own braids. “He says he’s not a real sorcerer but that doesn’t count if you wink every time. Right, father?”

Jon bore all this with a bewildered grin, his head swiveling back and forth to give each twin some attention. They seemed to thrive on that, grabbing at his hands and pulling him on towards a waiting press. There many from court travelling with them to the theater this night, all personally invited by Sansa days ago.

Though Tyrion and Sarella had made their excuses, Garmon Qoherys had returned from Stokeworth, the lord easy to spot with his purple hair and whiskers. While their castles were close together, Garmon kept his distance from Daegon. While Jon had long ago named the Blackfyre knight a
friend, even granting him lordship over Rosby, Garmon still held the old grudges. Jon felt more harshly toward Harry, who Sansa had also invited and he insisted Barristan watch over.

“Aemma likes Ser Harrold.” Rhaegina whispered up to him in Valyrian as her sister let out a cry out outrage. “She says he’s the handsomest knight ever and wants there to be a ball so they can dance—”

“Be quiet!” Aemma snapped, her face as red as her hair. “You promised! I never told anyone that you’re in love with Ser Daegon. He’s already married.”

“Stop that nonsense.” Jon interrupted the bickering, pulling at their hands to grab their attention. “It matters not, because neither of you are ever marrying. I will never let any man take you away from me.”

“Father!” The twins’ cried in unison, earning a grin from him.

“Well… maybe one day. But not for a long time yet. Your mother will have to convince me.”

“What am I convincing you of?” Sansa asked when they came upon her speaking with Catelyn and Royner Darklyn. Lady sat nearby but the direwolf drew less attention than Sansa who had donned her crown, a thin circlet of bronze and steel, decorated with blue diamonds.

“Is it in regards to the new Reach lands?” Royner tugged at his whiskers, his interest peaked. “There is no lack of potential lords among my kin at Duskendale. The Darkes, Darkwoods, it goes on and on.”

“No new lords are being named this night.” He said while kissing Sansa on the cheek. That’s when he spotted movement behind Lady and saw Aenry standing there, petting the wolf. “Hello, son. I hear we are to learn of Prince Garin tonight. Have you heard that story?”

Aenry nodded without really looking at him, instead moving to take Catelyn’s hand and stare at his feet. He had taken wounds in battle that hurt less than being spurned by his own son. Sansa touched his arm but he pretended nothing was the matter, calling for the carriages to be made ready. In the meanwhile Royner did succeed in pulling him aside.

“My king, about the Braavosi whoremonger.” The lord spoke in quiet tones. “Trust that if Lysa had known of what Baelish was, she never would have granted him a charter in my absence. I’ve made it clear I will be looking closely into rescinding it. A delicate matter you understand, the merchants of Duskendale feel their position is tenuous already with the rise of Aevalon.”

“I see, well then I should ease their minds.” He said, deciding this was as good a way as any to pass the time before the carriage came. “Tell those merchants who fear to flounder at Duskendale that opportunity awaits them at Tumbleton.”

To end the war, Highgarden had ceded all the lands between the rivers Mander and Blueburn to the Highlands. While Bitterbridge and the Grass Vale were valuable castles, it was Tumbleton that was the true prize. A market town sitting on the Mander and a short journey from Aevalon, Jon saw great potential for it.

“I will grant any merchants who wish to help Tumbleton grow with trade the rights to do so. Each one paying a tax on their trade to both the crown and yourself for arranging such.”

“How large a tax?” Royner grinned, for the man was ambitious and protective of the power House Darklyn wielded in his kingdom. Which Jon could appreciate, for he felt quite the same for the future of Aevalon and the Highlands themselves.
Before specifics could be discussed the carriages arrived. Jon shared one with his family, holding Sansa’s hand and staring out the window as the thing rattled its way down the cobbled road and into the city. Ghost and Lady ran beside it, the two direwolves looking as magnificent as Aevalon itself. Torches lined the way but it was the moonlight lit up the stone shops and dwellings they passed. The road they travelled marked the division between the Andal and Freedmen portions of the settlement. If he strained his ears he could hear the Common Tongue and dialects of Low Valyrian being spoken in the streets. In the distance he saw the silhouette of the sept upon Visenya’s Hill and the garrison upon Rhaenys’s.

“It’s so pretty at night.” Rhaegina said from her place beside Benjen, Aemma nodding as she urged Catelyn to look out as well.

“See grandmother, the Red Keep looks at tall as the sky from here.”

“Indeed, imagine how hard it was for your father to climb that hill in the heat of battle.”

“It was probably scary.” Aenry whispered from his place next to Sansa. “Lots of people died.”

“Yes they did.” Sansa replied, stroking his head. “Good men and bad. Your father was very brave in that battle and lucky to survive.”

“It was not luck.” He spoke suddenly, startling Aenry some yet daring to continue. “I would have died if not for a very brave man. My friend, Asher Forrester, he saved my life and lost his own to do so.”

“The Asher tree.” His son ventured, finally meeting Jon’s eyes. “I like to play there. It makes you brave. That’s what grandmother says.”

“I said it inspires courage.” Catelyn corrected and Jon smiled down at Aenry.

“I think you’re both right. When I went to war, I asked you to take care of our home. You must be a very brave boy to have done so. Asher would be proud, just as I am.”

Aenry offered the smallest of smiles before shaking his head and hiding his face in Sansa’s side. It was a tiny act yet a start all the same. Something Sansa marked by leaning over to kiss him longingly. The girls fell into giggles at that and Benjen cursed.

“Gods, Jon. Her mother is in the carriage.”

“The more grandchildren the better.” Catelyn added and Sansa’s gasp of shock broke the kiss then and there.

Their journey ended not long after. The carriages arriving outside the theater and all spilling out to take in its grandeur. Though much smaller than the theaters of the empire, Sansa took pride that no such thing existed elsewhere in the Seven Kingdoms. It was a tall, half-circle building made of pale stone. The arched windows above were filled with actors and other performers, all tossing flower petals down upon the royal family. Sansa had to scold the girls to keep from dancing under the flowery rain, but as Jon brushed petals off his shoulders another sight worried him more.

Ghost and Lady were acting half wild, the two wolves bearing their teeth up at the windows and the Targaryen guardsmen blocking the way within.

“What’s gotten into them?” He asked Sansa and she too gaped at the direwolves behavior.

“I’ve no idea. They’re acting worse than Shaggydog. Perhaps it’s all the people. A strange scent
within. These performers come from many lands…”

The other carriages had arrived as well and when Jon saw Barristan exit he waved him over.

“Ser, the direwolves know you and I fear they could harm strangers at the moment. This place likely has a stable, please lead them there until the performance is at an end.”

“I’d rather keep an eye on Harry.” Barristan cast a glance back at the exile knight. “It keeps me near to the queen and yourself. I’ve sworn to your safety-”

“It’s others safety we worry on.” Sansa spoke with a disappointed tone, eyeing her growling wolf. “There’s plenty of guards here this night, yet only one knight bold enough to face the wrath of direwolves. We thank you for that, ser.”

Barristan appeared putout but did as they asked, borrowing a spear from another man and causing a slight spectacle by twirling it about to drive the wolves back. That unnerved Jon for some reason. Or had he felt odd since stepping out of the carriage?

*It’s the theater. Mummers making battles into some sort of entertainment.*

*Last time they spilled red paint upon the stage to make blood.*

*I want no blood here this night. I’ve seen enough.*

The uneasy feeling followed Jon into the theater itself. The flat end of the half-circle displayed the stage with rows of tiered seating rising up to the heights of the rounded section. A tall backdrop drew the eye, for it was painted in the likeness of old Chroyane. While torches and moonlight illuminated the stage, a partial roof coated most of the seating in darkness.

Unsurprisingly the finest seats was reserved for the royal family, at the very center and only a handful of rows high, granting them the perfect view and clear hearing. While the other nobility filed into the rows his family sorted themselves out. The girls sat between Catelyn and Sansa, Jon by his wife’s side and Benjen to his left. Aenry insisting on sitting in his uncle’s lap and Jon was happy to allow that, if only to keep the boy so close. One day it would be him bouncing his knees and rocking Aenry back and forth.

“We have to get you ready.” Benjen spoke with an air of wisdom. “Tomorrow you’ll be on my ship and the waves, oh my dear prince, the waves! Only a direwolf could survive them. A dragon!”

“I’m a wolf!” Aenry laughed and kept his seat. “And a dragon! Like father!”

“Stop that.” Sansa snapped at them rather abruptly, and in the faint light he saw her face creased with worry.

“What is it?” He asked, touching her leg and finding it tense. “They are only enjoying themselves.”

“It’s not that. At least I don’t think so.” She closed her eyes. “I’m just… something’s not right. Maybe it’s the wolves. Poor Barristan is going to miss the play.”

“He’ll be okay.” Rhaegina piped up, grinning mischievously. “Ser Grandfather was probably at this battle.”

“That’s mean!” Aemma poked her. “He’s only maybe two hundred.”

Jon was torn between correcting their courtesies and laughing. Fortunately, the playmaster took the
stage then, in white linens meant to be silks and bronze circles that gave him a Rhoynish look.

“Be silent, and harken closely!” The man demanded, arching his ear to sky. “For in the wind you might hear the legacy of the Rhoynar. Of the great Prince Garin of Chroyane. Do you hear it? You will be blessed if you don’t. For it is a mournful sound. Of tears and fears, of bitter defeat and darkest curses. Listen close and hear the sorrows of the Rhoyn. Now learn how they came to be. The tale of a prince who rose too high and fell to the deepest depths…”

Well this will be a cheery tale… I doubt I will be sharing Sansa’s bed tonight.

The children will likely crowd it.

Despite that beginning, the play actually started off quite bright. The actor playing Garin was an actual Rhoynar and Jon found it fitting that a Dornishwoman played Nymeria. They bandied about words as minstrels played along with lutes and drums. When Garin won a great victory over the Valyrians and their dragons at Volon Theris, the drums beat in long successions, demonstrating the power of the water wizards called upon to crush the dragonlords.

Rhaegina and Aemma were enraptured, leaning forward and holding each other’s hands tightly. Aenry stared wide-eyed from Benjen’s lap, leaning back against the Stark’s chest like he was the most comfortable of cushions. Benjen caught Jon watching and smiled, mouthing a few simple words.

“You’ll miss this.”

He had not doubt he would, though he was content enough to miss the play to look about. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. A glance to Harry showed the knight distracted and bored, unlike Royner and Septon Tom who were as focused on the mummercy as the children were. Garmon and Daegen appeared to be enjoying themselves. Samwell and Aurene as well. Yet Jon could not stop looking about the audience. Looking for someone.

Barristan. Why hasn’t Barristan returned?

Garin was at the height of his power when a wolf’s howl could be heard over the mummer’s words. The drawn own sound belonged to Lady, and Sansa jerked some to hear the direwolf howling in such a way. Usually the wolf was of the best behavior.

“Where is Barristan?” Sansa asked him over the noise of the play, for the Valyrians were coming upon Garin in terrible vengeance. “He should be here. We need him here.”

“Something’s not right.” He agreed, looking to the children in almost a panic. “I don’t want to be here. I don’t want them here.”

Aemma shushed them as fire dancers began to spin torches near the stage, the firelight flashing across the actors at the mummers in dragon masks threw down the Rhoynar in their path. Only a trio of archers stood their ground. Men who held their bows as true archers would. Who notched their arrows to aim at the dragons. Arrows as real as the fear pounding in his mind.

“The children.” He croaked out before grabbing at Sansa and unleashing his terror. “THE CHILDREN!”

Then the archers were no longer aiming at the dragons. But at the crowd.

A white blur flew across the stage, leaping at the closest bowmen just as all three loosed.
The audience was screaming when Jon threw himself across Sansa and the girls. Aemma and Rhaegina were half crushed beneath him, both crying out in pain and fear. Sansa was shrieking and struggling to be free of him.

As he rose up he saw Royner stagger to his feet with an arrow through his throat. Harry fell forward, a fletching poking out of his shoulder. Ghost was tearing apart a man on stage as Barristan cut another’s head clean off.

The uproar was such that Sansa screams only became clear when she broke free of him, lunging to his left.

“Aenry! AENRY!”

His heart was ice when he turned about. His lungs giving voice to an anguished cry. For Sansa now clutched their boy in her arms. Blood running down his small face. His eyes open and face expressionless.

Then Aenry blinked. He blinked and Jon’s heart beat again.

Before catching sight of the arrow sticking out of Benjen’s chest.

Those Stark eyes of his wide and unseeing.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Love, loss, and lies.

The gathering of swords and lifting of veils.

THE FAITH MILITANT RISING

The Faith of the Seven is without peer for influence in Westeros, coming before the maesters or the Citadel itself. Septons have preached and won converts within every part of the Seven Kingdoms, even in the hostile North and Iron Islands.

At different times over the centuries, the Faith’s influence has waxed and waned. A significant period followed Aegon’s Conquest in Essos, a time when the High Septon was accounted the most powerful ruler in the Seven Kingdoms. Perhaps inspired by the grand undertaking of the Targaryens, this High Septon began to expand the Faith’s influence in a way not seen since the coming of the Andals themselves.

He set about a campaign to bolster the role of the Faith and strengthen the Faith Militant across the realms. Gold was gathered from the Lannisters, wheat from the Reach, whatever the faithful realms could give was welcomed. Thus the ranks of the Poor Fellows and Warrior’s Sons swelled, mostly from those displaced by Harren the Black’s cruel rule in the Riverlands.

It was the Drowned God of the ironmen that the Faith Militant first turned their pious fury against. To lead the crusade the High Septon chose the aging King of the Stormlands, Argillac Durrandon. Years of defeat at the hands of Hoares ended with Argillac invading the Riverlands with the Faith’s backing. A war of the faithful that saw many riverlords rise in rebellion while most longships were harrying the North. King Harren was eventually chased by Argillac’s men behind the walls of Harrenhal itself.

With the fighting in the Riverlands raging, the High Septon united King Loren of the Rock and King Mern IX of the Reach in common cause. A fleet of hundreds of ships sailed to the Iron Islands, carrying tens of thousands of warriors by some accounts. Men who brought fire and the faith to the reaver isles. An ugly bloodletting stymied by foul weather and stubborn resistance by ironmen under Vickon Greyjoy.

A similar struggle awaited the army of the Vale after Queen Sharra Arryn, goaded by her septons, launched a holy war against the Old Gods of the North. Sadly the path of the Arryn army took it straight to Moat Cailin. It was there Brandon the Bowman and his archers slaughtered thousands of Vale men, including three members of House Arryn itself.

That decade of holy war took a grievous toll. King Mern would be lost with much of the Gardener fleet during a storm. Harren the Black would starve within Harrenhal, a fitting end considering how many he worked to death building that monstrosity. To celebrate the death of his hated foe,
Argillac hosted a feast among the siege lines. Late into the revelry, Harren’s sons and their desperate men charged forth from the gates, catching Argillac’s men drunk and unawares. Argillac would be slain in the mayhem, earning the fallen king the title of Argillac the Arrogant.

Remarkably, the High Septon was one of the few rulers who believed his authority actually bolstered by the wars. To him, the failings of the holy crusades were seen as judgements on the impious ways of the leading monarchs, many of whom were now dead. Those heirs left to pick up the pieces were pressured by the High Septon to meet their tithes so that the ranks of the Faith Militant might continue to grow. There is talk he meant to name a Holy Emperor of the Seven to unite the faithful kingdoms. Whether the High Septon meant to take the title himself or name a member of his family has never been settled upon.

What matters is that it never came to pass. A sudden case of the bloody flux led to the death of the High Septon, a strange ailment to be found in Oldtown at the time. Afterwards, the Most Devout elected a successor who was far less bold.

Or mad, depending on who is doing the telling.

CATELYN

The pain struck so suddenly that Catelyn clutched at her chest, expecting to pull her hand away and find blood upon it. Here in the heart of Winterfell, there were no lack of archers or spearmen who could hurt her so. Yet this was no wound of the flesh, merely one of the heart. A wound the years away from Winterfell had not been able to heal.

It was Winterfell’s sept that brought on her ache. That tiny place of worship that Ned had built for just for her.

It’s still here… just like the rest of Winterfell. It’s all still here.

Except for Ned. My poor, sweet Ned.

Her grief was eclipsed by anger when her traveling companion was helped out of his saddle. Returning to Winterfell in the wake of another Stark’s death was hard enough, but doing so with Tyrion Lannister felt like spitting on Ned’s memory. Fingers balled into a fist as she watched the dwarf waddle across the courtyard, his mismatched eyes roaming over the home that the Lannisters had stolen from her.

“As handsome as I remember.” Tyrion remarked, adjusting the laces of his crimson jerkin. “A tad too grey, yes, and colder than I usually like, but I stand by what I told Robert all those years ago. Your castle has its charm.”

“Winterfell is mine no longer.” Catelyn replied, taking note of the group approaching from the Great Keep. “Save your praise, it is Robb you must win over. Not that a King of Winter will put much value in a Lannister’s opinion of his home.”

“I would wager that depends.” Tyrion glanced at the welcoming party. “On which Lannister that opinion comes from.”

As wrong as it felt, she knew Tyrion was right.
Walking towards them, arm-in-arm with Robb, was his golden Queen of the North. Robb led Myrcella on with steady strides, moving in a way that reminded her so much of Ned. Her son wore the woools and furs of the North and it was a surprise to see Myrcella doing the same. The young queen’s gown was a simple wool dyed blue, like the sea at shallow tide, her cloak soft white fox fur.

The king and queen were forgotten when a prince broke free of the group and hurried Catelyn’s way. Though Bran was now a man grown, he acted as eager as the precious little boy he would always be in her mind.

“Mother.” Bran threw aside his dark cloak so they could embrace. He was taller than her now yet still felt small in her arms. “Mother… I’m so sorry. This isn’t how I wanted to meet again.”

“Nor I, sweetling.” She whispered back. “I wish it was Benjen here in my place.”

Benjen’s murder had sent shockwaves across entire kingdoms. In one foul night, a beloved Stark prince was stolen from the North, Lysa lost her husband, and Sansa very nearly her son. Of all the horrors which followed, seeing little Aenry bloody and quivering in Sansa’s arms still set Catelyn’s flesh to crawling.

A terrible memory she was spared from after Catelyn spotted two little boys trailing behind Robb and Myrcella. They shared the same hair as their mother and the younger had Myrcella’s eyes as well. The elder boy though, he looked back at Catelyn with eyes she knew well.

“He has Robb’s eyes,” she thought, a little wolf with his father’s lovely blues.

“And the youngest, gods… I see his uncle Brandon in him for sure…”

“Welcome home, mother.” Robb said, freeing himself from Myrcella’s grasp and kissing her hand. “The North welcomes the Queen Mother, but allow me to introduce a grandmother to her grandchildren.”

“Please do so.” She fought through the grief to smile down at the little boys Robb urged forward. Without hesitation she bent low, dirtying her skirts in her haste to be closer to Robb’s sons.

“This is Ned.” Robb ruffled the older boy’s hair before nudging the little one her way. “And this shy one is Tom. Boys, this is my mother. Your grandmother, Catelyn Stark, Queen in the North.”

“Dowager queen.” She corrected before nodding Myrcella’s way, only to find the young woman staring at her feet, acting put out. Such wasn’t the behavior of a proper queen yet young Ned soon stole her attention by stepping forward and bowing to her.

“Hello, grandmother.” He spoke in a high, sweet voice. “You’re a Tully. Father says I’ve got fish eyes.”

“Fish eyes?!?” Catelyn joined her sons in laughing before cupping young Ned’s cheeks and pulling him in for a kiss. “Well the trout is certainly House Tully’s sigil, and we most assuredly have the same blue in our gaze. Like your father.”

“Pretty.” Tom piped up as he reached for her auburn hair. “Very red. Very pretty.”

“Thank you, sweetling.” Her heart felt near to bursting when she enfolded the sweet babe in her arms.

This was joy she had denied herself for far too long. It shamed Catelyn to think that she had been there for the births of all her grandchildren, save for these two. Sansa’s babes had come into the
world to find her waiting, Arya’s boy as well, yet events beyond her control had kept her away from Winterfell. The rebellions and the harsh winter had made travel across the North a trial, and Sansa had needed help governing her new kingdom while Jon was called away to battle.

That’s what she told herself at least. It was easier that way. Easier to stay ignorant of the boys’ sweet faces than face the anguish that awaited her here.

_Nearly ten years and my heart aches still. It was Ned who brought me to Winterfell._

_It is his ghost that kept me away._

Pain aside, Catelyn would do her duty, which brought her to Winterfell once more. In the wake of the attack, events were set in motion that could not be stopped. That Harry the Heir was a target had been damning enough evidence. The discovery of gold coins among the bowmen’s belongings, marked with the likeness of King Jasper Arryn of the Mountain and Vale, made the culprit’s identity all but certain.

So when the Manderly fleet set sail to return the body of their admiral to White Harbor, they did so with vengeance in their hearts. Ser Marlon Manderly only delayed their departure out of respect for her, and for the dire state of Aevalon.

Word of the violence at the theater had spread like wildfire. Rumors spoke of Aenry being dead, or perhaps Jon instead. Some said the assassins were foreign, while others claimed they were Westerosi. Depending on the tale and where it was heard, rage flowed through Aevalon’s divided populace. Catelyn and the others were barely back at the Red Keep before the riots started. Mobs rose from the western and eastern quarters, all in defense of their king, all thirsty for blood from the other side. Hundreds died before the Dark Order rode out, killing any who raised a blade or held a torch, spilling blood to restore order.

Smoke was still rising from parts of Aevalon when the Manderly fleet departed. The madness she left behind was nothing compared to the destruction they brought to the Three Sisters. Catelyn and Tyrion had watched from their ship as the isle of Sweetsister was set upon by thousands of vengeful northerners. The flames from the burning ships, docks, and villages lit up the night, all put to torch, simply because they owed fealty to Elbert Arryn. Ser Marlon declared that he was avenging Benjen by putting the Three Sisters to the sword, and Catelyn had it on good authority that those ravages continued even now.

_That’s as far as this can go. At least on the North’s part._

_I must spare it from the war to come._

They could not be spared the awkwardness of Tyrion’s presence however. Neither Robb nor Myrcella seemed inclined to have the Lannister at Winterfell, which surprised Catelyn some. Tyrion and Myrcella had enjoyed a warm relationship in the past but there were no hints of that now. Myrcella kept a purposeful distance from her uncle and focused her gaze on the ground. While Catelyn found Tyrion to be an immensely disagreeable man, what with his drinking and whore mongering, Myrcella’s reaction towards him was worrying. If not for the good he offered Robb’s family, she would have never thought to bring Tyrion to Winterfell.

A visit only the children acted pleased about. Tom soon pulled away from her embrace, pointing at Tyrion with a bright smile.

“Hello!” Tom giggled. “Hello, little man!”
“Tom! Your manners!” Myrcella corrected the boy but Tyrion was having none of it.

“I’ve been called far worse things in my life, dear niece. Not that I don’t wish to be styled in the proper way. There’s certainly a gift awaiting the young prince who can do so first.”

That caught Ned’s attention, who had been gaping at the dwarf in wonder. Now the heir began bouncing on his heels in excitement.


“I said you’re too clever for your own good.” Myrcella clarified.

“Both are quite fitting.” Tyrion winked at the boys. He then waved forth Podrick Payne, his sworn shield, who handed over a sack Tyrion began rooting through. “Come young Starklings, so that I might spoil you as befits your lion heritage.”

The boys went on eagerly while Catelyn caught how Myrcella jerked, as if she meant to snatch them back. It was a queer reaction to the fine gift that Tyrion bestowed upon Tom. A pair of clasps, one a snarling lion’s head wrought in gold, the other a silver direwolf doing the same.

“For when you wear a cloak as heavy as your father’s.” Tyrion patted Tom’s head before turning to young Ned. When he pulled forth a sheathed dagger Myrcella gasped in such a way Tyrion held up a hand. “Be at ease! I mean no harm. In truth, I hope this helps keep Prince Eddard quite safe. Here lad, go and show your parents.”

Ned handled the sheathed blade delicately, staring at the dark and smooth making of its hilt. Once delivered over to Robb, her son wasted no time in unsheathing it to display a dagger with a distinctive rippling to the steel. A sight which set Bran to whistling and Robb to raise an eyebrow at Tyrion.

“Is this-”

“Yes, Valyrian steel.” Tyrion nodded. “The hilt is made of polished dragonbone, a worthy substance to pair with such a blade. Mind you, it’s nowhere near as mighty as King Robb’s storied greatsword, Ice. But, since it shall be many years before Prince Eddard wields Ice himself, it seemed fitting to let him practice with a blade of his own.”

“Uncle, we cannot accept this.” Myrcella shook her head vigorously as Robb sheathed the dagger once more.

“Myrcella is right.” Robb said. “It is far too grand for a boy of Ned’s age. I cannot imagine it’s worth.”

“Then it shall keep until he’s older.” Tyrion grinned widely. “Let us not quibble about value and worth, we are... family, after all.”

This time Catelyn shared in the discomfort that Myrcella so obviously displayed. After that awkwardness, others came along and more reunions were had. It did her well to see Jory Cassel and Septon Chayle again, and when Maester Luwin hobbled his way to her side, Catelyn went so far as to kiss his wrinkled cheek.

“Too much, your grace.” The old maester blushed as they held hands. “Elderly as I am, the repute of our dowager queen is something I defend as strongly as ever.”
She sighed at that. “After all those childbirths you guided me through, it’s beneath you to be shamed by a simple peck on the cheek. It’s the least I can do. You did what I couldn’t after Ned passed. You stayed. You guided Robb as I hoped you would.”

“There was little counsel to give.” Luwin said as they watch Robb and young Ned show off the dagger to Jory and Alyn. “The North has a king both brave and wise. With a queen worthy of him and this kingdom. Take that as no slight against you-”

She was not ignorant of Luwin’s esteem for Myrcella. Over the years the maester had sent letters south praising Myrcella for her courage and intelligence. Catelyn did not doubt those accounts, for she knew first hand the trials that a southron lady faced here at Winterfell. She watched as Myrcella directed Vayon Poole and others on how to settle their guests, commands that none questioned and were followed without a glance to Robb. That took an authority Catelyn had spent years to gain herself.

*It would have been easy to abandon such responsibilities to Robb alone.*

*She could have allowed the North to break her. Or for the winter chase her back south.*

*Instead Myrcella became the direwolf I asked her to be.*

That was a heartening thought, for once it might have sickened Catelyn to see the likeness of Cersei Lannister ruling here in Winterfell. Yet Myrcella had all of her mother’s beauty and none of her nature, that was plain to any who saw how the queen helped little Tom up from a fall after tripping over his own feet. She soothed his tears with kind words and softer touches.

*Is that how Cersei got Tommen to drink the poison? Playing the loving mother all so she could murder her own child?*

She cursed herself for allowing such a terrible thought. Such was beneath her, yet with so many reminders of the Lannisters about and a pall of death hanging over the castle, it was hard for her mind not to wander to dark places.

Her unease only grew worse when they journeyed through the corridors and stairwells of the Great Keep. Their footfalls upon the stone floor rang out as memories rushed towards her. Ned carrying Robb on his shoulders. His tender words as he helped Sansa search for her doll. His laughter when Arya and Bran covered themselves in flour to act as ghosts. The pride on his face to watch Rickon take his first steps.

The feel of his lips. The welcome touch of his rough hands on her skin. His smile. Those grey eyes. His last words to her.

“I’ll not be gone long… a few moons… then I’ll be home… home with you.”

A lie Ned had told her without knowing it.

The king’s solar had changed little from how she remembered it. A fire burned in the hearth and Ice hung above the mantle. Newly drawn maps adorned the walls, showing the breadth Robb’s kingdom. A sharp contrast to how little room the solar offered with so many within. Bran and Myrcella refused to sit in the three chairs before the lord’s table, allowing Luwin and their guests to do so instead.

*That’s what I am now, a guest at Winterfell.*

Robb was their host yet, before he sat behind the table, his hand wandered over a pile of small
parchments.

“We’ve been besieged by dark wings since news came of Benjen.” Robb snatched up one letter idly. “The Greatjon demands we storm the Bloody Gate and tear the Eyrie down stone by stone. Lady Dustin seeks assurances that I remain committed to the defence of Barrowton and the western coasts. Uncle Edmure says the riverlords disavow any march until they have a harvest or two. Oh, and Elbert Arryn calls us butchers and worse for what’s become of the Three Sisters. Imagine the gall of that murdering scum—”

“The sisters do burn.” She said, sharing an uncomfortable look with Tyrion. “We saw that for ourselves. Sweetsister was poorly garrisoned at the time, no match for an assault as fierce as the Manderlys attack. They were hungry for vengeance Robb... and there was talk of pressing the fight.”

“More than talk.” Bran began leaning back against the wall, his face somber. “It was a great victory apparently. Ships have been put to the torch, Sisterton razed, Lord Sunderland killed along with many of his sons… hundreds more beyond that.”

“Likely thousands, my son.” Catelyn sighed. “Thousands dead, all in Benjen’s name… I cannot imagine he would have wanted this.”

“Benjen wanted to live.” Robb replied, falling back in his chair in a huff. “He wanted to share his days with his wife and children. He wanted to help Bran and I throw back the Greyjoys. All gone to ruin. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” His eyes narrowed on her. “Any could’ve escorted Benjen’s bones back north and I doubt you seized on this chance to finally return for a visit. So do what Sansa and Jon bid you, tell me to call my banners and make war against the Vale alongside their kingdom.”

The rebuke was embarrassing. Neither the maester or Myrcella could look her way, while Bran glared openly at Robb. She thought for sure Bran might rise to her defense yet she would not have that. So when Bran opened his mouth to speak she apologized instead.

“I am sorry, Robb. For the distance between us, for my absence all these years, for this reunion being a sorrowful one. Forgive me all that, and what I must do now. For you are wrong, your grace.”

“Oh? Jon and Sansa didn’t send you to plead their case for war against the Arryns?”

“They entrusted me to convey their wishes... which are not for war. Instead your sister asks for peace. The Targaryens ask the North to lay down their arms.”

“You can’t be serious.” Bran jerked away from the wall and came to stand beside Robb. “Elbert Arryn killed Benjen!”

“In an attempt on Jon’s life. Or Aenry’s. We’re still not certain.” She spoke truthfully, for the inquisition into the assassination was still ongoing when she departed. “Benjen arrived in Aevalon as a guest of House Targaryen. He was accorded all the protections owed, and Jon pledges to seek justice on his behalf.”

“Without the North?” Myrcella piped up, twirling a curl of hair in her hand. “I remember my lessons of the Vale. The Andals were the last to ever conquer it, and for good reason.”

Luwin nodded in agreement. “Beyond the Mountains of the Moon or upon the sea, the Vale can be defeated. Brandon the Bowman proved that. But if the Arryns keep their strength behind the ranges... the North once warred against the Vale for a thousand years without achieving victory.”

“The Worthless War.” Catelyn said. “Yes, maester, I recall the histories. As do many Vale lords. This sack of the sisters will be bad enough. If the King in the North declares outright war, it will only
rally our enemies and lose us allies. The High Septon swears by that.”

“The High Septon?” Robb asked, bewilderment wrinkling his brow and Bran’s face. “What does the Faith have to do with this?”

“Any old hatreds will be stirred again. Elbert already proclaims his kingdom threatened by an alliance of foreign and northern heathens. He moves quickly to make this conflict less about his crimes and more about defending the Andal conquest. A holy war of sorts.”

“Nonsense.” Robb scoffed. “I follow the old gods but you also raised me to respect the Faith, as my wife does for our sons. Half my bloody bannermen worship the Seven!”

“That may not matter.” Maester Luwin tapped on his cane as thought, his face grim as he took the meaning of this quicker. “Ignorance and fear can be potent weapons in such times. Reason is a weak shield against them.”

She thought that well said. “Right now the High Septon pledges the might of the Faith Militant to bring Elbert Arryn low. There are Warrior’s Sons already in the Vale, ready to rise up to aid the Highlands, Vale lords as well. The Royces of Runestone, the Redforts, the Knight of Ninestars... lords of repute who would be invaluable in a fight such as this... families that will not help us if you join the fight. Nor will the Faith.”

“Bronze Yohn Royce is a friend to us.” Bran noted. “He guested here on his way to the Wall. His house is descended from First Men.”

“And those same ancestors have warred against the North in defense of the Vale. Friend that he is, Bronze Yohn will not aid any invasion of his homeland that might see a Stark ascend the Falcon’s throne. Even if he could be won over, others won’t. The High Septon has been clear on that.”

Robb sat back in his seat then, looking to Bran and Myrcella who were both deep in thought. Maester Luwin was tugging on his chain while Tyrion watched all this with a bemused grin.

“I’ll be honest, I wasn’t prepared for this.” Robb finally spoke, gesturing to the others. “I can accept Jon and Sansa seeking justice on Benjen’s behalf, I can even keep the armies of the North at home, but I cannot stop Marlon’s fleet in the Bite. It’s a matter of honor now and I’d lose face if I tried. Not that I don’t need them elsewhere...”

“It’s the Greyjoys.” Myrcella went to her husband, laying a comforting hand upon Robb’s shoulder that made Cat feel assured as well. “Longships have been spotted along the Stoney Shore. Bran’s marriage to Eddara Tallhart was to be soon but we fear war will come sooner. The Stouts and the Reeds claim hundreds of reavers are arriving at Flint’s Finger under Theon Greyjoy.”

“So that’s where that cocky shit ended up.” Tyrion finally spoke, eyeing a ruby ring upon his finger. “My father’s gold bought us word that his uncles are off pillaging the Reach and sailing up the Mander. Meanwhile King Balon and the Kraken’s Daughter are at Fair Isle, sitting on poor Lord Farman’s island while they prepare to ravage more of the Westerlands.”

Robb gave a mirthless laugh. “Is this another gift, my prince? To hear that we don’t suffer alone? It’s of little comfort. The Greyjoys can afford to spread themselves out. With the number of ships they have, the krakens can strike wherever they will and sail away in haste, leaving our armies with little to do but bury their dead.”

“A situation that my father is hoping to remedy.” Tyrion said. “Highgarden was meant to join us in a war against the Iron Islands. Sadly, rather than building ships, like our canny King in the North, the
Greenhand spent all winter at war with the Dornish and the dragons. It will be a wonder if Oldtown can even protect itself, let alone go on the offensive.”

“That’s what they get for fighting our kin.” Bran said as Robb eyed Tyrion with interest.

“What are your southron woes to us, Prince Tyrion? Why are you even here?”

“Why, to see my beautiful niece! To share a barrel of wine with the Young Wolf that tied my father’s tail in a knot! Also, to propose an alliance between Winterfell and Casterly Rock.”

Maester Luwin’s jaw dropped open in shock while Catelyn was treated to the sight of her sons looking to each other before bursting into laughter.

“You came a long way to make a jest.” Robb waved at Bran to quiet himself. “Or to speak madness perhaps. I seek allies I can trust, and there’s little trust to be found in your family.”

“Enough to invite one of us to your bed.”

The laughter died away at that, Robb’s expression darkening and Myrcella paling some.

“My wife is a Durrandon, not a Lannister.”

“She certainly looks the part.” Tyrion shrugged. “Either way, she was a named enemy of the North until you met her and… forged peace. And from the look of my nephews, it was a fruitful peace at that!”

No one shared in Tyrion’s mirth and his smile quickly faded.

“The North has fought alongside the West against those accursed islands before and we can do so again. You say you distrust my father and brother? Fine. Neither of them are currently pillaging your coasts or holding your castles hostage. Think me a snake if you wish. You’ve fought beside vipers before.”

“That was different.” Robb looked her way. “You knew of this? That he’d propose fighting with the lions? Alongside the men who murdered our father?”

Tyrion raised a hand. “Hold on, Gregor Clegane was guilty of that-”

“Silence.” Catelyn snapped, gripping at the arms of her chair in anger and shame. “We condemn the dog as well as his master.” She then looked to her sons, fighting hard against the disgust building within her throat. “And yes, I knew of this. Just as I learned that you and Bran readied for war. It was I who bid Tyrion to join me… in the hopes that you would agree to the Lannister offer.”

“Mother, no.” Bran near whispered. “How could you… what of father…?”

“Your father is dead. My Ned is dead…” Her voice failed for a moment at that. “But our children live. If I must swallow my hatred in order for you both to be spared his fate, I will do so. Look at what the Greyjoys already took from Lady Tallhart. The North has lost enough sons. I would not have your boys lack for a father, Robb. Take your best chance for victory. Defend your realm. Protect our family.”

Robb stared at her as if she was some stranger. After all these years away, perhaps she was one now. So Catelyn sought the aid of his queen, for surely Myrcella could help win Robb over. Yet when she turned to Myrcella she found the golden queen as white as snow, her eyes wide in alarm.
“Myrcella? Are you alright?” She drew everyone’s attention to the ailing woman, who acted deaf to her words. “Myrcella? Bran, take hold of her.”

Bran did so in haste, causing Myrcella to blink like she was awoken from some spell. Robb was on his feet when she finally found her voice.

“My apologies… I…” Myrcella said, her eyes glistening and voice trembling as Robb steadied her. “All this talk of war… of lost fathers… might I retire?”

Robb excused her without hesitation, yet not before kissing her and forcing Maester Luwin to accompany his wife and see to her health. It was understandable for the woman to get so upset, Catelyn surely was, yet something about Myrcella’s reaction surprised her.

If anyone here in Winterfell should support Stark and Lannister coming together in common cause, it is Myrcella.

Such a victory over the Greyjoys might win her some measure of respect in the North.

As it happened, Myrcella’s spell might have aided the cause. Whatever objections Robb thought to raise were lost in his worry after his wife. His attention was elsewhere and it was not long before he called an end to the audience altogether. That Robb did not reject the notion out of hand was a far better start than Catelyn or Tyrion had expected.

It was a strange thing to keep Robb from fighting alongside allies, only to push him into waging war with the aid of enemies. After Maester Luwin reported that Myrcella showed no sign of illness, she tasked him with sending a raven to Aevalon. The White Harbor fleet remained an issue, so she pressed Jon and Sansa into drawing attention to the Manderly devotion to their Faith.

Perhaps the High Septon can see his way around their involvement.

After all, he was willing to forgive Rickon’s foolishness at the Bloody Gate…

The actions of her youngest boy were for Jon and Sansa to sort out. It was her eldest sons who Catelyn focused on for the rest of the evening. She was glad Bran decided to marry and had given up seeking the Wall, though his words on the matter sounded strained. Robb thanked her profusely for her offer to tend to the boys so he could seek Myrcella’s bedside. Thus, while Joy Hill sang Tom to sleep, Catelyn was given the chance to tuck young Ned in with tales of his namesake.

“I like your stories.” The little prince told her with eyes shut and voice heavy with sleep. “About grandfather. The way you tell them, I can pretend he’s alive.”

She held back until he was asleep before the tears slipped free. As she sat watching the night grow darker and young Ned sleeping so peacefully, all Catelyn could think about was how her husband deserved to be here. To look upon his grandson. To be by her side. For Winterfell to be theirs still.

It was late when she left her grandson’s chambers, yet it wasn’t in her to seek her own so soon. They weren’t her chambers truly, only a guest room made up for her. Catelyn’s old chambers were now Myrcella’s and she was not quite ready to face that truth. So she sought little Tom’s rooms, where Sansa had once slept. It would be nice to watch the babe sleep as Sansa once had.

Yet it appeared another had the same idea, for as Catelyn rounded the corner she saw Myrcella exiting the boy’s room. She did not call to her gooddaughter, certain that Myrcella would come her way to seek Ned’s chambers. Instead the queen continued forward, towards the stairs descending the Great Keep. Stranger still, Cat took notice of how Myrcella wore a peasant’s cloak rather than royal garment.
Perhaps her own cloak was misplaced. She might seek the sept in these troubled times.

It might lift my spirits to do the same.

Such is what Catelyn told herself as she followed Myrcella. Not that it explained why she stayed so quiet, or why she made no effort to close the gap between them. Those actions gave rise to the same foul sort of questions as Myrcella’s movements inspired. For her gooddaughter was taking care to be silent and held no lantern or candle to guide her way.

When Myrcella left the keep into the night beyond, she did not seek the sept. Instead Catelyn watched as the woman threw her hood on and moved swiftly towards the broken tower. The long abandoned watchtower was a ruin, its top third collapsed inward. Thus it was odd to see a flicker of light from one of its taller windows.

Catelyn let that dim light guide her journey towards the tower. Once within, she could hear footsteps making their way up the tower’s dusty, cracked stairs. Sounds that she used to cover her own climb. It was a dangerous thing to do, an ascent cloaked by darkness with her hands clutching at cobwebs.

You were born a Tully, now act a Stark. Be a direwolf.

As surefooted as Lady. As quiet as Ghost.

A glance out the window showed distant torchlights far below. She was near the tallest heights that any could reach in the tower. Near enough to take note that Myrcella’s steps had halted. Voices drifted down to her now. She couldn’t quite make out their words but her heart pounded to recognize the speakers.

Myrcella and Tyrion, meeting in secret, far from all prying ears. Save her own. Cat climbed higher until she could hear all she needed.

“I won’t let you.” Myrcella’s pained words echoed. “This is my castle, my life, you can’t take it from me! Whatever treason you plot-”

“There’s no treason.” Tyrion answered. “Not on my part at least. As far as I am concerned, your grandfather’s offer is genuine. The Lannisport fleet is at the ready if your husband’s are made the same.”

“Grandfather hates Robb. Mother wants him dead. She wants to ruin everything. She wants to take my family away from me like she took- like she took Tommen!”

“Cersei murdered Tommen. Killed him with me under the same roof. Do you think that doesn’t haunt me to this day? I don’t drink myself to sleep for fun, child. I’d never let you or your sons come to such an end. Neither would Jaime. He told me-”

“Don’t.” Myrcella’s command was as sharp as the stone Catelyn cut her hand on. She bit at her lip to keep from crying out.

There was treason afoot.

“Don’t speak of that, ever.” Myrcella spat. “It’s disgusting and wrong. You’re just like her, that’s what she threatened me with too. Now her crimes will doom my babes as surely as the poison did for Tommen.”

“Sad to say, it’s not all about you niece. If that tale came out, it would do far worse damage to our family than Robb Stark or Jon Targaryen ever did. That’s why Cersei has been kept locked away in
the deepest bowels of Casterly Rock all this time. Father will let no one but silent sisters tend to her. Not even Jaime has seen her…”

“Good. I want to go the rest of my life without seeing her. Any of you. I’m a Durrandon. My children are Starks, not Lannisters. Never Lannisters. Why uncle... why try and endanger the boys by casting doubt on their blood?”

“I did what?” Tyrion sounded as genuinely confused as Catelyn felt.

“The gift you gave Tom. The lion clasp! He’s a wolf first, and a stag second. I saw the threat then and there…”

“Fuck me.” Tyrion gave a biting laugh then. “Sweet niece, it seems you’re the one who is too clever for her own good. I chose the lion because of all those rebellions being started in the name of your boy’s claim to Storm’s End. It was an effort not to anger the dowager-pain-in-my-arse. No one batted an eye. Our family slaps bloody lions on everything.”

“Your family!” Myrcella snapped. “Not mine. Never mine. I want nothing to do with any of you. Just leave me be. Robb loves me and I love him. Ned and Tom are the most precious gifts I have in this world. I would die without them. Uncle, please, please... if you ever loved me, just leave my family in peace.”

“I am sorry, Myrcella.” Tyrion spoke with a softness she had never heard from him. “I truly am... but war’s coming whether I wish it or not. The Greyjoys are as great a threat to us as they are to the Starks. Look at me. Look at me like you used to. Once you trusted me. Trust that I came here to forge an alliance, not to endanger you.”

There was a pause then. She had climbed so close that Cat could peer around the bend in the staircase and see the dwarf holding a candle. The lengthy silence made Catelyn fear that somehow she’d been heard. A scrape of a shoe against the steps, a breath taken too loudly. Something that had betrayed her as she feared Myrcella might be betraying Robb.

It makes no sense. She fights and fights to keep Robb and the boys safe, yet meets in secret with a Lannister.

What is she trying to hide?

“I’m not who you think I am.” Myrcella finally said. “Not anymore. The girl who loved you is gone. She’s a direwolf now, and the Lannisters her enemy.”

“We aren’t.” Tyrion lowered his head. “Cersei may be mad, but Jaime is father’s heir. He is valued. He is heeded in most things. You imagined my gift was some threat? If I wished to do so, I would have spoken of who sent me that dagger for your boy. A gift from grandfather to grandson. Your father wanted to help keep your son safe.”

Robert Durrandon is long dead, Catelyn struggled to understand, and that man cared little enough for his children in life.

What nonsense have I stumbled upon?

“I told you to never speak of that.” Myrcella’s voice trembled some. “My son will never name that man anything of the like.”

“Myrcella, named or not, that’s what he is-”
“No, Jaime Lannister can never be that... he can never be my father.”

**SANSA**

The white cloaks hung pristine upon the shoulders of the knights. Light cascaded down upon them from high arched windows, casting a heavenly air about each warrior. More than a hundred onlookers packed the hall, gazing at the six sworn shields lined up before their king.

The seventh and finest of them strode down their number, his own white-cloak dragging on the floor behind him. Ser Barristan was the pinnacle of chivalry and devotion that Sansa wanted these knights to aspire to. Men she needed to put the safety of those nearest and dearest to her before all other things, including their own lives.

When Barristan ended his inspection, he snapped to attention to face her and Jon. One hand on the pommel of his sword, the other to his heart, Barristan bowed his head in deference.

“King Jon, Queen Sansa, we are your men. Your sworn shields. On our honor, by our blades, and with our very lives, we pledge ourselves to the protection of the royal family.”

“Then come forth and be recognized.” Jon beckoned to one of the knights, his voice ringing in Rhaegar’s iron tones. “Come and let me hear your name and vow.”

The first to come forward was no stranger and the only knight here that could rival Barristan in repute. He was an ordinary looking man, kneeling at their feet to unsheathe his blade and offer the hilt to Jon.

“Ser Dontos Hollard.” The knight proclaimed. “I pledge my life and blade to House Targaryen.”

Jon did not hesitate to take the offered blade before bidding Dontos the Daunting to rise. Once Royner Darklyn’s sworn shield, he had run afoul of the lord’s widow, her aunt Lysa. Free of his allegiance to Duskendale, Sansa was more than happy to welcome Dontos to their service. Sadly, as Jon returned the blade, she saw no sign of his being pleased at all. His expression was hard and cold, like the gold of his crown.

*He never wanted it to come to this, she thought, a time when we wouldn’t feel safe in our own home.*

*When we failed to protect our children.*

A glance to her left showed them safe and sound for the moment. Thoros stayed close to Aemma, who rocked Vaelena to keep the babe calm. Rhaegina was holding one of Aenry’s hands, the other safely in Sam’s grasp. They were all watching as Dontos went to stand facing the crowd while another knight knelt before Jon.

Ser Richard Horpe was a hard-eyed man with a face marred by battle and pox scars. Though of little renown, both Barristan and Gendry swore by his skill and loyalty. It also helped that Ser Richard hailed from the Stormlands. As did Ser Guyard Morrigen, who knelt next. While not the main reason they named these fine warriors to the guard, Sansa saw the appointments as a chance to improve the standing of House Targaryen among the Stormlords.

By honoring some of the Stormlands' finest warriors, Jon showed respect and esteem for his vassals. He did much the same for the riverlords in accepting the vow of Ser Myles Mooton. A broad-chested man and brother to the Lord of Maidenpool, Myles was known to be as bold as brass and true as steel.
The next two to come forward were quite different from the rest. Malo Jayn was a former sergeant in the Dark Order, a veteran of two tours which had left his dusky face scarred and his demeanor grim. A man of the east like most of their freedmen, Jon had not hesitated to knight his former sworn brother and welcome him into this new order.

Unlike with Lothor Brune, the sixth knight to kneel at the king’s feet. The middle-aged man was neither handsome nor ugly. His hair was a mop of nappy grey and his build was stocky and strong. In the jousts and melees they threw to select these men, Lothor had performed among the best. It was his lack of friends that hurt his cause. The Brunes of Brownhollow did not account him as kin of theirs and he had fought in the Vale under Denys Arryn, earning no glory here in the Highlands.

They might have passed over Lothor... if not for the praise of Daegon Blackfyre, who knew the knight from his own travels.

“I served with him on the Fingers.” Daegon had claimed. “A miserable campaign against corsairs that no great lords bothered with. Only us wanderers, men who are little better than cutthroats. Not Lothor though. Quiet as he is, you’ll find few as loyal or as fierce in a fight. Trust me, it would be worth it to take a chance on him.”

“My father once asked me to do the same for you.” Jon’s reply came quickly but was followed by a longer pause where he regarded his vassal. “And I’ve never regretted heeding such counsel. It gained me a brave knight and a better friend. The Seven know I need more of them these days.”

Such was how her husband’s misgivings were eased. In these trying times, Jon depended on few like he did the Blackfyre lord or Ser Barristan.

Her bold knight was the last to kneel and offer Jon his blade.

“Barristan the Bold.” Jon spoke the name with respect, taking hold of the sword hilt yet staying the knight from rising. “Ser, in the past I was sure you would join the Highguard. Are you certain we are the Targaryens you wish to serve?”

“There is no crown I’d serve before yours, my king. Besides that of your queen’s.”

Barristan’s jest earned laughter from the crowd, giggles from the twins, and a small nod of approval from the king. Jon then looked to her, for he insisted on Sansa playing a part in this.

“Then rise, ser.” She smiled down at her protector. “Rise and forever be known as Ser Barristan Selmy, the first Lord-Commander of the Kingsguard.”

When Barristan did so he humbly took his sword back from Jon and blushed fiercely to receive a kiss on his cheek from her.

There was never any doubt Barristan would head their newly made order. Though modeled after the Highguard, this so-named Kingsguard would harken to the Faith by numbering only seven cloaks. They would be personally chosen by their king to serve for life, foregoing any families, lands, or titles to their name. Their only purpose would be to safeguard the royal family. Sansa’s family.

She had wanted such an order for years but it was the night of the Bloody Mummers that spurred Jon to take action. There was less blame to lay on Jon’s shoulders than her own. It was Sansa who had wanted the theater built, she who insisted they attend that night’s performance, she who ignored all her instincts that something terrible was afoot.

If not for Barristan and the direwolves, things might have been worse.
“The wolves, they would not calm in the stables.” Barristan recounted to the inquisition. “I feared for what harm they could do if freed from their berth so I kept watch. Then the riders came, two armed men leading five horses.”

“To aid the assassins’ escape.” Sam had concluded and Barristan agreed.

“I distrusted it all immediately, demanding their names and purpose. Then they drew blades. I slew one before the wolves broke free. Lady took the other and the Warrior above told me to follow Ghost. It was the beast that saved Prince Aenry’s life.”

“Or King Jon’s.” Varys had been keen to note. “Whether that arrow missed our king or his heir remains unknown. A foul thing that even in failure, the assassin claimed a life.”

*He claimed nothing. That fiend stole my beloved uncle from us.*

*And whoever commanded that crime has the blood of hundreds to answer for.*

The riots and fires which spread across Aevalon following the attack had brought her to tears. Watching this place that she and Jon had built together tear itself apart was like watching one of the children suffer. Murder, rape, theft, there was no crime the rival factions did not inflict upon the other. Much of it was done in Jon’s name, as ugly a service as the one that Dark Order performed when it rode through the streets, putting down the mobs with sword and spear. After days of violence it felt like every part of Aevalon was tainted in blood. Even the peace that followed.

Jon had begrudged forgiving some of the worst crimes yet, to restore order, issued a blanket pardon for all. He showed no such restraint for those who took justice into their own hands after the pardon. Freeborn or Freedman, it made no difference. All acts of vengeance were answered with the noose.

Jon himself had attended the public executions. He stood with the ten condemned men upon the scaffolding, facing the gathered thousands in the cobbled square.

“There is no justice in Aevalon save the king’s justice.” Jon had declared. “Anything else is vengeance and a defiance of my rule. A threat to the peace you all deserve! To keep us from falling into anarchy once more, these men will be held to account.” He had swallowed deeply then. “And as I pass the sentence, I shall see it through.”

It was an ugly thing all around, made worse that some of the condemned were known to them. A Lyseni freerider who had fought beside Jon in the Reach. A Blackwater trader and one of the first to petition Sansa in the early days of Aevalon’s birth. Jon saw them all dead, though not by his own hand like he’d originally intended. He heeded her on that, for the sight of their king beheading so many might make him appear a monster.

And Jon was no monster. A truth that bid her to lean up and kiss his cheek once the ceremony ended.

“What was that for?” He asked, eyeing the many onlookers in a shy manner.

“I need no reason.” She stroked his beard. “Though our Kingsguard will need to know your orders soon. Ser Barristan still isn’t content with arrangements we’ve made.”

“Nor am I, but that is an argument for later.” Jon raised an eyebrow at something just behind her. “Unlike the one coming our way right now. Show patience, my love.”

“I am always patient-“
Her lips pursed together in impatience then. Since they were girls, Arya had such an effect on her. With the hall filled with highborn ladies in fine gowns, the Lady of Storm’s end stood out like a sore thumb. Arya was a woman grown now yet looked more like a man in her leathers. While her dark hair hung in one thick handsome braid, it was the thin sword hanging at her side that caused Sansa to groan.

*We gave her a castle. A fine husband. Everything a lady could desire.*

*And of course my sister wanted more. Why did Gendry have to make that thing for her?*

Gendry showed no sign of embarrassment by Arya’s garb. In truth she thought the lord carried an air of pride to lead his wife to them. Gendry looked like a maiden’s dream with his tall, muscular bearing and tumbling black hair. His beard was just as dark and far thicker than Jon’s.

*Arya should trim him with that blade of hers.*

“Something wrong, Sansa?” Arya smiled innocently before halting in a false shock. “Oh no! I’m underdressed aren’t I? I forgot my white cloak!”

“It wouldn’t suit you.” Jon said. “You look far better in that black and gold one that Gendry gave you on your wedding day.”

“A fine cloak.” Gendry sighed in mock lament. “Sometimes I wish she’d give it back… ow!”

It was a spectacle to see a lady wife pinch at her lord husband’s cheek. Of course Arya added to it by placing a hand on Needle’s pommel in idle threat. All that set Sansa to huffing in disappointment.

“I asked you not to wear that sword.”

“Asked, not commanded.” Arya laughed, angling her hip so Needle stuck out all the more. “There’s no shame in showing off my husband’s fine work. You called for us to bring our swords and that’s exactly what we did. Besides, Brienne’s is bigger than mine.”

Arya jerked a thumb back towards the most outrageous sworn shield Sansa had ever seen. Lady Brienne of Tarth was a towering woman that armored herself like a man. It was widely known Brienne had bested some of the most formidable rebel knights on Arya’s behalf. Though Sansa saw little of that side of the warrior woman in how she guided a small boy across the hall.

Arya’s visits were always exasperating, yet there was no denying that her sister was a welcome distraction from the problems at hand. Just as the sight of Sansa’s nephew helped ease her annoyance at his mother. Gendry and Arya’s three year-old boy had joined Sansa’s children in being regaled by one of Thoros’s fantastical tales. Lyonel was the spitting image of Gendry with his black hair and blue eyes. Yet when Thoros got to a part that inspired outrage in his young audience, Sansa saw Arya in how little Lyonel’s face scrunched up in anger.

“Speaking of swords.” Gendry stole her attention once more. “Two thousand more just arrived from the Rainwood along with their lords. On fifteen ships sent by the lords Tarth and Estermont.”

“That brings the war fleet to more than a hundred.” Jon’s demeanor changed to his kingly persona. “Even more if we count the smaller trade carracks and cogs.”

Arya’s grin was a wolfish one. “More than Elbert can muster, if that pitiful attack on Maidenpool is any proof.”

A small armada out of Gulltown had attacked Maidenpool shortly after their first denunciation was
sent to the Eyrie. Twenty or so warships that couldn’t overtake the town’s harbor and only succeeded in burning some trade ships and river galleys. Lord Mooton called it a dreadful attack yet Jon saw it more as a probing raid.

“How can we be sure?” She worried aloud. “We’ve no word on how big the Gulltown fleet truly is. If Elbert really did all this, who is to say he has not been readying in secret all this time?”

“If?” Gendry gave her a look of confusion. “What doubt can there be that the Arryn king arranged all this? He threatened Jon over Harrold Hardying’s presence here, and then attempts are immediately made on both of their lives. The assassins had coin from the Vale on them.”

“Many people do.” Sansa wrung her hands at that. “If only we’d taken one alive. Barristan was going to spare the last archer but Lady tore him asunder. There was little enough left for Sam to name him a Ghiscari.”

The assassins were a strange sort. The theater master reported all five came from different lands, each arriving separately in Aevalon. Varys had managed to learn the Myrish killer had come from Dorne, a lead Sarella herself left to follow up on. Doubt was cast on the Lannisters of course, yet with Tyrion in their grasp that seemed mad. Especially considering the campaign King Tywin wanted Robb to take part in. So many of their questions could be answered if only one of the assassins had been captured.

“Lady defended her pack.” Arya grabbed Sansa’s shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze. “I would’ve done the same. Those five assassins aren’t enough to answer for Benjen. Elbert needs to be taught the same lesson that Joffrey and Cersei were. The same one that the Trants and the Toynes learned.”

Sansa felt a mix of revulsion and relief to hear those names again. Houses Trant and Toyne were the Stormlords who took Aenry’s sickness as an opportunity to rebel. Unfortunately for them, they drew little support and inspired much outrage. When it came time to put down the rebels, the Lord and Lady of Storm’s End did so with fury. None were sure who truly ended the Toyne line as Gendry, Arya, and Nymeria had all killed one of the last three Toynes in the final battle.

The devotion that Arya showed them then and now made Sansa think of Rickon, far off on his own reckless quest.

While poor Wyllard had wept over his father’s corpse, Rickon was overtaken by a black rage. Her youngest brother rushed out of Aevalon with a small party of riders, including Robin Darklyn, both swearing vengeance for their fallen kin. Despite Olyvar’s attempts to quell their rage at Harrenhal, the young lords gathered hundreds more men to march on the Vale.

Thankfully Rickon was not so foolish as to attack the Bloody Gate itself. Instead he convinced Lyman Darry to aid in blockading the High Road into the Vale, cutting off Elbert’s overland trade. A score of small battles followed, mostly Arryn sorties sent out of the Bloody Gate. More worrying though were the attacks by mountain clansmen, who Rickon wrote were a more savage sort. Men now armed with weapons of castle-forged steel.

“We’ve no idea what we face in the Vale. There’s so much confusion regarding all of this.

*The only thing that is certain is that war is upon us again. A war none of us want.*

Despite preferring Arya and Gendry’s company, Jon soon made excuses for them to depart alone. There was another person they needed to speak to, one who Jon would have none save Sansa hear from, so shocking were his claims.
Though officially a guest, they had kept the man imprisoned in a tower of the Red Keep for weeks. Time that they had used trying to learn the truth of Petyr Baelish and what his presence meant to their kingdom. None save Barristan joined the couple in their journey to Baelish’s tower cell. While the newly cloaked Kingsguard stood out from the other Targaryen guardsmen, he seemed in good company when they journeyed within.

It was a troubling sign that their inquiries had drawn such an unexpected visitor to Aevalon. For keeping Baelish company was none other than Ser Arthur Dayne, Lord-Commander of the Highguard. A white-cloaked man with pale blonde hair and eyes of such a dark blue that they seemed purple, the knight made quite the impression. Unlike the short man with the pointed beard that sat at a small table in the cell.

“King Jon.” Ser Arthur bowed respectfully at their coming. “Queen Sansa. I have done as I was bid to. He will speak to what you ask.”

“I imagine I should be thankful.” Jon spoke brusquely. “But you've yet to speak on what your orders actually are, and you claim that this man sits here as an admitted spy sent by own family. Tell me, ser, are you his partner in this? Has Arthur Dayne fallen to such depths?”

“Jon.” She grabbed at his arm, feeling it tensed. Barristan acted the same while Baelish grinned at the whole display.

Arthur Dayne stood stoic despite her husband’s outrage. He’d done much the same a week past when the Highguard warrior arrived in the dead of night. The knight had stowed away on a Tyroshi trading barge, travelling in secret to confirm what Petyr Baelish had claimed when he was first dragged here from Duskendale.

The fact that the man was a known spymaster and had recently arrived from the Vale made Baelish a prime suspect in arranging the assassination. Yet when arrested on charges of being an Arryn agent, the man had simply laughed and produced a parchment which Jon paled upon reading.

For it named the holder a servant of the empire and under the protection of House Targaryen. Arthur had been willing to swear to that if Jon gave him leave to speak with Baelish alone first. Something that Jon had only agreed to hours before.

“Your grace, I apologize again.” Ser Arthur saluted in the Targaryen fashion. “I can only speak to what I’ve been permitted by royal command. It is not my choice to shield this man, yet my duty was made clear.”

“Is your duty finished?” Sansa asked in her softest voice, hoping to ease the tension. When Ser Arthur nodded she smiled widely. “Then Ser Barristan will see you out.”

“I believe I’m meant to stay-”

“No.” Jon’s face was solemn yet his eyes burned. “My queen told you our will. You are in my kingdom and I order you out. Push my patience ser, and whatever respect I hold for you will not keep me from having you dragged from this room.”

The knight regarded Jon carefully then, as if measuring his options. Sansa’s patience was tried by that, since it was she who had pushed Jon to accommodate Arthur in the first place. In the end, the Highguard accepted what was to be and was led out by Barristan.

Now alone with them, Baelish began twirling at his pointed beard, looking at her with calculating grey-green eyes. His confident expression fell away when Jon marched around the small table
towards him.

“Get up.” Jon commanded gruffly and when Baelish did so, he snatched the chair away, carrying it to their side so she could sit.

“How gallant.” Baelish waved a hand. “I did not expect such from the Kingslayer.”

“You are too bold.” Sansa warned. “I will not have a spy and a flesh peddler speak ill of my husband.”

“I thought I was meant to speak the truth? My apologies, Queen Sansa.” The short man eyed her up and down. “I’ll temper my words so as not to offend such a lovely woman.”

“We’d rather the truth.” Jon gripped at her chair. “We’ve waited long enough to hear your part in the assassinations.”

“I was not sent here to conduct assassinations.” Baelish replied. “My purpose was to set up my… business ventures. And to soak in the glory of this young kingdom. I was to learn the relative strength you could summon, the depth of your coffers, the value of your trade.”

“On whose behalf?” Sansa asked, fearful of the answer.

*With imperial protection it could be any member of the royal family.*


“Prince Aegon.” Baelish grinned and met her eyes in a way that made her feel uncomfortable. “The heir to the empire is very interested in the state of your kingdom.”

She tried not to let that shake her, for it spoke to some of their worst fears. In the years since Aegon’s last visit, Sansa held hope that things would improve between the brothers. Especially since the birth of Aegon’s son. A true son, not the bastard that Daenerys passed off as Jon’s whenever it suited her fancy. Unlike her brand, that was a hurt that still ached at times.

“You are Aegon’s… agent.” Jon spoke evenly. “If that is so, why were you in Gulltown before Aevalon? What use is the Vale to my brother?”

“The more accurate question would be, what use was I to the Vale? Quite a bit if I do say so myself. I was in Gulltown negotiating a contract with King Elbert over investigations into the Faith when Prince Aegon’s men found me. Their offer was far more attractive.”

Sansa was taken aback. “Spying on the Faith is loathsome. Why would Elbert do so?”

“Self preservation.” Baelish laughed before switching to a tone like he was speaking to a child. “Please, we all know how helpful the High Septon has been to you of late. All of those reports on Elbert’s strength and the loyalties of his bannermen just suddenly falling into your lap... did you not find that convenient?” He raised an eyebrow. “The High Septon has been plotting the downfall of Elbert for years. Before Denys Arryn’s death, his army had free use of the Faith’s wealth across every sept and septry in the Vale. After Elbert’s victory, septons became spies and the Faith Militant became an army lying in wait. Now they are all at your disposal.”

However much she distrusted the spymaster, Sansa could not deny the truth in the man’s words. While Royner had been the one to die from the Bloody Mummers, Tom of the Seven took to singing a different tune. He that claimed Royner had done much as Jon had, leaping to protect another from arrows.
“Elbert is a vile man with little faith.” Tom had preached to the masses at the Sept of Baelor. “Unlike Royner Darklyn! The lord tried to spare me from Elbert’s cowardly acts. It was I who the Foul Falcon aimed to slay that night, not Lord Darklyn! They wished to murder a man of the Faith! Blasphemy!”

Sansa hadn’t put much stock in those claims, nor had Jon, or mother. Yet others had, and the High Septon began offering much and more to aid war in the Vale. A thousand Warrior’s Sons and Poor Fellows had already arrived at Aevalon, and a thousand more awaited them in the Vale. More vital, the High Septon was sure he could win over a few Vale lords as well.

As Sansa thought more and more on these revelations, Jon pushed forward.

“Why are you being so open with us? Clearly Aegon didn’t want this being known.”

“My contract has been severed.” The spy replied. “High King Rhaegar has done so on Prince Aegon’s behalf. I’m to be granted safe passage across the Narrow Sea, in return for speaking the truth of all of this to you.”

“Aegon truly did this?” Sansa pressed. “He commanded you to spy on us? To try and bribe your way into meeting me? To approach my daughters?”

“My dear lady, none of that was on Aegon’s behalf.” Baelish leaned forward against the table, staring deep into her eyes. “I came across your daughters and found them to be charming little creatures. They will be blessed to have even half the beauty of their grandmother…and a tenth of their mother’s.” He pulled on his beard. “The only business involved there was my trying to grow closer to you, as a potential future client.”

“Pardon?”

Baelish bowed in a grandiose manner. “The life of a spymaster is like a leaf on the wind, I go where the power takes me. I foresaw the Highlands having great use of me. You call me a spy and a flesh peddler, both of which are true. Both those tasks suit me well, for I am a man who enjoys working with figures as much as people. I am soon to be a free agent, and let me assure you both, you do not lack for enemies.”

That was what bid Sansa to stand.

“That is likely true.” She said, smoothing her skirts while doing her best to show more pride than unease. “Though we would prefer a better quality of friend.”

With that she held out her hand for Jon to take in his. A simple hint that she no longer wished to be here. There was no need to urge him into leaving, for he was quite done with Baelish as well it seemed. While they could not harm him, the man was not going anywhere without their say so. If there were more questions to come, they could be asked later. For now the couple had enough to chew on.

“Do you believe him?” Sansa asked Jon when they were back in his chambers.

“I believe little about Petyr Baelish.” He answered. “The part about Aegon? Yes. With the imperial protection and my father bending over backwards to keep this all quiet, it points to nothing else. I cannot fathom why though. Our kingdom is little compared to the might of the empire. Is he to spy on Viserys next?”

“Viserys is no true threat.” She walked to his bed and sat down, Jon staring at her in surprise.
“I’m no threat to Aegon. I haven’t been for years... he’s the heir now...”

“And you’re a king, Jon. One whose power grows greater year after year. We worried on this once, what it would mean when Aegon came to power. It looks like he has acted on a fear very much like our own.”

That hit Jon hard, no matter how he tried to hide it. He soon joined her on the bed, allowing Sansa to rest her head against his chest and hold his hand.

“I should have been ready for this.” He said after a time. “For Aegon, for Elbert, for all of it. If I’d listened to you we would have had a Kingsguard years ago...”

“And they might not have spared us.” She pulled his hand up to kiss it. “Benjen would likely still be dead. Royner too. We do our best. Sometimes the gods are simply against us.”

“I can accept that for myself.” He kissed her head. “It’s far harder to do with you. And the children? Sansa... Aenry wakes screaming... he has the same nightmares of dead men that came to me when I was a man grown...”

“And you’re there for him when he does.”

Jon rarely spent the whole night abed with her. He would make his way to the children’s corridor, sleeping in a chair to watch over a different one each night. Wary for the cry of any that needed him. Whatever inhibitions Aenry fostered towards Jon were forgotten when he awoke from a terror. She had arrived one night to find their son curled up in his father’s arms, both seeking the peace that the world denied them in the worst ways.

“I wasn’t there when it mattered.” Jon’s voice became hoarse. “When the whoresons loosed... I tried to save you and the girls. It was instinct. I made no true choice but... I left Aenry to the fates. Sansa, if it had been our son and not Benjen-”

“It wasn’t.”

“But if it had... I would have been guilty of far worse than those men I executed. I would have come upon the Vale with ten times the savagery that we saw in those riots. I’m terrified it will come to that still. If I learn it was Aenry and not me that they aimed at... I’m already the Kingslayer, I fear to become worse.”

“I have no such fears.” Sansa raised up to lift the crown off her beleaguered king. Then she leaned in so that her brow touched against his furrowed one, her words becoming whispers. “Jon, I know you well. I saw how you conducted war. A good man doing his best in evil times.”

“That’s because I had you with me.” His fingers ran against her cheek. “I became a better man for you. Yet when I hear my children scream, that sound lodges itself in my heart as surely as that arrow did for Benjen. It fills me with cold rage... the same I felt when I slew Joffrey...”

What was she to say to that? If Jon ever came upon men who meant their children harm, she wanted them to end up like Joffrey. It tore at her soul think so. That a part of her wanted to do it herself. She heard Aenry’s cries too. Aemma sometimes woke the same way. Rhaegina was more rare but it happened.

She wanted to show them that they were safe again. To bend the world so that they’d never fear from it again. To spare Jon from doing so on his own.

Yet it would fall to her to stay behind once more, to stand and watch Jon ride off to war, watching as
Gendry and Arya did the same. Countless others were going with them. Petyr Baelish was eager to sell his help yet Sansa was kept from offering hers.

She held Jon all the tighter during these thoughts, their caresses giving way to gentle kisses. Not those that came before passion, merely expressions of their love and need for one another.

Kisses which ended when Ser Dontos knocked upon the chamber door. The news he carried was such that both leapt from the bed in a flash, their journey down the keep a blur. Nothing about what they had just been told made sense.

*Arthur Dayne arriving by secret was strange enough, but this?*

*How could she do this? Why would she come like this?*

These were the questions pounding in Sansa’s mind when she and Jon came to the bridge of Rhaegar’s Holdfast to find their newly arrived guest already crossing.

A regal woman who Sansa had not seen in many a year, flanked by the same two white-cloaked warriors as always. Ethan Glover remained as severe as ever. Tumco Lho bore a new scar yet smiled the same smile he always had.

Sansa lost sight of both when the High Queen opened her arms to embrace her tightly

“My lovely daughter.” Lyanna said before reaching out for Jon. “My dear son. You must show me my grandchildren. It’s not too late? The damnable ship felt so sluggish.”

“Mother… how are you here?” Jon was incredulous. “Why are you here? Ser Arthur was quite enough. If father means to have you make excuses-”

“I’ll be making no excuses for Rhaegar.” Lyanna spoke bitterly. “Not anymore. I’d request welcome here in Aevalon though. A long stay amongst your type of dragons is precisely what I need, for I’ve just left a worse kind altogether.”

**JON**

The white dragon rippled and swayed lazily across the black banner, just one of many raised throughout the camp raised outside of Aevalon. Hundreds of tents holding thousands of men. A sea of sigils.

The black stag of House Baratheon. The opposing swans of House Swann. The Morrigen crow, the brass buckles of the Bucklers, the Errol haystack, the Fells with their crescent moon and spruce trees, even the sleeping lion of House Grandison had roused.

Stormlords all. Some were former rebels, the rest were houses whose contributions to the winter war Gendry had found lacking. More than five thousand men came from these camps, which was part of the reason that Jon had chosen to show this part of his army to their new guests.

Barristan’s white cloak and the Blackfish’s dark one waved in the breeze as they kept watch. Dontos did the same while Gendry and Aurane discussed matters regarding the fleet. Nymeria pressed in about Jon and Arya, who he led on his arm while Ghost stayed close to Sansa. His wife was busy escorting another, though she somehow made it seem like their guest was leading her.

Bronze Yohn Royce could not contain his smile, which softened the large lord of Runestone's
martial look. Though his hair was grey with eyes to match, Sansa named the lord a warrior and Jon believed it. Those days were long past for Horton Redfort though, the old man leaning against the stronger body of his son, Ser Mychel. Both giving Lord Royce jealous looks from behind his back.

“I feel a younger man.” Yohn declared in a voice as large as his build. “Walking amongst warriors with a beauty on my arm, why this could be a tourney!”

“Like the ones you told me about at Winterfell.” Sansa patted the lord’s arm with a smile. “My poor father was quite put out after your visit. I pestered him from morning ’til night for a tourney in my name. An event to draw the finest of the realm I claimed, so of course Bronze Yohn would have returned for such.”

“If only that had come to pass, your grace. I’d rather a tourney had brought us together again over than this talk of war.”

“I prefer talk to war myself.” Sansa looked at Jon then. “As does my king. Yet those were not words Elbert Arryn loosed at our family. Like Elbert’s reign, the time for talk is at an end.”

Horton coughed loudly at that. “Denys Arryn once said much the same, back when he had armies of this size and I had four sons to offer him. Those hosts are gone now, and so is my boy Jon. Why should I risk what sons are left to me for your vengeance?”

“Not vengeance, my lord.” Sansa replied. “Justice. For all of us. Lend your strength to us and you will gain a king who brings peace to the Vale. One who shall rule justly, and with honor.”

“That’s not King Jon’s reputation in the Vale.” Horton wheezed in return. “Elbert names him a Kingslayer… a foreign devil… he claims that King Jon abducted his heir and tried to murder Ser Harrold through catspaws…”

Jon had heard such slander before, Varys having kept them well informed on the Arryn lies against his name. While he tensed to hear those words from a prospective ally, Arya tightened her grip on his arm before rising to his defense.

“Well if Elbert Arryn told me the sky was green, I would still have the sense to look for myself.”

The Redforts were gaping at Arya when Jon spoke. “The lords Royce and Redfort are quite sensible, my goodsister, else they would not be here. I welcome the chance to show them the truth of things, and to win the friendship of such noble men.”

“You sound like your father.” Bronze Yohn nodded his way. “Did Rhaegar tell you that in our youth we crossed blades once at the Eyrie? No shame in being bested by a dragon, that’s what Jon Arryn told me at the time. ‘Course, the falcon sung a different tune when we sailed against the Mad King. Glory awaited those who threw back the mad dragon’s fleet at Dragonstone… gods, what a fight that was.”

“My husband owes his life to that battle.” Sansa said. “It’s fair to say that you’ve already fought for my Jon once. Jon Arryn led the Vale to victory and glory and, on my honor as a Stark, I know his namesake can do the same.”

At that the Vale lords grew quiet and thoughtful. As unpopular as King Elbert was, it was disappointing that only two of his disgruntled vassals answered this invitation. Jon consoled himself with the knowledge that the Royces and Redforts were two of the most powerful families in the Vale. Winning them over was key to the strategy he hoped might bring victory.

A conquest of a scale not undertaken in the Vale since the coming of the Andals.
“Pretty words, your grace.” Bronze Yohn finally spoke before gesturing at the nearby banners. “Denys was good with words, still he never gained the swords he needed to win. There are others in the Vale who might support you, if not for the fear that your numbers are tenuous. Can the loyalty of your Stormlords be depended upon? Have they not risen up twice against you?”

“And fallen hard each time.” Arya broke away from Jon. “My husband and I saw to that.”

Ser Mychel shook his head. “Your bite is a fearsome one, Lady Baratheon, and strong. Stronger perhaps than the fealty of those who bent the knee to you.”

“My son is right.” Horton added. “We’ve heard that both the Lord and Lady of Storm’s End mean to march? Such means that a rebellion could rise in your absence, one that pulls you from the Vale, leaving us at Elbert’s mercy.”

Yohn grunted. “And Elbert Arryn has no mercy. Ser Denys and his family learned that. And my boy, Robar…”

“My lords, be at ease.” Gendry stepped forward, his words given weight by outmatching them all in size and strength. “Most of the men that march under my banner are the very ones you fear to rebel. They seek a chance to reverse their fortunes in the fight ahead, to regain our king’s favor.”

“You trust that?” Yohn looked between Jon and Gendry. “Words are wind they say.”

“Well the winds blows strong in our lands.” Arya put a hand to Gendry’s shoulder. “The Stormlords have learned that our promises are always upheld, for better or for worse. That’s all it took for Gendry to draw these men into mustering. A promise.”

“One sworn by my warhammer.” Gendry flexed his mighty hand in a fist. “Bring your strength to the king at Aevalon, lest you wish the king bring his strength to you.”

Lord Redfort coughed once more at that yet Jon caught the beginnings of a grin from Bronze Yohn. “You are Robert’s son, natural born as you are. I never thought to see his like again.”

“Lord Gendry is Jon’s most trusted commander.” Sansa broke in. “His value to my husband is great, as have been our rewards for his loyalty. Those who act as our friends never regret doing so.”

“Even Lord Darklyn?” Horton asked and Sansa touched at her chest in sadness.

“Only the Seven know why Royner was stolen from us, or my uncle Benjen. Their murders haunt us, my lord. That is why we shall not cease until they are avenged. Some good must come from their deaths. We owe that to our friends.”

“May the Warrior lend you strength in that.”

The voice belonged to none other than the High Septon himself. The holy man was striding their way through the tents, with another familiar face beside him. While the High Septon was garbed in the purest white robes and golden sashes, Ser Theodan Wells wore the rainbow cloak of the Warrior’s Sons over his leather and mail. The score of Faith Militant flanking their approach were all under Theodan’s command, yet loyal to none before the High Septon.

They’re supposed to be loyal to the Seven but the High Septon claims to voice their will.

That power makes him a king in his own right. A kingmaker as well.
All bowed before the High Septon, including Jon. When the holy man held out a hand towards him, Jon kissed his rings with as much humility as he could offer. The Royces and Redforts were descended from First Men, but they held to the Faith as strongly as any Vale lord.

“Bless you, King Jon. Bless you on this holy quest.” The High Septon made the sign of the seven-pointed star upon Jon’s chest before turning to the Vale men. “My good lords, I had not known you would be among the camps. Ser Theodan was just showing me the holy thousand he has gathered here to win back the Vale so it might once more be brought under the light of the Seven.”

Theodan bowed. “Wherever crimes done against the faithful, we will make the guilty atone. Our brothers in the Vale cry out for rescue from the Faithless Falcon.”

“Rescue?” Horton exclaimed with shock. “I’d not heard the Faith was under assault—”

“Elbert’s crimes are too many to list.” The High Septon waved away Horton’s words before wandering over to Sansa, who kissed his ring as well. “As our lovely queen can attest to. Will your children be attending my service this night?”

“They’ve looked forward to nothing else.” Sansa kept her eyes lowered in a practiced deference. “We’ve readied the new arrivals. Hundreds of freedmen only just arrived and they all wish to march to battle under the blessing of the Seven, under your blessing.”

“Marvelous.” The man leaned in to kiss Sansa’s cheek, whispering something to her. When he made to kiss the other, it was Sansa’s lips that moved against his ear.

The High Septon nodded then before turning back to the lords.

“Lord Horton!” The High Septon summoned both Redforts. “Walk with me... walk with me so that we might speak. Of late, I’ve heard your family is one of the few that the Seven can truly depend on—”

They made to journey away from the Stormlords then. These men were meant to march under Gendry and soon they came upon the men who would sail with Jon. After the recent troubles in Aevalon, it was clear there was rot in the city that needed to be drained away. He’d set Varys and his little birds to scouring Aevalon for those guilty of rioting and bringing them to him. If those men could light torches and brandish blades against their neighbors, they could do the same against his enemies. Though some were impressed into service, Jon was heartened by how many others volunteered, especially among the newly arrived freedmen.

Of the three thousand drawn from Aevalon and his nearby estates, four hundred had only just come from empire, men who the High Septon would now bless.

_They're a paltry replacement after father robbed me of my greatest asset._

_This war was already going to be a trial, now I feel like I go forth without my sword._

His hand went to Dark Sister but there was no need, the men ahead practicing with spears were no threat to him. A glance to Ghost and Nymeria’s calm demeanors spoke to that as well. A shout rang out then, sending knights and men-at-arms to ordering the freedmen into proper ranks. The voice belonged to Daegon, who came his way with a smile.

“A good lot, Jon.” Daegon said when they came together. “Most have seen battle before. Those that haven’t are damn near fanatical to fight for the white dragon.”

“Then I hope the black dragon trains them well.” Jon watched as Poor Fellows piled some barrels
together for the High Septon to stand on. “This fight will be a hard one, my friend. Your wife is with child. Do what I couldn’t, stay behind for her sake.”

“I want to be there for Laenora, but I owe you too much. I was born without a home, a pain my child will never know. You gave me that home, Jon Targaryen, I’ll see you back to yours.”

Once Jon would not have turned his back on a Blackfyre. Seven years and countless fights later, there were few he’d have by his side, save Daegon. Thrice Daegon had saved his life that he knew of and Jon had rewarded House Blackfyre for it. Daegon was named the Lord of Rosby and Sansa had helped arrange a marriage to one of Aurane’s Velaryon cousins from the empire. There was something rewarding about giving Daegon a chance for a future here in the Sunset Kingdoms. After all, Jon himself had been granted the same, something he still felt unworthy of.

*Daegon leaves his wife behind out of duty, meanwhile I thrust my own wife into danger for a kingdom.*

*By Vhagar, Sansa, how did I ever let you talk me into this?*

The answer came after the High Septon’s blessings finished and Sansa waded out amongst the freedmen. While already guarded by Barristan and the Blackfish, Bronze Yohn moved protectively about Sansa as she smiled brightly and spoke kind words to the lowborn strangers. Lord Royce had not yet declared for them, the freedmen had likely never seen her, yet all were drawn to Sansa. She knew what to say, how to act... she inspired the best from all men.

She’d turned such magics against Jon to convince him to let her join the march. An argument they’d waged from opposite sides of her bed.

“Your place is here!” He had shouted, one the rare times he’d ever done so to her

“Nonsense! I played my part in the war against Joffrey.” She’d ripped back at him. “And you’ve no quarrel with Arya going off to war.”

“Arya can take of herself! She has proven herself capable! That is, er- I mean-”

“That I am not capable! Are you saying I’m not the same worth as my sister? That I’ve not ruled our kingdom for years while you were elsewhere?”

“That’s why I need you here now.” He had gestured about the room then. “To keep all this place standing while I’m gone. Sansa, who else can do so?”

“There’s more need for me in the Vale for precisely the same reasons. To win this war you’ll need to use words as much as swords. Elbert names you a vicious war lord? Well, what sort of fiend brings his wife along with him?”

“A fool!”

“A king!” Sansa had straightened in a pose of regal defiance. “One showing off a new land to his queen. You trust in Arya’s way with the blade. Well, trust in my way with lords and ladies. Those Vale houses you can’t win with might, let me try with charm. Or have you lied to me of my strengths all these years?”

Jon had stood speechless. Furious. Terrified. Confused. All those feelings had rushed through him while Sansa proved her claims by coming to him and lifting his hand to her lips.

“I’d not suggest this if it wasn’t for Lyanna. With her here, she can help the council rule in our stead.
The children will have their grandmother to watch over them and Aevalon will have protection from the High Queen. None, not the greenhands nor the lions, would think to attack if it meant triggering a war with the empire."

“That hasn’t stopped them before…”

“Jon, the simple truth is that you’re not your mother.” Sansa had kissed his fingers and looked deeply into his eyes. “Whatever their troubles, the love between Rhaegar and Lyanna is worthy of song. He waged war against his own father on her behalf. None would dare challenge such passion.”

It was the passion of her words that showed Jon the horrible truth. Sansa was right. Somehow she had convinced him into doing the last thing he wanted. If she could do the same to the Vale lords, their chances at success could only grow.

One of those lords certainly seemed taken with Sansa as she led five freedmen to him and Daegon. Bronze Yohn was laughing at something she’d said when she turned her bright smile towards him.

“My love, this is Belasso.” She introduced the eldest of the freedmen, a tanned man with the tiger stripe tattoo of a Volantene slave and city guard. “And these are his sons.” She switched to Valyrian to speak of the others. “All four will fight for you, they fight to see our kingdom flourish.”

“This is the promised land.” Belasso spoke only when Sansa him urged to, in a low dialect from Volantis. “You are the promised king. If my fifth son was older, he’d fight for King Jonarys too. He stays with my wife and daughters. He wants to fight though, I swear it.”

“Then I believe it.” Jon answered. “If I hold any promise as king, it is because of subjects like you.” He was struck with an idea then and took Sansa’s hand. “This fifth son, we should have the city watch find a place for him as a page. It’s good work for a young man.”

Something like pride flashed across Sansa’s face. “See, my lord?” She asked of a bemused Bronze Yohn. “My husband rewards the loyalty of all his subjects, even the most humble. Imagine the honor he would do by a storied family who aids us in returning justice to the Vale.”

“King Jon is good and true.” Daegon said with conviction. “I am a lord, a husband, and soon to be a father, all thanks to him. I cannot say what his favor will grant you-”

“I’d settle for vengeance.” The lord spoke gruffly. “My son Robar rode with Denys Arryn when he was ambushed. I always knew it was treachery that claimed my son’s life, Harry’s tale only confirmed it. Elbert was never going to be my king… I simply couldn’t stomach the thought of naming any but an Arryn as ruler of the Vale.”

Jon felt his heart drop. Daegon and Sansa’s expressions grew dark as well. They were all shocked when Yohn stuck a hand out in Jon’s direction.

“I can support a man that Jon Arryn had me fight for already. There’s more of the Vale I knew in your kingdom than I’ve seen in our own lands for years. Swear to save us from ourselves and the Royces of Runestones are with you.”

“I swear it, Lord Royce.” He grabbed the man’s powerful hand. “Though I hope to offer the Vale more than that.”

Sansa touched at Yohn’s arm. “And to bestow great honors upon greater men.”

Those words rung in his ears all the way back to the Red Keep.
He had great plans for Bronze Yohn and his family. Just as he did for the Redforts, who the High Septon had delivered to him with pledges of support not longer after Bronze Yohn.

Still, that would have to wait, and it was Maester Samwell and Varys he sought out upon their arrival. As befit their duties, both somehow knew of his coming and met Jon and Sansa as they journeyed to Rhaegar’s Holdfast.

“You two are to help rule in my absence.” He said as the pair followed in step with him and Sansa. “The council shall decide on all affairs that I cannot conduct while at war, but it is my mother who shall hold power.”

“Advise Lyanna as best you can.” Sansa said as they crossed the bridge over the dry moat. “Share with her all your wisdom, but also put your faith in her at the end. Support her view of things even if the others on the council disagree.”

“What others?” Sam asked, his chain clinking with each step. “Lord Darklyn is dead, Aurane sails to war, and Jon has sent Garmon to watch over the Reach lands.”

Sam made a sage point. Though young Lord Meadows of the Grassy Vale and the new Lady of Bitterbridge had sworn fealty, their true loyalties were a mystery. Thus Jon had lessened any chance of rebellion by summoning their men to join his army. Weakened and somewhat vulnerable to raids from the Reach, Garmon was sent to those lands with the strength of House Qoherys. Which left their council lacking.

“Jon Connington will be here to lend steel to your authority.” Sansa informed the pair. “As will Ser Barristan, who we have told the same as you.”

“And what of Tom of the Seven?” Varys asked. “He has become quite bold of late. His standing with the High Septon grows with every decree that favors the Faith.”

“The Faith is our ally in this coming war.” Sansa said to a titter from Varys.

“Yes, how fortunate that we find ourselves at war with the Vale and the Faith already well prepared for one. A miracle of the Seven it seems.”

“We’ll do our best.” Sam stopped before them, bringing all to a halt. “Though I beg that you take Barristan the Bold with you. Surely he would be better than Brune or even Mooton.”

“That’s the idea, maester.” Varys said. “Who better than Barristan the Bold to watch over the royal heirs in our king and queen’s absence?”

Varys was right. Of the four Kingsguard they would leave behind at Aevalon, it was Barristan they put the most faith in. The ser wasn’t pleased with the arrangements either but Jon trusted him to do his duty and protect the children, their family.

Within the godswood Jon and Sansa found their children well protected to say the least. Six white cloaks were present in the grove, an even split of Kingsguard and Highguard. Thoros was there too, the red priest among the group Jon’s mother had lured to a flower garden. A court that Aenry presided over from atop the stone wall, a crown of leafy vines on his head, with the twins and Lyonel gathered below.

“All hail King Aenry.” Mother proclaimed from his side. “King of the godswood, Lord of the many trees, and Protector of the garden.”

“I’ll be the Lady of the Heart Tree.” Rhaegina spoke haughtily, grinning towards Arthur Dayne.
“And here stands my shield, the Sword of the Morning.”

“Oh! I get Thoros then.” Aemma grabbed at the red priest’s hand. “I’m the Princess of Fireflies and Thoros is my wizard.”

Aenry clapped at that. “Make him do magic.”

“Alas, your grace, the time is not right.” Thoros pointed to the sky. “Come nightfall, I will ask R’hllor to stoke the flames in the fireflies, in honor of my king and lady.”

“Clever.” Lyanna winked at Thoros before looking to Lyonel. “And what title shall you take my little lord? Would you rather Ethan or Ser Richard as your protector?”

“Neither, thank you.” Lyonel shook his head only to bear his teeth and raise up his fingers like claws. “I’m a direwolf! A scary direwolf!”

“Mine!” Aenry jumped up on his seat. “Lyonel’s my direwolf! He’ll eat who I tell him to eat! Like Ghost does for father!”

“I will!” Lyonel cackled as mother tried to hide a laugh behind her hand.

“Ghost is more a noble protector-”

“Yes, you sound silly, Aenry.” Rhaegina rolled her eyes and Aemma quickly did the same.

“Play the game right. Grandmother, he’s to order a ball for us.” Aemma sighed.

“That’s what he promised.” Rhaegina echoed. “So do it Aenry, or I’ll give you such a pinch-”

“Eat Rhaegina!” Aenry lifted a stick to point at his eldest sister. “Go Lyonel! There’s supper!”

Lyonel gave a howl and lunged at Rhaegina, who cried out in indignation. Mother and Aemma were laughing when the pair began a chase around Arthur and then the Kingsguard. Not a crack appeared in the grim face of Richard Horpe as a screaming Rhaegina ducked behind him. Yet when Lyonel ran between Myles Mooton’s legs, Rhaegina tripped over Guyard’s foot. Jon sprung forward yet another spared his daughter an ugly fall.

He hadn’t realized the Blackfish was back in the castle, let alone in the godswood.

“This seems familiar.” Brynden said as he steadied Rhaegina on her feet. “I may have saved your grandmother from a fall or two when she was your age. Cat always was the lively sort.”

“Lucky as well.” Sansa spoke, announcing their presence. “Something my children and I share in to have an uncle like you, ser.”

Aemma giggled from Thoros’s side. “Not a great great uncle. The greatest uncle.”

“That’s how you should style yourself.” Thoros chuckled at his black garbed comrade. “Brynden Tully, Knight of the Dark Order, Blackest Fish, Greatest of Uncles.”

“Stick to your red prayers, Thoros. Leave the charm to the ladies.”

“Enjoy this while you can.” Jon said to his former sworn brothers. “Sallador Saan will arrive any day now to take the Dark Order away. This is an end to an era, my friends.”

“It’s a folly.” Brynden gave an ugly glare toward Arthur then.
“It’s the will of the High King.” Thoros said dejectedly. “Where the empire has need, the Dark Order goes. As it has always been, we heed House Targaryen.”

The Blackfish scoffed. “There’s some Targaryens in need right here.”

He was right. Jon was left scrambling in his war preparations after word came that the Dark Order was being recalled to the empire. It was mother who first warned that the High King would be issuing such a decree, one she opposed vehemently.

“Ser Brynden has the right of things.” Mother spoke fiercely, aiming her words right at Arthur as she pressed Aenry into joining the other children in their play. “Rhaegar knows full well that the Dark Order belongs here. He’s let politics blind him to that. Politics and a conniving wretch, unworthy of being named a prince.”

“Your grace.” Arthur protested. “The estrangement between Rhaegar and yourself aside, it is not wise to speak in such a way of the High King. Nor his heir.”

“A snake by another name.” Mother snapped in a manner that reminded him of Lady, who now stood between the twins.

“She’s talking about uncle Aegon.” Rhaegina whispered to Aemma a tad too loudly.

“Girls, this is not for your ears.” Sansa said, waving at the Kingsguard. “You will go with the sers for a walk. Mind Aenry and Lyonel until we are finished.”

“Can Ser Arthur come and tell us a tale?” Rhaegina asked of her grandmother while Aemma pleaded with Jon.

“Thoros too!”

“They cannot and no arguing.” Sansa held up a finger when both girls opened their mouths in indignation. “You were acting as young ladies for High Queen Lyanna, do the same for me. Go on now.”

The twins did their best not to pout, though their displeasure was plain. As was Sansa’s when she addressed his mother.

“Lyanna, your heart was in the right place but please do not speak of these things in front of the girls. They are scared enough with us leaving, they do not need to think badly of the empire. To them Rhaegar and Aegon are friends and kin.”

“I wished they acted so.” Mother sighed before nodding. “My apologies, Sansa. When I left Rhaegar I did not mean to abandon my good sense as well.”

“There is nothing barring you from returning to both, Lyanna.” Arthur suggested, only for mother to reject the notion out of hand.

“Quite impossible.” Mother looked to Jon in sadness. “Rhaegar made that choice for both of us when he absolved Aegon of his spying and robbed Jon of the Dark Order.”

“The heir erred in employing Petyr Baelish, none deny that.” Arthur said. “But Aegon believes he acted in the best interest of the empire. Rhaegar knows that burden well.”

It was becoming routine for Arthur to say such things. Of late the Highguard had become an imperial envoy or sorts in Aevalon.
More like my father’s apologist…

Perhaps that thought was unworthy yet he felt no shame for thinking it. The explanations that Arthur offered were usually undercut by the High Queen’s own accounts of what transpired at Volantis. When Aegon realized his agent had been discovered, he’d gone straight to father to plead his case. With Khal Drogo likely to attack the empire after the harvests came in, Aegon wished to learn what strength the Highlands could lend if the time came. Of what strength they no longer needed.

An explanation mother scoffed at, just as she did for Arthur now.

“How is your father’s apologist…?”

“Nonsense.” Mother said. “Aegon’s been trying to recall the Dark Order for years. He’s just using the Dothraki as an excuse. Rhaegar knows this, he just couldn’t bring himself to rebuke his heir. He can’t depend on Aegon’s loyalty like he can Jon’s, so my son suffers for being the nobler sort.”

“I am far from suffering.” Jon rebuked. “Yes, the Dark Order’s departure was unexpected, and my father’s decision to stomach Aegon’s... tripe, is unsettling. Yet these setbacks do not cripple the aims that Sansa and I share.”

Sansa took his arm and lent him support. “This day alone we have won new friends in the Vale. The first of many we hope.”

“Allies who will be the key to the attack that Gendry and Arya lead against Gulltown. They have ten thousand to do their part and, even without the Dark Order, I can still invade the Vale of Arryn with no less than twelve thousand men and horse.”

“A fight I wish the entire order was a part of.” Thoros strode forth to throw an arm around the Blackfish. “At least the High King allowed some to stay behind, men we’ll miss in the days to come.”

Thoros spoke of the unprecedented action that father allowed the Dark Order to consider. Thoros had no choice but to lead the order away, yet he need not take all of them. Any man with less than a year left in his tour could choose to end their service by fighting for Jon. Thirty or so had chosen to do so, the Blackfish chief among them.

“A few score is not three thousand.” Brynden grumbled as he shrugged off Thoros’s arm. “Though I swear, the king will have the finest outriders in the Seven Kingdoms.”

“And the best company for his children.” Mother smiled then, looking off in the direction that the children’s laughter came from. “Aenry cannot get enough tales of you as a boy, Jon.”

“Truly?” He blinked in surprise. The boy welcomed his presence after nightmares yet remained standoffish with him most often. This coming war meant more time away from his boy and to hear that Aenry wanted anything to do with him was a gift.

One Arthur seemed ready to spoil when he cleared his throat.

“I am to assume that the High Queen refuses my escort back to the empire?”

“Until my husband sees reason, he shall not see me. Your journey back shall be a lonely one.”

“You are mistaken.” Arthur drew up to his full height, the pommel of Dawn rising up from above his shoulder and glinting in the sunlight. “The message I received from Rhaegar was quite clear if you refused to return. I am Lord-Commander of the Highguard, an order which serves the High King before all others-”
“Ser, don’t.” Ethan broke in, the northern warrior sharing a worried look with Tumco. “Do not ask this of us.”

“We cannot force her.” Tumco added in his foreign drawl. “It goes against everything I took the white to do…”

“Nor will I allow it.” Jon said, stepping between Arthur and his mother. He grew up seeing Arthur Dayne as a hero yet he stared the man down all the same. “Lyanna Stark may be my father’s queen, but she is my mother before all else. None shall remove her from Aevalon without her consent.”

“She helped us forge this kingdom, ser.” Sansa made to bar Arthur’s path to mother as well. “With the trials we now face, we have faith she’ll hold it together. So heed my husband’s words, my goodmother is not going anywhere.”

“It appears not.” Arthur nodded. “Nor will her Highguard. Or myself. As I said, Rhaegar’s message was clear. If his queen chose to stay, I am to stay by her side.” The knight’s strange blue eyes turned to mother. “As a gesture of the unbreakable love he holds for her.”

Jon didn’t quite know what to say to that and Sansa stood silent at this announcement. If the High Queen’s presence afforded some protection to Aevalon, the Sword of the Morning could only add to it.

“Follow Rhaegar’s orders if you must.” Mother’s words were as cold as her demeanor, quite unlike the warmth of her hand as it took hold of his own. “This gesture rings hollow to me. I hold the truest symbol of the love we shared, the son Rhaegar turned his back on.”

She then turned her back on Arthur, an action Jon felt obligated to repeat. As did Sansa. Soon all three sought out the beautiful children Sansa and Jon had created together.

Near the heart tree they found that their loves had quieted, all crouched down and gathered around the tiny form of Vaelena. The babe’s nursemaid had laid her out on a blanket. Lady curled up around the child protectively. Vaelena ignored the direwolf, her purple eyes locked on the butterfly hovering just above her face.

All the children acted just as entranced, Aemma used little effort to stay Lyonel’s hand when he made to grab the butterfly. None of the adults spoke a word. Mother sat down by Rhaegina, the pair looking quite alike with their dark features. Sansa sidled up behind Aemma and Lyonel, kissing her nephew’s head.

Which left Jon awkwardly inching closer to Aenry. He didn’t dare touch the boy, fearing to ruin the moment. The scene before them was the picture of serenity. His mother. His wife. His children. All basking in the peace which endured for now, a moment which would have to end soon.

This is what Sansa leaves behind for the sake of our kingdom. These children, I must wage war for their sake as well.

So none will ever think to strike at them again…

“Father?”

Aenry’s voice bid him to look down and realize he’d rested hands on the boy’s shoulders. Yet rather than cowering from his touch, Aenry gazed up at Jon with worry.

“You have to be careful.” Aenry whispered, pointing at the butterfly. “It’ll go away if you’re not careful. We want it to stay here.”
“Yes, son.” He met Sansa’s gaze and found her eyes to be glistening. “We must be very careful.”

Jon meant that. Less for the butterfly. More for himself and Sansa. He wished he could stay here, in this moment, the war forgotten.

That’s what Jon wanted. Yet it wasn’t what his children needed.

So, for them, he steeled himself for war.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The dragons come to the Vale.

A war which bleeds a land and tears a family apart.

The Great Queen Alysanne

Few Targaryen kings can claim to be as beloved by the songs and histories like the High Queen Alysanne. Sister and wife to Jaehaerys the First, or Jaehaerys the Wise as he came to be called, Alysanne was held to be the king’s most trusted counselor and right hand.

Truly many in the empire grew to view her as a figure of equal power to the king and not without reason. When Jaehaerys was called away from the capital, it was Alysanne who ruled in Volantis and not the council as was customary. During her reign Summerhall was pushed to new heights of importance, the queen’s invitation gathering the most powerful and learned of the known world to liven its halls. Her famed hospitality was matched by her love of travel, for Alysanne was a dragonrider and, on the back of Silverwing, she journeyed far and wide.

She would travel much of the empire, from the forests of Qohor to the shores or Tyrosh, crossing the Narrow Seas to visit the Summer Islands and several of the Seven Kingdoms, often winning friends and easing tensions with such visits. Alysanne became the first Targaryen to be welcomed to Braavos as a guest of the Sealord himself. Most famously, after becoming bored during a visit to Qarth alongside Jaehaerys, Alysane took wing to the mysterious island of Leng, meeting its Empress and gaining a bejeweled crown for her youngest daughter, Gael.

Yet as warm and charming as Alysanne could be, she remained a dragon.

While the reign of Jaehaerys was marked as a peaceable one, harsh times did fall upon the empire. When a Dothraki khalasar ravaged the eastern Rhoyne, the council advised Jaehaerys to pay a tribute to end the threat quickly. An option Jaehaerys was leaning towards until Alysanne, hearing of the suffering wrought by the Dothraki, led the king to mount Vermithor, as she did Silverwing, and together they loosed flame against the invading horsemen. Hundreds would burn but so did vast swathes of the Dothraki Sea, which Alysanne set to flame as a warning to other would-be invaders.

Elegant, wise, and above all, strong-willed, Alysanne Targaryen was a queen unlike any other. In her lifetime she gave her husband thirteen children, to the empire she left a legacy untouched by the passage of time and equal to the grandeur of her king,

That of the Great Queen Alysanne.
The drizzle weighed down his cloak with its cold, unwelcome dampness. There were no trees to seek shelter under, the fields and hills around them too rocky for such.

Beneath Jon a whinny of displeasure went up, his horse pawing at the muddy ground. The beautiful courser was the color of hickory and his prowess in battle had earned him the name Vhagar. Nearby Jon’s second mount exhaled in annoyance, steam billowing out the nostrils of the destrier towards the direwolf beside it. So large and powerful was the black beast, it showed no fear of Ghost at all. To Jon, it was a mount worthy of the name Balerion.

The horses were gifts, given to him by the very person he wished to grab hold of and carry far from the Vale.

Just to his right Sansa sat shivering atop her horse, a pair of gloved hands clutching at the hood of a sapphire blue cloak. The rest of their number also fared poorly, with highborn and lowborn alike cursing the rain and chill in the air. They’d left Aevalon basking in the warmth of spring, something sorely lacking here in the Vale.

_The sun only adds to the list of what’s missing. The Blackfish, Theodan Wells, Harry Hardyng, half my bloody army lost somewhere in this accursed kingdom._

_lost or dead._

There were plenty of dead in the field ahead, though thankfully few were loyal to him. Like Jon, most of his army had sat out the battle, watching as the Hunter force was routed. His heavy horse were putting down the enemy remnants, a paltry number compared to the droves fleeing in all directions.

“A victory.” Myles Mooton noted, the broad man wringing out his Kingsguard cloak. “Every man with a horse flees behind their lord. These Hunters didn’t care much to have arrows flying their way for once.”

“Twas a monstrous amount of arrows, ser.” Sansa said. “A downpour to shame this rain falling upon our heads. I dare say our archers matched the foe in number.”

The archers had won the day for them, of that he had little doubt. The army barring their way to Longbow Hall had been well positioned to bleed him in a desperate hour. Thus Jon chanced to do the same to them.

He lost count of how many volleys of arrows were loosed before the Hunter levees began to break. Only then had he allowed the heavy horse enter the fray, charging forth to avenge an earlier attack blamed on the Hunters.

A false belief in his mind.

“This was no justice.” He said. “The Hunters fielded too few here to account for the carnage wrought against Lord Staunton’s men.”

Mychel Redfort urged his horse onward. “Who else but them? The Hunters switched sides three times in the war between Denys and Elbert. They’re not only strongest family in these parts, but deceitful and vile to boot.”

“So vile as to do what we saw at the septries?” Sansa asked, her face twisting in disgust.
He regretted allowing Sansa to leave Lady behind at Aevalon after viewing the butchery at those two septries, if only so she would be better guarded. They were supposed to find shelter and supplies at the holy houses yet found only death instead. Both septries had been burned out, the faithful cut to pieces, men and women alike. Later they discovered a similar fate had befallen Symon Staunton and the hundreds who followed him.

Storms and rough seas had scattered his great army all across the coasts of the Vale, his men landing piecemeal and needing to come together again. Lord Staunton was likely seeking him out when the lord’s sizeable force was set upon. Whoever ambushed Staunton’s men spared none and left few hints as to the culprits. The men were content to name the Hunters, who had been harassing their advance for days now. Yet aspects of the killing seemed familiar to Jon. A sort of violence he had witnessed in far distant battlefields.

His attention was drawn back to war at hand by a trio of riders returning from the battle, Daegon at their head. When his Blackfyre friend removed his helm, his face was flushed and eyes wild.

“A thousand apologies, your grace.” Daegon declared, leading Lothor Brune and Justin Massey in bowing. “We rode right over their rabble but not swift enough to cut off Lord Hunter’s flight. His best slipping through our grasp. My grasp.”

Justin fidgeted at that. “We took some prisoners of note. A Ser Henrik of-”

“Sworn swords and hedgeknights.” Daegon cut off the knight. “Jon, let us give chase. The outriders are ready to follow and if we ride hard we can put down the Hunters before they reach their castle. Lothor, you served with the old lord, speak to it!”

“They’ll head to Longbow Hall alright.” Lothor wiped at his bloody sword. “Not an easy ride. Plenty of places to lay in wait. Eon likes his traps and snares.”

Myles jerked at his reins. “Better reason for us to act before he can use such trickery-”

“I believe you mistake Lothor’s point, ser.” He looked to the stocky Kingsguard. “If I send my horse chasing after the Hunters, they could be lost to an ambush.”

That earned a nod from Lothor and Daegon bristled. “Every rider we let get away is another man we’ll face upon the Hunter battlements. Jon, give me half-”

“I’m already missing half my army, squandering more in a reckless chase is not a gift I’d give Elbert Arryn.” He turned to the other two knights. “Justin, Lothor, we are advancing on Longbow Hall and I want you both in the vanguard. Be wary of ambush, for it shall fall on your heads first.”

Daegon was downtrodden to hear so, for the van had been his command until now. Nor did his mood improve as more duties were handed out for the march, leaving Daegon alone with Sansa and himself.

“Jon, I won’t fail again.” Daegon rode beside him to plead his case.

“This was a victory, my friend. Your victory.” He said truthfully and Sansa added a sound of agreement.

“A fine one, Lord Blackfyre. From what I saw, your leadership delivered a crushing blow with few of our brave men being lost. A mercy in such times.”

“We suffered losses-”
Jon reached out to comfort Daegon. “Less than we might have. I kept you back to safeguard the best commander I have left. You bid me to put my faith in Lothor, let him flush out any threats ahead. Not that Brendel will make it easy for the Hunters to slip the notice of his outriders.”

Daegon stiffened at those words, a foul feeling stirring in Jon’s stomach.

“Jon, Brendel Byrne fell in the battle.”

Daegon’s words jolted him and Sansa gasped. Brendel Byrne was Dark Order, or at least he had been. Like the Blackfish, he’d decided to stay at Jon’s side for the rest of his tour. A rough man, Brendel had stood tall against war elephants and Dothraki screamers. At Dragonstone he had backed Jon against Aegon, risking the ire of the future High King in doing so.

*Only to die years later in a muddy skirmish?*

“It was a good death.” Daegon spoke with admiration. “Brendel got all the way to Lord Hunter, just as he said he would before the battle. He told me *no man of the Dark Order could let a Blackfyre take such a prize.*” He shook his head. “The man hated my guts but I will swear to all that Brendel would have claimed lord’s head if not for the Hunter guards. There were just too many. Brendel slew two before he fell to the lord’s blade.”

“He was used to that.” Jon muttered. “Being outnumbered. Fighting against strangers. I thought perhaps it would be different this time. That my friends had earned better fates…”

“Oh, Jon.” Sansa rode closer, her words soft and touch tender against his cheek. “I’m so sorry. He was a good man.”

*He was a killer, he thought, that’s what the Dark Order needed of us.*

*Sansa helped make me more and I wanted to do the same for the others.*

He commanded that Brendel’s body be seen to, so that it could be carried on with them to Longbow Hall. Brendel had helped clear the way there and earned the right to reach the castle walls.

Just as Sansa deserved a proper roof to shelter under tonight, and a hearth to warm herself by. Though she had not once complained, the trials of this campaign had been worse than he expected. As it stood, they had endured ten days of marching in foul weather and worse surroundings. They found entire villages and holdfasts abandoned and fields burned to ash. All that made his drive for Longbow Hall a necessity, the merciless pace one Sansa both forgave and insisted upon.

For she knew the stakes if they failed to capture a stronghold so close to the coast.

*Gendry and Arya have the harder task but without a foothold in the Vale of Arryn their efforts will be for naught.*

*Benjen will go without justice… the dead will have fallen for nothing…*

Neither of them were willing to allow that to happen. A dedication their men matched with vigor.

Lothor’s fears were proven right. Twice along the rocky way to Longbow Hall, ambushes were attempted. One by archers hidden among a copse of pines, the second by Hunter riders hiding behind a hill. Both were discovered and the foe had no choice but to flee ahead of them, straight through the gates of the Hunter castle.

Nestled in the foothills of a great mountain range, Longbow Hall appeared a formidable holding at
first glance. Any conqueror would take pause at the castle’s tall walls, complete with rounded towers and iron-spiked battlements. Yet it became clear Longbow Hall had been weakened somewhat. The top of one tower was half caved in, parts of the battlements were torn away, and the main gatehouse appeared broken from some previous siege. A sight as welcomed by his war council as the hot, mulled wine Sansa arranged for them within his tent.

“Forget building a ram.” Myles lifted a steaming goblet. “I could walk up and knock on that gate and the thing’s likely to give.”

Justin laughed at yet not Daegon, who walked to the tent flap and pulled it aside, displaying the castle to all.

“We’re low on arrows but we won’t need many to screen an attack straight on.” The Blackfyre began pointing about at the fortress. “Massey and I could take our men and scale the walls to the north and south.”

He saw wisdom in that. “It be good to draw some attention from the main gate.”

“Or we could take the whole castle ourselves.” Justin smiled. “Should we fight well, this place could fall by sundown.”

“Earlier still if we talk instead.” Sansa met the men’s gazes with same stoic grace as the direwolf beside her. “Good men, your bravery is heartening but perhaps we should consider a less bloody course?”

“The Hunters have already shed plenty of blood.” Mychel shook his head while Ser Bennard Brune offered Sansa a pitying look.

“Your grace, these are ugly matters. Not suited for the gentle hearts of women…” Sansa earned a grin from Jon at this, one she found waiting when she faced him. “Jon, there is a chance here to prove what I told the lords Royce and Redfort about you. Offer Lord Hunter terms, honorable ones, and take this castle without spilling a drop of blood.”

“What of the faithful they slaughtered?” Myles asked. “Of Staunton and his lot, butchered to a man, should such savagery not be answered in kind?”

Others agreed loudly, and a part of Jon wished to join the others yet Sansa’s blue eyes shamed him from doing so. When she looked at him so, he feared she might see the worst of him.

“We’ve no proof Lord Hunter is guilty of that barbarity.” Sansa replied. “If innocent, that would mean another force is at large and nearby. Reason enough to avoid a battle here.” She paused then to take his hand. “Talk may spare the lives of our brave men. What valiant swords could earn, powerful words can win as well.”

“Words uttered by your lips perhaps.” He sighed, enfolding Sansa’s hand in his own before looking at the castle without. “I doubt how much credence Lord Hunter will give terms offered by the Kingslayer.”

“Jon-”

“Fear not, Sansa.” He released her, putting a hand to Dark Sister before addressing the rest. “My better half has appealed to my better nature. Send a man to the gates under a banner of peace. I will speak with the lord.”
The others were surprised by that yet it could not compare to the shock they shared when Lord Hunter agreed to the parley outside his gates.

Seven men from both sides came together on a patch of even ground beside the burned husk of a tree. Four protectors and two attendants per leader. Despite Sansa’s insistence, he left Myles with her, taking Lothor along as his Kingsguard. Justin and Mychel came along as well while his young squires Raymund Connington and Benfred Rykker acted as attendants. The seventh of their number earned the wariest glares of all.

Ghost made quite the impression on the Hunter party, which said much since most appeared able and hard men. All save for their lord, who was an aged man with gouty legs and such a limp that he appeared half crippled. Eon did not let that stop him from presenting himself as Jon did, armored in mail and plate with a sword on his hip.

“There’s strength left in the old lord. Atop a horse he had enough to kill my friend.”

“So this is the white dragon.” The lord wiped at his forehead, damp either from the drizzle or exertion. “Strange, the Jon Targaryen I met was but a babe. That doesn’t feel so long ago.”

“You were at Dragonstone?” He asked and Eon grinned.

“Jon Arryn summoned the best in the Vale and I answered. Those were good days. Times of honor, when there were falcons worth fighting for.”

Mychel snorted. “You found Elbert worthy enough to kill for. To burn defenseless septons and septas—”

“The Faith is not without its might.” Eon snapped back. “They were meddling, disloyal sorts, that’s the truth. Yet I’d still not slight the Seven above by harming them. I told the Titan’s Bastard he risked such. My army will defend my lands but they’d not join his pillaging.”


Eon nodded. “He’s the one to blame for those crimes, him and his sellswords. Shameful thing for a king to hire such filth. No clue how Elbert got it in his head to stoop so low.”

That was why the destruction they’d found here in the Vale was so familiar to him. He’d seen it before, during his father’s last war with the Braavosi. An ugly conflict that saw the Dark Order and Second Sons clash several times over. The Sons were a brutal outfit, employed by the empire as often as they fought against it.

“This changes things. Mero knows the ways of the Dark Order. He knows me.”

“I need this castle, Lord Hunter.” He said, for that had not changed. “Should you surrender it I promise no harm will befall yourself, your family or your household—”

“Those are terms for peace. I came to speak of combat.” Eon spoke plainly. “House Hunter proposes single combat between two champions. Should my side lose, the castle shall surrender and my men will lay down their arms. Promise to spare the castlefolk and should our champion prevail, my men will not harass your withdrawal. We will let you go in peace.”

“Have you gone mad?” Ser Justin was incredulous. “We can take this castle in a heartbeat! You must have the Warrior made flesh hidden among your number that you become so bold.”

“It was not so long ago that he could best you easily enough.” Eon removed his glove then, showing
a hand dotted by liver spots, before tossing the thing down between them. “I shall champion my own house. Meet my terms and my blade will meet any you wish, Kingslayer.”

Jon was less insulted by the slight than curious at why the lord was set on killing himself.

“You’re crippled.” Ser Mychel said, quite taken aback as he stared at the rest of the Hunter men. “King Jon, I’d act your champion if one of these cowards would step forward. Or will they let an old man fight their battles?”

“We are loyal!” A bearded man replied, dropping to his knee and grabbing at Eon’s surcoat. “Please, my lord. I beg you. Let me- let any of us take your place.”

“That’s enough now.” Eon patted his man’s hand and spoke in a manner Jon did not mark as mad. “It must be me.”

“Why?” He asked and Eon turned around to stare at his castle.

“Look at my home. Look at what it has become. We’ve lost so many the famed hall of my ancestors sits half empty at the best of times. I lost my eldest son during Elbert’s siege. My youngest when Denys sacked us for that submission. Elbert has my last son and should he hear I surrendered this castle without a fight… I do this for the son left to me.”

The rain continued to fall, Jon and Eon staring at one another, not an ounce of misunderstanding of what sacrifice the lord intended to make here.

“I’ll do it.” Lothor volunteered, the only one to do so. “It’ll be quick, no need to draw it out.”

“He’s an old man.” Mychel repeated. “There’s no honor in this.”

“There is.” Jon said begrudgingly. “Lord Hunter does his family a great honor. A father risking everything for his son…”

“He’s the type.” Lothor shook the wet from his nappy grey hair. “Like I said, I can do it quick.”

His eyes sought out Sansa then. She stood at the edge of their lines, Daegon and Myles at her side. Shivering in the rain, staring at him with such hope in her eyes. How quickly would her expression change if Sansa knew the decision before him? Would she feel disgust or horror to learn that he now weighed who to send to kill an old man?

After a few moments consideration, he decided to chance earning Sansa’s anger as well.

“Lord Eon, your challenge is accepted.” Jon said, undoing his cloak and handing it off to Raymund. “Since the lord of this castle shall fight on its behalf, the leader of my army shall champion its cause. Let us duel.”

“Your grace!” Justin protested first but he silenced the knight by handing his crown off to him. Eon took notice of that and eyed him as if he was mad.

“You’re sure?” The lord inquired.

“I am. You fight for your son’s life, I will fight for the life of the friend you cost me.”

“I did what?”

“Brendel Byrne. You slew him in the battle.”
“Ah, the bold one.” Eon nodded, leaning some on his man so he could pull free his sword. “He fought like a demon. I wondered if he would be the last life I ever took by my own blade.” The lord ran a hand down his steel with a faraway look in his eye. “I imagine that’ll be the case.”

Jon then drew forth Dark Sister, the Valyrian steel gleaming even in this grey gloom. He saw Eon’s men wince at the sight of the blade, then again when their lord stumbled some to ready himself. The two groups formed a circle, giving the champions room to battle. Ghost followed Eon’s limping with a curiosity that clashed with Jon’s shame.

_Aemma and Rhaegina could run circles about this man. Aenry too. Without a horse he’s as defenseless as little Vaelena._

_Stop... don’t think on them... or what they’d think of you..._

Jon could hear Sansa calling to him but he ignored it. He knew what he had to do.

Just as his body did when Eon lunged forward, slashing at his shoulder. Jon was two steps to the left before the blow had come halfway, his own sword cutting down to knock Eon’s aside. The lord gasped in pain, likely because of the strain on his legs when he pivoted to stab at Jon’s middle. Again he reacted on instinct, letting Dark Sister clash against the other sword, sliding up it’s length and throwing his shoulder into Eon’s.

The lord nearly tumbled onto the ground and Jon pictured Brendel faltering in the same way. Yet his friend would never regain his feet like Eon did. Jon struck next, Eon using all his might to throw off the attack. Then Dark Sister came at the lord again, cleaving free the vambrance from Eon’s forearm. Eon met the next two slashes but in such a late fashion that cuts appeared on the lord’s plate. Jon closed the gap between them, until he could feel Eon’s labored breathing upon his face. The Hunter men were urging on their lord, their voices heavy with desperation, whereas Jon’s men were silent. They did not cheer for the same reason Sansa continued to shout. To any it was clear Jon was about to kill an old, ailing man.

There was no glory in that. Though perhaps some surprise in how long it was taking.

Then all were given reason to be shocked. For Jon’s right foot suddenly slipped in the mud, unsteadying him for a few moments. Time enough for Eon to attack. Only now did Jon’s men cry out. Not just those nearby but the thousands more watching along with Sansa. All shouting as Eon’s blade cut right at his head.

A wild slash from Dark Sister was all that saved him, his sword meeting the other blade but an inch from his face. Eon pressed down with all his might, the edge of the his blade cutting into Jon’s cheek. He gave voice to the fiery pain the cold steel inflicted on him, throwing off the attack and falling to a knee as he clutched at his cheek.

When he pulled his hand away, it was slick with blood. Just a taste of what Eon intended for him, Jon scarcely having risen when the lord came on again.

An attack he deftly dodged, stepping aside and raising Dark Sister once more. Eon met his first strike, the second drove him back a step, the third tearing the sword out of the old man’s grasp. Eon was quite unprepared when Jon drove a fist into his face, knocking him back into the mud. The old man landed in a commotion of clanking armor and gasps of pain.

When Jon came to stand over his foe, he found Eon in a poor way. His legs were trembling and hand shaking as he desperately reached for his sword.
“Eustace… my sword…” Eon wheezed through a bloody mouth. “Give my son… give him my sword…”

“Do you accept your fate?” He asked, gripping Dark Sister tightly to think of Brendel.

“Yes… give my sword… to Eustace…”

“You will give it to him yourself.” He lowered his blade, offering a hand down to Eon, a gesture the lord stared at in confusion.

“I cannot… Elbert will hear-”

“He will hear that we dueled and you lost. But not before you drew the blood of a king. Let him hear that I imprisoned you for it. So that you might suffer from your grievous wounds.”

“Grievous?” Eon touched at his busted lip and Jon nodded.

“Well we can add a chill to your ailments, you’re likely to catch one if you stay in the mud much longer.”

Eon remained dumbfounded for a few more moments before he cautiously took the offered hand and both men managed to lift the lord to his feet.

“I thank you.” Eon rasped, pointing to Jon’s bleeding cheek. “To be so merciful after I tried to-”

“It’s no mercy.” He inclined his head towards the Hunter men. “I intend to have your people name me their king. Killing their lord might not be the best way to win them over.” He then waved a couple of Eon’s men over. “Prepare your lord’s chambers for his coming and have a maester ready. Mine own healer will tend to him until we arrive in the castle.”

He was true to his word. When it came time to journey through the gates, Jon lent the shaky lord the use of a horse so they could arrive together, Eon riding Vhagar and Jon atop Balerion.

It was some time later that his cheek was finally tended to and by that point he’d already decided the wound pained him less than Sansa’s admonishments. The pair had taken the chambers of the late Lady Hunter yet his own wife showed little sign of needing rest. Sansa was far too intent on taking out her anger by seeing to his hurts.


“You said that already. How about noble? Ow!”

“Don’t you dare say ow!” Sansa grabbed at his chin, forcing him to meet her fiery gaze. “Yes, it was noble but look how close you came to actually dying!”

“I meant to fall, Sansa. I was never in any real danger.”

“Did I know that? All I saw was a sword coming at your head and…” She swallowed deeply. “Well Lord Hunter is lucky I left Lady back with the children. She would have attacked the lord so that there’d be little enough of him left for you to spare.”

“I didn’t want to spare him.” He dropped his gaze to the hands which had strangled Joffrey. “Fighting Hunter wasn’t a task I’d leave to the others but there were moments I was tempted to end him. To cut down an old man.”
She slid her hands into his grasp. “An enemy who killed your friend. A lord who served the king who killed Benjen and nearly murdered our son. Jon, I think the Maiden herself would think of violence in those circumstances.” Her lips pressed against his. “And yet you found a way to act honorably. The Vale lords will hear of this. That there is a king in this realm who is noble in both blood and deed. This is how we win the Kingdom of the Vale.”

*It will take worse to best the Second Sons. The last time I fought them it felt like we set half the world ablaze.*

He was thinking on how to describe those dark days to Sansa when a knock came at their door. Raymund’s voice followed, sounding both excited and hesitant.

“King Jon? Queen Sansa? I don’t mean to intrude- that is, if you are able to see a visitor—”

“By the seven, lad!” A familiar voice bellowed, the pounding that followed a more powerful sort. “Are you two decent?”

“Yes!” They shouted together, for Sansa had recognized the voice too.

She was already across the room and at the door when the Blackfish entered, the dark armored knight quickly enfolding his queen in a warm embrace. The man looked a wreck, with dark circles under his eyes and all manner of filth on his person.

“Uncle, thank the gods.” Sansa said, pulling away to inspect him.

“Thank my horse, poor thing nearly collapsed at the gate.” Brynden look Jon’s way then, his eyes narrowing on the cut. “Is that the work of the Second Sons?”

“Eon Hunter’s, actually.” He ignored the knight’s confusion to quell his own. “How did you know of the Second Sons?”

“I damn near rode over that Brown Ben bastard two days ago! Loosed three arrows at the slippery bugger. We were trying to track you down and, as quick as his lot turned tail, I wager he was up to the same. Has Mero shown himself yet?”

“No to us.” He shook the knight’s hand before sharing the loss of Lord Staunton, which Brynden reacted to with a curse.

“It is not all bad news.” Sansa said. “We have this castle and the Hunter strength might soon add to our numbers.”

Brynden smiled. “With more on the way. Andar Royce and Silveraxe Fell have thousands following about a day after me. We knew that plan was to take Longbow Hall, so we hoped to find you here or take the castle ourselves. Sorry to have missed the fight.”

“Trust me, you didn’t miss much.” Jon said.

“A lie I shall set straight after you bathe, uncle.” Sansa took Brynden’s arm. “I was about to write a letter to the children. It will do them well to hear of their greatest uncle—”

“Brynden, wait.” He snatched up his cloak and came their way. “There’s a duty that must be done. A debt born of brotherhood and respect. One owed to the Dark Order.”

The Blackfish took his meaning well enough. “Who was it?”
“Brendel. We’ve built the pyre in the castle godwood. I know your travels were hard—”

“Easier than Byrne’s.” Brynden freed himself from Sansa to join Jon in the doorway. “He’s waiting for us to send him on and I’d not disappoint him. That man holds a grudge.”

“And we will meet again.” Jon added.

The pair left Sansa behind then, so they could go and tend to their brother. She didn’t need to deal with anymore death tonight. Jon prayed this was the last time he had to perform these rites for a long time to come.

Yet somehow he doubted that.

After all, this war had only just begun.

ARYA

The gulls pulled her gaze upwards to the early morning sky. As the ship beneath her feet rose and fell with the waves, the group of birds flew serenely through the air. High and away from her.

Not so far as Storm’s End. Or Lyonel.

The sound of the wind and waves, the smell of the sea, the cries of the gulls, it took Arya home to Storm’s End. To the countless walks she took with her son upon the curtain walls. Lyonel would see a ship and she would have to think of a magical land it sailed to. He always watched after the birds too, full of questions about where they flew.

*I want these birds to find you, dear one. See them and think of your father and me.*

*Let them find you safe and sound, just as I left you.*

She stared out across the wreckage-strewn harbor towards Gulltown, gripping Needle as tightly as she did the rail of the warship. The waters were clogged with ships, some ablaze or sinking, most pressing in to aid the battle raging beneath the city walls. A fight the *Lord’s Hammer* sailed steadily towards.

A war galley of four hundred oars, the *Lord’s Hammer* was the Baratheon flagship. Her ship. Gendry didn’t care much for sailing, but Arya wouldn’t let that stop the adventures she planned for them.

*One day this ship will carry us across the seas. To wondrous places, like Braavos or the Summer Islands.*

*So far east that Gendry and I can find where the sun rises anew each morning.*

Dawn was upon Gulltown, but Arya took no joy in its coming. Sunrise was meant to find their army already inside the city. Its defenders defeated and gates thrown open, Lord Grafton surrendered to their might. A victory she and Gendry could celebrate together. One that would have spared them from a bloodier battle altogether.

Instead the clanging thuds of a ram against a gate and the ring of clashing steel assaulted Arya’s ears. Dashing her hopes. If not for the light from the burning docks and fiery arrows it be hard to make out much of the fighting. Archers and artillery sent death flying back and forth between the two sides.
Ladders were thrown off the walls as others were raised up. All meaning this fight was far from over.

“It’s time.” Arya declared to her fellow onlookers. “Gendry was right, Bronze Yohn and the others couldn’t break through. He’ll be expecting us to come.”

Ser Andrew Estermont and Brienne wore their somber expressions with none of ease they did their armor. Her lady friend was somewhat taller than Andrew, yet his face betrayed less worry, his bushy, brown eyebrows set in a firm line.

“The plan was sound,” Andrew ran a hand down his long beard. “Lord Baratheon came at the Harbor Gate with terrible strength. The Royces and Redforts should have found the landward approaches sparsely guarded.”

“They found a fight, that’s for certain.” Brienne pointed to the other side of the city, where the sunlight illuminated smoke rising in the distance. “That Baelish man, he said there was talk that Elbert was reinforcing the city in fear of our coming.”

“Well he didn’t do the Arryn fleet any favors.”

Most of the debris floating by belonged to the Vale fleet, smashed to pieces by their attack. She had been in the thick of that fight, the Lord’s Hammer was among the first to meet the first line of Gulltown defenses. They had found fewer than twenty enemy galleys defending the harbor, ships which didn’t hold a candle to imperial dromonds like the Alysanne. During the battle, Aurane Velaryon had used his mighty warship to clear the way for Gendry’s assault on the harbor, yet now Jon’s admiral held back. The Alysanne was chief among a line of warships keeping watch on their rear.

All so Arya could lead another group onto the shore.

“Signal the others,” she said, looking to the men crowding the deck in anticipation. “Tell them to ready their rowboats and men. We have waited long enough. House Baratheon is taking this city.”

Andrew left to do as she asked, but not before shooting a curious look Brienne’s way. The lady nodded at him with an awkwardness Arya expected of Brienne at feasts and balls, any other time save before a battle.

“My lady… Arya, I know the lord gave you command of the reserve-”

“Gave me? I took it. Only because politics robbed me of the others.” She spoke in a mocking tone. “We just had to let the Conningtons and Grandisons grab some glory. I told Gendry he sounds like Sansa when he talks so.”

“Well, perhaps when we join the siege, Andrew and I should go to the front. So that you might command from the rear.”

“Now you sound like Sansa.” She had expected this to come from the likes of Estermont, but not Brienne. “My mother too, and you’re neither, Brienne. I’m long passed being a little girl that needs coddling.”

“I do not think you a-”

“The Stormlords didn’t want us, twice they tried to drive us from Storm’s End. They learned what Elbert Arryn and these Grafton fools will. Come at my family and you will suffer for it. You of all people, Brienne, you were right beside me when I cut down Simeon Toyne.”
“That duel was a dance, dangerous and graceful to behold.” Brienne reminisced with a respectful nod. “But this isn’t about your prowess in battle. Leaders often stay out of the thick of things. You held back at Storm’s End during the Winter War in the Reach.”

“Only so those that make trouble would be wary of stepping out of line.”

“Truly? I thought perhaps it was for Lyonel. That war was the first since the boy was born and… none would think badly if you wished to stay to the rear for his sake now.”

“So if I fight I care less for my son?” Her blood was quickening, and not because of the frantic activity going into readying the boats. “Did you challenge Gendry as well? What about Ronnet Connington? Half the army out there has sons, are they all poor parents in your eyes?”

Brienne acted wounded. “Arya, you welcomed me into your home. I could never doubt how much you love that boy. I speak out of the love I bear for both of you. That and fear. This fight isn’t like the others. It doesn’t feel right.”

“None of them feel right.” Arya said, pointing back at the city. “Not when it’s like this. Standing by and listening to people dying. It’ll be different once we’re there.”

When I’m beside Gendry. The big aurochs needs me.

“I’m not sure.” Brienne sighed, her sad eyes locked on Arya’s. “Sparring, fighting, much of it is instinct. Mine are plaguing me. Screaming for you to stay safe.”

“My armor will help with that.” She patted her friend’s face, drawing as much comfort from Brienne as she offered in return. “And we’ll see each other through this, just like always. Gendry and Lyonel would be lost without us.”

Brienne was bested and she knew it. Though her true feelings had been laid bare, the lady nonetheless insisted on readying Arya for battle. While Brienne could don the same heavy plate as Gendry and others, Arya opted for less bulky protection. The byrnie was finely made, a long-sleeved chainmail shirt that fell just around her knees. Though a layer of boiled leather separated her skin from the mail, she could feel the care that went into it. The steel came from Qohor, second in quality only to Valyrian steel and smithed by the masterful workings of her husband.

She hadn’t asked Gendry to make such a thing for her. One day she simply found the mail waiting in her rooms, a gift made just for her. Needle had come to her in a similar way.

To some, Gendry was a bull, massive and strong. Others saw him as a bastard pretender to a great legacy. Few could think of him as she did. The awkward sergeant who blushed the first time she kissed him at Winterfell. On their wedding night she learned that reddening spread all down his firm body. It was strange to think back on that time, for she hadn’t loved Gendry then.

Wanted, yes. But not loved. That came later.

After they settled at Storm’s End, where Gendry felt as out of place as she did. He knew what others thought of him and, though he tried to hide it, he too was unsure that the new Lord of Storm’s End would amount to anything. So she had helped him. For most of her life Arya’s mother and Septa Mordane tried to teach her how to act like a princess, yet the lessons never ended there. She was the daughter of Eddard Stark, King in the North, and remembered much of what he expected of his lords.

At first, Gendry was embarrassed by her help; but then he found a way to make her role as Lady of Storm’s End easier. He had been born in these lands, while she was but a stranger. They would
spend hours riding in the countryside, sharing their wisdom with one another and, often enough, finding a sheltered field to sate their lust amid the flowers and grass.

Over the months, their rutting became more tender, their kisses lingering longer, and their haste to dress again forgotten as they took to laying in each other’s arms, letting the sun and breeze caress their bodies where their hands had not settled.

Arya would run her fingers up and down his chest, admiring him much as she did the fine blades he crafted in their smithy. Gendry must have taken notice of that, for on the morning marking their first year at Storm’s End, he presented her with Needle.

Not a day had gone by since without Arya holding the blade close.

People told stories of how she’d taken Needle to her birthing bed, a tale where Arya held the sword in one hand, her newborn son in the other. Sansa acted scandalized to hear such while Arya laughed. It was only half true, she’d merely gripped Needle to see herself through the worse of childbirth. When it came time, Lyonel was the only thing in the world she wished to hold.

That’s what no one understood about Needle. It wasn’t just some weapon. It was the home she loved. It was Gendry’s touch. Lyonel’s laughter. Her family.

Yes, she’d killed with Needle. Just as Nymeria took lives when forced to. All to protect what mattered most.

*Father would understand,* Arya thought, *if he had lived to know my family…*

*He’d know why I fight so hard for them.*

She fought hard to keep her balance once the rowboats got underway. The waters of the harbor were calm, but the sheer number of boats and the wreckage floating about made the journey a treacherous one. Her balance was good, yet Arya was not fool enough to tempt fate like Brus Buckler. Brienne tapped her shoulder so that she could witness the knight standing on the prow of a nearby boat. With his armor gleaming and sword pointed towards land, Ser Brus looked like how a child might imagine a knight.

That is, until the boat struck a submerged beam with enough force to unsteady Brus. The knight fell over the side and plunged into the water with a splash. Gallant and strong as he was it did Brus little good as the weight of his heavy armor dragged him down into the depths.

As far as Arya could tell that was the only loss they suffered in the landing. The same couldn’t be said of Gendry’s first wave. Dead clogged the docks and streets leading towards the city walls. Most flew colors of allies, some were men she knew.

Ser Colen of Greenpools had been the captain of the guards at Storm’s End. Now his face was a caved in bloody mess, and Arya was forced to name him by the blue jays adorning his surcoat. Her guardsman Qyle had an arrow through his throat. A spear jutted through Cutjack’s plump belly. Tarber had died with his bow in hand. There were more but her pace quickened, the faces of the dead blurring together in her rush to reach the siege lines.

In search of the face Arya loved so.

Men were mustering near to the Harbor Gate, a massive gatehouse flanked by two imposing towers. The tall walls jutting from its sides in either direction showed a startling amount of broken ladders and fallen bodies upon their bases. Though archers continued to send arrows flying back and forth, most of the men were pulling back.
Rallying about the Lord of Storm’s End, who stood amidst a collection of lords and knights, his bull’s head helm tucked under one arm. Gendry’s armor was scratched, his golden tunic torn; yet besides the small cut upon his brow, he seemed well. He was so focused on Gulltown it was the white cloaked knight beside him that noticed Arya first.

“That’s a welcome sight.” Dontos Hollard wiped at his bloody blade, the Kingsguard acting so bold as to grin her way. “Here come our reinforcements. With a princess at their head.”

“That’s a shewolf to you, Dontos the Dullard.” Arya teased, for the knight enjoyed how she refused to style him as the Daunting.

“ Took you long enough,” Gendry said with a weary smile when they came together. Her hand found his and those blue eyes took a long hard look into hers before flicking back towards Andrew and Brienne. “I take it the valiant pair couldn’t sway you into staying out of this clash?”

“A fool’s errand. Did you put them up to that?”

He kissed her cheek. “I warned them against it. I know my wife, she’s too damn stubborn to hear reason.” Gendry smiled when she tugged at his beard some. “It’s good you’re here, Arya. This aurochs needs your help.”

“He has it. That and more.” She kissed him then, taking in the rough scratch of his whiskers and ignoring the sound of someone clearing their throat.

It turned out to be Ronnet Connington, a husky knight and nephew to the Griffin himself. Though many considered him a comely man and fierce warrior, Arya didn’t care for him. He was a man of import though, as were Sebastian Errol and Hugh Grandison, both lords, and Ser Balon Swann, who was nearly as broad as Gendry and a foe she was wary to ever cross blades with.

There was a stranger among them, a short man whose face was less familiar than his sigil, the red castle of the Redforts. He caught her curious gaze and bowed.

“Lady Arya, I am Ser Jasper Redfort. My father bid me to seek out your husband, so that we might understand his progress—”

“Gendry’s progress?” Arya scoffed at that. “If I remember correctly, you Redforts are supposed to be inside the city already, opening the gates for us. So do tell me how we have come to meet outside the walls. I mean, that’s what all this was about.” She waved an arm to exaggerate the scale of destruction around them. “My husband and his bannerman bled to hand you an opportunity for glory, not failure.”

“Damn good question,” Lord Grandison stroked at his greybeard while Jasper acted aghast.

“We have not failed! My family and the Royces fight on as we speak, facing defenses far beyond what we expected. Newly dug ditches, caltrops to cripple our horses and siege engines, hundreds of bloody crossbowmen whose bolts carve through armor like pudding.”

“Myrish ones.” Gendry frowned to say. “The Graftons have purchased some dead-eye killers. Jon and I saw Pentos do the same when the Braavosi were at its gates.”

Dontos spit in derision. “ Archers are cowards, no matter their tool of choice. To overcome them a score of swordsmen need only to gain the walls.”

“We have tried, ser. Many have died for the effort.”
“Perhaps it’s best if we settle in for a siege,” Lord Errol offered. “Encircle the city and allow ourselves to be resupplied by the sea while Gulltown starves. After a month or two, they’ll submit without a loss to us.”

Arya shook her head at that. “Jon and Sansa don’t want us sitting on our arses. The war doesn’t end with this city, we’re supposed to take and then join the fight in the Vale of Arryn. My uncle Benjen never met my son, and for that I’ll be showing Elbert Arryn some of my needlework. If climbing over these walls is what it takes for that to happen, show me the nearest ladder.”

Her words earned expressions of arrogance and disbelief from most of the men, the ones who had yet to see her in battle. Those who had took her declaration with grim acceptance. Gendry included.

“My wife speaks for both of us,” Gendry spoke in a grave voice. “This city can be ours, just not in the manner we intended.” He closed his eyes then. “From what Ser Jasper says, I think most of the crossbowmen are at the northern walls. Few were part of the fighting here.”

“That would make sense,” Jasper agreed, looking to the gatehouse. “Our section is the weakest part of the city walls, the wars hit hard there. Lord Grafton would want it well guarded.”

“Meanwhile we face that gatehouse,” Balon Swann spoke for the first time. “The gate itself is reinforced from within and with those towers raining hell down on any who approach it, we could send all our strength against it and only gain in corpses.”

Gendry nodded at that and Arya caught wind of what he was thinking.

“Then we go over instead of through.” She said.

“I hope to. We’ve gained the walls right of the gatehouse twice now. We were thrown back both times but it took the defenders longer to do so in the last attack. I thought so at least…”

“You were a tad distracted.” Dontos laughed, stepping forward and grinning once more at Arya. “The lord here was busy dueling Marq Grafton. His family may have driven us off yet Ser Marq came with us, courtesy of your husband tossing him off the battlements.” The grin died away when Gendry grunted in disapproval. “Yes, well the second counterattack did come on less harshly than the first. Perhaps they’re ailing?”

“Then let’s send some fresh and eager men against them.” Arya put her hands on her hips and beamed to draw attention to the reserves still arriving from the boats. “Well, I just so happen to have brought a couple thousand with me. If one of you fine men could just point the way to the ladders-”

“I will lead the reserve in this,” Gendry said without looking at her, his arms crossed in determination. “Dontos will join me and if House Grandison is able, I’d have them launch a feint against the left side.”

“Lady Arya will lead the center.” Gendry looked over her head to speak to the lords and knights. “Once we’re over the walls, my men and I will do our best to weaken the gatehouse defenses. Ser Andrew, Ser Ronnet, when the time is right I want you to back my wife’s assault on the gate.” He finally met her gaze. “She has my trust in this.”

Long gone was the uncertain young man who’d taken the lordship of Storm’s End with great reluctance. Gendry acted a lord in this and any arguments the others raised were heard, but quashed
under that authority. Yet when Arya and him stood alone, Gendry seemed torn between his roles as lord and husband.

“Do not fight me on this, Arya. The Seven above know that if I had another I trust half as much as you, it be them attacking the gate. Not my bloody wife.”

“I’m not bloody yet.” The jest caused Gendry to wince. “Sorry, I meant their blood, not mine.” She ran her hands through his black curls before cupping his cheeks. “Don’t you try and shame me with worry. Not when you’re about to climb those walls. That should be me, I’m the best climber in my family.”

“Liar, that be Bran. When we caught Lyonel climbing the tapestries, that’s who you said he took after…” Gendry grabbed at her sides, his grip so powerful she felt it through the mail. “I miss him so. Fuck Elbert Arryn and the Vale. Fuck this war. I want to be a father to my son. I want to grab you and him and be in our home again.”

“Hush.” She rasped, fighting back tears to pull Gendry’s head down so that their brows touched. The heat of his skin felt like the welcoming warmth of their hearth and their babe’s sweet face. “After we get home I swear, no more fighting. For the rest of our lives. Only us and Lye and peace. We just have to do this. If they could kill Benjen and get so close to killing Aenry… gods what if it had been Lye?”

“We won’t let that happen… we won’t…”

They held each other for as long as they could. Neither wept, Arya drawing just enough strength from Gendry to ward off her fear. Then some more to smack his arse when he made his way to the reserve. His smile helped keep her feet planted as he left her behind.

Brienne was with her as they readied the center for the fight ahead. The lady made far better company than Ronnet and Lord Errol, who both begrudged following her lead. The feeling was mutual.

*I’d rather be by Gendry’s side, climbing up the walls and keeping his sweet arse safe. Better than staring at those ugly things these lot call faces.*

Her rude thoughts were blown away when the trumpets sounded the attack.

The men gathered about Arya held firm while to either side of them thousands more rushed onward. Ladders and banners were carried with the tide of men surged on. Arrows flew up over their heads to strike at the archers shooting from the walls down at the attack. Most of their own arrows struck the stone battlements and did little harm while many of those sailing in the other direction cut down men long before they could reach the walls.

She knew it was unlikely Gendry would fall to such. His armor was too strong, the distance too great. Yet with each passing moment the attack drew nearer, her husband somewhere within that mass of flesh and steel.

Then the first wave drew close enough for the ladders to start lurching upwards, a half score of them striking the tops of the walls. More followed as the first of the men began the terrible climb upward. Now arrows were flying from the walls and the nearest tower. Rocks and boulders tossed down to crush and maim, oil poured forth upon the heads of climbers. For every two men who chanced the rungs, one would fall from the ladder shrieking. Those more heavily armored fared better, arrows scarcely bothering those in steel plate.
That’s how she caught sight of Dontos. The Kingsguard stood out like a sore thumb with his snowy cloak, yet he was among the first to reach the upper heights of the walls. More than two score ladders and grabbling hooks had found purchase by then. Soon Dontos was joined by others, a battle beginning along the tops of the walls themselves. She had no doubt that soon enough a Baratheon would be a part of the fight, so she made ready for hers.

“Brienne, how do you think the Seven Kingdoms will handle two ladies being the first through the gates of Gulltown?”

“It would be… interesting,” Brienne turned from the battle to look Ronnet’s way. “Some would take it better than others.”

“I imagine the Graftons guarding the gates will take it the worst of all.” She scanned her army, making note of who had what and how much. Then she summoned Ronnet over to make some instructions clear. “The ram is going first, but we’ll need a strong guard to keep it safe from sorties. Men with good shields, large ones at that. If the gate gives, columns of armored and shielded men will follow Brienne and I, that will be the first thrust.”

“I should lead it,” Ronnet said and she scowled.

“Of course you say so at the thrusting part. Too bad. You follow after us with as many men as you can-”

A commotion arose behind her, far louder than the din of battle itself. Men were shouting and a surge of activity was breaking out all up and down that part of the army. Gendry’s part.

“Have they seized the wall?” Brienne asked, squinting into the distance but frantic fighting continued there. The only thing that had changed was the shouting and the feel in the air. For these were not shouts of battle, but of panic.

Some words finally reached her ears, clear as day.

‘The lord has fallen!’

“What did he say?” She asked to no one, her feet already carrying her in that direction.

‘Lord Baratheon has fallen!’

‘The Bull is dead!’

‘They killed the lord!’

No they didn’t, she silently argued, not my lord at least.

Another lord. Another bull. There has to be another.

The shouts were growing louder with every step, her hurried push to learn the truth was impeded by men standing in the way. Hundreds meant to be charging forth had stopped entirely, shuffling about idly. Whispering. Worrying. Pointing at something ahead.

“Get away!” Arya shouted, forcing her way forward. Then another appeared beside her and men were thrown about with ease.

“Make way there!” Brienne bellowed, the helmed lady battering men left and right so Arya could get to Gendry. To make sure he was alright.
Then everything around them ground to a halt. Arya froze in place at the sight that awaited her. For coming her way was Gendry, just not as he should be. His powerful legs were going to waste in the arms of those who carried him. Ten men were needed to lift the lifeless form of her husband, his body bloody and unmoving upon their shoulders.

No. It was me. I was meant to go. I was going to be the one…

“A healer!” One of them shouted. “We need a fucking healer!”

“Does he live?!” She nearly screamed, rushing at the procession and forcing them to kneel so she could seek the truth herself. His helm was lost, his face bearing horrible gashes, his armor a cracked and caved in mess. Yet when she pressed her face to his, the gods smiled on her.

She felt his breath. He lived.

“He fell, my lady.” A distant voice said. “The lord was nearly at the top when a boulder broke the ladder and he fell.”

“The men are losing heart, they won’t take to the ladders without him.”

“They think he’s dead.”

“From that height he should be.”

“He’s not dead. He’s not.” Arya stroked his pale, clammy face, willing him to open his eyes. “Say something, Gendry. Anything. Call me m’lady. Please.”

Gendry said nothing. The most she got from him was another pained rasping breath. Another sound reached her ears though. One that did not belong. Not when Gendry lay barely clinging to life.

People were cheering. Atop the walls, the Grafton men were cheering. Ladders were being thrown back. Men were retreating down them. The scale of the battle along the battlements was shrinking. Gendry was suffering.

And they were cheering.

Needle was in her grasp in a flash, a grip which tightened with every ounce of strength she had. Her pounding heart fueling her fury.

“Get him help.” She choked out, rising to full height and bidding Gendry’s minders to do the same. “The best you can find. He lives. He lives or you’ll answer to me.” Arya pointed Needle at the walls then. “Just like they will. This attack is not over. We go onward!”

“Arya?” Brienne grabbed at her. “What of the gate? I don’t think—”

“Tell Ronnet to lead it!” Arya then slashed at the men holding Gendry. “I said go! The rest of you, with me! For Gendry!”

One of her guardsmen Kurz lifted his sword. “For the Bull!”

“To the Wolf!” Another answered as Arya began to rush towards the wall. “Fight for the Bull! Follow the Wolf!”

She moved as swiftly as a wolf then, like she would in her dreams sometimes. It would be better if this was a dream. A horrible nightmare she could wake from and find Gendry staring down at her, Lyonel and Nymeria jumping upon their bed.
Instead she stayed in the nightmare, one where she passed over the bodies of dead men and urged fleeing ones to change course. Brienne did so more forcefully, knocking down any who kept running, all while staying right on Arya’s heels.

Arrows whipped over her head or struck the ground at her feet. Some hit those around her, yet the terrible fury building within Arya kept the rest at bay. Suddenly she was at a ladder, a path to those who hurt Gendry. Who robbed her of those blue eyes. Then something pressed at her back, large arms grabbing the rungs above her head.

“Together, Arya.” Brienne echoed through her helm. “If we must, we do it together.”

“We must.”

Thus they began their ascent, Brienne shielding Arya every inch of the climb with her immense body. Arrows glanced off her armor, rocks sailing so close terror threatened to take hold of Arya as she held the ladder tightly. She wanted to be holding Lyonel instead. Or for Gendry to embrace her. Then she was a little girl again, climbing between her parents in search of protection from a storm.

Yet her father and mother weren’t there when Arya threw herself into the storm atop the battlements. The stone walkways were slick with the blood of the dead, the battle itself pure chaos as a man slew one foe only to turn around and find another at his back.

Her first kill was like that. She sent Needle through the back of a Grafton man-at-arms, driving it so deep blade did not stop till the pommel struck flesh. Arya was pulling it away when an axeman came at her. Brienne was over the wall by then and cleaved his head half off. Now both ladies were tainted by the bloodlust.

Arya’s arms were burning from the climb, but her legs did most of the work. Leaping to the side so she could let a blow pass by and slice at exposed flesh. Spinning her body about so she found herself at a foe’s back, ensuring he never saw the eyes of the person who slit his throat. Brienne was beside her, aiding her bloody vengeance, and more joined in. Kurz and Andrew had made the climb as well, hundreds more after them. Thousands pressing at the ladders below.

There’s plenty of fight left for them. Come and fight for Gendry. Lend him your strength.

A tower loomed large over the battlements yet few arrows found their way near Arya, for she was always in the thick of fighting. The archers would not risk striking their own men, a silly thing considering the deadly tally Arya had raked up. Five were dead by her blade by the time she found Dontos.

The Kingsguard had lost his cloak and helm but his sword was in fine form as it swung about, throwing back two enemy knights.

“You’re not the Baratheon I expected!” He shouted when Arya and Brienne took out one of his foes. “What kind of victory will this be? I can’t share a cask of wine with women!”

“Try drinking it yourself.” She snarled back, slashing at a spear. “About time you earned your name, Dontos the Daunting.”

“You called me the Daunting!” He laughed despite his exhaustion and injuries. “Maybe the Seven have blessed this day!”

The new gods have nothing to do with this. It’s the justice of the old gods I’ve brought to Gulltown.

For what these people did to Gendry… my poor love…
“Mercy!” A young bowman pleaded, dropping his disk after fumbling a stab at her throat. Most of his friends were fleeing behind him and he tripped in his attempt to follow. “Oh no… no, please! I never hurt anyone!”

“Liar.”

Gendry was still in her mind when she stabbed down into the boy’s heart, a quick kill that allowed her to give chase to his comrades. The Grafton defenders had let fear overtake them, they were streaming towards the tower and the across the bridge leading away from it, Dontos and a brave few were right on their heels. That path led straight down to the gates, which could mean victory if they overran them.

Thus Arya was right with them.

“Gendry!” She screamed at an old man who stopped to fight, slicing through his neck without pause. “Baratheon!”

“Arya!” Brienne shouted but she pressed on.

“To glory!” Dontos roared, leading the charge towards into a group of swordsmen who looked to block the way across the bridge.

Yet when they neared these defenders suddenly broke, diving into guard posts to either side. Suddenly the way forward was clear. The bridge open.

“Arya! No! The crossbows!”

Then she saw what Brienne had. At the other end of the bridge stood two lines of men. One kneeling in front, the other standing behind. All holding crossbows and wearing sashes of fine Myrish lace.

*Gendry, you were right. They’re from Myr.*

*You’re no aurochs.*

“Glory!” Dontos rushed on, sword pointed before him like Brus Buckler’s had been on the boat.

The first wave of crossbows fired at once, their bolts flying into the charge. Half those around the Kingsguard went down, like someone cutting a puppet’s strings. Dontos was struck twice, bolts striking his belly and shoulder. He lurched to the side of the bridge yet did not fall. More of their men were pushing forward from behind so Dontos once more tried to take the lead, Arya fighting him for it. Even if she wanted to stop, the others pushed her forward.

Right into the second barrage of the crossbows. This time Dontos fell, the third bolt taking him right in the chest. It was a painful way to die.

She knew that it was. For that’s where a bolt struck her too. A moment passed before she realized that’s what the impact was, a bolt punching its ways through her mail. Tearing through it to stab into her chest.

*No… no Gendry made me this… he worked so hard…*

Then she was falling. A biting agony coursing through her body before she hit the stone walkway. She didn’t want to be here. The field with the flowers would be best.

*We made love there…*
Men rushed by her, boots stamping down around her head. Above her she could see smoke staining the sky, and seagulls flying overhead.

*Lyonel... Oh love, look for the birds...*

Then someone was lifting her, like she would lift her little boy. Their arms were powerful, their eyes the kind of loving blue she yearned for. Yet it was not Gendry who had come for her.

The pain was taking hold of everything. Everyone was going forward but she was being carried back. Her body growing weak.

Still she struggled to hold on to Needle.

To hold on to her family.

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**SANSA**

This grave had been dug with care. Most of the holes scattered across the battlefield were shallow and misshapen, whereas this one delved to a respectful depth. A difficult thing to manage considering how hard and rocky the ground was.

*A labor of love*, she lamented, *this is what a family does for its own.*

*They care for one another, even when one is passed caring.*

*Oh, Arya...*

Sansa pushed that thought away, for it was a foul thing to look at a grave and think of her sister. The body carried on towards the hole was larger than Arya had ever been, a figure wrapped so completely in a brown cloak that strangers would be denied what Sansa knew. Within lay the corpse of a young man, though his father cradled him as if he were a babe.

Belasso showed less strain than grief in this, tears streaming down the former slave’s face. Rivers of anguish which ran over the tiger stripe tattoos the Volantenes had branded him with.

She felt ashamed to not recount his son’s name. They’d only met the once, when Sansa had introduced Belasso to Jon and Bronze Yohn before the war had begun. Back when Belasso had himself and fours sons to pledge to their cause.

A war which had stolen away all but the father. An ugly truth her uncle had only just shared with her.

“There’s one more,” Brynden said quietly, trying to lead Sansa away from the sight. “A boy back in Aevalon. Looking after his mother and sisters…”

“No.” She remembered now. “No, I had him made a page in the city watch…” Her heart ached to watch Belasso lower the body into the grave alone. “He gave all his sons over to us.”

“A good man.” Her uncle noted sourly, looking back towards the battlefield once more. “At least he still lives. He’s fortunate in that.”

Sansa doubted Belasso felt fortunate but her uncle was right. This latest battle had been as quick as it was unexpected, yet still it wrought a terrible cost. Her Kingsguard, Ser Myles Mooton was slain
whilst leading her defense. Another body to add to the untold number of corpses dotting the rolling hills around her. Men and horses, friend and enemy, all strewn together.

A vision of Gendry and Arya came to her then, the pair laying among the dead, their bodies broken and bleeding.

*Stop that. They’re not dead. Only hurt, grievously so.*

‘At death’s door,’ was what Aurane Velaryon had written of her sister and goodbrother. A report that followed his proclamation of Gulltown being defeated and how it now flew the Targaryen banner. His grand tale of victory over the Graftons had meant less than every small detail Sansa could glean about Arya and Gendry’s well-being.

*Or their suffering. Should I be thankful that they still feel pain?*

*So long as they draw breath I can hope… hope and pray.*

Her fingers were burned and ached still from all the candles Sansa had lit in prayer for Arya. There had been plenty of chances to pray of late. Days past, she had attended a meeting of sorts at a mountainside enclave of the Faith. There, under the guidance of septons and the protection of the Warrior’s Sons, Lord Ruthermont and Lady Waynwood joined her in talks aimed at winning more support for Jon’s campaign in the Vale. Allies her husband desperately needed, for while Sansa guaranteed rights and titles at the enclave, Jon and their army continued the terrible struggle elsewhere.

Personally she felt guilty of weakening those efforts, for he had forced Daegon and Brynden escorting her with no less than two thousand men, including nearly all the Faith Militant. Her only consolation came after the Ruthermonts and Waynwoods had pledged fealty, for it meant her escort doubled in men and tripled in heavy horse.

Enough to throw back the enemy force they found athwart their path back to Jon. Only three days out from the enclave and once more she was immersed in the bloodshed. As Brynden led her on across the field she took note of the sigils upon the enemy dead. The bronze spearheads of House Moore and House Melcolm’s rusty anchor. Neither of which carried the weight of the sigil she found born across a fallen banner. The bright blue falcon of the Arryns.

“Elbert tried to get the drop on us.” Brynden noted grimly. “I thought for sure he’d need longer to mend after the carnage at that gods forsaken pumpkin patch. He lost hundreds there.”

“Men he left to rot.” She said, remember the smell vividly. “So great was his haste to regroup and rally more strength. He must have come to stop us from doing the same, an ambush meant to strike while-”

“This was no ambush.” A pained voice bid her to face the coming of Harry Hardyeing. The knight clutchted at an injured arm and his comely face bore a bruise or two.

“How can you be certain, ser?”

“Because of who slew Ser Myles.” Harry said before wincing to lift his wounded arm. “The same knight who did this. Mandon Moore, Elbert’s cold-eyed killer. If Lyn Corbray couldn’t lead Elbert’s vanguard, that duty always fell to Mandon.”

“Elbert never bestowed that honor on his heir?” Brynden acted cool to the knight’s words. “I take it he thought you better suited to the murder of women and children.”
“Uncle, enough.” She chided the older knight. “If not for the ser this Mandon Moore might have struck me down. I owe him my life and I’d think you would be grateful to be spared more hurt than we already have endure.”

Brynden chewed on that some, his jaw tightening as it had when Sansa first shared word of Arya with him. Her great uncle had always been an infrequent visitor to septs but of late he’d knelt beside her in prayer regularly.

“So you say this was Elbert’s van?” Brynden crossed his arms and glared at Harry. “That would mean his army is not far off and somehow we stumbled into its path.”

“I’m afraid we share the same one.”

Daegon Blackfyre strolled their way at the head of a large party. Surprisingly, the lord appeared untouched by the fighting for once, yet there was little joy in his expression. Nor in that of the captured knight being led along by the bearded Ser Theodan Wells of the Warrior’s Sons.

“Theodan’s men managed to grab us a gift for Lord Hunter.” Daegon continued. “Queen Sansa, meet the heir to Longbow Hall, Ser Eustace Hunter, formerly in service to King Elbert.”

Eustace blinked incredulously. “Unless you people get moving, I’m not foreswearing any vow to my king. He’ll be on us in short order.”

“So the Arryn army is near.” She felt somewhat thankful for that. “That means Jon only faces the Corbrays and Belmores at Heart’s Home.”

“That’s where Elbert is heading.” Daegon sighed to say so. “Eustace claims Elbert is making haste to join the fighting there. He leads an army of almost ten thousand.”

“Nearly a thousand horse among them.” Eustace added quickly. “Every knight and able man we could find. Elbert’s scoured this part of the Vale for every scrap of armor and blade of grass to strengthen his army. He wants to crush the white dragon and we’re to meet up with the sellswords on the way-”

“So they are to halt their assaults on the faithful?” Theodan flushed in anger. “The dogs of the false king have destroyed septries that have stood since the Andals brought the word of Seven to the Vale. Idols and scrolls blessed by High Septons of old. If Elbert comes this way we should make him pay for this sacrilege!”

“No.” Daegon and Brynden said together, earning Theodan’s ire.

“Is your faith so weak you fear a battle?”

“I’d say my wits are sharp enough not to risk losing the war.” Brynden shot back before addressing her. “The odds aren’t in our favor and there’s no decent place to make a stand near enough. Our best bet is to press on and try and reach the king before Elbert. Then we can combine our strength and wipe out the Corbrays before Elbert arrives.”

She wrung her hands. “But if there is a chance we can stop Elbert here we should take it. At least try and weaken him some.”

“My queen, I’m afraid that’s not possible.” Daegon said and she raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps not here but if we seek a stronger position-”
“That’s not what he means, Sansa.” Brynden stroked at the grey stubble about his chin, sharing a look with Daegon who ran a hand through his pale blond hair. “There’s a reason the black dragon and I were sent with you.”

“The king trusted us to do as he commanded.” Daegon shifted awkwardly. “To defy you if need be.”

“Defy me?”

“We are not to engage in any pitched battles if there could be any risk to you.”

“A wise move, niece. Jon meant—”

“I am your queen, Ser Brynden. Remember that.” Her anger was hard to contain at that moment. To hear Jon had gone behind her back to usurp what authority she commanded of their men, it did more than hurt. It offended her. “We cannot allow Elbert to bring such a force against Jon when he already does battle. There must be a way to ensure my safety as well as your king’s.”

“There’s not.” Harry uttered, staring at the ground. “Nothing is safe in these wars. Nothing and no one.” He managed to look her in the eye then. “Queen, woman, it makes no difference, if Elbert gets a hold of you, he’ll kill you.”

Of course Brynden found his way to agreeing with Harry on this, most of the men forming a united front against her. With the lot of them likening Sansa to the last queen Elbert had at his mercy, the one he threw out the Moon Door, her arguments were drowned in short order.

Strangely enough, Sansa doubted Harry had been speaking of the late queen towards the end of his warning. The heir to the Eyrie had not been the same since seeing what had come of House Hardyng. What had once been a modest keep with walled courtyards and gardens had been put to the torch and its people slain, most of whom Harry had called kin. Then at the enclave Lady Anya had shared more grim tidings with her former ward. The bastard daughter Harry had at Iron Oaks was lost to fever, and worse had befallen the woman and child he left at Gulltown. Both having been slain on Elbert’s orders long before Arya’s army arrived.

It bothered Sansa how accustomed she was becoming to the death of women and children. War was nothing new to her, yet she could never have imagined the horrors that were visited upon the Vale. Village after village lost to flames, entire towns sacked and razed to the ground. Though Jon had won thousands of Vale supporters their endless march across the Vale left a trail of dead behind them. In victory or defeat, the cost was always borne in blood.

Even still the sword accounted for less loss than starvation. Barely the first harvest had come to the Vale before most was hoarded away in expectation of war. What little was left for the smallfolk was often stolen or burned, and shamefully this was not a crime done only by Elbert’s men. Her fleet did its best to bring fresh food and men to the Vale but the mountain clansmen and Second Sons wreaked havoc upon their supply lines.

A situation made worse by how little came by way of Gulltown, where the Baratheon army had performed a vengeful sack after the gates fell. From what few confused reports came from the city, it was clear Gendry’s army lacked in unity and was overburdened with potential leadership. Several different men vied for control, with the likes of Ronnet Connington and Lord Estermont squabbling with Bronze Yohn over who should lead the march east and when.

By the time they set out all that will be left of the Vale is ash and bones.

We call ourselves dragons but Jon and I never meant for such destruction to visit this land.
She sought some absolution for her part in that. Without her leave Brynden and Daegon had ordered their men to ready to move out, yet another army found them in the meanwhile. A hungry, desperate horde of smallfolk which had followed them since the enclave, seeking what scraps could be found in their wake.

Hence their surprise when Sansa herself arrived among their number to share what little could be spared with the children. She did so under heavy guard, protected by not only her uncle but the knights Roland and Wallace Waynwood, Gerold Gower, Hubard Rambton and his three sons, and the suddenly earnest Eustace Hunter.

“A thousand apologies, your grace.” Eustace said as he sternly waved mothers and children forward to take what morsels she could offer. “After so much time by Elbert’s side, one becomes wary. Had my father not maimed your husband I’d likely be dead now.”

“Jon suffered but a scratch.” She said, handing a pitiful serving of salt beef and stale bread to a young mother about Arya’s age with a babe of a couple years. Both were so thin their skulls poked at their flesh and it was hard not to think of how her little Vaelena fared without her.

“Thank you, m’lady.” The girl stroked at her babe, hiding the food among its bundle. “I’ll pray for you. You and the dragon king. Where do you go? Me and my mine will follow and work-”

“Don’t tell her.” Eustace spoke gruffly before shooing the pair away. “Go on now! Be thankful for what you’ve been given.”

“Your chivalry is as weak as your loyalties, ser.” She snapped at the knight, who appeared shocked at the slight.

“I-I meant only to protect you. Elbert has made it known far and wide that any who share the comings and goings of the Targaryens will be rewarded. Truly I’m sparing the beggar too. Any who fail to declare all they know are given over to the torturers. With all that Mandon saw here they’ll be wanting to see what this lot knows.”

“He’d torture them to learn of me?” A chill crept over her, for even when she tried to do well by these people it led to suffering.

“More likely he’ll offer gold and food for any who’ll betray your company.” Eustace pointed to a nearby warrior of the faith. “Any who bring the scalp of a poor fellow gets bread and copper coin. A Warrior’s Son will earn a goat and a bag of silver. That’s nothing compared to those who merely point the way to the betrayer… er- I mean Ser Harrold.”

“That makes sense, Elbert tried to kill Harry in Aevalon.” She shuddered to remember that night in the theatre. “He went so far as to hire trained assassins to bring his evil to my kingdom.”

“The king calls that a lie. That he was innocent in what happened at Aevalon.” Eustace shrugged, waving a few more children onward. “A dishonest claim to be sure, but a convincing one. Elbert wants Harry brought to him alive, the reward for such is nearly three times greater than that for Hardyng’s corpse. Actually, both bounties are worth more than the prices on you and your husband’s head.”

“Truly?”

“He’s obsessed. To Elbert this is all Harry’s fault. He thinks Hardyng and the High Septon plot together to usurp the Arryn throne, just like Denys tried to.”

Sansa saw no lie in how sincerely Eustace spoke and marveled at how Elbert could be consumed
with such single mindedness in the midst of losing his kingdom. She and Jon were clearly the greater threats to his reign at this point, Harry merely a pawn in their keeping.

*Yet Elbert thinks of him as the most valuable piece... the king in a game of cyvasse.*

Her last game of cyvasse against Sarella came back to her. The one where Sarella had become too focused on her own strategy rather than watching the board. As she continued to feed the hungry smallfolk Sansa’s mind was filled with thoughts of game pieces and players in the terrible game of thrones at work here in the Vale. Thoughts which took her to suck dark places that, when Daegon came to collect them, her mood was no mystery to him.

“Do not fret, Sansa.” Daegon said, coming alongside her and Brynden for their ride to the front of the column. “Soon enough we shall be back with the king and you can have him lop our heads off for angering you.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say.” She barely whispered, so caught up in the evil blossoming within her mind.

“Blackfyres aren’t known for their humor.” Brynden mocked the lord before putting a hand to his chest. “I’ll admit, it’s tempting to cross blades with the Second Sons again but what I’m most excited for the chance to learn how Catelyn and her boys are faring in the North. It’s hard to wrap my head around how little Bran is now a man wedded.”

“Yes... yes, to Eddara Tallhart...” Sansa tried to focus on that bit of good news to try and save herself. “Mother said the wedding drew the best to Torrhen’s Square... it lured the most powerful of the North...”

Brynden chuckled. “Couldn’t have beat the audience at yours. I swear every lord in the North was there. I’ve never seen so many beards, or Jon looking so scared. Wait, that’s not true. When you birthed the Dragons Darling, the man was right terrified.”

“I can’t blame Jon for that.” Daegon smiled some. “Fatherhood is a foreboding thing. More than anything I want this war to end so I can get back to Rosby, yet I’m scared at what I’ll face when I do so.”

“Gods, man. Your wife birthed a daughter, not a demon.”

“How can you be so sure with a name like Daemona?”

That wrenched Sansa from her spell. “Daemona Blackfyre is a lovely name. I’ve no doubt you’ll take to fatherhood with the same vigor you did to serving us all these years.”

“I hope so...” Daegon bowed her way. “Though I fear my daughter may demand more of me than my king and queen ever has.”

“Children have a way of doing that.”

*Even if Benjen had survived the theater I still would have wanted war for the attempt on Aenry’s life.*

*Should we lose here, our enemies may grow bolder still. Do to us what was done to the Durrandons.*

Sansa pulled up on her reins then, bringing her horse to a halt and forcing Brynden and Daegon to swing about.

“Is there a problem, your grace?” Daegon asked.
“Yes, many. I wish you to call together a war counsel on the Arryn army.”

“Sansa, don’t do this.” Brynden hung his head low. “There’s no fight to be had here. Not if I have anything to say about it. We’re not going to put you at risk so we best hurry away from here.”

“It’s not me you put at risk. It’s our chances for winning this war.” She kept her thoughts focused on that. “Uncle, you talked of outpacing the Arryns as our best hope for victory. How likely are we to do so if Elbert is as close as you fear?”

“The odds aren’t terrible. We’re a smaller force and can move more swiftly than his. That and we have a lead on them.”

“Yet not much of one. Should we manage to unite with Jon and find the Corbrays still a threat, there would be precious little time before we faced both them and the Arryns.”

“Then we should not waste a single moment lingering here.” Daegon pulled at his reins. “Your grace, I commend your bravery but if we stand against Elbert now we’ll be serving up this army on a silver platter. Reinforcements you worked so tireless to win.”

“Running is an ugly thing.” Brynden spat to the side. “But it’s the way out of this. We’re doing all we can with the situation before us.”

“We are not.” Sansa pressed. “There’s a way for us to delay the Arryn march and travel onward to Jon in the same breath.” She caught her uncle readying to argue. “Without risk to me… not to me…”

She looked over the hundreds ahead to find the knight she meant to doom. A healer was tending him, helping care for the wound Harry had taken in her defense. When the knight met Sansa’s gaze, the doubt threatened to overwhelm her. Until she pictured Jon broken in his place. Arya and Gendry writhing in pain. Her ears now ringing with the screams of her children at the theater.

“My queen?” Daegon eyed her curiously. “I don’t quite understand-”

“I intend to lure Elbert away from Heart’s Home. To offer him a prize he wants more than Jon or I. We shall give Elbert the chance to capture reclaim his heir.”

“Give him what?” Her grizzled uncle blinked in disbelief. “Hardyng? Sansa, you can’t be serious.”

But she was. Her face set to stone, betraying none of the turmoil within as she explained to them what Eustace had told her. Of Elbert’s obsession with Harry, of the relentless drive he showed to revenge himself upon the knight.

“On Elbert’s game board, Harry’s the piece that matters.” Sansa said, finding it easier to speak in this manner somehow. “So we shall task Harry to break off from our march and we make sure the smallfolk know it.” She glanced to the desperate lot, her rabble in this game. “Let Elbert find them full of talk of Harry heading north, towards the mountains. Or back the way we came. It matters not, what does matter is Elbert halts his advance to follow.”

“To take our bait.” Brynden spoke in a thoughtful manner. “I’m not sure how much that will help us. Elbert could send merely a token of his men after Harry and still bring most of his army onward.”

“Then we make Harry the threat Elbert fears him to be. Put Harry at the head of the Warrior’s Sons and Poor Fellows. The heir Elbert fears leading an army of the faith he despises so. I believe this king is too consumed by mistrust not to commit himself to chasing down such a force and bringing an end to them.”
“Slaughtering them, you mean.” Daegon’s expression had darkened so that his eyes could almost be called black. “They would stand no chance. Not just in numbers but in leadership. Theodan and his men are fanatics, they put more faith in the gods above than sound tactics. They’ll stop and make a fight of it long before they have to. And Harry… he’s fought well but…”

“He cannot be trusted in this.” Brynden reluctantly finished, holding up a hand when Sansa made to speak. “Do not let his defense of you cloud what Harry truly is. He had the chance to act a hero once before and let women and children be murdered. I do not see him valiantly sacrificing his life to help Jon gain his family’s throne. I imagine he’ll betray the faithful the first chance he gets.”

“You would be right.” Harry’s voice broke in, the knight emerging from behind a wagon, his bandaged arm clutched against his chest, the other arm and hand resting on his sword. “I turned my back on honor as easily as I did my children. Who I am… what I’ve done, I am the kind who would betray strangers to save myself.” His eyes moved to her then. “But I fear my flaws go deeper. That I’m a vengeful man. For what Elbert did to my family… for the murder of Saffron and her boy… give me the chance to hurt him. I beg it of you.”

There was an earnestness in Harry’s words she had heard before. When the Hound asked for the gift of mercy. Robb when he swore before father’s statue and Barristan begging her forgiveness. Jon’s devotion when he spoke of their children.

That threatened to break her resolve in this. For while Harry spoke of dying for his vengeance, she knew Elbert wanted the knight alive as part of his revenge. That thought bid the brand on her back to ache terribly, burning once more.

As cruel as Joffrey was to me, Elbert hates Harry more.


Yet she held her tongue on that, for Harry stood before her, already a willing piece in her strategy. The one piece she needed to safeguard her king.

“Defeat likely awaits you, ser.” She found herself able to say that at least. “I cannot see a chance for escape-”

“I seek none.” Harry became desperate, dropping to a knee before her horse. “At the enclave I pledged my life to see Elbert brought low and by the Warrior I meant it. I will die to see him lose what he cares for.”

“Which is precisely why you cannot lead those men.” Daegon declared bitterly. “You’re little better than Theodan. Your thoughts are for vengeance, not the betterment of the king’s cause. You thirst for battle but the goal is to delay one, to lead these wolves on a long hunt, fruitless hunt for a flock of sheep.”

“Then a proper shepherd is needed.” Sansa felt numb, so great was her shock at the evil her mind could conjure. Yet there it was, clear as day in her mind. The cyvasse board and all its pieces, including two sitting their horses before her.

A cavalryman and a dragon. Both valuable in their own right. Both dear to her.

“What fools were we.” Brynden laughed suddenly, the sound as inappropriate as it was harsh. He was still doing so when he looked to Daegon. “The pair of us, raging at Jon for thinking of sending any other commanders besides us. A waste, we called it. Keep them where they’re needed. We can handle Sansa all by ourselves… bloody fools.”
“I was thinking the same thing.” Daegon closed his eyes and exhaled loudly, confirming that he knew what foulness she considered.

“It’ll be me then.” Her great uncle said as if speaking of who would eat the last of the beets. “Makes sense, I’ve got the most experience. From the Dark Order and before.” He winked at Sansa. “Plus I’m wily to boot. You tell Cat and those little dragons of yours-”

“No, ser. It shall not be you.” Sansa felt a mix of relief and revulsion to set her gaze on the dragon before her. “Lord Blackfyre, I task you… I ask you to lead this chase.”

“What?” Brynden snapped in anger and shock. “Seven hells, don’t let your love for me blind you! I am the best able-”

“Your experience is precisely why I cannot spare you! Somewhere ahead of us the Second Sons might await. Besides Jon, only you know them so well and I’d not endanger our progress any further by choosing the wrong man for each duty.”

“Daegon can handle Mero! Send me, Sansa, by the gods the man’s just had a child! You’re sending him to die.”

She looked deeply into Daegon’s troubled eyes then. “I’m asking him to serve his king. To act my dragon in this. My lord, I will not command it of you. I pray you would not force me to.”

“Niece, see reason-”

“Enough, Blackfish. It’s done.” Daegon ran a hand over the black dragon upon his chest. “For the first time in a hundred years, the Blackfyres have a home. My daughter has a home. I do not forget who gave us that…” He straightened in his saddle, his face set and firm. “We Blackfyres are used to being on the run. I’ll give all I can, Queen Sansa.”

So did Arya and Gendry. Ser Myles as well. And poor Belasso.

After all that loss, it was hard to reconcile the dedication her plot earned from those involved. Ser Theodan and most of his men were content to see themselves as the Andals come again, believing the holy seven hundred they brought with them would have divine protection in the days ahead. Harry was deaf to the protests of the Waynwoods, who urged him to abandon the march entirely. On the other hand Brynden listened quite intently to Daegon before the lord passed off a letter to the knight.

Words meant for his wife, no doubt. A woman’s whose kiss Daegon likely wished to feel instead of the one Sansa bestowed upon his cheek before he rode away.

And so Daegon and Harry would depart. A paltry force following behind as they crossed the path of the begging smallfolk.

The rabble and the dragon, both playing their part. In cyvasse there was no piece to represent the heir that would tempt Elbert into folly. Nor one for the queen who set all this in motion.

For Sansa was no piece in this. She was a player.

One who desperately wished this game to end.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The dying days.

The Broken King

Seldom has a king ever tasted a victory so bitter as the one which brought Aegon III to the throne.

Aegon the Dragonbane, as he would be known, ascended the throne following the Dance of the Dragons, which saw the deaths of his parents, brothers, and his predecessor, Aegon II. Though one of the few Targaryens to survive the civil war, some claimed a part of the king died along with his kin.

The High King inherited an empire bitterly divided, the civil war having left deep scars across his lands and people both. Volantis had been torn apart by destructive riots. Myr, Lys and Tyrosh continued to war against one another, long after peace had officially declared. Norvos had been sacked, the merchant fleet of Pentos lost to sellsails, and the Forest of Qohor still burned from dragons’ flame. Even the mighty Rhoyne was brought to its heels, its towns and ports having been ravaged by armies and dragons both.

Though wishing to heal his tortured lands, the burdens of rebuilding the empire crushed the king. His Council of Heralds filled with schemers and plotters, it took years for Aegon to wrest full control and by then his rule was scorned by many.

Yet by the end of Aegon’s reign, the empire remained united and peace and prosperity had returned. Many credit his younger brother Viserys for this feat.

Few today recall the mercy he showed to former enemies or the justice he gave to corrupt allies. Citizens made slaves during the war were freed. Maesters, learned men from the Sunset Kingdoms, were summoned and consulted for their wisdom.

Aegon is better remembered for his cold manner, how he scorned joyful occasions and locked himself away for days at time to brood. More damning to his legacy, the last dragon would die during his rule.

That Aegon hated the dragons is widely known. Yet most forgot how, in spite of that hatred, the High King sought the help of mages to restore the very creatures which killed much of his family.

Truly, Aegon III was a king defined by the war which won him the throne, and the lasting pain it caused to both him and his realm.
JON

It was a fine spring day, full of warmth and sunlight, with nary a cloud to be seen. Perfect weather for farmers to tend fields or for a father to watch his children frolic about a godswood.

Sadly this war cared little for the wants of smallfolk or parents. Instead this golden day would be wasted on the wrath of kings.

At last, Elbert Arryn had come at him.

Ahead two armies were clashing along a vast stretch of farmland. Whatever crops these fields once boasted were trampled beneath the boots and hooves of rival hordes. Wherever the two sides met, blood flowed, men fell, and banners waved. None more prominent than the blue falcon banners of the Arryns or Jon’s own white dragon, hundreds of which flew beneath the bright midmorning sun.

For hundreds already, this morning’s sunrise was their last, he thought, and the bloodletting has only just started.

Soon the killing would begin in earnest if he had anything to do with it. Jon sat atop Balerion, dressed in armor as black as the warhorse’s ebony coat. While much of his army was already in the field, he held back with the rearguard. A mixed force of riders and foot, ready to pounce should the need arise.

Or an opportunity to present itself.

A glance across the battlefield made him suspect none would come easily. Behind the main enemy advance stood the Arryn reserve. Hundreds of armored riders, including many he knew to be Second Sons. At their heart, well protected and wary, armored in shining steel and wearing a crowned helm was King Elbert Arryn.

Did he sit back and watch the slaughter at Martyrs’ Mill? Or did he pick up a blade to join the killing?

This time the fight comes to him.

“Our Valemen hold.” Ser Justin Massey declared from his saddle, pointing a lobstered gauntlet towards their right. “Fine work. After that charge, the right looked ready to break.”

“My brothers are brave and able.” Ser Donnel Waynwood replied, the knight brushing aside his thick brown hair from his eyes. “They’ve faced their share of heavy cavalry before. We held then too. Not to say it wouldn’t help to reinforce them some…”

“They must make do for now.” He dashed the knight’s hopes, watching as the right did their best to throw back the vicious Arryn assault.

Most of his Vale allies could be found in the right, the Waynwoods united with the likes of the Ruthermon, Hunters, and more. This was only the second time they had fought under his banner. Together they had crushed the Corbrays and Belmores at Heart’s Home, capturing Lord Lyonel Corbray and sacking his castle.

A victory he owed to Sansa and her reinforcements. A deliverance that had doomed others.

When Elbert and his army never arrived at Heart’s Home, it was their first clue that Sansa’s gamble
had worked. In time messengers confirmed that Elbert had indeed interrupted his march to pursue Harry Hardyg. Fouler tidings came from ravens meant for Lord Corbray, their dark words attesting to a grand triumph… for Elbert.

Daegon had done as tasked, using Harry and Ser Theodan’s Faith Militant to lead Elbert on a lengthy chase. One that ended only after the Arryn cavalry trapped the small force along a riverbank. There were differing accounts of the battle but two things were for certain.

Daegon and Harry had made their stand at a mill, and what followed was a massacre. The hundreds of Poor Fellows and Warrior’s Sons who fought with the black dragon were slaughtered to a man. What befell Jon’s friend, none could say. Harry was the only prisoner Elbert felt the need to boast about in his letters.

Now, weeks after the butchery of Martyrs’ Mill, their armies had finally come together. They were only a day’s march from the Eyrie, and even from this distance, he could see the peaks of the Mountains of the Moon. Whether Elbert intended to reach the Eyrie or merely block Jon from doing so mattered not.

*Elbert has given me a chance to end this war, he thought, either by capturing him.*

*Or killing him.*

At that his eyes flicked away from the main battle. Not so far as the hill where Sansa awaited with the baggage train, but to a deep ravine that ran up the edge of the farmlands. Little could be seen of what was within, only that it stretched along the right of both armies.

He had done nothing to draw undo attention to it. With his advantage in bowmen, the battle opened with his archers loosing withering barrages against the Arryns. Eventually Elbert responded, unleashing his heavy horse against the right, where Jon’s Valemen bore the brunt of the attack. Much of the Arryn foot followed after, until Silveraxe Fell brought the center into the fray and Ser Bennard Brune led the riders of the left to swing around to outflank Elbert.

More than an hour of fighting and neither side had made a breakthrough. Ghost, agitated by the smell of blood, paced before his horsemen, the mounts growing as unsettled as their riders.

“The Second Sons haven’t moved.” Ser Mychel Redfort worried aloud. “Elbert’s guard is still too strong. If Ser Bennard thinks to draw them off, he needs to push through.”

“Bennard won’t get around them.” Ser Lothor stated gruffly, the Kingsguard holding his white helm under his arm. “The Moores and Melcolms have stopped him cold. They’re bringing pikemen up to hem them in.”

“Perhaps we try the archers again.” Ser Justin suggested, to Ser Donnel’s outrage.

“Open your eyes! The lines are too close now, any arrow we loose could land on the heads of our men. Or our kin!”

“The king has a strategy and I’m giving him the best counsel to see it through. If some sacrifices must be made—”

“No more sacrifices.” He said, quieting both men. A wave to the waiting Raymund and Benfred brought both squires rushing to him, one carrying his helm, the other a spear. A long ironwood one, of a kind the Dark Order used. Though Dark Sister hung at his belt, the spear would do him well for what was to come.
“Elbert’s reserve is going to stay put until they have reason to move.” He said, donning the helm but keeping his visor up. “The men fight bravely but with what strength the foe has afield, they can do little more. It is our time now.”

“So we’re to charge?” Ser Donnel asked expectantly. “At which point?”

He grabbed the spear from Benfred, using it to point to an area of fighting on the right. “There. The Arryns had to thin their line to keep Silveraxe and Ser Bennard at bay. Hit them there and, gods willing, we might have a chance.”

“Your grace, patience is in order.” Ser Justin offered. “Let the battle run its course for awhile longer. A better opening might reveal itself.”

“Or this one could be lost.” He replied, allowing Raymund to tighten the strap of his shield. “Waiting costs me men, ser. Time is our enemy as much as Elbert. Every moment that passes leaves the Blackfish vulnerable to discovery or worse. Prepare the others. Ready yourselves. We charge.”

Despite his reservations, Ser Justin bent to his will and joined the others to see banners raised and the rearguard ready to charge forth. The plan was equal parts daring and mad, which made sense considering whose it was. Long past, Brynden the Bloodraven had used a similar strategy against Daemon Blackfyre.

Except Bloodraven had the Dark Order to pull it off. Men of discipline, brothers who rode in the shadows together.

*My men are loyal but they cannot compare…*

“King Jon, let us ride with you.” Benfred asked in a pleading tone, the youth joined by Raymund, who gestured to their swords and mail.

“We’re ready. Benfred brought down a foe at Heart’s Home and I drew blood.”

“I remember.” He nodded with respect, while thinking of these two as little more than boys. “That’s why I entrust you both with protecting the queen. Should we fall, it is you who must see Queen Sansa to safety. Go to her now.”

Dejected, the squires did as commanded, passing by Lothor as they left.

“It be smart to stay back.” Lothor said, the grim knight keeping a respectful distance, his gaze moving to Ghost. “Let one of the others lead the charge in. As wary as the beast is acting, I’d still choose your wolf over Massey to do so.”

“You don’t beg the honor for yourself?”

“My place is beside the king.” Lothor touched at his sword. “Or behind him. Better to watch your back.”

If that was meant as a jest, Jon didn’t care for it. Through tragic twists of fate, Ser Lothor was the only Kingsguard left to him here in the Vale after losing Ser Myles and Ser Dontos. Even Daegon, the man who had recommended Lothor, was likely lost. He wished any one of them by his side rather than the Brune knight.

Still he thanked Lothor for his concern and stood ready to lead the charge himself.

The fighting was reaching a fever pitch when his riders formed up. Ser Lothor and Ser Donnel to his
right, Ser Justin and Ser Mychel to his left. Near enough were Ser Gerald Gower, Ser Hubard Rambton and his sons, Ser Herbert Bolling, Ser Desmond Keath and many more. Behind them came ranks of men-at-arms and spearmen.

“Let us end this war!” He shouted, lifting his spear high. “Ride as one! Fight as brothers! We shall meet on the other side!”

“For King Jon!” Ser Desmond bellowed and Ser Mychel took up a cry of his own.

“The white dragon!”

When hundreds shouted for him, only then did Jon lower his visor, not daring a glimpse towards Sansa lest he risk losing his nerve…

“Charge!” He cried out.

The trumpets sounded a second later, quick blasts he barely heard over Balerion’s whinny. The powerful warhorse was already thundering onward, his heavy hooves tearing up the earth below as Ghost raced silently alongside them.

They travelled right at the weak point of the line, his men already there pulling back to let the full force of the charge hit the foe straight on. By then a strong cordon had formed up around him. His knights hit the mass of Lynderly warriors first. The unlucky foes in the front ranks were either ridden over or cut down.

Suddenly Balerion’s hooves were crushing down on men as well as earth. When he came upon a pikeman aiming his weapon up at Ser Luthor, his own spear found its mark, the point skewering the man through his chest.

Ghost took down another in chainmail, Ser Mychel a mounted knight, Ser Luthor more than he could count.

With his spear, he thrust the point down at any who managed to pass by Ghost or his other protectors. This was warfare as he’d learned in the order. Lessons which had not spared Gendry, who now lay at death’s door. The thought of his friend led Jon to slay two more men.

They were pushing forward. Breaking through. His arm ached from the weight of the spear. Sweat trickled down his face, stinging his eyes. The wails of dying men echoed in his helm.

So focused was he on the fight, he nearly missed the warhorns. A sound familiar to him after countless skirmishes against the Seconds Sons. Beyond the battle, King Elbert’s reserve had divided. Hundreds of sellswords and other riders broke away from their king, riding forth to meet them.

Yes. Send them. Send them all.

“My king! They come!” Ser Justin warned, throwing down his broken lance to pull his sword.

Not enough, he lamented, for too many still remained behind. They needed to be drawn into the fight too.

“To me!” Jon shouted to those around him. “Rally to me! We push on! Signal my lords! Forward! Forward all!”

“To the king!” The rallying cry went up. His knights forcing the splintered foes back, forming a steel wall that the foot pushed forward to brace with their numbers.
Those who retreated in panic stumbled right into the path of their own reinforcements. The horde of Second Sons and knights rode right over those poor souls, their lances and spears raised. Any one of them could be his death. He gave a cry to ward that off, savage and defiant. His men did the same, their cries becoming a roar which muted the pounding of the enemy hooves.

Then the charge hit. Nothing could drown out the sounds of crashing steel and screams that followed. He saw Ser Hubard’s head and helm caved in by a war lance before the avalanche surged over the front to reach him.

Three riders came on but when Ghost bounded forward, the leader’s horse spooked. The terrified beast jerked into another mount, one of the men falling while Ghost leapt up at the other.

The knight who made it through had a white winged chalice on his pink tunic and bore a lance aimed right at Jon’s chest. Thankfully the attack came at his shield side, which he raised up in the same movement that he readied his spear.

The enemy lance struck the shield with a glancing blow powerful enough to rattle his bones. His spear did fouler work. The knight’s gorget was either poorly made or fastened, for Jon’s attack found its mark, impaling the man so deeply the spear point came out the back of his neck. There it stayed, for the force of their passing snapped the end of the spear clean off.

He threw the rest away and pulled Dark Sister free, for there was more fight to be had. His men were battling for their lives. Two sellswords battled Ser Donnel, and Ser Gerald had lost his horse, now fighting afoot. Ser Mychel was locked in a vicious duel with a knight wielding a sword clearly made of valyrian steel. As their horses circled, it was also made clear that they knew one another.

“Stand down, Mychel!” The knight demanded, defending with a shield adorned with ravens carrying hearts. “You stand no chance against me!”

“Never, Lyn! You taught me too well and I’m a squire no longer!”

Their words were lost as the fray enveloped him completely. Enemy riders surged by, Ghost and others fighting hard to keep him safe. Some paying for it dearly. He saw Ser Donnel fall, his helm dented and a halberd buried in his shoulder.

His attacker a towering man with a long, red-gold beard. An old enemy.

“Mero!” Jon shouted to the leader of the Second Sons, who drew forth a falchion and pointed it his way.

“Dragon’s Runt!” Mero laughed, riding at him. “Finally! I’ve grown tired of the filth you call warriors! Time for you to face the Titan’s Bastard!”

He rode Balerion ahead to do that very thing. Dark Sister struck first, nearly taking Mero across the face and wiping the smile from his foul face.

“What’s wrong, Mero?” He demanded. “Too accustomed to killing unarmed peasants?”

Mero’s answer came in a powerful hack which Jon struggled to hold off. Dark Sister was the better weapon, yet the falchion wielded properly could do terrible damage to his armor. It was his weak points Mero kept aiming at, trying to cripple him for an easy kill. The bastard went so far as to aim at Balerion’s head, a blow the horse pulled away from only to bite at Mero for the effort. He followed that up with a cut of his own, slashing a line across the sellsword’s chest plate and cutting free a part of his beard. Mero was bellowing in rage when Jon tried to cleave the man’s head. The blow was met, but so late that Dark Sister opened as ugly cut upon Mero’s brow.
The blood pouring forth blinded Mero but before he could finish it, Balerion lifted his hind legs in fury. As Jon struggled to stay in his saddle, he cursed the volatile horse. Until he saw that Balerion was kicking his hooves at Ser Lyn Corbray, who had ridden upon them unnoticed.

When Balerion came down, two blades of valyrian steel met.

“So you’re dragon I was meant to kill.” Ser Lyn growled from behind his helm. “Finally! Lady Forlorn was meant for better than that black pretender.”

The shock of hearing so hit him as fast as Lyn’s next slash, for the knight had all the speed Mero lacked. Two more strikes came after that, one ringing off his helm.

“Not a chance, boy fucker!” Mero warned, trying to work his horse around to Jon’s back. “That reward is mine!”

Whatever gold was promised them, Jon made them work for it. He wheeled Balerion about again and again, the destrier bullying the smaller courser and charger his foes rode. The pace of the fight was terribly quick, his breath coming out as heavy as Balerion’s. Dark Sister went back and forth between them, meeting cuts and jabs, knocking away Lyn’s shield, hitting Mero’s gauntlet and breaking some fingers.

When he caught a low strike from Ser Lyn, Mero took his chance for revenge. Jon barely ducked in time, the falchion delivering a crushing blow to the side of his helm, sending it toppling away. His head ached with a painful ringing as more of the battle was laid bare to him. So when Lyn raised back Lady Forlon for a killing blow, he had the foresight to focus on Mero instead.

He’d let Ghost handle Corbray.

A moment later, the blood stained direwolf bounded at the group, attacking Ser Lyn’s mount with a savage bite to it throat. Twisting in the air, and his powerful jaws holding firm, Ghost brought the horse to the ground screaming. Ser Lyn following after.

“Good!” Mero’s bloodied face twisted in a sneer. “If anyone’s killing a Targaryen, it’ll be me. Gold be damned. The Titan’s Bastard will make the High King weep in grief!”

“I doubt he’d weep.” He shot back, spinning Dark Sister in the air. “And you’ve caused too much grief for too long.”

Dark Sister was moving through the air before his words finished. Mero lurched to knock away the first cut, then the second. The third went to the same side, to his right. But the fourth was a feint, swinging wide so his backstroke would come at Mero’s left, where his vision was blurred by blood.

More blood followed. His blade slicing through Mero’s neck like soft cheese. In shock, Mero tried in vain to close the wound with his hand. His last words coming out as an ugly gurgling.

Followed by a terrible yelp. Ghost had never uttered such a sound before and he jerked about in fear. The direwolf lay on the ground, a deep cut down his side, his snow-white fur painted red.

Ser Lyn had lost his helm, but held his bloody sword before him proudly.

“Ghost!” He cried out, kicking at Balerion to charge at the cruel knight.

Too late did he see the pikeman to his left. The weapon stabbed up at him, missing his face but the curved hook at its end took hold of his shoulder. It wrenched him out of his saddle, and he hit the ground with his arm outstretched. Despite the clatter of his armor, he still heard the snapping of bone.
Steel could not protect him from the pain that followed. His leg and ribs screamed as well, but nothing as bad as his arm.

He rolled upon the damp earth in agony, clutching his broken left arm to him and snatching up Dark Sister with the right.

Through the pain he saw a limping Ser Mychel battling off the pikeman but none others to aid him save Ser Lothor. At first it was a relief to see the knight striding his way. Then Lothor tore his Kingsguard cloak away and raised his sword in threat. As worrying as this was, the Lothor’s eyes made it worse. For within them, Jon found the cold gaze of a killer. A killer coming right at him with his blade at the ready.

A numbing chill took hold of his heart.

Oh, Sansa. We came so far... our children...

Look at them and think of me... not those harsh words I spoke last...

When Lothor was almost on him, he fought through the pain to lean against his broken arm, lifting Dark Sister up in a feeble defense. Lothor took hold of his sword with both hands, readying a blow Jon knew would end him.

Only for the knight to swing over his head, catching Lady Forlorn in mid-air. Ser Lyn stood above him, frozen in the midst of a killing blow. Corbray tried to overpower Lothor, yet the Kingsguard held firm before knocking Ser Lyn away with his shoulder.

Then they danced. The two knights trading blows as Jon struggled to his feet. He was making his way to Ghost when he heard the trumpets blaring.

A shrill rhythm used by the Valemen. A call to defend their king.

He looked to Elbert then and saw the Arryn reserve nearly in a panic. They were moving swiftly to the right, towards the ravine where two hundred Targaryen spearmen had emerged.

These were Jon’s freedmen and veterans from the east. Men like Belasso, who’d climbed into the ravine under the cover of night to await the Blackfish’s command to surprise Elbert. To capture or kill the Falcon King and end the war.

Yet even as the Blackfish’s spear-tipped shieldwall advanced on Elbert, he saw the plan would fail.

They attacked too soon, he realized, we haven’t lured enough of his guards away...

Elbert’s defenders appeared an even match for the Blackfish, and more were on the way. Large parts of the Arryn army were rushing to the defense of their king. An opportunity Jon’s commanders exploited.

Spotting an opening in their lines, Silveraxe Fell drove his men to the right, encircling those attacking the Waynwoods and Hunters. While this unfolded, Benedar’s riders gave chase to those seeking to regroup around Elbert. Fresh from slaying Lyn Corbray, Ser Lothor had snatched up Lady Forlorn and took Jon’s place to lead the rearguard against their confused foes.

Jon witnessed some of this, the rest he was told, Ser Justin and Ser Mychel having forced him from the field long before the battle ended. They managed to get him onto Balerion and Ghost into a cart, Lothor’s discarded cloak pressed against the wolf’s wound.
Slumped over in his saddle, cradling his arm, Jon was forced to watch a large force of enemy riders abandon the fight. Elbert’s royal standard flying above them.

There he goes… look how the falcon flies…

“Jon!”

Sansa’s worried voice reached his ears only a few moments before her party reined up before him. She came at the head of two score men, Raymund and Benfred flanking her to either side. Filthy as he was, barely able to sit a horse, he felt less a king whereas Sansa looked every bit a queen. Sitting with perfect posture atop her white palfrey, his wife wore a handsome gown of green and gold, her auburn hair kept up in a double braid and encircled by a gleaming crown.

The only thing he disdained in her appearance was the pain and fear etched across her face.

“Jon, you’re hurt!” She came close enough to reach out and cup his cheek. Her hand stroked him gently before she turned to the rest. “The king needs a healer at once! Help him into this cart so he can rest.”

“The cart is in use.” He grunted, looking down at the ailing form of Ghost.

Sansa gasped at the sight. “How bad is he?”

“Far worse than me. The healer tends Ghost first, then Ser Mychel.”

“I am fine, you grace.” The knight lied, for all saw how badly the wound to his leg was bleeding.

“The healers see them first. That’s a command. One I want followed, unlike the ones I gave the Blackfish. Have him brought to me at once to answer for that.”

“I’m sure uncle Brynden had his reasons.” Sansa spoke softly, eyeing his arm with worry. “That needs to be set. The king’s health should come first.”

“Enough, Sansa!” He barked yet felt terrible to see Sansa jerk back in hurt. A short time ago he had been terrified of losing her, only to end up snapping at her now. “Just… please, help me on to camp. Let me hear what cost us Elbert and then I’ll do as you ask. I promise.”

She stayed silent, yet nodded in agreement. Truly he wanted nothing more for her to tend him right now, to feel her loving caresses ease away his hurts. Yet so how much had been sacrificed to give them the opportunity to stop Elbert in this battle, he felt they both deserved answers.

Not long after, he would have them.

The Blackfish and Ser Lothor found them in his pavilion, where Sansa alone waited with him, wiping at his face with a clean cloth and cool water. The two knights looked in need of a wash themselves, both sweat-stained and spattered with gore. When both men knelt before him, he saw that Ser Lothor carried a sheathed Lady Forlorn in his grasp.

“My king, Elbert’s army is broken.” Ser Brynden said from his knee. “He’s riding hard for the Gates of the Moon. With fresh horses there’s a chance we can overtake him before-”

“A chance.” He repeated, gritting his teeth against his pain and anger. “There should be no need for a chase. Elbert should be my prisoner or slain. Not on the run. You knew your orders, ser. How could you fail me so?”
“Blame this bloody thing.” The Blackfish reached into a satchel and pulled forth a Myrish eye from their Dark Order days. “I was watching the battle, saw your men faltering. When you went down… well I made a choice.”

“I did not send you into that ravine to make choices! I trusted you to end the war!”

“Then I accept failure for that. Any who die because of it, that’s on me too. To save the life of the finest king I’ve ever known, those are burdens I will gladly bear.”

He glared at the Blackfish, torn between feeling disappointed in the old knight and being touched by his words. Tapping the arm of his chair, he bid both to rise before gesturing to Sansa.

“My desire to punish you is not as strong as it could be, since I imagine my wife is pleased by your actions. She puts my well-being above most things.”

Though kindly meant, Sansa flinched at his words.

“I’d not deny being grateful.” She said. “Uncle Brynden did what he thought was best and you are returned to us. Hurt, but alive.” Sansa looked to Ser Lothor then. “A better fate than Lyn Corbray would have served him, if not for our lone Kingsguard. I owe you my heartfelt thanks, ser. Where is your white cloak? You surely earned it today.”

“Forgive me, but I had to cut it off.” Ser Lothor replied. “I couldn’t take the chance of it getting in the way. I’d seen Corbray fight before, he is a skilled killer.”

“He was.” He corrected, nodding with respect to the knight. “You saved my life, ser. Ask a boon of me, and it is yours.”

“I did the duty I swore to.” Lothor stepped forward, offering up Lady Forlorn to him. “Here is the blade the foe raised against my king, it is his to do with as he pleases.”

“No.” He nearly recoiled at the thought of taking the sword, remembering Lyn’s claims about Daegon. “No… that’s your prize. You may have sworn never to take a wife but feel free to take Lady Forlorn.” With that, he turned to the Blackfish. “And you. Get your fresh horses, assemble as many men as you can. I doubt you’ll succeed, but do your best to catch Elbert before he reaches safety. We will follow as swiftly as we can.”

Sansa must have had the healers waiting without, for the moment the knights departed, he was swarmed with minders. They splinted his arm, bandaged his aching side, and had him drink a warm tea mixed with milk of the poppy. None of that eased his mind like hearing how Ghost fared.

“The royal beast will likely live.” The lead healer seemed put out to having tended Ghost at all. “We have stopped the bleeding, though we had to put the wolf to sleep to stitch it properly. It would not stay still otherwise.”

“He has learned bad habits from others.” Sansa suggested and he accepted the charge.

Though he fought her insistence that he sleep, allowing Sansa merely to help him lay his weary body on the bed for a short while. It felt better than he wished to admit and blamed the milk of the poppy, which sent a welcoming warmth through him.

“Take heart, Jon.” Sansa sat at the edge of the bed, stroking his hair. “Today was not the victory we hoped for, but a victory all the same. After this battle, Elbert’s strength is a shadow of what it was.”

“More than enough if he reaches the Eyrie.” He sighed, staring up at her hair and running his fingers
through it. “I’d feel better if our reinforcements from Gulltown were already here.”

“Well, Lord Fell says we captured several lords and knights of note. Some might be won over, their strength added to ours.” She paused then, wringing her hands some. “Perhaps some would know of what prisoners Elbert keeps. Whether he holds Daegon or not?”

“Daegon’s dead.” He said without much grief, the warmth pushed it all away. “Lyn said he killed him.” When Sansa started, he patted her hand. “It’s not a surprise, not really. Remember what I told you, there wasn’t much hope with all the others dead. You were right, Elbert wanted Harry... only Harry.”

Sansa stared at him strangely, her eyes glistening and mouth agape.

“No.” He made a soothing sound at the blurry vision of his wife. “You didn’t kill anyone. Elbert did. And I don’t hate you, Sansa... I love you so much... it just hurt to know you gave such an order.”

“I did it for you.” She wept. “For us and the children... oh gods, Daegon’s wife and daughter.”

Whatever pain she felt was beyond him now. His aches were forgotten, the loss of Daegon mingling in with the mist clouding his mind. He didn’t want to watch Sansa cry, he wanted to sleep, so he shut his eyes. Yet he could hear her still.

“Don’t cry, Sansa. It was a good plan.” He told her, feeling no fear of being honest anymore. “I did the same in the Dark Order a few times. Using men as bait... the guilt was always terrible... but somehow this is worse.”

“Worse? Why? Because of Daegon’s family?”

“No, because I thought you were better than me.”

Her soft weeping stopped then and Jon let the black take hold of him.

And he slept soundly.

**LYANNA**

She-wolf of Winterfell. Rebellious slave. High Queen of the Targaryen Empire.

Her life had never followed a clear path, the fates obscuring it like winter snows.

Yet Lyanna felt anything but lost now. Her place was here, sitting in her son’s tall, ironwood throne, holding court in his newly finished throne room. Though the hall was long and spacious, there was much work to be done still. A roof over their heads was a good start but they were missing the grandeur befitting a king. She had made arrangements to rectify that and soon new glass windows from Myr and some Lyseni tapestries would arrive.

*And I must send to Qohor, for a metalworker, to build Jon a proper throne.*

*Not gold, it's too gaudy. Something stronger. Perhaps steel... or iron.*
At the moment though, she was quite content with this throne. Were it any taller, she would not be so close to the Dragons Darling, who sat to either side of her upon small seats of their own. To her, it was important for Aemma and Rhaegina to learn how a kingdom was ruled. While little Aenry was too young for such lessons, the twins were ready, no matter Lord Connington and Septon Tom’s reservations.

Sansa had certainly taught them well. The twins sat with proper grace, their backs straight and chins held high. Both wore gowns of azure and cream, nearly identical to her own. Where they differed was how each princess regarded their visitors. Rhaegina’s purple eyes flicked about boldly, just as Brandon’s had when he sized up challengers in the yard. Aemma took everything in more leisurely, with soft eyes of blue, winning smiles from any she gazed upon.

Their first petitioner among them. Dark of skin and dressed in eastern finery, his silver-white hair was tied back in braids and his eyes were the color of orchids.

“Presenting Baleron Otherys!” The court steward declared. “Son of Balarr Otherys and Xatana Qo, Princess of the Summer Isles—”

“Of the Sweet Lotus Vale to be precise.” She interrupted, looking to her granddaughters. “Not the Red Lotus Vale. I made that mistake once.”

“And my mother never let you forget it.” Baleron replied in High Valyrian. “Father forever lamented the day his wife corrected the High Queen.”

“I earned that chastisement. Xatana more than made it up to me with those pleasure trips on her swan ship. I was sorry to hear of her passing, Baleron.”

“We buried her in Selhorys, as she wanted. She loved her homeland, but in death she would rest where she built life.”

“How lovely.” Aemma spoke up and Rhaegina nodded.

“She sounds like our parents. They travelled from far away lands too.”

“And built our home here.” Aemma finished.

“Your High Valyrian is impeccable, princesses.” Baleron spoke the Common Tongue with only a sprinkle of accent, giving Lyanna a teasing look. “A difficult language, some have a harder time learning than others.”

“Well your Common Tongue is well done… my lord?” Rhaegina questioned and Aemma shared her confusion.

“Or is it your grace? Your mother was a princess.”

“You might name this man cousin.” She said. “For Baleron is descended from the line of a High King.”

The girls were enraptured to hear that Targaryen blood ran through Baleron’s veins. Unlike the Blackfyres, Aegon the Unworthy’s bastards by Bellegere Otherys had stayed loyal to the empire. Their family flourished along the Rhoyne, especially at Selhorys, where Baleron had served as Keeper of the Harbor and an ally of hers.

Baleron’s arrival was a bright spot in a gloomy time and she would make the best of it.
“Our friend of Otherys has come to serve your father.” She explained to the girls. “When the king won Tumbleton, he gained a market town on the Mander. A place of great promise. Should the right people guide its rise, Aevalon would become all the wealthier. Baleron oversaw the harbors of Selhorys for…was it ten years?”

“Eleven. My daughter had just been born.” He answered. “Selhorys was the only home Belladona ever knew, and I nearly shared her tears when we sailed away.”

Forced to leave your home, I know the feeling well, she thought.

“How sad.” Aemma said. “We can show her the castle if you would like.”

Rhaegina smiled brightly. “Or take her sailing up the Blackwater! If your daughter cannot have the Rhoyne, our river might do.”

She and Baleron laughed at that, for nothing here in the Seven Kingdoms could match the mighty Rhoyne. The Mander would have to do though, now that Aegon had seen Baleron stripped of his position. The head of House Otherys had received lands to look the other way, so Baleron and his family had few places to turn.

His poor fortunes working to Jon’s benefit. Beyond Baleron’s expertise with river ports, he brought a household worthy of a lord, including a hundred veteran warriors and bowmen. In Selhorys he had married well to Korra of Tyrosh, whose family was as rich in gold as they were in Valyrian bloodlines.

Which was enough to convince Jon’s council into allowing Baleron the rights to establish a proper port at Tumbleton. Winning Maester Samwell and Lord Connington over had been the true test, this petition merely a show for court.

One her granddaughters excelled at, for it was they who bestowed Baleron his license.

“We hope you will prosper in our father’s kingdom.” Rhaegina held out her hand for Baleron to kiss, Aemma doing the same.

“And wish the blessings of the seven upon you and your family.” Aemma said with a curtsy. “Please stay as our guest until you are ready to depart.”

Rhaegina smiled. “So we can meet your daughter! Then perhaps we could all help improve grandmother’s Valyrian.”

“Thank you girls.” She sighed. “Quite charming.”

They could find fine matches back in the empire, she thought, men of power and influence.

Allies we may need... should Aegon ever ascend the throne.

She knew Qohor and Norvos both held Jon to great esteem, as did the magisters of Pentos. They remembered which dragon fought for them in their hours of need. While Volantis and the Three Daughters would be for Aegon, the might of the Rhoyne could still be won over. Some towns along that river would be considered cities here in Westeros. Volon Therys, Selhorys, Valysar…

And we have potential friends in Valysar, though that can only be brought up at the right time.

I cannot risk angering Sansa with a mislaid mention of Daenerys or Baelyon.
While the doubt over Baelyon’s parentage lingered in the empire, she had not heard a whisper of him in Aevalon. If any future alliances were to be made, they had to be broached delicately. Just as she had to handed their next petitioner.

“Presenting Ser Petyr Baelish! High Steward of Duskendale and envoy of the Merchant’s League!”

The short man came forward grinning, perhaps even smirking. His smile was clearly false to her eyes, yet the twins appeared genuinely pleased to see him.

“Ser Baelish, we received your gifts!” Aemma shared a knowing look with Rhaegina.

“They were very handsome. We thank you with all our hearts.” Rhaegina added.

“It was my utmost pleasure.” Baelish swept low into a bow, his eyes never leaving the girls. “I struggled to find anything worthy of your beauty or majesty.” He rose stroking his pointed beard. “And speaking of majesties, High Queen Lyanna, I return with news. All you asked of me has been accomplished. I convinced the Merchants League of Duskendale to accept your conditions for developing Tumbleton.”

“Marvelous work, ser.” She said with a careful smile. “You have proven yourself useful far beyond my hopes. It’s little wonder Lady Lysa has come to depend on you so much.”

“A widow in a poor way.” He rose, a hand to his chest. “The suffering of women has always weighed terribly on my heart. By mending the rift between Duskendale and Aevalon, I hope to ease the burdens of two noble ladies.”

“You surely have. Just as you saved Princess Arya from treachery, you spared Jon’s kingdom from terrible unrest in our hour of need.”

A grumble went through the assembled courtiers, some clearly disagreeing with the praise given to this foreign merchant. Since Jon and Sansa’s departure, Petyr Baelish’s rise had been spectacular to witness. His charming of Lysa Darklyn led to lucrative positions in Duskendale, and his ear for gossip did even more. Were it not for Petyr Baelish, Arya might be lost to them.

Following Gendry’s fall and Arya being struck by a poisoned bolt, it was expected that both would be returned to Aevalon. Yet only Gendry had arrived. Despite his dire injuries, they soon learned that Arya was the one truly in danger. After brutally sacking Gulltown, Ser Ronnet Connington and others thought to exploit the power they held over the city and Arya’s person to strangle new lands and rights from Jon. Unfortunately for the traitors, Ser Andrew Estermont had taken a bedwarmer beholden to Baelish.

After he uncovered the plot to the court, she dispatched Ser Barristan and a company of loyal men to Gulltown. The Kingsguard, backed by the fleet and their Vale allies, swiftly took charge of the army, quietly arresting the traitors and rescuing Arya.

And for his part, Petyr Baelish had earned a knighthood. Though the man made her skin crawl, it had been a small price to pay for the man who had saved her niece. More importantly, Baelish was known for taking any venture and making it prosper.

So I must smile. Keep smiling.

To do what I must with this man.

“It is a hard thing for me to admit when I’m wrong.” Her voice rose over the naysayers. “Yet I was woefully mistaken in doubting you, Petyr Baelish. These last few months, you have proven yourself
a valuable friend and a better ally.”

“Anything to make up for my terrible first impression.” He quipped, earning laughter.

“Well you have impressed.” She waved at a steward, who carried a roll of parchment to Baelish. “In winning the Merchant League over, the king’s council has decreed that you shall take charge of the royal enterprise at Tumbleton. With you and Baleron Otherys hard at work, Tumbleton is sure to thrive.”

“Your grace, I don’t know what to say.” Baelish lied, for all of this had been previously decided. “I’m humbled to have the king’s trust.”

She let the mummerry continue, knowing full well this was just a stepping stone for Baelish before he made a play for lordship of Tumbleton. Another upward movement to his goal, whatever that was.

“There’s more.” Lyanna bid yet another man to step forward, this time one of Jon’s treasurers. “To do all that Jon requires, I present you with a note of credit from my own wealth. Spend it wisely ser. I am placing great trust in you.”

Baelish was truly surprised then, as were many others. She ignored the gossip that went through the court, yet not the twins’ attempt to invite Baelish to an upcoming feast.

“I’m afraid Ser Petyr must make haste.” She explained quickly to her granddaughters and Baelish at once. “When Baleron arrives with his wife and children at Tumbleton, I expect him to find the town well in hand.”

“That- that he will.” Baelish replied, obviously hungry for the chance to steal any advantage away from Baleron. “I’ll leave this very night.”

“Good travels, ser.” Lyanna found the grace to hold out her hand for him to kiss.

He found a way to kiss around the large ring Rhaegar had given her, his lips pressing against her skin. It bothered her more when he did the same to the twins. She nearly lost her composure to watch how his hand lingered on Aemma’s longer than it should, a finger caressing the underside of the girl’s palm.

This did not go unnoticed by her guards. Tumco might have torn Baelish away if not for Ethan, who grabbed at his comrade’s wrist and held him back. More worrying was how Ser Arthur witnessed all of this. Baelish’s touches, her Highguard’s hesitation, how Lyanna stomached it all.

He’ll explain it away. Arthur knows I’ve endured worse than unwanted touching.

That I’ve watched worse befall my family.

Years ago, Arthur had been by Rhaegar’s side when their vessel came upon her slave ship. She remembered standing tall against them, half-starved and with a sword in her hands. Ready to die rather than submit herself to another lash of a whip.

Or the rape that always followed.

When the slaver captain Davees first forced himself on her, she regretted not dying with Brandon. Feeling a fool for ever wishing a different fate than Robert Durrandon. That was what made the slavers tortured so cruel, it caused her to feel guilt for all that befell her.

One night she came close to jumping into the sea to end it all. Until she remembered how they had
done the same to Brandon, throwing him overboard like so much trash.

*He was a Stark of Winterfell,* she had thought whilst stared into the sea, *he was meant to be buried in the crypts with our forebears.*

*He was a winter wolf… and so am I.*

That was the moment she decided, if any more were to end up dead, it would be those who’d earned it. Justice she would meet out herself. With false smiles and caresses, the slavers slowly saw her as a pet rather than a wolf. Soon growing content to keep Ethan and the others chained while leaving her free. They thought the men were the only threat. Even when Davees and his surviving crew were at her mercy, bound in the very chains she’d freed the others from, they still looked to the men in fear. She made sure they learned their mistake soon after.

Sometimes when Lyanna doubted herself, she remembered their screams. The cries of those who’d used her, hurt her, stolen from her. A terrible music that touched her in a way that Rhaegar’s harp never could.

*Father held justice to be about honor. He would never accepted my brand of it.*

*Nor would he accept me, not after what the slavers did…. He always said a tarnished woman was a blight on a family’s name.*

Now all knew Lyanna’s name. Adjusting her crown, she hoped the slavers could see her from whatever hell they burned in. Her departed parents and brothers too, so that in their rest, they might understand all she had done. Perhaps even be proud of her.

She certainly took pride in Jon’s daughters. Long after Baelish left, the girls stayed with her to hold court. They handled themselves well, listening intently to petitions, asking questions on subjects they could not grasp, looking to her for answers. Rhaegina and Aemma showed such charm that those who left disappointed were hard pressed to show it.

After the session ended, she sent the girls along to their septa, so only Tumco and Arthur followed on her errands. She checked on Vaelena, smoothing the babe’s tuft of silver-blonde hair as she rested. Then they sought Aenry and Lyonel out. The boys were a real worry. With his parents ailing, Lyonel spent many a night curled up in bed with Nymeria, weeping into the direwolf’s fur. None of this was lost on Aenry, who constantly fretted after his own parents. He went so far as to tear a rare book apart when denied word of them.

So it was a welcome sight to finds the boys together, the pair distracted from their woes by Maester Samwell. Both acted enthralled by the maester’s animated telling of Lann the Clever.

“Wits, young masters.” Samwell tapped his head. “Lann lacked for men and swords, yet his sharp mind won him the gold of Casterly Rock. Not all great men have been the noblest of blood or the mightiest of warriors. Remember your wits. Should you ever lack strength, your wits will carry you through.”

She and her companions did not linger long, though the maester’s words stuck with her as they walked the corridors.

“Jon was taught much the same.” Lyanna said. “It’s good to see the boys learning more than swordplay. Don’t you think so Tum? Arthur?”

“In the pits I was taught nothing but killing.” Tum replied. “I always hoped for more. Everything I’ve learned since, it’s made me a good man, I think.”
“I doubt you were ever anything else.” She smiled while Ser Arthur frowned.

“To be good is a different measure. Greatness demands many qualities of a man. To be strong and wise, firm yet merciful, ambitious but cautious. Contradictions, more often than not. No king can be perfect, my queen.”

“Any who expects that is a fool.” Lyanna met the knight’s gaze. “Do I look a fool?”

“I see a High Queen far from her empire. Far from where she belongs.”

She paused at that, wheeling to face the older Highguard, who remained handsome and powerful despite the passing of time.

“Tum, go ahead to the sick chambers. I will be there shortly.” She commanded. The moment the younger Highguard turned the corner and was out of sight, she snapped.

“Too bold, ser!” Her words were quiet but quick. “If I did not let the High King tell me my place, what makes you think I would abide you doing the same?”

“Because I do so not as a husband, but as a friend.” Arthur replied, running a hand through his long hair. “Rhaegar writes to me as well. Though he might not have said so to you, he needs us Lyanna. The empire is in peril.”

“So are Jon and his kingdom. A situation Rhaegar helped create and I will help right. Do not think me cold to his plight. If the High King is in need, I implore you to go to him.”

“Only if you come with me.” Arthur pressed. “Please Lya. With all his burdens, think of how unfair you’re being. If you would only hear Rhaegar—”

“The song became a tired one.” She forced the memory away. “Bewitching to a young girl’s ears, but I’m a woman now and Rhaegar’s charms cannot disguise his faults. Elia warned me that this would happen.”

Arthur started at that. “High Queen Elia loved Rhaegar! Her loyalty to him was second only to her children.”

“And what loyalty did he show her? Elia, a woman of grace and compassion if there ever was one. She told me Rhaegar dreams of a world yet to be, and that she was once a part of that dream. ‘Rhaegar thinks so much on that world, he forgets those he uses to build it.’” Lyanna felt the old shame return at her friend’s memory. “I thought her only jealous... gods was I blind.”

“Rhaegar has not forgotten you.” Arthur urged. “Nor Jon, or any of his family. Think on his letters and try to say differently.”

_The only letter I’ve been thinking on came from Sarella Sand._

_Another Dornish lady whose wisdom saves me from folly._

None of this was shared with Arthur, for she had quite enough of his pleading. More importantly, he could not take part in what she had planned for later. So she left him behind, reuniting with Tum to
visit with Gendry and Arya as she often did.

Not that it could be accounted much of a visit, for neither were in any state to speak. Gendry lay heavily bandaged and splinted to one side of the room, Arya to the other, her chest bound and darkened with sweat and foul humors. Her niece remained in a feverish state as she battled off the poison, a terrible struggle that Maester Samwell did all he could to aid. At least with Gendry, the milk of the poppy spared him some agony, leaving him in a fitful slumber.

When she kissed his cool and clammy brow, her stomach tightened.

_Blood and birth aside, Gendry is a son to me. Look at what they’ve done to him._

_Let Jon will avenge him in the Vale… I’ll protect them both from here._

A cold feeling crept into her heart and stayed long after darkness fell and the candles grew dim. Tum’s eyelids were growing heavy when a servant knocked lightly upon the door, inquiring if the High Queen still desired quail’s eggs for her morning meal.

_That’s the signal. He’s returned._

Her journey went largely unnoticed. After lying to Tum about seeking her bed, she slipped away from her chambers in a servant’s cloak. With such simple garb and no Highguard following her about, few paid Lyanna much mind. She went alone down the winding staircase to the deepest of the castle cellars. These were the damp and dark regions of the Red Keep that doubled as a secret dungeon, known only to a few. Which was why she had chosen it for tonight’s foul work.

At the bottom of the stairs she found a corridor with only one flickering torch. Through the shadows she found her way to a heavy wooden door barred with iron. Three quick raps against it and a moment later the door was pulled open and she entered.

Inside was a small room of stonewalls and an earthen floor, empty save for two men. The prisoner was naked and hanging from the ceiling, the chains stretched his arms taut and his feet dangled above the floor. His body marked by ugly wounds, dripping blood down onto the filthy rushes below.

Ethan strode about, bare from the waist up, his chest and its thick curls of hair matted with sweat and blood. He lifted a ladle of water out of a bucket, pouring it over his sweaty face and demon brand.

“All went well.” Ethan explained as she shut the door. “The ambush and the too. His guards went into the Blackwater with no faces to speak of. The men Baleron lent us, they’ll stay quiet. They never even asked the name of our quarry.”

“Who…?” The prisoner became aware of her presence, his voice rattling with his chains. “You… why are you doing this?”

“Your grace.” She said, removing her cloak and resting it on the floor. “I have earned that much. Just as you have earned your place here, Petyr Baelish.”

Baelish jerked at his chains. “I have a pardon from the High King himself and Lady Darklyn’s protection. This is a crime, your grace.”

“That it is, yet here we are.”

Baelish blinked in either confusion or fear, it was hard to tell with his eyes darting about. Seeking an escape like a trapped rat. He flinched as Ethan drew close, planting a stool in front of the man. As
she sat, her own gaze moved to how the manacles dug into his wrists, dripping blood down his arms.

“Is this your first time feeling the gentle caress of a chain?” Lyanna asked, smoothing her skirts. “I have no doubt you’ve placed them on the girls you use to line your pockets.”

“I… no… is that what this is about?” Baelish asked. “My girls are courtesans, well-trained and better cared for-”

“Some are. Not all. I know much and more about your business dealings than I care to. Varys was quite eager to share them with me. Do you really keep a standing order at the Lyseni flesh markets?”

“The spider cannot be trusted!” Baelish shouted before trying to regain his composure. “Yes, I’ve conducted trade in the empire but his webs extend into darker corners-”

“I despise slavers.” She spoke honestly. “For so many years I had to abide them in Rhaegar’s court. Attending our balls, sharing our meals, all so they could go home drunk and happy, free to peddle flesh again come morning.” Her hand gestured to Ethan. “My dear friend learned torture at slavers’ hands. He did not bend easily to their uses. Neither did I.”

“I am no slaver!” Baelish kicked feebly in the air. “I brought you what you asked of me! I delivered your merchants and saved Arya Stark! I shared all I knew of Aegon’s movements! I help your son!”

The man lied well. If she did not know better, the sincerity in his voice might have given her pause. He would have to be shown the punishment for lying. With a nod, her friend grabbed a thick leather belt, unrolling it upon the ground to display several tools. Knives of all sizes, a hammer, a chisel, a pick, and more. Ethan ran his hand down them carefully, eventually stopping at the hammer with a dark look in his eyes chilling even to her.

“What pain you’ve endured, it is nothing.” Lyanna explained to Baelish. “Ethan was under orders not to truly begin before my arrival. I wanted you to have your wits when I told you that I know. I know.”

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“Know what?”

“You said Aegon sought you out in Gulltown, that Elbert Arryn had lured you there. Yet that was not your first time here in the Seven Kingdoms, was it?”

Baelish swallowed. “I’ve worked on both sides of the Narrow Sea for years.”

“For Targaryens?” She pulled a parchment free from her bodice. “This came to me from Sarella Sand. The lady tracked one of Benjen’s assassins all the way to Dorne... uncovering some sad truths there.”

Truths that the Martells had kept quiet. Jon’s war with the Reach had begun when some had claimed that eastern freedmen were raiding Gardener lands. Here at Aevalon such talk was dismissed while in Dorne none dared speak the truth. For those claims were true. Bands of eastern warriors had indeed raided into the Reach.

At the behest of Viserys.

Apparently her goodbrother had been chafing under Prince Doran’s thumb for these past years. Growing jealous of Jon’s power in Westeros and denied men by Princess Arianne, Viserys went behind his wife’s back to hire warriors from the empire and find conquests for himself. Prince Doran put a stop to his goodson's actions as soon as he found out, but by then Jon had already joined them in war. Unwilling to air his family’s unrest to the realms, nor risk their alliance, Doran kept all of this
quiet.

Until Sarella revealed that one of Viserys’s men had been the one to assassinate Benjen.

“Doran’s a cautious man. If Viserys was part of the plot against Jon, he would not risk Dorne to protect him, marriage aside.” She folded the parchment. “Nor was Viserys willing to be condemned of a crime he did not commit.”

“Lies.” Baelish had the gall to smile a bit at that. “Even I have heard of how Viserys threatened King Jon and slandered your noble highness.”

“Viserys is all bluster and snide remarks. Beyond that, he’s an incompetent at best and a fool at worst. It seems his grand plan for glory was not even his own. Like his men, it was supplied by another, planted in his ear by a whore. One who vanished along with the assassin.”

“I am not the only man in the Sunset Kingdoms who procures whores for hightborn men!” Baelish shouted before regaining his composure. “Besides, even if it wasn't Viserys, then the culprit was clearly the Vale.”

“Yes, Elbert Arryn, the great fiend.” She said with a sigh. “Tell me, what sort of villain pays assassins to kill his rivals using his own minted gold, then goes on to deny ever doing such? How much Arryn gold did you hoard during your stay in the Vale? How many wars has Jon been drawn into since you came across the Narrow Sea? Lord Darklyn's death was fortuitous for you, coming so soon after he declared his intent to oust you from Duskendale.”

“This is no evidence… no evidence, for I’ve committed no crimes.” Baelish protested. “Queen Lyanna, please. I’m a victim of foul coincidence.”

“No, it’s you who leave victims in your wake. I tire of your foul plots and false smiles. Jon and Sansa war against Elbert Arryn, thinking their cause righteous, but it’s all a lie. Cooked up in a brothel by you.” She leaned close then. “Or was it Aegon?”

Though none of what she said could condemn him outright, Lyanna had been certain of his guilt since Sarella’s letter. After the Sand Snake drew the first connection, all the pieces began to fall into place. This man hid the worst of his treachery behind treacheries he was willing to admit. He admitted to spying for Aegon to throw them off his scent, making sure to implicate Elbert Arryn instead.

The only thing she was unsure of was where Baelish’s ambition ended, and Aegon’s complicity began?

“Your grace, these claims are baseless and false. I am not this villain, just a humble servant. A knight pledged to you… to your family. I saved your niece, did I not?”

“That you did, ser.” Lyanna nodded before giving him a cold stare. “But a good deed does not wash out the bad. Arya was only in peril because of a war you started. You are a knight now, but you have always been a fiend, a liar, and a murderer.”

He continued his denials. His pleas and attempts to mislead her continued but soon Lyanna stopped listening. When she rose and stepped away, Ethan knew what to do, her friend coming forth to take her place, hammer in hand. With one powerful hand he grabbed hold of Baelish’s leg, steadying it as he raised the hammer. The first strike produced a sickening crunch and a loud cry, the knee exploding like a rotted grapefruit. The second drew a wail from Baelish so terrible it hurt her ears.

He was still cursing and weeping when Ethan backed away, quieting only when Lyanna slapped
him soundly across his damp face.

“Tell me why.” She demanded. “Was this for your own ambition or more?”

“Innocent… please, I’ve done nothing-”

“Ethan, you may begin again. The other knee this time.”

“No! No!” Baelish shook and trembled. “No more! Keep him away!” He eyes were glassy and wild, yet she caught the defeat which clouded them. “The Highlands… Dorne… they were growing too powerful. Challenges to the heir’s rise… he wanted them weakened. His brother most of all…”

“And who ordered the assassination?”

“Who?” The cloud cleared some. “Aegon of course… I was but a pawn. Helpless against his will, his bloodlust to see Prince Aenry dead. He is jealous that he does not have a son of his own blood and it curses his heart into dark action.”

“Interesting.” She took hold of his pointed beard, making sure that Baelish met her gaze. “For you see, I was there when Aegon learned of the murders in the theatre. As was my friend. Ethan, tell our guest what you witnessed.”

“The heir was shocked to hear of it.” Ethan spoke gruffly, wiping at the hammer with a cloth. “Genuine to my eye. He looked pale and sickened when he heard that Aenry was the likely target.”

“That was my estimation as well.” Her lips curled back in a snarl. “So I think you lie to me still Petyr Baelish. Even now, I think you try and use me. I will never be used again.”

“I’m not! It was Aegon-”

“To a point, perhaps. I can believe that. He is jealous as you say, and petty. But ordering Aenry’s death? No. For all his faults, Aegon knows the importance of blood. No Petyr Baelish, I lay that crime at your feet. You had Lord Darklyn targeted to serve your own ends, so why not my grandson as well?”

Baelish sputtered denials but there was no use. His role in these foul matters was now confirmed, she expected they would get little more truth out of him. Besides, the details of the conspiracy meant little, only that Aegon had played a role in unleashing this man upon them. That Rhaegar had unwittingly aided him.

“High Queen, I can be of use to you.” Baelish argued. “Your enemies, their secrets and weaknesses, let me flush them out. We can expose Aegon together.”

“I’m afraid that will have to wait.” She said. “To reveal Aegon and your evils now would undermine the justness of Jon’s cause in the Vale. He would go from being a righteous king avenging great wrongs, to a tyrant perpetrating them.” She took a cloth from Ethan, wiping Baelish’s sweat and blood from her hand. “My son is a good man. An honorable man. I want him and the Seven Kingdoms to believe that. To see that come to pass, I will accept this lie. Just as the realm will accept your disappearance.”

The court had witnessed Baelish leaving the Red Keep with her coin, yet none would see Ethan smuggling him back. A key part of avoiding trouble with Rhaegar or Lady Darklyn.

“Most already think you a foul sort.” Lyanna reached down to select a large, cruel knife from the belt. “A whoremonger running off with the wealth entrusted to him? I half believe it myself. Here,
Ethan.”

He took the knife, sliding a finger down its sharpened edge, drawing some blood.

“A good choice.” He asked, crinkling his face in disgust as Baelish pissed himself. “You’ll want to go now, Lya. Benjen was my friend too. So I’m going to cut his name into this filth's chest”

“Don’t taint Benjen’s memory with such barbarity. You will do this for me.” She put a hand on his shoulder, her grip hard enough to make him frown. “And I want this man torn to pieces. A death by a thousand cuts. The same fate he intended for my son’s kingdom.”

“Would you prefer I start anywhere in particular?”

Lyanna looked back at Baelish then, naked and mewling. A far cry from the bold man who’d taken great liberties back in the throne room.

Remembering how his touch lingered on sweet Aemma.

“Why not the little finger?”

**SANSA**

The Gates of the Moon was a stout castle. Its towers square, the moat deep and walls thick. Nestled against the base of the Giant’s Lance, the castle guarded the way up to the Eyrie.

Yet no longer.

“The Gates have fallen.” Lady Anya Waynwood declared, from her place beside Sansa. The pair and their guards stood far behind the siege lines, where they’d witnessed the final assault against the castle.

“It’s at an end.” Ser Lothor agreed, a hand on Lady Forlorn’s pommel, his thumb caressing its heart shaped ruby restlessly. The knight had wanted to be a part of this fight, as brutal as it was.

Fires still burned along the castle’s ramparts, yet none were fighting there anymore. No longer did men climb ladders raised against the walls, instead they marched by the ram sitting idle by the gatehouse, moving freely through the broken gates. Leaving behind the dead scattering the approaches to the castle and clogging the moat.

*Jon planned this attack for a month, had twenty times the men, and still we bled dearly for the effort.*

At that moment, a siege tower put to flames early in the battle now collapsed in on itself, sending sparks and ash into the air. Her eyes followed them, and then higher still up the mountain, to where the Eyrie’s pale towers awaited.

“This is no end.” She said with a shake of her head. “We’ve taken a castle, not the throne. That awaits us in the Eyrie, where Elbert sits far from our reach. There he is a symbol to all his loyalists. Until we have him, the Vale will never truly be ours.”

“That’ll come with time.” The older woman spoke with confidence, patting her arm. “Patience, my young queen. No army can take the Eyrie, but cut off from bounty of the world below, the Eyrie becomes a tomb.”

“That could take weeks. Months even.”
“Perhaps years.” Lady Anya mused. “Depending on how well supplied they are.”

The lady’s attempts at comfort were less welcome than the arrival of one of Jon’s squires, Raymund Connington. The youth leading along her palfrey, Grace.

“Queen Sansa, the castle is ours!” The squire declared with excitement. “A battle of heroes! Barristan the Bold and Brienne the Beauty scaled the walls and slew more than can be counted! Your brother was first through the gates! He brought low the king’s champion himself!”

“Brave deeds to be sure.” She spoke evenly, raising an eyebrow at the youth. “Are such tales what you were bid to tell me?”

“Oh! I’m sorry, no. I just thought-”

“Out with it boy.” Ser Lothor growled.

“His majesty wishes you to join him in the castle. I’m to take you to him.”

“Now? While the castle’s still burning?” Lady Anya appeared shocked yet she felt nothing of the sort.

She knew Jon wouldn’t send for her unless it was safe. Truly, he knew her well, for had he not sent a summons, she would likely have sought him out.

A moment later, she was atop Grace and Raymund had a hold of her reins, leading them on towards the castle. Ser Lothor and her company of guardsmen marching with them. Normally Sansa wouldn’t have insisted on them coming, yet she could not be too careful.

Raymund’s own brother, Ronnet, had been one of the Gulltown traitors. Since Ronnet lost his head, she sought any hint of vengeance lurking within Raymund. So far the squire continued to pledge his undying loyalty to Jon and appeared quite sincere in his shame over his brother’s treachery. Becoming the new heir to Griffin’s Roost likely played a part in that.

He was not the only one she was wary of. Among the army Barristan brought from Gulltown came scores of men who either supported the Gulltown treachery or were kin to those who had. Or at least there had been. Many of those tinged by betrayal had been the first Jon sent against the Gates, where they faced relentless flights of arrows, burning oil, and worse.

Deaths Rickon considered too honorable for turncloaks.

After the Bloody Gate fell to an attack to its rear, Rickon arrived with the men he’d led for nearly six months in blockading the High Road. They were a hardened company, having Arryn sorties and raids by the mountain clans. An ordeal somehow Robin Darklyn had survived, her cousin being the one to lead Rickon’s vanguard into the Vale.

Far more shocking was to see mountain clansmen among their number. A scandalous development Rickon had merely shrugged off.

“Kill a few of their leaders in single combat, and they take a shine to you.”

She saw a few of the savage warriors among the dead they passed when entering the castle. More of the living variety could be found lingering about the yard, picking over the corpses of Arryn guardsmen and Second Sons. While many of the Vale men turned up their noses at the clansmen, she saw them doing much the same.
And Rickon doing worse. With his axe slung across his back, her brother sat on a barrel drinking with his men, laughing uproariously as Shaggydog gorged on the flesh of a dead sellsword.

“Battle gives Shaggy a fearsome appetite!” Rickon jested, raising his wine skin. “And me a terrible thirst!” He was laughing when spotted her. “Be that my sister? Sansa! What are you doing here? We spilled so much blood, you’ll get your gown in a right state.”

He laughed again but she felt nothing but embarrassment at his crass display, dismounting in a huff.

“Don’t bother getting up, Rickon. Apparently it is beyond a Prince of Winterfell to help a lady from her horse.”

“Forgive him, your grace.” Lord Robin bowed. “I think Ser Mandon Moore battered some of his wits loose during their duel.”

“Well I did worse to him.” Rickon said, reaching behind the barrel to lift a severed head up by its hair. Ser Mandon was always said to have dead eyes, and it was certainly true now. “He gave me a fine fight. I’m proud to share a drink with him.” He then poured some wine into Mandon’s gaping mouth, his men hooting to watch it pour out the bottom of the head. “But the man can’t hold his drink!”

“Rickon Stark!” She snapped. “Foe or otherwise, that man is a knight of noble birth. Show him some respect. What would our father say to see you act this way?”

“Better than what he’d say to Robb for joining up with his killers.” He shot back, rising to his feet.

“Watch how you speak of your king.” She warned him. “And think on this. As foul as the Lannisters are, they did not disrespect our father’s body. They acted better than you do now.”

Rickon flushed at that and Shaggydog scorned his meal for a moment to growl. She met their glares, shaming Rickon into handing off Mandon’s head to one of his men, grumbling about its care before storming away from her.

There was no more time to waste on Rickon’s foolishness. Instead she urged Raymund into leading her to Jon. Her husband awaited them in the castle hall, among allies and foes alike.

She saw Bronze Yohn Royce standing with his barrel-chested cousin Nestor. Ser Justin Massey sharing wine with the lords Grandison and Redfort. Then there were the knights Wallace and Roland Waynwood, her uncle Brynden, Lady Brienne of Tarth, and many more.

Altogether she spotted four royal protectors about Jon, who wore his dark armor despite his left arm being splinted. New to their sworn guard was Ser Mychel Redfort, who wore his white cloak with pride, and Ser Balon Swann, whose white armor now bore spots of red. A shade far darker than Ghost’s eyes, which nearly glowed with intensity as the scarred direwolf stared at a chained man kneeling before Jon.

Before she could get a glimpse of the prisoner, Ser Barristan announced her.

“King Jon, your queen has arrived.” The older knight smiled warmly, leading the room in bowing. “These dark halls are in need of your radiance, Queen Sansa.”

“You charm like a younger man.” She returned his smile to which Bronze Yohn chuckled.

“He fights like one too. Put some of these others to shame.” The lord grinned at the Waynwoods and elbowed Ser Justin. “Not a one of you came close to the Bold’s count.”
“The lady did.” Uncle Brynden put in, causing Lady Brienne to flush.

“The time for honors will come later.” Jon decreed, his eyes only glancing at her before settling back on his prisoner. “Sansa, meet Brown Ben, Mero’s replacement as leader of the Second Sons.”

The shackled captive turned her way then. He was an aged man, his brown skin weathered and his hair and beard gone grey-white. Though his smile seemed pleasant, it did not reach his dark almond shaped eyes.

“Well met, your majesty.” The sellsword nodded her way. “Since I can’t quite rise now, just imagine I’m kneeling to your grandeur.”

“Shut it, filth.” Uncle Brynden snapped, hatred burning in his eyes. “You’re lucky to draw breath at all. If it was I you met on the walls instead of Ser Barristan—”

“Another time, Blackfish.” Brown Ben winked, his gaze following after her as she came to stand by Jon.

“Good spirits for a man’s whose company is broken.” Jon spoke coldly. “How many Second Sons are left? Half of those we found within the walls are dead, the rest prisoners like you.”

“Well, have a good hundred or so in the countryside harassing the roads.” Ben smiled again. “But you knew that. What you want to here is how many of us are up there in the Eyrie. With the king.”

“There’s no king up that mountain.” Bronze Yohn boomed in his powerful voice. “Only a tyrant whose days of bringing dishonor on the Vale are at an end. Elbert is king no longer.”

“King longer than you might think.” The sellsword replied. “Elbert has a hundred men in the Eyrie and food enough to feed twice that number for a year. Help will arrive before that. He’s placed an order with the Ghiscari for Unsullied and I saw the contracts he offered the Windblown and Stormcrows myself.” At this his face darkened. “More than gold, he promises lands and titles. Better payment than Mero won out of him.”

At this, ripples of unease moved through the assembled lords

“Two years?” Lord Grandison said in shock. “We can’t sit here that long, what of our lands?”

Ser Mychel frowned. “If more sellswords arrive, those we’ve already defeated will rise up again. The Belmores, the Moores…”

“We should attack the Eyrie now, they won’t expect it.” Silveraxe Fell proclaimed.

“Attack?” Ser Justin repeated in horror. “Up that?”

“Suicide at best.” Nestor Royce added. “The ascent is treacherous enough without arrows and missiles raining on our heads from the waycastles. Take an army up there and you’ll lose.”

“Victory awaits those brave and bold enough to try.”

“Bravery is no true shield.” Lady Brienne shook her head, her eyes distant. “The risk is too great. And the cost….”

Cost. That word fed into the thoughts churning within her. The others were thinking of battle, yet she picked through Brown Ben’s words again and again. How sincere he sounded. Especially his anger at the end.
A sellsword values little more than gold, and Elbert gives him less than others.

A man whose fought his battles for half a year now…

“Do I call you captain?” She asked Brown Ben over the talk in the hall. “Or is commander?

“Captain will do.” He acted surprised, as did the others. “Though my friends call me Ben.”

“Captain, then. Since you’re being so forthcoming I’d ask you how many of your men are at the Eyrie. Speak honestly, now. I do not beg my husband’s mercy for liars.”

“Then honesty you shall have. I’d say there’s thirty or so of my men up there. Fine warriors, hungry for the gold Elbert’s promised.”

Her uncle grunted. “Let them try to eat gold when they run out of food.”

“Uncle, please.” She said, staying focused. “Captain, were your men to learn no gold was coming to them, I imagine they’d grow quite distressed. Could they find their way to seizing the castle?”

A hushed silence fell over the hall, those within either struggling with her suggestion, or likely guessing at her dark thinking. Jon certainly had, for he now grasped her hand, bidding her to look at his thoughtful expression. In it she saw a good man but a tired one, with dark circles below his eyes.

“My men could do that.” Brown Ben answered, a grin pulling at the corner of his mouth. “Though you spine a fanciful tale. My men know the gold Elbert promised us is at the Eyrie.”

“Though less than what he offered others.” She put in. “Surely not enough to make recompense for the losses the Second Sons have offered.”

“I did happen to be in the midst of renegotiating our rate…”

“Why not do so here and now?” Sansa asked, squeezing Jon’s hand and looking deep into his sad grey eyes. “We can surely match the offer Elbert made to your rival sellswords.”

Chains rattled as the prisoner stroked his beard. “Oh I think breaking our contract is worth more than that.”

“Like your life?” Brynden snapped. “This man should be begging at your feet, not bartering for gold!”

“We cannot plot with this scoundrel.” Bronze Yohn added, earning nods of agreement from others. “Elbert must be brought low by the best of the Vale—”

“Many of whom would likely die for the effort.” Jon cut in, his eyes moving about the room. “Perhaps even some in this room. Of the army I brought to the Vale, one in three will never see their homes again. How many more should I doom to the same fate? How much more suffering can the Vale endure?” His swallowed then, disgust tingeing his face before he lowered his gaze to Brown Ben. “What’s your price?”

A foul smile greeted the question. “For the men who’ll do this? I imagine five times what Elbert promised will do the trick.” Brown Ben stroked his beard again. “Of course you’ll need me to go up there and arrange all this. That’ll cost you ten times my captain’s rate, and some land.”

“After what you’ve done to our people?!” Ser Wallace shouted and the sellsword shrugged.

“Preferably somewhere other than the Vale.”
Despite how unseemly it was to deal with this man, the fact he pushed so hard on his demands was a good sign. On top of ensuring the rest of the Second Sons would still be paid what was owed, he demanded safe passage for the company out of the Seven Kingdoms. Jon could not agree to that, for it would ignore the crimes done to the smallfolk and the Faith during their campaign.

“Someone must answer for those lives.” Jon said, firm in his resolve.

“Fine then, if it gets the rest paid and home, I’ll turn over some.” Brown Ben folded his hands in front of him. “But I’ll need you to do the same.”

“What foolishness is this?” Lord Hunter asked incredulously.

“Well, Elbert will know the battle’s well and done here. It’ll arouse suspicion if I show up so late after all others have fled. I will need a very good reason. Or a very valuable prisoner. One of this lot should do."

She blinked in disbelief. “You expect us to hand over one of own to your care? All so you can deliver them to Elbert?”

“That’s a death sentence.” Jon agreed with her in a solemn manner. “We’ve learned that to our sorrow.”

The dead of the Martyr’s Mill came back to haunt her gain. The face of dead men rising up in her memory. Daegon’s was among the clearest. Then Harry, who they had heard little of and assumed the worst.

“Elbert will want to kill them.” Brown Ben agreed. “But not right away. If it’s someone Elbert thinks will have the answer he wants, he’ll question them first. Perhaps throw them in the sky cells to loosen their tongues.”

Jon became livid “Think of another way-”

“Your grace, I will go.” Barristan stepped forward, hand on his sword. “Let this man arrive at the Eyrie with the commander of your guard. That should sate Elbert’s doubts.”

“No. Ser, step back.” Sansa urged both with her words and eyes. “We will not send anymore to Elbert-

“My queen, I will be of more use up there than I am here. Truly, it offends me to think these sellswords alone could claim victory in your name. If this man can deliver on what he promises, I will gladly accept whatever trials await me.”

“No.”

“Sansa.” The chill in Jon’s voice bid her to face him, his lips pursed in distaste before he spoke to the hall at large. “Ser Barristan speaks bravely. His words as wise and true as the knight himself. He is my sworn shield, but in this he safeguards the lives of thousands.” He brought a fist to his heart, a warrior’s salute. “Go forth, ser. Do what I and this army cannot.”

He allowed no room for argument, for which there was much among the lords. Sansa felt numb when Barristan kissed her hand before departing with an unchained Brown Ben. They would take ten more captive sellswords with him, to better sell themselves as a defiant rearguard that barely escaped with their lives.

Long after they departed, in the dark of night, she stood at a tower window, watching their torches
climb high up the goat trail. They became as small as the fireflies the children chased around the Asher tree. She had a hand to her middle when she heard someone enter the chamber.

“This wasn’t how I wanted it.” Jon said as he came to join her at the window. “Treachery and guile, endangering a friend, so much for the king you tried to make of me.”

“You’re still the king who took a scar for the sake of old Eon Hunter. The one who led a brave charge to end this war once and for all. A better sort than your queen.”

“Sansa-”

“I’m guilty of those charges you lay at your feet. My thoughts are dark, my friendship a curse. I could have tried harder to change your mind about Barristan. The arguments were there to speak to. Yet I stayed silent. Sacrificing dear Barristan fit in perfectly with my plan. Why should the love I bear for Barristan spare him? My friendship didn’t save Daegon.”

“Stop this.” He pulled her about, taking her chin in hand forcing her to meet his eyes. “This is about what I said after the battle. That was the milk of the poppy talking. You were in an impossible situation, Sansa-”

“No, Lord Blackfyre was.” She rasped at him. “Just as Ser Barristan is now. I used to think Joffrey was born a monster but perhaps the crown twisted him into what he became.” Her hand went to the back of her shoulder, where the stag brand burned again. “What if his brand planted the seed in me and now it blossoms? How much worse can I become? Look how callous I’ve become to the lives of friends… I’ve already slain one man I loved…”

“That was a mercy.” Jon kissed her brow, pulling her close. “You saved my life, Sansa. In the North, and here too I suspect. Mine and thousands more. I hate that you’ve gone to such the dark places, depths I know all to well, but you went there to do good. Our friends would say the same.”

“Daegon would ask to see his daughter.” She looked up, tears blurring her eyes. “How can is it fair that I robbed him of ever knowing his child, but I’ve been blessed with another?”

She’d known for some time now she was with child again but wouldn’t risk being sent away because of it. Jon took the news as well as he usually did. His jaw dropping and eyes growing wide. After a few sputtering attempts at words, his mouth found hers and they kissed. His lips and touch loving, his fingers gentle as they wiped the tears from her cheeks. For she had to weep at the joy and tragedy of it all.

She would spend the rest of the night in bed with a king too good for her. Thoughts of others never leaving her mind. The dead of the war. Arya and Gendry’s pain. Ser Barristan’s fate.

Her mind stayed troubled for two long days. A torturous time of waiting which ended with the coming of a raven from the Eyrie. A letter written by another, yet bearing Barristan’s mark. Words bidding them to climb.

Despite his fears over her pregnancy, she joined Jon on the ascent to the Eyrie. Two parties would go, to defend against betrayal during the climb. The first travelled ahead of them, a party of warriors with uncle Brynden, Rickon, Ser Lothor and Lady Brienne among their number. Sansa wondered if they trembled like her during the journey.

Not since her time with Joffrey had Sansa felt such terror. The narrow goat trail leading up fell away into a sheer drop at its sides, the smallest misstep meaning death. The whole way up, cold wind whipped at them, pushing as if it wanted her to go back. Or to fall.
The waycastles they passed were abandoned or surrendered, and after half a day, she found herself directly below the Eyrie. The castle itself was a cluster of seven white towers, all grouped tightly together. Before the terrifying climb, she might have thought it beautiful. Now it seemed a cold, lonely place.

Yet, after catching a lift into the castle itself, they found a warm greeting awaiting them in the form of Ser Barristan.

“King Jon, Queen Sansa.” The bruised knight bowed. “The Eyrie is yours.”

“As promised.” Brown Ben put in from a doorway where he and several other armored sellswords stood, eyed warily by Rickon and Ser Lothor. “So let’s remember, we’re all friends here.”

“Some truer than others.” Jon said, shaking Barristan’s hand before Sansa went forth to kiss his cheeks. The knight reddened at the affection and winced to have his bruises touched.

“Are you badly hurt, ser? What did Elbert do to you?”

“They went easy on me. A fist or two for my refusal to talk. Then they locked me up in the sky cells.” He jerked a hand towards Brown Ben. “Until the Second Sons set me loose. They needed me for the fight. Taking the castle was a brutal affair, even if much of the garrison were killed in their beds.”

“You’re welcome.” Brown Ben said with a grin. “Lost near half my men in the effort. I’ll still be expecting their portions of the payment though-”

“What of Elbert?” Jon asked, hand hovering over Dark Sister.

Barristan nodded. “Our prisoner. The others wanted to lock him in a sky cell, and seven knows he’s earned it but I could not. Elbert surrendered as a king and I treated him as such. He awaits in the High Hall of the Arryns. There, Elbert will hand over his crown and realm to you, Jonarys Targaryen, King of Mountain and Vale.”

A cheer went up among those packed in the small chamber, one Jon halted by raising his hand.

“It’s not done yet. Take me to Elbert.”

“There’s more.” Barristan looked between them both. “Begging your pardons, but it’s something you’ll want to see first. Queen Sansa too.”

After charging the knight to risk his life, she was more than willing to do as he asked. Jon, though clearly impatient, put his trust in Ser Barristan as well. Thus they were soon led through the corridors of the Eyrie, stepping over pools of blood and worse. They came to a chamber door just as a maester was stepping out. Ser Barristan introduced him as Colemon, the Eyrie’s maester and healer.

“Humble greetings to you, your majesties.” The thin, nervous man said. “Ser, I did as ordered and offered them milk of the poppy. The lord refused but the ser accepted and is already calming.”

“Then step aside.” Barristan urged, opening the door and beckoning them within. “I didn’t know what else to do. I was sure they needed to be tended to somehow. You see, I wasn’t the only prisoner the Second Sons freed…”

His words fell away as she stepped into the chamber. A fine room, which was lavishly furnished with tapestries, chairs and a large bed. A man lay curled up on the bed, his shaggy hair and beard making it hard to recognize him as Harry Hardying. She was gaping at him when Jon grabbed her
shoulder, bidding her to look to the corner of the room.

There another man sat in a chair, much of his face turned away from them. With his silver-blonde hair and what she could see of his profile, her heart leapt to speak his name.

“Daegon.”

He jumped at the sound of her voice, whipping around to look at her. Yet, to her horror, it became clear Daegon couldn’t see a thing. His deep blue eyes were lost to a milky white blindness, the flesh around them scarred by terrible burns.

Somehow, his smile was the same.

“Sansa? Sansa, it’s you.” Daegon rose shakily to his feet, reaching the wrong way in search of them. “Is Jon here too?”

“I’m here.” Jon crossed the space between them, taking hold of the lord and steadying him. “You’ve been missed, my friend. Dearly missed.”

“If you’re here, that means it worked. Sansa was right. We beat Elbert. We did it.”

She dared to approach them, taking his other hand. When Daegon’s sightless eyes searched in vain for her, a knife went through her heart.

“Daegon… from the bottom of my heart, I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

“I did my part.” Daegon said, his voice shaking. “House Blackfyre stands true.”

“None will ever doubt that again.” She kissed his hand, then jumped by a sudden burst of laughter from Harry.

“No eyes, not so bad.” Harry mumbled, rocking back and forth on the bed. “He didn’t have to see… see the nothing…”

“Ser?” Jon inquired, bringing Harry’s attention to them, his eyes wide and fearful.

“Dragons.” He closed his eyes tight. “Dragons can fly. Falcons too. But not me. Not me…”

“The sky cells.” Barristan explained. “I spent one day in them, enough to trouble me the rest of my days. Harry spent weeks there. Anyone would be driven mad by that.”

Happy as she was that both men yet lived, their torture filled her with a dreadful anger. From how tense he’d become, she suspected a similar fury coursed through Jon. With dark eyes and hoarse voice, he beckoned Ser Barristan.

“Take us to Elbert Arryn. For what he’s done here. To my son and Benjen and so many others, his reign is at an end. His time is now.”

They strode to the High Hall, side by side. Behind followed a long line ready to witness Elbert’s downfall. Brynden and Rickon. Bronze Yohn and the Waynwoods. Their Kingsguard and Brown Ben. Even Ghost, who led Daegon on in his need to see this through. Their heavy footfalls beating the ground like an executioner’s drum.

Half of year of vicious warfare. Thousands upon thousands dead. Her children’s innocence stolen away.
Winning this kingdom it has to be more than a mere conquest.

This is not the time for a Kingslayer… we need to show these lands justice again.

When the doors to the High Hall were thrown open, a long and austere hall awaited them. Torches and narrow windows dotted walls of blue-veined white marble, all leading to the tall weirwood throne of the Arryns.

Which stood empty. As were long benches and every seat within. There was not a soul to be found in the drafty, cold hall. Yet it was noisy all the same, eerie moans and howls echoing along the walls.

“I don’t understand.” Barristan voiced his confusion. “He was sealed within, the doors under guard. There’s nowhere he could go.”

“That’s not true.” She said, her eyes having found the source of the howls.

Between two slender pillars was a narrow doorway. Wind whipped through the open entrance, its weirwood door swinging back and forth idly. Beyond that lay nothing but empty sky.

“The Moon Door.” Bronze Yohn whispered. “He could not have climbed from it, it be his death.”

“I think that’s the escape he sought.” She answered. “He’d not give us this triumph…”

“Nor any justice.” Jon said in a defeated way. “This isn’t how it should be.”

They gazed long and hard at each other. Somehow, she knew they weren’t the same people who’d come to the Vale together. With the wind howling loudly, they walked to the Moon Door, looking out at the vast abyss of the sky beyond. Then down to the six hundred foot drop to the stones of the valley below.

Sansa felt like she could see the whole of the Vale. A land of mountains and lush valleys, blue rivers and snowy peaks. A view both wondrous and terrifying. One they’d paid in blood to earn. In the suffering of friend and foe alike.

As she looked out over their new kingdom, a tear escaped her eye.

And like Elbert Arryn, it fell into nothingness.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Tainted justice. A stolen dragon. The queen's lament.

JON

Whether in Aevalon or the Eyrie, petitions were always a trial.

Mercifully, far fewer callers came to seek Jon in the High Hall of the Eyrie than back home in the Red Keep. Scaling the Giant’s Lance was an impressive feat and those who braved it earned his full attention. No matter how bothersome the issue or fickle the request, he would listen until his arse grew sore upon the Arryn throne. At times he put his discomfort down to the weirwood seat being meant for a falcon, not a dragon.

Nonsense of course, a throne’s a throne. I simply became too used to the saddle.

I've been acting more conqueror than king, putting the burdens of rule on Sansa.

That ended now. Sansa was in dire need of relief, and he could not yet entrust such matters to the new head of House Arryn. Seated in a smaller chair to Jon’s right, the newly anointed Harrold Arryn barely mustered any interest at all. Though his shaggy hair and beard had long since been trimmed, Harry still had that vacant look in his eyes, as if he were still trapped in the sky cells.

Whether Harry would ever recover from his ordeal, no one was sure. Others in the hall, like Ser Symond Templeton and Ser Eustace Hunter, eyed their new lord with little regard, yet Jon was willing to be patient.

No matter how much this petition exhausted him.

“Lord Melcolm, I’ve heard enough.” He said to the older lord and his party. “From you and your esteemed companions.”

The Lord of Old Anchor had brought a chubby septon, his cousin, and a maester whose arms were loaded with parchments. Bronze Yohn and his other Vale allies glared at the group openly yet Jon kept his face even.

“I had my maester go over your declarations.” Jon explained as he gestured to the thin form of Maester Colemon. “All your blood claims have been found true. With all members of House Hersy dead, there are grounds for you to make a claim to Newkeep and all its incumbent lands and incomes.”

“Thank the Crone for blessing his grace with such wisdom.” The chubby septon smiled at him. “Trust that my kin are eager to prove themselves.”

“I said that Lord Melcolm has a claim.” Jon leaned back in the throne then. “Beyond that, I must refuse to grant him the Hersy holdings.”

“Why? My father’s mother was of Newkeep.” The lord protested. “By the laws of inheritance, those
lands are mine.”

“Actually they belong to me, by the right of conquest. As such, I have bequeathed Newkeep to Lord Daegon Blackfyre, a true and loyal knight.”

“That foreign born hedge knight?!”

“You grace!” The septon appealed. “After all the sacrifices made by the faithful in this war, I urge you to reconsider. I have the High Septon’s ear. I’m sure his holiness would be greatly concerned to hear of Andal noblemen having their lands stolen away—”

“I have taken nothing from your lord, though I surely could have. He fought against me, and when the war was lost he bent the knee to me, I left him be. I even upheld his family’s rights to Old Anchor, despite the misgivings of more than a few of my lords. Let him seek the High Septon’s counsel, for I feel certain he will urge Lord Melcolm to thank the Seven for the lands he has.”


There was more to his title but Jon waved it off, instead offering Lord Melcolm chambers for the night. This also served to remind the lord of the men he must soon deliver to Gulltown, so they might sail for the Blackwater Rush all the sooner.

While Jon was inclined to fairness, he was also the victor of this war. Which meant Lord Melcolm, despite his anger, had little recourse than to accept his decision. Should the lord seek the High Septon, Jon imagined those complaints would be drowned out by the clinking of coin or the hammering of stonemasons, repairing and rebuilding the holy places of the Vale. Nearly half of the wealth they had found in the Eyrie’s vaults went to the Faith and what was owed the Second Sons. Some more gold was given over to his army, mostly those who had missed out on sacking of Gulltown and other enemy castles.

What was left went towards ending the suffering here in the Vale. Whether to buy food for the starving or seed for the burnt out fields, the cost was worth it. He wanted these lands to prosper once more.

War delivered them to me, but if my realm is to thrive, we must have peace.

So the North has to make due without us. As must the empire.

Fighting may have ended in the Vale, yet it raged elsewhere. Ravens and messengers bombarded the Eyrie with word of troubles to the north and across the Narrow Sea. However much it rankled Jon, his fragile realm could do little for the Starks, and even less for the High King and the imperial family.

The choice before Robb was a terrible one, yet it was the letter from Daenerys that haunted him most.

After everything that’s happened, I can do nothing to help. Not that it matters.

She will never forgive me.

He pushed that aside. It was his new domain that required his attention. The Targaryen hold on the Vale was tenuous at best. Raising up lords like Bronze Yohn and others to key positions had helped, but the people needed time to accept Jon as their king. Thus, for the foreseeable future, he and Sansa would rule their enlarged realm from the Eyrie.
Hopefully my gift to her will arrive soon, to lessen our new burdens and make this strange place feel like home.

Jon had just agreed to name Nestor Royce castellan of the Gates of the Moon when a commotion outside the hall grabbed his attention.

Despite the thick stone, he could hear the sounds of hurried footsteps and a child’s wailing growing louder and louder. Jon was on his feet when a pair of guardsmen swung the doors open. Suddenly the cold, marble halls of the Eyrie came alive for him for the first time in moons.

His children had finally arrived.

“There he is!” Aemma was the first through the door, dragging Aenry along with her. “Father! Father, we’re here!”

“We weren’t announced.” Rhaegina scolded, doing her best to look proper as she and Lady followed behind.

What a difference a year had made. Each of his children appeared a head taller than he remembered and more beautiful than ever. His daughters looked less like girls and more like young women as they came on. Rhaegina wore a gown the color of jade with emeralds about the neck, and Aemma the opposite. He suspected his mother’s hand in those new gowns, and in the Aenry’s dark doublet adorned with a white dragon. The boy was gazing in awe at the hall, yet when he met Jon’s gaze, his son offered a shy smile.

“Hello father. Are you well?” Aenry asked.

“I am my son.” He walked forward to gather Aemma and Aenry into his arms, kissing their heads and holding them tight. “I have not felt this well in a very long time.”

“Were you ill?” Rhaegina asked, trying to look and sound proper. Yet her act faltered when he waved her forth to embrace him as well.

“Not ill. I left parts of my heart back in Aevalon, and now it feels whole again.”

“That’s sweet, father.” Rhaegina nuzzled against him before Aemma leaned in to whisper to her twin.

“I think he stole it from a song.”

His laughter was overshadowed by the loud cries of a babe, for the youngest of his children had just entered the hall behind a troupe of white cloaks. Ser Barristan and Ghost guided Ser Guyard Morrigen, Ser Richard Horpe, and Malo Jayn into the hall, each having spent the war at Aevalon. Behind them came Lord Lyman Darry and his wife, Lady Talia, who had been one of Sansa’s closest friends. Jon was grateful for how lovingly she carried Vaelena.

He nearly gasped to see how much the babe had grown. Dressed in a tiny gown of cream and gold, Vaelena now had a head of silver-blond curls and her voice seemed louder than ever. When they grew near, he released the other children to hold out hands in expectation.

“Your grace, forgive her.” Talia said as she handed Vaelena to him. “She slept most of the journey and only just woke.”

“It is I who owes my daughter an apology.” He took the crying girl into his arms and smiled down at her. “Forgive me if I hold you poorly Vaelena. I am out of practice. I promise to improve, even if it
means I must hold you for hours. Days even.”

The girl quieted some to pull on his beard with sharp, determined tugs.

“She did that to Ghost’s tail.” Aenry noted with a grin. “He didn’t like it either. It’s funny when she wrecks the girls’ braids, sometimes they cry.”

“Hush now.” Aemma snapped, growing red at how many of the men in the hall chuckled.

“At least we didn’t keep our eyes closed the whole climb up.” Rhaegina added and it was Aenry who grew red.

“Not the whole way!”

“Do not worry my son. Many a knight and lord have done the same. Perhaps even a king or two.”

Aenry laughed at that, and Jon knew then that a new day had dawned at the Eyrie.

“Did everyone make the ascent with you?” He asked of Lyman, who shook his head.

“There weren’t enough mules for all of us. Maester Samwell and the rest of the council will come tomorrow. The High Queen jests that you left her without much company in Aevalon.”

“She will do well with her fine few.” He said, planting a kiss to Vaelena’s cheek. “I trust my home completely to their care.”

However awkward his parents’ estrangement, he was glad to have his mother in Aevalon. Few could balance the needs of the freemen and freedmen so well. Yes, she had shown poor judgement in trusting Petyr Baelish with her wealth, but the thief could not hide forever. Jon almost pitied Baelish, for the ruling quartet of Aevalon would not most likely show him little mercy.

“Arya and Gendry were doing well when we left.” Lyman told him. “The lord’s moving about easier and the lady hasn’t suffered a coughing spell in some time.”

Aemma perked up then. “Grandmother said Lyonel and Nymeria would have dragged them from their sick beds sooner or later.”

“The boy is as bold as Arya ever was.” Talia agreed. “Though, even she was humbled by the lands and incomes you awarded House Baratheon. You should know, Gendry spoke of refusing them.”

“He’s too modest. I almost did worse to those Gulltown traitors. Losing some lands to House Baratheon is a small price compared to their heads or the Wall. And if not for Gendry and Arya, the city might not have fallen, so they more than earned an income from the city’s port trade. They’re just lucky I didn’t hand them a castle like I did Daegon. Did he arrive in Aevalon before you left?”

“Yes, father.” Rhaegina answered. “We were there to greet him with Lady Laenora and little Daemona. The lady was so very proud that you chose him to help rule Aevalon.” She then eyed him and Vaelena in a sad way. “He wept to hold Daemona… he said the gods must have deemed him unworthy of her beauty.”

Aemma sniffed at that. “That can’t be true. Lord Blackfyre did such a brave thing. Him and Ser Harrold both.”

It was then that his daughter caught sight of Harry, still seated in his chair. The man was staring at the children and mumbling to himself.
“Ser— I’m sorry, it is lord now.” Aemma smiled at Harry. “We said prayers for you, all of us did. In thanks for your noble act—”

“No. Not noble.” Harry shook his head, trembling to look towards the Moon Door. “They should not be here. Not here. It’s not safe for children… they can’t fly… they can’t…”

Harry’s voice faded as he covered his face with trembling hands. The children gaped at the display, yet thankfully Bronze Yohn had the sense to act.

“It is good to see the Dragons Darling again.” The lord declared in his booming voice before smiling at Aenry. “My prince, what a strapping young man you’ve become.”

“You’re the bronze lord. I remember you.” Aenry said.

“He’s more than that, son.” Jon gestured to the lord. “Lord Royce shall serve as Lord Protector of the Vale until Harry is feeling well again. He and Lord Darry are going to join Maester Samwell and the others on my council.”

“Congratulations, my lord.” Rhaegina said as she and Aemma curtsied to Yohn. “We met your cousin Nestor at the Gates of the Moon. His daughter arranged a ball for us.”

“It was quite splendid.” Aemma continued. “The Lady Myranda danced with Ser Roland Waynwood and challenged us to make the Darry boys blush.”

Aenry giggled. “Raymun and Gregory looked as red as apples.”

“Perhaps we don’t tell your mother about that game.” Talia shifted uncomfortably.

“Where is mother?” Aemma asked, searching the faces in the hall.

“I’ll take you to her in just a little while.” Jon said quickly before waving the other lords forward. “First, I believe Rhaegina spoke of proper introductions.”

Some of the men in the hall had fought against them in the war. Men like Ser Symond and Ser Marwyn Belmore had heard the worst of him from Elbert. Their knees may have bent, but he wished to win them over fully. To show these men that he was more than a conqueror and a Kingslayer. His children were proof of that.

They were the best of him.

_The best of us_, he thought, _nothing makes Sansa happier than our babes._

The children were overjoyed when they finally left the hall in search of Sansa. Talia walked with the older three, helping them admire the tapestries and carved stone likenesses of Vale heroes along the way. He and Lyman walked ahead, Vaelena jabbering nonsense up at Jon as he held her his arms.

“When we arrived at Gulltown there was a ship preparing to raise anchor.” Lyman said softly, as if he were speaking to Vaelena instead of Jon. “I counted thirty knights and retainers, all fitted and kitted, ready to answer those raids from the Reach.”

“Eager for the plunder to come from our own raids, more like.” He grumbled. The marcher lords Rowan and Vyrwel had been striking along their borderlands, and Jon sought former foes to answer these new threats.

“Yesterday those men were fighting against me, spare sons and hedge knights of Elbert’s loyalists.
Tomorrow they’ll fight in my name, if only to regain some of the pride and wealth that my victory cost them.”

“If it endears them to us, all the better.” Lyman insisted. “When the Reach men see knights of the Vale among our war parties, it’s sure to give them pause. The Gardeners simply refuse to rein their lords in. King Mace talks of peace and trade... but the court at Highgarden is rife with foul rumors.”

“I’ve heard. I am the Kingslayer twice over now.” He growled, hating the moniker even more now that he hadn’t even met Elbert Arryn before the end.

“That’s not the worst of it.” Lyman looked behind them before continuing. “There’s a vile tale being spread about Queen Sansa. Some say Elbert Arryn was thrown out of the Moon Door only after the queen bled him before a weirwood as a blood sacrifice.”

His jaw fell open at that. “It’s not true! Not a word of it! Who says such filth?”

“Genna Lannister and her Osgrey husband. The Peakes and Footlys as well. Varys can speak to it more than me.”

“How could they stoop so low... the Eyrie doesn’t even have a heart tree!”

Had Vaelena not begun fusing, his anger might’ve worsened. As it went, both men quieted so the child might calm. Jon tried his best to smother his outrage with the loveliness of his little princess. A memory of Sansa rocking Vaelena to sleep came back to him then, and he wondered how anyone could think evil of such a loving woman?

He remained unsettled the entire climb up the splendid tower where Sansa kept her chambers. The doors were sanded weirwood with gold banding, and when they entered they found a cluster of lavish rooms. Among them was a large bedchamber, a dressing room, and a small library with a window overlooking the castle garden.

That’s where they found his queen.

Sansa sat next to the window in a simple gown of grey, her hair unbound and resting on her shoulders. Although a book rested in her lap, Sansa paid it little mind as she stared out the window in a listless manner. Unbidden, the image of Harry came back to him.

Vaelena was squirming in his arms when Aenry cried out in joy.

“Mother!” The boy called, startling Sansa terribly. Her book fell away as she spun about, displaying the dark circles beneath her widening eyes.

“Aenry? How-” Sansa asked as she took in the group before her. “Girls... what are you doing here?”

“We came to see you!” Aenry giggled, running to wrap his arms around Sansa’s middle. “I missed you, mother. I said my prayers and brushed Lady every day...”

Sansa numbly patted the boy’s shoulders, looking at Aenry and then the twins with a bewildered expression. Rhaegina and Aemma were frozen in place, the girls sharing a worried look with one another. Unlike Aenry, the twins were old enough to sense the change in their mother.

Such was the power of the deep melancholy which had held Sansa in its grasp for weeks now.

Beyond her drab appearance and lack of good cheer, Sansa was often listless by day and restless at
night, barely eating and only when he urged her to. She refused to consider leaving the Eyrie, not wanting to leave him to face this task alone. Yet in most ways, it was like Sansa wasn’t here at all. His wife scorned all matters of rule that she once delighted in and what few she did take up she quickly set aside, claiming that there were others better suited.

He was about to urge the twins on to their mother when Vaelena uttered a gurgling laugh. The babe reached for her with tiny grasping hands, and Sansa recoiled, her face twisting in fear.

“How could you?” Sansa demanded of him, pulling free of Aenry. “How could you bring them here?”

“Sansa, they missed you.” He said softly. “If you must stay at the Eyrie, I would have you be happy. See how much Vaelena has grown? I had forgotten how beautiful she was-”

“That’s not the point.” Sansa put up her hands and turned her face away. “She should be in Aevalon. All of them should. It’s not time. We’re not ready yet.”

“We are. There’s peace now. The Eyrie is ours. The Gates too. This land, its people... they belong to us now. To our children. Let them see what our time apart has brought about.”

“I don’t want them to see.” Sansa shook her head, a hand running over her middle. “Do even know what I... do they know what it took to have this peace?”

“We do.” Rhaegina said then. “Grandmother told us, about Ser Dontos and Ser Myles.”

“The singers are writing songs about them.” Aemma added. “About Ser Daegon and the Martyr’s Mill as well.”

Sansa looked ready to retch. “Songs? Songs!? They wish to sing about those poor men? All they endured because…” She swallowed deeply. “No. No Jon. I want them to go home. Send them home. Far from here. We’re not ready.”

“Mother? What’s wrong?” Aenry asked as Sansa walked away, avoiding Jon’s grasp.

“Sansa…”

“I’m not ready!” Sansa shouted, darting into her dressing room and slamming the door.

Aenry ran after her and started to pull and bang on the door, prompting Vaelena to begin wailing.

“Mother! Mother! Don’t go! Please! We’ll be good!”

“Perhaps I should take the children to their rooms and get them settled.” Talia suggested despite the shock upon her face.

“Yes... yes...” Jon nodded numbly while he handed Vaelena over, still rattled by this unexpected disaster. “Girls, Aenry, go with Lady Talia. She and Ser Mychel will show you to your new rooms.”

“I want to stay with mother!” Aenry was crying now, beating his fists against the door. Without being told Aemma went to him, gathering the boy up in her arms and whispering kindly in his ear.

“She’s tired, Aenry. Let’s let her rest.” Aemma whispered as she led Aenry toward Lady Talia.

“What did King Elbert do to mother?” Jon heard his son ask. “Why didn’t father protect her?”

The words hit Jon hard, causing him to place a hand on the wall to steady himself. While Lyman did
his best to look elsewhere, it was Rhaegina that came to him then. His eldest child grabbed his free
hand and pressed it to her cheek.

“It will be alright, father.” She whispered to him. “Mother will be better. She’s a dragon too. You
made her one.”

“Thank you, darling. Go on now. You and Aemma should tend to your little brother and sister.”

Rhaegina left to do as she was bid, and he went to stand outside Sansa’s door for a few moments. He
steeld himself for yet another argument. To tell Sansa once more that she was still the pure soul that
he had married. That she was not to blame for the suffering Elbert Arryn had wrought.

Yet he couldn’t. Jon did not have the strength to watch her cry again. To hear her beg for him to
leave her be. So instead he turned and left her chambers, Lyman following after. Evidently the lord
found the awkward silence between them as unbearable as he did.

“I heard how terrible the war was…” Lyman started before thinking better of it. “It’s no surprise it
unnerved the queen. I’ve seen it happen with seasoned warriors. And with what happened with her
brother on Harlaw, my heart goes out to her.”

“Sansa doesn’t know about Bran.” He said as they reached the stairwell. “You saw how she is. To
burden her any further… it would be cruel.”

Lyman ran a hand down his face at that. “So we’re not to speak of the North?”

“At least not that. Nor of the empire and my family.”

“I wouldn’t dare. All know it’s folly to mention Daenerys Targaryen or that boy in Queen Sansa’s
presence- er, that is, yes your grace.”

“Once she’s feeling better I’ll tell her all this myself.” He said as they descended further down the
tower. “The good and the bad, everything a queen would need know… I’ll tell Sansa when she is
better again.”

Jon said it as much for Lyman’s benefit as for his own. It gave him hope to think of Sansa better
again. Her melancholy would pass, just as his grief had all those years ago.

When he had married Sansa.

When things were better.

BRAN

They sailed throughout the night, reaching the isle of Harlaw as the sun rose anew.

Long before any others in the northern armada could spy the large island, Bran had done so using the
eyes of a wolf. Summer was standing with him upon the deck of the King Eddard when he slipped
into the wolf’s skin. Only to see what lay ahead of the war galley other than dark rolling waters.

Through the wolf’s eyes, the pebbled beaches and rolling hills of the island were so clear to him.
Thus it was strange sensation when Bran returned to his own body and had to strain to make out
Harlow’s dark shape in the distance. A shiver ran through him then, likely because his leathers and
cloak were far less warm than Summer’s fur had felt.
Don’t lie to yourself, he thought, it’s not the damp that makes you shake.

It’s the death that awaits us.

Bran leaned against the bow of the galley, looking back at the Stark armada following behind. They had all departed Blacktyde together, leaving the enemy isle a smoking waste in their wake.

Many had died there. Some by Bran’s own hand. He had done the same in the sea battles off Cape Kraken and the retaking of Flint’s Finger. During the Flint fighting he’d taken an arrow to his shoulder from the bow of Theon Greyjoy himself. The brisk sea air caused the wound to ache, yet it was an ugly truth that bothered him more.

Before this war, Bran had never taken a life. Now the count stood at eleven.

A few more lives and I’ll have killed more men than spent nights with my bride.

The wife I was never meant to have.

His marriage to Eddara Tallhart was the work of politics, and the speed of their wedding was proof of that. No sooner had he arrived at Torrhen’s Square than the pair went before the weirwood to swear their vows. Beyond her titles Bran knew little of Eddara other than what his eyes told him. Short of stature, with fair hair and generous curves, there was no question Eddara was a pretty woman. Especially when her cheeks dimpled with each smile.

More and more, he found himself thinking of those dimples. The ones upon her face, and elsewhere.

He’d gotten his first glimpse of such during their bedding, when Bran and Eddara both been stripped down by the guests and thrown into bed together. Laying half-naked in Eddara's presence was hard enough, yet to glimpse her bare breasts and the thick, honey colored hair about her sex filled Bran with nervousness. Being a widower, Eddara was far more experienced at consummating a marriage than him. In truth he might as well have been a maiden.

Awkward as that was to admit, he had told new wife much the same.

“I’m a touch surprised,” Eddara had smiled to hear so. “My father marked you a very daring prince. Anytime we visited Winterfell, I saw a boy climbing the tallest towers and braving treacherous heights. I only assumed the man he became would not balk to climb into the bed of a woman or two.”

He remembered flushing in embarrassment. “To climb a tree is not to dishonor it. I didn’t like how others jested of bedding women… my father never spoke of my mother that way. There was love and honor between them. I was waiting for that I guess.”

“So was I.” Eddara told him with a sad look. “Until I wed Cley. He was a good man. He was quite gentle with me when it came to our first night.” She had stroked his face in a way no woman ever had. “What we will have will be different, but in a good way I hope. With you I might know love again… and hopefully this night will be worth your wait.”

Eddara was good to her word. She eased his mind with soft kisses and gentle caresses, guiding his hands and letting him know the body she had pledged to him. When Eddara climbed upon him, lowering herself upon his manhood, it thrilled Bran in a way he had never known.

He began to yearn for those moments. The preparations for war kept him busy during the day, his unleashed lust for Eddara taking up much of their nights. They came to know each other’s bodies better than their minds. Now and then he caught glimpses of the loneliness that Eddara kept hidden
away, and he hoped she could not sense the turmoil he faced each night. For while she slept soundly in his arms, he would find no such peace in his dreams.

The three-eyed crow haunted them so. An otherworldly messenger that first came to him years ago. Telling Bran of things to come, of all he could do... promising to help him fly.

Once the crow came sparingly, now it invaded his dreams every night. Cawing the same messages again and again.


One day I’ll go to the Wall, he told himself, even if it must wait until I’m old and grey.

He had a wife now, and he owed Eddara a good life and children. Father would expect that of him. The same went for waging war on his brother’s behalf. If not for the injuries Robb took at Flint’s Finger, it would be him leading this attack. Instead his king had entrusted Bran to do so, a charge that he could not bring himself to argue against.

By serving his king faithfully, Bran felt closer to his father.

No matter how far he travelled.

Soon rowboats carried him and Summer even farther, bringing them and many others to the deserted beach. Once ashore, other commanders gathered to him. The lanky warrior woman Dacey Mormont, Rickard Ryswell with his thick brown beard and stallion’s head upon his tunic, the quiet but barrel-chested Ronnel Stout, and lastly Ethan Forrester, who ran a hand through his dark, wavy hair before kneeling on the beach and uttering a prayer to the old gods.

He heard the names of Ethan’s wife, Beth Cassel, and their two children. It struck Bran then that in a few years, he too might be so torn between duty and family.

“This is strange.” Dacey said as she eyed the beaches and hills around them. “After Theon Greyjoy’s escape from the North, I thought for sure his people would have some warning of our coming.”

“Aye.” Rickard agreed. “We were lucky to take Blacktyde by surprise, but to spy no longships on the way here? No signal fires?”

“They’re scared.” Ethan declared, hefting up a shield that bore the white ironwood and black upturned sword of his house. “The squids know we’ve come to do the as we did at Cape Kraken and Blacktyde. Let them cower in their driftwood keeps and salty hovels.”

Ronnel grunted at that. “The ironmen are no cowards. We’ve not yet faced a true taste of their might. I wager most of our foes are off fighting worse threats than our meager raid.”

Ethan flushed some at that but Bran thought Ronnel had the right of it. Much of the Greyjoy strength had been drawn south to Fair Isle, where the bulk of the Lannister and Manderly fleets were battling to free the island from reaver rule.

Summer whined and drew his attention away from the others. Through their bond, he sensed his friend’s urgency and saw the wolf staring at something beyond the beach. A sight he could not make out until he slipped into Summer’s skin.

“There may be trouble ahead.” He warned once free of the wolf’s mind, pointing inland. “Something’s burning. Perhaps some of those signal fires Rickard expected.”
“I see nothing.” Dacey squinted along with the rest. “Are you sure?”

“The prince has the eyes of a hawk.” Hallis Mollen said, Bran’s large captain of the guards approaching with the rest of Bran’s Dreadfort men. Among them was Steelshanks Walton, a brusque sergeant who had once served the Roose Bolton. Summer had never smelt any treachery in Steelshanks, and although Bran didn’t much care for him, he made a fine soldier and captain of his riders.

“Could be an ambush awaiting inland.” Walton said, gesturing to the horses being led through the surf. “I can lead some outriders ahead, flush them out.”

“No. A stronger force, with Summer and myself at the head. Just like at the Flint Cliffs.”

“theon Greyjoy nearly killed you for that recklessness.” Hal pointed out and Bran rubbed at his shoulder again.

“Springing that trap spared Robb from worse. We’ll clear the way. Dacey and Ronnel will bring up the rest behind us. Let’s find out where we are and who our first fight shall be against.”

The others were right of course. Doing as he planned invited great risk. Treachery and a lack of protection had cost Eddard Stark his life. Yet Bran imagined things would’ve been different for his father if he had had a direwolf.

Summer led their number, acting as Bran’s eyes and ears as he rode behind with scores of armored horsemen. They travelled along a well-trodden trail, over barrens of shaggy grass, passing by rocky hills and crags dotted with deserted mines. Their party kept quiet for most part, ready to find a fight at any moment.

What they came upon was worse. Through Summer, Bran had smelt the death and smoke long before Rickard and Ethan gave shouts of alarm at the burnt out hovel.

Though the fire had died out some time ago, smoke still rose off charred logs and corpses. The only things untouched by the flames were five severed heads impaled on sticks along the trail. Those of an elderly couple, a man, a woman, and a small boy.

Darker tendrils of smoke rose into the sky ahead, and he feared what might have caused them.

As they rode, there were more hovels and farms ravaged in the same manner. A small mining village was burnt to the ground, the dead piled high at its center. A stone holdfast had its doors broken and the heads of its defenders and smallfolk alike stuck upon spikes. There they found the first clues to who might be responsible.

The attackers had left their own dead behind. Upon a dead squire, Ethan spotted the sigil of House Sarsfield while another’s shield bore the hooded man of House Banefort.

“Westermen.” Hal spat. “What are these whoresons doing here?”

“The same as us.” Rickard replied grimly. “Raiding while the reavers are away. The Banefort isn’t far from Harlaw. It wouldn’t take long for their ships to reach here. King Robb worried we might meet our allies in this way. That’s why the prince leads us.”

All looked to him and his thoughts went back to what Robb had said to him from his sickbed.

“The bad blood runs deep.” Robb had explained while cradling his battered ribs. “Many of my lords care more for vengeance than the future of our kingdom. The Lannisters may have killed father, but
he lives on as long as our realm does. He would want us to do what’s best for the North and its people. However much it hurts, do honor by him Bran. Do what I cannot.”

Robb’s trust was little comfort at the time, yet Bran had sworn the same oath as the rest of those around him. He reminded them of that oath now.

“Our blades are for the krakens.” Bran reminded Ethan and Hal. “So we keep our hatred of the lions sheathed. For now the westermen are our allies.” He looked to Rickard then. “Any who act otherwise, think on which you’d rather stomach. The Lannisters or exile.”

Three had already made that choice, including Rickard’s younger brother. Roose Ryswell, along with Gryff Whitehill and Ser Donnel Locke, had publicly denounced Robb and foreshowed the alliance with the Lannisters during a muster in the Rills. When Robb learned of this, he had had each man banished from the North for at least five years. A warning to other would be detractors, like Rickard Karstark.

*Gods help me if one of these men fall out of line, he worried, Robb punishes oathbreakers just as father would.*

*By the blade.*

These thoughts troubled him as they pressed on.

It was not along before Summer led them to another attack still underway. They crested a hill to find a town in the midst of being sacked, hundreds of armed men putting buildings to the torch and its inhabitants to the sword. Whatever defense these people could offer was crushed, all the ongoing violence amounting to little more than butchery.

Disgusted, he decided this had to stop. Thus he rode down to seek the commander of this slaughter.

A horn was blown to signal their coming, and the sight of Bran and the others riding through the blood-soaked streets caused many of the westermen to stay their hands. He spotted a few more Banefort men-at-arms watching them pass, as well as several other sigils he didn’t recognize. Yet one in particular gave him pause.

Three hounds on a yellow field. He saw it upon the bloody tunic of a sandy haired man-at-arms, who laughed as he ripped a girl from the arms of an old woman.

“You!” He shouted at the man. “Who commands here?”

“The Mountain That Rides.” The man called back with a bold grin. “Ser Gregor Clegane. Who might you be, northman?”

“Prince Brandon Stark, son of King Eddard!” Ethan bellowed back as Bran gripped his reins tightly.

“Eddard Stark, ain’t that the king the ser slew…”

Summer’s growl cut him off, for their bond meant the wolf shared in his fury. Bran had steeled himself to deal with the Lannisters and their lords, but nothing could have prepared him to face Gregor Clegane. The monster had murdered his father in cold blood, cutting Lord Eddard down so savagely that only his bones came back home. The father who Bran had loved was gone forever, leaving nothing for him to hold onto but a cold statue in the darkness.

*No, remember what Robb said. Father lives on. He lives on as long as I honor him.*
“Take me to him. Now.” Bran demanded of the man. Ethan and Rickard urged otherwise but he insisted. The Mountain’s man, Raff as he was named, begrudgingly returned the girl to the old woman before taking them deeper into the village. All the way to a wide, open square with a longhall at its end and a pile of dead sitting in the center.

Scores of smallfolk were gathered in the square, guarded by cruel, jeering men. All watching as a Clegane man-at-arms cut upon a bearded captive they had strapped to a pole. When the man bellowed in agony, a small boy broke free from a woman’s arms, running towards the tortured man.

“Leave my father alone!” The boy cried before he was knocked down by a spearman with a loud crack. The child was kicked several times before a woman leapt atop him, until soon she was the one being kicked and beaten.

“No!” The captive pleaded. “Please leave my family be… I’ve told you everything…”

“Is there gold in the village?” The torturer demanded, pulling a hook from his belt. “Where have the Reader’s men fled to?”

When the man claimed ignorance, the hook was pressed against his belly.

“STOP!” Bran shouted, pulling his sword and dismounting from his horse. “Cut that man again and you will suffer the same!”

“This be a Stark prince.” Raff said as all eyes turned to him and his party. “He’s come seeking the ser. Best listen to him for now, Tickler. That wolf of his looks like it can do bloodier work than you.”

“So it does.” The Tickler backed away, he and Raff joining a line of their men that formed up in opposition to Summer and himself. Rickard and Ethan took a place to his right, Hal and Steelshanks to his left. They were all glaring at each other when the hall’s doors burst outward with a crash.

The monster that emerged from the hall caused his breath to catch. Nearly eight feet tall, with massive shoulders and limbs as thick as tree trunks, the Mountain brought an ominous silence onto the square. Screaming from elsewhere in the village continued as Ser Gregor walked forward with a greatsword strapped across his back, his heavy armor clanking with every step.

Raff and the Tickler stepped aside so the Mountain could come and tower over him, the man’s severe eyes surveying the northern party before settling on Bran.

“This village is mine.” Gregor’s voice sounded like stone breaking. “We march on Ten Towers. You northmen can find plunder elsewhere.”

“You cannot dictate terms to a prince of Winterfell.” Rickard said before Bran raised his hand.

“We are to harry this island, not turn it into a slaughterhouse.” His voice came out, cold as ice. “King Robb has made me pledge to accept surrenders and show mercy to the smallfolk. These people mean nothing against our combined strength-”

“They are chattel.” The Mountain glanced to the tortured man lashed to the pole. “Eating what we could, taking up space that my men need. When lords lose enough of them, their will breaks all the quicker.”

“That’s not how we wage war.” He said as Summer growled and bared his teeth.
“I care not. Lord Banefort sits at a port to the east. Seek him out if you want to talk. Just begone from here. This village is mine. Same goes for all in it, wolf prince.”

“I’m ordering you to show them mercy.” He took a step forward, only for Rickard and Hal to take hold of him.

“The oath, my prince. Remember your oath.” Hal urged and Rickard nodded.

“It’s not right, but these people are our foes. These sick dogs are our allies. Let’s seek Lord Banefort. You’ll have more luck reasoning with him than this aurochs.”

Every ounce of Bran wanted to kill the Mountain. Not just for the horrors being done here, but for father. Gregor knew who Bran was. The Mountain knew what he had stolen from him. He knew! Yet the monster still had the gall to stare him down.

*Think of father… remember what Robb said… remember your oath.*

“We ride.” He croaked out, turning his back to the Mountain and his men. “As far as it takes to be free of the stench of these scum.”

His men were obviously relieved by this, yet the captive’s wife and son were not.

“M’lord, please!” The woman called to him, blood running from her nose as she clutched her son tight. “Mercy! Don’t leave us, I beg of ye! Pray mercy for my husband!”

Summer whined but Bran kept walking... until the Mountain’s grumbling laughter caught up with him.

“Mercy?” Gregor looked from the suffering pair to the man he had tied to the pole. “Is that what you want? Stop hiding behind your wench and ask for it yourself.”

“Yes… mercy…” The man nodded weakly, only for his eyes to grow wide in terror when the Mountain unsheathed his giant greatsword with one hand.

“Mercy it is then.”

“No!” Bran and the wife screamed as one, yet their shouts did nothing. His blade struck the captive square in the chest, cleaving through him cleanly and burying itself in the wood. The dead man let loose a choked gurgle of agony, living long enough to watch as the Mountain laughed at him one last time.

The boy’s wails echoed in his ears. Screaming for his father, just as Rickon had all those years ago. He saw mother holding Sansa and Arya close as they wept. Robb being presented with Ice as father’s bones lay close by.

Suddenly it was Eddard Stark’s corpse he saw bound to that pole, butchered at the end of the Mountain’s blade.

*My father.*

“Murderer!” Bran shouted as he pushed by his men, rushing at the Mountain with his sword raised. “You bloody monster!”

Gregor was still tearing his sword free from the pole when Bran struck, slashing at the man’s massive side with all his strength. The crunch of steel against mail was louder than the annoyed grunt the
Mountain uttered at the blow. Gregor barely winced at the strike before pummeling Bran in the chest with a mailed fist that felt like the blow of a warhammer. He was driven to his knees, gasping for breath when the Mountain jerked his armored leg upwards. A quick jerk of his head spared his face being smashed in but the glancing blow was still enough to batter him near senseless.

He managed to slip into Summer’s skin in time to watch himself fall, noting the bloody gash across his brow. His true self was down, but within the wolf he pressed his attack. The Mountain’s Men had rushed to hold back Ethan and others, yet none were swift enough to stop Summer. The wolf lunged at the Mountain, piling into him with such force that the behemoth was driven two steps.

Yet Summer’s fangs fell short of his throat, snapping in vain as Gregor’s mighty hands held the wolf back.

“I’ll have you stuffed.” Gregor snarled, strangling Summer with all his might while the wolf clawed and bit at him. “You and that pathetic excuse for a boy. I at least broke a sweat killing the father.”

He couldn’t break free, couldn’t breathe. The Mountain’s hands were crushing Summer’s throat, the wolf growing weaker with each passing moment. He was forced to look right into the eyes of the man strangling the life from him. His last sight would be looking into the face of this monster.

The same as father.

Summer’s eyes started to roll back but Bran forced them to stay locked on Gregor. Staring as deeply into those cruel, black pits as he could. Then deeper still. Far deeper. Gregor might have held back Summer’s teeth and claws, yet Bran now tore his way into a place where Gregor could not protect himself.

Then Bran wasn’t the wolf any longer. He was the Mountain.

“Argh!” Gregor screamed, dropping Summer as he clawed at his head. “Get out! GET OUT!!”

His presence was too powerful for Gregor to buck. The rage and pain of his loss fueled Bran’s attack until he took control of the Mountain, piece by piece. Using Gregor’s arm, he wrenched the greatsword free from the pole and tossed it to the ground. The Mountain spasmed violently, wrenching his back before he came crashing down, Bran forcing him to his knees as he jabbed the man’s thumbs into his own eyes.

He felt none of the pain, having fled back to his own body at the last moment. Then Bran was climbing to his feet, blood blurring the vision in his one eye while the sounds of battle rang out all around him.

Yet when he picked up the Mountain’s greatsword nothing else seemed to matter. He dragged the heavy slab of steel across the ground, passed the wheezing form of Summer to where the Mountain knelt.

“Get out… get out…” The blind monster rocked back and forth, clueless and helpless to what lay in store for him.

Bran couldn’t allow that.

“Gregor Clegane.” He grunted as his hands tightened around the greatsword. “In the name of Eddard Stark, Lord of Winterfell, King in the North, Ruler of the First Men, the Blood of Winter, I sentence you to die.”

Bran lifted the greatsword up then, hoping that his father was watching him do as he had been
taught. It all felt so foolish now. No oath could make Bran into the man Eddard Stark was. Honor
couldn’t bring his father back. Eddara, with her dimples and her touch, could never make that stone
statue in the crypts warm like Eddard Stark had been.

In one moment Bran would destroy it all, his honor, his marriage, his oath to Robb.

Yet as the sword swung down, he knew he would at least have justice.

DAENERYS

A breeze rustled the curtains, painted gold by the bright sunlight. The room was the largest in the
manse and the huge bed at its center made the frail man within seem as small as a child.

again? Sleep here brother… rest with me…”

“That’s right uncle. You rest.” Dany stroked the ancient dragon’s feverish brow. “Dream of better
days.”

Shameful as it was, she was thankful to this fever for robbing Aemon of his senses. Otherwise the
man would know of the evils gripping the empire, a realm that Aemon had spent more than a century
serving, through golden days and black times.

Has the empire ever faced such a dire hour as this?

Outside, the sounds of trumpets blowing and the dull thud of stamping feet reached her ears. Valysar
had been her sanctuary for years. The large town a peaceful haven where her son could grow up free
of the burdens of court and the divisiveness it engendered.

Yet now she wished more than anything to be at Summerhall. To be as far away from the Dothraki
threat as possible.

Rising to stand near an eastern window, she sought a view of the mighty Rhoyn. Aemon’s manse
sat atop a tall hill, allowing her to see over much of the town and its walls to where the river flowed
constant, so wide that the other side was hidden from sight. Somewhere across that vastness, the
Dothraki watered their horses and sharpened their arakhs. They did all this with Rhaegar as their
prisoner.

A High King captured by a Dothraki khal... such a thing would have never happened in the days of
dragonriders.

Their flames kept the worst at bay.

The moon had only turned once since Rhaegar and Aegon had stopped here on their way to battle
Khal Drogo. Amon had been feeling better then, happy to host the High King and his heir beneath
his roof. More worry lines than ever had stretched across Rhaegar’s face, and even with more than
sixty thousand imperial troops marching with him, it was plain the High King was troubled. None
spoke her name at the prince’s table, but Dany knew Lyanna’s absence weighed as heavily on
Rhaegar’s mind as the Dothraki invasion.

“Put your mind at ease, father.” Aegon had sipped of his wine. “We will crush Khal Drogo outside
Selhorys and mark every mile of our march back home with a Dothraki head.”
“The commanders of the Third and Fifth legions promised much the same. Now they are dead, alongside thousands of their men.”

“The Golden Legion is everything they weren’t.” Aegon had said, drawing Aemon into the discussion.

“The Dothraki are terrible foes. Yet so is the Dark Order.” The wizened prince had declared. “Under Jonarys, I cannot remember a force growing so fearsome. With the order and Aegon’s golden might at your disposal, you have the means to intimidate Khal Drogo into accepting a tribute…”

“A tribute?” Aegon had scoffed. “Uncle, we mean to crush this threat, here and now. It’s high time we stopped paying these horse riding barbarians, save in blood.”

“Theirs or ours?” Dany remembered staring right at Aegon then, chiding him with her eyes as she had since they were children. “You’re underestimating them. However skilled you are Aegon, your pride has always been your weakness. The rise of Khal Drogo, the resurgence of the Ghiscari, the survival of Jon’s kingdom, you yourself declared all these things unlikely. Yet here we are.”

“Yes, here we are.” Aegon had glared right back at her. “Yet where is young Baelyon? Hiding him away still? Have you sent him to… have you sent him across the Narrow Sea? I thought better of you Daenerys. The boy should have a proper father.”

“He has had one.” Dany had reached out to grasp Aemon’s gnarled hand then, squeezing it in thanks. “Forgive me Rhaegar, but I’ve never seen anyone act a better father than Aemon. My son has had a splendid life and the finest education. As we speak, he studies scrolls from the days of Old Valyria with the scribes of Valysar. If he was not locked away in their vaults, I would be proud to present him to you High King.”

Aegon had made to say more, yet Rhaegar raised his hand to silence the prince.

“The way you speak of Baelyon, with such pride and hope, I heard the same in Elia when she spoke of Rhaenys and Aegon. I can still hear Jonarys’s praises being sung by-” Rhaegar had paused then, gripping his goblet tightly before draining it. “Aemon, you told me once that all moments are fleeting. Well treasure this time with your boy. We never know when time with those we love most will be cut short.”

Aemon had raised his goblet at that. “To those we love and have loved.”

Rhaegar did not hesitate to do the same. Aegon met her gaze again and they drank in unison. For half a moment, Dany saw the man she had once loved more than anything. Years ago at Summerhall, a healthy dose of wine and some reminiscing of their former love had led to Baelyn’s conception. Had she not had her moon blood just prior, her feigned confusion about Jon’s role might have been genuine.

And if not for Rhaenys she might have betrayed the truth from the start. There was no love in Aegon and Rhaenys’s marriage, yet Dany and her niece remained close all the same. It was Rhaenys who warned her to deny Aegon her son.

“The moment he heard you with were child, he began making plans.” Rhaenys had told her back in Summerhall. “If it’s a boy, he’ll take it from you. Aegon will foster it with an ally at court. Use the child to sway the Council of Heralds into choosing him as heir. Neither you nor I factored once in his plans.”

“Aegon is not so callous.” She had argued. “We’ve grown close again. Believe me, I’m not trying to
steal your place, but there’s love between us—"

“The less you think.” Rhaenys went on to tell her all she knew of Aegon’s time in Dorne. She held nothing back, telling Dany how Aegon had taken her cousin Nym to bed. “Only after he failed to seduce Arianne and Tyene. And Nym only did so on my behalf…”

This was only the first of many betrayals Aegon dealt her. She soon learned that Rhaenys was right, that Aegon had made arrangements regarding her child long before he was born. She felt no guilt then to deny Aegon any right to Baelyn, nor to keep her son hidden away from him during this visit.

Though it weighed on her greatly how it might have cost Baelyn his last chance to see Rhaegar.

The battle outside Selhorys had proved to be a disaster. As Thoros told her, the Dothraki loosed so many arrows at once that they blotted out the sun. Even the Dark Order could not match the skill of Drogo’s bloodriders. The Lord Commander rested in a room here in Valysar, filled with shame that half his order had perished that day. As terrible as their losses were, they were mild compared to those of the Highguard. When Rhaegar’s contingent were surrounded, his protectors had died to a man to protect the High King.

As far as any could tell, there were only a score or so Highguard left alive from the empire to the Highlands. Not that they could perform their duties with the High King held prisoner.

_We must be glad Aegon fought free. If anyone can rally the empire or negotiate the safe return of Rhaegar, it’s him._

_It has to be._

Across the river, Aegon was meant to be treating with Khal Drogo. All of Valysar was on edge, the town packed full of survivors from the Slaughter of Selhorys, some of whom Dany found entertaining her son in the walled courtyard of the manse.

Karl Bowden was displaying his skill with a bow as Grenn tried to show Baelyn how to twirl his sword hand over hand.

Her son stood in stark contrast to the two black-clad warriors. Far shorter and skinny as a twig, Baelyn’s flowing silver-blonde hair was as bright as his silks. Still he took to their martial efforts with enthusiasm.

“So which is better, the sword or the bow?” Baelyn asked in the Common Tongue as Karl struck another target perfectly.

“Well, dropping a man at a distance keeps you and yours as safe as can be.”

“Which is all fine and good if you can hit the bugger.” Grenn added, holding up his sword. “When he gets up all good and close though, that’s when every man wishes he was a swordsman, young dragon.”

“All your friends were warriors.” Baelyn said sadly. “The High King too. That didn’t save them from the horselords.”

“The king still lives.” Karl replied. “As long as that holds true, the war is not yet lost.”

“Well said.” Dany announced herself to them, descending the steps into the yard and beckoning Baelyn to her. “Do not be so quick to lose heart, my love. Our dear friends from the Dark Order
have always proven that desperate times can be overcome.”

Grenn nodded. “Our friends fell at Selhorys. Brothers we held dear. They are lost to us but the Dark Order stands. Their quarrels are now ours to take up.”

“Dark times do not worry us, Baelyon.” Karl put a fist to his chest. “For it was in the darkness that we found each other. And we will meet again.”

“We will meet again.” Grenn saluted as well, which Baelyn mimicked, standing straight and doing his best to appear fearsome. He worshipped the Dark Order, as some children often did.

“So you see, there’s nothing to fear.” She lied, patting his cheek. “What worries can we have with such fierce warriors defending Valysar? Remember, the order has defeated Khal Drogo before.”

“In the Forest of Qohor!” Baelyn beamed then. “Thoros told me all about it! Jonarys Targaryen was their commander then.” He gave a quick look to the captains before switching to Valryian. “Maybe he’ll return to help us! Do you think he might mother? Would he come to see me?”

His hope was plain. She could abide Aegon’s anger and the spiteful gossip of court, but it was moments like these that tore at her heart. Her ruse was cruelest on Baelyn, who was still too young to be trusted with the secret of his sire. This tormented Baelyn at times, for she knew the boy’s heartfelt desire was for Aegon or Jon to claim him. Her son loved Aemon deeply, yet what boy wouldn’t dream of having a warrior prince for his father?

Dany sighed as she prepared to stifle another of Baelyn’s dreams.

“Jon will not come. He is warring against the Arryns of the Vale, I told you of this.”

“I know... I just want to meet him. If King Jon came, I know he’d visit me. Prince Aegon won’t even do that.”

There was anger in Baelyn’s voice at the end. Dany had worked hard to keep Aegon and their son apart, for his own good, yet she grew worried at the disdain he was starting to show towards Aegon.

“Aegon’s the heir, and there’s few with as many duties as him. At this very moment he’s trying to negotiate with the Dothraki for the sake of your royal uncle. Why don’t you act as he does? Fetch a book to read to Aemon. Your voice comforts him-”

“Thoros!” Baelyn interrupted, running by her to where the wounded leader of the Dark Order emerged from a side stair. Thoros wore his black mail once more, yet how he managed to don it with a broken arm was beyond her.

“Young Baelyn, your cheerfulness does me wonders.” Thoros patted the boy’s head before bowing. “Princess, I believe it’s past time my captains and I return to our men.”

“Nonsense. You shall enjoy our home and bounty as long as need be.”

Thoros eased Baelyn away then to speak to her privately.

“Daenerys, you shall forever be known as a friend of the order, but our presence here does neither you nor Aemon any good. The heir blames us for the High King’s capture-”

“A claim we both know to be false.” She whispered back. “You lost most of your men trying to rescue Rhaegar from the Dothraki. Odds that few would have braved.”
“Prince Aegon risks his own life as we speak.” Thoros sighed. “I’ve peered into the flames, and R’hillor has shown me little good coming from these talks. I saw a horselord carrying away a dragon. Let us pray I am unworthy of grasping the Lord of Light’s true meaning.”

She prayed for the same. Not just for the sake of Rhaegar, but for Aegon and his children by Nym. She’d only met young Jaehaerys and Rhaella once or twice but found them to be delightful. A credit to their character, since both of Baelyon’s half-siblings had been torn from their mother at a young age and entrusted to the care of Aegon’s courtly allies. Nym endured the separation with the help of Rhaenys, who had long been a source of solace for the Dornish lady. Dany was one of the few who knew there was more love than malice between Aegon’s wife and his consort, for Rhaenys was the dragon Lady Nym truly gave her heart to. Both women found happiness in each other, and together they wielded considerable influence over Aegon and empire.

Dany however was content with her small corner of the world. A home she was unwilling to let Thoros leave quite yet.

The Lord Commander was being stubborn, and their arguing over his lodgings went on and on as Grenn and Karl continued to school Baelyon on the ways of the Dark Order. The Bowden captain was handing Baelyn his weirwood bow when one of Aemon’s guardsmen came running into the yard.

“Princess, there’s a party at the front gate.” The spearman said. “Prince Aegon demands entrance. He comes with his men and Dothraki barbarians!”

The last part came as a shock, yet relief flowed through her all the same.

“This must mean good tidings.” Dany said with hope in her heart. “Have the men form an honor guard. Don’t let them in yet. Not until we are there to greet them.” She paused then to urge Baelyn inside. “Go and see to your great-uncle. I won’t have you around the Dothraki screamers.”

“Mother!”

“Go dearest one. Go now.”

Baelyn cursed and dragged his feet yet obeyed all the same, disappearing into the manse. Only then did the Dark Order men escort Dany into the main courtyard. Aemon’s household guard awaited them, a score of spearmen lining the edges of the yard. With a nod of her head, the gate soon opened and Aegon rode inward.

The silver heir wore golden armor, his face marred by faint bruises earned at Selhorys. Overall Aegon seemed well, yet her heart fell to see no sign of Rhaegar among the trio of Dothraki riders. The most fearsome of the copper-skinned riders was the one at their head, a tall and muscular man with black hair and eyes, a drooping moustache, and a braid so long it reached his thighs. Tiny bells were interwoven in it, all jingling as Golden Legion warriors filled the yard with the sounds of their tramping boots.

“Daenerys.” Aegon spoke in strange tone as he dismounted. “Is Aemon still ailing?”

“He rests and is in no state to entertain.” She said, taking note of how many men Aegon had brought here. “If these Dothraki need convincing to release Rhaegar, I am more than willing to plead his case.”

“No... no let him be.” Aegon said as he came to her, kissing her hand. “And rest easy, Dany. I’ve already negotiated terms to secure my father’s release.”
“Glad tidings to be sure.” Thoros said as he eyed the Dothraki with hatred. “Is that not Khal Drogo in your grasp?”

“It is. He has come to collect ransoms for the High King. A steeper price has never been asked.”

Aegon acted pained to watch as even more of his men entered, crowding the yard. Among the Golden Legion men she spotted Ser Jorah Mormont, the swarthy northman leading forth a lovely white palfrey. As he handed the reins over to Khal Drogo, she recognized it as one of Aegon’s prize steeds.

“The great Khal Drogo wanted your horse?”

“No, Drogo demanded much more than that. The horse is a gift…” Aegon swallowed then, his eyes falling to the ground. “It’s just one of many sacrifices I’ve been forced to make. Gold. Jewels. Horses. Slaves. I offered practically half of the empire’s wealth to the horselords yet still he demanded more. So much more.”

“Any ransom would be a pittance to have the High King returned to us.” Dany said with sympathy. “Empty every vault in the empire if that’s what it takes to get Rhaegar back. Aemon will stand with you.” She touched at his shoulder. “As will I.”

Aegon jerked away from her, surprising Dany with the anger she saw in his face.

“Stand with me? Aemon is bedridden and you… I lost my faith in you long ago, Daenerys.” Aegon hissed at her, causing a small, forgotten part of her heart to break. “Despite all you’ve done, all the hurt and betrayal you’ve served me, I doubt you’ll ever know how much it pained me to do this. But there was no other way. With father held prisoner, someone had to act as king. To make the hard choices.”

“What are you saying?” She didn’t like how desperate Aegon sounded. Nor how tense his men were acting as they stared at her.

“I’m speaking of sacrifice. I’m sorry. Believe that.”

Aegon followed this with a wave of his hand, and the legion men struck like lightning. Half fell upon her guards, seizing their weapons and driving them to the ground. Others rushed into the manse or attacked the Dark Order men, who managed to draw their weapons before they were overwhelmed. Three men wrestled Grenn to the ground while Ser Jorah cracked a first across Karl’s jaw as he tried to notch his bow.

“Stop this!” Thoros bellowed as his blade was torn away and a dirk pressed to his throat. “This is a princess of the blood! The council will-”

“Blood is why we are here.” Aegon grumbled. “The council chose me to speak for the empire in my father’s absence, Thoros. Do not force me to name you and the Dark Order traitors to the throne. This must be done.”

“Why?” Dany fumed to watch legion men enter the manse. “What possible reason could you have to invade our home?”

“I need to collect part of father’s ransom. Drogo wants nothing less than a dragon to parade back to Vaes Dothrak. He’s willing to give us our king if I hand him another prize with king’s blood.”

“You can’t think to…” Her eyes widened and she looked by Aegon to Drogo, who watched all this with a look of amusement. Her flesh began to crawl.
“It’s me… I’m to be his prize, aren’t I? This is how you revenge yourself upon me?! Damn you, Aegon! I will not be handed away like a broodmare!!”

“I could never do that to you, Daenerys.” Aegon shook his head. “Whatever your faults, I loved you once. To imagine a Dothraki barbarian pawing at you… by Balerion, I could barely stomach the thought of Jon tainting you with his touch. I could never sell you to someone worse than him.”

“Then why are you doing this? If not me then who…”

Her words fell away, a terrible fear twisting her stomach into knots. Aegon could not meet her eyes as he spoke to the vile notion.

“Drogo will trade our king for the grandson of a king. A prince’s son. Baelyon. It must be him.”

“NO!” She screamed at him. “No! I forbid it! You can’t do this!”

“I have to. Drogo’s sworn a blood oath to keep the boy safe and return him come next spring.”

“He’s not taking my son. Aemon might be sick but do not forget Jon. Are you willing to risk his wrath as well as mine?”

“You think so highly of him.” Aegon scowled. “Jon may not like the deal, but if it frees our father he’ll swallow it as I have. This price must be paid. I doubt Jon would be willing to offer Aenry up in Baelyon’s place. Do you really think he’s so noble as to trade a trueborn son for some questioned bastard?”

She didn’t get a chance to answer. The sounds of boots drew their gaze to an archway where two legion men emerged with Baelyon in their grasp.

“Mother, what’s happening?” Baelyon blinked at the sight of her surrounded by blades. He tried to pull away but his captors held firm. “Leave her alone! Prince Aegon! Help her!”

“No one is going to hurt her.” Aegon spoke softly. “We’re here for you, young dragon. Ser Jorah is going to take you on a grand adventure with Khal Drogo. Soon the whole Targaryen Empire will speak of you. The boy who saved the High King-”

“He’s yours.” Dany proclaimed, speaking the truth now to save her son. “Aegon, Baelyon is your son. He’s always been yours. Don’t do this to our child, I beg of you.”

Baelyon paled to hear what he’d waited his whole lifetime to learn. Yet when the boy looked to Aegon, the prince ignored him. Aegon’s face was made of stone.

“Years ago that would have meant everything to me.” Aegon narrowed his eyes on her. “When I could have been his father, not some stranger. That’s what he is to me at least.” He turned his back on them then. “You stole a son away from me Daenerys. Maybe now you will know my pain. Say your farewells.”

Deaf to her pleas, Aegon ordered his men to let Baelyon go, so the little boy could run to her. They hugged each other desperately, Baelyon crying and Dany doing everything she could to hold her tears back. The boy was already trembling, she would not make this worse for him.

“There, there.” Dany lifted his face so she could wipe away his tears. “Don’t cry, dearest one. You have to be brave for me. Brave like the Young Dragon was.

“The Dothraki killed him…” Baelyon sobbed. “I don’t want to go… I don’t want Aegon to be my
father…”

She kissed his brow. “Our wants can mean nothing to the gods. You mean everything to me, Baelyon. The khal swears to take care of you, give him no reason to do differently. I will miss you with all my heart, so come back to me with grand tales to cure my woes. It may take time, but we will be together again, I swear it. Promise you’ll return to me. Promise me that…”

“I p-promise.” Baelyn’s chin quivered as he said so. She stroked his face and hair, whispering everything she could think of to build up his courage. To let her son know how loved he was. Nothing else mattered but hearing his sweet voice and having him close.

If only for a short while.

Then she heard Khal Drogo bark something in Dothraki and his men laughing. Then Ser Jorah and Baelyn’s handlers appeared, pulling the boy from her arms. It took everything in her not to scratch their eyes out, to stand there and watch as Baelyn was dragged on to the Dothraki. After Ser Jorah helped him upon the white palfrey, Dany had to swallow a scream when Drogo roughly grabbed at Baelyn’s chin. The khal stared long and hard at the teary-eyed boy before his almond eyes flicked to her.

A curt nod followed. The only assurance the horselord would give before turning his mount and forcing Baelyn to do the same.

Before they rode out of the gate, Baelyn turned back to look at her. That was when Thoros stepped forward, pressing a fist to his heart. Karl and Grenn joined him, saluting her son as well. Her fist clenched so tight, her nails cut into the flesh of her palm. She pressed it against her chest, where the hole that was her heart once was.

When Baelyn did the same, he managed one last smile. Over the sound of the horses’ hooves, his small voice found its way to her ears.

“We will meet again.”

Then he was gone and Dany’s legs gave out. She knelt upon the ground, clutching at her chest, willing with all her heart for his words to be true.

*We will meet again.*
she was both his subject and goodsister.

“Your grace, I beseech you.” Eddara said, bending so low that her long honey-colored braid touched the ground. “Spare my husband. Forgive Bran his faults. This I ask for Torrhen’s Square, who have lost too many lo’ these hard years. For House Tallhart, your proud sentinels of the North evermore.”

“My lady, rise.” Robb beckoned, his brow creasing beneath his iron crown. “Do not prostrate yourself to me in your own home. The Tallhart legacy is one of faithful service and loyalty. You do it proud by honoring your vows as a wife. If my brother had half your character, perhaps he might have upheld his oath to me.”

Eddara looked up but otherwise stayed put. “He acted recklessly. Brashly. Yet there was no treason in his heart. I may not know Bran as well as you, but I believe that wholly and completely.”

“The treason was in the act.”

“I pray you to see it as justice instead. By his own hand, Bran slew the man who murdered thy own father.”

“What of your family?” Robb demanded. “Leobald and Benfred. My friend Cley, your husband. All slain by the krakens. We were to avenge them and so many others upon the ironmen. A quest Bran has turned to ruin.”

Robb shot a sharp look her way then. Challenging Catelyn to say differently.

She could not. To peer out the window to the lake beyond was to see ships meant to be at war floating idly at anchor. The fleet numbered far less than it should. While Bran’s armada was able to escape Harlaw with relative ease, the Manderlys had suffered dearly. Denied the use of western ports, the merman fleet was forced to travel north with nary a safe harbor. Harassed by the krakens and battered by storms, the Manderlys lost more ships and men to the journey than in the fighting around Fair Isle.

Yet it the losses at Harlaw that Robb wished to speak on.

“If not for Bran, Harlaw would have fallen. Pyke too. He set two armies meant to crush those islands to fighting one another. That madness gave Theon Greyjoy and Rodrik Harlaw time to gather their forces. The only reason my brother and the others escaped at all is because the krakens fell upon the lions first. Lord Quenton Banefort is captured, most of his men slain.”

“Losses to the Lannisters.” Eddara glanced to Myrcella. “Once such tidings were celebrated here in the North.”

Myrcella lowered her head at that, while Robb’s eyes narrowed upon Eddara.

“Lord Ryswell does not feel like celebrating. His son Rickard must be buried. The Forresters are praying Ethan will lose no more than his leg. What of the dead left rotting on Harlaw? The men lost to the seas? Those losses, my dear lady, those are our losses. Deaths I lay at Bran’s feet.”

“Men who died bravely.” Catelyn spoke in as even a voice as she could manage. “To achieve what many northmen have long aspired to gain. Justice for Ned.”

Robb shook his head at her. “A cause you asked me to set aside to strike up this alliance in the first place. Foul as it was, I swallowed my hatred and managed to convince my lords to do the same. All so my brother, the one I trusted most, could defy me. No. No, mother. Your hypocrisy cannot be mine. Bran must be punished.”
“You mistake me, Robb. I was merely speaking to how delicately this matter must be handled. For I agree with you. Whatever justice Bran served to Gregor Clegane, he needs face yours as well.”

Her words shocked the others but, the Seven help her, they were the truth.

“Bran broke more than an oath to you, he betrayed his king. After the banishments you handed out, your brother’s defiance cannot go unpunished. Yet the response must be a tempered one. Too lenient, and it makes you look weak to your lords. Too severe, and they question your devotion to your father.”

Robb stiffened at that. “I take it you have some suggestions on the matter.”

She did, and they made her feel a poor mother indeed.

“Should Bran denounce himself, and spare you from doing so, you spare his life. Strip him of the Dreadfort and its lands. Banish him to the God’s Eye, so he might seek penance among the green men and their weirwood groves. After a time, set him to task on your behalf. An act of contrition to earn his place in the North once more. So he might return here, to his wife and her castle, a chastened and loyal subject.”

Eddara blanched at the proposal while Robb put a hand to his chin, stroking his beard in thought. That he considered it at all was a reason to hope.

“How many years would we be apart?” Eddara asked. “I could not leave Torrhen’s Square, not with the reaver threat renewed.”

Before Catelyn could answer, she grew troubled by how Myrcella approached Robb. If what she suspected was true, this would be the time for Myrcella to strike.

“It is a fair measure, Robb.” Myrcella surprised her by saying. “To lose a castle and title, to be exiled from his wife and kin in shame, none could call that soft-hearted.”

“Tywin Lannister will.” Robb replied. “He threatens war if Bran’s head is not delivered to him. The Riverlands will bleed again…”

Eddara leapt to her feet but Catelyn was beside the lady in a flash. “A demand the old lion made to save face with his bannermen. He knew Robb would never accede to it.”

“Nor is Casterly Rock without worries.” Myrcella nodded. “If a two-front war would stretch the North’s abilities, I doubt the Kingdom of the Rock could do any better. Winning back Fair Isle will not stop the ironmen from returning, especially with the alliance at an end.”

“They are every bit as vulnerable as we are.” Robb winced to push away from the table, going to look out the window. “So many ships… less than we need though. The krakens will come again, like the tide itself. To reap vengeance for what little we accomplished on those isles. This war, it was about more than winning back our lands. To crush the Greyjoys would have meant years of peace along these coasts. Time to rebuild and raise better defences. A foolish hope, a dream of spring.”

He lifted his crown off his head, staring at it as he ran his thumbs over the iron spikes.

“Winter is coming… but the ironmen might have been kept away. If not for Bran.”

“Robb-” She tried to reason with him, but Robb was already barking for Alyn. The guardsman entered as her son returned the crown to its rightful place upon his head.
“Fetch the prisoner. He will hear his sentence from my lips before it’s announced to the rest of the realm.”

“What sentence though?” Eddara asked as Alyn departed. “My king, I pray you speak of the exile the dowager queen proposed.”

“I do not. Such a sentence would work to settle a quarrel between brothers. Not between a king and a traitor. Our blood earns Bran the only choice I can rightly give him. Lose his head or take the black.”

Myrcella gasped and Catelyn put a hand to her chest. Less startled by Robb’s decision than the coldness in his voice.

The North is hard and cold, and has no mercy.

Ned had told her that an eternity ago. A warning to his young southron queen of the realm she would soon rule. One she held to be true, of the lands and its people. Just never their son.

The prospect of losing another son to the Wall troubled her greatly. For Bran was more than the gentle soul she’d treasured since he was a darling boy. He was Robb’s heir.

If the truth ever came out about Myrcella’s true parentage, the North would curse her as an abomination.

Poor little Ned and Tom as well.

That Jaime and Cersei Lannister could act so selfishly, so utterly mad, it infuriated her. She harbored a dark desire to expose them and reveal the rot of House Lannister to the whole of Westeros. Yet in punishing their crimes, Catelyn would attain her grandsons.

Something she could not do. For whatever Myrcella was, those boys had Robb’s blood. Stark and Tully blood. They were every bit family to Catelyn as her other grandchildren.

A bond which clashed with her duty to Robb. The truth would destroy his standing with the northern lords, who might well reject his heirs and spell the ruin of Robb’s reign. Unless he had other viable heirs to raise up.

Rickon, Wyllard, Sansa and Arya’s boys, any of them might do if need be.

Yet none have the standing of Bran in the eyes of North. He would be the lords’ natural choice.

Surely Myrcella realized the same. A deep suspicion had taken root in Catelyn upon hearing of Bran and the Mountain. It was possible that Gregor Clegane’s arrival on Harlaw had been part of a deliberate provocation. One meant to eliminate Bran as a threat to Robb’s Lannister heirs. Perhaps Myrcella had arranged such to protect her sons, sending word with Tyrion Lannister back to Casterly Rock.

A muddled conspiracy at best, one even she could not fully accept. With her own ears Catelyn had heard how Myrcella scorned her Lannister kin. Nor would it make sense for Myrcella to arrange such an elaborate plot, only to argue for Bran’s sake now.

Mistrusting what Myrcella is only makes it easier to blame her for all this.

Far easier than accepting the faults of mine own sons…
“Bran cannot take the black.” Eddara declared, stepping to Robb in defiance. “I lost one husband already, you will not take another from me.”

“It cannot be helped.” Robb replied, meeting her gaze. “If the day comes, I will permit you to remarry-”

“So some new man can act the father to my child?”

Robb gaped at that. He then watched as Eddara’s hands went to her middle while Catelyn saw her eyes fill with both pride and fear.

“I’ve not told him yet. I was afraid, I mean Cley and I tried for years…” Eddara shook her head. “My time with Bran was so short I did not expect to quicken so soon. The Old Gods have surely blessed our family. So I beseech you, King Robb, do not curse us to be apart.”

She went to Eddara, the lady allowing Catelyn to grasp her shoulders. The joy of such news tempered by the prospect of yet another Stark child losing a father. To look at Robb was to see him grappling with this too, his stern expression having faltered under Eddara’s withering gaze.

“My love, a child.” Myrcella whispered, tugging at his arm. “In exile Bran would have the hope to be act a father one day.”

“Robb, it is enough to take his lands and castles.” She made common cause with Myrcella. “But not that hope.”

Robb pulled away from Myrcella. “Unlike Bran, I stay true to my word. He has my leave to become a better man at the Wall. Eddara, you have my sympathy. My pledge of support for you and your child-”

“You pledged me a husband! That’s what we need!” Eddara snapped as a hard knock came at the door. Alyn entered soon after, Bran following behind.

Other than some healing cuts and bruises and his plain attire of roughspun wools, Bran’s ordeals had changed him little. There were no shackles, for Robb had accorded him the treatment deserving of a Stark prince.

When Bran bowed in deference to his king, that proved too much for his lady wife. After a final fierce glance to Robb, Eddara turned her back to him and strode towards the door. She paused only for Bran, laying a hand to his chest so the pair could share a longing look. From where Catelyn stood, she recognized the regret in Bran’s eyes. That would worsen if Eddara spoke of her news, though the lady did no such thing.

With no word of farewell, Eddara drew away from Bran and was gone. He stared after her even as Alyn closed the door.

“She grieves for me...” Bran said simply, his head lowered. “It’s strange... I’d rather she not care at all. I never meant to hurt her.”

“You betrayed her as much as I.” Robb stared at Bran with a cold intensity to his blue eyes. “A crime that has touched us all. One you will answer for.”

With an iron firmness, Robb laid out Bran’s charges and the deaths he’d caused. Bran asked of Ethan, and was bereaved to hear how Beth dared not leave his bedside for fear of his chances. When Robb nearly revealed Eddara’s pregnancy, a sharp look from Catelyn quieted the king.
Robb may rule over us all, but it’s not for him to speak to Eddara’s child.

He cannot take that from her as well.

After being told he must take the black, Bran did not so much as blink.

“There, you’re finally getting your wish.” Robb said. “I did everything I could for you, Bran. The Dreadfort, a fine bride in Eddara, all of it thrown away. Still, you get what you want.”

“I have to go to the Wall… but I never wanted it to happen this way.” Bran looked between them before closing his eyes. “The two of you were right, father wouldn’t have wanted this. The Mountain earned that death but my king, my friends, my wife, you all deserved better from me. I’ll say that to whomever you need, Robb. Accept my failings before the whole of the North. Don’t let them blame you for this. This was fate, Robb. Ugly as it is, this was meant to be.”

“Stop with that nonsense.” Robb spoke hoarsely, crossing the space between them and grabbing hold of Bran’s shirt, bracing him violently. “This was not fate. For our father to finally be avenged only so I could condemn you… to condemn my brother…”

“I’m sorry, Robb.” Bran met his eyes, and where two men stood she now saw a pair of little boys again.

“Don’t.” The king rasped, pulling Bran close so they rested their brows against one another. “By the gods, so many battles… all that blood… and it is you that breaks me.”

The condemned prince grasped the back of Robb’s head, holding them together.

“The Starks endure.”

She let them have this moment. For soon Robb would have to stand before his lords to condemn Bran openly.

With a kiss to Bran’s cheek, she promised to visit him in his tower cell at a later hour. By then, Eddara will have likely revealed all that he left behind. She would be there for him then. For what little time they had left.

Then she was alone with Robb and Myrcella. Her son slumped against the desk, his wife doing her best to console him with whispered words and soft caresses.

“You need rest, Robb. Your travels, these trials, I can see how your hurts worsen again.”

“Bran’s in for worse than this.” He sighed, rising to his full height. “Though you give sage counsel, ‘Cella. I should seek a bed, I must be well-rested to forsake my little brother.”

“You can still change your mind.” She said, earning a dismissive grunt.

“I could, but I won’t. Bran has made his peace with it. So must you, mother.” He gestured to the window then. “Though I doubt you’ll ever forgive me. He was always your favorite.”

“That’s not-”

“No more false words, not between us. Do not feel compelled to stay in the North. You came to forge an alliance that is as dead as the Mountain. Go back to your life in the south. Revel in Jon and Sansa’s triumphs. We Kings of Winter offer you naught but grief.”

There was truth to what he said. More than she cared to admit.
A return to the south was not unwelcome to her. The girls would have use of her, especially after what they’d endured in the Vale. Winterfell still held ghosts for her, and soon the cheerful memory of Bran’s laughter echoing of its walls would haunt her as well.

Yet when she looked to Myrcella, who once more twirled her hair in nervousness, worse thoughts troubled her.

*Lannister treachery cost me one king… if I should leave it may cost me another.*

*Whether Myrcella is friend or foe, the truth of her remains a threat.*

“I would stay.” She declared, bowing to Robb and Myrcella both. “My son is in need. I will give the North all I can, despite how cold and hard it has been to me.”

“For we Starks endure.”

SANSA

She pressed her face against the window, the coolness of the glass a welcome sensation. Water dripped down the other side as rain pattered against it. A ways below was the garden of the Eyrie, and she watched a pair of serving girls running through it, smiling and laughing as they sought shelter from the rain.

Despite how warm and dry her chambers were, such joy eluded her. The twins were similarly subdued, though they offered the odd smile or giggle from where they sat near the hearth. They clearly took more enjoyment from their needlework than Sansa did. Her needles and thread sat abandoned upon the side table. Truly she could not recall setting them aside, though her patience the work was quite at an end.

She was staring at her poor attempt at stitching a winter rose when Aemma hissed something to Rhaegina. Both girls now eyeing her with worry.

“I am sorry about the rain, my darlings.” She said. “A walk in the garden did sound nice.”

“It’s not your fault, mother.” Aemma said sweetly. “We’ll just have to take our stroll tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Sansa felt as if that interfered with something she must do, though she could not think of what. “I think it will be too wet still. Perhaps the day after. We’ll go later, I promise.”

“It’s always later. Later. Later” Rhaegina punctuated each word by stabbing forcefully into her work, her purple eyes twinkling in the firelight. “You were supposed to join us in the garden last week. Before that it was prayers in the sept or helping father welcome newcomers. We did it all without you—”

“I was ill, sweetling. Then there were things I had to do… I must have told you—”

“You always have an excuse but it’s never the truth. Just be honest and tell us to leave you alone.”

“Rhae.” Aemma grabbed her twin’s hand, her blues eyes wide and beseeching. “Stop it. You can’t talk to her like that. We’re supposed to be helping.”

“How? She won’t let us.” Rhaegina crossed her arms and turned away, scorning them stare into the fire. A whispered plea from Aemma was ignored, leaving the young princess to chew her lip and
look to Sansa as if expecting her to do something.

They all expected things from her. Yet she had naught to give. Nothing good that is.

She wrung her hands nervously. “Rhaegina, Aemma, I enjoy your company very much. If not for the rain we would be touring the garden. Now when we do go, you can bring your high harps. Your playing always livened the godswood so.”

Aemma brightened. “Let us go fetch them then. We’ve been practicing a new song to cheer Lord Harry and you can tell us what you-”

“Not now. Later.” She said before realizing better, Rhaegina’s shoulders tensing to hear the word. “I’ve yet to see what pretty things you’ve stitched today. Aemma, what that’s you’re working on.”

Rhaegina muttered something as Aemma shifted uneasily, holding up a cloth showing the outline of a white castle.

“It’s a gift for Ser Mychel. To welcome him into the Kingsguard.”

“A white fort instead of red.” She spoke sadly, remembering now that Aemma had already told her this. Both the girls had, yet her mind had been elsewhere. Now, for the life of her, she could not recall what Rhaegina had said.

Before she could ask, Rhaegina threw her embroidery to the ground. It landed near Sansa’s feet, and she saw a half-finished white dragon and grey wolf. Both stood upon their hind legs, their claws entwined, as if dancing. She used to love dancing.

“It’s for you.” Rhaegina spoke bitterly. “To wear during Aenry’s nameday feast.”

“Oh.” A deep unease stirred within her. “Well, it is delightful. So much so that I think you should wear it instead, sweetling.”

“Because you’re not going, are you?” Rhaegina rose to her feet, glaring in accusation.

“I was planning to…” Her hands tightened around each other. “Yet I fear a feast might be too much too soon. My head could take to spinning again and- Rhaegina!”

Her cry came too late to stop Rhaegina from storming off. One moment the girl was pushing at the chamber door, the next she was gone. Leaving Aemma behind, clutching at her own embroidery so tightly that her knuckles whitened.

“Do not be cross with me. Please, Aemma. If it was a smaller occasion… if I was feeling better…”

Her excuses bid Aemma to set aside her needlework to stand. Unlike Rhaegina, there was more sadness in her glistening eyes than anger. A tear ran down the girl’s cheek as she turned her back to Sansa, following after her twin. When the door shut behind her and Sansa found herself alone, she bent forward to bite on her knuckle.

Anguished to have disappointed her darling girls so. Ashamed at how relieved she was for them to be gone.

For Rhaegina had spoken the truth, Sansa dreaded the time they spent together. All she wanted was to be left alone. If the twins stayed away, she was spared their judgement and they were free from her frequent distemper.
It was worse with Aenry and Vaelena. Her son always asking for a song or a tale, demanding to show her some new corner of the Eyrie he had just discovered. Every visit ended the same, Aenry would grow wroth at her refusals and then weep when she sent him away. Vaelena was less demanding yet the babe’s simple need to be held and loved felt a crushing weight to bear. Most times Sansa simply watched her tiny girl crawl about a cradle until she fussed before letting others tend her.

She loved them all. She truly did. Only any way she thought to show it felt terribly unworthy. Her children deserved better.

As did Jon. Since taking the Eyrie, they’d made love but a few times. Truly she was hard-pressed to call it such. The passion was gone, his caresses feeling forced, their kissing hasty and awkward. No doubt he saw in her body the same ugliness that dwelt within her soul. She could barely look at her naked self anymore. Her skin was pasty and blemished, and though her middle swelled slightly from the new babe, the skin about her ribs had drawn tight.

“Some time out this tower would do you wonders.” Jon had told her when she escaped his grasp to cover herself once more. “A proper meal too. There’s a sunroom in the eastern tower, let’s go bask in the light and I can feed you some lemon cakes. Like the day you told me you were carrying Aenry. To see you so happy again…”

He didn’t understand. To think on the life they’d had before filled her with sadness. Sansa remembered how happy she had been in those golden days. Yet those memories only drove her further into the shadows. A darkness she’d rather suffer alone in her rooms.

At times these walls felt like a prison but they were also her safe haven against the ugly world beyond. One that would surely judge her harshly for all she’d done.

Thus she made no effort to chase after her darling girls.

*Wherever Rhaegina and Aemma go, they will be better off.*

*They can care for each other better than I.*

The rain continued to fall in the hours that followed. She switched between trying to read and continuing her needlework. All that came of it was a growing pile of unfinished books and embroideries. Mostly she just sat idle, pawing at her middle and watching the rainfall.

So when the knock came at her door, she felt it an unbearable interruption.

“I’ve no hunger.” She called, hoping that whichever servant carried her meal would not inform Jon of this. He had a disagreeable tendency of visiting to shame her into eating.

“I’m glad for I’ve no food to offer.” A familiar voice answered, and soon after the white robed form of Septon Tom entered her chamber. She was on her feet, smoothing her skirts, feeling quite unprepared to be scrutinized by the Faith, when the septon bowed to her.

“Your grace.” Tom of the Seven smiled widely. “It has been too long since you reminded me of the beauty the Seven can bless we mortals with. I congratulate you on the news of your upcoming child.”

“I thank you.” She replied. “Septon, I am a tad unprepared for this. I had not heard you were at the Eyrie, but if you’d like to arrange an audience later…”

“Actually I only just arrived.” The man gestured to his thin brown hair, which was quite damp. “Do you mind if I take a seat by the hearth? Some rest and warmth would be a kindness.”
She wanted him to seek comfort elsewhere, yet Tom did not wait for permission, collapsing into the chair. He let out a sigh of relief to hold his hands to the fire and smiled at her. The way his eyes darted between her and her chair bid Sansa to sit once more. Her back and shoulders tensing at the unwanted intrusion.

“I apologize for my delayed arrival.” Tom plucked at the golden rope binding his robes. “Maester Sam and the others were right to hurry here, but I had to seek the truth of the dire reports we’d heard. To see with my own eyes the terrible damage the war wrought against the holy places of the Vale.”

Images of burnt of septries and bloody septons and septas came rushing to her mind. The smell of smoke and death so powerful in her mind she could even taste it.

“Yes, there were many crimes done in the war. Towards the faithful… and others.”

“Yes, yes. I think none so vile as the Martyr’s Mill.” Tom’s big mouth tightened into a firm line. “A few Poor Fellows have turned the mill into a monastery of sorts. They were the first to return, seeking to bury the dead in the proper way. The sheer number of graves is startling. One after the other, long unending lines that cover a whole field. When I beheld them for the first time, I took to singing the hymn of the fallen right then and there. Have you had a chance to visit yet?”

“No.” She tried to hide her horror at the idea. “Though I’m sure the work there is surely worthy of all your praise.”

“The martyrs will have better still. I have it on good authority the High Septon himself shall visit the mill. His holiness cannot make the journey to Andalos again with all the troubles in the... well, to visit the resting place of so many holy warriors makes for a fine pilgrimage. Perhaps her grace could join him in doing so.”

A powerful urge to retch took hold of her. The idea of strolling along the graves at Martyr’s Mill offended Sansa to her core. Others might have done the killing and dug the graves, but it she who had delivered those poor men to their ends.

*I knew what terrible fate I sent them to. There is no penance to be found there. No forgiveness*

*Daegon and Harry can feign such, but the dead tell no lies.*

“I cannot go.” She swallowed deeply. “Truly, my presence would mean little compared to a pilgrimage by the High Septon himself.”

Tom regarded her strangely. “My queen, you should reconsider. Your presence would mean very much indeed. His Holiness could spread the word far and wide of your devotion to the seven-”

“To challenge the whispers of me making blood sacrifices?”

This shocked the septon into silence, and she turned to the window once more. Outside the sky was dark but the lights from other parts of the castle could be seen through the dark rivers of rainwater running down the glass.

“I know what they are saying about me at Highgarden and Oldtown. Did Jon tell you not to speak of it?”

“The king asked me to be mindful of the delicate condition you were in.”

“He’s said the same to everyone I think. Maester Samwell, Talia, perhaps my darling girls as well. They are all so careful not to speak of Bran. Of Rhaegar and the empire. Once Jon would have
known better than to try and hide things from me.”

*Back when he thought better of me. Before I had fallen to such depths as these.*

“Do not think it a betrayal to talk with me about foul tidings.” She continued to watch the rain patter against the glass. “The whole of Westeros has likely heard of how my brothers have turned on each other. I must confess, picturing Bran in the blacks of the Night’s Watch is easier than accepting that it was Robb who condemned him to such. Tell me, have the Lannisters made war against my family once more?”

“I have heard talk of a raid or two into the Riverlands. They are only so well known because of how fiercely Prince Rickon threw back the incursions.”

“He must be careful. Princes are no safer in this world than kings. The High King himself can tell him so. Is it true Rhaegar has returned to Summerhall?”

“It is. King Jon says his father rallies new armies there. The empire is still ravaged by bands of Dothraki not party to the prince’s peace with Khal Drogo. I’m told that beast left the empire with a caravan of spoils that stretched for miles. Gold, silver, jewels—”

“And one boy.” She rubbed at her middle. “I love Daenerys not, but to have her son dragged away by barbarians… I would have understood if Jon had tried to help her…”

“King Jon showed wisdom in not being drawn into that ugliness.” Tom paused for a moment of consideration. “What could be done? The High King himself approved of the Prince Aegon’s bargain with the Dothraki and your kingdom is in no state to press the matter. Truthfully, when the king offered Daenerys safehaven in Aevalon, I spoke against it out of propriety.”

She sighed. “Daenerys and propriety have never gone together. Still, she did not deserve this. Nor does her son.”

“An opinion the princess shares. She rejected the king’s offer, pledging to win back her son whether he helps her or not.”

“Then I wish her luck.” Sansa said, praying Aegon and Daenerys kept their troubles to the other side of the Narrow Sea.

“My queen, something confuses me.” Tom pulled her attention back to him, finding the septon tapping his fingers upon his knees. “If you knew of all this, then why not tell your royal husband? He values your counsel above all others, including those of us on his council.”

“Not any longer.” She replied, looking to the floor. “My faults were laid bare to him, that’s why he keeps such matters from me.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but that’s untrue. As I understand it, he’s merely tried to spare you added hardships. He openly laments your absence from matters of court. This king does languish without his queen.”

“He is better off. The children too. All I do is disappoint them…. hurt them. If I stay away, from my family, from all of this, I can do no more harm.”

“What harm? Those with sense know the tales spread about you are false.”

“Not all!” She shouted. “Daegon will tell you! Harry too if he can muster his wits! Ser Theodan cannot. Nor his men. You saw their graves, you saw what I sent them to. I didn’t want them to die
but that didn’t stop me. Gods help me, that’s how badly I wanted this kingdom. A poisoned prize… it taints me, it taints this child. I wish it to be born tomorrow if only to be free of me.”

By the end, she was gripping the arms of her chair so tightly her nails had dug into the wood. Elsewhere in the castle, a long, loud howl reached through the window. In this Lady gave voice to her sorrow but her friend could not heal it. There was no cure for this.

Septon Tom said nothing at first. She saw none of the recrimination she expected in his eyes, yet the worry lines that creased his face seemed to deepen. A flaw in his mask of calm, and she suspected a carefully worded rebuke at any moment.

Yet it never came. When Tom finally did open his mouth to speak, it was to whisper a prayer to the seven. Once finished, he folded his hands across his lap and nodded her way.

“I wish to tell you how I found my way to the Faith.” Tom told her. “Few know this tale. In many ways, my path to salvation shame me more than the sinful life I led before it.”

“Please, septon. I am in no mood…” She quieted when Tom raised a hand to silence her.

“The man I was, he was called Tom of Sevensteams. Though he preferred to be known as Tom of Sevenstrings. He was a singer, a minstrel, but a scoundrel first and foremost. His home was the open road, his stage any inn or castle hall that would pay coin for his songs. There were few sins he did not revel in. Nary a bed he would scorn. From the Dornish Marches to the Trident, highborn or low, many a maiden fell to his charms.”

A small smile pulled at Tom’s face and there was a faraway look in his eyes.

“He was a tad older than you when his travels took him back to a village in the Riverlands he knew well. There he found a drover’s daughter who’d offered him a place to sleep and her virtue a year before. She met him with a bright smile and a son she named as his. He had fathered other bastards and it shamed him little to promise this girl all she wanted to hear. For a warm meal and another night in her bed, he swore she would be his wife and to take them away to a better life. His lies as sweet as the song he sang for her.”

He leaned back in his chair, his face turning to the hearth. The fire dancing across his face.

“After a few days he slipped away while she slept. He knew there were better things ahead for him. There was war in the lands and with it came armies and lords who paid to have songs sung of their glorious feats. He came upon such a lord on the road, whose men might have killed him if not for his voice. Instead he joined their march. Straight back to the maiden’s village.”

His voice grew hoarse at this part.

“There was nothing he could have done. Armed with nothing but a lute and his voice, he was no match for men with blades and mail. That’s what he told himself when he watched the village burn. Then when he found drover’s daughter and her boy after. Burying them would have been the decent thing. Yet when the lord demanded another song, he abandoned them again. A better man would have refused, but he sang for the butcher. Sang the very song he’d won the maiden over with.”

“No more.” She said, having endured enough heartbreak of her own, yet Tom would not be silenced.

“Time wore on, he travelled far, yet the dead followed him wherever he went. Only drink held them at bay. Soon there was little else he cared for but that escape. His throat dried to worthlessness, he pawned his lute for coin, and suddenly he was but another beggar on the roadside. At his worst, a
travelling septon found him. A good and simple man, one who saw some use in a broken man. For food and drink, he joined this shepherd on his travels, singing hymns to the septon’s flocks. Weeks, months, I cannot say how many passed before the hymns came to mean more to the wretch. Their holy words spoke to what he needed. The drink mattered less, the pain diminished with every hymn, and slowly, he built himself anew. The pit he wallowed in was deep, the climb hard, but he found his way out. I found my way out.”

At this Tom slumped back in chair, his voice now hoarse. The rain continued to fall but she was not tempted to seek the window again. Tom had her attention now, and though his tale was one of heartfelt honesty, she found its message somewhat shallow.

“So I am to sing hymns and pray? This is how I find salvation? I feel for your trials, but this is advice any number of septons would give.”

“Fuck prayer.” Tom snapped, pointing a finger at his chest. “That was not what helped me. It was the singing. Finding some joy in life again. Some work for my idle hands. It might not sound like much, but inch by inch, those efforts pulled me free.”

This sounded like nonsense. She had tried to keep herself busy. Books, needlework, meeting with the children, none of it helped. The septon simply did not understand, and when she told him so, he nodded.

“Then help me understand.”

“I’m too tired to talk… later maybe.”

“Don’t talk then.” He gestured to her table where some blank parchments and a quill sat. “You say the king and others are not telling me the truth. That the rumors thriving at Highgarden are false. So put it to parchment. Tell me the story that no one else is sharing. Let everyone know the war as you knew it, help us to understand.”

At that, the older man rose wearily to come and kneel at her feet. He kissed at her hand before guiding her in a whispered prayer. After this, the septon made to retire, without bothering to beg her leave. Unlike the twins, Sansa did challenge him before he could slip away.

“Did Jon send you here? To say these things?”

Tom smiled. “My dear lady, whether he did or he didn’t, it matters not. The seven brought me here this night, for it was they who guide us all. Good night to you.”

Then he was gone. Leaving Sansa alone save for the child growing within her. The familiar relief flooded through her at this, yet she did not seek the window again. Nor her books or needlework or even the comforts of her bed.

Long after he’d departed, the septon’s challenge lingered in her mind.

For her to tell the tale of the war that no one else wanted to hear. A story of blood-soaked brutality and merciless cruelties with a few rare moments of chivalry in between. Much of which Sansa had seen with her own eyes, some she’d set in motion herself.

A glance to her feet showed Rhaegina’s embroidery still lying on the ground. She picked it up and laid it upon her table. The work was well done and she wished the girl had finished it.

Closing her eyes, Sansa steeled herself against the doubts which clouded her mind. Then she snatched up the quill and smoothed down a piece of parchment beside the Rhaegina’s half-finished
needlework.

_Daegon, Harry, all the others, I can tell their tale at least._

_I owe them that._

That first piece of parchment was soon turned to ruin. Then a second. And a third. Only then did she realize, it made no sense to start the tale midway through.

Her loved ones, her victims, even her enemies, they deserved to have their story told in full. So, with a hand to her future child, and another on her quill, Sansa struggled to act a scribe.

**The War for the Vale**

This war began as another ended. The renewal of spring brought with it the return of a king and a short-lived peace. Until that time, the Vale and Highlands had no quarrel between them. That was until an ill-fated night at the theatre of Aevalon.

And once more, the death of a direwolf began a bloody war. One that gave rise to heroes and villains both, and made victims of them all...
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Spring returns to the Six Kingdoms. With it comes invitations, opportunities, and the worst sorts of betrayals.

Chapter Notes

Almost ten years have passed since we last saw this world.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Six Kingdoms

The conquest of the Vale by Jonarys Targaryen ushered in a period unseen since the last King of the Trident. A change to the number of realms within the Sunset Kingdoms, from seven to six.

The Kingdom of the North and Trident, the Kingdom of the Rock, the Kingdom of the Reach, the Kingdoms of the Highlands, and Dorne.

With nearly half the south ruled by the Targaryens of the white dragon, another terrible war seemed on the horizon. Either to be waged by King Jonarys, who had a violent repute quite unearned by deed or manner, or by the remaining rulers of the south in defense of their realms. Perhaps even their lives.

Indeed, two long-ruling kings would not survive this period. Mace Gardener, King of the Reach, and Doran Martell, Prince of Dorne. Neither of whom were slain by the white dragon, but were lost to natural causes. King Mace passing away in his bed, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Prince Doran would succumb to his long-suffering ailments, at the Water Gardens he so loved. Both dying before the end of yet another conflict between their realms.

The rest endured. For, rather than war, years of peace would be ushered in between the Targaryens and their neighbors.

Robb Stark, King in the North, with great hardship did deny the Iron Islanders any new footholds in his realm. That the riverlands remained under Stark rule is credited to the leadership of the king’s youngest brother, Prince Rickon. Styled the Black Wolf, he rallied the riverlords and launched a raid or two into the west, becoming a bane to the lions of Casterly Rock.

Despite these setbacks, King Tywin Lannister became a beacon of hope to his subjects. Though his lands had not expanded beyond their traditional holdings, the Lannisters had
retaken all that was once lost to them. Beyond the years of prosperity, many held up Tywin’s greatest feat during this time as winning his son, Tyrion, in the form of a cousin, Cerenna Lannister.

For the betterment of the other realms, the Iron Islands endured a steep decline in power and reach. King Balon Greyjoy wasted much of his resources on ill-fated campaigns and battling rebellions by his own son, Theon. Denied any significant holdings in the mainland, the Greyjoys subsisted on small-scale reaving. Sadly, as the ironmen are fond of saying, they have a way of rising up harder and stronger.

While the Reach and Dorne would go to war, and the Black Wolf and golden lions did battle, peace reigned in the lands of the white dragon. King Jonarys would rule from the Eyrie for a small part of this period. In place of Sansa Stark, the dragon’s queen, who suffered from a mysterious illness in the Vale, the Dragons Darling were rumored to act the true ladies of the Eyrie. That was until the Targaryens left things to Harrold Arryn and his wife, Eleanor Mooton.

For the Kingdoms of the Highlands, the ensuing years were a time of peace and plenty. More Targaryens would be born and newly landed houses, like Blackfyre and Otherys, did thrive.

Yet the calm of the Six Kingdoms was merely the eye of the storm. What did follow was the destruction of entire realms, the rise and fall of kings, and the worst sort of bloodletting.

That of brother against brother.

JON

The years melted away in moments like these.

Riding freely in the company of good men, it was easy to think himself the youthful leader of the Dark Order again. The warmth of the sun upon his skin, the way the breeze ran ghostly fingers through his hair, all of it felt much as it had when he was a brash man of twenty.

Not a weathered king inching towards forty, he mused, however I feel for the moment nothing is as it was.

His companions were proof of how much things had changed. Among those riding out of the Kingswood were the knights Raymund Connington and Benfred Rykker, once his squires and now men grown. His new squires, the fair-haired Ashor Darry and dark-skinned Valarr Otherys, had been little more than babes when the Vale was won. In those days Ser Mychel Redfort was a freshly made Kingsguard, now he lorded over Ser Quinn Mallory, the newest addition to the white cloaks.

Only Gendry had been with him from the beginning, the powerfully built lord riding by Jon’s side even now. Gendry’s thick black hair and beard showed the odd grey hair, yet beneath the lines creasing his face, Jon still saw the brother he chose.

Especially when Gendry frowned to catch him staring.

“I’m not going to race you.” Gendry shook his head. “It’s poor form to show up a king.”

“Excuses.” He replied over the sound of the hooves. “Arya may have a fine eye for horseflesh, but
that mount is wasted on an aurochs like you."

Gendry snorted and Jon began stroking Vhagar’s hickory mane, preparing the courser for what was to come.

“What is it about spring that makes you Starks so restless? Lyonel and Arya began to torment me the moment the Citadel’s raven arrived. I’ll not race you, Jon. You hear me?”

His reply was a challenging bellow and the snap of his reins, which set Vhagar into a gallop. The others gave surprised shouts, yet a glance behind showed Gendry already in pursuit.

The pair rode hard towards the Blackwater Rush. To the other side of the river, the Red Keep jutted up from the heights of Aegon’s Hill, looming large over the city below. The walls of Aevalon stood tall, and to reach its gates from the south they would need to cross the length of the Blackwater Bridge. Doing so meant passing through the fortified town that had sprung up to the bridge’s southern end, where the roads to Storm’s End and Tumbleton met.

Farside-of-the-River. Farside to most in Aevalon, though Jon had heard the city’s small offshoot called something far less pleasant.

_Ourside. Gods damn the fool who thought of that._

Unlike Aevalon, only a few thousand dwelt in the town and nearly all were freemen born of Westeros. When Jon and Gendry passed through Farside’s gates, nary a freedman was seen among the simple folk within. Most were woodworkers, haywards, and the like. People who bowed as Vhagar ambled up the cobbledstone road. They passed by a garrison hall flying his white dragon emblem, then a stable and a pair of traveler’s inns, followed by the modest homes of the townsfolk.

Removed from the bustle of Aevalon, the folk of Farside enjoyed a quiet, peaceful existence. A lifestyle Jon very much liked his family to share in from time to time.

Hence how Farside was chosen as the perfect place for the royal retreat.

The estate was impossible to miss. A massive portion of land enclosed by pale walls and a gatehouse topped with golden merlons. He waved at the spearmen patrolling above and two iron-banded doors swung inward, allowing his party to enter the sanctuary.

Within the walls lay a large estate of lush green fields and orchards. Groves of fruit trees lined the lengthy path onwards to a small hill where three white villas appeared to glow in the midday sun.

This was his home away from home. The palace of Targarra.

_Only people who have never seen Summerhall could call it a palace._

_In the empire, Targarra would be just another noble estate. Though a handsome one at that._

“I still say you need a keep.” Gendry said as the horses moved leisurely over the tree-lined path.

“The plans called for one and it would make Targarra easier to defend.”

“No, brother. The walls and guards are enough. The town has a strong garrison, its walls and battletowers built well. Have some faith in Farside to do as you intended.”

“

_Faith._” Gendry repeated. “I’d rather trust in steel and stone. If it were up to me, this would be a castle. One with a nice, deep moat.”
It was Gendry who first commissioned work to begin on the town. The war in the Vale inflicted upon Gendry more than a limp and crooked left arm; it had hardened the lord’s heart against his bannermen. After the treachery at Gulltown, his friend believed Aevalon needed a bulwark against any threats from the Stormlands.

Yet while this martial town was born of Gendry’s wariness, Targarra came about as an act of kindness by a pair of she-wolves.

“Arya and my mother had the right of it. We didn’t need another castle.” He gestured to the birds singing in the branches of an apple tree. “Do not look at Targarra through a warrior’s eyes. See this haven for what it is. A place to lay down our burdens.”

“Or to be spied upon.” Gendry whispered back, flicking his eyes to the opposite side of the path. Continuing to face ahead, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye within the shade of the grove. That of a large, dark shape stalking their advance. He spotted another soon after, then two more to the other side. None of this worried him, for he had little doubt what these shadows were.

Ser Mychel had taken notice too, smirking along with Gendry while Ser Raymund and Ser Benfred did their best to hide their amusement. Yet when a twig snapped from the direction of the smallest shadow, Ser Quinn ruined the game.

“Who goes there?” The fiery-haired knight pulled his sword to point at the trees.

“Easy now.” Gendry said as Ser Mychel smacked at Ser Quinn’s blade.

“Sheath your steel, man. That be a dragon you’re threatening.”

“One playing at being a wolf.” Jon sighed, crossing his arms. “Come out, son.”

While the larger shadows stayed put, a dark-haired youth emerged from the trees. He wore tanned leathers and had a bow and quiver slung over his back and a knife strapped to his belt. Tall and strapping, the lad was often confused for being older than his eight years. Yet when Jon looked into the deep grey eyes of his second son, they were filled with boyish innocence.

“Hello, Graeme. How long were you with us?”

“Since just inside the gate.” Graeme said, fidgeting with his bow. “We were sneaking up on the guards again. Me and Shadow were so close to Wide Wat I could smell him. That’s when Silver heard you coming.” He kicked at the ground. “She was the one that broke the stick. That’s what gave us away, wasn’t it?”

“It was.” He lied, for the boy was proud of his skills. “Now about this stalking the guardsmen, I thought your grandmother had a talk with you about that.”

Graeme scratched his head. “She said if I can catch the men unawares they deserve to be startled.”

“That sounds about right.” Gendry chuckled as Jon cursed his mother’s sense of discipline.

Graeme lived with Lyanna here at Targarra, acting as the High Queen’s cupbearer. Thus the boy had ample time to roam the grounds with Lady’s newest litter. The three young direwolves had slipped away during Graeme’s explanation, though in truth they were all half-breeds. Both Lady and Nymeria had mated with common wolves, producing several litters that now prowled the Kingswood in packs. The youngest three stuck close to home though, guarding Targarra and bonding with Graeme more than most.
How deep does that bond go? Does my son dream as his parents do?

By day he acts half a wolf, by night he might well become one.

He lifted the boy up so they could share his saddle. Years ago, when Graeme was but a bundled babe, Jon had carried him down from the heights of the Eyrie for the journey back to Aevalon. It was easy to think of him as the best thing to come out of their time in the Vale.

A dark period in his life. One where the vows he swore in Winterfell were sorely tested. His marriage was its worst then, and the love between Sansa and himself very nearly became another victim of the war.

“You just missed mother.” Graeme said as they drew near to the palace. “They stopped here on the way back from their ride. Mother, Aunt Arya, ladies Sarella and Talia, then Rhaegina and Aemma and, truly father, there were so many I bet they scared off every deer in the forest.”

“Well none of us were hunting today, it was just a pleasure ride.”

“How come Aenry’s not with you? Did he irk you or is his nose buried in a new book?”

“Do not mock your brother his pursuits.” He said despite being annoyed Aenry had not come along. “Spring’s only just arrived, there’s plenty of time for him to go riding. We shall all go together.”

He said this as much for Graeme’s benefit as his own. There was nothing wrong with a bookish prince, his uncle Aemon proved that. Yet Aenry acted far more aloof than he found appropriate for an heir. Sansa called it a folly of boyhood and urged him to be patient. It was hard though, since Rhaegina and Aemma took such interest in their kingdom and its rule.

Despite his misgivings, Jon did heed Sansa’s counsel. Just as he had heeded Tom of the Seven when he advised the same regarding Sansa during her dark time.

He had never regretted doing so. Even now he remembered Sansa’s smile to behold Targarra for the first time.

The three multi-leveled villas were built in the imperial style, with tall limestone pillars, marble tiles, and ornate archways. Dominating their lower levels were spacious banquet halls and galleries filled with sculptures and mosaics. All opened up into a courtyard, truly a large flower garden, with a circular fountain-fed pool at its heart.

There was no need for Graeme to lead them any longer, not when they could follow the sounds of childish glee and splashing water.

“The king!” A shout went up as they rounded a rose bush, finding his mother holding court near the pool’s edge. Though her few companions quickly jerked about to face him, the High Queen did so at a leisurely pace.

In old age Lyanna Stark remained a handsome woman. Her silver streaked hair moved freely in the breeze and her smile was bright and warm.

“First Sansa and the girls, now you? What a welcome surprise. Oh and I see you apprehended my wayward cupbearer.”

“He was off running with the wolves again. Not exactly the princely duties we expected you to set him to.”
“Oh, I think such adventures have their uses.” Mother said with a wink to Graeme.

She ignored Jon’s exasperation to plant a kiss on his cheek. As she went to do the same to Gendry, he took note of those the High Queen kept near. Baleron Otherys was no surprise, the Lord of Tumbleton being a dear friend to his mother. The same went for his wife, Korra of Tyrosh, who dyed her silver-blonde hair a garish blue. The black pointed beard of Ser Symond Templeton seemed somewhat unremarkable in comparison. The Knight of Ninestars had been at court for two years now, having left the Vale in grief at his wife’s passing. In an act of kindness, Mother kept him a frequent guest at Targarra.

Yet none were so constant as Lyanna’s grim shadow. Jon spotted Ethan at the edge of the pool, the brutish Highguard leaning upon his poleaxe as he watched the trio of children frolicking within.

“Did you enjoy the Kingswood, your grace?” Ser Symond asked awkwardly. “That is, your ride through it?”

“It was fine. Next time I’ll insist you join us, ser. You too, Baleron.”

“I prefer the deck of a galley to the saddle.” Baleron jested. “I’m looking forward to the day when a journey from Aevalon to Tumbleton need not require a horse at all.”

“That canal again.” Korra spoke High Valyrian with a Tyroshi accent. “It’s all he ever speaks about. In the empire I could envision such an enterprise, but in these lands it is surely a dream.”

“So was Aevalon once.” He replied. “Your family has worked wonders with Tumbleton, it can be the same with the Mander. If the lords speaks with as much conviction to the Gardener king as he does to me, I feel content to dream.”

After the Vale, renewed war with the Reach was his nightmare. The defeat of Elbert Arryn left the remaining kings of the south fearful of him, including his allies in Dorne. All might have made common against the Highlands had such a notion not died in its infancy.

A rebellion in Dornish Marches led to yet another conflict between the Reach and Dorne. The passing of King Mace in his sleep led to his heir Willas ascending the throne at Highgarden, who was far cooler to the calls for war. The new king took notice of how preoccupied the Lannisters were with the Iron Islands and the North, and the costly raids against the Highlands’ borders by his own bannermen.

Willas saw what he did, that another war between their kingdoms would pose heavy burdens upon both sides. So they did something daring. They talked.

Not in person, but through intermediaries of the Faith and emissaries like Baleron and Prince Garlan. Jon swore upon the Seven Pointed Star that the Gardeners were the anointed Kings of the Reach, pledging generous trade opportunities at Tumbleton and five years of peace with his neighbors. Most importantly, he kept his bannermen back from the fighting in the Dornish Marches. In return, Willas reined in his lords and allowed Tumbleton to thrive.

The Martells were not pleased with the accord, nor the Lannisters, yet the objections of their fickle allies did not dissuade either king. A good thing, since the five years of peace came and went and still the borderlands were quiet.

Which led to grander notions still.

“A canal between the Blackwater and the Mander.” Ser Symond spoke with disbelief. “Such a thing has never been done in the Seven Kingdoms.”
The High Queen smiled. “Someone likely said that when Brandon the Builder started the Wall. Such thoughts are prudent, yet they can also hinder greatness. Boldness and determination build wonders. Like Storm’s End standing defiant upon Shipbreaker Bay or the Eyrie being raised upon those great heights.”

“What about Harrenhal?” Graeme asked with little cheer. “I’ve heard it called a wonder. Maester Sam says thousands died to build it. Would building a canal mean the same?”

“Let’s hope not.” Baleron grew somber. “Some would die in the effort, yet their children and children’s children forever more will benefit from the prosperity it brings. I’ve said much the same to King Willas. That traveling from the Reach to the Narrow Sea need not mean a lengthy journey around Dorne. A canal would lead the Mander to flourish with trade. Highgarden, Aevalon and Tumbleton, all would thrive. The possibilities are endless.”


“Not without the Reach.” He said before urging Graeme on towards the pool. “Go on, make sure your younger kin don’t drown each other.”

The boy dragged his feet at first, though soon quickened his pace to seek Ethan’s side. He waited to speak again until he was content Graeme could no longer hear them over the laughter and splashing in the pool.

“It’s been months now, and still no reply to our proposal. On the canal or other matters.”

“King Willas did say both would require deep consideration.” Baleron reminded him. “Though he was clearly pleased by the idea of betrothal between your two houses. I spoke of Prince Graeme’s many handsome qualities, of how the king’s niece would find no nobler a prince to name husband.”

Matching Graeme to Prince Garlan’s daughter Alera was Sansa’s idea. It was meant to seal a grand partnership on the canal to the Mander.

“Unless Willas agrees to match our contribution, the canal cannot happen. The treasury does not have the gold for it and I’ll not press my vassals further. This realm is already hard enough to govern without lords rebelling over taxes. Before a canal my kingdom needs proper roads and a standing force able to march along them at a moment’s notice.”

He was speaking of the ascaera. A small force of only a few hundred, but sworn to him alone. Modeled after the Dark Order and other imperial legions, the aescara lived to march and fight at his command. A mix of riders and pikemen, they were constantly drilled by seasoned warriors like Belasso and Grenn, who’d finished his time in the order and sought better opportunities with Jon.

At the moment they were somewhere up the Blackwater Rush, having left Aevalon as soon as the snows started melting to patrol the upriver settlements of the freedmen of Dracaria, Queenston, and Freehold.

A march cut short by his recent commands. It was likely Grenn and Belasso were already leading the men back even if few in Aevalon knew so.

His mother apparently being one of them.

“Why have you recalled the ascaera?” She asked, taking his arm and leading them on a walk to around the wide pool.

“Who says that I have?”
“Not Sansa, I can assure you. She refused to speak to it. There’s a lot of Ned’s stubbornness in her.”

“I see it as loyalty.”

“Well, you always see the best of her. Not that I can blame you. Whenever I look upon my grandchildren, I curse the fool I was to ever speak against you marrying her.”

They both turned to look within the pool where three children played. The oldest was a raven-haired girl of seven, Gendry and Arya’s daughter, Argella. The other two were dearer to him.

“They begged Sansa and Arya to stay.” Mother said. “This pool might not be the hot springs of Winterfell but with the warm weather upon us, it makes them happy.”

*I am glad of it then, for they bring me joy.*

He watched with mirth as his two youngest children splashed each other. Daedved was a charming boy of six, with Tully eyes and Targaryen hair. Maery was a dark-haired treasure with snow-white skin on the cusp of her fifth year. Both had been summer babes, Daedved born during its hot, sultry peak, Maery at its close.

That summer was one of peace and bounty, it was also saw his winter queen returned to him. Sansa’s recovery from her melancholy had been a lengthy road, and not without its setbacks. Well after he thought her free of it, Sansa was forced to correct him.

“The darkness hasn’t left my mind, I doubt it ever will.” She had told him one night as they lay together, stroking the scar on her shoulder. “I’ve just had to accept it. Like Joffrey’s brand, it’s an ugliness that shall always be with me.”

“Nothing about you is ugly. Body and soul, I see nothing but beauty. I swear it, my love.”

“But it’s how I feel, Jon. How I’ve suffered, what I’ve done to others, I had to accept all of it as a part of me. Talking helps though. The darkness makes it feel right to hide, to push you away. I’d not give it that satisfaction again… I don’t want to give it one moment more…”

He understood that feeling well. After witnessing the courage Sansa showed in battling her demons, Jon’s esteem for his wife only grew. In truth, he came out of the dark time loving Sansa more than ever. The fear of losing her surely played a role, yet it was how Sansa found ways to surprise him that made his heart beat harder.

Her writing most of all.

“Just to warn you, Sansa and I had words.” The High Queen said. “Have you read her treatise on the Clash of Stags?”

“Yes, it’s quite well done.” He replied. “It must have something to do with the flow of the tongues but the tale of Renly and Stannis comes across a deeper tragedy in High Valyrian. I imagine it’ll be well received at Volantis.”

“For all the wrong reasons. The imperial court does not to hear how the Durrandon brothers nearly doomed their kingdom with their strife.”

“That’s the truth as far as I know.”

“A harsh truth at an inopportune time.” Mother stopped him with a hand to her chest. “Brother against brother breeding folly. That’s the message I took from Sansa’s work. Others will see it too,
Jon. You could be a rallying point of opposition to Aegon but tales like this do us no favors. Good men might endure Aegon’s misrule if they fear the Targaryen Empire could fall to ruin otherwise.”

“It very well could. That is why I leave the empire to my brother.” He gestured to the palace around him. “I have a realm of my own. May Aegon be as pleased with the empire as I am with my kingdoms.”

“He’ll never be content. Not as long you both wear crowns. You cannot ignore the threat he poses. The slavers falling upon ships of freedmen travelling here, all to sell them back into slavery. Whose purse do you imagine their silver lines? What about the harassment of the Dark Order? How many of your former comrades have sought refuge here? Even if you ignore all this, we both know Aegon has meddled in your affairs before. When he ascends as High King things will worsen. The empire will either turn its back to the Highlands, or turn against it. Look at what’s befallen Daenerys”

“She went too far and do not pretend otherwise.”

It pained Jon to say so. He had failed to aid Dany and her son in their hour of need, yet that could not excuse her actions since. After the passing of Aemon, Daenerys had used much of the wealth and influence their uncle left to her to frustrate Aegon at court. She sought any avenue to hinder his rise, including several petitions bidding the Council of Heralds to revisit his position as heir.

Their unwillingness to do so led Daenerys to terrible folly. In secret, she had attempted to offer her hand in marriage to Khal Drogo without the High King’s blessing. Once this plot was revealed, his father’s response was swift. Three years now Dany had been confined to Summerhall as a guest to the High King. A prisoner in all but name.

“What Dany did was tantamount to treason.” He said, eyeing his mother closely. “An act you were fortunate not to be tainted with. All the backing you gave Dany in her quarrels against Aegon… I should have put a stop to it before.”

“I no longer share Rhaegar’s bed but I am still High Queen. Yes, Daenerys had my help and favor. As do others in the empire. Friends you will thank me for one day.”

“Friends are welcome but if my parents did reconcile, it be a wonder.” His voice softened some. “Mother, each time you journey back to the empire, I wish you’d stay there. Do not doubt my love for you, just remember that my father is even more devoted. That you visit Norvos and Selhorys yet scorn Summerhall fills his letters to me with anguish.”

She bristled. “That his feelings are hurt does not redeem Rhaegar to me. I will not speak of this again”

“How can you claim yourself queen while ignoring your duty to the king?” His anger got the better of him. “Why urge Ser Arthur and Tumco to do theirs? They went back to rebuild the Highguard after its devastation, yet you’ll not bother to mend a frayed marriage.”

“Not frayed. Broken.” His mother spoke each word in a cold, deliberate manner. “The cracks were there from the beginning, they only worsened with time. I say the same of your father’s reign. I see much of its great promise proven false. Except for you. I’m not alone in thinking so.”

“Here and now, you are.” He made to turn away when she grabbed hold of his arm.

“Heed me. Our friends in the empire tell me that in places both high and low, the white dragon is held above others. Rhaegar and Aegon are known for their defeats, you for your conquests. That Jonarys is Daeron the First come again, the Young Dragon reborn.”
“Not so young anymore.” He pointed out. “Nor much of a warrior. I laid down Dark Sister to wield the ruling scepter. I make trade pacts now, not war. That repute you speak of, it means little, not when peace is all Daedev and Maery have ever known."

He bid his mother to look upon the children again. Argella was doing her best to drag Graeme into the pool, only succeeding when Gendry gave him a nudge. Below the dragon shaped fountain, Daedev and Maery were turns leaping through the water pouring out of the beast’s mouth.

“Another five years of this. Ten. The rest of my life. Theirs too, I pray.”

“Jon, I want the same.” Mother sighed. “Else I would not speak to all this. The next High King cannot be trusted to feel as we do.”

“I know. By Vhagar, I know it.” His hands clenched into fists. “Yet I will not stand in opposition to Aegon. Not while there’s still a chance for us. For our families and our realms. I believe as my father does, that our destinies lie together. We only need make the effort.”

Lyanna eyed him in a curious manner and he hesitated speaking further, for Sansa had urged caution in broaching this matter with his mother. The time seemed right and he despised keeping secrets from those he trusted.

“A message came with the latest group of freedmen.” Jon said. “My father has declared thirty days of feasting and frolicking throughout the Targaryen Empire. To celebrate the coming of spring and the return of Baelyon Targaryen.”

“Quite the gesture. After all this time with the Dothraki, I hope the festivities are lively ones for the sake of that young man.”

“You can judge for yourself if you wish. Father has extended an invitation for you to attend.”

“Jon, did I not make myself clear? I have no desire to return to Rhaegar.”

“I heard you. Though I thought you could find your way to helping guide your grandchildren through the halls of the imperial court.” He watched her eyes widen. “The High King bids House Targaryen of Aevalon to tour the empire as honored guests. So my family can join in the celebrations as Aegon and I can forge a new understanding between us. Apparently father is doing the same as you, he already prepares for a time after his passing.”

He wants his children to be secure, he thought, the same urge drives me or else I’d not consider such a journey.

The empire held little appeal to him after spending almost half his life now in the Seven Kingdoms. There were things to be done here. Overseeing the first harvests of spring, completing the road to the Vale, fostering actual friendship with the Reach while reassuring the Dornish, expanding his fledgling cohort of standing warriors. All things Jon felt key to keeping his mighty realm together. He feared the disarray plaguing the North and Dorne.

Perhaps the Kingdom of the Rock as well if what Queen Catelyn wrote of is true...

“Out with it, Jon.” Mother pushed into his thoughts, her tone somewhat excited. “Are you truly going back to the empire?”

Before he could answer, Daedev and Maery swam up near to where they stood. The boy and girl scrambling to be the first out of the water so they could stand before him in their dripping small
“Father!” Daeved exclaimed breathlessly. “Did you see Graeme fall in?”

“Uncle Gendry pushed him.” Maery whispered as if this was some scandalous secret. “I’m glad. The others wouldn’t put more than a toe in the water.”

“Rhaegina and Aemma looked like this.” Daeved held his chin high in a haughty manner. “Oh and Vee called us childish.”

“We are children.” Maery tugged on a lock of dark hair and stared up at him. “Father, will you come swimming with us?”

“Not today, love.”

“Because you only swim at night?”

He blinked in confusion at the odd question and Daeved shrugged.

“When mother wouldn’t swim Aunt Arya said you two only go in the pool together. After dark.”

Vhagar help me.

“Your aunt is jesting.” He said as mother stifled a laugh. “You two go have fun while you can. Soon it’ll be time to dry and dress so I can deliver you back to their mother looking like a proper prince and princess.”

Daeved laughed. “I want to go back to the Red Keep like this!” He shook his damp pale hair. “Hello all! I’m the Lord of the Fishes!”

“No! Prince Soggybottoms!” Maery giggled as she threw arms up high and posed. “And I’m the Merling Queen!”

“Then we must get you to the sea.” He declared, gathering the two wet children into his arms. They squealed and squirmed as he carried them on to toss both his babes into the water.

The pair came up laughing and splashing one another. When Argella and Graeme swam over to join in the youthful glee, he was once more struck by a wave of nostalgia.

Once another four children had frolicked so in the reflecting pools of Summerhall. He saw Rhaenys and himself in how Argella and Graeme kept towards the edges, watching the louder two with amusement. Aegon and Daenerys had always laughed the loudest and smiled the brightest, just as Daeved and Maery did now.

Back then we all saw each other as family. There was friendship and love between us then.

Look how far we’ve come…

“Jonarys.” Lyanna grabbed his chin and forced him to look upon her. His mother’s gaze filled with a familiar mix of worry and hope, like the day he and Gendry had left for the Dark Order.

“Speak to it, son. Are you returning to the empire?”

“I am. We all are.” He said, watching the children at play. “To fix what is broken. To try and go back to how things were.”
For the sakes of those who follow in our footsteps.

ROBB

The Greatjon knew how to throw a celebration.

He was leaving the feast far later than intended; the sounds of merriment following him as he climbed the rough stone stairs of Last Hearth. Scores of voices echoed up from the hall, coming together in a bellowed rendition of Wolf in the Night. More songs would follow, in between the boastful retellings of the battle or the odd wrestling match; all fueled by an endless flow of ale and wine.

They are welcome to it, Robb thought, I partook in more than my fair share.

He had passed the likes of Morgan Liddle and his man Quent retching just outside the hall. Strict restraint on his part avoided such displays. While he never scorned lifting a goblet with one of his lords, the rest of the time he only drank when his bronze crown slid far enough to require adjustment.

This practice had served him well over the years. Whether he played a host or honored guest, he acted a king regardless.

The crown rested easier now. A welcome warmth flowing through his body, his thoughts somewhat clouded. As if the mists which rose off the hot springs in winter had worked their way into his mind. Hiding away his worries. Making him remember a time when Myrcella had emerged from the water, a golden beauty naked and waiting for him to join her for a soak.

A soak and more.

His pace quickened, the stairs unable to tire him as he sought out Myrcella here in the Keep of Giants. Her invitation bid him on, and he wagered she’d forgive him ailing a touch from drink.

After all, he had returned to her in far worse conditions before.

Only yesterday Myrcella had beheld his return to Last Hearth in blood-soaked triumph. The wildlings were growing bold. They had gone from raiders to invaders in a matter of years. More were scaling the Wall or braving the Bay of Ice or the Gorge than ever before. First in the hundreds. Then in the thousands. More than his northernmost bannermen and the Night’s Watch could handle.

To bolster both, he moved his court to Last Hearth, bringing as much heavy horse as he could rally. The timeliness of their coming could not be gainsaid, with spring came a surge of attacks. Not just through the Gorge or in the Gift.

Seemingly out of thin air, a massive wildling host was discovered south of the Wall and moving on Last Hearth. An army led by a wildling named Styr of Thenn who outnumbered them by thousands.

The Karstarks had promised men, but he could not wait.

“I will not be the first Stark king to suffer a siege by wildlings.” He had declared to his war counsel. “Numbers alone do not a victory make. That’s the only advantage the wildlings have. They are ignorant to how I make war, and I will treat them to a bloody lesson on the subject.”

“Aye, the more the merrier for the slaughter.” The Greatjon had boomed, the old and grey lord beaming at the prospect. “These bastards are in our lands. Trapped between us and the Wall. We’ll
crush them like Umbers have done since the Builder’s days!”

He put the Greatjon’s confidence to use. A day’s ride north of Last Hearth, the lord met the wildlings with only the Umber strength at his back. Arrayed against the northmen were thousands savage in manner and appearance. Defying their vast numbers, the Greatjon’s taunted his foes by pissing on the field between them. What little discipline the wildlings maintained broke at that. They rushed forth as a mob, spreading themselves out across the wide field in a chaotic charge.

Only then did Robb’s horse appear on a hill to the east and more under Kyle Condon to the rear. The wildlings were caught unawares, Grey Wind and his outriders having slain every enemy scout they came across.

Disorganized and attacked from three sides, the wildling host was torn to shreds. He and Ice had reaped a terrible toll, its dark and smoky steel slick with blood by the close of the killing.

Others boasted grimmer tallies, seasoned warriors like Smalljon Umber or Garen Tuttle of the Night’s Watch. Yet neither could boast of slaying the wildling leader, the fearsome Magnar of Thenn.

That honor fell to his firstborn son.

The very same lad he now discovered in an alcove, half-hidden by the shadows as he and some girl kissed with youthful passion.

“Are you two lost? I doubt you’ll not find the hall that way.”

His query startled the pair who pulled apart with haste. Ned had spent the last three years at Last Hearth as the Greatjon’s ward and was much changed from the boy he had been at Winterfell. At nearly ten and five, Ned was already of a height with him and hailed as a natural swordsman.

Other changes gave Robb pause though. Upon arriving at Last Hearth, he was taken aback by how much Ned resembled Jaime Lannister. To look upon his son’s golden curls and handsome features was to travel back to Whispering Wood, where the Lannister prince had slain Robb’s friends before his eyes.

Yet when he looked into Ned’s eyes, there was no sign of Jaime Lannister in their bright blues. In them he saw the first babe Myrcella gifted him. The boy who pestered him endlessly for tales of his namesake.

A prince whose face now burned to be caught in such a compromising position.

“Father! This isn’t how it looks.” Ned struggled as his companion curtsied, her head bent low.

“I know you. Might your name be Mora?” He asked, recognizing the girl as the youngest of the Greatjon’s natural born daughters. She was older than Ned by a couple years, which he noted with amusement.

“Yes, your grace.” Mora Snow kept her eyes on the ground, her tone full of deference.

* * *

A spirited girl, the Greatjon called her so after she slapped that Lake man for unwelcome advances.

Clearly he lacked Ned’s charms…

The lad did the gallant thing then, stepping between them to shield the young woman.
“We left the feast for good cause.” Ned continued. “Mora was going to tend the Lady Thea and with so many drunkards about, escorting her seemed the honorable course-”

“I fear one lusty scoundrel broke though your cordon.” He smiled before addressing Mora. “Do rise. If you expect reproach, it shall not come from me. Though if my son has acted untoward in any way, do not hesitate to say so. Your family has my respect and you my protection.”

“Protection?” Her eyes grew wide. “Ned didn’t- that is Prince Eddard did me no harm. It’s like he said, we were walking to my goodsister’s room and… the climb was quite tiring.”

“No doubt that’s why you both look so flush.” He could not help that one, yet forced himself to stop tormenting the pair. “Mora, if can do without your escort the rest of the way, I’d like have a talk with my son.”

The young woman jumped at the chance to flee and he took note of the hurried looks of longing between the youths.

“Nothing can come of that.” He said evenly, a hand on Ned’s shoulder. “You’re the heir to Winterfell, the next King in the North. All she has is her name. Snow.”

“She’s a daughter to one of our most loyal lords.” Ned argued.

Robb nodded. “Aye, and she seems lovely. Mora will make a fine wife one day, but she will not be yours. Dispel any illusions otherwise. I say this not to be cruel, but to spare you hurt. So that you might spare Mora the same. Don’t take advantage, Ned. Treat her with honor.”

“I wasn’t going to bed her.” He reddened in either anger or embarrassment. “It was only a kiss. One to thank me for walking her about and defending her home. I’d be a rude sort of prince to turn away a thankful maid.”

“I see she kissed away your modesty.” Robb guided his golden heir down the corridor, passing by the torches and rusted bronze swords adorning the walls. “This is what I hoped to speak of. In the hall I praised your defeat of Styr, now I’ll take the chance to call you a bloody fool.”

“Father?”

“Trust that your mother has choicer words for you.” He tightened his grip on Ned, remembering the terror he felt to hear his boy was battling the Magnar. “You could’ve been killed. Carry my standard. Hang back. Stay safe. That’s what I bid of you. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking of grandfather.” Ned looked at him with soft eyes. “You wish you’d been there. At the ambush that killed him. I heard it in your voice every time you spoke of it. How badly you wanted to save him. When I watched you ride into the fray, that’s all I could think of. The Thenns were pushing closer and there were so many… Styr was calling for you… he fought so hard…”

He felt a slight tremble work through his son. Some relished their first kill. The Greatjon and others saw it as a stepping-stone to manhood. Neither of these things applied to Robb and his boy.

“I’d do it again.” Ned said with clenched fists. “Earn your ire. Mother’s too. I’d kill the Magnar a hundred times over. Just like he’d do with you or mother or my sister. He tried his best with me. He fought so hard.”

He stopped Ned by grabbing his shoulders and forcing the prince to face him.

“The wildling earned his end. That you stand here and he rots below is a gift from the old gods and
the new. I want you to think long and hard before you disobey me again, but have no regrets on the blood you shed. We are Starks, lords, Northmen, killing is a part of who we are. Yet it’s not all we are.”

Although Ned nodded at his words, it was plain how much effort he was putting into hiding the troubles within. In this, Robb saw so much of his father.

_We named him well, father. If you must choose between us, put your faith in him._

He had only just let go of Ned when the youth’s brow furrowed and he looked about with curiosity.

“My king, unless I’m mistaken, your rooms were in the eastern wing. This is where mother sleeps.”

“Is it really? I must have got turned around. The Greatjon did insist on that third tankard of ale. Don’t worry yourself on it. Go back to the feast. I’ll sort myself out.”

“I’m sure you will.” Ned’s smile cut like a knife. “Tell mother I wish her a good night and as restful a sleep as she can manage.”

Somehow he had gone from lecturing his son to being mocked by him. This caused Robb to chuckle as the prince sought the stairs to return to celebrations. One day Ned would inherit his crown, he might as well start by taking his place at the feast. With the king and queen gone, it would be good to have at least one Stark there

He had looked forward to being with Myrcella since they’d parted earlier. During the feast she had been the picture of grace, paying every compliment to the Umbers. That she had retired early from the feast was for the benefit of the newest member of House Umber. Sick of being a widower, the Smalljon had taken a new wife in Thea Wull, a maiden less than half his age and now full with child.

“How she fidgets? The poor thing is exhausted.” Myrcella had told him in the hall. “In her state she should be abed, resting. Not trying to impress the rest of us. The next Lady of Last Hearth is unwilling to shame her husband and kin by retiring before a Queen in the North.”

“You gather all this from some squirming?”

“No. From experience, my love.” Myrcella then squeezed his hand. “The North is a hard place. It demands much of its men and more from its women. Whatever hardships lay ahead for Lady Umber, I’ll gift her some comfort tonight. I shall take my leave.”

His offer to join her was rebuffed with a kiss and a whispered reminder that a victorious king should share joy with the men he shed blood with.

“My bed is not going anywhere. Whatever the hour, there you’ll find me waiting. Ready for our own celebrations.”

The mere hint of such intimate revelry made the feast seem a dull affair after she departed. His lust was not so distracting for him to miss how Lady Umber left not long after.

_Myrcella knows my people. Our people now, for she made them her own._

_And cares for them as a queen should._

There were those in the North who thought the worse of Myrcella. He had heard the talk. The endless array of insults against his love. Southron flower. A golden trinket. Kin to killers. More lion than stag.
I could stand to see the lioness in her tonight, he thought as he pushed open the thick cedar door to Myrcella’s chambers.

The rooms were a modest size with pelts of snow bears and shadowcats hanging on the walls and an ancient looking giant’s skull resting on the mantle above the hearth. Grey Wind lay at the foot of the large bed, but what truly drew the eye was the queen within it. The sight of Myrcella in her nightgown with her hair undone stirred something wild within him.

Until something else stirred upon the bed. A tiny red-haired girl rising up from beside her mother.

“Papa!” Cathlyn called, the four-year-old leaping up to reach at him. “I had a bad dream!”

“How could that be?” He strode forth to lift his only daughter up. She felt as light as a feather and smelled of berries and herbs. “Wife, did I not banish all bad dreams from troubling our princess?”

“I do somewhat recall.” Myrcella yawned.

“That was home. At Winterfell.” Cathlyn said with certainty. “I don’t like it in my room. It’s scary. Can I stay with you?”

“No tonight.” Myrcella spoke before he could. “Septa Eglantine is bringing a cup of warm milk to settle your mind. You’ll share a bed with her.”

“There, with Eglantine near no foul dreams will trouble you now.”

Cathlyn’s lip stuck out in a pout. “I want Grey Wind too.”

“Then you shall have him.” He nuzzled the girl’s cheek. “Keep this a secret, but I’m more scared of the septa.”

“Stop, papa!” Cathlyn giggled as she pushed away. “Your breath smells funny and your hairs scratch!”

“Sorry, sweetling. I’d keep it off but I’ve found it’s grown on me.”

“By the gods, Robb.” Myrcella groaned at his jest, and he had an urge to inspire her to a different sort of groan altogether.

Thus he welcomed the sound of knocking a short time later. Septa Eglantine made swift work of getting the princess in hand, carrying her off with Grey Wind in tow. The door was barely shut when he started tugging off his clothes.

“What was that about your breath?” Myrcella inquired, toying with the laces of her nightgown.

“Scented with the finest wines and ales House Umber can boast.” He tossed away his undershirt and began work on his pants.

“I tasted those vintages with mine own lips, what if I have no desire to do so again on yours?”

“Then I’d scour the castle to sup of mint and honey.” He stepped out of his underclothes, his hard cock throbbing as he put hands to his hips. “Considering my attire, the Umbers will likely begrudge me that quest.”

A grin pulled at Myrcella’s lips, which she’d wet while her eyes roamed over his nakedness.

“We best not trouble our hosts.” She undid the laces about her chest, half exposing her breasts and
waving him on. “I hope they still sing in the hall, I’ve no intention of being quiet after that long wait.”

He could not have been quiet if he wanted to. Once Myrcella was free of her shift, their bodies pressed as tightly together as their lips. She was beneath him, one hand clasping his as he fondled her breast, fingers teasing her nipple to hardness. He kissed at her neck, his face buried in her golden mane, then his mouth drifted to suckle at a breast. His hand went lower still, fingers working through the down of her mound, finding her sex hot and damp.

The whole time Myrcella kissed and bit at him, her free hand taking hold of his cock and tugging it with long, firm strokes. When her soft as silk lips glided over his, he yearned to feel them sucking on his cock again. The thought was fresh in his mind when he made to slide down her body, his mouth ready to taste her.

“No, I want you.” Myrcella rasped, pulling him overtop of her, legs pressing against his hips. “Let your poor jaw rest. I’ll wear you out in a finer way.”

“There is no better way.” He joined Myrcella in groaning as his cock began to sink within her.

Three children, nearly two decades of faith and love between them, and still he struggled to understand how anything could feel so utterly perfect. Thrusting inside her, feeling Myrcella’s nails rake his back and hearing her moans, all of it filled him so deep a sense of belonging.

Winterfell was a castle, she was home.

When their lovemaking peaked, both shuddering as his seed pumped within, it was not the unfamiliar bed he sank back into, but his wife’s embrace.

“Forget time, it’s you that makes me feel old.” He wheezed, breathing deeply and finding the air thick with the smell of their sweat and love. “Gods, ‘Cella. I ached less from battle than I do now.”

“How sad that only one deed is worthy of song.” Myrcella stroked his chest and sighed. “Your daughter said a prayer tonight. For the wildlings to go away so all of us could go home. She misses Tommen and Joy’s girls. Was I wrong to say we’d be back soon?”

“Children have a poor grasp of time. Soon little Cat will make friends here and then weep to leave them behind for Winterfell. I’ll ask Ned to pay her some attention before we ride out again.”

“Did you get a moment with him at the feast? He cannot act so reckless again-”

“Yes, yes, after I stumbled upon his foray into the realm of feminine delights.” He shrugged at the confused look she gave him. “I caught your son and Mora Snow pawing at one another. Truly I felt poor to berate him twice, but the girl has it hard enough being a bastard, she need not have her heart broken for it.”

Myrcella reacted strangely to that, tugging at a blonde curl in a hint of nervousness.

“Worry not about Ned. This march is but a hunt to mop up what’s left of the wildlings. They think to scurry back down those tunnels the prisoners told us about. Once we meet up with the Karstark strength and Castle Black’s rangers, we’ll make short work of them.”

“Then home.” Myrcella cuddled up close, resting her head upon his chest. “You and I. Ned and Cathlyn. Tom waiting for us. Think of it, Robb. All our children together under one roof again.”

“Worth fighting for.” He kissed her brow and drew some furs up over their bodies.
Soon they fell into silence, content to slowly drift off to sleep together after a long, weary day. With Myrcella so close, his thoughts kept drifting back to his family. He felt such pride in Tom, who had stayed behind to act the Stark of Winterfell under the watchful tutelage of the sers Alyn and Olyvar Frey.

Olyvar and Jeyne Poole had come north him after Rickon dismissed the loyal Frey knight from his service at Harrenhal. Rickon troubled him deeply, his brother forever demanding more aid from the North while railing against any notion of the riverlords sending their strength here. The prince had not forgiven his banishment of Bran to the Wall. Truly, neither had he.

Not that Bran acted bereaved. There was no malice in the letters Bran sent from the Wall. They were cordial things, regarding the state of the Wall or wildling raids, appropriate correspondence to pass between a king and the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch. That Bran had risen high in his new life was of little comfort to him. Nor was the possibility that they might reunite in the coming days. *He’ll not embrace me... not the brother who denied him ever holding his own son.*

When sleep came, his dreams were filled with memories. Holding his children as babes. Myrcella smiling and happy. Suddenly it was Bran he held instead. Then Rickon after him. The image of Myrcella replaced by his father. Yet there was no joy in him. Only a wary expression of defeat as men in crimson and gold laid hands upon him. Dragging his father away.

*Father... no... father...*

“Father.”

Robb jerked awake, finding the chamber barely lit and the fuzzy image of Ned standing above him.

“Gods, what hour is it?” He rasped, sitting up while taking care that the furs covering Myrcella’s naked form did not fall away as she slumbered.

For his part, Ned kept his eyes averted. “Father, you must come. There were riders in the night. They command none be woken save you-”

“Commands?” His ears became keen to the sound of wind and rain against the window. “It storms. To travel in this and give orders in the Greatjon’s castle, they must be bold. Or mad.”

“They be the Widows of Winter.” Ned whispered back and captured Robb’s attention fully.

He dressed with as little noise as he could so as not to wake his queen. Myrcella stirred some but did not wake, his parting glimpse showing a peaceful expression upon her face.

There was no such contentment to be found in the small gallery Ned led him to. Nestled away in the corner of the keep, the room contained a hearth and little more. He spotted three women gathered about the fire, all clad in wet cloaks and holding out their hands to warm them against the flames.

The shutting of the door bid them to turn, and he found himself face to face with three of the most powerful women in the North.

Most distinguished was the Lady Barbrey Dustin, her grey hair tied in a widow’s knot and back unbent by age. Softer in demeanor was Wynafryd Manderly, his aunt and a princess by marriage and the Lady of White Harbor. The third was a princess in the same right, yet Eddara Tallhart was no true widow. Her fair hair was tied in braids as tight as the line her lips formed upon seeing him.

“Hail to thee, King Robb.” Wynafryd spoke first, bending to do him homage. “Forgive us this
“Our king is not a forgiving sort.” Eddara added to which Barbrey tutted.

“That would be the chill talking. A poor way to start things but I assure his grace, we are as wet and weary as we appear. Trust that we’d rather be where you were, abed and warm.”

“Then why was I roused? By what right do you barge into this castle and command me about?”

“They did as I asked.” Another voice spoke up, his mother emerging from a dark corner with a folded cloak in her hands. Though still a regal-looking woman, the dowager queen bore dark circles of exhaustion beneath her eyes. He also thought there to be more worry lines upon her brow than he recalled.

“Mother. What in the frozen hells is happening here? You’re meant to be at Winterfell with Tom.”

“Is my brother well?” Ned asked and Catelyn gave him a small smile.

“He’s fine. I left him as healthy and hale as you appear to me, Eddard. In truth it was Tommen who sent us.”

“He sent a great deal more than that.” Lady Dustin added. “Behind us come three thousand men. They can’t be more than two days south and it’s likely they’re all drowning in this sleet.”

“Another army?” His confusion deepened. “You could not have had word of the wildling attack so soon.”

Mother nodded. “We only just heard of it. No, these men were mustered swiftly. Lady Barbrey and Eddara brought all they dared and Tom sent every sword and spear he could. Speed and secrecy were needed to answer this threat.”

“But we beat the wildlings.” Ned put in. “I slew the Magnar of Thenn myself.”

“We did not come because of the savages.” Eddara flicked back her hood, eyes ablaze. “There is treason at work in the North. It marches towards this castle. Perhaps it is already here.”

“The Umbers are no traitors!” Ned shouted to the disdain of the ladies.

“It be a shock to learn otherwise.” His mother spoke firmly. “Yet I’ve no such faith in House Karstark. Lord Rickard means to betray you, Robb. To depose you through villainy and murder.”

His first instinct was to shout down the accusation but a tide of distrust washed over him. Some of his bannermen caused him headaches, yet the Lord of Karhold was in a class all his own.

“These are grievous charges, mother. As we speak Lord Karstark marches to lend his strength to me.”

“Against you, your grace.” Wynafryd held up her wet garments. “Kfarstark uses his pledges as a cloak to cover his ill intent. I pray you’ll see through it once our evidence is weighed.”

“The scales are against Karstark.’ Eddara said, regarding him coolly. “Were there any doubt to his treachery I would not be here. The fiend has already struck against my son and I.”

He tensed to hear so. Whatever Eddara’s feelings towards him, her son Rodrik was kin and dear to his heart. The bright-eyed boy was his mother’s heir and held all the promise Bran once had.
“My cousin Brandon has forever chafed at my rule of Torrhen’s Square. His heart hardened against me when I spurned him to remarry another. If not for the love I bore my late uncle Leobald, I’d have sent him away long ago. A folly that allowed a viper a nest in my home.”

Eddara reached into her cloak then, pulling forth a letter to place in his grasp.

“There, read how my cousin was enticed to move against me. That he should seize the castle, lock me in a tower, take my heir as hostage and name himself master of Torrhen’s Square. Read it, and then take note of the author’s seal.”

His eyes flicked immediately to the end, and there saw a wax seal he knew well. The sunburst of House Karstark.

“There’s no benefit to Karstark in this.” He said with disbelief. “Torrhen’s Square has naught to do with Karhold. Surely even Rickard knows its lady cannot be named among my friends.”

“You robbed me of a husband and my son of a father. I have no reason to love you, Robb Stark. Yet I am no traitor.”

“That’s why she needed to be overcome.” Lady Barbrey said. “And why I came to be wooed by Karstark. If I was to marry the lord and convince my son to ally with him, he promises the title of Warden of the Rills and Barrows be returned to us. My son’s first act in that duty would be to aid Brandon Tallhart in his efforts. Seizing Winterfell was the next step.”

“Fortunately, the lady stayed true.” The dowager queen spoke with a sharp edge to her words. “How long she wrestled with that choice, I cannot say.”

“I expect more gratitude from my king than his mother displays.” Lady Barbrey turned up her nose. “Had I not forewarned Eddara, the ships and men of House Tallhart would now serve her false cousin. Winterfell taken by surprise.”

“And its prince slain.” Mother added grimly. “It’s in the letter, Robb. Eddara and Rodrik were to be prisoners. Tommen was to be executed.”

They were right. The plot was laid bare as he poured over the words, two of which set him to seeing red. For when Karstark referred to Tom’s murder, he did not use his son’s name.

“Lannister filth.” He growled to repeat Rickard’s insult, struggling not to tear the parchment to pieces. “I will take his head myself. I swear it. To think a lord could sink so low as to the murder of innocent children… Gods, I thought the years eased Rickard’s vengeful bloodlust.”

“This goes beyond revenge.” Mother looked between the two men. “Lord Karstark seeks the end of your line, Robb. The attack on Winterfell was to be the finishing stroke. You and Ned were to die at the hands of the Karstarks themselves. Ambushed in the field, betrayed in battle, we cannot be sure how they planned it but your deaths were the goal. Myrcella and Cathlyn’s too.”

“Father, this must have blood.” Ned spoke hotly, his face red with rage. “Let us wake the Greatjon and make ready to avenge ourselves upon these honorless bastards!”

“In time. I want our garrison readied and your mother and sister put under guard. Just in case any among the Umbers prove to be party to this plot. I take it that’s why we received no ravens to alert us to this threat?”

Mother nodded. “We were unsure of who could be trusted outside ourselves.”
“The only ravens sent were to Karhold.” Lady Barbra added. “All full of falsehoods. How I accepted the lord’s proposal and Brandon now rules Torrhen’s Square. We delayed them for a time but for all Karstark knows, the march on Winterfell has begun.”

“Instead their army took ship with us.” Wynfryd said. “First down the White Knife, then to the Dreadfort. Wyllard and more men remain there, awaiting word of where to march.”

“To Karhold.” He declared. “Let my coz bring fire and the sword to the castle. When I meet Lord Karstark in the field, I will tell him how the fate he wished for Winterfell has been visited upon his home. Rickard can die knowing the ruin he has wrought upon his house.”

“He must truly be mad.” Ned said as he made to rouse their guard. “Had he succeeded in killing us, then what? The North would not look to a vile traitor as a king. Loyal families would answer blood with blood.”

Eddara sighed. “A rabid beast knows no reason. It does violence because it must.”

Enraged as he was, that did not ring quite true.

_The Karstark plot is mad but its lord is surely not._

*Rickard has sat on his rage for years, why act on it now?*

He was pondering this as the dowager queen asked Ned to lead Eddara and Barbra to chambers. Wynafryd stayed put, sharing a look with his mother look filled with unspoken understanding. Their expressions grew even more solemn once they were left alone with him, the dowager queen acting as if she was pained by something.

“Robb, there is more we must speak on.” She said, closing the gap between them, her voice as motherly as ever. “About the reason for this revolt.”

“Beyond vengeance and naked ambition?”

“Sadly, yes. For I fear Lord Rickard means to champion a cause many in the North may find just.”

“Just? My death and the murder of my wife and children? Even those with little love of me like Barbra and Eddara cannot stomach such.”

“Others might. Should Karstark share with them all he’s learned. I’m sorry, Robb. I worked so hard to make sure no whisper of this would ever come to be uttered… For you and the children. Her as well.”

*Her?*

“My king…” Wynafryd began before seeking assurance from mother. “I was a party to this Karstark ordeal before Queen Catelyn had need of my ships. Some moons ago, Harrion Karstark asked that one my septons travel from White Harbor to Karhold for his Bracken wife. I thought nothing of it at the time… until word came that Eramus had died of a fever.”

“A fit and able man.” Mother interjected. “Whose body the Karstarks refused to return for a sept burial.”

“You believe they killed him?” He asked and Wynafryd nodded.

“I know they did. Before his end, Septon Eramus smuggled a message out of Karhold. He wasn’t
summoned to pray with any lady. They needed his skill with a document penned by an order of the faith that had come into their possession. To speak to its seals and the authenticity of the… declaration.”

“Lord Rickard has never had any use for the faith. What’s so special about this parchment?”

Wynafryd hesitated, swallowing deeply as a bead of sweat running down her brow.

“It is a sworn statement, come from the Kingdom of the Rock. One that attains your children as the products of incest… as abominations…”

“The bastards.” He exclaimed, his temper stoked once more.

That the Lannisters were involved played but a small part. Yes, the Karstarks had their reasons for hating him, some he could very well understand. Yet his children were innocents. Unworthy of being slandered with such outlandish lies.

“They have truly become desperate. Incest? Between me, a proud son of Stark, and a Durrandon princess, the last of her line? If I was not so deep in fury’s fiery pit, I’d be laughing.”

“Robb, the accusation has little to do with you.” Mother eased Wynafryd back to stand before him, her gaze full of sadness. “It regards Myrcella. You name her a Durrandon but that is not her true name. She might well be a Storm. Perhaps a Hill. Either way, she is bastard born-”

“Be silent.” He rasped, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’ve never approved of Myrcella. After all her efforts, every kindness shown, the three beautiful grandchildren she’s gifted you, and still you hate her enough to embrace Karstark’s pack of lies.”

“I have known this to be true for years now. Just as Myrcella has. Ask her, Robb. The children are being condemned for being the fruit of woman who was herself born of incest. Think of your Ned. He is named after your father yet has the look of hers.”

*Ned looks nothing like Robert. Our boy resembles her uncle-*

“No.” He argued, refusing to believe it. “You’re saying my wife… that Cersei and Jaime…”

“They did.” Mother could not hide her disgust. “In defiance of the laws of gods and men, they begat three bastards. Joffrey, Tommen… and Myrcella.”

Flashes of the Whispering Wood came back again.

Of a golden prince slaying the Karstark brothers. Suddenly Ned’s killing of Styr seemed an echo of how Daryn Hornwood came to die.

At the hands of Jaime Lannister. Cersei had been dragged away by those hands back at Harrenhal. After she had whispered something to Myrcella that troubled her for days… she said it was nothing and he believed her.

Which only served to make the realization hit him harder, like a blade through his heart.

*She knew then… Fods, it’s been there all this time…*

*More lion than stag… No stag at all…*

*And she knew.*
Sansa

She stroked the top of Lady’s head, relishing the softness of the old wolf’s fur.

Maester Sam was left to fiddle with his chain as they awaited Jon’s reaction. The solar was quiet as her husband sat at a desk, reading over the parchment set before him. It delighted her to watch Jon do so.

He read slowly, though not because of any lack of understanding. Jon simply valued patience, careful to wring every last bit of meaning from the words. The way his wintery gaze moved over the writing, how he stroked his beard in silent reflection, it marked her king a thoughtful man.

“Quite the list.” Jon said, laying a finger against his brow. “There are more names than I expected. A few unexpected ones among them.”

She smiled. The list named all those the queen and maester thought should accompany the royal family to the empire. It was expected Jon would need convincing.

“Yes, we exceeded the limits some.” Sam folded his hands. “Still, the queen and I believe this an entourage befitting a ruler of such a large realm.”

“Yet not so numerous as to become a faceless mob.” She added. “Each and every name is on there for a reason. Among them friends, men who could be better friends, or those we cannot afford to become enemies.”

“With these invitations his grace bestows great prestige upon his bannermen. Winning some added favor among some houses is worth the extra ship or two needed-”

“More like ten.” Jon grumbled and Lady moved from her side to his. He started petting the wolf as he peered at the parchment.

“Lyman and Talia. Lord Beric and Bronze Yohn. All welcome. More than the Estermonts, or the lords Grafton and Caswell. It is no secret they love me not.”

“So we shall change that.” She smiled again. “My husband has a talent for charming over those wary of him.”

“Some were worth the effort.” He grinned at her. “Though your point is taken, wife. Perhaps these men will prove the same. I hope Robin Darklyn will. You don’t think it’s too early for him to return to our company after the… unpleasantness?”

A very good question. His heart was broken after all.

Her cousin Robin had been a feature at Aevalon nearly as long as there had been a court here. Never the ablest of warriors, nor the healthiest of men, the Lord of Duskendale nonetheless proved himself a loyal vassal and a worthy successor to his murdered father. A feat considering the constant meddling and overbearing nature of Robin’s mother, her aunt Lysa.

Now she worried Lysa’s constant maligning of her family might ring true to Robin. For when the lord asked for Aemma’s hand in marriage, he was rebuffed not once, but twice. First, and most gently, by Jon himself, who explained they had other plans for Aemma. The second rejection came from Aemma herself, when Robin dropped to a knee before the Asher tree and proclaimed his love for her.
Aenry and Rhaegina argued over who was the first to laugh, yet agreed on everything else.

“He nearly knelt on Aemma’s foot!” Rhaegina had told them. “Then he mumbled through some poetry before shouting about making her the happiest woman in the world. Aemma jumped so high she nearly tripped.”

“After that, it got bad.” Aenry had added. “Everyone was dead quiet except for Ghost lifting his leg to take the loudest piss right beside us. Septon Tom should have been there. Before our eyes, the Seven themselves came together to shit on Robin Darklyn.”

Aemma refused to speak of it, embarrassed for Robin and herself. The poor thing did her best to let Robin down courteously but the snickers of her siblings and others belied such efforts. Robin had left the Red Keep at once and hadn’t step foot out of Duskendale in two moon turns.

“The time away will have helped.” She offered. “He’ll have learned by now that we spared him great embarrassment by keeping the incident quiet. It’s not like Robin was the first to be turned away regarding the twins…”

Sam nodded in a sage manner. “I’m thankful for Prince Rickon’s visit to Duskendale. Some time with the queen’s brother should lift the lord’s spirits.”

Rickon’s erratic behavior bothered her so, yet his surprise visit from Harrenhal to Duskendale did seem fortuitous. The two cousins were close friends, and if Rickon was there then the rumors he was raising swords in the riverlands were likely false. It would be a blessing if Rickon could ease tensions for once, rather than inflaming them.

In case of trouble, there were some names kept off to list she trusted to deal with it.

“Gendry will thank you.” Jon mused. “His first trip to the empire was in chains, he’d not speak to it, but a return there unnerves him. I’ve no wish to burden him, but what if others see this a slight against Gendry?”

“We shall name Gendry as Lord Protector of Aevalon in your absence, a great honor indeed. With him commanding the strength of the Highlands and Arya at Storm’s End, things will be well in hand.”

“Yes they would be…” Jon trailed off, tapping a finger at one spot of the parchment and shooting Sam a curious look. “Yet I think the realm will be better served if Daegon stays behind as well. He knows our minds on most matters, so let him act a guiding hand to Gendry and the council.”

“A fair point.” Sam answered. “Lord Blackfyre’s presence in the empire will rob this realm of a fair and measured administrator.”

The maester avoided her eyes, for they had already argued at length on this matter and she had overruled him.

“Daegon deserves this, Jon.” She kept her tone even. “A newly made lord who has served us so faithfully, it speaks to your largesse that he rises so high. After the years Daegon spent here, by our side, laboring to make this kingdom great, how would it look to leave him behind? What will people think?”

_They’ll see that I’ve abandoned him again. A good man and a friend, left behind when he should come with…_

A sharp pain gave her pause, for she’d been wringing her hands so desperately a nail had cut her
palm. A small cut but a symptom of a greater hurt. The darkness often threatened her most in
moments like these. All her efforts in the Vale, fighting to accept her faults could suddenly teeter at
the brink on ruination all over again.

*Think on the story,* she thought, *think on what all the pain and death has won.*

*All the good done since… My atonement…*

“What does Daegon think?” Jon asked gently, rising from the desk and rolling the parchment in his
hand. “He’d not refuse our invitation publicly but Daegon’s not of the east, Sansa. For much of his
life and that of his ancestors, the black dragon and the red did slaughter upon one another. A
Blackfyre will find many an enemy in the Targaryen Empire.”

“He has friends in us.” She said, only for Jon to raise his eyebrow. “Very well. We shall ask in
private, after the evening meal perhaps. Daegon and Laenora are to dine with us tonight in my
ballroom. Arya and Gendry as well.”

“Is that all?” His question had a mocking edge to it.

“Well, Ser Barristan and Lady Sarella will be there. And our good maester, of course. Prepare
yourself, Sam, Sarella quite disagrees with your suggested revisions for the Clash of Stags.”

Sam smiled, patting his large stomach. “A good meal and a lively scholarly debate, I look forward to
it.”

“A good thing you didn’t invite my mother then.” Jon grumbled before suddenly livening up. “Oh,
the talk of Daegon distracted me. About the invitations, why isn’t Ser Symond on the list? A former
enemy turned friend and already at court. He seems a natural fit.”

Sam stiffened but she maintained her composure.

“We considered the ser at length. He just seemed better suited to joining our delegation to
Highgarden. A well-respected Vale knight among them displays the unity of our realm.”

“Did mother suggest him?” Jon inquired idly yet did not wait for an answer as he handed the list to
Sam. “Not that it changes things. The list is long enough as it is. Ser Symond can have my leave to
travel to Highgarden.”

She shared a quick moment’s relief with Sam. Jon was troubled enough by the acrimony in his
family, the truth behind Symond’s exclusion would only make things worse.

*Lyanna may have taken a lover, but we’ll not bring him with us to Rhaegar’s empire.*

*The High Queen’s dalliance would bring the High King’s wrath done upon the Knight of Ninestars.*

Other knights waited for them outside the solar. The humorless and dangerous pairing of Ser Richard
Horpe and Ser Lothor Brune kept watch in their white cloaks. The Kingsguard could escort them,
but it was for Jon to take her in hand.

Once her arm entwined with Jon’s, he held her with strength and tenderness. A touch that felt as
natural to her as the need to breathe. The same went for waking up beside him, and making love in
the small hours of the night or by the light of a new day. She would not trade their love for anything.

So how could the famous romance of Rhaegar and Lyanna fall to such a state?
After the losing the Hound, Sansa had found true love again in Jon, but Sandor had been years dead and buried by then. That Lyanna could so with Symond while Rhaegar lived and openly longed for her, it led Sansa to suspect her aunt had fallen into a darkness of her own.

Yet Lyanna had never seemed happier. She kept Tagarra lively and full of laughter. No ball at the Red Keep was complete without her dancing, and her presence was expected on most hunts or rides. Lyanna stayed so involved at court and with the children, it sometimes felt bothersome.

All things my melancholy kept me from. Parts of my life I had to fight to take joy in again.

Among the upper rooms of Rhaegar’s Holdfast, they passed her study. Close to the library and her chambers, it was there she wrote many a tale and history. Writing served an urge to tell the stories others failed to, or to better understand the history that led to their branch of House Targaryen.

More than anything, writing made her happy. In the Vale, it became a stepping stone in her climb from the darkness. A way for her to feel happiness without crippling shame.

Other pleasures returned with time. Needlework and music. Conversation and good company. Sharing Jon’s bed and ruling by his side. Trying to bring the dream of Aevalon to life.

Her children. Forever her children.

My melancholy cost me precious time with them, and my shame at that feel only entices its return.

A vicious cycle Sansa had accepted easier than she forgave my own sins. True forgiveness was divine and sometimes she allowed herself the hope that the Seven had forgiven her. Why else would they hand her so many blessings?

They found her eldest blessings in one of the training yards.

She held Jon and their knights back in an archway, not wanting to interrupt the children as they amused themselves with the martial display unfolding in the yard. Three young men were sparring with shields and blunted blades for the entertainment of a small audience shading under a wide awning. The Kingsguard knights Ser Richard Horpe and Balon Swann flanked the small group of young royals and their companions.

Most laid upon cushions save the Dragons Darling, who sat in chairs. Sansa’s daughters may have inherited her womanly figure, but beyond that the twins were as different as night and day.

Rhaegina sat with impeccable posture, her calm expression like that of carved stone as eyes of indigo darted about, following every thrust and parry. A small raise of an eyebrow, a finger tapping against her cheekbone, Rhaegina eyed the combatants like Jon would new recruits to the castle guard.

Unlike Jon, who encouraged his men in a stern fashion, Aemma did so in a lady’s way. Her auburn locks bounced about her bodice as Aemma clapped and cheered the fighters on. Each combatant earned kindly smiles and melodious praise from the princess, who inspired others in similar gestures. Most taking their cue from Aemma herself.

Young ladies like Belladona Otherys, with her dark skin and white-blond hair, the lithe Attia Dondarrion, or the plump yet fair Ysolde Royce. Daemon Blackfyre was nearly of an age with her little Vaelena and the two could have passed for sisters themselves. Both had slight forms and the classic features of Old Valyria, though Daemon’s eyes were bluer, and Vaelena kept her pale hair braided in the northern style Sansa had worn as a girl.

While she took pride in their girls, she felt Jon tense to catch sight of Aenry.
The long-limbed heir stretched out over several pillows, his head of red-gold curls resting against Ghost, who had lay down to watch the bout. Unlike the old direwolf or the assembled ladies, Aenry showed little interest in the duel. He shot only cursory glances to the fight as he nibbled on a pomegranate. Whenever he deigned to speak, it inspired laughter among from the girls.

_He has charm_, she thought, _our son is clever and gifted with words._

_Not all princes are born to be warriors..._

Jon claimed to accept that, yet she noted how quickly his disappointment faded away when his attention moved from Aenry to those dueling.

It was two against one, with their beloved nephew Lyonel battling against the older Darry brothers. Raymus and Gregory, both strong and able, were struggling to overcome their foe. Well-muscled and broad-shouldered, Lyonel had the look of his father but in battle he was as defiant as his mother.

The onlookers cheered as he dodged an attack from Raymus and knocked Gregory back.

“Fine form, cousin!” Aemma called, clapping lightly. “Press on Raymus! Gregory! You’re doing splendidly!”

“Be careful, Ly!” Vaelena urged. “They’re oh so good! Yield if you must!”

Aenry gave a laugh at that. She doubted many noticed, for Lyonel had launched himself at Gregory, his blunted blade battering squire’s arm and shoulder before the Darry boy submitted. No sooner was that foe vanquished than the older Raymus fell upon Lyonel, jabbing at him from a safe distance.

After several more jabs, Lyonel aimed a powerful swing at Raymus’s shield, which was swiftly pulled away. In the same motion, Raymus brought his sword down, a sharp clang ringing out as he struck Lyonel’s blade from his hand.

Which left Lyonel with only a shield as Raymus came on, beaming in triumph.

Instead of retreating, her nephew attacked, throwing his weight behind the shield and running right into the startled Raymus. His arm was caught mid-swing as the two shields connected with a heavy thud, sending each lad to the ground. Raymus was clearly winded from the impact, so he could do little when Lyonel moved to pin him to the ground, shield raised about him in threat.

“Yield, ploughman.” Lyonel grinned. “I promise you safe passage to the Wall and to comfort your betrothed.”

“You are such an ass.” Raymus grumbled. “Fine, I yield. Just get off me. Go sit on Gregory instead.”

“Come off it, Ray! I wouldn’t have fallen for that move.” The younger Darry said as he and Lyonel helped Raymus to his feet. Talia’s sons might have fallen into bickering if Rhaegina and Aemma had not risen to praise the young men.

“Well done, all of you.” Aemma said bidding the three to bow. “Raymus Darry, you are hardy indeed to rise so quickly after a charge like that. What an unexpected turn, quite the bold move, coz.”

“A risky one at that.” Rhaegina circled Lyonel, eyeing his dirty face and scrapes. “Were this a real battle and Gregory still able, you would have pinned one brother only to be skewered by another.”

“I’d not stab a man in the back.” Gregory protested and Rhaegina scoffed.
“I surely would. If it meant my brother’s life.”

“Now which brother is that?” Aenry chuckled, tossing away the fruit and standing. “The other day you threatened to end me with that steel sliver you call a blade.” He nodded towards the Darrys. “Good effort, friends. Ly, next time do keep your elbow up.”

“You weren’t even watching!” Vaelena pointed out, to which Aenry shrugged.

“Thank you, Vee. Thanks for proving my cousin needs neither my advice or attention to win.” Aenry patted the larger Lyonel on the shoulder. “Not your most impressive match though. I counted far less gasps and sighs from the ladies during. Perhaps it was the smell, we were down wind of you this time…”

“It’s a healthy musk.”

Lyonel and Aenry shared a laugh as Rhaegina rolled her eyes. Aemma took no notice, for she was waving a figure watching from the far end of the yard.

“My lady! What did you think of the match?”

“A hard won victory.” The Lady of Tarth replied as she stepped away from the wall and into her vision. Brienne wore heavy armor and a serious expression, one that quieted the youths and caused Lyonel to fidget some. Her children often acted the same when under Sam’s scrutiny, for Lyonel was Brienne’s student and the teacher did not appear impressed.

“Yet a defeat as well, for Lyonel failed to do as he was taught. Princess Rhaegina speaks the truth, such a performance might serve in the practice yard or a melee, but in the thick of battle, you’d be dead. Tell me why.”

“I lost my sword.” Lyonel lowered his eyes. “I let him bait me… But after I did as you said. I used whatever I had left to get the upper hand.”

“What if it had been me you faced? Or Ser Balon?” Brienne asked. “We are both larger than Raymus and that charge would not have fazed us.”

“So Lyonel must keep growing.” Aenry jested. “Then none can threaten him and the lady will be in good company.”

This earned laughter from the Darrys and others. Not the twins or Lyonel though, and Jon least of all.

“He should hold his glib tongue.” Jon said under his breath. “Lessons like these could save Lyonel’s life one day.”

“Aenry means no harm. He was only trying to ease his friend’s embarrassment. There was no disrespect to Brienne in his—”

“AENRY TARGARYEN!” A familiar bellow echoed through the yard, pulling all eyes towards the old knight storming onward.

Brynden Tully might not move as swiftly as he once did but their master-at-arms still boasted a demeanor as tough as tempered steel. His leathers were black as night, his hair and beard streaked grey and white, which served to make his Tully blue eyes burn all the brighter as they narrowed on Aenry.
“Oh, hello uncle Brynden.” Aenry shrunk back towards the twins.

“Don’t uncle me.” Brynden growled, the younger men parting to let him pass. “Nephew, prince, it matters not, I’m ser to all those I train. Or those I was supposed to be training since daybreak. I was at the yard. As were Graeme, Valarr, Ashor, yet no sign of you. So tell me, did you miss the burning ball above our heads or did you get lost in your own castle?”

Jon took a step forward to hear so, yet she doubted it was to defend Aenry against the Blackfish’s admonishments. More likely he meant to add to them.

“Jon, don’t make this worse.” She grabbed hold of him. “It could be a simple mistake.”

“Yet again?” He snapped yet paused long enough to catch Aenry’s excuse.

“A matter came up…” Their son proclaimed. “I’m only here because I thought it too late to seek you. That perhaps I could train with Lady Brienne and Lyonel instead. You see, I was helping Maester Samwell with some rare books—”

“Were you now?” Jon bellowed, striding forth into the yard.

All snapped into bowing or curtsying, except for their children. Vaelena rushed to Rhaegina’s side while Aemma touched at Aenry’s shoulder, bracing the terrified prince.

“Father…”

“Maester Sam was with your mother and I for most of the morning.” Jon said brusquely, nodding to Brynden as he bore down on Aenry. “Shall I summon him to say so?”

She arrived in Jon’s wake, watching as Aenry reddened in shame before all in the yard. Despite her urge to put herself between them, she squashed it down to try and silently calm Jon.

A queen should not rebuke her king, but nor should a king berate his heir so publicly.

“I lied.” Aenry admitted, his voice but a whisper. “Not about wanting to train with Ly… just the rest.”

Jon shook his head. “Telling jests and weaving tales is the work of fools, not a crown prince. You must start acting the part.”

“My love, Aenry knows that.” She said as Lady nudged at Jon. “He’ll go with Brynden now. Let him train under the midday heat as atonement for this boyish folly.”

“I’ll go with him.” Lyonel offered, with a nod to Brienne. “If you’d permit, my lady?”

“There’s no need.” Uncle Brynden said. “He can spar with Graeme. I left him still at work with the archery butts. The lad’s does well with bow and blade.”

“Likely because he practices.” Jon’s words caused Aenry to flinch, and she caught her husband do the same in sudden remorse. There was love between the father and son, it was only buried beneath layers of frustration and misunderstanding.

She was about to ease Aenry away when a cry rang out behind them.

“Your grace!” A small boy shouted, rushing out of the archway to seek out his namesake. Jonarys Blackfyre was only just older than Daeved and the spitting image of his father. Save that his eyes were still bright and able.
“King Jon! Queen Sansa!” Jonarys wheezed. “The princess… Arya… and my father… they sent me… the Black Wolf… Prince Rickon is here… council chambers…”

“Uncle Rickon!” Rhaegina and Aemma exclaimed together, their smiles wide.

She did not share their daughters’ enthusiasm. Rickon’s visits were rare, and it was even rarer for trouble not to follow them. That he had come unannounced did not bode well.

“Let them know we are coming.” Jon said to the boy before waving at the twins. “Rhaegina, Aemma, you can join us.”

“I should come too.” Aenry spoke tentatively. “If something’s wrong-”

“I’d have you be prepared.” Jon replied curtly, gesturing to Brynden. “So follow through on your duty. Go and practice so you might be ready for tomorrow.”

They left Aenry clenching his fists, jerking away from Lyonel and Vaelena when they tried to comfort him. The whole situation was odd. Usually it was Jon lamenting Aenry’s lack of interest in important matters. Now the father had spurned the son.

She resolved to seek Aenry out later and set things right. For the time being, she would go with Jon and the twins, straight on the council chambers with Ghost and Lady at their heels.

More direwolves were waiting where their advisors usually gathered to help govern the realm. Nymeria and Shaggydog were prowling around the edges of the council table, the black direwolf sniffing at the only man seated there.

Daegon was not discomforted by the inspection, stretching out a hand to aid the wolf. He smirked when Shaggy took to licking him, the whole while his sightless eyes stared unblinking as Arya paced nearby.

The Vale had changed her too. Beneath her sister’s riding leathers lay a scar where the poisoned bolt had pierced her chest. The poison had drained much of Arya’s color, leaving her with a pale pallor and dark bags under her eyes.

Despite this, Sansa still held the Lady of Storm’s End to be a rugged beauty. One few dared to cross if they had any sense.

Sadly, judging from the frown on Arya’s face, it appeared their youngest brother was once again pushing his luck.

“You’ve no idea what you’re talking about, Rickon.” Arya chided the brawny prince gulping down wine by the hearth. Rickon had his back to them, yet she recognized his wolf fur cloak and long auburn ringlets easily enough.

“There, a touch of fury.” Rickon chuckled. “If you and Gendry are going to use the Durrandon words, live up to them. It’s been too long since either of you took the field.”

“Peace is not something to lament.” She said and a grin pulled at the side of Rickon’s mouth.

“Ah, the sweet sound of our sister’s corrections. How I’ve missed them. Hello Sansa, Jon.”

As Rickon turned to bow with uncharacteristic deference, it struck her how handsomely he was dressed. Beneath his fur cloak he wore a hazel and moss colored doublet with gold buttons and high black boots polished to a shine. The badge upon his chest drew her eye. There she saw a quartered
crest displaying the Tully trout on blue and red, the blue towers of the Freys, and the Stark direwolf twice over to the upper left and lower right, save that one was black instead of grey.

“You’ve taken a new sigil?” She said when Rickon came to kiss her hand.

“Our parents’ union and my own.” He grinned, tapping at the badge. “House Stark of Harrenhal may be a young house, but our roots are deep in the riverlands. That they are as a part of me as the North. I want none to forget that.”

“Dear prince, how could they?” Rhaegina asked, stepping forward with Aemma.

“All in the riverlands know the Black Wolf of Harrenhal.” Aemma added.

“Hello, girls.” Rickon moved swiftly to the pair. “Don't worry, I’ll not try and lift you for a spin. Might I have a pair of kisses in reward?”

“I’ll do so gladly.” Rhaegina kissed his cheek once and then again. “One for my uncle, and another for his manners.”

Aemma did the same to the other side. “A visit to Aevalon and showing such restraint? You’re full of surprises, nuncle.”

“Fatherhood must agree with me. You can speak to that, can’t you Jon?”

“I can, and let me say in person what I did with our ravens.” Jon held out his hand. “Congratulations on your son, Rickon.”

After the two men shook over Rickon’s newborn son, Sansa kissed him as the girls had. As part of the deal she had helped strike at the Twins during the war against Joffrey and the Lannisters, Rickon had wed Walda Frey, great granddaughter to Lord Stevron. While the happiness of their four-year union was the subject of much debate, recently it had proved fruitful. The birth of Benedict Stark meant Rickon now had an heir to pass Harrenhal to.

Perhaps even more should the inheritance of the Twins come into play…

“Ask him why he’s not with that wolf pup.” Arya said, filling a goblet of wine for herself and Daegon. “You’ll be wanting to use your freshly kissed hand to smack him with.”

“The spring weather put me in a mood to visit a good friend.” Rickon sighed to look at Aemma. “Poor Robin desperately needed a companion after the heartbreak this darling dragon dealt him. Laughter can pierce the heart as surely as steel.”

“I never laughed.” Aemma blanched. “I swear, I’d never. Everything happened so quickly… it went so badly that I couldn’t—”

“You’ve nothing to apologize for.” Rhaegina soothed her sister in High Valyrian. “Our uncle speaks of blades, well it’s not your fault that Robin tripped and fell on his.”

“He was trying to act a knight from a song. You should not have laughed. He is a lord, a friend, our own kin. We of royal blood must respect such ties. Our courtesies.”

“Are they talking about me?” Rickon asked and Daegon coughed.

“Somewhat.” Daegon tapped his fingers together. “Since you were speaking of Lord Darklyn, please elaborate on why so many of his fighting men rode in with your party.”
“Nothing gets by you, Lord Blackfyre. Fine. I’m not trying to hide anything. Robin and I fought together for our realms before, I thought he’d welcome the chance for another noble quest. To safeguard the riverlands and the Highlands against our foes.”

“He means to take up the sword again.” Arya muttered. “A new campaign against the Reach. That’s why he sent Olyvar away. The ser tried to argue sense into him.”

“Stop exaggerating. Olyvar had a problem remembering which Stark rules Harrenhal so I sent him on to Robb. He’ll be happier at Winterfell. Jeyne too.”

“What of this campaign?” Jon asked and Rickon grinned.

“Arya used that grand word, not I. It’s merely a few quick raids to set the Reach houses off balance, so I might one day push them out of the riverlands completely.”

“Out of the question.” She declared, wheeling on her brother. “There are years of peace between us and the Reach lords. We speak with the Gardeners on an immense undertaking, Rickon. King Willas is open to a lasting-”

“He’s a cripple. A weakling.” Rickon waved off her words to seek Jon. “When we fought all the way to Highgarden, he hid behind the walls like his fat coward of a father. King Mace is dead, and his heir is even more feeble. They lost too many fighting the Dornish, the reavers will soon raid up the Mander, and the Florents and Beesburys war against one another. Now’s the time to strike.”

“No, Rickon.” Jon regarded his former squire with disappointment. “This is the perfect time to prove myself a peer to the other rulers of the Seven Kingdoms. I am seen as a foreign invader, a threat to the remaining realms. I’ll not act the part. Nor should you dismiss King Willas so easily. He’s proven himself a man of good faith. One with an open mind and interest in a brighter future.”

“For the Reach! Not us!” Rickon protested, causing Daegon to shake his head.

“Raids are uncertain things. Blind as I am, even I see that attacking the Reach will cost House Targaryen what it already earns through goodwill and trade.”

“There’s better things than wealth. Glory. Victory. Our names ringing out.” Rickon’s tone had a tinge of desperation to it. “Jon, hear me. Are we coin counters or warriors?”

“He is a king. Not a rampaging warlord.” She answered and Arya slapped her hand down on the table.

“And who are you to propose any of this, Rickon? Does Robb know what you plan? It’s his lands you’re endangering after all.”

Shaggydog growled suddenly and Rickon’s face clouded over.

“I’m the only reason the river lords are free of westemen and reavers.” He snarled, lifting up his sleeve to display a scar there. “I took this crossing blades with Addam Marbrand. More on my shoulder from throwing back the longship landings at Seagard. Where was Robb? Quarreling with his bannermen and bending over backwards for that Lannister he stuck a crown on.”

“Queen Myrcella is a Durrandon.” Aemma corrected and Rickon scoffed.

“For that reason Arya and Gendry keep having to put down rebellions in their own lands. Forgive that if you must, but don’t forget she was sister to the man who tortured your mother and left that mark on her.”
“Rickon!” She was aghast that he’d speak so. “Girls, leave us. There are words I cannot say in your presence.”

“I speak the truth and you’d offer me a tongue lashing.” His face wrinkled in disgust. “I should count my blessings. Better than what Robb did to Bran for avenging father. Don’t look at me like that! How many times have I bled for you, Sansa? For all of you? I’ve earned your trust! Have can you keep faith with our foes and scorn me?”

“This is not about you!” She was nearly shaking with anger by this point. “We will not plunge realms into war simply to sate your boredom.”

Jon took her hand then, easing her into relaxing the fist she’d made to entwine their fingers. A simple reminder that he was still there. This was how they calmed one another.

Arya did her part with Rickon, who had narrowed his furious gaze on Sansa. He looked ready to speak again when Arya stepped to him, pressing a hand to his chest in a firm but forceful manner.

“Get a hold of your temper.” Arya said as Nymeria and Lady boxed in a growling Shaggydog. “Brother, the people who love you most are in this room. Think on that. Then on how you rage at us for nothing more than a raid.”

“It is more-”

“Why not come with us to the empire instead?” Rhaegina asked as the twins defiantly held their ground.

“Oh yes. You could bring your babe too.” Aemma added. “We do so wish to meet little Benedict.”

“Does he take after you or his mother?”

The girls’ interruption distracted Rickon, who broke his glare to regard them softly.

“Me, mostly.” Rickon admitted. “Tiny as he is, I can’t see taking Ben all the way to the empire. Nor myself. Thank you but there’s too much I must attend to in the riverlands. Especially if I’m standing on my own.”

“Rickon…”

“Don’t trouble yourself, Sansa. Having Robb as a king has made me used to it.”

She was at wit’s end, so with a simple nod to Jon, he went to his former squire. Jon guided Rickon to the far end of the room, listening to her brother’s complaints and quietly reiterating all she’d said. Though in a softer manner.

Letting Rickon frustrate her was a mistake, yet seeing Jon act so patient with him gave her hope.

*If Aegon is anything like I remember, this is fine practice for what awaits us in the empire.*

*And should Jon falter as I have, then I will be there to help him with his kin.*

A sudden knock came at the door, a muffled voice calling her name.

*What now?*

She opened the door herself, shocked to find her uncle Brynden standing without. Somehow, the scowl on the old knight’s face had only deepened since the yard.
“Ser? Aren’t you training Aenry and Graeme?”

“I was.” He replied in a wary voice. “Sansa, you should come. Your sons came to blows. One moment all’s well, the next it’s bruised knuckles and bloody noses. I can’t make sense of it.”

Beyond her disappointment, a dread feeling took hold of her heart.

What sense can there be in such a fight? What peace can last in a world where brother battles against brother.

_Blood against blood._

Chapter End Notes

Alice of Alonso beta’d this chapter and she is a lovely lady indeed.

End Notes

I love constructive criticism so send it my way, with a bloody trebuchet. I usually post snippets or previews on Tumblr under DolorousEdditor.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!